

## Three Pictures of America<sup>\*</sup>

There is wide disagreement among both ordinary Americans and scholarship about America on how it should be conceptualized. Is America unique in some respect? If so, how? Is it now, or has it ever been, one “nation”? What follows is an attempt at clarifying some of the salient issues. Three “ideal-types” are constructed.

### I “Democratic Universalism”

(a) America is culturally an amalgamation of many peoples of many cultures who have jointly created a common culture: The Melting Pot.

(b) America is committed to “freedom,” (The Bill of Rights) and “democratic equality”(The US Constitution)—a shared set of common ideals. On some versions, this commitment is all that required to be an American. Thus, e.g.:

“America is an Immigrants’ land, open to anyone of any race or culture who accepts the ideas of the European Enlightenment on which it was founded. Provided the ideas remain intact, an America populated with Martians would still be America” (quoted from Lind: *The Next American Nation* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 232, from *The Economist*).

In America, individuals (ideally, of course) are treated as individuals; hence race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender are irrelevant. For Democratic Universalists, this should be the fundamental principle of public policy.

(c) Although the ideal is not fully realized, American history is the record of progressive movement toward this ideal, expressed clearly in the Declaration of Independence. Jacksonian Democracy, the tragedy of Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s represent watersheds.

(d) In some versions, the United States is a “universal nation” in that “nationality” is irrelevant.

(e) For many, the United States has a special “mission” in the world. Herman Melville articulated this in 1849:

We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours (quoted from Lind, p. 228).

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\* “America” includes, of course, both the North and South American continents, and properly we should say “United States of America.”

## II “Multiculturalism” (Pluralism)

(a) America is a nation of nations: The Salad Bowl. On this picture, the “pot” has not melted and should not melt. Diversity is both good in itself and has valuable consequences.

(b) As above, America is committed to “freedom,” (The Bill of Rights) and “democratic equality”(The US Constitution)—a shared set of common ideals. This is a sufficient ground of unity. Within this frame, then, pluralist politics are entirely appropriate.

Promoting diversity is a critical policy rationale since “one can be a good citizen without relinquishing one’s native culture, language, food, dress or folkways” (Ravich). Equality of opportunity requires attention to differences in needs of groups: Affirmative action, e.g..

## III Nativist America

America is White Christian Nation under continual threat by “aliens” who include secularists, liberals, the black underclass, Jews, Latinos, Asians and homosexuals.

### Some Pertinent History

1. America was founded by WASPs: White Anglo-Saxon Protestants: Evangelical Christians who had a mission. . (“An Anglo-Saxon...is a German that’s forgot who was his parents”). In 1776, some 20% of all those residing the colonies (about 2.75 million totally) were blacks held in slavery. The Naturalization Law of 1790 limited naturalization to “free white persons.”
2. “Manifest Destiny” (the concept comes slightly later) forced native Americans west—until they were all but annihilated.
3. Between 1815 and 1860, five million Europeans immigrated, the majority from Britain (including Irish, Protestant and Catholic), Germany, Scandinavia and Holland.
4. The Civil War, the last “capitalist revolution” freed the slaves, but with the complete cooperation of the WASP Northeastern Establishment (essentially the Republican Party), apartheid was enforced on black Americans. Although repeatedly challenged (and always met with violence), **the system of apartheid did not end until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s**
5. Anti-Asian American Nativism propelled the Chinese Exclusion Act (1883).

6. With rapid industrialization in the North, another 24 million immigrated, mostly Southern and Eastern Europeans, creating “ghettos” especially in cities of the northern industrial heartland. In 1910, of 91,997,266 Americans, 32,413,723 were foreign born. Woodrow Wilson, sensitive to the difficulties of convincing these “Americans” to enter World War I, remarked: “Some Americans need hyphens in their names because only part of them has come over.” For him, “the English race,” “the pure strain of the nation which planted the colonies and made the independent government under which we live,” was best kept “without taint or mixture” in Virginia and “hitherto in all the South.” Race based immigration instituted in 1920. (70% to England, Ireland and Germany, 2% to Asians and 1% to Africans.) Deportation of subversive aliens prompted by the Red Scare.
  
7. Second and Third generation Euro-Americans begin the process of assimilation to WASP America, a process effectively complete by the end of World War II, (what Lind calls “the Second Republic). They constitute the largest of the five groups of Hollinger’s Ethno-Racial Pentagon. Ethnic outmarriage among European-American is significant: Four Fifths of Italian Americans born since 1950 marry other European ethnic groups; seventy-five percent of English, Irish and Polish Americans outmarry; About fifty percent of Jews outmarry.  
  
But outmarriage between European-Americans and the four other groups is very small (except in Hawai’i.) (Until the 1950s, 30 states had miscegenation laws.)
  
8. The Civil Rights movement was even more radical in its consequences than the Civil War and (failed) Reconstruction. Not only did it break down apartheid, it provided the legal muscle and ideology for all the conceptions of multi-ethnic America (including programs aimed at correcting not only the legacy of past discrimination (as originally intended, but programs aimed at ameliorating the conditions of all those with “special needs,” whether or not they were victims of past discrimination.)
  
9. The 1965 Immigration Act propelled the largest flood of immigration in this century, some 39% of all growth in the US population between 1980 and 1990. Most of these people are both non-white and unskilled.
  
10. The 2000 US census permitted for the first time inclusion of so-called “mixed race Americans.”

#### **IV The Real America?**

All three of the Pictures of America lack an analysis of class and both Democratic Universalism and Multiculturalism fail to acknowledge that while the Civil Rights movement was of enormous importance, civil rights are insufficient to realize equality of

opportunity: Class and racial differences accordingly, undermine both democratic universalism and multiculturalism.

“Nativism,” unfortunately, is not restricted to a marginalized right, but remains part of an unspoken legacy among many white Americans. Accordingly, it propels elite white hegemony, endorsed by many white working class Americans who are not threatened by class (having accepted the idea that anyone in America can make it if they work hard enough), but are threatened by immigration and by programs aimed at promoting diversity; similarly, “identity politics” reinforces white hegemony by securing “tokenism” instead of structural change.

Although the idea of “a melting pot” expresses an important idea, there is a wide gap between ideals and reality. If realized, it would affirm an American “nationality:” an American is a speaker of a dialect of English who acknowledges and celebrates the inherited legal and political tradition *and* the cultural contributions of the many peoples who today constitute the nation, including African-Americans (who unnoticed by many, have made enormous contributions to culture, from Jazz to Hiphop.) As John Dewey put it:

Such terms as Irish-American or Hebrew-American or German-American are false terms, because they seem to assume something which is already in existence called America, to which other factors may be hitched on. The fact is, the genuine American, the typical American, is himself a hyphenated character. It does not mean that he is part American and that some foreign ingredient is then added. It means that...he is international and interracial (sic) in his makeup. He is not American plus Pole or German. But the American is himself Pole-German-English-French-Spanish-Italian-Greek-Irish-Scandinavian-Bohemian-Jew—and so on (Quoted by Lind, p. 277).

As is evident, in the real America, Dewey’s sound suggestion is profoundly marred by the absence of reference to African-American, Chinese-American, Samoan-American, etc. understood precisely as Dewey understands other hyphenated Americans. As Lind notes, “Americans should think of themselves as belong only to one race—the human—and to one nationality—the American” (p. 296).

If realized, in a post-ethnic America, race/ethnic difference would not be an obstacle to equality of opportunity; and as Hollinger notes, Alex Haley could say that he was Irish without drawing laughter. To be sure, even this does not touch on obstacles to equality of opportunity generated by class differences, nor more radically, does it challenge equality of opportunity as a worthwhile ideal.

Most Euro-Americans are today fundamentally “symbolic ethnics:” they treasure features of their heritage, but are thoroughly “integrated” Americans. African and Asian Americans, acknowledging racist practice by whites, have tended to reinforce their “ethnic” identities; “Hispanics” (of lighter color!) may seek assimilation or resist it.

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