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"HANS" AND THE HISTORIAN: ETHNIC STEREOTYPES AND AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE, 1820—1860

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Anyone casually familiar with mid-nineteenth century American popular literature is well-acquainted with ethnic stereotypes. "Hans" and "Paddy," the purported representatives of hosts of German and Irish immigrants, cram the pages of pre-Civil War newspapers, school texts, political and religious journals, even the ubiquitous "ladies' magazines," to say nothing of melodrama and pulp novels. Ethnic stereotypes are nothing more than patterns of verbal description which create enduring images of ethnic minorities in the language of popular culture.[1] Humorist Thomas Butler Gunn's portrait of the proprietors of a New York City "Gasthaus" in the late 1850s typifies contemporary stereotyped perceptions of German-Americans:

> He is a stout, middle-sized man, with a broad, good-looking face, light, curly hair, short beard, and shaved upper lip, always in his shirt sleeves, and seldom out of temper... She is equally bulky in appearance but dark-haired and very talkative... As industrious and painstaking as her husband, she is a hearty woman, with a proportionately large appetite, a laugh and a joke for male boarders, and a ten-widow power tongue... Altogether, they are... hard-working, honest, good-humored, solid.[2]

Historians have been reluctant to accept popular stereotypes as genuine expressions of American interethnic attitudes. Many of the most explicit examples, like Gunn's, appear in works of humor. Perhaps the greatest number can

be traced directly to the anti-immigrant rhetoric of out and out nativists who possessed special reasons for portraying the members of ethnic minorities in particular ways. Even in less suspect sources, their frequency and character appear to vary so closely with their proximity to episodes of intensified ethnic rivalry, like elections or riots, that they seem dubious representations of sustained dispositions. But mostly, historians are leery of taking stereotypes too seriously because of their reputation for being products of uninformed predisposition, unrealistically inflexible, improbably generalized, and more likely to reveal the needs, concerns, and values of the stereotypers than much about the character of the stereotyped.[3]

But that is selling ethnic stereotypes too short. Social psychologists inform us that stereotypes are more than just condensed cultural pre-dispositions and rationalizations for self-aggrandizing behavior. Rather, the elements of ethnic character that stereotypes isolate, generalize, and lift to attention are also functions of the actual features of the stereotyped, especially of those that bear significantly upon interethnic group relationships.[4] At the same time, stereotypes exhibit the regard in which the stereotypers hold these attributes. Stereotypes, then, are as likely to be products of intimacy and knowledge as of ignorance and misinformation. This is not to say that stereotypes are accurate group portraits by any means, but simply that they reveal interethnic attitudes which reflect not only preconceptions and prejudices but also the character of ongoing group relationships. Perceived in this way, ethnic stereotypes must be understood to possess a capacity for flexibility which allows them to change as group relationships and intergroup attitudes change.

If stereotypes can be treated as summaries of popular attitude which reflect actual interethnic relationships, then historians may turn their prevalence in the artifacts of popular culture to advantage. For we can mine them for patterns of content which reveal what stereotypers regarded as the salient features of ethnic minorities and what sort of evaluation they placed upon them. We can employ them as

indicates of change in both the context and character of group relationships over time. And we can draw upon them to identify those elements of the relationship between one ethnic group and another that distinguished it from all other contemporary ethnic relationships. By examining a sufficiently large sample of popular dialogue, we can try to locate those enduring features of group attitudes which were independent of atypical circumstances or the pressures of special interests.

Students of mid-nineteenth century German-Americana should find ethnic stereotypes particularly useful research aids. Despite the fact that four out of five immigrants to the United States between 1830 and 1860 were Irish or German and sensitivity to ethnic minorities consequently narrowly focused, historians have not proven themselves particularly adept at distinguishing between the attitudes generally held by the native-born Anglo-American ethnic majority toward different immigrant communities. Nor have they found it easy to trace the Anglo-American reaction to either the Germans or the Irish to particular features of interethnic relationships. Most of the explicit opinions mid-nineteenth century Anglo-Americans offered of immigrants were just that, opinions of "immigrants" rather than of the members of specific ethnic minorities. Conforming to a tradition extending back to the admonitions of the founding fathers of the republic, natives almost always regarded "immigrants" as a pressing political and cultural problem. References to this vague agglomeration of persons in popular literature rarely reflected dispositions developing out of the characteristics of actual ethnic relationships.[5] Nativists, who had the most to say about immigrants, typically compounded Germans and Irishmen into a single class of undesirables and placed heavy emphasis upon the threat of Roman Catholicism, a trait which was only attributed to a portion of the German minority, and upon the dangers of immigrant participation in politics, to which specific ethnicity was irrelevant. Readers of the existing historical literature on the immigration problem and nativism before the Civil War are apt to come away wondering how, if in any way, the popular re-

action to the German immigrant community differed from the reaction to the Irish and what ethnic attitudes had to do with actual contact between members of the Anglo-American ethnic majority and the hundreds of thousands of Germans and Irishmen who abruptly came in among them.

Historians can evaluate ethnic stereotypes in the language of popular culture in much the same way that political scientists, journalists, and literary scholars study thematic and semantic patterns in diplomatic correspondence, propaganda, and literature of disputed authorship: content analysis. In essence, content analysis is the examination of the internal characteristics of language outside of its structure or context. The techniques for performing content analysis include the calculation of word usage frequencies, the categorization of terms by meaning or emphasis, and the assessment of degrees of implied evaluation. Sociologist Howard Ehrlich has developed a word classification scheme specifically for the analysis of the content of ethnics stereotypes which, with a little modification, can be used in an historical context. Ehrlich's system uses fourteen categories of ethnic adjectives to pull together the elements of stereotypes which describe related group attributes, e.g., "positive moral characteristics," "negative intellectul characteristics," dispositions to "conflict and hostility," or "physical characteristics."[6] Another helpful procedure, called "Evaluative Assertion Analysis," permits researchers to establish the degree of favorability or unfavorability of the ethnic image produced by the wording of a document or group of documents by numerical scaling of grammatical components.[7]

For several years, I have been extracting descriptions of American ethnic minorities from mid-nineteenth century popular literature and have subjected over 2500 references to German and Irish immigrants, both as individuals and as groups, to content analysis.[8] The results persuade me that Anglo-Americans widely shared patterns of ethnic perception, that popular attitudes toward specific ethnic minorities were clearly distinguishable from one another, and that inter-ethnic attitudes were more than products of pre-dispositions and prejudices but are actually traceable to developments in

ethnic relations. Without question, perceptions of ethnic minorities were highly uniform and strongly patterned in Anglo-American popular culture. Only 366 different descriptive adjectives recurred among the 2535 statements I examined. For any particular ethnic minority, the verbal image was much tighter. I could find only 113 ethnic adjectives repeatedly employed to describe German-Americans. And fewer than a third of these accounted for 60 percent of all descriptions of the antebellum German community, nine terms alone for 25 percent.[9] Popular ethnic images were obviously composed of a very small number of verbal components endlessly repeated in different combinations. Clear patterns of emphasis emerge from these tight verbal packages. Of the 113 ethnic adjectives which came to make up my German stereotype "dictionary," fully 75 percent fell into just five of the fifteen word meaning categories that I employed in the study.[10] This pattern of distribution proved extremely consistent across different types of language sources, from school texts, for example, to melodrama. Obviously, random description was not typical of mid-nineteenth century American verbal depictions of ethnic minorities.

Content analysis of antebellum ethnic stereotypes makes it abundantly clear that these popular verbal images were expressive of group attitudes; that is, that they were highly evaluative. On an evaluative assertion analysis scale of -9.0 (most unfavorable) to +9.0 (most favorable), descriptions of Germans in popular literature scored a mean +2.7. This contrasts with a mean of -4.5 for the verbal image of the Irish and +7.5 for the Anglo-American self-image in popular language. "Immigrants," with no nationality specified, rated an extremely unfavorable -7.5, reinforcing my conviction that public attitudes toward immigrants as a class, based upon a priori assumptions about the dangers of ethnic diversity, were considerably different than attitudes toward specific ethnic minorities, influenced by actual interethnic relationships. Obviously, different kinds of sources possessed their own evaluative tendencies, but the really remarkable thing is how closely these approximated the overall evaluation of

particular ethnic groups across the range of sources examined.

Undoubtedly, the content characteristics of antebellum ethnic stereotypes reflected developments in ongoing ethnic relationships. While the mean evaluative assertion analysis score for descriptions of German in popular literature published between 1820 and 1844 was +4.5, it deteriorated to -1.6 for sources published between 1845 and 1860. A similar transformation took place in the Irish stereotype over the course of the antebellum period of American history as the numbers of immigrants and their offspring grew and opportunities for interethnic friction multiplied.[11] In both cases, developments in evaluative character kept pace across different source types. Changes also appeared over time in the emphases of antebellum ethnic stereotypes. What Anglo-Americans considered important about specific immigrant minorities was different in the 1840s and 1859s from what seemed important in the '20s and '30s and was reflected in their use of descriptive ethnic adjectives in common discourse. That popular ethnic images were not simply pale reflections of nativist dispositions or cultural preconceptions held over in Anglo-American culture from a distant past is indicated by the differences in emphasis and evaluation that are apparent between these stereotypes and the portraits of immigrants found in the literature of nativist organizations or the travel accounts of English visitors to the United States. Not only was the evaluative assertion analysis favorability rating of nativist rhetoric for all antebellum ethnic minorities predictably more negative than that of non-nativist sources, but nativist ethnic images possessed a distinctively different focus. While nativists found the religious and politico-religious characteristics of immigrants their most remarkable features, only 3 percent of all references to Germans in non-nativist sources made any mention of these qualities.[12] English travellers to the United States also reported very different impressions of American minorities than those which stood out in the language of native society, suggesting the extent to which American ethnic attitudes were molded by sustained ethnic interaction.[13]

Close scrutiny of the verbal portrait of German-Americans in antebellum language reveals the distinctive features of the stereotype: its relative favorability, its pronounced emphasis upon economic characteristics, its well-defined difference from the contemporaneous image of the immigrant Irish. Despite voluminous evidence of popular fears about the dangers of ethnic diversity in the abstract, actual impressions of Germans were mildly complimentary in tone. Over two-thirds of the statements about German-Americans examined in this study emphasized unambiguously favorable group characteristics. Conversely, only a tenth highlighted patently unfavorable attributes. In fact, the large number of references to German "positive intellectual," "positive moral," and "positive interrelational" qualities compares favorably with the cast of the ethnic adjectives composing the antebellum Anglo-American self-image. Actually, the most pronounced content emphasis was upon what might be termed "substantial" traits, that is, those indication "qualities of continuity, industry, persistence, and direction." Fully 40 percent of all ethnic adjectives applied to German-Americans fell into this content category or the related one of "economic" characteristics.[14] Gunn's "industrious and painstaking" German landlady obviously represented a widely-shared ethnic perception. This emphasis was even sustained in antebellum fiction, though frequently, in the interests of amusement, normally favorable group attributes were so highly elaborated that they became minor vices. Thus humorists transformed providence into miserliness, perseverence and industry into single-mindedness.[15]

What contrast there is between the popular image of the antebellum German minority and that of the Irish! Less than one-fifth of all references to the Irish in the literature of common culture contained descriptive adjectives which displayed favorable characteristics. But fully 45 percent portrayed unambiguously unfavorable ones. Ethnic adjectives applied to the Irish concentrated heavily in word meaning categories labelled "conflict/hostility," "insubstantial," and "emotional," whereas these sorts of verbal descriptives

were almost entirely absent from the German stereotype.[16] At least as significant, the Irish portrait in language was much "harder" than the German, tightly linking cultural and behavioral characteristics to stereotyped physical features. In the decade before the Civil War it became almost racialistic, emphasizing group characteristics which were purportedly heritable and resistant to the mechanisms of acculturation.[17]

To say that the antebellum German stereotype had more in common with the contemporary Anglo-American self-image than with popular impressions of the Irish is not to say that the native citizenry failed to distinguish themselves from German immigrants. To describe their own "positive intellectual" characteristics Anglo-American relied upon terms like "ingenious," "versatile," and "shrewd," but to describe German intellectual character they employed the much more restrained "learned," "judicious," and "educated." Likewise, American "substantial" traits included "energy," "enterprise,' and "self-reliance," but Germans were better described as "industrious," "persevering," and "thrifty." Not surprisingly, each stereotype contained physical analogues to these traits. Americans were "tall," "thin," and "agile," Germans "stout" and "short." Obviously, here was a simple ethnocentrism at work. What ethnocentrism cannot account for is a marked increase in the frequency of references to the "political" and "negative moral" characteristics of Germans in the ethnic portraits conveyed in the popular language of the 1850s.[18] Conceivably, the increasing emphasis upon "radicalism," "free-thinking" and "aetheism" in references to German-Americans in common language was related to the arrival and prominence of the refugees of the German political unrest of 1848 combined with the growing impact of ethnic voters upon American political developments. If so, here — in microcosm — is a straight-forward example of the responsiveness of verbal stereotypes to the characteristics of actual interethnic relationships.

What has been offered here is more an exposition of technique than a statement of conclusions. My objective is to demonstrate the effectiveness of content analysis of popular

stereotype in discerning mass attitudes and tracing them to authentic developments in ethnic relationships. While information about the native response to German immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century is often obscurred in traditional historical sources, antebellum ethnic stereotypes demonstrate that members of the Anglo-American majority were able to distinguish the German community very clearly from other immigrants minorities and that their dispositions toward it were products of unique patterns of group interaction.

FOOTNOTES

1 Obviously, a complete definition of "ethnic stereotype" requires more than a single line. Social-psychologists devote whole volumes to explaining how stereotypes are formulated and applied. But a sentence should suffice, I think, to describe what ethnic stereotypes are as material artifacts.

2 Thomas Butler Gunn, *The Physiology of New York Boarding Houses* (New York, 1857), 257, 262.

3 For an example of this attitude see David Brian Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review,* 47 (September, 1960), 205-224. Davis describes ethnic stereotypes as riven with the "irrational."

5 A typical condemnation of immigrants reads like this: "These poor strangers, these immigrants, have none of the American element in them, whatever it may be; they are destitude, despirited, sick, ignorant, abject... They swarm in filthy localities, engendering disease, and enduring every species of suffering... and, finally, sinking by sure degrees deeper in the scale of human beings, they often become habitual sots, diseased and reckless, living precariously, considering themselves outcasts, and careless of any change in their condition." New York State Assembly, *Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Examine into the Condition of Tenant-Houses in New York and Brooklyn* (Albany, 1857).

6 Howard J. Ehrlich, *The Social Psychology of Prejudice: A Systematic Theoretical Review and Propositional Inventory of the American Social Psychological Study of Prejudice* (New York, 1973), 24-29. Ehrlich actually proposes fourteen categories of ethnic descriptives; I have appended a fifteenth. I have also altered his category titles slightly. The fifteen are: Positive Relational Characteristics, Positive Intellectual Characteristics, Positive Moral Characteristics, Negative Relational Characteristics, Negative Intellectual Characteristics, Negative Moral Characteristics, Conflict/Hostility, Substantial Characteristics, Insubstantial Characteristics, Emotionality, Political/Religious Characteristics, Economic Characteristics, Esthetic/Cultural Characteristics, Physical Characteristics, and Subjective Assessments.

7 "The objective of evaluative assertion analysis," writes content analyst Ithiel de Sola Pool, "is to arrive at a measurement of the attitude of a source toward a certain attitude object (target)." Evaluative assertion analysis is performed upon ethnic stereotypes by assigning numerical values to the verbs and adjectives that compose a "unit perception" of an ethnic target and multiplying to derive a product which serves as an attitude score for that statement. The average value of all the

statements derived from a single source provides a measure of the disposition of the source toward the target. See Ithiel de Sola Pool, "Trends in Content Analysis Today: A Summary," in Pool, ed., *Trends in Content Analysis* (Urbana, Illinois, 1959), 194-195.

8 The study sample included the following varieties of printed sources: melodrama, prose fiction, school texts, travel narratives, newspapers, popular magazines, government documents, and a broad range of nonfictional books. From among these, 215 unit-perceptions of German-Americans were subjected to content analysis.

9 The nine adjectives were, in descending usage frequency: industrious, honest, persevering, thrifty, cowardly, fat, short, courageous, and educated.

10 These five were Positive Relational Characteristics, Positive Intellectual Characteristics, Positive Moral Characteristics, Substantial Characteristics, and Economic Characteristics.

11 Between 1845 and 1852, for example, the mean evaluative assertion analysis score for unit-perceptions of the Irish in an extensive sample of popular literature was -3.0. For the period 1853 to 1860, it was a substantially less favorable -4.5.

12 For instance, the evaluative assertion analysis score for unit-perceptions of the Irish in nativist literature for the period 1820 to 1860 was -7.2, while for non-nativist sources it was only -4.5. 10 percent of all references to the Irish in nativist literature focused upon political or religious characteristics, whereas less than 5 percent of the ethnic adjectives employed in non-nativist materials could be categorized in this way.

13 The evaluative assertion analysis score for unit-perceptions of German-Americans extracted from the travel accounts of European visitors in the United States was +1.8.

14 31 percent Substantial Characteristics, 8 percent Economic Characteristics.

15 Thus the evaluative assertion analysis score for unit-perceptions of German-Americans extracted from antebellum fictional literature was -1.5, mildly unfavorable.

16 For the period 1820 to 1860, 12 percent of all unit-perceptions of Irish-Americans emphasized Conflict/Hostility, 9 percent Emotionality, and 9 percent Insubstantial Characteristics. The comparable figures for unit-perceptions of German-Americans were 0 percent, 2 percent and 1 percent.

17 For the period 1845 to 1860, fully 14 percent of all unit-perceptions of Irish-Americans in nonfictional sources emphasized Physical Characteristics. The comparable figure for fictional sources was 25 percent.

18 For the period 1820 to 1844, no unit-perceptions of German-Americans sampled emphasized Negative Moral Characteristics, only 1 percent Political/Religious Characteristics. The comparable figures for the period 1845 to 1860 were 5 percent and 7 percent.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

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