

Ethnic Loyalty is OK, But Not Too Much

Book Review by Leon Bouvier

In this well-written and concise report, sociologist Alan Wolfe interviews middle-class Americans about their views on numerous issues — relevant to the American “common good.” Chapter I discusses his methodology. To a retired sociologist like this reviewer, it was a joy to see how Wolfe anguished over how best to arrive at a meaningful representative sample of the American people. He decided to limit his interviews to the middle class and to limit it to suburban dweller. As he writes (p.21): “My choices were designed to test the hypothesis that middle-class Americans no longer share a common world view but are bitterly divided into traditionalist and modernist wings.” Wolfe selected eight suburbs from Brookline, Massachusetts, to Rancho Bernardo, California. He interviewed 200 respondents, or twenty-five in each suburb. In each community, random samples were compiled and residents were sent a letter explaining the project and requesting an interview. The response rate was about 25 percent. Does this sample truly represent the areas or are certain types of people more likely to cooperate than others? Wolfe also discusses the two basic approaches that social scientists use when gathering data — questionnaire surveys or in-depth personal interviews, such as in the Middletown studies. Wolfe does include a brief survey, but concentrates mostly on person-to-person interviews.

What does Wolfe and his group of interviewers [we are never told how many researchers are involved] ask of his respondents? To cite from the cover page: “God, country, family, racism, welfare, immigration, homosexuality, work, the Right, the Left, and each

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other.” The author is adept at quoting his interviewees. One wonders if these were taped. But they prove to be interesting reading and they illustrate how different, as well as similar, many suburban Americans are in their views on society. Since this journal is primarily concerned with matters dealing with population, immigration and cultural adaptation, I will concentrate on those portions of Wolfe’s book that deal with such matters.

It is Wolfe’s approach to first discuss the subject, often citing other research and usually explaining both sides of the issue if such exists. For example, regarding multiculturalism, Wolfe points out that: “In the way multiculturalism has been debated in America it appears to pit two important principles against each other: American respect for tolerance and pluralism suggests that we ought to welcome cultures from all over the world, while American ideals of loyalty and patriotism suggest that such differences should be blended into support for America and its way

of life.” (p.154) Interestingly, the respondents were strongly opposed to multiculturalism if that meant bilingualism. “Americans place great store on English as the language of the country.” (p.154) Wolfe concludes that Americans do believe in what he calls “benign multiculturalism.” They want the newest immigrants to be able to express their diversity, but they also want them to move toward a ‘post-ethnic’ perspective. Or as one of the respondents so clearly enunciated” (p.157) “[Americans] support the principle that groups in the United States ought to be allowed to retain their distinctiveness, but only so long as they do so within an official culture that insists on the priority of the national community over subnational ethnic groups.” This reflects this reviewer’s position that “pluralistic assimilation” may be the answer to the recent shifts in our racial composition, a point that Wolfe neglects to discuss.

**One Nation, After
All: What Middle
Class Americans
Really Think
About**

by Alan Wolfe
New York: Penguin Books
358 pages, \$13.95 paperback



The chapter dealing with immigration is one of the weaker sections of the book. Wolfe is not always correct in his own statements on this topic. On page 134: "Immigration is anything but a new phenomenon; previous periods of American history, especially the decades around the turn of this century, witnessed far more migration to the United States than the present one." This is false. The past 10 to 15 years have seen a larger number of immigrants than ever in the nation's history.

Wolfe finds that his subjects are overwhelmingly opposed to illegal immigration. However, more feel that the doors should remain open rather than be shut to legal immigrants. Wolfe states that: "Without some borders in place, it is not clear that there is a distinctive country to which Americans can pledge their loyalty. But without some immigration, the America that people have known and respected would no longer exist." (p.137) I have no idea what this means! Regarding illegal movements, many respondents blame not the immigrants, but the employers who hire them. As one said: "Make it illegal to hire them." (p.148) But it is illegal to hire them!

Wolfe does not discuss population growth. On numerous occasions, comments from the surveys strongly suggest that people are concerned about population size, or at least urban sprawl. Wolfe never follows up on these comments. Increasingly, Americans are beginning to discover overpopulation. It would have been interesting to learn how this sample of suburbanites feels about such growth.

So much for the demographic aspects of this interesting publication. Wolfe is a well-respected sociologist and cites numerous sociological works (classic as well as more recent). Given that this is a community study, I was surprised that he did not refer to Tonnie's famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gessellschaft*, or even more appropriately, Canadian sociologist Anthony Richmond's updating of that concept with *verbindungschnetschaft*, or "post-industrial society." The latter is most fitting to the communities being studied by Wolfe. In one chapter, the author refers to the Durkheimian concept of "sacred" and "profane," without ever explaining what is meant by profane. I suspect that most readers, unfamiliar with Emile Durkheim, wonder what profane really means in the present context.

These comments should not take away from

Wolfe's excellent research. He has used a very innovative method in an attempt to answer questions about modern-day America. Furthermore, he tries (successfully in my judgment) to be objective. When appropriate he makes clear what his personal views are. He is to be congratulated for that.

I reserve my most critical comments for the editor of this book. It was simply not thoroughly edited and contains too many spelling errors (typos!) One example is simply indefensible. On page 263 a dark print sub-heading reads, **No Moral Heros**. No, this is not about

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the sandwich! More important is the question of footnote (or the lack thereof). Wolfe is fond of citing surveys (other than his own). That is good. But as I read chapter after chapter, I wondered where the reference was to these surveys. *There is not a single footnote or endnote in the entire book!* However, I eventually discovered (after reading about 200 pages) that references and comments are located at the end of the book, and they are numerous. How does the reader know when to look at the back of the book? He doesn't. I am aware that recent books have adopted new versions of footnoting. But this method goes way beyond reason. I long for the bygone days when footnotes were at the bottom of each page. As a respected scholar, Wolfe should have objected to this editing style. But the publisher is the boss!

Without question *One Nation, After All* is well worth reading. It provides us with a new adaptation of the traditional methods of sociological research. It is well written and interesting throughout. However, I must warn the prospective reader to check the "Notes" beginning on page 324 before you begin each chapter.

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