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Seeking Pluralism Within Unity

By Amitai Etzioni

Little attention has been paid in the current debate about the Los Angeles riots to what kind of relations we may expect to develop among the various groups that constitute our cities and, ultimately, American society. Liberals, true to their colors, are stressing that government ought to provide jobs and housing; conservatives are concerned with law and order.

Typically, many politicians favor a little of both. (President Bush, for example, called for "Weed and Seed.") Implicit in both approaches is that once all Americans have a place to live that they own, and get off welfare and go to work, they will become regular Americans and live in harmony with one another. They will "buy into the system," we are promised.

Unfortunately, all these measures will not ensure that the various racial and ethnic groups that now constitute a majority in cities such as Los Angeles will see themselves as members of one overarching community. Studies of hate show that middle-class blacks, who are well endowed with all these advantages, feel as rejected as lower-class blacks. And many hard-working, home-owning whites in places like Bensonhurst, N.Y., and South Boston feel hostile toward black Americans.

What kind of society, in terms of relations among groups, can we reasonably expect to attain? Many Americans seem still to favor a melting pot, in which distinct ethnic identities are boiled down into one American stew. They are looking forward to a society in which all persons will be accepted on the basis of their individual characteristics and not their background.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., in his recent book, *The Disuniting of America*, cites those who view American culture as a great "solvent" that, like paint remover, will bleach out all traces of a divisive, immigrant past. Shelby Steele, a black author, calls for blacks to rise as individuals rather than as a group or class.

The opposite ideal is behind the vague concept that America is, or ought to become, a "people of color." Much has been made of the concept of multiculturalism, which seeks to replace the traditional curriculum of "dead white men" with a potpourri of writings by Africans, Asians, Native Americans and feminists. The underlying sociological notion, which has gained much less attention, is that we shall then

live next to one another like various tribes, like the colors of the rainbow, with few or no shared values.

As I see it, as a communitarian sociologist deeply concerned about American society, the "melting pot" ideal is unnecessarily homogenizing, while the "people of color" notion is unduly divisive. What we need is a new concept that explicitly recognizes that every mosaic requires some framework and glue, a concept of pluralism-within-unity. There is no reason to pressure people to give up their heritage, their subculture, their hyphen.

Pluralism, however, must be continued within a strong framework of shared values, if we are not going to gradually become a Yugoslavia. Specifically, people of all groups must recognize that democracy, with all its flaws, is by far the best political system there is. We cannot allow the commitment to democracy to be lost among notions of the virtues of tribal consensus or town hall meetings, which may be wonderful for small groups but are unworkable for a nation.

And all Americans must accept the primacy of the Constitution and its Bill of Rights, precisely because it provides a fine balance between a commitment to shared purposes, the "general welfare" (as stated in the Preamble), and the protection of individuals and minority rights (in many of the amendments). Finally, we all must subscribe to the value of mutual tolerance among the diverse subgroups that make up America.

Given such a framework, we can face a sociological fact we are rarely willing to face: members of various ethnic and racial groups rarely love one another dearly. Once segregation and discrimination are overcome, blacks will be able to see that the occasional animosity they experience is a reflection of *normal* group relations.

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Scandinavian-Americans often feel some antipathy toward Italian-Americans; many Jews toward gentiles; and Asian-Americans toward others, and so on. Indeed, ethnic groups may snub some of their own. Thus, among Hispanics, many of South American heritage hold those from Central America or Puerto Rico in less than high regard.

While these feelings can be muted and contained, it may well be impossible to eradicate all such group feelings.

Above all, in-group feelings are not incompatible with maintaining civility and an overarching community. Recent suggestions, by Mickey Kaus, the author of *The End of Equality*, and Pat Gurin, a social psychologist at the University of Michigan, that we should move to ensure that people of different backgrounds will be made to live next to one another, are too aggressive. One can be adamantly opposed to redlining, racial covenants, and so on, without seeking to prevent people of similar background from choosing to congregate in one community.

Rather than expecting a widespread sense of brotherhood and sisterhood among all Americans one-on-one, we should realize that we can live peacefully with one another — and maintain our subcultures — as long as we continuously recommit to the framework values that hold the pieces together. School, ethnic, racial and community leaders should make the core of their post-L.A. agenda not a New Age eradication of group differences and a citywide love-feast, but a shoring up of the commitments of the various groups to respect one another and the community they share. ■