

American Nationality in Postethnic Perspective¹

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The perspective I call «postethnic» pulls together and defends certain elements of multiculturalism, and criticizes others. A postethnic perspective is suspicious of the authority that society has traditionally allowed skin color and bodily shape to exercise over culture and over social affiliations. This perspective tries to balance an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities, and it promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethno-racial backgrounds. A postethnic perspective is not an all-purpose formula for solving policy problems; it is merely a distinctive frame within which issues in education and politics can be debated.

A *postethnic* perspective develops and applies cosmopolitan ideals in a specific historical context: that of the past quarter-century's greater appreciation for a variety of kinds of *ethnic* connectedness. In contrast to the liberal critique of «ethnocentrism» prominent during the middle decades of the century, recent thinking about «community» has attributed to local, regional, religious, and ethno-racial units a capacity for the formation of human character said to be lacking in the national and global affiliations favored by «universalists». Moreover, many ideas that were presented in the 1950s as «human nature» or «American culture» have turned out, under critical scrutiny, to be the particular interests of historically specific, empowered groups. Where all of humankind was once taken to be the referent, we are now more inclined to speak about, or on behalf of, an «ethnos», a particular solidarity rooted in history. The term «postethnic» marks an effort to articulate and develop cosmopolitan instincts within this new appreciation for the «ethnos». Postethnicity is the critical renewal of cosmopolitanism in the context of today's greater sensitivity to «roots». «Rooted

¹ This essay is adapted from Chapter Six of D.A. HOLLINGER, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, New York 1995.

Cosmopolitanism» is indeed a label recently adopted by several theorists of diversity whom I take to be moving in the direction I call postethnic².

But the significance of the notion of «postethnic» should not be exaggerated. It refers to a cluster of insights and dispositions that are actually quite widespread in our time. I hope these ideas can play a greater role in our national – and international – conversations about diversity if they are identified, elaborated, and associated with a name. The word «postethnic»³ is a practical, linguistic device designed to stabilize and make more easily available a set of ideas that now flow in and out of multiculturalist discourse with the imperceptible ease of tidal waters in a lagoon.

A postethnic perspective on communities of descent within the United States entails the principle of affiliation by revocable consent. This modest choice-maximizing principle supports the renewal and critical revision of those communities of descent whose progeny choose to devote their energies to these communities even after experiencing opportunities for affiliating with other kinds of people. A postethnic perspective denies neither history nor biology, nor the need for affiliations, but it does deny that history and biology provide a set of clear orders for the affiliations we are to make. I want now to turn to the sketching of a postethnic perspective on American nationality.

Among the historic acts for which President Woodrow Wilson is remembered is the bringing of the Jim Crow system of racial segregation to the American capital city. White Washingtonians did not lack means to discriminate against their black fellow-citizens before Wilson came to town in 1913, but the first southerner to occupy the White House since the Civil War did come with something new: the South's system of separate-and-unequal public accommodations and services that survived until dismantled by protest movements and court decisions in the 1950s and 1960s. Although Wilson's institutionalization of racial discrimination is sometimes seen as an anomaly in a progressive president's vision for America and the world, there is a certain logical consistency between this act and another historic act for which Wilson is also remembered: the championing of

² M. COHEN, *Rooted Cosmopolitanism*, in «Dissent», Fall 1992, pp. 478-483; B. ACKERMANN, *Rooted Cosmopolitanism*, in «Ethics», CIV, 1994, pp. 516-535.

³ The word «postethnic» first came to my attention when I saw it in W. SOLLORS, *A Critique of Pure Pluralism*, in S. BERCOVITCH (ed), *The Reconstructing of American Literary History*, Cambridge, Mass., 1986, p. 277.

the cause of «national self-determination» on the part of the various ethnic groups of Europe after World War I.

Wilson's advocacy of the nationalism of Czechs, Poles and other minorities within the old European empires was of course intended to liberate the downtrodden, while his advocacy of the Jim Crow system cannot be so construed. But Wilson's acts at the Versailles conference of 1919 bespoke an «ethnic» rather than a «civic» nationalism, just as his commitment to racial separation in the United States compromised the non-ethnic, «official» ideology of the American nation. The «nations» to which Wilson ascribed a right to self-determination were ethnic entities, even if some of the new states Wilson helped to create – especially Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia – were more multi-ethnic than his theory warranted. Indeed, the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in our own time are events more truly Wilsonian in spirit than were these Versailles-created states to begin with.

The case of Woodrow Wilson dramatizes and renders historically concrete a distinction between «ethnic» and «civic» nations⁴ essential to the development of a postethnic perspective on American nationhood and the American nation-state. The nationalism we hear the most about today in the Balkans, in South Asia, and in the parts of Europe that were once within the Soviet Union, holds ethnicity to be the proper foundation of the nation. Nationality, in this view, is based on descent. The true nation is a solidarity grounded in what its adherents understand to be primordial ties, not any instrumental or accidental connections.

Ethnic nationalism claims «that an individual's deepest attachments are inherited, not chosen», writes Michael Ignatieff in his television series and book, *Blood and Belonging*, as he laments the persistence of primordially defined conflicts in Northern Ireland, Kurdistan, Quebec, and several sites in eastern Europe and the Balkans. The more precarious principle of civic nationality, according to Ignatieff, asserts that the nation should be composed of all those – regardless of race, color, creed,

⁴ This distinction is proving more useful than ever to students of nationalisms, past and present. See, for example, one of the most ambitious books yet addressed to the topic, L. GREENFELD, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, esp. pp. 11-12. The utility of the civic-ethnic distinction is accepted by Greenfeld's most effective critic, Stanley Hoffmann, whose brilliant review should be read by anyone using the Greenfeld book or otherwise interested in the difficulties of defining and addressing «nationalism»: *The Passion of Modernity*, «Atlantic», August 1993, pp. 101-108.

gender, language, or ethnicity – who subscribe to the nation's political creed. This nationalism is called civic because it envisages the nation as a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens, united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values⁵.

Civic nationalism is the variety of nationalism developed the most conspicuously by the United States and France following the revolutions of 1776 and 1789, and also by the countries of Latin America who declared their independence early in the nineteenth century. The revolutionaries who created the United States and the Latin American republics «shared a common language and a common descent with those against whom they fought», Benedict Anderson has emphasized in *Imagined Communities*, the most provocative and influential book on nationalism written in our time⁶. Nationality, in this second view, is based on the principle of consent, and is ostensibly open to persons of a variety of ethno-racial affiliations. A civic nation is built and sustained by people who honor a common future more than a common past. The United States has never been without a battle of a kind between the illegitimate ethnic nation and the official civic nation. This is the classic conflict between the nation's strictly non-ethnic ideology and its extensively ethnic history. The damage the ethnic proto-nation of Anglo-Protestants – and later of white Americans generally – inflicted on ethno-racial groups imperfectly protected by the civic nation endows the multiculturalism of our time with its political intensity. An ironic consequence of this well-documented history is that American criticisms of the civic nation are now voiced not only by those purporting to speak on behalf of «the people who built this country» but also by persons carrying the mantle of ethnoracial minorities. If echoes of the older nativism can still be heard in some of the calls for a «more Christian America» emanating from the religious right, the tables have partly turned. The civic nation, so long accused of being too commodious, too accepting of «outsiders», is now credibly accused of being too insensitive to the group needs of people who bring non-European ethnicities

⁵ M. IGNATIEFF, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*, New York 1994, pp. 6-7, 249.

⁶ B. ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd. ed., New York 1991, p. 47. In his preface to the second edition of this book, Anderson complained bitterly and justly that most discussants of the first edition (1983) had ignored his emphasis on the New World and continued to theorize about nationalism on the basis of the «ethnolinguistic nationalism» of Europe (xii).

into the republic. The claims of diaspora and of conquered peoples are raised against pressures for assimilation.

Yet it would be a mistake to conflate America's version of the battle between the ethnic and the civic nation with the versions of this battle now being fought in Kurdistan, Bosnia, and most of the other parts of the world that generate today's headlines about nationalism. Many of those disputes feature one or more de-facto ethnic nations struggling against one another, and most of them entail either the creation of new states or the drastic redrawing of state boundaries. This is simply not the situation in the United States. Even the overwhelming majority of those African-American and Latino intellectuals whose programs for cultural enclaving and group entitlements lead their most hostile critics to call them «separatists» do not advance movements for separate sovereignty remotely comparable to that found in the Canadian province of Quebec or the Tamil region of Sri Lanka.

Exactly what place such ethno-racial solidarities should have in any particular civic nation needs to be worked out within the circumstances of that nation. No one begins with a clean slate. No one can simply draw up any system of affiliations at all. But a civic nation can play a role in the dynamics of affiliation that an ethnic nation cannot. The civic nation is located midway, so to speak, between the ethnos and the species. It can mediate between them, and all the more significantly when the society is diverse: a civic nation mediates between the species and those ethno-racial varieties of humankind represented within its borders.

«Mediation» can be of many sorts. This description of civic nations as «mediators» fits well the old Austro-Hungarian empire, with its many semi-autonomous peoples being governed by the old Hapsburg monarchy. So, too, does the description fit some of the dictatorial states of Africa that have inherited borders set by the European colonial powers. One can «mediate» by telling everyone what to do, by virtually ceding authority to regional or ethno-racial sovereignties, or even by establishing hierarchies of groups and systems of apartheid.

When the role of mediation is performed by a democratic polity without falling into universalist conceits, however, it can be a significant step in the struggle for achieving sound affiliations. Of the various «we's» available, a civic nation with democratic aspirations and a sense of its own historical particularity can be a rather attractive candidate, given the alternatives. The philosopher Thomas Nagel has recently argued that the inher-

ently dangerous but indispensable instinct for «solidarity» is better acted upon in relation to a democratic nation-state than in relation to «racial, linguistic, or religious identification» on the one hand, or «the world» on the other.

The United States is not the only democratic, civic nation to mediate modestly between the species and its ethno-racial varieties. Canada is another, and examples from other continents might include Argentina, Brazil, and Zimbabwe. But the United States has exemplified both democracy and the principle of civic nationality for a longer period of time than have any of the comparably multi-ethnic societies. The national community of the United States – the «we» that corresponds to citizenship – *mediates more directly than most other national communities do* between the species and the ethno-racial varieties of humankind.

This is not to say on behalf of Americans, «we are the world»⁷. This popular trope may help us recognize the diversity within American society, but it also threatens to deceive Americans into supposing that the varieties of humankind are no more various than those prominently represented within the borders of the United States. It also tempts us all to underestimate the cultural particularity of the United States, ignoring the continuities that cut across ethno-racial and other lines, and enable people living in most of the rest of the world to identify many people as Americans when they appear abroad. Further, the sense that the United States is isomorphic with the world portends an imperialist propensity to take it over. The points I am making about the United States are more modest.

The United States is unusual in the extent and passion with which its ideological spokespersons accept and defend the nation's negotiated, contingent character within a broad canopy of universalist abstractions derived from the Enlightenment. «America is still a radically unfinished society», Michael Walzer has recently reminded us in tones reminiscent of Randolph Bourne's characterization of a dynamic, «trans-national» America welcoming and transforming many varieties of humankind⁸. But

⁷ See G. YUDICE, *We are Not the World*, in «Social Text», nos. 31-32, 1992, pp. 202-216.

⁸ M. WALZER, *What Does It Mean to Be an 'American'?*, in «Social Research», LVII, 1990, p. 614. Although Walzer comments extensively on Horace Kallen's development of the idea of «cultural pluralism», Walzer's own position would seem to be closer to Bourne's interactionist ideal for American ethnic groups than to Kallen's tendency to encourage in each group a greater measure of internal solidarity.

Bourne spoke against the torrent of nativist, Anglo-Saxonism that eventually curtailed immigration in the 1920s; while Walzer speaks at the nation's touted multiculturalist moment, in an atmosphere of increasingly widespread acceptance of cultural diversity as a national virtue. The constructed, profoundly non-primordial character of national solidarity in the United States is openly avowed, and treated as a virtue rather than an embarrassing compromise.

The United States is unusual, moreover, in that it is actually making some progress toward rendering its open and flexible self-image less fraudulent than it once was. A new demographic diversity – marked the most dramatically by the numbers and varieties of Asian and Latin American immigrants and their offspring now part of American society – has diminished yet further the privileged connection between American nationality and Anglo-Protestant ancestry challenged earlier by Catholics, Jews, other European ethnics, and the African-American descendants of slaves. A «Chinese ethnic» can of course be a citizen of France or of Great Britain, or even of Israel or Japan, but in all of these cases he or she will encounter a national community with a manifestly more ethnocentric social history and public culture than he or she will encounter in the contemporary United States. Moreover, when this «Chinese ethnic», or a «White Southerner», or any other American rooted in any one particular enclave within the United States manages to identify with the American people as a whole, that American takes a tiny but ideologically significant step toward fraternal solidarity with the species. *To say this need be to celebrate America, but to perform a comparative evaluation of the world's national culture, considered as instruments of egalitarian values.*

I do not propose to minimize the reality of ethno-racial prejudice, discrimination, and violence within American society. Nor do I wish to reawaken the dangerous myth of the «chosen people», bearing, in Melville's apotheosis, «the ark of the liberties of the world»⁹. One can easily enumerate the failures of the American effort to «share» American liberties with the world, and to guarantee these liberties to those of its own citizens lacking the privilege of Anglo-Protestant ancestry. Indeed, so conscious are many of us today of American arrogance – and so appalled at the uncritical enthusiasm for American military power displayed by much of the public during the Persian Gulf War of 1991 –

⁹ H. MELVILLE, *White-Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War*, New York 1979, p. 153 (originally published 1850).

that many American intellectuals tend to avoid earnest discussions of American nationality out of fear that the topic itself can yield only chauvinism. But the ideological resources of the United States are simply too useful to democratic egalitarians to be conceded to the Far Right.

The value of a democratic nation-state that is commodious enough to sustain diversity yet cohesive enough to guarantee rights and provide for welfare is too easily lost from view as we try to absorb and assess the global scale on which much of life is now lived. The relative significance of the nation-state as an institution, we are told with increasing assurance and frequency, is declining proportionately with the rise in influence of «transnational» or «postnational» organizations and loyalties. But «a cosmopolitan, post-nationalist spirit» still depends, as Ignatieff insists, «on the capacity of nation-states to provide security and civility for their citizens»¹⁰.

This insight is lacking in much recent talk about the emerging «post-national» order, which breathes an air of political unreality. One of post-nationality's most thoughtful and learned enthusiasts, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, describes the Olympic movement as «only the most spectacular among a series of sites and formations on which the uncertain future of the nation-state will turn»¹¹. But the Olympic games turn out repeatedly to serve as arenas for an exuberant nationalism in which individual athletes are virtually carried about the stadium and the world's electronic media by the flags and anthems of their sponsoring states. The Olympic movement proved unable even to prevent Tanya Harding from skating at Lillehammer after she admitted to a very non-Olympic degree of involvement in the attack on her rival, Nancy Kerrigan. The American representatives of the Olympic movement were thwarted by the threat of a civil suit; what stood in the way of the Olympic movement's enforcing of its own ideals was the American nationstate's rules for protecting the rights of its citizens.

The amount of «post-national» significance carried by other transnational formations Appadurai mentions is also open to question. Amnesty International, Habitat for Humanity, Oxfam, and «networks of Christian philanthropy, such as World Vision»¹² are no doubt virtuous, valuable organizations, but we

¹⁰ M. IGNATIEFF, *Blood and Belonging*, p. 13.

¹¹ A. APPADURAI, *Patriotism and Its Futures*, in «Public Culture», V, 1993, pp. 419-420.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 419.

should not kid ourselves about the power they wield. Appadurai is also cheered by cases of ethno-racial diasporas that do not express themselves in the form of demands for territorial states – he mentions Armenians in Turkey and Kashmiri Hindus in the Indian capital of Delhi – but these are weak indicators of the promise of a postnational order when we have before us examples of so many stateseeeking and state-redesigning movements. On whom can diasporic minorities truly count for the enforcement of their rights other than the state in which they reside? And from what authority do such rights derive? The force of «world opinion» and of international organizations such as the United Nations do matter, but not much.

Nation-states still do matter, enormously. Yet the nationstate, so long a dominating presence in the world, does face pressures that are often counted as a crisis. These pressures are invoked by two of our era's buzz-words, «globalization» and «particularization». The capitalist economy has always been international, yet until recently most theorists of its expansion anticipated that the social and cultural peculiarities of distinctive localities would steadily diminish as a result of incorporation within a single, «modern» world-system. As the range and pace of economic integration has sharply increased, however, especially since the early 1970s, a host of particularist movements have resisted cultural homogenization. The strident assertion of particularity on the part of various religious, ethnic, and regional communities is stimulated in part by resistance to the western cultural values that often come with more complete integration into the world-capitalist economy. But this «particularization» is sometimes actually facilitated by the strategies of «globalization». In the «culture industries», observes Kevin Robins, «the drive to achieve ever greater economies of scale» dictates the targeting of «the shared habits and tastes of particular market segments at the global level» rather than by geographic proximity¹³. Both local and diasporic taste-communities are thus reinforced by the sophisticated marketing strategies of multinational corporations eager to exploit a particular culture-market wherever it may be geographically located.

In this context of simultaneous globalist and particularist pressures, the link between the «nation» and the «state» may loosen.

¹³ K. ROBINS, *Global Culture*, in S. HALL - D. HELD - T. MCGREW (eds), *Modernity and Its Futures*, Oxford 1992, p. 317. This entire volume is an exceptionally lucid and fair-minded introduction to the political-economic and cultural circumstances now confronted by industrial societies in an era of rapidly increasing interdependence.

Nation-states exist when the apparatus of a state is associated with a people who think of themselves a nation, but history is filled with nations lacking states and with states lacking a population united by the strong sense of peoplehood that makes a nation. Since a state functions better if the population supports it, leaders of states are naturally eager to convince their citizens that they constitute a nation whose will is expressed by the state. Just how convincing or fraudulent are a given state's claims to speak for a nation is the perennial issue in the history of modern nationalism, and is acutely felt by civic nation-states being told that they embrace many nations who should, perhaps, have their own states. Whatever tensions exist within any given nation-state between its nation and its state are intensified by the dynamic of globalization and particularization. States will continue to exist, of course. What they will respond to, however, may not be a nation. It may be, instead, a multitude of constituencies united less by a sense of common destiny than by a will to use the state as an instrument of their particular agendas.

Isn't that what nation-states have always been? Some would interpret the history of the United States itself as essentially a story of successful and unsuccessful struggles by various groups to direct the power of the state to support their own interests. The element of truth in this point threatens to obscure a feature of the nation-state worth pondering as people decide how much of themselves to invest in the American national «we». The appeal to a common destiny – to a sense that Americans are all «in it together» – has been a vital element in the mobilization of state power on behalf of a number of worthy causes. The successes of the Civil Rights movement owed something to this intangible nationalism. «It was the United States, the American people – not just some of them», as historian David Farber has summarized the matter – that African-Americans were able to hold responsible «for guaranteeing one standard of basic social provision, justice, and equality before the law»¹⁴.

The building of the welfare state, too, was justified with reference to a sense of nationhood. The Progressive Movement and the New Deal and the Great Society, whatever else they may have been, were decidedly «nationalist» movements, claiming to speak on behalf of the American nation. Not all claims to a common, national interest are equally disingenuous. If the United States of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s had been possessed of a

¹⁴ D. FARBER, *The Age of Dreams: America in the 1960's*, New York 1994, p. 66.

stronger sense of national solidarity, it is possible that agreeing upon a national system of health care would have proved less formidable a challenge for the American polity.

What the world-wide crisis of the nation-state has done to the United States is to place under renewed pressure a national solidarity that has always been episodic. One source of pressure is the diasporic consciousness that flourishes under the aegis of multiculturalism. This consciousness is guarded about the American nation because of its assimilationist potential, but looks to the state as a source of entitlements. The second source of pressure on the American nation-state is considerably more portentous, but gets insufficient attention in discussions of «separatism». This is the opportunity that globalization presents for American capitalists to maintain and increase their profits without attention to the economic and social welfare of the nation. More and more of their employees live in Manila, Taipei, and the Dominican Republic. A business elite with a transnational focus will find certain uses for the American state, but it has little need for the nation. From the American national community, this business elite can, in some ways, «separate» itself. Those who worry about the «fragmenting» of America would do well to attend more closely to this variety of separatism.

The American nation, in the meantime, has not gone unattended. While diasporic consciousness and multinational corporations render the American nation less vital and immediate for Americans caught up in «particularization» and «globalization», the nation is being claimed with increasingly fierce determination by a third constituency. A complex of movements and organizations commonly associated with «middle America» and evangelical Christianity, and with the earnest defense of «family values», are prominent elements in this third constituency. These people tend to be suspicious of the state, except as an enforcer of personal morality, but they believe, with a vengeance, in «America». Their political heroes include Congressman Newt Gingrich and the television and radio commentator, Rush Limbaugh.

These three constituencies are not the only players in the American drama of the nation's relation to the state. But all three are prominent in the cast of characters, and each helps to loosen the specific link between nation and state that facilitated the expansion of public responsibility for welfare and that responded to the Civil Rights movement. All three of these constituencies are the object of critical argumentation. Robert Reich, James Fallows, and others have tried to persuade the business

elite of the importance of the nation¹⁵. Arguments to the effect that the «middle Americans» have too narrow a cultural sense of the American nation and too restricted a political sense of the American state are staples of multiculturalist discourse. Less easy to come by are arguments of the kind I am making here. I believe that proponents of diasporic consciousness have rather less to fear from the American nation – and more to gain – than many of them acknowledge, and that the cosmopolitan element in multiculturalism is compatible with a strong affirmation of American nationality.

The terms in which Appadurai casts his obituary for the American nation-state exemplifies, once again, a position increasingly popular in multiculturalist circles, and thus invites critical appraisal here. The United States has generated «a powerful fable of itself as a land of immigrants», says Appadurai, who asserts that the old liberal ideas about American nationality simply cannot deal with the «thoroughly diasporic» realities presented by recent immigration. Appadurai urges attention to «the difference between being a land of immigrants and being one node in a postnational network of diasporas». The United States is «no longer a closed space for the melting pot to work its magic», but a place «people come to seek their fortunes but are no longer content to leave their homelands behind». A suitable role for the United States is to serve as «a free trade zone for the generation, circulation, importation, and testing of the materials for a world organized around diasporic diversity». In this context, patriotism for the United States might well be replaced, or supplemented, by a series of «new sovereignties», of which «queer nation may be only the first», followed, perhaps, by «the retired, the unemployed, and the disabled, as well as scientists, women, and Hispanics»¹⁶.

Appadurai exaggerates the novelty of the contemporary conditions that inspire his observations. The history of the United States suggests this nation-state to be more equipped than most are to cope with a world of simultaneously globalizing and particularizing forces. The vitality of immigrant communities early in the century, as measured by foreign-language newspapers and publishing houses, rendered the United States in the 1920's decidedly more multicultural than it is now. In the Polish language alone, there were being regularly published in the

¹⁵ R. REICH, *Work of Nations*; J. FALLOWS, *How the World works*, in «Atlantic», December 1993, pp. 61-87.

¹⁶ A. APPADURAI, *Patriotism*, cit., pp. 423-425, 427.

United States in 1923 sixty-seven weekly newspapers, eighteen monthlies, and nineteen dailies, the largest of which had a circulation of more than 100,000. Moreover, approximately one-third of all the immigrants who came to the United States in the great migration of 1880 to 1924 actually returned to their country of origin. To take the Poles, once again, as an example: of the nearly one-and-a-half million Polish immigrants between the turn of the century and 1924, nearly forty percent went back to Poland¹⁷. Back-and-forth migration of foreign workers was the norm, not the exception. Appadurai is a victim of a common misconception that the pre-1924 immigration greatly differed from the post-1965 immigration in the timing and intensity of immigrant attachment to the United States.

Students of today's diasporas and their relation to the American national community would do well to examine the earlier case of one of the European groups that eventually produced part of the American mainstream: the Italians. More than half of the nearly four million people who entered the United States from Italy between 1899 and 1924 decided not stay. If the «melting pot» ever worked in the «closed space» invoked by Appadurai as the salient historical contrast to today's diasporas, it did so only during the 1924-1965 interregnum between migrations and even then was affected by a culturally conspicuous migration from Hitler's Europe and by a steady stream of illegal immigrants from Mexico. The new immigration since 1965 is behaviorally mixed, like the old. Today's demography of immigration has its novelties, but uncertain attachment to the United States is not one of them.

The fundamental difference between the two immigrations is not that one was assimilationist and the other diasporic; rather, the economic conditions have changed. The opportunities in a highly controlled, service-oriented economy are narrower than in the expanding, production-oriented economy of the earlier era of massive immigration. There are additional differences between the two great migrations, but most of them render the American nation-state more important, not less, to the lives of immigrant workers than it was in 1890 or 1910. In the era of «free immigration» it was easier for foreign workers to move in and out of the United States at will than it is today; now, move-

¹⁷ For tables displaying arriving and departing immigrants by foreign nation, see S. THERNSTROM (ed), *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, Cambridge 1980, pp. 1036. For the Polish case, see this reference work's article by V. GREEN, *Poles*, pp. 787-803, esp. 798.

ment is more tightly regulated. Today's immigrants are more prepared for a measure of assimilation by the world-wide influence of American popular culture; most are more culturally attuned to the United States before they arrive in the United States than were their counterparts of a century ago. More importantly, immigrant communities are also acculturated into a vastly different political atmosphere. «Unlike the political institutions in place during the last great wave of immigration», observes Peter Skerry, «those in place today» encourage immigrants «to define themselves as a victimized group that cannot advance without the help of racially assigned benefits» derived from the state¹⁸.

Appadurai's vision of America as home to an expanse of particularist affiliations, too, is more traditional than he seems to realize. The assertion of group identities is so mainstream an activity that it is often observed that to affirm such sub-national identities is an American ritual. Organized interest groups, moreover, have long been a staple of American public life, and in exactly the categories listed by Appadurai: the retired, women, ethno-racial groups, and trade and professional associations. The proliferation of voluntary associations in the United States has been a staple of commentary on American society since Toqueville. Some of these affiliations were decidedly trans-national, like the vast movement in support of Christian missions, associated with missionary organizations of Western Europe. Today, the American Association of Retired Persons, an organization of thirty-three million dues-paying members, seems able to handle its dual loyalties – to the aged, and to the nation – rather comfortably. Whether it makes sense to call Queer Nation and the AARP «sovereignties» is dubious, however, and may exaggerate their power¹⁹.

Celebrants of diasporic solidarities are sometimes slow to appreciate the reality, integrity, and positive value of the larger American sovereignty. They treat «common ground» not as a commitment to one another within which we negotiate a future across the lines of acknowledged and respected difference, the way juries work toward a common verdict without pretending to collapse the differences they bring to the task; rather, «com-

¹⁸ SKERRY, *Mexican-Americans*, p. 7.

¹⁹ For a careful exploration of the prospects of divided sovereignty, see T.W. POGGE, *Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty*, in «Ethics», 1992, pp. 48-75. Pogge is a strong «voluntarist», engaged especially by political communities of «consent» that override, rather than build upon, ethno-racialities.

mon ground» is feared as a trick to hoodwink some Americans into sacrificing their interests for someone else's interests disguised as a common interest.

Americans have become too afraid of each other, and too unwilling to take up the task of building a common future. Part of the problem is with the notion «common», which when coupled with «ground» is often taken rather preciously to imply a uniform opinion on whatever questions are at issue. The national community's fate can be common without its will being uniform, and the nation can constitute a common project without embracing all of the projects that its citizens pursue through their voluntary affiliations.

From a postethnic perspective, the United States certainly can and should be a setting for the development of a great number of voluntary associations of many different sorts, including transnational affiliations. But the temptation to regard the United States as merely a container of cultures that come and go, rather than as a cultural entity in itself, should be examined in specific relation to some of the lessons learned during the age of ethnos-consciousness we have just experienced. If people do need to «belong», and if there is no escaping the drawing of «boundaries», these insights can apply to the national community of the United States as well as to more global and to more local solidarities. If all solidarities are ultimately constructs, and not primordial, it will not do to pronounce «artificial» the cultural continuities that have developed in relation to the American nation-state, and to then take at face value the claims to «authenticity» made on behalf of other cultures. Indeed, the distinction between «civic» and «ethnic» eventually breaks down because over the course of time civic affiliations help to create those that are eventually recognized as ethnic.

A measure of historical particularity can help to save the United States from the illusion that it is a proto-world-state. The United States will fall well short of its potential as an agent of democratic-egalitarian values if it tries to stretch itself to accommodate on the same terms every diaspora, every claim to group rights, every set of taboos and inhibitions that demand respect in the name of diversity. Rather, it makes more historical and practical sense for the United States to maintain its own public culture – constantly contested and critically revised, to be sure – against which the demands of various particularisms shall be obliged to struggle within a formal constitutional framework. The United States should not try to be all things to all people. Americans can even be «a people», so long as they remember

that they are not a «chosen people», or even the «almost chosen people» invoked by Lincoln, but merely *a people among peoples* in the sense that Geertz urged a modest «we» understood as «a case among cases, a world among worlds».

The «Americanizers» of the early twentieth-century were clearly wrong to have tried to make America into a monolithic culture. Horace Kallen made an equally conservative mistake in the opposite direction by wanting to reduce the United States to an administrative canopy under which a variety of «old-world» clans could perpetuate themselves. Both resisted novelty. Both, like their less extreme successors on today's «middle American right» and today's «multiculturalist left», tried to resolve the old American problem of «the one and the many» by relaxing it, by pushing toward either «one» or «many». A postethnic perspective is willing to live with this problem, and to treat it as an opportunity, rather than to try to escape from it.

A postethnic perspective invites critical engagement with the United States as a distinctive locus of social identity mediating between the human species and its varieties, and as a vital arena for political struggles the outcome of which determine the domestic and global use of a unique concentration of power. Such an engagement with the American nation need not preclude other engagements, including affiliations of varying intensity and duration defined by material or imagined consanguinity. A virtue of the term *postethnic* is to distinguish the perspective on American nationality sketched here from any reversion to a *preethnic* perspective on that nationality, according to which the general question of the ethnos is dismissed rather than critically addressed and the specific issue of ethno-racial identity is suppressed by a monolithic «100 percent» notion of American citizenship. Being «an American» amid a multiplicity of affiliations need not be dangerously threatening to diversity. Nor need it be too shallow to constitute an important solidarity of its own. A postethnic perspective embodies the hope that the United States can be more than a site for a variety of diasporas and of projects in colonization and conquest.

American Ethnicity in Post-National Perspective

R. Craig Nation

Professor Hollinger's argument is organized around three contrasting representations of the place of ethnicity and nationalism in American political life. Two of these can be described as mildly caricatured extremes, and the third as an idealized alternative.

In the first place there is the familiar image of the American melting-pot, in which ethnicity gives way to assimilation on behalf of a dominant conception of nationality. The result is the kind of imaginary, sanitized Americanism portrayed in the images of Norman Rockwell – an America with Archie Bunker as sage, Rush Limbaugh as prophet, and Newt Gingrich as messiah.

The opposite extreme is that of contemporary «multicultural diasporic consciousness», characterized by the passages cited from Barbara Hernstein-Smith and her so-called «laissez-faire multiculturalism». In the extremes to which it is being taken in the United States (as rendered by Appadurai Arjun for example) this approach is portrayed as increasingly subversive of any kind of viable civic consciousness and therefore an impediment to effective public policy. The examples cited are fairly representative of one current of thought in contemporary debates, but the position as a whole is once again represented as a caricature. Arguments on behalf of an assertive multiculturalism which demand the nurturing of difference are represented here as little more than recipes for an anarchic and destructive tribalism.

These images are set up as straw people which the author proceeds to knock down to make way for the idealized alternative of «postethnic nationality». The key ingredient is a conception of «civic nationalism» purged of cultural hegemonism and intolerance, mixed with a depiction of an imagined America in which «cosmopolitan multiculturalism is compatible with a strong affirmation of American nationality». In this happy land the classic civic virtues and the ideals of citizenship and responsibil-