

Multiculturalism and Nationalism

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Multiculturalism is a special irritant to someone of my generation. I got into politics through the 1960s civil rights movement. To this day I tear up whenever I hear the cadences of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream”—“little black boys and black girls will ... join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers,” and “the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will ... sit down together at the table of brotherhood.” And yet, when the spirit of integration was shoved aside by the black power movement in 1968, I was sanguine. I had read Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon in college and felt their anger very keenly, and was living in Bedford-Stuyvesant when black-power politics emerged. I thought that defiant self-assertion was a natural step for black Americans to take their place alongside Italian-Americans and others as a distinctive tribe getting respect in the rough-and-tumble of American society. But racialism quickly turned violent, not just on the pages of books but in the streets. I modified my views and was even Pat Moynihan’s RA on his famous “benign neglect” memo to President Nixon in 1970. Eventually the clouds seemed to part: When Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver became a political conservative and Mormon, and then Congress of Racial Equality Chairman Roy Innis became a Libertarian, I figured everything was going to be alright and turned to other pressing social problems like EPA overregulation.

More generally, my generation—the first cohort of millions of educated, affluent baby boomers—brought with it a strong insistence on equality among persons of different races, religions, and ethnicities, and of men and women, and of gays and straights. As social pioneers, we took some real casualties. We blithely assumed that our new custom of the two-career marriage would be natural and easy and unproblematic. We were wrong about that and left behind considerable wreckage—along with many practical tips for those who came after us.

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My generation has much to apologize for, especially when we were coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s and intoxicated by the power of our great numbers (and by a few other things)—Robert Bork’s “vertical invasion of the barbarians.” But we can be proud of having brought historic improvements in legal and social status in schools, the workplace, government and politics, and communities and homes. Not quite the same thing as defeating the Nazis and Japanese imperialism, but a generational achievement of merit and importance.

So the rise of multiculturalism is a matter of puzzlement and consternation to many of us. Fifty years after the civil rights revolution, forty years after the women’s equality revolution, we would have thought that social relations among those of differing racial, ethnic, and other groups would have become more relaxed and harmonious—so we could now, in the spirit of John Adams, all turn to more interesting and elevated things. And in vast areas of everyday American life, that is blessedly the case. But in politics and government, in schools and universities, and in many organs of media, art, and entertainment, issues of group identity and claims against other groups have instead become central, burning preoccupations.

The new multiculturalism is not an outgrowth of the civil-rights and women’s-rights movements. The previous movements were part and parcel of the American liberal tradition going back to the founding—that is, the progressive extension of freedom, equality, and opportunity to new groups and new circumstances. That tradition continues, to be sure, as in the extension of legal rights and status to gay individuals and couples. But, for the most part, multiculturalism is a sharp break with the liberal tradition:

First, the previous movements were premised on the essential goodness and worthiness of American society. They demanded that excluded groups be admitted to its pastures—to its opportunities and challenges and benefits. In contrast, multiculturalism, even when employing the language of inclusion, maintains that American society is fundamentally unjust and must be transformed. It has had some success in dismounting key leaders and events from American history, and in substituting ideological cartoons in

school textbooks. This is an effort to deny the necessity of making hard choices among imperfect alternatives—which is the source of progress or decline in a free, self-governing nation.

Second, the previous movements appealed to the Constitution and the rule of law and made use of their procedures and protections. In contrast, multiculturalism is hostile to freedoms of speech, inquiry, and association and to due process and the presumption of innocence. It regards them as tools of oppression and impediments to true social justice. It promotes collective guilt and collective innocence.

Third, the previous movements emerged from palpable circumstances of American life experienced by many and observable to all. Jim Crow subjected blacks to enforced segregation and routine public humiliation. Betty Friedan's housewife quietly sublimated her vocational talents and interests (that was my mom, and many of her generation). In contrast, multiculturalism is often directed at inequities that are beyond common experience; even the victims of oppression, befuddled by false consciousness, cannot perceive it without careful instruction.

Fourth, the previous movements had specific goals, mainly in public policy—to abolish Jim Crow, desegregate schools, revise family and inheritance laws, amend or reinterpret the Constitution, redistribute income through tax and welfare programs. These could be proposed, debated, and negotiated and enacted or rejected. In contrast, multiculturalism has an amorphous, unbounded quality. It is organized around progressively narrower definitions of identity and intersections of victimhood, progressively more esoteric theories of social oppression, and progressively more microscopic and ambiguous forms of private conduct. Instead of a redistribution of income, it seeks a redistribution of dignity from the white patriarchy to all and sundry others. Accordingly, it penetrates into areas of private life that the liberal tradition regarded as sacrosanct. It wants a new cultural hegemony, one whose strictures expand continuously in response to new grievances.

Multiculturalism is hardly a unique American phenomenon. It exists in many other nations with their own distinctive histories, and yet with many of the features I have described. In Canada, it is official national and provincial policy, with entire ministries devoted to protecting distinct cultural and ethnic identities. It has official “human rights” status in the EU and its subordinate European nations. Thomas Sowell’s *Affirmative Action Around the World* (2004) analyzes government efforts to calibrate group privileges in India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Nigeria. In each case one can point to specific historical predicates—Quebecois separatism in Canada, state secularism in France, ethnic animosities in Asia, the caste system in India.

But the pervasiveness of the phenomenon suggests that general features of human nature and of government are involved. Most individuals live their lives in groups that give them companionship, purpose, fulfillment, and protection. These may include families and local communities, more-or-less well defined racial, ethnic, and religious groups, and communities of interest, vocation, and calling. Each group is characterized by strong loyalty and moral obligation within the group, weaker loyalty and moral obligation toward outsiders, and an aversion to other groups with differing values and traditions, especially when the others are competitors for resources, mates, power, and prestige. Governments attempt to satisfy group demands and to mediate conflicts among them. But their instruments for doing so are limited and blunt—political rhetoric and coalition building, and state coercion and distribution of benefits—and prone to making matters worse rather than better. These are all universal features of social life and politics.

The historical antecedents of contemporary American multiculturalism are not hard to fathom. First is our history of slavery and racial discrimination against blacks, leading to the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. This legislation set a precedent for federal intrusion into local and private affairs that proved impossible to limit to the remediation of our great organic national sin. Over time, their provisions were extended to many other minority groups and to women. Simultaneously, the legislations’ original policy of nondiscrimination degenerated into racial quotas and special preferences, and these were

also extended to others. That created powerful incentives for organizing additional groups with claims to their own preferences. The result was angry, zero-sum conflicts among grievance groups for public sympathies and resources.

The second antecedent is the mass immigration that followed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. In 1970, foreign-born immigrants accounted for less than 5 percent of the American population; in 2014, they were more than 13 percent, a figure that would be higher if we had an accurate count of illegals. The share of immigrants has been much higher in the southwest and in many northern cities and includes a wide array of nationalities and cultures.

The surge of scores of millions of new arrivals would have been a challenge to national assimilation even in a nation whose cultural self-confidence had not been shaken by internal politics. In their 1963 book, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan demonstrated that New York City's major ethnic and racial groups had maintained their distinctive cultures through several generations—but had also contributed to a common city culture. When asked in 2000 if the book's analysis might be updated, Glazer wrote that mass immigration had made that impossible. The arrival of 100,000 new immigrants every year over several decades, combined with the decline of public education, had transformed the city. Gone was the demographic stability that had produced the integrated pluralism of the previous era.

It seems to me that dismantling group quotas and preferences, and achieving immigration levels that permit stable cultural assimilation, are the *sine qua nons* of reversing the growth of multiculturalism. But, as I have noted, multiculturalism is much more than the sequela of particular historical incidents. It requires a broader counterstrategy.

My *Claremont Review* essay, "Trumpism, Nationalism, and Conservatism," attempts to understand the new spirit of nationalism in America and Europe and to put it to productive use. Its major concern is with the divide between, on the one hand, the highly

educated, mobile, liberal-minded elites of both parties—people who have mostly had their way with American government and politics in recent decades; and, on the other, the locally-rooted, patriotic, working-class middle-Americans who felt left behind until Donald Trump came along. But these broad groupings track closely with multiculturalism. The elites are generally happy with multiculturalism so long as it does not impinge unduly on their own prerogatives; and those who are political progressives see it as a means of coalition-building for the Democratic Party. The down-home folks—the “Somewheres,” in David Goodhart’s typology which I employ—have strong group loyalties of their own, but are generally averse to identity politics and multiculturalism. I offer several prescriptions for what I call a “more capacious nationalism”—one that goes beyond the immigration and trade issues that brought Mr. Trump to the White House. These are directly pertinent to the challenge of multiculturalism.

My first prescription is for the revitalization of Congress and return of many areas of lawmaking from declarative government—edicts by agencies and courts—to representative government. Missionary regulatory agencies, each one concerned with a very narrow facet of American life, are fertile ground for multiculturalism. Affirmative action began as an executive initiative of the LBJ and Nixon administrations, perverting the antidiscrimination policies of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Once established, racial quotas, and further extensions such as “disparate impact analysis,” have sometimes gotten picked up in legislation, but they could never have made their debut on Capitol Hill. (Hubert Humphrey declaimed on the floor of the Senate that he would eat his hat if the Civil Rights Act ever led to race quotas.)

Many of the regulatory state’s multiculturalism initiatives of recent years, such as national bathroom etiquette rules for transgendered persons, could never have won concurrent in the House and Senate. John Fonte’s recent *American Mind* essay offers the striking example of the Census Bureau, at the end of the Obama administration, attempting to create yet another artificial trans-ethnic category—MENAs, for Middle East/North Africans. But for the change in administrations, that new “protected group”

would have entered American law with little notice, and much less criticism than the reintroduction of the Census's citizenship question.

It is often said that the legislature is a majoritarian institution, indifferent to minority rights. That is a calumny: Congress enacted the 1964 Civil Rights Act and many other minoritarian measures, beginning with the Bill of Rights in the First Congress and continuing through many recent measures against sex, age, and handicapped discrimination. But legislatures incorporate the moral sensibilities of the whole community and are disinclined to go off on tangents. The state legislatures were well on their way to approving same-sex marriage, while also protecting the private rights of consciousness objectors, before the Supreme Court proudly stepped out front on the first issue while neglecting (so far) the second.

But Congress is no panacea and bears careful watching. Last month, the House implicitly approved, by a huge majority, a sly, artfully planned act of anti-Semitism, something that would have been inconceivable before the Age of Multiculturalism. And so long as Congress is free to delegate contentious issues to missionary agencies, it will be vulnerable to multicultural wolves in sheep's clothing. The sweet-sounding Paycheck Fairness Act would commission armies of bureaucrats and trial lawyers to adjudicate the fairness of pay disparities between professors of finance and professors of social work, and between shop clerks and oil-rig workers. It passed the House last month with the votes of all of the Democrats and also a handful of chivalrous Republican gentlemen.

My essay's second recommendation is to bring issues of American identity and purpose to the forefront of national politics—issues that employ popular, unifying principles to subdue multicultural caterwauling and interest-group scheming. My three all-American precepts are educational opportunity as an instrument of citizenship and mobility, freedom of inquiry as an instrument of knowledge and discovery, and the competitive market economy as an instrument of prosperity and growth. My policy proposals include support for charter and vocational schools, restoration of freedom of inquiry at colleges and universities, and a second wave of Trumpian deregulation

extending to finance and communications and to busting up the state occupational-licensing cartels.

Now I am gung-ho about all of these initiatives. If I were on President Trump's political team, I would urge him to move charter and vocational schools and occupational licensure to the top of his policy agenda, his rally routine, and his Twitter campaigns. I like his recent executive order on university free-inquiry, and hope that its popularity, in the face of progressive teeth-gnashing, inspires him to go further with my program. But here I would like to move beyond policy particulars to the larger question of how to challenge multiculturalism with active nationalism.

Successful nationalism requires balancing immediate local loyalties with national loyalty, and integrating local cultures into an overarching national culture. American multiculturalists appeal to liberal pluralism—meaning legal equality and democratic respect for other groups and cultures; but in practice they take sides with the insurgencies of the moment, always aiming to discredit and deconstruct the dominant national culture and its traditions. They are playing a dangerous game. As William Galston has argued in great depth, liberal pluralism is essential to modern democracy but is also incomplete and unsatisfying. Human beings naturally prefer their own cultures, including national as well as local cultures, and wish to live their lives according their standards. A national creed that declares all cultures to be relative and none preferable is unlikely to inspire the allegiance that effective statehood requires.

But foes of multiculturalism sometimes make the opposite mistake, unduly elevating national unity and asking too much of it. We all love stories of the New York Jewish boy and Iowa farm boy and California rich boy fighting side-by-side in World War II, protected from above by the Tuskegee Airmen. And who wasn't comforted by the flags in every window after 9/11? But in everyday life in normal times, national loyalty will usually take second place to more particular and immediate loyalties—and these will often include animadversions against other groups and loyalties. Telling everyone to fall in line and come to attention behind King and Country is as unlikely to be effective as

telling everyone that their own values are just arbitrary splashes in a glorious multicultural mosaic.

But these dilemmas manage themselves to a considerable degree. We have a few strong, anti-American subcultures, such as the Nation of Islam, that need to be contained. But for the most part, persons who are part of families, communities, and associations with strong internal cultures tend to be more patriotic than those who are not. There is some survey data on this. They suggest that, in general, strong local loyalties do not come at the expense of national loyalty but rather contribute to national loyalty. Burke's little platoon is not only "the germ ... of public affections" but also "the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love of our country." There is reason to worry that our little platoons have become frayed and depopulated in contemporary society. But where they are strong, they tend to support, not vitiate, both liberal pluralism and national cohesion.

What we can do—we political and intellectual activists—is to promote national policies and a national culture that appeal to citizens whose first loyalties are to subsidiary groups and institutions. The policy proposals in my *CRB* essay were selected with this in mind. They would highlight controversies over educational opportunity and freedom of inquiry where the multiculturalists are on the wrong side of American tradition and popular opinion. My deregulation proposals emphasize competition and property rights, principles that are widely understood and embraced by dint of everyday experience, from sports to personal possessions. I conclude by envisioning a return from debt-financed government to taxpayer-financed government. That would constrict opportunities for divvying up free stuff among contending groups, and open up opportunities for investing in public goods such as roads and security that benefit the national community.

But much of the work of sustaining our national culture is for the private battle of ideas. On this score, my essay pronounces itself content with the vibrancy of today's organs of the Right such as the *Claremont Review* and *American Mind*. So let me

conclude by adjudicating one of our intramural debates. Is American nationhood defined primarily by our founding ideas—Locke and Madison, the Declaration and the Constitution, the Bill of Rights—or primarily by our lived common experience—our achievements and failures down the centuries and our aspirations today? When it comes to fighting multiculturalism, I am for action in the service of ideas. I myself am eager for the latest book on Madison and exegesis on originalism, but I belong to a very small tribe. Most of my countrymen prefer stories—as we now say, narratives—with drama and conflict and resolution. While academic history descends into unread arid theory and annoying political correctness, what strikes the American chord are popular histories and biographies, and movies and TV series on great political personalities. The greatest cultural sensation of the past decade is the musical *Hamilton*. I know, I know—not entirely Claremont-compliant—but let’s loosen up. Here is a smash Broadway hit that features two earnest cabinet debates, over the assumption of state debts and establishment of a national bank, and taking sides in a looming war between France and England, set to intensely clever rhythm and rhyme—and if the wordsmith of the Declaration comes up short, there’s a lesson in that, too.

Multiculturalism’s great vulnerability in American culture is that it elevates being over doing. Its loadstar is identity itself, not the uses that might be made of identity. It is concerned with rights as possessions, unconnected to obligations. Multiculturalist ideology is oblivious to the questions of worthy living in a free society that are of utmost interest to most of us—questions of choice and consequence, of active liberty and moral judgment.

Modern media, for all of its sins and excesses, and its pitiless violations of what used to be considered privacy, are our allies here. They expose and exaggerate the imperfections of American society in real time, which these days include the incarnate consequences of multiculturalism. Ignorant heckling and violent tirades at elite institutions of higher learning. Mob justice at the Senate Judiciary Committee. Citizens summarily drummed out of jobs and colleges, and accosted at restaurants and on their

doorsteps at home with the encouragement of powerful political figures. A Hollywood star faking a hate crime against himself.

Episodes such as these are intimations of tyranny. They illustrate, more powerfully than academic argument, the living value of our ancient constitutional protections. They explain the sacrifices, otherwise inexplicable to the secure and comfortable and young, that many of our ancestors made to preserve those protections. Some of the episodes require interpretation and receive tendentious ones from the progressive media. But many are words and deeds that speak for themselves, causing millions of citizens to ponder our national traditions of free opinion and association, of due process and the presumption of innocence, of civility and mutual respect, of deference to the rule of law—and how those might come into play in their own lives. Those of us who are devoted to high-end political interpretation and advocacy have important work to do, but our success depends ultimately on popular understanding. We should take heart that the consequences of multiculturalism are coming vividly to light beyond our own pages and podcasts, and have faith that the American dogma continues to live loudly in a sufficient number of our countrymen.