

ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL HONOR

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INTRODUCTION

The question of whether ethnic origins are an important factor in the distribution of social honor in the United States has been raised by observers over a long period of time. Weber, for example, pin-pointed the problem when he remarked on the then increasing emphasis on descent from the Pilgrim fathers (thus British ethnic origin).¹ If true, this would be quite important for understanding the operation of American society, for it would mean, taken to the extreme, that no person of immigrant background could successfully compete for social honor without first successfully disclaiming his national origins or the national origins of his ancestors. But even if the case is not as extreme as this, its importance should be sufficient to warrant detailed treatment in the wide literature on American stratification. Yet, so far as the writer knows, investigations of the relationship between social honor and ethnic origins are conspicuous by their absence, although the middle class folklore abounds in references to their intimate connection.

However, if pressed, one could make a case for the thesis that the importance of nationality is restricted to a very few people, or perhaps to such extremes as the "yellow horde." While the writer personally knows of at least two instances in which private individuals changed their names to legitimize their positions, one an American reservation-born Indian (a university graduate and army officer) who took the name of Stephenson, and the other a university instructor with an Italian name, still the very fact that an individual with the German name of Eisenhower could, even with the advantage of having accumulated prestige through war-time exploits, be suggested as a presidential candidate and then be elected by an unprecedented majority, seems to indicate at least an important change in the social honor distribution, if not a negating case to the hypothesis. This is shown by the fact that with the exception of three other persons, all American presidents have had British names, and even the three exceptional presidents, Van Buren and the two Roosevelts, are not as deviant as it may appear at first sight since all of them are from extremely old highly visible New York Dutch colonial families. Eisenhower can make no such claim; his only social honor legitimation² derives from his public image as the "savior" general of a victorious army.

In addition to the fact that a person with a German name is now president, a glance through any recent copy of Who's Who or even the staff directory of the University of Wisconsin will serve to show that by no means all persons with non-British names feel called upon to change their names since a great many individuals do not have British names.

These bits of evidence could be used to show that nationality is no longer an important factor in the stratification of contemporary American society. It is the purpose of the present paper, however, to show that the contrary is true: Nationality background, as shown by the compared nationalities of the legal and stage name of American entertainers, is still an important factor in the distribution of social honor.

SOURCE OF DATE AND LIMITATIONS

This hypothesis, as well as the opportunity for testing it, arose when on October 12, 1952, the Milwaukee Journal published an article by Harold Heffernan entitled, "What's in a Name," in which the legal and stage names of 91 entertainers were listed. The frequency distribution of the nationalities of these names is shown in Table 1.

Although the table is presented only to describe the sample and not as part of the analysis the following points may be made at this time. (1) In terms of sheer quantity the greatest shifts took place within the categories of "British" and "German."

Table 1 -- Nationality of Legal and Stage Names of
91 Contemporary American Entertainers

Nationality of Names	Number		Amount and Direction of Gain
	Legal Names	Stage Names	
British.....	34	66	+ 32
French.....	8	13	+ 5
Slavic (not including Jewish).....	3	2	- 1
Spanish.....	1	0	- 1
Swedish.....	1	0	- 1
Italian.....	5	2	- 3
Irish.....	8	3	- 5
Jewish (including Slavic and German)...	6	0	- 6
German (not including Jewish).....	20	1	- 19
Unclassified.....	5	4	- 1
Total.....	91	91	

This is in part a function of the unequal representation of the different categories. (2) Except for the rubrics "British" and "French", all categories indicate a loss in net representation. (3) Not one non-European name appears anywhere in the sample.

While these figures are fairly accurate there are at least two reasons for supposing that they are not exact. (1) Since the 91 persons are only a sample of the total population of highly visible entertainers the question of bias in the sample may be raised. One may be relatively sure that the sample is in fact biased, because Heffernan in all likelihood selected persons both because their legal names were bizarre, and because their stage names might be expected to be

familiar to the largest segments of the screen and television reading public, rather than to the "entertainment consuming" public as a whole. (2) In most cases there was no difficulty in deciding the national origin of the names but this was a problem in a few instances, which were called "Unclassifiable." In all cases the national classification of names is subject to the limitations of the writer's knowledge of the origin of the names. Nevertheless, it is felt that neither source of error seriously jeopardized the validity of the conclusions that will be drawn.

SPECIFIC HYPOTHESES

It will be readily apparent that the hypothesis that national background makes a difference in the distribution of status honor is too general to be of much use and furthermore is not cast in quantifiable terms. For these reasons more specific hypotheses have been formulated.

Hypothesis 1. The proportion of persons with non-British legal names who change to British stage names significantly exceeds the proportion of persons with British legal names who adopt non-British stage names.

Hypothesis 2. The changes in nationality of legal and stage names which are not accounted for by Hypothesis 1 may be explained in terms of (a) the typical character-role image upon which the entertainer depends for his public success; and (b) the degree to which the non-British nationality lacks prestige, irrespective of the special role played by the entertainer.

The rationale behind these hypotheses is that the entertainer's success is a function of the qualities attributed to him by the public upon whose favor he depends. Part of the public judgment of the entertainer is made in terms of his apparent national background since, except for the person's objective performance in his role and the advertising done for him by his publicity agents, most Americans have no other basis upon which to judge him (and they do judge him) than in terms of stereotypes of the qualities of "nations" which they then attribute to the individual whose public image bears the symbol of the nation: his name.

But although, following Hypothesis 1, entertainers feel their public views most "foreign" names as more or less reprehensible, there are cases in which a particular type of foreign name is definitely desirable in terms of the stereotype behavior noted above. For example, few virtuosos of serious music would dream of using a "common" American (English!) name in public life, for which Stokowski may serve as an illustration. This may be generalized by noting that the entertainer views his acceptability in the eyes of the public as a function of public stereotypes of the "proper" backgrounds for all persons who play the public role which he plays, i.e., ordinarily a swarthy Greek would make a better villain than a handsome square-jawed Nordic.

Furthermore, due to "historical accidents" some groups of immigrants such as the Irish have become almost fully acceptable in their own right. That is, there is a degree of prestige-ranking of nations in which some are viewed as "worse" than others.

These two hypotheses and their rationales will be tested by application to the 91 persons whose legal and stage names are given in the sample.

TESTS OF THE HYPOTHESES

Hypotheses 1. The proportion of persons with non-British legal names who change to British stage names significantly exceeds the proportion of persons with British legal names who adopted non-British stage names.

This hypothesis is tested by data presented in Table 2, which shows that the preponderance of shifts in nationality of name took place in the expected direction: on the whole, "Britishers" and "non-Britishers" alike took British names. The hypothesis, which accounts for 63 per cent of the cases, is acceptable and is shown to be so by a chi square test of the probability of obtaining this distribution of frequencies due to chance alone. The test indicates that the distribution is so biased that it would not occur even one time in a thousand due to chance alone.

Table 2 -- Nationality Shifts in Choice of Stage Names

Direction of Change in Name	Number of Persons
1. From non-British Legal Name to British Stage Name.....	39
2. From British Legal Name to British Stage Name.....	27
3. From non-British Legal Name to non-British Stage Name.....	18
4. From British Legal Name to non-British Stage Name.....	7
Total.....	91

$$\chi^2 = 19.43, P < .001$$

Even so, 27 per cent of the 91 cases cannot be explained by Hypothesis 1. To account for these, the deviant cases, Hypothesis 2 will be brought into play. This second hypothesis holds that two factors will explain the remainder: the public role played by the entertainer is so stereotyped by equally stereotyped "national" images that "success" in playing the role is made more likely by adoption of names from specific non-British countries, and that certain non-British "nations" are acceptable irrespective of the public role played by the entertainer. Data testing this hypothesis are presented as follows:

Of the seven persons who had British legal names but took non-British stage names six may be accounted for in terms of role: five took French names, and French is acceptable for entertainers; and one (Boris Karloff) who plays the role of a villain took a Slavic-sounding name. This leaves one deviant "Britisher" unexplained. She, however, took an almost acceptable name, Mayo, which is Irish and therefore is accounted for in terms of ranked prestige of "nations."

There are eighteen "non-Britishers" who took non-British names. Sixteen of these may be accounted for in terms of the role hypothesis. Eight took French names, acceptable for entertainers. Two took Italian names, one because he plays the role of buffoon (Lou Costello) and the other because he wishes to capitalize of the "opera-image" (Mario Lanza); both of these are currently stereotypes of Italians. Two others, Garbo and Dietrich, who had an American image of being exotic before arriving in the United States, kept their European stage names. One dark girl with an Irish name, whose physical appearance fits the American stereotype of the beautiful southeastern European took the name Dvorak. One dark German who plays the role of the suave cosmopolitan gentleman retained his real Christian name as a stage surname (Paul Muni, counted as "Unclassifiable"). Finally, a woman who plays the role of "big, dumb, beautiful glamour girl" took the unclassifiable but non-British name of Dagmar.³

Thus two of the eighteen "non-Britishers" who adopted non-British stage names fail to be explained by the role hypothesis. These two are persons who began with Irish legal names and kept Irish stage names. They, then, may be accounted for by the hypothesis of ranked nationalities. To the "genuine" American, the Irish have become fairly respectable even if not entirely so.

SUMMARY

All 91 nationality changes in name, from legal to stage, may be accounted for by the hypothesis of differential distribution of social honor due to national origin. While there is some evidence, given in the Introduction, to support the contention that national origins may not be as important as they once were, it is certain that their importance has not diminished much. At least these 91 entertainers who, by virtue of the type of calling they follow, must be extremely sensitive to the nuances of public approval and disapproval, apparently feel sufficiently afraid of adopting non-British names to select them only in cases in which stereotypes either enhance their role-image or at least do not detract from it, and most of the time they avoid non-British names.

This analysis has lead, then, by modifying the hypotheses guiding the study, to a "three factor theory" of the relation between ethnic backgrounds and social honor in contemporary America. (1) In general British background is a prerequisite to full personal acceptability. (2) But the prestige of different non-British "nations" is rather carefully ranked, Irish being almost fully acceptable and others being less so. (The total absence of non-Europeans in the sample is worthy of remark regarding this.) Total personal acceptability is more nearly approached by persons of some national origins than by persons of others. (3) There are a few quite specific occupational public roles in which, due to widely-held American stereotypes of the ability of certain "nations" as performers of these roles, on-British backgrounds may become an adjunct to or a prerequisite to the attainment of public recognition.⁴

FOOTNOTES

1. Max Weber, "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism," From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills; Oxford University Press, New York (1946); p. 310.
2. This discussion is concerned with the question of social honor and nationality (or better, nationality as it appears to mass populations who know little about the objective national backgrounds of most highly visible persons: hence nationality of the person's name). Eisenhower's objective ability as a political decision-maker is, of course, irrelevant.
3. There were eleven stage names which involved unprecedented procedures, such as Dagmar and Annabella who have no stage surnames, and also such as those who invented names. A test of the glamour-girl-role hypothesis to account for these unprecedented names showed that ten fit the hypothesis, yielding a chi-square significant beyond the .01 level. This indicates that the use of such naming procedures is rather peculiar to the glamour girl.
4. In consideration of these it may be hypothesized that the choice of alternative (3) which guarantees maximal public acceptability for the person as a player of character parts, automatically rules out full personal acceptability in modern America.

Appendix (Not in original text)

Legal Name by Change in Name

Change	Legal Name		Total
	British	Non-British	
Change	7	39	46
No Change	27	18	45
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
Total	34	57	91

$$\chi^2 = 19.43, \text{ d.f.} = 1, P < .001$$