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New Thinking About Ethnic Strife

A Book Review by Gustav A. Uhlich

FEAR OF STRANGERS — AND
ITS CONSEQUENCES
By David Allen
Garnerville, NY: Bennington Books
224 pp., \$13.50 paper

It is refreshing to come across an author who confronts the reader with a summary of his thesis on page one. David Allen focuses our attention on three disturbing questions:

1. Why do we live in a world full of ethnic strife in spite of intensive educational, moralistic and legislative efforts to bring about a more civilized living arrangement in the United States and worldwide?

2. Could it be that our sincere and well meaning efforts are futile because we have missed the correct diagnosis, the real cause for persistent ethnic and racial discrimination?

3. Is it possible to discover a common denominator for a multi-faceted problem with the hope of eventually devising more successful social engineering strategies?

Allen's answer is unequivocal: ethnic strife is a perpetual problem because we fail to appreciate one crucial causative element: an innate fear of strangers. Part one of the book, under the heading of "The Stranger Outside," reviews ethological data in support of Allen's hypothesis. There is ample evidence of hostile behavior by established groups of animals towards intruders of the same species from outside the group. From ants to monkeys, from cockroaches to apes, strangers are rejected, or occasionally admitted under strictly enforced conditions. But is it really the fear of strangers per se that explains such uniform behavior? Do ants really experience fear — an emotional reaction dependent on brain structures found only in animals several steps up on the evolutionary ladder (Paul MacLean: *The Triune Brain*)? Why do hordes of tourists descending on foreign shores elicit a generally friendly rather than hostile response? How does "fear of strangers" explain unprovoked forays into foreign territory characteristic of chimps and humans (p.63)? We may have to look further and settle for more basic instinctual drives such as aggression in the service of self preservation (Konrad Lorenz) or a basic "Territorial Imperative" (Robert Ardrey) to arrive at a unifying theory of ethnic strife. Allen readily concedes that further study of the question may modify his central thesis.

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Part 2 of the book, under the heading of "The Stranger Inside," examines the situation of modern Homo sapiens, caged in by the rigid borders of the nation state with no open spaces offering the comfort of voluntary exile for minority groups. Rapidly mounting population pressures, ethnic "scrambling" within multicultural societies, and rigid adherence to abstract political doctrine are exposed as aggravating factors in the sad state of ethnic and racial affairs the world over. Examples of recent ethnic cleansing, rape and outright genocide on the Indian subcontinent, in Japan, in Polynesia, in Africa and in the Near East bring into proper perspective the fate of American Indians, African Americans and European Jews: "All in all, minorities suffering discrimination in one place practice discrimination in other places as majorities, once again proving that hostility to strangers produces the same behavior pattern every-where regardless of culture or ethnic uniqueness."

Allen introduces some useful terms such as "identity crisis", "swamping", "critical mass" and "flash points" into the vocabulary of ethnic confrontation. In the final chapter of the book some preliminary suggestions toward a more peaceful co-existence of ethnic groups are advanced: graceful acceptance of some inevitable, non-violent rejection; separation as a freely chosen option; reassertion of the seniority principle (right of first occupancy); rejection of highly abstract political doctrine; and efforts toward integration of ethnic groups rather than of individuals. Allen does not mince words when it comes to the myth of the melting pot: "The basic reason why ethnic groups in the U.S. are refused legal recognition is that they are supposed to be transient and temporary, doomed to extinction by assimilation and integration, which means that everyone is to be homogenized. This is Utopian hogwash, perpetuated by the simple failure

to ask the people who are supposed to be assimilated whether they want to be (p. 179)." Allen is equally outspoken on the immigration issue: "Why nations insist on accepting immigrants who are not culturally compatible and create generations of strife and stress is a tribute to the power of ideological indoctrination over sense (p.197)."

It will, no doubt, take some time for any theory based on innate human behavior to find general acceptance. The danger of the naturalistic fallacy still looms large on the horizon of our collective past. "Because it is that way we shall keep it that way" was the excuse used by Social Darwinism during the early phases of the industrial revolution. Today we should know better and strive to find sensible solutions to pressing social problems.

The merit of Allen's book lies not so much in its postulating an innate fear of strangers as the mainspring of ethnic strife, but rather in its demonstrating convincingly that under certain circumstances ethnic communities all over the world will assert their will toward self preservation in a predictable way. Some 120 years after the publication of Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, it should come as no surprise that much of human behavior is based on 3 million years of gradual evolution. It cannot be changed abruptly at the whim of political ideology or moralistic exhortation. A better understanding of human nature should permit us to devise social engineering strategies aimed at bypassing situations that invariably activate the most brutal and reckless impulses in the mosaic of human potential. Allen's book points us in the right direction. In 200 pages it provides a wealth of pertinent information and a bag full of provocative suggestions. It recommends itself to the reader who subscribes to the sentiment so succinctly expressed by Wallace Stevens: "The real is only the base, but it is the base." ■