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September 26, 2006

POL 303

Professor Polanska

Ethnic Conflict in Postville

This essay will examine the causal factors and means through which Orthodox Jews and German Lutherans came to identify themselves as separate ethnically, and it will analyze the dynamics and context of their conflict. The essay will draw on readings from Postville by Stephen Bloom, An Introduction to Ethnic Conflict by Milton Esman, and The Stranger by Georg Simmel for support. The paper will specifically claim and support the idea that the major factors in the conflict were the disparate histories of the two groups, the different natures of the two groups, the proud ethnic character of both groups, and the difficulty both groups experienced in relating to one another.

In order to understand how the residents of Postville came to identify themselves as separate, it is important to first understand the idea of ethnicity as a collective identity. Esman writes, "Ethnic awareness is a form of collective identity or membership in a group that shares certain common attributes" (Esman 8). Awareness of ethnic identity and separation, Esman says, is "re-inforced by early socialization, as children learn in their family circle and among neighbors to cherish the proud traditions and folkways of their people as their own" (Esman 8). In the case of Postville, long-standing residents of the town were raised not only with stereotypical rural American values but also as very

proud German Lutherans: indeed, Postville was founded in 1840 (Bloom 84) but “it wasn’t until 1917 that the weekly newspaper *Iowa Volksblatt*, which was printed entirely in German, changed its name to the *Postville Herald* and began printing in English” (Bloom 87). In the film based on the book, we also learned that Postville’s Lutheran worship service was conducted entirely in German into the 1980s.

Meanwhile, the Orthodox Jews who moved to Postville after purchasing a meat processing plant had been raised primarily in New York City as observant and traditional members of Jewish faith – observing the rabbinical rules of apparel, dining, worship, and culture as closely as possible (Bloom 74, 156). Many Lutheran residents of Postville had never encountered Jews before, let alone Orthodox Jews in traditional apparel, and were distrusting and even hostile to the new residents (Bloom 22, 30, 46). To the natives of Postville, the Rabbis were “outsiders” – as Esman writes, “Outsiders may be friendly or they may be hostile, but in either case they are different, they are the ‘other’” (Esman 8). The Lutherans in Postville were not sure whether the Jews would be friendly or hostile, and the Jews’ apparent lack of interest in socializing with the Lutherans made them even more anxious (Bloom 104).

Simmel writes about exactly this type of conflict. The outsider’s status in a group is “determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning” (Simmel 402). As in Postville, where the Jewish residents felt unable to mingle extensively with the Lutheran residents, Simmel’s typical outsider “is not radically committed to the unique and peculiar tendencies of the group” (Simmel 404). A shining example of Simmel’s theory in the case of Postville comes from the film, in which Jewish residents declined to participate in the Postville town parade – practically a blasphemy in

this small town. This separation “does not simply involve passivity and detachment; it is a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement” (Simmel 404). Simmel proposes that this is because the normative culture, in this case the Lutherans of Postville, has “only certain more general qualities” (Simmel 405) in common with the outsider, in this case the Jews of Postville.

In other words, to tie together Simmel’s theory and Esman’s observations, the conflict seen in Postville between Jews and Lutherans is based on their different personal stories – rural as opposed to urban, overly social as opposed to somewhat reserved, traditional Jews as opposed to protestant Christians. The disparity is exacerbated by the nature of Jewish Orthodoxy, which requires the Rabbis to live rather separately from the rest of their community, by each group’s proud ethnic character, by the past experience of both groups in very different geographic settings, and by a difficulty for the groups to relate to one another.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Stephen G. Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc. (2000).
- Esman, Milton J. An Introduction to Ethnic Conflict. Cambridge: Polity Press (2004).
- Simmel, Georg. The Stranger.