Introduction

In 1905 a young Serb, Nikola B., came to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in search of work and the money to permit him to better his lot in his home village. Fate and circumstance kept him in Johnstown for most of the next three-quarters of a century until his death a few years ago. His life was typical of the lives of many who came to this city, as he did, from East Central Europe.

He was born in 1889 in Cvijanović, Kordun, as the sixth child in his family. His father owned 5 hectares of land, two cows, three pigs, and two horses, which he took with him each year when he set off with his sons to work on farms in Hungary. In 1902, Nikola's uncle and his cousin departed for America with a group of other men from the village. From Johnstown, where they settled, they sent letters and photographs: "They looked well and I decided to go."

Nikola arrived in Johnstown in April 1905 and moved in with his relatives in a boardinghouse in Woodvale. "I was frightened of everything, different country and different people, and I never saw such big factories. My uncle told me everything, what to do, how to behave, what to say." His uncle and cousin took him to the coal mine at the outskirts of the city that supplied Cambria Company mills. "Soon this hard work began to weigh very heavy on my shoulders. I regretted my coming to America and more and more missed home. All day I sweated in exhausting labor, seeing no sun, only darkness, water up to my ankles, from morning till night."

After two and a half years, Nikola went back to his village. "But there was nothing there for me, same poverty, same hardship as when I left." In 1910, he returned to Johnstown, bringing his younger brother. They worked as "buddies" in the mine: If they stayed there eleven to twelve hours a day, they each made $11 a week. "It was terribly hard work, coal mine, back-breaking, dirty, awful. But I still preferred it here, thought it was better. I saw here some future, and at home there was none."

In 1913, the Cambria Company mines laid off many of their workers. Nikola and his friends set off in search of other em-

ployment. They went to Steubenville, Ohio, which had a Serbian colony whose people came from their own region in Kordun, but the two young men did not find anything there; then they moved back to Cambria County and tried several mines in the area. Each new place seemed worse than the preceding one. It was a bad period for Nikola: He had no money, was in debt, and was very depressed.

Then his luck changed. A friend, another Kordunac, got him a good *ples* (place) besides him as a second boiler cleaner in the rolling mill department at the Cambria Company steel mill. For a nine-hour shift, he received $1.90. "I paid my debts, bought things, I repaired myself and stood on my feet. Then, a bolt from the blue, the works stop. I went back to the mine. When the war came, it was good again . . . In 1918, I married a Serbian girl; met her at a dance at St. Nicholas, her father liked me, so we married. Bought her a nice dress in a store, 150 people came to the wedding party. We lived with her parents in Cambria City, paid them rent and shared food expenses. The first son came after a year . . . I worked with my father-in-law and other Serbs in the blast furnace department; we were a gang and moved around together. My father-in-law was in charge, and work was steady."

In 1926, Nikola bought a house on the hills, away from the mill. The house cost $4,000; some of it he had saved, some he borrowed from a next-door neighbor, the rest was to be paid in installments. It had a garden in back, where Mrs. B. grew vegetables and apple trees, and kept a few chickens and geese. "She made almost everything at home, canned tomatoes, and beets, mushrooms, and beans. She also sewed well and sold to the neighbors, $1.50 a dress." At that time, Nikola was on the board of St. Nicholas Church and a vice-president of the Svety Jovan lodge of the Serb National Federation: "People respected me and listened to my opinions."

In 1927, with his brother-in-law he opened a small grocery store in Cambria City. "It took us $1,500 to open, but we could not maintain the business, it was all credit [to people], no money, mostly paper. So I talked to this man, a Rusyn I knew, he worked in the mechanical department at Cambria, and he got me a job there, $34 a week and overtime. I also played at weddings, we had an orchestra and played during the weekends, you could make $3.00 a night. It was not bad then, we had electricity and water in the house, and plenty of food on the table, and we dressed nice, American. I bought a radio and new furniture for the bedroom."

> The Depression hit Nikola's family pretty hard. "It was like the first years again. I worked two to three days in two weeks, but we were seven in the family now, it was very tough on all workers here." In 1934, unable to pay the debt on the house, Nikola had to sign it over to Mr. F., a local Slovenian merchant, "because we could not pay for food and groceries. To pay the water bill, I worked at the dam." Five years later, when work at Cambria was steadier, Nikola retrieved his house. His two oldest sons now worked with him in the mills, and there was more money.
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> "The union came in . . . it was a big thing for us, Roosevelt and all, the whole situation improved, but one always had to be prudent though, as you never knew what may come next . . . Here in America, when things were good, they were better than in the [old] country, but when they turned bad, maybe it was worse . . . It is just that over there they never seemed to get better."

Like Nikola B., thousands of East Central European immigrants and their children struggled in such circumstances in Johnstown to survive, and build a life of dignity and respect. Each life was different yet punctuated by similar twists and turns. This book will be their story.

Concepts and perspectives

This study is about the coping and adaptive strategies used by East Central European peasant-immigrants and their children to solve problems and realize cultural goals and expectations in a restricted and uncertain environment. The process of coping, of "appropriating" any space available under constrained circumstances, generates new purposes and new dilemmas. They are dealt with as people cooperate and invent ways to bring the environment into closer conformity with their purposes.

The number of sociohistorical studies devoted to East Central Europeans and their experience in America has been increasing in recent years.[1] Still, they remain one of the least studied populations among American immigrants. In particular, there is a need for more, and more detailed, accounts of how they perceived America and their position in it; what their expectations were; how they organized their everyday lives in meaningful patterns and strategies in pursuit of their goals; and what they did and did not achieve.

Weaving existing knowledge into my data-analytic framework and interpretations, I attempt to breathe more life into the dull, papier-mâché-like image of East Central Europeans that persists in Amer-

ican social history by showing their backgrounds, both in Europe and in America, as more diversified, their social environment as more complex and multifaceted, and their adaptive options as more underdetermined and open than has often been assumed in ethnic literature.

The structurally induced uncertainty of the existence of immigrant laborers and their families in industrial America in the first decades of this century, along with its implications for their behavior and attitudes, have been convincingly documented by social historians.[2] But the resulting "working-class realism" of the immigrant culture as depicted in these studies seems to me one-dimensional, flat, and tensionless, painted, as it were, with one thick monotonic line, not fully rendering the felt experience of the immigrants. This book brings out the diversity of East Central European life-styles and the tensions and ambiguities generated by coexisting yet often incompatible goals and preferences; the nuances of family economic strategies and the conflicts they engendered; and the internal status divisions and ambivalences involved in utilizing several frames of references and evaluations simultaneously.

This study covers half a century, beginning in East Central Europe at the time of mass peasant migrations and then following those who settled in Johnstown until the outbreak of World War II. In purpose and design it belongs to the genre of historical sociology.

A core element in the works of the sociological masters – Tocqueville, Comte, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber – historical sociology has always been part of the "high" sociological tradition. It has been continued over the past half century by the French *Annales* school. In the United States, sociological studies in history have been pursued by individual scholars – sages such as Reinhard Bendix, S. N. Eisenstadt, or Barrington Moore, Jr. Widely known and respected, their studies, however, remained by and large outside of the mainstream of research of both sociology and history. As academic pursuits grew ever more professionalized and specialized in postwar years, these two disciplines likewise became compartmentalized and separate, their relationship commonly depicted in terms of the incompatibilities of "nomothetic" and "idiographic" sciences. Today, the increasing "blurring of genres," as Clifford Geertz put it, of humanistic reflection again has narrowed the gap between history and sociology. With a steadily expanding body of sociologically informed historical work and a growing concern among sociologists with the historical *durée*, historical sociology has been enjoying a renaissance. A series of recent works by Arthur

Stinchcombe, Charles Tilly, Philip Abrams, and Theda Skocpol investigating the relationship between sociology and history demonstrates the theoretical and methodological unity of these two modes of discourse.[3]

Two distinguishable, though in part overlapping approaches inform the work of the "historicals," as Norbert Wiley somewhat ungracefully has termed a growing number of the practitioners of sociological-historical research.[4] One is macrosociological in scope, focusing on large-scale societal formations and processes. It has produced a plethora of excellent studies of a wide variety of problems ranging from social stratification, class formation, and class struggle, the transition to industrialism, and the development of cities and states, to social revolution and the world economic system.[5]

The second perspective represented in historical sociology is more microscopic in emphasis and execution. It calls for the apprehension of the relationship between everyday human actions, on the one hand, and social organization on the other as a continuous development in which fragments of society are seen as historically constructed by people who are in turn constructed by society. In a coinage that seems to be gaining increasing popularity, Anthony Giddens termed this process *structuration* and presented a forceful theoretical appeal for its use in sociology. "Theoretical manifestos" from the affined disciplines, by Fernand Braudel, E. P. Thompson, James Henretta, Clifford Geertz, and Pierre Bourdieu, have advocated a similar approach.[6] It has also been brilliantly realized in sociological-historical practice.[7]

This study falls within the second category of sociological-historical endeavors. Central to its conceptualization is the idea of "structuring" as sustained, dynamic interpenetration of the everyday personal world and the social environment, each constituting and reconstituting the other. This conceptualization conceives of the social environment as limiting and constraining, yet at the same time as enabling and mobilizing the individual in his or her pursuits. Conversely, it sees people and their actions as creative and purposeful agents who manipulate and adjust their social environment. The recriprocity of human action and social environment involves what Giddens terms "the dialectic of power and control."[8] The enabling capacity of the social structure and the corresponding creative capacity of the individuals obviously depend on the degree of the latter's autonomy in society. That of the East Central European peasant-immigrants and their children in Johnstown before World War II was certainly severely restricted. However, as long as they were

not totally confined and controlled – that is, as long as they remained agents – they possessed some margin of freedom and choice that they used to "turn their weakness back against the powerful" and to pursue their own purposes.

Analysis of the process of "structuration" requires the apprehension of the concrete, phenomenal world of human actions in which the *becoming* of social reality actually takes place. The focus of this book is on the *Lebenswelten* of the East Central European immigrants and their children. This study takes its place in the tradition of *Geisteswissenschaften*, the social sciences considered to be essentially interpretive, their function to understand the meaning of social reality in people who were taking part in it. A hermeneutically informed sociological-historical study, such as this one aspires to be, reconstructs the phenomenal texture of the life-worlds experienced by the actors. Throughout the study, then, I attempt to interpret the creative coping and adaptive strategies employed by the peasants in Europe at the turn of the century and later as immigrant workers in Johnstown in terms of their own perceptions – that is, through the prism of what Znaniecki termed the "humanistic coefficient," Schutz called the "relevance structures" of everyday lives, and Geertz refers to as "webs of meaning" of social actions.[9] In this endeavor, I am particularly indebted to the guidance and insights of Thomas and Znaniecki, on whose voluminous, brilliant analysis in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* I relied extensively.[10]

Such an approach to social history necessitates an analysis that is at the same time microscopic and holistic, embracing the multitude of layers and dimensions of the life-worlds of the people studied. This study, moving across the "thick territory" of the social world of the East Central European families and illuminating, as it were, with a lantern its various parts, has such panoramic quality. Unavoidably it possesses the drawbacks of such an approach. However, I trust it also offers the advantage of furnishing an encompassing depiction of the environment of the people who inhabited it.

Although central, the interpretation of the *Lebenswelten* of the East Central European peasant-immigrants and their children is not the only purpose of the study. An aim of historical sociology is to account for the relationship between people's actions and the social environment as it evolves in their everyday lives. In order to do this, historical sociology attempts to perform two types of work at once and in concert. The first is primarily concerned with the question of "how it was," recreating and narrating the past through factual evidence. The second is basically devoted to discovering its socio-

logical character – "how and why it happened." It is a controlled analysis consisting of a series of arguments that establish significant patternings of social reality.[11]

In the chapters that follow I have tried to accomplish this difficult synthesis of the evidence of the moment with an account of social forces and trends of the longer *durée*. The former constitutes the explicit content and bulk of the book; the latter is more implicit, for the most part built into the narrative that it punctuates as certain arguments are introduced and summarized. In this approach, the study represents what Theda Skocpol has called a *problem-oriented* sociohistorical analysis, seeking not to rework an existing theoretical paradigm or to generate an alternative one but rather "to make sense of historical patterns, using in the process whatever theoretical resources seem useful and valid."[12]

Two major, interconnected themes run through my analysis, both of them related to the general problem of the transition to industrialism. The first one is that of the intermixture of tradition and modernity in the adaptation of peasant-immigrants to American urban industrial society.

Attacked by multiple theoretical and empirical critiques, dichotomous, linear-polar conceptions of tradition and modernity have been discarded. The *becoming* of urban industrial society is now interpreted as an uneven and multifaceted development in which, depending on particular historical circumstances, old and new elements and aggregations, often ill fitting and inconsistent, come to coexist in varying blends and combinations.[13]

At the empirical level, a large body of sociological data testifies to the persistence of solid pockets of traditional patterns and orientations in both the "developing" world and industrialized societies. For the latter of these the United States – its urban communities, its social stratification and political processes, its formal bureaucratic organizations, and its family and career patterns – serves as a test case.[14] For well over a decade, evidence of widespread persistence of preindustrial frameworks in core American institutions in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been accumulating in studies in the so-called new or revisionist American social history, especially in the fields of immigration, urbanism, and labor, which demonstrate how industrial society has positively nurtured traditional attitudes and behavior.[15] Modern society, it is asserted today by commentators on social change, is perfectly capable of accommodating ascriptive bonds and particularist orientations and of incorporating large sectors of traditional economic and social institutions.

The particular concern of this book – the adaptation of peasant-immigrants from rural East Central Europe to American industrial society during the first half of the present century – locates it within the field of ethnic studies. Departing from earlier interpretations that conceived of ethnicity as a set of "given" cultural characteristics and "primordial attachments," recent sociological and sociohistorical scholarship treats it as a dynamic category: a "strategic tool" or "resource" situationally activated and mobilized in the process of interaction between the immigrants and the host system.[16]

This book is intended to exemplify and extend the direction of this newer literature concerning both tradition and modernity, and ethnicity. The analysis that follows attempts to blend these two themes into a more encompassing understanding of the evolution of urban industrial society in the United States. Namely, by showing what the Rudolphs, referring to contemporary Indian society, have aptly called "the modernity of tradition,"[17] this study demonstrates how the ethnic-ascriptive and particularist networks and identities of peasant-immigrants-become-industrial laborers served as the important vehicle of their socioeconomic achievement and of their incorporation into the larger American society.

First I examine the incipient alterations of peasant worldviews in East Central Europe in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as structural changes produced the first cracks in a still prevalent traditionalism. These innovations in the peasants' thinking and behavior consisted of certain elements of gain-instrumental orientation and of their general "mobilization for a better life," which coexisted with traditional outlooks and ideas. Following peasant-immigrants to America, I show how the traditional patterns in their pursuits and attitudes, nurtured by Johnstown's economic and social environment, in fact played an instrumental role in furthering new elements in their orientations that had already surfaced in Europe.

In particular, I look into the role played in the adaptation of peasant-immigrants and their children to industrial society by two characteristics: the persisting familial collectivism and partial fusion or nondifferentiation of kinship/ethnic and work/occupational roles in their economic activities; and the persisting particularist, ethnic-ascriptive foundations of Johnstown's social organization.

The adaptive role and the persistence of the ascriptive networks that members of immigrant groups create and utilize to cope with host environments have been repeatedly noted in ethnic literature.[18] Recent sociohistorical studies, particularly those dealing with people from the rural areas of southern and East Central Europe who came

to this country at the turn of the century, have interpreted the immigrants' familial collectivism and their reliance on "fused" kinship and ethnic networks as primarily defensive strategies for survival in the new and adverse industrial environment. These survival strategies, it has been argued, reflected the immigrants' "fundamental concern for [economic] security" and their "limited aspirations [for achievement]."[19] This study argues for a more complex interpretation of the immigrants' orientations and behavior. Their experience as peasants in the impoverished European villages, together with their continuously precarious economic existence as industrial laborers in America, most certainly sustained the immigrants' fundamental concern with security, and it is undoubtedly toward this end that they utilized the ascriptive networks of kinship and ethnicity that they created. At the same time, however, the continuing fusion of kinship/ethnic and work spheres in the lives of immigrant laborers, nurtured by the industrial and normative systems of the host society, also had the effect of solidifying their gain-instrumental attitudes that motivated them to seek to maximize their resources and facilitated their socioeconomic achievement. It was, however, a "particularist achievement," conceived of and pursued differently from a "universalist" one defined and realized as individual advancement based on formal education and skills.

In the classical modernization theory as well as in the assimilation theories of ethnicity, the inclusion of groups and their members into the larger society occurs through the replacement of segmented, particularist loyalties by more embracing, "higher-order" identities and attachments.[20] In a quite different, in fact, an opposite approach, recent sociological studies of "reactive ethnicity" have emphasized the role of intensified ethnic awareness, particularly among groups structurally and culturally disadvantaged, in their "political mobilization for membership" directed against the dominant society.[21]

The experience of peasant-immigrants in Johnstown before World War II lends itself to neither assimilationist nor conflict interpretation but calls for yet a different approach. It is summarized in the title of a recent sociohistorical study of the immigrants in Pittsburgh by John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael Weber: *Lives of Their Own*.[22] Their book deals primarily with the economic pursuits of the immigrants, but its title has broader symbolism. As we shall see in this study, the rigid, segmented class/ethnic divisions of the local society in Johnstown "imposed" on East Central Europeans ascriptive frameworks for identities and actions. At the same time, the im-

migrants themselves mobilized and sustained their "ethnicity" by forming in the segment that had been assigned to them complex networks of solidarities and associations within which they defined and pursued their goals. They incorporated themselves into the larger American society by a segmental appropriation of sorts: neither "for" nor "against," but, rather, "alongside" the dominant system. This self-incorporation occurred through the crystallization of ethnic awareness and sharpening of the boundaries dividing particular groups, and through the participation in ethnic organizations and daily activities carried on within ethnic communities that extended from neighborhoods to the workplace. This divisive-inclusive process of ethnicization I call "ascriptive inclusion."

Intimately affiliated with the above arguments is the second, concurrent theme that runs through this study: the process of formation of the modern American working class, and "contained" within this process, as it were, the proletarianization of peasant-immigrants and their children. The leitmotiv behind my analysis of the experience of East Central European workers is that the actual "becoming" of these two-in-one processes occurred precisely through the interplay between old and new ways and approaches, as one transformed the other. The social infrastructure and cultural outlook of a large segment of the contemporary American working class came into being and assumed its identity through the adjustments of traditional peasant values and behavioral patterns "tested" in the new environment, and through the ethnicization of bonds and relationships. In advancing these arguments, this study draws from several excellent works by the historians of industrialism and labor, and from sociological studies of social class images and representations.[23] At the same time, it shows the tension and ambivalence involved in the industrial experience of peasant-immigrants and their American-born children, informed by the precariousness and uncertainty of their economic existence and by overlapping, often conflicting cultural orientations and multiple reference frameworks.

Such a minutely documented account of the ambiguous, multifaceted life-worlds of peasant-immigrant workers contributes, I hope, toward a better, historically grounded understanding of social reality at three levels of generality. The first, in descending order, is the meaning of modernity *tout court*, constituted, as Geertz proposes, by the "dazzling multiformity [of consciousness] . . . and the increasing diversification of individual experience."[24] The second involves the particular experience and worldview of one large segment of American industrial society – the working class – as they were developing, during the first half of this century, into a mosaic