

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

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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 Appádurái 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-

ity – of equality before the law, equal opportunity, guarantees of basic human dignity, and respect for the human essence – will be reasserted in the face of divisive, petty, and conflicting agendas for group entitlements.

Professor Hollinger's essay presents a *plaidoyer* for this vision. It is not an unsympathetic vision, and it is developed in a subtle and sensitive manner that leaves few alternative explanations altogether unexplored. The author's tolerant liberalism is nonetheless potentially deceptive. The essay rests upon a sharp critique of one edge of the multiculturalism debate in contemporary America, and it articulates a strong alternative based upon a notion of American nationality that, in the context of the debate, seems designed to provoke if not offend. These conclusions are presented polemically, in the guise of a solution to the «problem» created by rampant Hernstein-Smithian laissez-faire ethno-politics. As such, I would argue, they suffer from several potential defects.

The most important area of ambiguity concerns the concept of multiculturalism itself. Professor Hollinger's key line of differentiation, reflective of his preoccupation with «diasporic extremism», is drawn between the pluralist or diasporic variant of the multicultural ideal and a «cosmopolitan» alternative. There is a tendency to downplay or ignore the weight of America's assimilationist tradition – the ideal, if not always the reality, of the homogenizing melting pot. It is precisely an attempt to move beyond this tradition, however, which lies at the source of the entire multiculturalism debate. The image of the melting pot has been so widely ridiculed that one risks to forget that it refers to something not altogether imaginary but also on occasion powerful and real. For those who are not intimidated by America's mainstream culture, because it is in some measure a projection of themselves, it requires a real effort of will to come to terms with that culture's pervasiveness and persuasiveness. Far from representing a quaint relic of the past, I would suggest, the assimilationist tradition has if anything been exaggerated by the universalizing tendencies of the age of globalization, inspired by the material culture of the West and a sometimes insipid but viscerally hegemonic «Americanism». The author poses diasporic extremism as the essence of the problem, but it is in fact only a part of a larger and more complex set of issues. These include the challenge of maintaining and nurturing individuality and difference in the face of a potent dominant culture.

What are the sources from which contemporary preoccupations with the politics of identity have emerged? The problem is

not really taken up here in a systematic way. When the issue is broached, it is usually in terms of the vague and unspecified notion of «consciousness». People arrive at a heightened awareness of collective identity, one might presume, because in some undefinable way the *Zeitgeist* wills that it be so.

I would propose an alternative explanation grounded in the realities of discrimination and exclusion, most vividly illustrated in the American experience by the situation of the Afro-American community. The enduring ground for movements within this community stressing cultural essentialism and separatism, from Marcus Garvey to Malcolm X to Louis Farrakan, is not the «spirit of the times» however defined, but rather an historical pattern of structural racism and marginalization. These realities are revealed today in any number of ways, all painfully visible. Housing patterns, particularly in great American cities, reflect a kind of de facto apartheid system of physical segregation. In urban ghettos, young Afro-Americans live in a world that is closed upon itself, walled in by physical, social, and psychological barriers. The economic disadvantages confronted by the Afro-American community as a whole, including pervasive prejudice, lack of viable tracks leading toward gainful employment, and a degraded physical and educational infrastructure, are too well-known to require elaboration.

All of this leads inevitably toward cultural distancing. The differentiation that has resulted, communicated socially within the dominant media culture via more-or-less subtly coded racial messages, becomes, in turn, a solid ground for the crystallization of cultural intolerance and racism. Diasporic consciousness may be a consequence of these realities, but it is not their cause. They are the result, not of a paralyzed, but rather of an uninspired, misdirected, and racially biased public policy.

One should also take care to differentiate between a superficial cultural diversity and an authentic multiculturalism. Much of what passes for multicultural in both the «diasporic» and «civic» or «post-ethnic» models is little more than superficial interfacing. Here one might take the situation of the thirty million strong Hispanic American community as a case in point. This community controls three television channels, 350 journals and magazines (including Spanish-language editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *The Miami Herald*), more than 30 radio stations, and a growing indigenous literature – a rich cultural outpouring indeed, but unfortunately not really accessible to the large majority of American citizens. Only 3 percent of American students complete more than two years of Spanish language in-

struction (only 10 percent even in New York City, where about a quarter of the population is Hispanic), a level of achievement that does not impart any kind of functional use of the language. As a result the real substance of Hispanic culture remains ghettoized, or, in the guise of so-called «cross over culture», diluted into a kind of folkloric parody-exotic, trivial, and ripe for commercial exploitation.

A richer and larger appreciation for cultural diversity is a minimal foundation for an authentic multiculturalism, and in contemporary America that kind of appreciation often lacks. Before we arrive at the «post-ethnic» commitment to public culture that the author proposes, it would be well to have some of the underpinnings in place. Is the ideal of cosmopolitan multiculturalism on the order of the day in an environment where the real correlation of cultural power remains so clearly weighted toward the mainstream?

One may finally inquire about the relevance of postethnic model outside the confines of the fifty American states. Despite the conceptual sweep of the key categories, that relevance, I fear, remains limited. The conclusion, evoking the American model as «a distinctive locus of social identity mediating between the human species and its varieties», become celebrational, a fervent evocation of yet another city on a hill, in this case the idealized civic nation mediator. Despite a range of occasional references to non-American examples the conclusions are rooted firmly in the American experience and they rest importantly upon the tradition of American exceptionalism. Insofar as Europe is mentioned at all it tends to be superficially and pejoratively. In this regard the essay risks perpetuating the received wisdom of a dynamic multicultural America in confrontation with a traditionally-minded and intolerant Europe clinging to a variety of integral nationalism and resisting multiculturalism in all its variants.

Contemporary Europe is without question struggling with the dilemma of multiculturalism, and its response has at least in some measure been characterized by the temptation of closure and a new intolerance. There is another side of the coin, however, that deserves some attention as well. The struggle of relatively homogenous societies such as Germany to come to terms with the reality of greater ethnic diversity has not been without flaws, but it is of considerable interest. With its traditions of cultural diversity, more widespread multilingualism, and vision of unification, contemporary Europe has perhaps more to offer to the debate than is often credited.

Professor Hollinger's essay is rich in insight and positive in inspiration. It correctly emphasizes the risks of a shallow and divisive preoccupation with ethnicity and identity at the expense of citizenship and civic culture. In seeking to counter these trends, however, the argument risks losing sight of the sources of the problem. The realities of marginalization and exclusion that lie at the core of the multiculturalism debate should probably be more strongly highlighted. The structural context is neglected, and as a consequence the author moves on to defend a model of postethnic nationalism for which the prerequisites – including an authentic multiculturalism as the basis for a real civic culture – are not yet in place.