

In Defense of Civic Culture

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The growing racial, religious, and cultural diversity of the United States is a fact — indeed a juggernaut, unstoppable even if the country's liberal immigration laws were reversed tomorrow. The 1990 Census counts only three-quarters of Americans as non-Hispanic whites and finds that whites as a group are older and less fertile than people of color. "If current trends continue," writes demographer Martha Farnsworth Riche, "the United States will become a nation with no racial or ethnic majority during the 21st Century ... Without fully realizing it, we have left the time when the non-white, non-Western part of our population could be expected to assimilate to the dominant majority. In the future, the white Western majority will have to do some assimilating of its own."

The increasing "multiculturalization" of America offers an historic opportunity to enrich democratic pluralism here and throughout a world that still looks to America for alternatives to endless tribal warfare. The Mexican writer Octavio Paz thinks it "just possible that in the next century the United States will become the world's first truly multiracial democracy." That vision should certainly be defended against unwarranted fears of new racial, religious and cultural diversity. As social critic Randolph Bourne recognized early in this century, when Americans accept their differences in a context of certain shared principles and values, the myriad cultures present and emerging here become wellsprings of spiritual strength and social justice in a great, transnational experiment. A more multicultural America offers an exciting opportunity to extend freedom and democracy to people who haven't had it before and to enrich it for those who have.

But the promise of a multicultural America must be defended against the new "identity politics" propounded by some activists and institutionalized by bureaucracies on campuses, in government offices, and even in private corporations. Identity politics makes race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation the primary lenses through which people view themselves and society. It tends to encourage new and old minority groups to withdraw from — or assault — a mistrusted "majority" culture in the pursuit of their separate communal destinies.

Turning the mere fact of racial, ethnic, and sexual difference into the most basic organizing principle of society, identity politics portrays American civic culture as an elite trick or imposition upon minorities on behalf of an oppressive

"Eurocentric", patriarchal, or capitalist agenda, rather than as the common, if contested, ground it really is.

But the irony is that, especially in the wake of the collapse of the utopian ideologies and amid the troubling resurgence of religious fundamentalism and nationalist passions, America's civic culture remains one of the world's few great resources for both individual freedom and social justice. The best way to advance these values is to nourish and renew our common civic culture, not promote its balkanization in identity politics or its dissolution in a largely empty rhetoric of class warfare. *That means struggling, like the early civil rights movement, to affirm principles that transcend race, gender, and religious denomination, even as we try to expose racism, sexism, and other injustices.* It means challenging activists, educators, and public officials who, ironically, in the name of combatting racism and sexism, are working to ensure that we classify each other by color and ethnicity. They risk repeating racism's primary sin — subordinating what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the content of our character" to "the color of our skin," gender, or sexual orientation.

This essay holds that precisely because the country is becoming more diverse, Americans of dramatically different and increasingly mixed backgrounds must work harder than we have recently to find and affirm common principles. Some of these were hammered out by the country's founders, who understood how important it is to check the utopian ambitions which impassioned, "liberating" factions bring to the pursuit and exercise of power. The Constitution's separations of church and state, of executive, legislative and judicial powers, and of federal and state prerogatives, all force cultural, religious, and economic interests to bargain in the public marketplace, where they must justify their demands upon the polity by principles more widely shared than their own. Constitutional provisions for liberty of conscience and freedom of expression protect individuals not only from government but also from oppression by their own racial, religious or cultural communities.

Around these vital principles has grown a less formal but palpable civic culture, emphasizing characteristically "American" virtues such as tolerance, optimism, self-restraint, self-reliance, reason, and concern for the public interest as a function of both benevolence and enlightened self-interest. These virtues are taught and "caught" in the daily life of local institutions and in the examples set by neighbors, co-workers, and public leaders. Of course, other, often contradictory values are also imparted; what's important is that the first set survives as a sort of overlay, a living standard that tempers and guides public passions. Becoming an American should mean committing oneself to internalize and uphold these values.

In the very majesty of its freedom, America has generally tolerated subgroups that abstain from the civic culture. *But defenders of American pluralism need to make clear that whenever multiculturalism turns into identity politics or ethnocentrism — that is, whenever it becomes an ideology that forecloses a common*

culture and a polity based on shared principles — it undermines freedom and therefore the basis for multiculturalism itself. It is one thing to argue that we must purge the common culture of its racist, sexist, or elitist elements; it is another to demand that the common culture celebrate one's own preferences or to abandon the hard work of forging shared values and mores.

When the pursuit of ethnic and racial diversity becomes an ideology in its own right, the central and all-pervasive goal of a polity or institution, it submerges intellectual and political diversity in a sea of enforced relativism: Each group's "culture" — sometimes little more than an artificial solidarity cobbled together to resist both real and imaginary outside pressures — is exempted from critical assessment, even from within the group itself. Real differences among members of the same group and real similarities among members of different groups are ignored. The spirit of common purpose evaporates, leaving us isolated in our camps.

This essay argues instead for intensifying the work of building a common culture. It traces the historic role of America's civic culture in assimilating immigrants and progressively extending the boundaries of social equality and citizenship. And it criticizes efforts to advance an ethnocentric agenda under cover of "diversity" in three key areas of American life: elections, public education and economic policy.

The Value of the Civic Culture

The United States emerged from a particular Anglo-Saxon culture and so was riddled from its inception with deep contradictions, racial and otherwise. Yet it was the first nation in history crafted consciously to advance rights which its founders claimed for "all men." Most other countries trace their origins to prehistory, to divine interventions that, according to their ancient myths, commingled blood, soil and spirit to found great nations. The U.S. has not been innocent of such myths, from those that justified the expropriation of Native Americans and the slavery of black Americans, to the country's many religious and secular evangelists. In their name, great brutalities have been committed. Yet, always, America held out the promise that, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, in this "asylum of all nations, the energy of ... all the European tribes [and] of the Africans, & of the Polynesians will construct a new race..."

Few other nations have presumed to burst the bonds of ancient myth in order to advance universal, inalienable rights, and at this pass, only the U.S. has even begun to fulfill those rights for a populace of truly international diversity. That is why America alone has been a magnet for substantial immigration from virtually every other country; it is the first truly multiracial civilization since ancient Rome to nourish the seeds of its own transformation.

From abolitionism to suffragism, from the civil rights movement to the women's movement, men and women have struggled to expand the reach of the founding documents and to realize Emerson's vision. They have renounced old, parochial prejudices and feuds — and sometimes surrendered more precious legacies, too. John Quincy Adams told a German moving here that newcomers "must cast off the European skin, never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than backward to their ancestors."

But what, precisely, does it mean to become an American? The ambiguity of the answer has been the country's genius as well as its peril. "Imagine, my dear friend, if you can," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote back to France, "a society ... having different languages, beliefs, opinions: in a word, a society without roots, without memories, without prejudices, without routines, without common ideas, without a national character, yet a hundred times happier than our own." The historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. notes that Tocqueville saw civic participation as "the great educator and the great unifier: Immigrants, Tocqueville said, become Americans through the exercise of the political rights and civic responsibilities bestowed on them by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution."

In other words, new Americans relied not only on their own courage and industry, but also on the resilience of the founders' core documents and institutions, which, however imperfect, guided the great experiment. Demands for inclusion were legitimated not simply through the claimants' raw electoral numbers or economic clout, but, more subtly, through their willingness to claim the founders as their own ancestors and, following the vision of the Federalist Papers and the Constitution, to master the rules of separated powers and sophisticated coalition-building — that is, of pluralist politics.

Of course, "Americanization" has never been a one-way street. Within the white population, Italians, Germans, Irish Catholics, and Eastern European Jews transformed the dominant Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture even as it transformed them. It is almost universally accepted among cognoscenti of American popular culture that the romantic, small-town ethos touted by Ronald Reagan as actor and president was largely a confection whipped up by second-generation American-Jewish writers who left New York for Hollywood in the 1930s. Just as often, contention has eclipsed consensus: Irish immigrant leaders in 19th-century New York only reinforced prevailing WASP suspicions that they were unfit for the rigors and responsibilities of citizenship when they demanded public funds for parochial schools, as much as some black leaders do now in demanding publicly funded Afrocentric education.

Yet black and other nonwhite cultures, too, have transformed the "dominant" cultural consensus in ways both hidden and acknowledged: Blacks and Chicanos, predating most whites on these shores — and Native Americans, predating all whites

— have shaped American culture, politics and economics for centuries. As the black scholar Cornel West notes, the racial commingling at the core of our tradition is as profoundly indivisible and easily accessible as jazz, which couldn't exist without both African rhythms and European instruments. Meanwhile, ironically, some ethnographers find that many recent immigrants of color, from Chinese students to home-owning Caribbean blacks, adhere to supposedly WASP norms better than do many older Americans, white or black.

Is there, then, really an American cultural and political "mainstream" to assimilate to? Or have we always made it up as we've gone along? Even amid demographic churning, America's civic culture has advanced certain fundamental premises, values, and rules that are transethnic and transracial in essence, even if not always in application. Without that common culture as its inspiration and guide, the American experiment could not have survived and cannot endure. The immigration that is expanding our cultural diversity is a tribute to the depth of that inspiration: American political culture, condemned not so long ago as a fount of imperialism and oppression, is in reality the world's most powerful magnet for people from every country and civilization.

The Assault on the Civic Culture

Yet the notion of an enduring civic culture faces challenges on several fronts. First, the enormous economic opportunity that sustained America's immense absorptive capacities has been compromised, if not by the economy's actual shrinkage, then by widening disparities in income and opportunity. If individual upward mobility is thwarted too long, stagnation could prompt retreats from the civic culture into ethnic and racial camps warring for economic advantage.

Second, as the sociologist Alan Wolfe has shown, even amid affluence, market forces and state bureaucracies have made complex encroachments on institutions of the civic culture — families, neighborhood organizations, churches, and schools. New configurations of investment and of mass marketing and communications have transformed and uprooted communities, weakened family ties, and eroded the habits of reading, thinking, and public debate that sustain a democratic political culture. If recent electoral politics is any guide, the retreat from what Richard John Neuhaus has called "the naked public square" is approaching the dimensions of a rout.

Today's ethnocentric alienation includes a particularly tragic historical irony: The very dismemberment of the slaves' African cultures left them and their descendants uniquely dependent upon — and therefore often uniquely committed to — America's living up to its creedal promises. Through leaders as diverse as Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King, Jr., blacks spoke truth to white power as the quintessential, often the