

Cultural Pluralism and Assimilation*

In 1981 David Hollinger observed that accounts of social identity in the United States were 'entangled in two incongruous metaphors. The master symbol for ethnic assimilation, the melting pot, is surrounded by plants of many varieties looking for their "roots.'" On its face, at least, the plants seemed not only to have found their roots, but to have rather vigorously grown. Indeed, if we add the ethnic disintegration of what, for all the world seemed like stable and enduring States: In the USSR, the 'independence' movements of Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Georgians, Ukrainians, Azerbaijani, Armenians and Russians of the USSR, In Yugoslavia, Croatians and Serbians on the edge of civil war, Kurds and Palestinians and Armenians, still longing for autonomy, and nearer to home, Quebecois and a Hawaiian 'sovereignty' movement--to name but a few, we can say that something huge is afoot. Although it is not the purpose of this talk to explain this, one can suspect that it is one of the consequences of the transforming powers of 'modernity,' abstractly, the response to what Durkheim called 'anomie,' what Weber called 'disenchantment,' and what Marx diagnosed as 'alienation.' In a more obvious way, it is the response to the fact that in constructing the modern state from kingdoms and empires, no 'nation' has been coincident with its state.

Americans (here using the term wrongly but conventionally to refer to the citizens of the United States), had believed that they had escaped all of this. Indeed, having won their independence, created the institutions of liberal democracy, absorbed some 24 million Europeans between the Civil War and World War I and, since then, having become an industrial and military power with no real competition, 'the City on the Hill,' could well celebrate its achievement.

Woodrow Wilson was well-placed to have played a role in this. 'Americans' had rightly regarded the war in Europe as none of their concern. But stunningly, Wilson had convinced them otherwise. The war was, he insisted, an opportunity to further 'our democracy and civilization.' With this version of our history not doubt in his mind, no less a figure than John Dewey had given him the words. But Wilson had also been unhappy with 'the hyphenated movement.' What indeed was the character of these Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Polish Americans and the rest? On his view, 'some Americans need hypens in their names because only part of them has come over.' But, he continued, 'when the whole man (sic) has come over, heart and thought and all, the hyphen drops out of its own weight and out of his name.'

Nor was the idea of an 'American' problematic for Wilson. In a remarkable and oft-repeated lecture, he was distressingly frank: 'We have the immemorial practice of the English race itself, to which we belong.' Since he was addressing a Virginia audience, he could add: 'Nowhere else had the pure strain of the nation which planted the colonies and made the independent government under which live been kept so without taint or mixture as it has been in Virginia and hitherto in all the South.' Never mind the Italians or Polish Jews: He did not need to say, but we need to be reminded, that miscegenation laws did what they could to keep the 'strain' pure. Black-Americans, of course, were not convinced by Wilson's assimilationist notions, since nobody, neither black nor white, supposed that they would ever be 'assimilated' anyway. But, of course,

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others might be assimilated and they might also have been convinced by Wilson's challenge to bring over 'the whole man.'

My father was convinced. That is why my name is misspelled. For my father, 'M-a-n-i-k-a-s' just didn't *look* 'American.' Indeed, my family is a paradigm of assimilationism. When my father married by mother, whose parents had come from Sicily, they were both disinherited. To be sure, there would be nothing to inherit from their parents, and eventually, recognizing forces in this new country as they were, they forgave. While Greek was my first language--when I was born my father's family (my 'Yaya' and 'Papoo') lived with us--I quickly lost this. There were few Greeks in Batavia--in upstate New York, no Church, no Church school. Still, in my childhood, my sister and I knew what my mother (or father) meant when she would comment on how 'Americans' eat or how they behave. I married a part-Hawaiian whose paternity is chop-suey. Our children were reared on Long Island but their first words were Hawaiian, 'pau' and 'au au.' I am (sometimes reluctantly!) an American; my wife is (emphatically) an Hawaiian. But if our children are not 'Americans,' then except for George Bush and his Skull and Bones associates, none of us are Americans.

Indeed, assimilation works! I personally do not think that there is any doubt that the 'new ethnicity' is very superficial and that as regards American history up to perhaps 1963, at least the *Caucasian* melting pot has melted. It is easy to see why this is denied. There is something very comforting in identifying with an ethnic community, even if the 'community' is imagined. A 'haven in a heartless world,' it allows us to distance ourselves from what is objectionable in American culture--and thus also from what is objectionable in modern culture! Perhaps more importantly, it allows to revalue what had been disvalued.

Still, it is quite impossible to deny that ethnic intermarriage has become the norm, that among groups who migrated prior to 1963, English is the first language, that cities experienced rapid residential diffusion (which is now reversing itself), and that attitudes and behavior regarding sex, religion, ritual, leisure and vocation are, if not homogenized, at least very widely shared across nominal ethnic groups. (For references, see Stephen Steinberg's very valuable *The Ethnic Myth*. (A group of us in Sociology are engaged in a historical study of inter-ethnic marriage patterns in Hawaii.)

This is hardly surprising. The United States is a modern mass society. That means not merely that mass media dominate 'information' and communication, but that this is a society characterized by patterns of mass consumption, and by extensive economic interdependence and bureaucratic control. Add to this an obvious mechanism for assimilation.

During the first series of great immigrations, it was possible to reject assimilation. Neither of my grandfathers ever learned even to speak English, still less to read it. They did not need to since in the economy they entered, as illiterates, they could still earn a living wage. The ethnic enclaves of America became possible because of this. From the time that Congress curtailed immigration (in 1924), not only was there no longer a continuous flow from the mother country to support these communities, but as the economy moved toward 'post-industrialization,' the second and third generation of immigrants could hardly fail to appreciate that their opportunities depended upon assimilation. Consider, e.g., Lee Iacocca. (As Steinberg makes clear, the absolutely critical fact in the relative success rate of immigrants has been the relation between structure of the economy and the resources (skills, etc.) of immigrants at the time of their migration. A variation of this argument is decisive also as regards the conditions of blacks in America.)

At the same time, no one doubts that the ideal of a universal humanity and of impartiality

toward persons as persons has been fundamental in the struggle against exclusion and status differentiation. This has been a long and difficult struggle, to be sure and, of course, while the victories have been notable, there will be many more struggles ahead. Indeed, as Steinberg (and others) have argued, the ideal which is offered as the alternative to assimilation, 'cultural pluralism' (multi-ethnicity) may be fatally flawed.

Cultural pluralism needs not only to identify some plausible way for groups to resist the conditions of mass society, but normatively, it needs to presuppose that as they enter America, ethnic groups enter with resources and opportunities--wealth, education, skills--at least approximately equal to the resources and opportunities of those who came before. Given these assumptions, we could then envisage Horace Kallen's 'harmonious orchestra of cultures,' happily coexisting under an ethnically neutral American state whose main task would be (as Easton had it) to enforce the rules of game.

But the assumptions are preposterous. As it is, *bodegas* in Flushing, Queens look very much like the Gristedes markets found all over New York--and these, of course, are indistinguishable from the Safeways of California and Hawaii. Worse, having eliminated effectively the indigenous peoples of the continent, those who came first gathered pre-eminent resources, including what quickly came to be control of the state and economy. Those who followed them, then, were allowed relative measures of success in accordance with the dynamics of world capitalism including, lest we forget, the slaves freed during the last 'capitalist revolution' in the American South. It is fair to say, I believe, that the most salient causal factor in the failure of a class politics, but more particularly, of the American labor movement, has been ethnicity in America, nowhere more graphic, perhaps, than here in Hawaii. Because the 24 million immigrants and their descendents identified with their ethnic group and not their class, the United States today lags profoundly behind every European advanced capitalist state on almost every measure of public responsibility. And to add to the insult, among those who have secured a measure of prosperity and security, they have done so at the price of becoming very much less 'ethnic.'

On the other hand, as a normative ideal assimilation is also flawed, perhaps fatally. There are two main reasons. First, there is no such thing as humanity in general. As Herder was perhaps the first to see clearly, '*Humanität* is not ready made, yet it is potentially 'realizable.' But its 'realization' has 'manifold' expressions.' There is a such a thing as 'human nature,' but because the human being 'has to learn everything,' groups, in transaction with specific local environments and sharing a history, created not a human world, but human worlds, concrete realizations of our shared human potentialities.

The idea that a good society would be group-neutral and that in such a condition a group-neutral individuality would flower is pure nonsense. In this regard Woodrow Wilson was wiser than some Enlightenment-influenced thinking. At least he was not hypocritical in insisting that the assimilation would be to the point of view, culture and forms of life of the privileged groups in society. Carmine De Sapio's WASP's knew what they wanted and at least until recently, they got it.

Assimilation has been largely been a process of what is rightly termed 'cultural imperialism,' the imposition on others one's own values, culture, form of life. There is, to be sure, always a 'dialectic of power.' Accordingly, American sub-cultures have had significance influence on what 'American' means. Jazz is but one obvious example. 'Cultural pluralism' is properly contrasted with 'cultural imperialism.' But if, as I have argued, 'cultural pluralism' is flawed, perhaps fatally, and assimilationists are cultural imperialists, we surely do have a dilemma. I think

that the dilemma is real, but before addressing it, there another problem with the assimilationist ideal which needs addressing. It is this: *As long as racism exists*, the experience of non-whites will be different from the assimilating experience of whites. That is, although it is easy to show that 'race' is exactly on a par with 'ethnicity' in being wholly a social construction, it is an enormous error to generalize from the historical experience of Caucasian ethnics in the United States to non-Caucasians.

I address racism first. Men and women are 'natural kinds,' races and ethnic groups are not. That is, sex (though *not* gender) is genetically (or biologically) determined; races and ethnic groups are not. We can here pursue the idea which I earlier attributed to Herder. Humans need a human environment in order to become humans, but the possibilities for this are enormous. Let us say that some trait, property, characteristic or difference true of humans is genetically determined only if in realizing that trait or capacity, the developing conceptus undergoes a 'characteristic' human development such that it is substantially irrelevant where or when that process occurs. (I am aware that there is no such thing as a 'characteristic' development since 'normal' human development is consistent with a fantastic range of human environments. Roughly, the idea is to put aside biological questions regarding how DNA, etc, in cooperation with the environment gives rise to traits through the genotype to the phenotype, to rule out environmental 'accidents,' e.g., thalidomide babies, and to make social factors irrelevant while acknowledging that humans need a human environment to become human).

Thus, everywhere there are (mostly?) males and females. (I say 'mostly' because there are exceptions to sexual dimorphism. Note also that everywhere males and females are related both heterosexually and homosexually, although the explanation of this is far from clear.) Other biologically determined differences include manifest traits which mark 'family' resemblances, such coloration, facial features, body-type, type and color of hair and the presence or absence of an epicanthic fold. But--and for present purposes, this is my main point--these do not allow us define races. That is, we need to recognize that there are an enormous number of populations of freely mating individuals, and then to see that while as regards genetic distribution, every population differs slightly from every other one on the average, there is as much genetic variation within groups conventionally thought of races as between such groups. Indeed, as my colleague Emanuel Drechsel has pointed out, 'crucial selective features and adoptive forces in human variation have no reference to any racial boundaries.' For example, 'the prime trait for every-day recognition of racial categories, namely skin color,...relates to geographic location before European exploration and colonization radically altered human distributions.'

Races, then, like ethnic groups, or 'nations,' are social constructions, historically constructed from materials at hand, including, but not restricted to, those physical features just now identified. (Weinstein, DeLeon and I have written on the construction of Portuguese in Hawaii as 'local.' See ASR.) To say that they are social constructions is not, of course, to say that they are not real. They are real enough; indeed, ethnic and racial distinctions have real consequences. But while races and ethnic groups are real, unlike 'natural kinds,' by altering human beliefs and practices, they could be cease to be real. Acknowledgement of this is perhaps what motivates writers and activists who reject essentialist notions of race, for example, Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah. It may be behind Jesse Jackson's recent suggestion that 'black Americans' refer to themselves instead as 'Afro-Americans.' If indeed, what they have in common with Africans cannot be race (and surely, on any plausible sense of the term, it cannot be 'culture') then

it must be as with other hyphenated Americans, their 'roots.' (I owe these references to Nancy Holmstrom.)

As noted, the foregoing argument holds, *a fortiori* as regards ethnic groups which are easily seen to be social and historical constructions from materials at hand. It is just this, of course, which explains the possibility of assimilation. (Worth mention, assimilationists of a Hegelian-inspired sort--almost certainly the typical sort--imagine (or would prefer) a coincidence of state and nation, a multi-national-state system. Assimilations of a more Kantian-inspired sort are universalists: They imagine an undifferentiated humanity plus law. This is not, as noted, what it pretends to be. It is, rather, the imposition of northern European bourgeois notions on the rest of the world. I return to this.)

Racism presupposes that races are natural kinds and that the differences are socially significant. Given that the prime traits for recognition are physical, as long as societies are racist, the historical experience of non-whites cannot be the same as the experience of assimilated and assimilating ethnic whites. Widely current 'people of color' rhetoric sees this, sometimes to the annoyance of otherwise well-meaning anti-racists.

This would seem to be especially critical at the present junction. Changes in US immigration laws have consequentially altered Asian and 'Hispanic' immigration to the United States. There are, now, some six million Asian-Americans and Spanish is the first language of speakers in several American cities. Even relatively well-resourced Asian-Americans are facing and will face American racism, forestalling, or preventing, their efforts to assimilate as full-fledged Americans. This may or may not be severe as the racism encountered by Black Americans, depending on other factors. Many immigrating Hispanics, perhaps most, are not Castilian Spainards, Europeans from the New World. Rather, they come from populations which experienced extensive inter-marriage with indigenous peoples and, as regards immigrants from the Caribbean, descendents of African slaves. They will have similar problems. To be sure, many blacks (still the preferred term among Black Americans) have, of course, 'made it.' So, too, will many of the new 'Asian-Americans' and 'Hispanics.' But unlike the Irish and the Italians, even after taking on the mores of 'Americans,' they will not likely or easily be able to identify with their 'fellow' Americans. In a racist society, their physical differences will mark them and remain socially significant.

I have, to this point, been assuming that assimilation is cultural imperialism, assimilation to WASP and bourgeois America. And I as noted, the alternative, 'cultural pluralism,' as that is usually understood, is fatally flawed. We thus have a dilemma: We are damned if we do, damned if we don't. Is there some way to sneak between the horns. It may be that there is.

Let us first be clear about what is objectionable about cultural imperialism. The culture, language, forms of life of the groups being imperialized are not merely different; they are disvalued. Worse, as Iris Young (a former student at Queens College) puts it:

'to experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominate meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one group invisible at the same time as they they stereotype one's group as and mark it out as the Other...Those living under under cultural imperialism find themselves defined from the outside, positioned, placed, by a network of dominant meanings they experience as arising from elsewhere, from those with whom they do not identify and who do not identify with them' (p. 58f.).

This applies, of course, not only to ethnics, but perhaps more emphatically to other groups

identified by marks which are socially significant, blacks, women, Gays and the disabled. To use W.E.B. Du Bois terms, a 'double consciousness' is created, a 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (quoted by Young, p. 60).

But this diagnoses, exploited by more recent 'post modernist' and feminist literature suggests also the remedy: A re-valorization of difference including a re-valorization of particular, local expressions of cultural difference. And--this is crucial--this does not require barricaded, exclusionist communities; still less, does it require sovereign territories.

In this regard, one can reconsider the idea of 'an American.' The disaster, as noted, was the supposition that to be an American was to assimilate to WASP, bourgeois culture. It can hardly be doubted that this continues to be the dominating assimilationist posture. Contemporary assimilationists, unlike Wilson are, of course, reluctant to acknowledge this openly. But it has been clear to groups defined as inferior in its terms. 'The politics of difference' can be seen as self-conscious responses to this assimilationist ideal, efforts to assert a positive sense of their culture and experiential specificity. In my view, this must be enthusiastically endorsed, including then, efforts to save or to recover what remains of ethnic heritages.

This suggests a reconceptualization what it means to be an American. It must mean, in part at least, a willingness to value difference and a rejection of the idea that the assimilationist idea that full participation in American society requires a rejection of the language and culture of minority groups. Usually forgotten this was Lenin's plan for the new USSR. As one of his 'last struggles' (the title of Moshe Lewin's excellent treatment of this), Lenin declared a war 'to the death on dominant-nation chauvinism. It was inconceivable to him that the Bolsheviks should struggle against imperialism and then 'ourselves fall--even in trivial matters--into something like imperialist relations toward the oppressed nationalities.' He was clear also what this meant. It meant, first and foremost, defending the use of national languages. Abuses, 'under the pretext of unity of the railroad service, under the pretext of fiscal unity and so forth' must end.' In a 'state,' of course, this requires at least bilingualism. (Lenin, of course, lost this last struggle--to Stalin. And, of course, the problem did not go away. Compare here, of course, the effort to suppress Hawaiian language and culture.)

I do not think that Americans can either easily or quickly transform their Americanism from an imperialist WASP, bourgeois chauvinism to a roomier recognition of the values of others; but I think also that the politics of difference is an effective strategy in this transformation, especially if it is properly conceptualized. That is, while some immediate gains may be achieved by taking an essentialist view of oppressed groups, in the long run this may be counterproductive. Oppressed groups can revalorize their difference and identify interests without this. Finally, in the absence of a class politics, real social change in America will require a coalition politics, a politics of difference joined to a politics of overlapping and shared concerns.