

Portuguese-Americans in the East Coast –
is “crystallization” a myth?
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In the last but one census of the population in the US, I had to respond as a foreigner resident, and when I was asked about my race, I chose to answer the ways I had heard the activists of the civil rights movement used to do in the US, when color blindness was an important thing to fight for – to “RACE” I added “HUMAN”.

To the question that constitutes the title of my presentation, that I remind you is “Portuguese-Americans in the East Coast – is crystallization a myth?”, the answer is obviously NO, it is NOT a myth, it is a reality.

My hypothesis of crystallization will be illustrated through a brief description of the Luso-American Club, which serves as a microcosm of the society in the community of Chicopee, a city in the US, in the western part of the state of Massachusetts. I will contest Marcus Hansen’s theory that defends that the third generation “wishes to remember what the second wants to forget” (HANSEN 1952: 495). I will conclude with general remarks about ethnicity in the US.

In my study I used a variety of sociological qualitative methods, such as the techniques of recorded intensive interviewing and observation with minimum participation that were combined with brief analysis of primary text, such as minutes of meetings of the Luso-American club and statistical data, as well as readings of literature about ethnicity. The personal choice of a topic in a sociological paper as the motivation to pursue research is an interesting topic to be discussed. The choice of a Portuguese community over another ethnic group is justified with observations on the dilemma of the outsider-insider dichotomy when pursuing fieldwork research. In the study the awareness of the importance of reciprocity and respect for confidentiality as an ethical issue concerning the relationships developed with the respondents in terms of choice of the researcher’s patterns of behavior is also an important issue.

But to start discussing “crystallization” needs a predefinition of what I consider it to be: by “crystallization” I understand the preservation of certain cultural forms that evolve with a particular life of their own, that are necessarily different from the original models and also different from the evolutions that these cultural forms take in the original countries.

Let us also accept, for the sake of my argument that the Portuguese-American club from Chicopee is a Microcosm of the ethnic group. It is there that the crystallization can be better seen: many forms that happened in the Old Country in the past, remain a reality in the community of Chicopee. In the club we can see the language issue and education as defence of the ethnic group: the more educated the group proves to be, the better it climbs in the so called "ladder of success". There are forms of solidarity in the club: socializing and finding a job, communal work and the Ladies Auxiliaries, where we can see the caricature through crystallization in time. There are certain things in the club, and as an extension in the Luso-American community of Chicopee, that show us that crystallization of habits and customs is a reality among the Luso descendants in the East Coast of the United States. For instance, in the Luso-American club of Chicopee there is a position of "Manageiro" in the administration of the club. This word was coined by the members, and displays a process of linguistic fusion of the two languages: the basic semantic root is clearly English ("manager") which merges with the masculine norm of the Portuguese occupational vocabulary (-eiro). But what is even more odd to the researcher is that the terminology is "pre-Revolutionary": after the revolution on April 25th, 1974, there were profound changes in the way the local recreational associations, sports clubs, and workers organized themselves. Administrative positions designating power in one individual were abolished for a relatively long period of time. Committees were created instead, and a President or a Director became unthinkable for it was considered a synonym for an "anti-democratic, reactionary" attitude. But as the club began long before the Portuguese revolution, it completely ignored the concept of "Council of Administration" or "Administrative Committee" in its first days. As we can see, these forms were crystallized in time. This proves that the Club has now an autonomous American life that no longer follows Portuguese models. I do not want to judge negatively or positively either the Luso-American community, among whom I lived and I very much admire. I have to point out, however, that they live under some crystallized forms of their own.

By the linguistic analysis of the Minutes of the Club we can see the mixture of both languages. In terms of vocabulary, one can see the typical problems of interference between the two languages. The first time that the word "Manageiro" is used is at the tenth meeting. There are words that are direct translations from English into Portuguese, because the referent was not known in the "Old Country" when they left. Because the

speakers do not know how the referent is pronounced in Portugal nowadays, they coined a new word. Here are some examples: REFRIGIDEIRA (“refrigerator”) when it should be “frigorífico”, TIQUETES (“tickets”, in English) when it should be “bilhetes”, ESTOUA (“Store”), when it should be “loja”), ESTOQUE (“Stock”), when it should be “depósito, armazém”).

Other words are direct or phonetic translations from English into Portuguese, because there is no cultural equivalent concept in the Portuguese culture. Here are some other examples: FEETES (“feet,“) when it could be expressed in “meters”), CHAUAS AND STAUQUES PARIS (“Showers and Stag parties,”) which might be translated as “festa de despedida de solteiros”, although the cultural concept is not equivalent in both the US and Portugal).

Other expressions are literal translations from English into Portuguese for the same reason. Again, some more examples: “Escrever um POSTCARD”, when it should be “postal”), MACHINS DE COCA-COLA (Coke machines), CHAMAR UMA REUNIÃO ESPECIAL (“to call a special meeting,“ when it should be “convocar uma reunião extraordinária”).

The present error analysis was conducted on the Minutes of the first meeting, on April 1st, 1945. The considered corpus is composed by approximately 920 words. There are essentially five big types of errors detected: **1.** ortographic (phonetic graphism – 18 cases – and inside this group there are 3 cases of wrong phonetic production as a basis for the orthography). Another type of error is **2.** vocabulary (wrong expression – 5 cases – and non-standard regionalism – 2 cases). **3.** Structural (a too long sentence – 6 cases, lack or wrong punctuation, including wrong morphological stresses – 3 cases – and inadequate verb tense – 1 case). There is also an error in the logic of **4.** speech (3 cases of disconnection or redundancy), and of **5.** interference (2 cases).

Although the members of the club do not appear to have a high level of schooling, they never used the Portuguese school at Chicopee for purposes of literacy among adults. However, it seems that administrative problems were not the cause for they are non-existent. The two Presidents of the school and of the Club seemed to be good friends, and the place where the school functions belongs to the Portuguese club. The school does not even have to pay rent to the club for using the rooms. There are one classroom, one recreational room for the children, and one room for the teacher’s office.

Now that I have focused crystallization, I would like to briefly question Marcus Hansen’s theory that says that “the third generation wishes to remember what the

second wants to forget”. My observation, reflection and reading of the literature tells me that, at least in the case of the Luso-American community in Chicopee, neither the third, nor the second generation wishes to forget the ways of the so called Old Country: the immigrants carried with them the prejudices, the taboos they had in the mother country. Sexual education was denied to youths in that generation, and there was women’s oppression as a form of authoritarianism for those were the ways that were common in Portugal. Although they are fairly “Americanized”, the third generation wishes to remember the ways of the Old Country as a preserved memory, something like a museum in their memories, even if they question the ways of the second generation, the first American – born citizens.

I would like to end this presentation making some general considerations that, I hope, will illustrate what I have been saying so far:

To the foreign student, ethnicity is one of the most striking characteristics of American culture. Especially after the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and 1960s that created a sense of belonging to a group, and especially during the implementation of the affirmative action during the 1970s, today, most Americans define themselves through an identification with the ethnic stock of their ancestors. “I am an Asian-American,” or “ I am an American with an Italian heritage” is the common response given to the foreign student who asks an American for self-identification. The notion of America as the “melting pot,” as Max Lerner puts it when he quotes Israel Zangwill is “a dangerous metaphor since it implied that all the immigrant strains must be purified by being assimilated with something more American” (LERNER 1972: 117). Assimilation means, Peter Isaac Rose argues (ROSE 1990: 78), conformity to the Anglo ways, and therefore loss of the particularity of each ethnic group. Max Lerner also mentioned Horace Kallen’s image of cultural pluralism in the United States as a symphony orchestra, with an harmonic music played by different sections.

America can be also seen as a “Nation of Nations”, as Walter Whitman suggests metaphorically, and this idea grew out of the important role that the sense of belonging to a specific group played in the making of this country.

“Diversity” and “Pluralism” are two of the most proudly advertised aspects of the American culture. When after all “Pluralism” is only one aspect of the process of an alien to get adjusted to a new culture. Peter Isaac Rose considered what he called “assimilation,” “amalgamation,” and “cultural pluralism” as three possible ways. According to Rose, the immigrants that were assimilated in the American society were

integrated through conformity to the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant ways of living. “Amalgamation” corresponds to the concept of the “Melting Pot” with inter-exchange of both cultures. “Cultural Pluralism”, continues Rose, was said to bring richness to the nation as a whole, for there are contributions of the various tendencies.

These aspects were used to encourage people to immigrate to America. “Tolerance,” “Freedom,” “Equality,” “Opportunity” were key-words used in the propaganda speeches that drew immigrants to the US. No matter how appealing it might have sounded, the immigrants knew that they were going to find a strange, new world, and as “There is safety in numbers,” they went in groups.

In early colonial times, the settlers were still isolated sailors, but as time went by, people went to the US relying on somebody they knew would help them out. They were prepared to do the same for a recently arrived relative or friend, building, therefore, a chain between the “Old Country” and the “New World.” As different groups of settlers were beginning their life in a specific part of the continent, identification of individuals with their group became particularly strong. “We, the English in Virginia,” as opposed to what they, “the Germans in Pennsylvania” were “doing over there,” became a form of perceiving the diversity that all the immigrants brought with them. American diversity is created from the different customs brought from the “Old Country,” as well as different ways in which those habits were adapted to the new ways of life.

In other countries ethnicity is deeply connected to the maintenance of original local stocks. In the US, as Native American groups were being annihilated through the genocide by the European colonists, ethnicity became more and more connected with the import of new stocks through immigration.

Immigration in a larger perspective is one of the dynamic trends that shaped American culture. What makes the US an original case of ethnicity is that, except for the Native Americans, all ethnic groups came from backgrounds foreign to the country, and although they are proud of their ethnic roots, they also rank themselves in an hierarchy where “the best ones are the oldest ones”. One of the effects of a belief in such a scale is the phenomenon of obsession with becoming successful, attempting to “make life better than they could back in the Old Country”. The cult of social mobility as a group status symbol develops rivalry and competition among the various ethnic groups. The individuals and the ethnic groups who are better equipped to succeed in the new society are the ones whose ways more closely resemble those of the majority. The

more the group is exposed to an urban and industrial tradition at home, the faster it has a chance to ascend in the "ladder of success" in the New World. The host society sees advantages in taking the new group if they are schooled because it will be seen as a valuable asset, and therefore worthwhile welcoming.

The faster the group can become "Americanized", the better its chances of competing and winning in a hyper-developed, corporate capitalistic system. Therefore, the group has to compensate for the loss – more or less voluntarily – of its original ways through valorization of what is particular to the group. On the surface, American ethnicity manifests the individuality of the group through the eating of the so called "ethnic foods", and through festivities or celebrations brought from the old countries. However, after some years or generations, these customs become different from the ones that were brought in the first place, because they acquire a new life, in spite of crystallization. The customs suffer in America an evolution which is separate from the evolution that the same customs suffer in the Old Country. Therefore they are not the same as when they were taken to America, and they are also different from the ones that coexist in time in the Old Country, which, again shows that same crystallization.

Ethnicity in the US is different in concept from ethnicity in other countries because all ethnic groups, except the Native Americans emigrated from elsewhere. Because American society is very diversified, the common bond to all the ethnic groups must be respect for pluralism. All ethnic groups begin to be "just one more group of immigrants that arrives in the US". I would like to argue that in an early stage of ethnicity, such as is the case of the Luso-American community of Chicopee, the common bond that produces unity within the diversity is the attempt to prolong and conserve the characteristics of what was left behind in a crystallization process. In that attempt, the characteristics are over-emphasized in order to be affirmed, and therefore become what we might call a caricature of the previous ethnic cultural traits.

I hope to have shown that ethnicity in the US is ruled by the importation of ethnic forms from other countries, and that the forms of ethnicity are not directly "transplanted" to the new continent, but refined through a process of sublimation with American characteristics. Not even the third generation, for so long in the history of criticism of immigration considered the one that "went back to the roots", manages to reproduce the ways of the Old Country in America. This notion comes namely from the school of thought that believes in Marcus Hansen's theory concerning the third generation immigrants as the key-figures of the reconciliation between the ways the

immigrants left in the Old Country, and those they developed in the US. But I contend that the ethnic groups are by no means units that were “transplanted” from the country of origin and brought intact to the US. If that were the case, ethnic communities in the US would be faithful reproductions of the locals from which the immigrants went. The ways of the ethnic communities are social constructions of cultural expressions and not the expressions themselves, as Eric Wolfe referred (WOLFE 1982:56). Regardless of whether these communities are in an enclave, protected from pressures from the majority or in a ghetto more or less coexisting in parallel with the majority, it is not true that the reproductions are faithful. No Chinatown or Nihon-machi in an American city is to be taken as a realistic sample of what the People’s Republic of China or Japan look like, no matter what eager tourists with cameras willing to taste “different” food choose to believe.

To illustrate the idea that an ethnic group in the US is not a faithful replica of the societies from which they went, my study focused on the descriptive analysis of a New England Portuguese-American community in Chicopee, Massachusetts. I contended that although some of the participants in the community nostalgically believe, or want outsiders to believe, that their community proudly remains faithful to the Portuguese ways, the community is not and I quote one of the respondents “a piece of Portugal”.

I described briefly the characteristics of the Club, through an inevitable filter that comes from my bias because I am a native born Portuguese. It is necessary to show the general framework of immigration in the US from the historical point of view, even in a cursory way, if we are to understand some specific characteristics of this group. The major immigration waves to the US, in which the Portuguese immigrants can generally be placed are also important to understand. The ways in which people describe themselves and tell their ancestors’ stories, ancestors meaning sometimes only their own parents, reveals extraordinarily well the self-definition of the group as a collective unit. Indeed moving to a new place affects the notion of time and memory, for they seem to be telling a very remote story in time, just because the life they are describing is very different from their own.

The situation of the Luso-American community within the broader context of Chicopee at large as a overwhelmingly predominantly white population where the Poles, the Canadians, and more recently the Puerto Ricans play an important role is also important.

I would like to have had the time to have mentioned support institutions and religious customs. I would like to have had the time to have described Chicopee in its historic as well as its current context: the original population stocks and main immigration groups as well as a description of the population in Chicopee in terms of the occupational structure, racial composition, economic level and their political identification. The relations among the main ethnic groups in Chicopee also.

But all that will be for another time. I would like to conclude by saying that it is always dangerous to generalize concepts inductively, but from what I have seen in Chicopee, I believe that there is crystallization among the Portuguese-Americans in the East Coast, this constitutes NOT a myth, but a reality, and I also believe that the second and the third generation have the same interest to remember the habits of the Old Country, being by no means a reactionary community.

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