I had, since the mid-1940s, been studying and writing about American ethnicity, an interest spurred by my work as an editor of Commentary magazine. I had already written a book about American Jews, and another book on the American Communist Party, which interpreted it more as an expression of ethnic rather than of class interests. The genesis of Beyond the Melting Pot was an idea of James Wechsler, editor of the New York Post, and Irwin Ross, for a series in the newspaper on the ethnic groups of the city. Daniel Bell suggested me as the person to write it. I expanded the idea into a book, which was modestly supported by the New York Post Foundation. Martin Meyerson, then director of the Joint Center for Urban Studies of Harvard and MIT, was also interested in my work on ethnicity, and the support was funneled through the Center.

"My original intention was to have each ethnic group studied by a scholar from that group, who combined the empathy and understanding one might expect on the basis of origin and intimate experience, an objective perspective, and a willingness to participate in the project. The combination, in 1959, was hard to find. The only collaborator was Daniel P. Moynihan, a young political scientist suggested by Irving Kristol. Moynihan wrote the section on the Irish and brought to the book unexcelled knowledge of the political role of ethnicity in New York City.

"The book's impact, I believe, was based on the fact that it took ethnicity seriously at a time when most thinking people considered it a survival from the age of mass immigration and of decreasing importance. It turned out we—in America and the rest of the world—were due for a revival of ethnic interests, loyalties, and attachments in the later 1960s and 1970s, accompanied by considerable social research on ethnicity. A good deal of that research takes off from—or against—some point or hypothesis in Beyond the Melting Pot."