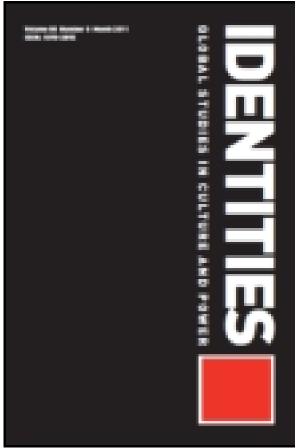
This article was downloaded by: [Columbia University]
On: 10 November 2013, At: 13:42
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gide20

Herbert J Gans: an interview with Shamus Khan

Herbert J Gans [a] & Shamus Khan [a]

[a] Department of Sociology, Knox Hall , Columbia University , 606 W 122nd Street, New York , NY , 10027 , USA

Published online: 08 May 2012.

To cite this article: Herbert J Gans & Shamus Khan (2012) Herbert J Gans: an interview with Shamus Khan, Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 19:2, 135-148, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2012.676262

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2012.676262

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly

forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power
Vol. 19, No. 2, March 2012, 135–148

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Herbert J Gans: an interview with Shamus Khan

(*Received November 2011*)

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

Speaker key

SK Shamus Khan
HG Herbert J. Gans

SK In your *Identities* piece you argue that cultural sociologists can't really agree on a definition of their object. I wonder how much of a problem this is really is, because often academics can't agree on definitions. If we take the example of class, Marx has a different definition than Weber, Weber has a different definition than Bourdieu. And class is a very rich research area. So I wonder why not agreeing on a definition of class is not a problem for the research area, but it is a problem for cultural sociology?

HG I think many definitions of culture are floating around; Kroeber and Kluckhohn wrote a whole book about them already in the l950s (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). However, there are only a few definitions of class, and they are all about economic and other inequalities.

SK So there's a kind of commonality to them.

HG Yes, a big commonality. The main debate has been about whether classes are identifiable and bounded social phenomena or not, to which the answer is yes in some European and other countries, but not here, where they are better, if not perfectly described as strata in economic and social pecking orders. And the strata can be operationalized comparatively easily – and you can then even call them classes. The classic operational definition was a combination of income, occupation and education, now identified with Sandy Hollingshead, the Yale sociologist (Hollingshead 1975). However, by now we know that wealth is important, the number of years or generations in one stratum, various aspects of ancestral background, what kind of school you went to, etc., so we have complicated the measuring and made it come closer to empirical reality. But culture goes off into several different directions; there are several cognitive, emotional, value and practice definitions. And then there's Ann Swidler's tools definition (Swidler 1986), which is still to my mind the most sensible one, but it is hard to connect to all the others. And so students of culture first have to wander through the forest of definitions.

ISSN 1070-289X print/ISSN 1547-3384 online
© 2012 Taylor & Francis
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2012.676262
http://www.tandfonline.com

SK I wonder then why it's become so popular, particularly in American sociology. You note in the piece that it's now the third largest section and that cultural sociology is one of the more popular areas for young people, particularly graduate students. Do you have any suspicions for why this is the case? And do you have any worries about what this means for the direction of sociology?

HG I have asked at ASA and in the section, but since sociologists don't study themselves very much, little is known about who's in the section. But the ratio of student to faculty members is much greater in that section than others, and maybe the students haven't quite decided where they belong. There's nothing wrong with that; they are after all students with the right to explore their intellectual futures . . . You know, I played a marginal role in founding the section, but then it was mostly about the sociology of culture, and the big difference was between the students of high culture and those of low or popular culture. I think the sociology of culture group must be very small by now. ASA recently did a study comparing the numerical rank of the sections by their rank in employability and the culture section was very low on that hierarchy, so it may be that many of the student members will have to find something else, although they may also belong to other sections already.

SK Do you think it's that sociology has become less political?

HG I think it has, and that's what my piece is basically about. I think cultural sociology too often tries to avoid economic and political subjects, and I can't quite figure out why. Part of it may be that American sociology came in part out of a Christian reform movement that was for the most part non-political; then it went quantitative, and numbers crunchers are not often political. The pressure to be value free didn't help either and being non-economic and non-political may have helped this young discipline find a niche.

After World War II and I guess for the next 40 or 50 years, the field had what looks now like an outlier period – after World War II, sociology attracted many children of immigrants, and some had been red diaper babies, which produced a significant interest in economic and political issues. Some very prominent red diaper babies livened up American sociology after World War II. However, thanks in part to upward mobility, the red diaper babies didn't buy red diapers for their babies; it's all Pampers now.

SK They became terribly bourgeois.

HG No, bourgeois but not terribly so, and though the politically inclined ones were always a minority, the next generation became non-political – and some got involved in the race, class and gender triad which was political inside the discipline but not very much in the outside world. Perhaps this is beginning to change again, because the times have changed, and if we respond to the times, the sociology of the political economy, or political–economic sociology should become a growing field. But for the moment, it is fair to say that many sociologists, or at least the ones with tenure, became upper middle class, but that's true of most academic disciplines. Maybe you can put it this way; as sociologists became economically and socially more comfortable, so did sociology. . . .

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

SK Look at the office we're in.[1]

HG Yes, I know. Sociology was never terribly Left, and when I was a graduate student I still remember a professor – he may have been an anthropologist saying politics is part of culture, now let's talk about culture. I was shocked. But I went to Chicago and the Chicago School ecologists were covertly sociology sort of anti-government, especially in Chicago, but overtly, I don't think they thought much about politics outside of the ivory tower. You know, if you look at Andy Abbott's book on the Chicago department after World War II there was a lot of politics in the department, but that wasn't American politics (Abbott 1999). Conversely, some of the students, probably more in the other social sciences, were involved in American politics at least as it played out on campus, but not in department politics.

SK I'd like to return to something you had said about some of your early contributions to culture, with high culture/low culture. As you know I write on inequality, but I am also a cultural sociologist. My work on inequality explores the lives of wealthy people, not poor people (Khan 2010). And I sometimes joke that culture is for rich people and structure is for poor people. You quote Orlando Patterson in the piece, and you talk about 'the relentless preference for relying upon structural factors like low incomes, joblessness, poor schools and bad housing for explaining poverty'. If we think about the explanations of wealth, whether it comes out of Bourdieu or other scholars, we often end up talking about cultural institutions like operas, plays, music, social clubs. I wonder if you have any sense of why this is; why it is that we're very comfortable mobilizing culture for advantage and structure for disadvantage, but that the reverse doesn't seem to happen as much, particularly for culture and poverty.

HG I remember reading Bourdieu on cultural capital and how important some high-culture sophistication was for getting a fancy corporate or government job. That may be so in France but I think American MBAs who told prospective employers of their interest in the opera would probably be turned down for a job, although it's also true that many Ivy League graduates wind up on Wall Street even if all they majored in the liberal arts. But I think wealth in America has to be explained by structure, whether old economic political and status structures for old wealth, and the new service-and-finance economy as well as the political power they can buy with the new wealth. In any case, I am not sure about your culture–structure comparison but the point I make in the article, and it is well reflected in Orlando Patterson's quote, is that structure is a code word for economic and political analysis. It's a code word also for neo-Marxism, I think and cultural sociology, at least in America, keeps its distance from anything resembling neo-Marxist analysis. Maybe it's another example of tenured academics, especially at elite universities, becoming too comfortable. If you live in Cambridge, MA, as I once did, people used to joke that the way you learned about the problems of African Americans was by asking your maid.

Anyway, I think that's the important thing, that structure is connected to politics and economics, and culture, at least the cultural sociology kind, stays away from them. And I don't think the high-culture/low-culture analysis is still relevant, because if you're talking about cognitive, emotional, value and practice conceptions of culture, I don't think they are applied to high-culture and popular culture research. I should explain: I haven't done much work in the sociology of culture except for that one book (Gans 1975) which was really about social stratification and applied a version of Lloyd Warner's view of the class structure to culture (Warner *et al*. 1960). Warner was interested in class culture and talked about it in class, although he didn't do much with it.

But sociologists have never been very interested in popular culture – the first major contributors to its study were European Jewish refugees who began by reacting to the Nazi and Stalinist use of mass culture and the commercialization of culture. One reason it and media sociology attract so few sociologists is that it's low status, but we also haven't done much with high culture. However, that requires a cultural sophistication not in the sociological research curriculum. Anyway, I think a status element is involved here, but that's not the whole story. Also, now that the class divide between high and popular culture is allegedly gone (though it really is not), it may now be prestigious enough to study. However, now there's also cultural studies which loves to write about popular culture, and though I don't know how cultural sociology feels about cultural studies, I suspect the latter is considered low status – and it's also not social science.

SK I'm often surprised that sport isn't studied more in sociology, and I think that some of what you've said explains part of this, which is that as a popular phenomenon it's not a particularly popular phenomenon to study or a high-status one. But if you think of, sort of, collective enterprises that people organize their lives around in the United States and elsewhere, sport is huge.

HG Oh, yes. If it's huge, then maybe that's another reason we don't want to study it. Also, you know, it's a male thing, although I'm surprised women haven't done more with female athletics.

SK Or that we haven't used sport to talk about the ways in which men create meaning and intimacy with one another.

HG I'm not sure they just create meaning and intimacy; don't forget competition. As for the spectators, don't forget those who use it as a chance to get drunk and let themselves go, and with commercial and college sports, they experience a weekend, and socially cost-free sense of community.

SK So also on this high/low theme, your book (Gans 1974) was written well before *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984) came out – maybe a decade before . . .

HG Yes, actually the book started as a term paper for Elihu Katz and David Riesman's seminar at the University of Chicago in 1948 or l949, and I had published some articles about it in the 1950s and 1960s.

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

SK Yes, which was, I think, probably well before Bourdieu was thinking about this. He was still a young kid playing rugby in the south-west of France. But you've expressed a certain degree of scepticism about Bourdieu.

HG Yes.

SK And I'm curious about this, because to a degree Bourdieu does some of what you'd like to see within cultural sociology. That is, he provides a very structural account, but with cultural elements, and he's very concerned with inequality. And he's very political as well. So some of the things that you worry about with cultural sociology, Bourdieu seems to address pretty head on. And at his core he would be thought of as a kind of cultural sociologist. So I'm curious why Bourdieu doesn't play more centrally for you.

HG Since he was a boy when I went to graduate school, he never made the reading list, and I now read in so many fields that I have been negligent on some of the contemporary authors. I did read *Distinction* of course, also his book on television, and some of his other works. Although my book came out first and though it has sold pretty well, *Distinction* knocked me out in the citation game. *Distinction* is more empirical and it also has a much more solid aesthetic grounding. In addition, Bourdieu came out for high culture in the end whereas I advocated more cultural equality – 'to each his own on matters of taste, and so . . . ' And his book is more academic; my writing is less technical.

But what I'm unhappy about with Bourdieu is, well, two things. First of all, he dominates the discipline and a single scholar should not have such power. It's not his fault, but I think it takes away from the diversity that we need. Also, as he is read in America, I think he is sometimes depoliticized and his structural analysis is downplayed. Still, though his notion of social capital was superior to Coleman's (Coleman 1998), I wish he had said more about money, that is, economic or financial capital. Again, it's not his fault, but the concept has diverted poverty research and antipoverty policy; it's too easy for sociologists to study the social capital of the poor – as if they had anything to invest it in – but still, some researchers and of course conservative pundits suggest or imply that social capital will enable the poor to pull each other up by their collective bootstraps . . .

SK You describe your piece as a polemical piece, which it is, I think, and also a very provocative one. I'm curious what the stakes are. So let's say cultural sociologists wake up tomorrow, and they say, 'Gans is right, we need to follow him!' Or they wake up tomorrow, and they never read Gans, and they go on doing what they're doing. What's the difference? What are the stakes for this fight?

HG It is a polemic; it doesn't really cover the field or give enough attention to the cultural sociologists who give equal weight to structure – it needs a book to do justice to them and the field as a whole. I talked about only a few cultural sociologists, so it's an unfair piece in that respect. As for the stakes: I've had tenure, I'm an emeritus, so there are no material stakes, and I didn't write

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

it with stakes in mind anyway. I have always written about phenomena that interests me or questions I wanted to answer for myself. I only hope that if people don't like the piece or disagree with its overall thrust, I hope they will argue with it, which is one way I learn.

SK The reason I ask is because your career has very much been as a public sociologist. So if you think of many of the major debates in the United States since the 1960s, you didn't lead them, but you had something to say about them, and something to say which people actually listened to. [Gans laughs] No, I mean this quite seriously. And you enjoyed a kind of position that I think it would be very difficult for a sociologist to enjoy today. I mean, I don't know how many copies *The Urban Villagers* (Gans 1962) sold, or *The Levittowners* (Gans 1967), but it was a major piece of the American conversation. I have two questions about this. It seems to me that a lot of your career is about the stakes of ideas, and their potential public impact of this. But the second question is . . . You know, when I write a book now, and I talk to some of my senior colleagues, they warn me about the public impact of my work. And they warn me a little bit about the public impact of my work by suggesting that if the work has a large public impact, it's not very scholarly. And if I think of your generation of sociologists, and the generation before you – we can think of in the United States people like Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, C. Wright Mills – these are people who were both respected academically and had a public impact.

HG First, I think you overestimate the goodness of the old days; as compared to today, only a handful of sociologists became publicly known and read. There are so many more today so fewer stand out. Second, you picked an interesting trio from those old days because Bell and Glazer started out as editors and European style essayists, and Mills had an unhappy time as a researcher at Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research who became a public figure in the political and cultural uprisings of the 1960s. Dan Bell got his PhD for *End of Ideology* (Bell 1960), which is full of comments about how awful sociology is. Nat Glazer also got his for a book that he had already written (Glazer 1961). And David Riesman, who was probably the first public sociologist of the post-war era started as a lawyer and law professor who later educated himself in sociology and the other social sciences and built his career there rather than in the law. They were not a typical breed even then and I think this may still apply even today to many of the people who become public sociologists.

As for me, I am a refugee from Nazi Germany and my family came without money and perhaps that was one reason that I have always been interested in democracy and in equality – also issues that became publicly more important in the l960s. Also, originally I thought I wanted to be a journalist, and then I discovered that most of the things I was writing in high school were essays which were called sociology when I got to college, so I became an instant sociologist, or maybe I started training myself as such in high school already. But I was unhappy, because as a graduate discipline, sociology was not interested

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

in policy, so I got my MA in an interdisciplinary social science division and later, I got a PhD in city planning – or in social planning, really. Both my MA and PhD were taken in brand new programmes which had not yet developed a list of required courses so in both cases I could choose courses from all over the social sciences. Literally, I am trained as a social scientist and a social planner (policy analyst is today's term) who had already chosen sociology as his favourite among the disciplines. Both my training and my experience in journalism, in high school and later in the army – or maybe just the way my upbringing shaped my curiosity – got me interested in particular research issues that often crossed disciplines, and as a planner who sought solutions for social problems, I also had to cross disciplines.

I should add that I was lucky; I began my graduate education just after the end of World War II as the social sciences began to flourish and the research money began to flow, which among other things provided a lot of freedom that is no longer available to today's student. I spent almost all of my 4 years studying for the PhD and the next dozen years after I had got a PhD before I took my first full time teaching job.

SK Well, when I think about the three stories you just told me about – Riesman, Glazer and you – actually all three of you didn't really have a firm training in terms of being disciplined into a discipline like contemporary sociology, particularly if we were to compare this to the kind of disciplining we give our graduate students today. And I wonder if that's part of the way you think of your audience, not just as the disciplinary audience that you've been trained into speaking to, but instead something a little bit broader.

HG Hold it: I think we all picked up as much disciplinary training as today's students, but we did it differently in a very different era and to some extent by ourselves. Bell, Glazer and Riesman were also a whole lot smarter than most other graduate students of their time and probably our time as well – Riesman clerked for Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter – but maybe neither they, nor I, were as you put it 'disciplined into a discipline' – we weren't told this is what you have to study to become a sociologist and get a tenure track job in a research university. The social sciences were very small, much less bureaucratized than today, and so they and we had more intellectual freedom. I was also lucky because I studied fieldwork with Everett Hughes, who was a brilliant and much underestimated sociologist – and as you must know, doing fieldwork requires an intense preoccupation with method because you constantly have to ask yourself about the data you are getting; whether its reliable and valid by fieldwork standards and that makes you far more disciplined than the students who analyse an already available database. They don't have to ask where the data comes from and whether the data gathering was done properly – and if they found out, what could they do anyway?

Finally, I always tell my students that fieldwork is the most scientific of sociological methods because it gets you closest to the people you are studying, far more than survey data and interviews. Surveys mostly ask general and

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

often superficial questions and they do not always know how their respondents interpret them. Even with interviews, people only tell you what they do, whereas in fieldwork – you can see what they do, and you can then talk to them about what they did, thought and felt. So the culture/structure distinction doesn't make much sense in fieldwork, which is another theme in my article, although I didn't pursue it sufficiently. The piece needs a sequel, presenting a framework in which the two are combined. I thought of writing it and I've got some notes on it, but I'll let somebody else write it, probably if someone has not already done so.

I should say a little bit about the disciplinary bias against public sociology, which reflects the common distrust of scholars for the general public – and of course vice versa. If the public sociology is of high quality and the general public appreciates it, that bias will disappear, but in these times and in today's job market, it may make sense to begin as a conventional scholar and postpone intentional public sociological work until you obtain tenure. More important, since in the end, the public decides what will be public sociology, there's something to be said for unintentional public sociology, for doing research on questions that interest you, but in which the answers are written in plain English. That explains most of what I have written. It also helps if the questions are topical ones that non-sociologists are also asking as well.

SK We've moved a little away from the piece, and I actually want to ask you two final questions on race and ethnicity in America. So the first is on what has become a popular theme in the press and among our students: post-racial America. Although in academic circles it's not a respected idea, in part because it seems to us so manifestly not true, when teaching our students it's something that they very much talk about. My students will either claim that they don't 'see race', or they mobilize Obama as an example of how far we've come. And I'm curious about this, because I think, on the one hand, Obama is not just window dressing; it's a non-trivial, symbolic event. But on the other, since 2007, we've seen an amplification of racial inequality in the United States. And so I'm curious about, how these, sort of, two balls are in the air at the same time. On the one hand, public rhetoric of racial progress – of post-race, and on the other, an aggravation or increase in racial tension and racial inequality in the United States.

HG You have to be careful when talking about our, that is, Columbia's students because they are mostly white and mostly upper middle class and so they see a very limited part of America. Some or many may see a bit of the rest of it when they graduate and go out into the real world and find out that the racial glass they saw as more than half full is actually less so, even for upper middle class blacks. As for Obama, yes he is the first dark-skinned president, but no, he may have been an aberration if he loses the next election because of the continuing if largely subliminal racial bias against him. Also, Obama was originally elected as an advocate of change. He never quite said

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

what change was, so he attracted a wide group of young people and others, including blacks, but he cannot repeat that vague strategy in 2012.

SK Although I think the black vote is always overestimated, because, you know, they say 91% of blacks voted for Obama; probably 88% voted for Clinton.

HG Yes, blacks have voted solidly Democratic since 1932, largely for economic reasons, and that cannot change as long as the Republicans represent the very rich, Southern whites of all classes, and in this continuing recession – which may be becoming the Little Depression – the economically insecure who do not want to share anything with the less well off. But race is also only one factor in the political equation; in 2008, the desire for change trumped Obama's skin colour, just as the Tea Party accepted the much darker Herman Cain because he catered to their interests and anxieties. You know, colour is sometimes very relevant; but it's also often a proxy for class, and blacks are our bottom class in the way that Gypsies are kept at the bottom of the class structure all over Central and Eastern Europe.

SK You know, in elite American institutions, race is the only indicator of diversity that really counts. So Columbia is an incredibly racially diverse campus right now. It's a majority–minority; 13% of the students are black in the incoming class. And it's a very important transition, but I think a lot of our students read that as saying, well, since Columbia has gone through this kind of change, it must mean that in the United States the experience of blacks and whites might not be that different.

HG I am sure our sociology of race courses teaches them what goes on outside the campus but maybe some students do not want to see it.

SK Sadly that's often true. Yet while these institutions have become more diverse, they've also become wealthier over the last 20 years. And yet at American elite schools we are often blind to the complete lack of class diversity in our classrooms – we often don't see it.

HG Who's we here? the less affluent students see it all the time. But you are also right because the higher you are in class status, the less visible class becomes, in part because you have so little contact with and so much distance from the less affluent classes. One of the reasons I'm here at Columbia is because the Ford Foundation gave three chairs in 1969 to Columbia to be filled by urbanists, and urban was then as now a code word for race. There were then only a few black students on campus, and they were mostly children of ambassadors or of elite African Americans. So Columbia was always ahead in diversity, partly because the UN was here, but it was always racial diversity and class homogeneity.

SK Its Jewish quota was not as stringent as others, particularly Princeton.

HG They were all pretty bad, but that all ended after World War II, partially because of the GI Bill; and with New York being heavily Jewish, Jewish students took advantage of it. And when more professors were needed, the ones with PhDs were hired, which is how even the Ivies ended up with Jewish professors.

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

SK A question about ethnicity; have you ever heard students or others talk about a post-ethnic order in America?

HG No, I don't think so, but nearly a half century after the resumption of massive immigration into America in 1965, I think ethnicity is fast becoming irrelevant beyond the immigrant generation. I think the pace of assimilation has speeded up since the post-World War II period when the descendants of the nineteenth century mass European immigration began to be accepted as Americans.

SK What accounts for the speed up?

HG First, more of the immigrants were middle-class people, especially the first waves of that immigration – remember the Europeans had been almost entirely rural poor, and frequently illiterate people. Assimilation requires acceptance by majority groups and this time, the newcomers, other than poor ones with dark skins, had an easier time and their children even more so.

In 1990 Mary Waters coined the term ethnic option to suggest that people, especially the children of intermarriage could now choose their ethnicity (Waters 1990), but interestingly enough, I don't think many have taken up the option – I think most, though by no means all, just dropped it. It's revealing that hybrid ethnicity is no longer based on national origin – the children of Chinese or Mexican immigrants now are more likely to become Asian American and Latinos rather than Chinese or Mexican Americans. The descendants of the European immigrants never called themselves or were called European Americans. Richard Alba once described them as such, but his naming did not stick even in the academic literature (Alba 1990).

Today, intermarriage is more likely to take place between Chinese and Anglos than between Chinese and Koreans, and at a rising rate. We call their kids biracial but don't notice they are biethnic as well. In the 1950s, Italian women still married Irish men, and Polish ones, German men – very few would have found an Anglo, that is, a third or fourth generation American spouse. But ethnoracial intermarriage is still mainly a middle-class phenomenon. Class makes a big difference.

In fact, poor immigrants, especially with darker skin, still suffer from a good deal of discrimination and illegal Mexican immigrants are demonized as an undercaste these days just as much as poor African Americans, but they have been an undercaste for centuries. The existence of new dark-skinned undercastes probably helps to explain why Asian Americans and light-skinned Latinos intermarry with whites at such a high rate, and why they are being identified as white by other whites at an equally high rate. That took three quarters of a century for the descendants of the European immigrants, and they were white-swarthy, not darker skinned.

There's another reason why today's immigrants, other than the poorer ones, are accepted so quickly; they also Americanize at a faster pace. Loyalty to the parental language has a shorter life span than ever before, and the cultural practices of the parental country of origin are given up more quickly. There are

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

still enclave industries and neighbourhoods where immigrants can work and live their entire lives without learning English but these are getting scarcer, except maybe among Mexican immigrants in California and other parts of south-west America.

One more reason that deserves mentioning: global culture. Unfortunately, American research into immigrant assimilation began and still only begins after their arrival here, when in fact we should always have also tried to study the potential newcomers or at least their communities before they came here. We assumed those who immigrated were the brightest and most ambitious – a nationalistic but not necessarily accurate assumption – but today many immigrants are already culturally bright. American culture and English have diffused so widely by now all over the world that America is not as strange for today's newcomers as it was for the Europeans who came here between the 1870s and 1924. What the internet does to further speed up what I call anticipatory acculturation still needs to be determined. But the moral of this story is that we need a great deal more comparative immigration research, seeing how acculturation and assimilation work in all the countries which are receiving significant numbers of immigrants.

SK So finally, I want to talk about urban America a little bit . . .

HG I'm supposed to be an urban sociologist, although I still have not come up with a credible definition of city.

SK Well, this might be related, because I've been having a series of conversations with people about how New York isn't *a* city, it's multiple cities. It may seem like it's this diverse melting pot of American life. In some ways that's very accurate, in some ways it's not. I'm curious about your thoughts on the transformations in this city over the last, say, 40 years. We have a certain degree of migration into the city by wealthy whites and also wealthy non-whites; the abandonment of the city that there was some anxiety about 40 years ago isn't happening. But New York has become both one of the wealthiest and the poorest places in the United States. It's an incredibly diverse place: there's 170 languages spoken in New York, over one-third of our New Yorkers are immigrants – if you include children of immigrants like you and me, it's more than 50% of the city. And so it seems to be both a place that's a little bit about the promise of urban life, in terms of the kind of encounters you get from this diversity of people and the diversity of places that you find in the city. But it is also a sort of warning bell of some of the transitions that are happening in America. Particularly if you look at the degree of inequality, the concentrations of residential segregation, the huge differences or disparities between the census tract on the upper East Side where the average family makes about $200,000 a year and the census tract in east New York where the average family is living on just above $10,000 a year. I'm curious if you think there's been a transition that's happened in cities, or better, how these two contradictory processes – the promise of New York as a city and the pathology of New York as a city – are going hand-in-hand in recent years.

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

HG No, I don't think anything's happened recently that wasn't here a hundred years ago, when the white working class was killing the blacks. You know, first of all, New York or at least Manhattan is, as we sometimes say, an island off the coast of America. It's not in any sense a typical American city. In fact, most of the cities that urban sociologists study – Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and maybe a couple of others – and Paris, London, Rome, Berlin and the like in Europe, are all also distinctive cities – they're big capital cities or regional cities. I am not sure if the American cities have ever been very different except the poverty was more severe and the urban rich weren't quite so wealthy. Also, the poor and the working class were not always as visible to researchers as they are now. The Chicago School was mostly interested in immigrants, even though Park wrote that canonical essay on the City (Park 1915) and many of the researchers didn't even study the immigrant communities, they had people come into their campus offices to be interviewed. And it must have been immigrants who spoke English, because the Chicago School didn't speak any of the immigrant languages other than perhaps the German they learned in Heidelberg. Also, by now most of the European capitals are in some ways similar to the American ones; they are racially as or more diverse than New York. In fact, European cities have changed a bit more, because they are still learning to live with racial and ethnic diversity.

I think maybe there are two changes in Manhattan since I arrived here in 1961. One is that the poor are no longer so invisible. It's more complex than just visibility since some of the spatial and other boundaries between the classes have become a bit more porous. The other change is that, beginning perhaps around the 1970s – all of a sudden there were lots of jobs for single, young people, who liked to go out at night, especially in New York since most lived in tiny apartments or with roommates, therefore had to get out. I remember when First Avenue, Third Avenue were one singles' bar after another; it was really a huge youth quarter. These young people also went to the plays, the movies, the concerts and other musical performances, and provided the audiences for the various new cultures that New York has become famous for. Eventually, of course, they got married and had kids, and they had to move out to the suburbs, because, you know, once you have two kids you can't afford . . .

SK To live in New York . . .

HG Especially if they want or need to send their children to private schools. And once you have children, you cannot go out so often anymore. Today, with the depression, or the recession that we're in now, the supply of jobs for young single professionals is shrinking and some of the entertainment and cultural facilities they supported are going to go broke. I think 25% of the undergraduates at Columbia go to work on Wall Street, or have been going to work on Wall Street, and the reduction of jobs there could affect this university and I suppose all the Ivy League schools.

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

SK I can imagine two directions. It has the potential to radicalize them – maybe not radicalize, but I'm curious if they will think there's been an abdication from the contract that they saw themselves entering into. They have basically said, 'We agree to pound the pavement, work, and you agree to pay us a lot of money!' I don't know how hard they work, but they do go through this very competitive, very expensive process where the reward is fairly clear and has mostly been guaranteed. And you can imagine a progressive move because they think the deal they entered into has not come to fruition. But there could be a very conservative move – blaming the poor and government expenses for the collapse of the economy and the loss of their 'good jobs'. Where the attribution of responsibility happens among the minds of those young people is really going to matter: if it's the poor people who are bringing us down through social spending, or if it's capital in the way in which Wall Street was a gambling industry that gambled away their future. And this attribution of responsibility is very cultural.

HG I am not sure how much is added by calling it cultural, because those are really the main possible reactions to the structural reality they face, and I think both will come to pass. I don't think many of the graduates who would have gone to work on Wall Street have joined the Occupy Wall Street and other Occupy movements – and don't forget some of these young people are now competing for unpaid intern jobs. But some of what's happening here is happening all over Europe, and, you know, if its debt and other crises worsen; the Euro crashes, we're going to have this conversation in a number of cities, and then, you know, with somewhat the same consequences.

SK Well, thank you Herb. This has been really fun.

HG Yes, I've enjoyed it too.

Note

1. Shamus Khan's office at Columbia University, which is nice.

References

Abbott, A., 1999. *Department & discipline: Chicago sociology at one hundred*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Alba, R.D., 1990. *Ethnic identity: the transformation of white America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bell, D., 1960. *The end of ideology: on the exhaustion of the political ideas in the fifties*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Bourdieu, P., 1984. *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Coleman, J., 1998. *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gans, H.J., 1962. *The urban villagers: group and class in the life of Italian-Americans*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Gans, H.J., 1967. *The Levittowners: ways of life and politics in a new suburban community*. New York: Knopf.

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013

Gans, H.J., 1974. *Popular culture and high culture: an analysis and evaluation of taste*. New York: Basic Books.

Glazer, N., 1961. *The Social Basis of American Communism*. New York: Harcourt Press.

Hollingshead, A.B., 1975. Four factor index of social status. Unpublished working paper. *Yale Journal of Sociology* [online], 8. Available from: http://www.yale.edu/sociology/yjs/yjs_fall_2011.pdf

Khan, S.R., 2010. *Privilege: the making of an adolescent elite at St. Paul's school*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kroeber, A. and Kluckhohn, C., 1952. *Culture*. New York: Meridian Books.

Park, R.E., 1915. The city: suggestions for the investigation of human behavior in the city environment. *American Journal of Sociology*, 20 (5), 577–612.

Swidler, A., 1986. Culture in action: symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review*, 51 (2), 273–286.

Warner, W.L., Meekel, M., and Eells, K., 1960. *Social class in America. The evaluation of status*. New York: Harper and Row.

Waters, M., 1990. *Ethnic options: choosing identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

HERBERT J GANS is Robert S. Lynd Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Columbia University.
ADDRESS: Department of Sociology, Knox Hall, Columbia University, 606 W 122nd Street, New York, NY, 10027, USA.
Email: hjg1@columbia.edu

SHAMUS KHAN is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Columbia University.
ADDRESS: Department of Sociology, Knox Hall, Columbia University, 606 W 122nd Street, New York, NY, 10027, USA.
Email: sk2905@columbia.edu

Downloaded by [Columbia University] at 13:42 10 November 2013