Introduction

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Introduction

Arthur O. Lovejoy once remarked that despite a popular belief to the contrary, philosophers are “persons who suffer from a morbid solicitude to know what they are talking about.” Although he put the point amusingly, Lovejoy meant it seriously. And since the passage occurs in one of his earliest and best-known essays in the history of ideas, “On the Discrimination of Romanticisms,” we can safely assume that he thought this way of characterizing philosophers ought to apply to intellectual historians as well. I think it also applies with special force to historians who deal with ethnic and religious issues. The essays collected in this book are intended to illustrate that conviction; but in keeping with the spirit of Lovejoy’s remark, let us begin by inquiring just what he was talking about.

If knowing what one is talking about is taken to mean doing one’s homework, performing the necessary research, or getting the facts straight, then historians surely have as good a claim to Lovejoy’s quasi definition as philosophers. Indeed, most would probably feel they have a better claim, since they tend to regard philosophers as indisposed to research and only moderately interested in empirical evidence.

But simply doing one’s homework was not what Lovejoy had in mind when he spoke of philosophers’ morbid solicitude to know what they are talking about. The context of his remarks leaves no doubt that he was talking about conceptual clarity, about knowing what one means by the terms one uses. Relatively few historians—especially American historians—would claim that Lovejoy’s witticism, thus understood, captures their essential professional concerns. True, there are occasional outstanding works, such as Daniel T. Rodgers’s Contested Truths, which focus directly on how the meaning of key terms has shifted over time, and the so-called linguistic turn (i.e., the influence of postmodern literary and cultural theory) has alerted intellectual historians to the importance of “discourse.” But “discourse” is less a clarifying concept than a candidate for clarification itself, and prominent intellectual historians such as Bruce
Kuklick and David Hollinger have criticized the hermetic quality of some of the work inspired by the “linguistic turn.” For these reasons, the recent talk about discourse cannot be taken as evidence that historians as a group have been converted from their relative indifference to terminological precision.

The difference between historians and philosophers in this regard reflects a fundamental difference in what we might call cognitive temperament. Historians and philosophers simply go at their intellectual tasks in different ways. And although I believe that historians ought to cultivate a greater sensitivity to terminology, the impatience with these matters they sometimes display is not the result of sheer perversity. At least three reasons for it can be suggested.

First, historians characteristically believe that immersion in empirical detail puts them in the most rewarding contact with what William James called the “rich thick set of reality.” By contrast, they are apt to associate concern for definitional niceties with the ultra-abstractionist’s preference for “skinny outlines” and barren generalizations. Second, the social scientists and other conceptualizers who deal with historical data so often disagree among themselves on fundamental points that workaday historians can plausibly excuse themselves for bypassing definitional problems wherever possible. Finally, historians of ethnicity (among others) can argue that their highly informal approach to terminological issues is justified because the concepts that figure most prominently in their accounts—“nativism,” “racism,” “prejudice,” “assimilation,” and so on—long ago entered the realm of general public discourse, losing in the process whatever conceptual precision they may once have possessed.

Many objections might be made to this set of reasons, but let us assume for the sake of argument that they have some validity. Nothing further need be said about the first one, which philosophers might be disposed to regard as little more than an invidious restatement of the temperamental difference between practitioners of the two disciplines. Points 2 and 3, however, deserve a word of elaboration because, to the extent that what they assert is true, they should actually be understood as reasons for historians to be more, rather than less, sensitive to conceptual and linguistic issues.

With respect to point 2, the historian who deals with subjects on which conceptual disagreements exist, or where definitions of key terms vary, must be painstakingly attentive to these matters in order to avoid pitfalls of the apples-and-oranges variety. While this may require explicit discussion of theoretical points, it does not betoken abandoning history for speculation. On the contrary, it is entailed by a methodological prin-
crible that all historians accept: evidence must be handled carefully and critically.

The same consideration applies to the third point, for the widespread use of terms such as *racism*, *ethnicity*, and *pluralism* in popular discussion in itself constitutes an important kind of historical evidence. The meaning of these terms, when so used, is inevitably fuzzy, and their application correspondingly loose and overlapping. But that does not detract from their importance as evidence. Several other facts add materially to their evidentiary value: that their usage is often charged with passion; that the terms themselves take on heavy moral overtones, both positive (as in most usages of *pluralism*) and negative (as in virtually all usages of *prejudice*); that their salience in public discourse, and the connotations they bear, change over time; and above all, that the terms in which the discussion of ethnic and religious issues is carried on go a long way toward determining how those issues are understood and evaluated. All this makes the popular terminology of ethnicity historical evidence of the highest importance.

The essays that follow will, I hope, serve to illustrate and substantiate this highly compressed statement of the reasons that justify historical study of the terminology of diversity. It is perhaps pertinent to add here that my own convictions on this score derive from having carried out these investigations; they were not the precipitating cause for undertaking the research in the first place. In other words, I did not embark on the first of these studies out of any prior conviction that the semantic, or conceptual history, approach would be particularly rewarding. More on that in a moment, but before commenting on the background and genesis of the essays, I want to state explicitly what will soon become evident to the reader, namely, that they are not based on, nor do they intentionally incorporate, any systematically articulated theory of language, rhetoric, hermeneutics, or “discourse.” Most of them were originally written before historians had heard much about the linguistic turn, and I have not attempted to revise them in the light of recent interest in these matters. Although they deal with matters that can legitimately be called linguistic, they are the product of the traditional, commonsense approach conventionally employed by historians. In other words, they reflect the characteristic methodological bias of the historian. But I am immodest enough to claim that they also illuminate important conceptual issues in ways that cannot be duplicated by any other method.

The focus on terminology is most consistently central in part 1, “Coming to Terms with Ethnicity.” The first of these essays, on the melting pot as a symbol of ethnic interaction, was what got me started...
on this line of investigation. As I noted above, I did not undertake it from any particular sensitivity to the importance of language. I had recently completed a doctoral dissertation that involved issues of ethnicity and religion, and I was looking for a new project. An offhand comment by one of my professors in graduate school, Thomas N. Brown, had earlier alerted me to the variety of meanings that the melting pot had for different people. Sometime thereafter, I ran across Henry Pratt Fairchild’s shocking suggestion that the village dog pound was a better symbol than the melting pot for what immigration was doing to American nationality and culture. That really caught my attention, and, after the dissertation was out of the way, I began collecting other specimens of melting pot usage. The myth-and-symbol approach to American studies, which was still in some vogue, no doubt helped convince me that the project was worth pursuing more systematically.

That, as nearly as I can reconstruct it, was the process that led to the original melting pot essay. Researching and writing it persuaded me that the semantic history approach was worthwhile, for it seemed quite clear that the ambiguities of usage of *melting pot* not only reflected but also contributed to conceptual confusion about the substantive issues that the melting pot somehow symbolized. This conclusion had purely historical interest when the article was published in 1964, for the melting pot had yet to make its comeback as part of the terminology of the ethnic revival. That happened with a vengeance over the next fifteen years, and the updating of *melting pot* usage that constitutes the second essay in this collection documents its undiminished capacity to confuse, along with a much enhanced power to evoke outrage on the part of many of those who use it.

Research for the second essay confirmed what was obvious to the casual observer, namely, that those who reject the melting pot typically champion “pluralism” as the preferred alternative. But it also revealed something not at all obvious: that in many contexts of usage, *pluralism* (or *cultural pluralism*) differs very little in meaning from certain versions of *melting pot*. This finding suggested the value of a more systematic historical comparison of “pluralism” and “assimilation,” the concept conventionally symbolized by the melting pot. Chapter 3, which embodies the results of that investigation, shows that the concept of pluralism is at least as ambiguous as the symbol of the melting pot, has often blended with the latter, and has been equally productive of confusion.

Between the writing of the second and third essays, I undertook a more ambitious investigation of how ethnic factors figured in collective American self-understanding over the entire span of U.S. history from...
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independence to the present. The results were published under the title “American Identity and Americanization” in the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (1980). Although highly relevant to the themes of the present volume, that essay is not reproduced here because of its length, because it is already available in a paperback edition, and because it would overlap too much with some of the other essays included in the collection. It deserves mention at this point, however, because it reinforced my belief in the value of this historical approach, and because it called my attention to, or deepened my understanding of, various issues discussed in these pages, including the relationship between pluralism and assimilation.

Chapter 4, “Minorities (Almost) All,” is not so direct an offshoot of the encyclopedia project as some of the other chapters, but I place it next in order since, like the first three essays, it too deals with a term/concept that applies to the group level of ethnic interaction. The importance of the minority concept and certain ambiguities in its usage first attracted my attention while I was working on “Americans All” (chapter 5), which was originally published in 1981. Although the term is briefly noted there, its historical evolution was first sketched out for a conference on the life and work of Louis Adamic in 1981 and brought to its present state of elaboration for another conference in 1989. Chapter 5 on *identity* differs not only in focusing on a term rooted more in psychology than sociology but also in that it derives directly from my assignment for the ethnic encyclopedia. Since the editors insisted the article had to be about “American identity,” I had to establish what *identity* meant before I could discuss it historically. Tracing its usage not only aided me in deciding how to approach the larger subject but also persuaded me that the semantic history of the term was worth separate treatment. Chapter 5 is the result.

Research for the encyclopedia entry made me realize for the first time that World War II not only changed American thinking about the role the nation should play on the world stage but also reshaped Americans’ collective understanding of themselves as a people. This came about because the wartime stress on the need for national unity based on “the ideals America stands for” gave unprecedented salience to the ideological dimension of American identity and caused ethnicity (not to mention race) to be downplayed. These developments were obscured at the time because of the emphasis placed on “tolerance for diversity” as an element in the democratic ideology, which made it appear that “pluralism” was carrying everything before it, whereas the real imperative was ideological unity. Besides furnishing a striking instance of how the
terms employed can baffle understanding of what is taking place, this paradoxical wartime development not only provided the matrix from which sprang the postwar campaigns against prejudice, discrimination, and segregation; it also paved the way for the repression of ideological dissent in the era of the Cold War. On another front, so to speak, the war also reawakened interest in the study of "national character," especially "the American character," and contributed mightily to the development of the new interdisciplinary discipline known as American studies.

These themes, which were adumbrated in my contribution to the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups,* recur in various contexts in the essays collected here. But the subject is so important, and so little studied, that it deserves to be highlighted by placing together as part 2, "World War II and American Identity," the three essays most directly relevant to the topic. Chapter 6, "Americans All," provides an overview of the subject, while chapter 7 shows how the great democratic revival of the late 1930s and early 1940s fed into the development of American studies and reshaped national self-understanding in a more general way. Chapter 8 explores the interreligious tensions that pitted Catholics against Protestants and secular liberals in the immediate postwar years. Although this essay might with equal justification be placed in part 3, it fits here because the controversies—in which the basic charge against Catholics was that their church was un-American—dramatized the tensions latent in the ideological revival and exposed some of the ambiguities of pluralism.

The story of Protestant/Catholic/secularist tensions provides a transition to part 3, "Religion and American Diversity," by reminding us that religion figured much more prominently as an element in intergroup relations at midcentury than it does today. Analytically, "religion" has been so undervalued in recent times that it comes as a shock to discover that in the fifties and early sixties, social scientists regarded the main confessional groupings (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish) as very important categories of social analysis. Given everything that has happened on the racial, ethnic, and gender fronts since the 1960s, religion's decline as an interpretive principle is historically understandable. But if historians wish to do justice to the realities of an earlier time—even a time as recent as the first half of the twentieth century—they will have to develop a greater sensitivity to religion as an analytical category and as a factor in the intellectual and emotional lives of the people they are studying.

So much for exhortation. I hope the essays in part 3 will lend substance to the message. Chapter 9 offers evidence for the contention that
religion was a key social category at midcentury by showing that Marcus L. Hansen’s famous principle of third-generation interest (“what the son wants to forget the grandson wants to remember”) attracted no notice at all until it was taken up by students of American Jewish life in the early 1950s. Will Herberg really put “Hansen’s law” into circulation, but a number of other commentators interpreted the contemporary Jewish religious revival in similar terms. The essay also suggests several reasons why Jewishness was in those days interpreted in religious rather than ethnic terms, a phenomenon closely linked to World War II.

Chapter 10 is a more broad-ranging review of the way historians have dealt with the relationship of religion to immigration and American group life, paying particular attention to the role of education and to the elusive notion of “civil religion.” The last of the essays applies to the particular case of American Catholics the conceptual history approach employed earlier in studying ethnic interaction in general. In tracing the usage by American Catholics of the terms Americanism and Americanization from their introduction in the 1850s to the present time, it reveals significant shifts in the way Catholics have conceptualized their relationship, and that of their church, to American culture and institutions. This essay has been extensively revised from a version published in 1973. The others are, except for minor editorial changes, republished here in their original form.

NOTES
