

Ethnicity, Diversity, and Conflict

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WHEN I WAS A CHILD GROWING UP in a Carbon County, Utah, mining town in the 1920s, I would pass the Greek coffeehouses on Main Street after attending Greek school. Sitting inside were off-shift miners and sheepmen home for a time between lambing and shearing. They would be reading Greek newspapers, drinking demitasses of Turkish coffee, and quarreling over politics in Greece and Greek Orthodox church crises in America.

Farther north on Main Street, a Japanese woman would arrange fish in a display case. If it were Friday, she had more fish than usual to supply the needs of the American, Irish, Slovenian, and Croatian Catholics and the Serbian and Greek Orthodox. One of her steady customers was a Japanese woman who ran a boardinghouse. In her backyard stood large wooden tubs where her Japanese boarders washed themselves after their mine shift: they were not allowed to use the showers at the mines.

I often heard music coming from the Denver and Rio Grande Western depot where the uniformed Italian marching band met incoming passenger trains. They were hired to serenade immigrant picture brides, sent by their families to marry men they had never seen. The bands also played funeral dirges as they escorted the dead to the graveyard, mainly young men killed in falls of coal and explosions. (Immigrants were almost all young then.) Behind the hearse their compatriots marched, wearing the sashes or emblems of their Yugoslav, Italian, or Greek lodges.

Although America was ostensibly a melting pot, the immigrants were unaware they were expected to melt into it. In their neighborhoods they continued their age-old customs: they married and baptized or otherwise acknowledged their children's place on earth in joyous communal affairs; they played their folk songs on ancient instruments; they sang of their nations' tragic history under waves of foreign invaders or hereditary rulers; they called midwives and folk healers to attend them; and they keened for their dead at the side of open coffins or buried them ac-

according to their ancestral customs.

Still none of these immigrant groups was entirely united in traits and beliefs. The northern Italians and the southern Italians were hostile to each other. The Cretan Greeks were adamant that there would not be intermarriages between them and mainland Greeks; the Croats, Slovenes, and Serbs, later to be called Yugoslavs, brought ancient political and religious differences with them. The Japanese did not want social relations with the *etas*, the lowest in their hierarchy. Facing all of them were the Americans who had been in this country several or more generations than they and who made the laws and rules of the new land.

This was my first experience in diversity, living among many nationalities and races—the Depression-born Works Progress Administration (WPA) would count twenty-eight. It was a world of anxiety for a child of immigrant parents. Stepping out of the home each day meant facing taunts for being different, for being “foreign.” Yet being different colored my life and enriched it deeply. Other cultures were not strange to me. I did not think them unworthy because they were unlike mine. They were instead interesting. All my life I had an understanding of other peoples that I did not have to learn; it was almost instinctive because I had been born into that multi-ethnic milieu.

Later there would be other experiences in diversity: the pull of two cultures on us immigrant children; the conflict between workers attempting to unionize and employers who were determined that they would not; questions about religion and politics. Diversity is a condition of life. There is diversity in all nature, in the animal and plant world, in every facet of life on this earth. It often brings conflict and that conflict is not necessarily bad; the results, often immediate, most usually seen only after the passage of years, are often good.

When I hear people speak of the generations their ancestors have been in this country, I no longer feel, as I did as a child, that I had only tenuous ties to this land. No, their forefathers, as James Baldwin tells us, “left Europe because they couldn’t stay there any longer . . . they were hungry, they were poor. . . . Those who were making it in England did not get on the *Mayflower*.”¹ This is why my parents also came to this unknown land and it is how we, their children, became Americans. I use the word *we* Americans although my family’s history in this country began in 1907 when my father arrived in New York without an overcoat. Not until two months later in freezing cold was he able to buy a heavy jacket. He had to spend his first wages on a gun to protect himself. I include myself in the *we* of America because I was born in America, in that Carbon

1. James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” in *Multi-Cultural Literacy: Opening the American Mind*, eds. Rick Simonsen and Scott Walker (St. Paul, MI: Graywolf Press, 1988), 9.

County mining camp, and America's history is also my history. I am as American as those whose forefathers came on the *Mayflower*.

From my vantage point as an ethnic historian, I still hear the peculiar description of America as a "melting pot." This was a flawed presumption one hundred years ago and time has proved its fallacy. Some cultures remain closer to their ethnicity than others; even when language is lost, customs and religion survive. Many people of multi-ethnic background continue to consider themselves ethnic Americans, not simply Americans. And this diversity is good for America.

They came, the immigrants, to this new land, so vast that great spaces of wilderness and alluvial earth even the Native Americans, the Indians, knew only in the oral tradition of their people. Then over this wide country the immigrant poor and African Americans laid down millions of rails, crisscrossing a terrain of prairies, deserts, mountains, and valleys; under innumerable factory smokestacks armies of American and immigrant workers labored for a few cents an hour. Great forests were felled; rivers were dammed; roads built over mountains so high that oxygen was thin and laborers fell ill.

The immigrants exchanged their brawn for wages. This symbiotic relationship gave America its might. It made us so prideful we became egotistical. Only now have scholars begun to see flaws in Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Walt Whitman's American individualism. These American giants promulgated the "illusion of omnipotence over the clear perception of reality."² With the ever-increasing immigrant influx from the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and Asia, this individualism reared into fanaticism. Only industrialists wanted these millions of poorly paid immigrants to work the mines, mills, smelters, build railroads and roads, and keep factories running. The illusion of America's omnipotence ignored their necessary labor without which America could not have become a great nation.

The history of immigrants in this country is stark with discrimination, hostility, and anti-immigrant movements, the resurgent Ku Klux Klan in 1923-25 in the nation and in Utah the most flagrant example. Yet the immigrants persevered and gave new blood to this country, transformed it with their labor and with the accomplishments of their progeny. They gave America the vitality that characterizes it. We must also acknowledge that not all young immigrant men were hard working and virtuous. Some saw in America opportunities to make easy money as labor agents, procurers, gamblers and thereby stigmatized their entire people.

2. Peter Kivisto and Dag Blank, eds., *American Immigrants and Their Generations: Studies and Commentaries on the Hansen Thesis after Fifty Years* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 183.

Throughout the years in the new land the immigrants spoke of their native countries with nostalgia; even the water was better there, colder, more pure. Yet few returned to their homelands to live as they had planned. On visits most were disillusioned; they found fault; the water was not so good as they had thought. They came back earlier than they had intended to their American-born children and grandchildren, some of whom had married people of other cultures. They came back gratefully to this country that was now irrevocably theirs.

We have benefitted by the immigrants' relinquishing their aim of return to their native countries. Whenever I see an exceptional television program, I watch the credits with pleasure. I see among the Anglo-Saxon, north European, and Scandinavian names, others such as Bonelli, Saccamano, Frigidakis, Manopoulos, Konga, Draculich, Yamasaki, Wong, Tourouliau, Moustafa, Droubisky, Lowenstein. I feel a deep pride for these third- and fourth-generation progeny of those millions of immigrants who looked to America as to a guiding North Star. Among those moving names I know there are African Americans who still carry the names of white masters. I know there are also Anglicized names arbitrarily given to frightened immigrants by harried Ellis Island clerks who would not take the time to write the difficult names. Other immigrants changed and modified the names of their clans for convenience and sometimes for survival in a new land. During the Panic of 1907 my father went by the name George Nelson to keep from starving.

How did this happen that in such a short time the bearers of immigrant names are prominent in science, business, literature, and the visual arts? Education was the magic. Yes, their forebears had to take freight cars all over the country to look for work. They had to work under factory owners, mine and railroad managers in collusion with unscrupulous labor agents, early immigrants among them, who extracted bribes in return for jobs. And yes, they lived and worked in abysmal conditions before unions cut their work down from six and seven days a week and ten hours a day with wages as low as fifty cents to a dollar a day. They were, though, frugal, left labor to open shops, and spurred their children to get an education that would have been denied them in the Old World.

We can view other peoples who do not fare so well as industrialized nations perceive the third world. Most immigrants and their generations have done well in America, but blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans are struggling still. When someone tells me, "Your people pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, let others do the same," I know I am looking at a person who knows nothing about the historic forces that preclude our comparing these groups with European and Asian immigration. Such remarks are made not only by people who trace their genealogy back to Puritan days, but also by children of immigrants

themselves. African Americans were brought in chains, purposely separated from their own tribal people and placed with others with whom they had no common language and history. Their culture was almost destroyed. Kept from schooling, subject to sale, they endured the humiliation of slavery long after the Emancipation. Why blacks fare poorly in American life is complex; for our purposes, I quote from the former dean of Columbia Teachers College who said of an African American child, "On the day he enters kindergarten, he carries a burden no white child can ever know."³

The Hispanics too have a tragic history. The indigenous culture of Mexico was nearly annihilated under Spanish conquest. The Treaty of 1848 ceded huge Mexican territories to the United States. While Hispanics continue to enter the American middle class, the never-ceasing arrival of Mexicans into this land can give the false impression that Hispanics have not progressed.

Indian pride and freedom also were practically obliterated when white settlers plowed the land that had sustained them with seeds, nuts, berries, and small animals. Shunted onto reservations, the Native Americans were unable to live many of their ancient ways and some honored rites languished.

Yet the question keeps insisting: Why have the European and Asian immigrants done so well even though they had to face hostility and were subjected to severe restrictions at work and in housing? When reading microfilms of old newspapers, I often found items such as: American Indians were fired when Italians arrived on a railroad construction site and replaced them; or again, a labor gang of Greeks was brought in and blacks were let go. Was it because the Native Americans or the African Americans were not good workers? No, the reason is obvious: the darker the skin, the greater the discrimination.

Yet we marvel at Asian students and their superior academic achievement. We are quick to compare blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics with whites in educational status, but would rather not compare Asian and Asian American students with Americans. The high number of Asians who meet admission standards in schools such as the University of California in Berkeley but are rejected is disturbing. The Office of Education is investigating charges that school administrations' "fear of a preponderance of Asian Americans is a replay of attitudes colleges once had about Jews."⁴

To know why African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans have comparatively few of their number graduating from colleges and

3. Andrew Hacker, "Affirmative Action: The New Look," *New York Review of Books*, 12 Oct. 1989, 63.

4. *Ibid.*, 64.

Asians have a great number requires a concerted knowledge about family stability, social patterns, environment, attitudes toward education, and the nation's economic climate. Why is it impossible for some critics to see that unemployment and low income affect people? For American Indians unemployment is as high as 96 percent on certain reservations. In 1986, 31.1 percent of African Americans and 27.3 percent of Hispanics had incomes below the poverty level, three times the rate for whites.⁵ Disturbing statistics show an ever-widening gap between living standards of minorities and whites. We have to know the cultural traits and the economic realities of these groups before we make quick assumptions that can only further speed the decline of minority education and participation in American life.

Great strides were made during the twenty years' war on poverty and the civil rights movement between 1960-80. Stagnation and even reversal began taking place fourteen years ago when the burgeoning budget deficit and the defense program slashed entitlements that were helping minorities. Because education is the key to progress, educators were alarmed. In 1988, the Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life (chaired by the president of Cornell University, Frank H. T. Rhodes, and including state governors, former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, university presidents, and leaders in various fields) reported:

Minority Americans are burdened not by a sudden, universal, yet temporary economic calamity, but by a long history of oppression and discrimination. . . . America is moving backward—not forward—in its efforts to achieve full participation of minority citizens in the life and prosperity of the nation. . . . They are tomorrow's one-third of a nation.⁶

The report concludes:

The plain and simple fact is that full participation of minority citizens is vital to our survival as a free and prosperous nation. . . . their numbers will increase. The United States will suffer a compromised quality of life and a lower standard of living. Social conflict will intensify. Our ability to compete in world markets will decline, our domestic economy will falter, our national security will be endangered. In brief we will find ourselves unable to fulfill the promise of the American dream.⁷

Helping minorities is not merely altruistic and "doing them favors,"

5. American Council of Education, *One-Third of a Nation: A Report on Minority Participation in Education and American Life* (N.p.: n.p.), 4.

6. *Ibid.*, vii, 6.

7. *Ibid.*, vii, 30.

as some look at it, but the entire well-being of our nation depends on facing and eradicating the evils that put young people in ghettos of place and ghettos of the mind. Education brought the American dream to the progeny of immigrants. Education must bring it to our racial minorities.

The drop in minority college graduates is tragic. Young people have fewer role models to give them the promise of education's being the key to stepping out of the ghetto's mean streets, the barrios, or being able to survive away from the reservation. How greatly improved, for example, a black child's life would be, Ira Glasser tells us, if more African American police officers walked the streets of the ghettos. If he could see more black physicians, attorneys, judges, and college professors, corporate executives, and foreign service officers, he could know that once he finished his education, he too would find employment.⁸

The Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life gave six strategies toward progress in minority education: challenges to institutions of higher learning to recruit, retain, and graduate minority students; to national leaders to restore national solvency; to the presidency and elected officials to lead efforts to assure minority advancement; to private and voluntary organizations to initiate new and expand existing programs to increase minority participation; to each major sector of our society to contribute a new vision of affirmative action; and finally to minority public officials, institutions, and voluntary organizations to expand their leadership roles.

This last strategy is of special importance. Too often minority graduates forget their people's needs. Yet when we read that the Utah Jazz basketball star, Karl Malone, has given a great amount of scholarship money to black colleges and University of Utah professor Ronald Coleman is a nationwide authority on African American history; when we read of the increasing number of Hispanic teachers and attorneys; when we see Native American leaders, like the late Fred Conetah, leading an awakening of Indian self-realization, one's pride knows no bounds.

There are too few of these exceptional people. One of the most severe blows to minority children is that few of their culture are preparing for teaching careers. This is a particular problem for minority students, the commission reports, "but it also is a loss for majority students who otherwise only rarely may be exposed directly to minority citizens in professional roles."⁹

A leading Mexican writer, a diplomat, and son of a diplomat, Carlos Fuentes, said, "[C]ultures perish when deprived of contact with what is different and challenging."¹⁰ Diversity in the schoolroom gives enrich-

8. Hacker, 63.

9. American Council of Education, 13.

10. Carlos Fuentes, "How I Started to Write," in *Multi-Cultural Literacy*, 93.

ment, shows students that others are like them except for the color of their skin, teaches them that others have ways, customs, ideas that are not only as important as theirs, but often more interesting. I remember in childhood being teased because we ate lamb, a symbol of Christ, on Easter; one of my ethnic Italian friends was ridiculed because he ate spaghetti. Time and World War II (when our soldiers, the GIs, returned from foreign countries with expanded fields of vision and some with brides) changed that: ethnic food has become American food. Missionaries of all denominations, and in Utah mainly Mormon, also return with changed views on ethnic peoples. The Brigham Young University *Culturegrams* are of inestimable value for government officials and our armed forces particularly.

We can look back now on that celebrated American individualism of which we could be justly proud if it were pure, if it were not tainted with the unwitting arrogance that American culture, views, standards, perceptions are the right and proper ones to hold. Americans looked upon immigrants and racial minorities as inferior peoples, even primitive. Americans had, the pioneer anthropologist Ruth Benedict tells us, the notion that people rose from simple, primitive stages and arrived at a civilized state. Yet even so-called primitive societies are highly complex and they possess all the traits of good and bad that supposedly civilized peoples do. How can we possibly say that the Native American, the Indian, view of the land is inferior to ours? To the Indians the land was given for people's use, not to own, not to desecrate; it was holy.

Other nations realize the importance of knowing foreign languages to facilitate discourse between nations, to understand the mores and cultures of these countries. We in the United States have hardly been concerned with learning the languages and cultures of others. Americans see other nations through American eyes. It has served us badly in diplomacy and in wars. Diplomats are appointed for political repayment, given crash courses in the countries to which they are assigned, and are often a source of embarrassment to our government.

Books on Vietnam continue to be published; the tragedy is minutely, tenaciously examined. Daniel Ellsberg said of his days as a prowar government official: "there has never been an official of Deputy Assistant Secretary rank or higher (including myself) who could have passed a freshman exam in modern Vietnamese history, if such a course existed in this country."¹¹ In his book *Flashbacks: On Returning to Vietnam*, Morley Safer says, "Had the people in civilian and military command even the most rudimentary understanding of the history and language [of the

11. Jonathan Mirsky, "The War That Will Not End," *New York Review of Books*, 16 Aug. 1990, 29.

Vietnamese], this awful business would likely not have happened.”¹² How can we forget the high-ranking American army officer who told us that death had not the same meaning for the Vietnamese as for us Americans? Life, he said, is cheap to the Vietnamese.

Our government still has not learned much about the Middle Easterners. The roots of their religious fanaticism, their ancient cultures, are measured by American standards. The historic struggles of the Middle East from Turkey’s domination to protectorates under the British and French continue to be blank to Americans. Government officials show their ignorance when they speak of humiliating a Middle Eastern people. The Middle Easterners know considerably more about our culture because their young people are sent here in great numbers for higher education.

We do not know what the United States would be like if blacks were not brought from Africa in chains, if the Spanish had not traveled north from Mexico into Indian land and built settlements throughout the West, and if all immigration had ceased at the end of the last century. The nation would have been one of peoples from Britain, Holland, Scandinavia, and a lesser number from Germany and Switzerland. I believe such a nation would be uninteresting. Fortunately, immigration prevented it and continues to prevent it. Neo-Nazis and other white supremacists would be happy with such a country, but how do they know what ethnic strains they carry in their genes? None of us, no matter how far back we trace our genealogy, can know this for certain. Invaders and the invaded intermarried; for economic gain or for survival people changed their religions, took on new names, and often posterity forgot its origins. In their history of exile the Jews, for example, took on the physical characteristics of the countries in which they settled. In my own history, I found it hard to believe my father’s description of his mother as having had blonde hair and blue eyes. Yet when I visited my father’s ancestral village, I was struck by the number of relatives and other villagers who were light complexioned. The closer we traveled to northern Balkan countries, the more prevalent these characteristics became.

In the history of immigration we see that the raw determination, the strong beliefs of the immigrant generation begin to water down in the second generation and become pale by the third generation. The progeny of those pioneer Mormon journal keepers are shadows compared to their ancestors. The stark words, phrases, sentences are riveting there on the darkened pages; their progeny’s comments on television and in newspapers are not. I think of the immigrant Greeks, Yugoslavs, and Italians I knew in Carbon County. They were giants of individualism compared to

12. *Ibid.*

their children and grandchildren. Neither church nor civil authorities could make them change their stand when they believed they were right and most of them spoke out even when they knew it was not in their best interests. I recall when I was researching the Carbon County Strike of 1933 that a Catholic bishop came to Carbon County to warn the Yugoslav and Italian Catholics to stop their strike activities and go back to work. Hardly a striker heeded the bishop's warning. The passing of generations diffuses individualism, but America's vitality continues because fresh blood renews it.

These new immigrants, many from Asia, face the same discrimination and rejection as earlier arrivals. We hear people speak with dismay over their numbers, over their customs, over their taking jobs away from Americans. These complainers have not paid attention to history; further, they have not really looked about them. Historians who peruse microfilms of old newspapers read dire warnings of what immigrants will do to this country. *Mongrelize* was a favorite word. Greek coffeehouses and ethnic lodges were spoken of as sinister places where intrigues took place. Foreign-language newspapers were certainly, they editorialized, filled with subversive propaganda from the immigrants' native countries. Greek schools showed Greeks could never be Americanized. Italian, Greek, and Serbian priests could hardly speak English and should go back to their own countries. The American-born envisioned immigrant children as clones of their parents.

None of the dire predictions came to pass. Although ethnicity is not entirely lost, nor should it be, the progeny of immigrants are fully American. In my experience, and in that of others of immigrant background, we never felt more American than when visiting our parents' native countries and to our surprise were referred to as Americans, not Italian Americans, Greek Americans, Lebanese Americans as we are called in the United States, but Americans. We return homesick to this nation that is also ours. If people will let time pass, immigrants will accommodate, then adapt, then assimilate by the third generation.

We do not have to go into ethnic history for examples of assimilation. One in the recent past involves Americans. During the 1930s Depression when drought dried the topsoil of the Midwest, from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, crops died without water, winds carried the dust a thousand miles away. At noon, Arthur Rothstein, the noted photographer of those years, said, "the skies of New York were darkened." Farmers and storekeepers who depended on crop sales piled children and the most necessary of belongings into old cars and drove to California hoping for work. Sheriffs stood with guns at county boundaries to turn them back. There was no unemployment relief. People died of starvation. Newspapers harangued over what the lowly Okies, as they were called, would do to Cal-

ifornia society. They would lower the standard of living; they would be a blight on the economy; they were inferior people. Within two generations the Okies entered the California middle-class.

Diversity in labor history gives us several excellent examples of conflict that looked at the time pernicious, but decades later proved to be salutary. One is the maligned Industrial Workers of the World, the I.W.W., the Wobblies, the I-Won't-Works, as cynical observers called them. A radical union for the times, the I.W.W. was seen as syndicalist, anarchist; but it also welcomed nonwhites, women, the unskilled, and the foreign born into its ranks, all of whom most locals of the staid American Federation of Labor excluded from membership. The I.W.W. fought employers of lumberjacks, migrants, dock workers, and miners for a living wage, decent housing, and an eight-hour day. These were radical demands at a time when foremen hired, decided wages, kept men at work for ten and twelve hours, provided lice-infected housing if any, and charged the men for every necessity of life leaving them at times with nothing to show for their labor. By 1932, the I.W.W. was almost finished, yet the precepts it upheld throughout confrontations with authorities, battles with management thugs, horrible beatings, and long prison terms under inhumane conditions, are today taken for granted.

Diversity in religion also brings conflict, but without it there would be no change to fit the times. All religions must change to survive. Generations may pass before alterations are effected. I recall, for example, that the wedding ceremony in my Greek Orthodox church reached its final form in the year 1200. Often necessary changes are painful. I was dismayed the first time I saw the ancient St. John Chrysostom liturgy translated into English. I knew it was necessary, but it was also jarring to hear the words so natural in their original Greek chanted rather clumsily in English. Recent Greek immigrants in the East rail at the translation of the liturgy, even in the face of the high percentage of marriages outside their culture and the loss of language among third and fourth generations. Many Roman Catholics yearn for the old Latin rite which is celebrated once a month in St. Ann's church in Salt Lake City. Cults have arisen when long-held Mormon church tenets have been disallowed.

In all kinds of diversity, we have serious problems to face and primarily in education because it is the basis of our doing well in life. Again we must place the needs of minority students prominently on the nation's agenda—not only for their sake but for the sake of the nation.

A thoughtful person wonders how he or she can be of service. In answer I think of the great doctor, Albert Schweitzer, whom not many remember now, but who spent his life in Africa building clinics for black Africans. He was deluged with visitors who were attracted to his remarkable work. One woman asked how people like her could also help. He

answered that everyone could not come to Africa to work as he had, but that each person could do his or her best for those nearby. When we see acts of discrimination; when we hear racial disparagements of others; when we hear superficial comments that condemn an entire culture; when we are silent while someone harangues against the African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans and argues that Asians should be barred from the country; when neighbors comment derisively about the customs of those who are different, we should defend them. They are part of the diversity and conflict of our nation and, just as the immigrants of the first twenty-five years of this century did, they too will enrich it with their blood; infuse it with the vitality that America has not yet lost. Always we must remember that these minorities are one-third of our nation. Their numbers cannot be ignored and how they fare the United States will fare.