

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: The American Variations, 1900 to 2000

ON OCTOBER 12, 1900, as many as thirty thousand Italians paraded from Washington Square through lower Manhattan to celebrate Columbus's landing in America. They marched under a cloud of bad news: a state assembly resolution to prohibit the hiring of "alien Italian workers" for tunnel construction; a socialite's proud announcement to the press that she would ban Italian laborers from working on her estate, though it would cost her thousands of dollars; a brick-throwing brawl between Italian and Irish workmen ("Get out me way, yez Guineas," shouted teamster Thomas Conley at the hod carriers); an unannounced invasion on a Tuesday morning of homes in Harlem's Little Italy by police and sanitation workers, who liberally sprayed cellars with disinfectant (although, as chief inspector Feeney later admitted, they found few problems with uncleanliness); a request from the Italian government that those guilty of lynching five Italians in Louisiana in 1899 be punished; and the discovery in that summer of 1900 that Italians had been murdered in Mississippi.¹

About a hundred years later, the Bronx Columbus Day parade, starting off on White Plains Road and heading to Pelham Parkway, featured local Italian-American businessmen and clergy, the New York City police band, Italian-, Irish-, Jewish-, and Puerto Rican-American politicians, a suburban drum-and-bugle corps, the "Dixie Dandies" traditional jazz performers, and a West Indian steel drum band. (In 2000, the parade also included a Chinese dragon.)² The great-grandchildren of 1900s Italian aliens had moved to the suburbs and found acceptance in America. More broadly, the multicultural-

ism of the Bronx parade and the whole genre of ethnic carnivàle in modern America signified a happy consensus that, now, at last, difference was wonderful. If only it were so easy.

The motto “e pluribus unum” inscribed on the Great Seal of the United States puts in Latin an American ideology. “From many, one” describes not only the union of many states into one federation, but also the faith that different kinds of people from many nations can coalesce. Yet every American generation has worried about that solidarity. At times, differences seem to overwhelm commonality.

The turn of the last century was one such time. The millions among the “huddled masses” and “wretched refuse” flooding from southern and eastern Europe to America’s “golden door” seemed much more foreign than the earlier immigrants who had come from northern and western Europe—they were different “races.” Gaps between newcomer and native, black and white, rich and poor, skewed the lottery of life: many Americans lived well and long, while many others lived grimly and briefly. Region still divided the native-born. Four of ten had been alive when Lincoln was shot, and most Americans still nurtured grievances from what the southerners called “the War Between the States.” (The novelist Saul Bellow recalled a schoolteacher in the 1920s repeating tales of his father’s Civil War battles.)³ Regional contrasts were all too apparent in both the poverty and the distinctive lifestyle south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Reconstruction had ended a generation earlier after failing to remove the consequences of generations of slavery; subsequent years of Jim Crow had preserved many of its bitterest fruits.

The latest turn of century, in 2000, also had its divisions, the Bronx’s ecumenical parade notwithstanding. The influx of Asian and Latin American immigrants worried many native-born Americans, just as the influx of Italians, Jews, and other swarthy people had worried earlier generations. And more than ethnicity split Americans. The economic gap between the rich and the rest was widening to a degree unseen for decades. Political lines had carved sprawling communities into small, competing fiefdoms. The Protestant uniformity of 1900 had given way to the denominational *mélange* of 2000, and secular and religious Americans contested society’s moral ground rules.

The historian Thomas Bender has pointed out the persisting tension in American thought between, on the one side, a historic view that the nation requires commonality and consensus and, on the other side, a modern, cosmopolitan view that the nation is enriched by diversity.⁴ This debate flared up in the seventeenth century when Puritans insisted on religious orthodoxy, and again in the nineteenth when Jeffersonians resisted the rise of industry and the laboring class it created. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the debate has flared up around matters such as immigration re-

strictions, the role of government in leveling wealth, and multiculturalism. This enduring debate and efforts to synthesize the two impulses call Americans to understand their history of diversity and commonality.

In many respects, such as in their ethnic heritage and in the work they did, Americans clearly became more diverse over the twentieth century; in other ways, such as in basic living standards and childbearing, Americans clearly became less diverse; and in yet others, such as their incomes and some social values, differences widened in one era and narrowed in another. (Indeed, while commentators at both ends of the century focused on division, commentators in the middle of it, in the 1950s, dreaded too much uniformity.) There is no easy metric for determining whether America in 2000 was, in all such respects, more “*pluribus*” or more “*unum*” compared to America in 1900. We can see that *how* Americans differed and what kinds of differences *mattered* changed over the century. Gender, region, national origin, and even, in some matters, race became less consequential in shaping people’s life chances and lifestyles (although the black experience remained distinct); age, income, and, notably, educational attainment became more consequential. This book describes how Americans differed from one another, even became divided against one another, over the twentieth century. It also describes ways in which Americans moved toward greater similarity and agreement over the century.

We are struck, in fact, by how often common values bridged American differences, especially by 2000. Americans prayed in a multitude of diverse churches and temples, but they did so in a relatively similar way (in weekly services led by a professional clergyman) and held much the same faith (in God and the afterlife). Americans descended from a global variety of cultures, but they valued much the same goals (self-reliance, free choice, true love, the single-family home, and a bedroom for each child). Americans lived in novel kinds of families, but they overwhelmingly agreed on the best family (a married couple with two children). Americans’ financial assets ranged from billions of dollars to far below zero, but they shared similar tastes and owned similar goods (a car, a television, fashion clothing). This book tries to calculate the shifting balances of differences and similarities over the twentieth century.

The broadest change we describe concerns not the sum total of differences among Americans—did they become more or less alike?—but *how* they were different, the changing *axes of difference*. One of the most striking changes is that contrasts between people by place, race, and gender generally faded over the century but contrasts by education sharpened; at least since midcentury, education became a key sorter of Americans. How much schooling Americans got increasingly determined how they lived. The next chapter specifically describes the development of education and educational differences during the twentieth century.

Our approach thus sets aside the search for the mythic average American. To be sure, we describe what social scientists call “central tendencies.” For example, Americans generally lived longer, made more money, moved to the suburbs, and more often endorsed racial and religious tolerance as the century unrolled. We dwell, however, on what social scientists call “variances.” For example, variation among Americans in family size shrank, income differences narrowed and then widened, and divisions on family issues first widened and then narrowed. The reader can get an immediate sense of this distinction between a focus on central tendencies and a focus on variations by glancing ahead to figure 4.2 (64, this volume), which displays what happened to the life expectancy of women in the twentieth century. The average life span—more precisely, the *median* (fiftieth percentile) life span—increased about fourteen years, from about seventy-two for women born in 1900 to about eighty-six years for women born in 2000. More dramatically, the *range* of life spans shrank. Long-lived women born in the early 1900s lived about sixty-five years more than their short-lived sisters; long-lived women born around 2000, demographers project, will live about twenty years more than their short-lived sisters—so much did life spans at the low end increase. So Americans’ longevity grew in the twentieth century, but *shared* longevity grew much more. It is this dimension of social change in the twentieth century—the history of variances, differences, and divisions—upon which we focus.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Although this book rests on many numbers and on sometimes complex calculations, we have written it with general readers in mind, using, for example, simple graphs to convey the most essential findings. Motivated readers will find comprehensive discussions of the technical details—including a few methodological innovations we have developed—in the notes and appendices and on the book’s website. Most readers can ignore these additions.

All readers should, however, understand the nature of the evidence underlining our discussion. The story of twentieth-century America has been told in various ways—for example, as personal biography, as the history of ideas, as political combat. We seek to describe the everyday diversity and commonality of ordinary Americans. This leads our search for evidence away from the journals, diaries, letters, and press accounts used in most histories to materials such as the decennial censuses. People sometimes doubt the accuracy of those censuses, wondering whether everyone is counted and whether people honestly tell the census-takers about their private lives. These concerns are well placed, and researchers have addressed them. We know, for example, that the census of 2000 missed perhaps as many as one

in twelve African-American men. Undercounts were worse in earlier censuses, missing perhaps one in seven black men. We also know that census information on incomes is skewed by poorer people not reporting under-the-table income and even more by richer people underreporting their investment incomes. Similarly, marriage statistics are distorted when abandoned women report themselves as widowed and common-law couples say they are married. Nonetheless, the vast majority of Americans are forthcoming. Repeated examinations have confirmed that census data are quite accurate—and accurate enough for our purposes.⁵ And finally, census data are the best and often the *only* evidence that can answer our questions. Where a problem is critical—such as the missing African-American men—we note and attend to it. Analyzing historical censuses has become practical thanks to the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), which compiles, codes, and makes available the data on millions of past and present Americans.⁶ In some places we draw as well on other Census Bureau data, especially the annual Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted in the last few decades of the century.

The census does not, however, ask Americans about everything we might wish to know. Censuses do not ask people about their faith, values, attitudes, or emotions. To track the history of Americans in these domains we use commercial and university-based national surveys. In particular, we draw on the many polls conducted by the Gallup organization from 1935 through 2000 and on the General Social Survey (GSS) for 1972 through 2000.

Popular skepticism about surveys probably exceeds that about censuses. And surveys do have faults. They sometimes undercount certain groups, such as people without telephones or workaholics who are never home, and some of the questions that interviewers ask are prone to distortion. Many people, for example, are reluctant to admit to racial prejudice. These are well-understood problems in the survey profession. Over the century the better polling organizations (and there are differences) have refined their techniques and provided accurate snapshots of Americans' views and experiences. A three-percentage-point error in predicting a close presidential election embarrasses a polling organization, but such small errors are much less important here. When the polls show, for example, that in the 1930s Americans overwhelmingly frowned on married women working and later polls show that in the 1990s Americans overwhelmingly approved of married women working, we can be confident that this difference indicates a real change in national views on gender. Similarly, when surveys show that after 1970 the gap between rich and poor Americans widened not only in income but also in how they felt about their incomes, we can be confident that there really was a growing divide in Americans' sense of economic security.

In the chapters that follow, we typically begin by describing Americans in

2000—how they formed households, their standards of living, their religious lives, and so on. We then put 2000 into historical perspective, tracing changes over the century—or as much of the century as the available data allow us to trace—and particularly changes in lines of division. How did diversity in family patterns or occupations or values change over time? When and to what extent did differences in, for example, wealth or religion or cultural values correspond to differences in race or region or education—to various axes of difference? In what ways did Americans divide or coalesce over the twentieth century?

OVERVIEW

We examine twentieth-century diversity and commonality in eight areas. In chapter 2, we describe the increase in Americans' educational attainment over the century, showing how women caught up with men, African Americans closed the gap with whites, and regional differences diminished. We also begin our discussion of how educational attainment increasingly shaped and distinguished Americans' fates and fortunes.

Chapter 3 examines diversity in the sense that most Americans hear the term: ethnicity and race. Ancestry was a controversial matter in the 1900s, when nativists openly testified in Congress about the influx of inferior European "races" such as Jews, Greeks, and those Italians who marched in lower Manhattan. The heterogeneity they feared became vastly greater in the final decade of the century with the arrival of millions of Asians and Latinos. Ironically, this diversity became less consequential as immigrants assimilated, intermarried, and increasingly gained acceptance from the native-born. The key exceptions to these homogenizing trends were African Americans, the descendants of America's "peculiar institution."

Chapter 4 treats the American family. Observers have warned that the households of married couples and children are "disappearing" as more and more Americans live as unwed couples, grow up in single-parent families, or even live alone. We describe a more complex story, one rooted in basic demographic shifts—longer lives and smaller families, in particular. In several ways, American family patterns did not change as much between 1900 and 2000 as many seem to believe, and much of the major change that did occur—such as increasing single-parenthood and one-person households—was specific to certain racial, educational, and age groups. The story is less one of increasing family diversity than of changing axes of diversity.

Chapter 5 describes the diversification of work in America, a consequence in part of the near-disappearance of farming, once Americans' main occupation, and in part of the invention of new jobs. The march of women into the labor force obliterated one of the biggest differences among Americans: that men worked for pay and married women did not. Education and

age replaced gender and marital status in determining who worked, how many hours they worked, who had the best job, who got paid the most, and how people felt about their jobs.

In describing American inequality in living standards, chapter 6 moves beyond the usual discussion of recent trends in income differences to look, historically, back to the early twentieth century and, topically, to inequality in wealth and consumption as well. For most of the century, economic gaps narrowed, particularly as blacks and rural southerners caught up with the rest of the nation. After 1970, however, divisions of income and wealth widened again. In spending and consumption, America's cornucopia of productivity allowed poorer Americans to come closer to the standards of more affluent Americans; by 2000 few Americans really went hungry, and almost all Americans had color television sets. But even the equalization of consumption stalled or perhaps reversed over the last few decades. Material gaps between Americans generally became greater than they had been for much of the century—and polls showed that Americans sensed it.

Chapter 7 tracks the mass movement of Americans from countryside to suburbs over the century. One consequence of that movement was a shift in the geography of social differences. Where once South versus non-South and rural versus urban clearly coincided with differences of social class and ancestry, by 2000 suburb versus city was the more important axis of difference. Racial segregation, having intensified for much of the century, weakened inside American cities in the last decades. But at the same time, suburban boundaries stiffened, making the political geography of American metropolitan areas an increasingly important social divider of Americans.

Chapter 8 examines religious diversity and religiosity, a topic of much controversy in the early twenty-first century. Americans in the twentieth century largely retained their characteristic piety, experts' expectations of secularization notwithstanding. With the expansion of Catholicism and the emergence of Eastern traditions, Americans in the twentieth century became more diverse in their specific religious affiliations, but at the same time they seemed to become more alike in their actual beliefs, including many of the unchurched among them.

Chapter 9 confronts the end-of-the-millennium debates on whether Americans were becoming polarized or even fragmented on values issues, a thesis sometimes labeled "the culture wars." Taking a much longer view of Americans' attitudes—back to the 1930s—we see that the most polarized era was probably earlier, the 1950s and 1960s. We find that Americans were not "falling apart" culturally in the last decades of the century.

Chapter 10, the conclusion, reviews what we have learned about the twentieth-century course of diversity and unity, extracts a few implications for issues of concern to twenty-first-century Americans, and points to avenues of potentially fruitful research.

One such avenue of further work would be to explain *why* Americans became more or less divided in various ways. Our main task in this book is to *describe* historical trends, not explain them. Where there is a scholarly consensus on some trend, or a simple reason why it occurred, we note that. Where there is serious debate about explanations, we outline the controversy. At some points, we offer in passing what we believe to be a plausible reason for a development. We do not, however, thoroughly investigate and test theoretical explanations, as we would in a focused journal article. We do not, for example, try to resolve alternative explanations for the widening income gaps since 1970, or the convergence of Catholics' religious behavior with that of Protestants after about 1960.

SHIFTING LINES

The contrast between the Columbus Day celebrations in New York City, which bracketed the century, symbolizes the eventual assimilation of yesterday's alien immigrants. It also illustrates more broadly how lines of division among Americans shifted over the century. The significance of European nationality clearly waned, and ancestry in general was far less a source of conflict in 2000 than in 1900; the marchers in 2000 even celebrated ethnic and racial diversity. But other differences among Americans, such as between living in the city or in the suburbs, between blue-collar and professional workers, and notably between the poorly and well-educated, shaped the lives of the great-grandchildren of the 1900 marchers much more than those immigrants parading out of Greenwich Village might have imagined.