

Multicultural America, Multicultural World

A Commentary on Benjamin Schwarz's "The Diversity Myth"

By Lawrence Auster

One of the guiding, if inchoate, myths of contemporary America has been the belief that everyone in the world is basically "just like us." Animated by the crazy notion that all five billion people on planet Earth are somehow *potential* Americans, we have embarked on two complementary paths of turning them into *actual* Americans: We import the rest of the world here as immigrants, and we export "Americanism" to the rest of the world.

Throughout most of the twentieth century this Americanist idea has taken the form of a Messianic faith in democracy. In the name of democracy, Woodrow Wilson at the end of the First World War broke up the ancient Austro-Hungarian empire, creating a poisonous instability in Central Europe that in turn gave rise to Hitlerism and World War II. In the 1990s, President Clinton has sought with a similar lack of realism to bring "democracy" to such countries as Somalia and Haiti.

Of course, the democratist illusion is not limited to Democrats. In the rhetoric of House Speaker Newt Gingrich the Messianic impulse is expressed in fervid tones:

America is a hegemony in the classic sense. We need serious thought about how do we lead the planet.... Unless we are prepared to say, "We will lead the human race," the only alternative will be very dark and bloody.

This American-led world order, the Speaker adds in his modest way, must be dedicated to nothing less than "*freedom and opportunity for all humans*." [Italics added.] In other words, it is America's mission to reshape every nation on earth so as to make it conform to the global democratic capitalist system. From Wilson to Clinton to the "conservative" Gingrich, the drive to impose our economic and political beliefs on societies we do not understand (and our inability to learn the lessons of repeated disaster) has remained a keynote of American policy.

Yet as Benjamin Schwarz writes in a remarkable cover article in the May 1995 *Atlantic Monthly*, the Americanist myth in recent years has taken on a new and more perverse twist. It is not just American-style political democracy we are seeking to export today, but *multicultural* democracy. In our emerging multi-cultural

society, U.S. policy makers have come to believe that "diversity" is the fundamental historical fact about America, and therefore *the desired condition of all other societies as well*. These policy makers' favored solution to ethnic and separatist conflict in foreign countries is an American-style pluralism for which those countries are wholly unsuited. For example, the U.S. recognized and supported the state of Bosnia because Bosnia, with its Muslim majority and Serb and Croat minorities, was "multicultural" — yet this, of course, was the very reason the embattled Serb minority refused to accept its existence. America's multicultural solutions have been rejected not just by frightened minorities but by victorious majorities, who do not like being told they must give their defeated enemies a voice in government and culture.

We always get it wrong, says Schwarz, because we are not concerned with the actual needs and problems of these conflict-ridden societies, but with what their troubles say about us:

America's anxiety over the fragmentation of foreign states and societies arises from our sense that American society is fragmenting, culturally and ethnically. We are desperate to repair what the foreign-policy community terms "failed states" and "divided societies," for such success would prove to us that the liberal notions of pluralism and tolerance upon which we would like to believe that American unity was founded remain vital enough to build communities abroad and, perhaps more important, at home.

In other words, when we promote pluralistic solutions in other countries, *our real motive is to bolster our self-image as a successful multicultural society*.¹ The destructive illusion we keep trying to impose on others is the same illusion we have imposed on ourselves. For example, believing ourselves to be historically multicultural, we think the answer to our increasing ethnic fragmentation is more "inclusion," when in fact it has been an excess of cultural and ethnic "inclusion" that has caused the fragmentation in the first place.

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Schwartz sets out to shatter the multicultural myth. The American nation, he says, was not formed by a multicultural blending of diverse and equal cultures, but by the imposition of the majority "Anglo" culture on immigrants and minorities. In the words of a Swedish minister who visited the Delaware River Valley in 1745:

I found in this country scarcely one genuine Swede left, the most of them are either in part or in whole on one side or the other descended from English or Dutch parents.... The English are evidently swallowing up the people and the Swedish language is so corrupted that if I did not know the English, it would be impossible to understand the language of my dear Sweden.

Here was the true meaning of the Melting Pot — not a mixing of diverse cultures into a "multiculture" having nothing in common except a belief in democracy, but the assimilation of diverse cultures into the dominant, Anglo-based ethnicity that defined a distinctive American identity. Various traits and traditions of the immigrant and minority groups survived in the mix and added new flavors to the whole, but not as distinct or autonomous "cultures." Meanwhile, groups perceived as unassimilable, such as American Indians, blacks and Chinese, were physically pushed aside, denied full citizenship, or excluded outright. Throughout its history, America did not celebrate ethnic diversity, but repressed it. This, Schwarz declares with astonishing directness, was the secret of American success and stability.

But today, armed with the fiction that the American nation was formed by "respecting minorities," we misunderstand not only our own historical experience, but that of other countries as well. We condemn Russia for its imperialist history, while we ignore the long process of conquest and subjection of native peoples that was required to create the United States. Schwarz discusses these uncomfortable facts with the cold realism of an ancient Roman:

These [Indian] wars, one of the longest series of ethnic conflicts in modern history, were resolved not by power sharing but by obliteration. Although this record engenders much handwringing today, it is impossible to imagine the United States existing if a more reasonable course had been pursued. For from the "American" point of view, a reasonable accommodation would have required that, in Theodore Roosevelt's blunt phrase, the vast continent be set aside "as a game preserve." America's great ethnic struggle should have taught Americans that

many conflicts are simply irreconcilable.

The other great conquest that was the price of nationhood was the Civil War. The conflict over slavery was not settled by "power-sharing" or "respect for diversity" — it was settled by the brutal subjugation of the non-conforming part of the country.

Then there is the problem of blacks. As Schwarz points out, Crèvecoeur's answer to his famous question "What then is the American, this new man?" was not exactly universalistic. "He is either an European, or the descendant of an European," Crèvecoeur declared.² Blacks, while a part of American life and contributing to it in many ways, were effectively excluded from the national identity and culture, and from any significant voice in the body politic, until the mid 20th century. Our current attempt to make one nation of black and white, Schwarz asserts, "is an enterprise that might never succeed."

Certainly our greatest historical figures, including Jefferson and Lincoln, would have agreed with him. Jefferson felt that the Anglo cultural imposition that had worked in the case of non-English immigrants, and that might even work in the case of the Indians, could never work in the case of blacks. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he proposed the liberation of the slaves followed by their removal "beyond the reach of mixture." Jefferson's uncompromising views on this subject, which have been carefully erased from our mainstream history, should be more widely known. "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate," he wrote, "than that these people are to be free; nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live under the same government." At the Jefferson Memorial, in a bit of Orwellian redaction, the words following the semicolon in the above sentence have been deleted, the semicolon changed to a period.

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The tragic — and, to contemporary Americans, unbearable — insight underlying Jefferson's precept is that mutually incompatible peoples or cultures cannot live together as equals. Thrown together within the same borders, they are doomed to lasting conflict in which each group, in order to gain autonomy over its own existence, will feel compelled to dominate the other group or else to separate from it. Political arrangements aimed at evading these realities (such as Bosnia) will founder.

Everywhere minorities chafe under majority rule in which the minority is seen only as an appendage to the main body of the nation. Examples of such dissatisfied minorities are the Francophone minority in Canada, the Arab minority in Israel, and now the growing nonwhite minorities in Western Europe. As we've already seen, the American approach to this problem is to get the majority to share cultural and political power with the minority. But of course no sane and healthy majority will accept such a scheme since it would endanger its own position. Schwarz comments:

Such blandishments amount, whatever the motivation, to crass interference in another state's internal affairs. How would Americans feel if Japan, out of a sincere desire to stabilize a dangerously divided United States, tried to pressure it to adopt the radical power-sharing solutions of Lani Guinier ... to effect a political order in which minorities were assured a more powerful voice in the U.S. political process?

Nevertheless, America keeps urging pluralistic power-sharing on embattled majorities all over the world, because the only alternative would be to acknowledge a reality that multicultural America is unwilling to face: that "[s]tability within divided societies is normally based on some form of domination, and once internal differences become violent, usually only the logic of force can lay them to rest." The awful truth is that "the most stable and lasting solution to ethnic and nationalist conflicts has been ethnic cleansing and partition" (Bosnia, however horrible, is again a case in point). Schwarz concludes that the U.S. has only two rational options when dealing with ethnically divided countries: either let the conflict take its own course, or intervene (as the Great Powers routinely used to do) on behalf of the side most capable of restoring order.

Solution to the American Dilemma

While Schwarz's prescriptions for foreign policy are clear, he leaves unstated the profound implications of his analysis as it relates to America's own ethnic conflicts. If the surrender of cultural hegemony by America's national majority has been the cause of America's ethnic fragmentation, then the only cure may be the re-imposition of such hegemony. In an article published two months before Schwarz's piece appeared in the *Atlantic*, Samuel Francis spelled out that idea with stunning and disturbing frankness:

The answer is, quite simply, the reconquest of the United States. This reconquest does not involve any restoration of white supremacy in the political and legal sense that obtained under slavery or segregation, and there is no reason why nonwhites who reside in the United States could not enjoy equality of legal rights. But a white reconquest of the United States would mean the supremacy of whites in a cultural sense, or in the sense of what is nowadays called "Eurocentrism."¹³

To put it another way, America's nation-forming majority — defined, in Sir James Goldsmith's words, by a shared "common culture, sense of identity, heritage and traditional roots"⁴ — must begin to express itself as the majority. Minorities would continue to have rights as citizens, but would be prevented from pursuing their own numerical and cultural aggrandisement at the expense of the majority culture.

While the above ideas are clearly "ethnocentric" in the sense of recognizing the ethnic dimensions of nationhood, they should not be seen as rigidly exclusivist. On the

contrary, a majority culture can remain open and attractive to minorities only to the extent that its own dominance is unquestioned. This is something that used to be instinctively understood by most people. Rabbi Mayer Schiller fondly recalls how during his boyhood in Brooklyn in the 1950s, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" was sung every day by the children in school. When he sang the words

*Land where my fathers died
Land of the pilgrims' pride*

it never occurred to him that the men who had died in the War of Independence and the Civil War were not his own fathers.

How different is the experience of Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, who once told a reporter: "My grandparents were from Lebanon. I don't identify with the Pilgrims in a personal sense."

Now it is no great problem for a country if a small, powerless minority feels the way Miss Shalala does. But if, as a result of cultural breakdown or large-scale immigration, a large segment of the population comes to share that kind of alienation, then the nation's majority culture loses its legitimacy, and the nation itself begins to expire. That is exactly what has been happening to America since the 1960s. Yet our dominant elites, committed to the multiculturalist or universalist program, see the impending death of our nationhood as a wonderful thing, and they seek, through the export of the Americanist ideology, to kill or suppress other nations as well.

I disagree with Benjamin Schwarz on only one point, but it is a crucial one. Schwarz seems to suggest that America's sanguinary record proves that power alone has been the basis of a successful and unified nation — that "might makes right." But this is a crude reductionism. The American nation, despite being founded (as all nations are) on force and cultural dominance, has also been infused in its national life with ethical and spiritual principles. Assimilation of minorities has not been simply a matter of cultural imposition by the majority, but of a positive attraction to the good. To deny these historical facts, to believe that power (or race or class or any other purely material factor) is the *only* reality, is to embrace a Macchiavellian view of the world that is as false to the American experience as it is to the better angels of our nature. ■

NOTES

¹ As an example of the narcissistic self-regard that drives American policy, *The New Republic* says that America has a moral obligation to help Bosnia win back its lost territory, since America is "the country that exemplifies for the world the essential connection between multiethnicity and decency." Apparently a society can't be decent unless it is multiethnic like ours, and it is our duty to make other countries "decent."

² Crèvecoeur, Michel Guillaume Jean de, *Letters From an American Farmer*.

³ Samuel Francis, "Prospects for Racial and Cultural Survival," *American Renaissance*, March 1995.

⁴ Goldsmith, Sir James, *The Trap*, New York: Carroll & Graf, 1994.