IMMIGRATION CELEBRATION:
IS THE EXPERIENCE STILL RELEVANT?
By Richard Bernstein

The speeches have been delivered now and the covering cloths pulled off the gleaming copper Wall of Remembrance, but as Ellis Island formally opened to the public yesterday (9/10/90), a question about the meaning of it all hung in the air.

It was this: What exactly, in 1990, a year of considerable racial antagonism and a growing ethnic assertiveness, is Ellis Island a memorial to?

The speeches, by the likes of Vice President Quayle and Lee A. Iacocca of Chrysler, tended to equate the former immigration reception center near the Statue of Liberty with the American experience itself. Ellis Island, they said, was the place where millions of ordinary people did an extraordinary thing: They started new lives in a new place, and in so doing, they forged anew identity, the American one.

But given today's ethnic frictions and the country's present tendency toward a de facto separatism, it can be asked: Is the new museum a monument to an America of the past, or even an imaginary America - a kind of Williamsburg of New York Harbor? Or does the symbolism of Ellis Island, its status as a point of entry not just to a country but to a new identity, still hold its force even in these days of ethnic assertiveness?

These are complicated questions with no clear answer during these days of remembrance, reflection and no small measure of sentimentality.

Common Identity Questioned

But if a simple answer is possible, it would probably be something like this: Since Ellis Island closed, we have become a far more diverse and heterogeneous society than we ever were before, so much so that the very idea of a common identity seems at times threatened. In this sense, the opening of the Ellis Island Museum just now rings with a certain dissonance. And yet, even in the prevailing mood of intense ethnic consciousness, the historic immigration to these shores continues, and many people are becoming Americans in much the same fashion as previous waves of immigrants.

What was Ellis Island anyway?

Among the proudest parts of the newly restored island is a long copper wall on which some 200,000 names of former immigrants - from Agnes Abrahamson to Ferra Zyziak - are inscribed. Passage through Ellis Island was not required for inclusion on the wall; all that was needed was a donation in the immigrant's name. Still, the wall is in one sense a physical symbol of the melting pot, with its vast mixture of national origins, its English, Swedish, Polish, Jewish, Italian, Greek and other names. But black Americans or Asian-Americans visiting the wall would probably find few names directly relevant to them.

European, White Immigration

The wall is evidence that Ellis Island belonged to a specific time in American history. It was the time of the huge influx of European, white immigrants that took place in the first half of this century. And it was a time when the new arrivals accepted as a matter of course the need to adapt to a culture and a language that was not their own, to take on a new identity as part of achieving the American dream.

James P. Shenton, a professor of history at Columbia University, has pointed out that this willingness reflected the narrowness of the melting pot concept. Not only were Asians and blacks largely excluded then, but there was also plenty of prejudice against Southern and Eastern Europeans, the feeling being that they would not melt in very well.

Americanness was defined basically as a more rugged version of western European, particularly British, culture, and that definition was largely accepted by the new immigrants.

To be sure, in private life many of the immigrants remained "beyond the melting pot" - as such scholars of American ethnicity as Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote long ago. They kept their customs, they often married among each other, they marched in their parades. Still, the Ellis Island immigrants did not contest the idea that a new national identity would supercede the private identity. They implicitly accepted what the 18th century Frenchman, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur - writing in English, not in French - called "The American, this new man."

Hostility to Melting Pot

By contrast, the late 1980s and the early 1990s are clearly a time when the national mood is in many ways hostile to the melting pot concept. The stress these days is not on Crevecoeur's shedding of "ancient prejudices and manners," but on the search for roots, the ethnic reaffirmation.

The atmosphere is full of ethnic antagonism, with crime and its punishment in particular becoming an arena of racial enmity - as has happened several times recently in New York with incidents in Bensonhurst, Howard Beach and Central Park. The racial antagonisms are not new, but they bring a new element with them, an often aggressive ethnic self-assertiveness, a desire not to melt into the whole but to see the whole as a patchwork of irreconcilably separate groups.

A goal of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, to erase differences, has given way to a tendency noticeable among the more militant members of minority groups to stand apart from the formerly oppressive white majority, to assert their cultural and ethnic differences.

Various groups are pressing for things like bilingual education, not, as was originally intended, to help foreign children learn English, but to maintain their native languages and cultures. Across the country, there are ever more ethnic studies programs, more demands that history texts be re-written, more protests urging the hiring of minority faculty members. At the universities, demands for what is being called "multi-culturalism," and a concept that the "white Anglo-Saxon culture" has maintained a kind of "hegemony" over other cultures.

Most fundamentally, there is the sense in some quarters that there is no such thing as an American identity or alternatively, that the American identity is just another name for the white Anglo-Saxon identity; beyond that, there is a separate African-American identity, or a Hispanic identity, or an Asian-American identity.

The question now seems to be how the new assertiveness - it has been called a "new tribalism" by some commentators - will mix with another unmistakable current phenomenon, namely the continued arrival of huge numbers of immigrants.

Today in New York there are probably more foreign-born residents than there were in the 1930s. The city has something like 60 foreign-language newspapers. Across the country in Los Angeles, more than half the children in the public school system are Hispanic. Nearly 30 percent of the incoming freshmen in the vast University of California system are Asians. A new immigration law being considered by Congress now would allow 750,000 people into the country each year. (Editor's note: The Immigration Bill passed on August 27th placed the numbers at 700,000 annually through 1994 with a supposed drop to 675,000 thereafter.)

Rapid Upward Mobility

There are worries that the stress on "multi-culturalism" will erode the "transformative" qualities of America and create, instead of unity out of diversity, a new Tower of Babel (to paraphrase historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.). If that happens, Ellis Island will certainly be a memorial to an America that no longer exists.

Yet, there is plenty of evidence that many of the new arrivals are taking advantage of America's opportunities in much the same way that their predecessors did.

In this sense, the dream remains what it was for those who came to Ellis Island - to be free and to get rich. Realizing the dream has never been easy, not for the Ellis Islanders and not for the immigrants coming today. Yet plenty are realizing it, and that is a sign, despite the fading of the melting pot ideal, that the history commemorated at the new Immigration Museum is still being made today.

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