An Historian Looks at Polyethnicity

A Book Review by John Tanton

POLYETHNICITY AND NATIONAL UNITY
IN WORLD HISTORY
By William H. McNeill
University of Toronto Press, 1986
85 pp.

William McNeill is Professor of History at the University of Chicago, and a past president of the American Historical Association, to mention only two of his many credits. Perhaps his best-known books are *The Rise of the West* (1963) and *Plagues and Peoples* (1976). Because of his prominence and because he is Canadian by birth, McNeill was asked to inaugurate a series of memorial lectures commemorating the Canadian historian Donald Creighton who, we're informed in the introduction, was a Canadian nationalist. McNeill delivered a series of three lectures in 1985, which constitute the chapters of this slim but challenging volume.

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The first lecture, "Empire and Nation to 1750," seeks to make the case for "polyethnicity as normal in civilized societies, whereas the ideal of an ethnically unitary state was exceptional in theory and rarely approached in practice." Three phenomena accounted for this change from the "barbarous homogeneity to civilized polyethnicity." The first was simply the military success of some tribes: they conquered others and incorporated them into their domain. These newcomers often started out as slaves or as otherwise unequal, but gradually blended into the conquering community, diluting its homogeneity. Military success based on the solidarity of homogeneity contained the seeds of its own reversal.

The second factor was disease in the cities, both endemic and epidemic. As a result, most urban areas did not replace themselves demographically. To make up the shortfall, they had to import people from the countryside — initially those close at hand (and more similar ethnically), but then more distant (and more dissimilar). These elements tended to dilute the original stock (here McNeill draws on his *Plagues and Peoples*, which also generously repays the reading).

Finally, trade was another diversifying factor. This was often facilitated by setting up protected ethnic enclaves to enable trade, thus introducing another outside influence. The net result of these forces were empires — conglomerations of many peoples under central control, but politically unstable due to this diversity.

In the second lecture, "The Triumph of Nationalism, 1750-1920," McNeill sets forth what he sees as the conditions that gave rise to nation-states in northern and western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. According to McNeill, these European states were exceptional in world history in their ethnic unity. Four factors accounted for this:

First, the classical Greek and Roman model of the self-governing city-state was familiar to the educated classes, and held up as the ideal. Second, the development of a sufficiently large body of professional and educated people put a premium on the development of a standard language that "provided a powerful new basis for expanding and delimiting national boundaries and for communicating within the national group so defined."

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The third factor was the "remarkable population growth that set in from about 1750, not merely in France and England but across most or all of the civilized world ... which constituted a turning point in human history." This happened in part because of a change in the patterns of disease from *epidemics* (which killed off the mature, reproducing adults) to *endemics* (which killed off the more easily replaced children). This population surge had twin effects. It made it possible for the cities to replace their demographic shortfall with ethnically more similar populations from the nearby countryside (rather than importing ethnically different peoples from afar, as in the old days). And, as the now-surplus people of the countryside gravitated to the cities, "there was enough tinder concentrated in the towns" to fuel the revolutions of the era.

Lastly, there was the response of other European nations to the French military successes. They too raised large standing armies which, through drill and

discipline, effaced differences among the troops. The care and feeding of these standing armies also called forth a national response.

The nationalism thus engendered "papered over local differences of varying magnitude by virtue of the commonality of a school-learned language and whatever commonality of historical experience could be discovered or invented by industrious, national-istic historians," and "the myth of national brotherhood and ethnic unity mattered. It justified sacrifice in war; it sustained public peace at home; it strengthened the hand of government in everyday affairs."

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The concluding chapter is entitled "Reassertion of the Polyethnic Norm since 1920." Here, McNeill details the efforts after WWI to follow the Wilsonian principle of `self-determination of peoples' by giving each ethnic group its own country in Eastern Europe. This failed; there was just too much admixture of ethnic groups within the redrawn borders. After WWII, in Germany, France and England, large numbers of `different' people appeared: Turks, Muslims from north Africa, `people of color' from the colonies. These nations, formerly fairly uniform, were going the way of the rest of the world and becoming polyethnic. The same type of changes started in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Where does all this lead? McNeill answers:

> *The long-term fate of American, French and British experiments in polyethnic living remains just as problematic as is the future of the two-tiered society generated by the legal status of Gastarbeiter in Germany and Switzerland.*
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> *Political resistance to intermingling of peoples and skills across state boundaries is therefore far from negligible, and may well increase in time to come as the difficulties of living in polyethnic societies become more widespread and apparent.*
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> *Modern national states of the liberal tradition accepted foreigners as at least potential citizens; and women, too, achieved political rights, though only in the twentieth century. Whether these principles will survive the impact of an interacting world in which vast differences of skills, culture, wealth, and physical appearance exist, is one of the capital questions for the next century.*

Finally:

> *Canadian and American experience gives North America something of a head start in the awkward matter of getting used to living side by side with people of differing ethnic heritage. Europeans are only beginning to get used to looking across the Atlantic; but in matters of public policy towards ethnic minorities, they may have reason to do so in time to come.*

That last was written in 1985; one wonders what sort of an epilogue McNeill might write now. Would he still hold up the United States as an example for others to emulate?

McNeill's book should also raise for us the question of how much further it is wise for the United States to go in deliberately increasing its diversity through immigration. Given the troubles of managing polyethnicity that McNeill cites, is it a good idea to consicously invite such problems in? Those who make policy on these matters would benefit from reading this book. ■