Using a hundred years worth of census and opinion poll data, Century of Difference shows how the social, cultural, and economic fault lines in American life shifted in the last century. It demonstrates how distinctions that once loomed large later dissipated, only to be replaced by new ones. Fischer and Hout find that differences among groups by education, age, and income expanded, while those by gender, region, national origin, and, even in some ways, race narrowed. As the twentieth century opened, a person’s national origin was of paramount importance, with hostilities running high against Africans, Chinese, and southern and eastern Europeans. Today, diverse ancestries are celebrated with parades. More important than ancestry for today’s Americans is their level of schooling. Americans with advanced degrees are increasingly putting distance between themselves and the rest of society—in both a literal and a figurative sense. Differences in educational attainment are tied to expanding inequalities in earnings, job quality, and neighborhoods. Still, there is much that ties all Americans together. Century of Difference knocks down myths about a growing culture war. Using seventy years of survey data, Fischer and Hout show that Americans did not become more fragmented over values in the late-twentieth century, but rather were united over shared ideals of self-reliance, family, and even religion.

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