

## Review

Nathan Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge, Mass, and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 192 pages, ISBN 0-674-94851-3, \$19.95 hardback

This book is a timely antidote to the anger in the often contentious 'culture wars' by the retired Harvard sociologist best known for co-authoring *Beyond the Melting Pot* with Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Approaching a book written by a senior Jewish academic who served on the infamous New York State curriculum committee with Arthur Schlesinger, this reviewer expected it to echo Schlesinger's vituperative attack on 'multiculturalism' in *The Disuniting of America* (1991). Instead, while sharing some of Schlesinger's discomfort with Afrocentrism and other multicultural excesses, Glazer writes a calming book that is conciliatory toward the people Schlesinger damned. The difference stems from Glazer's reluctant conviction that poor urban African-Americans are in a uniquely frustrating position. Glazer maintains that the immigrant model is working for those recently arrived from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America, but not for African Americans. Thus 'multiculturalism is the price America is paying for its inability or unwillingness to incorporate into its society African Americans' (147).

Glazer was embroiled in the battles over New York State's curriculum that brought 'multiculturalism' into the national spotlight and helped spark the 'culture wars.' The word was virtually unknown in American parlance before the late 1980s, having been the province of Canadian and Australian discourse. By the early 1990s the phrase was raising blood pressures across the United States.

Unlike Schlesinger, Glazer changed some of his views as a result of the New York State curricular wars. The controversy began with Gov. Mario Cuomo's selection of Thomas Sobol as State Superintendent of Schools when many Black and Hispanic leaders expected the post to go to one of their own. To assuage them, Sobol placed a number of potential enemies on a Task Force for Minorities. Its intemperate report, *A Curriculum of Inclusion*, denounced mainstream education as 'Eurocentric' and called for separate curricula tailored to each ethnic group. Having lumped Europeans into one group and made dubious historical claims of sub-Saharan African achievements, *A Curriculum of Inclusion* was savaged by historians, politicians, and journalists. Sobol then appointed the New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee; including Glazer and Schlesinger, to try again. This committee was broadly representative and less contentious. Glazer believes its call for a moderate form of multiculturalism would have passed without much attention if taken on its own merits. It avoided the intemperate language of the first report, was supported by white 'upstate' educators, and echoed much already being taught in New York State's social studies classrooms. But the controversy surrounding the previous report guaranteed scrutiny, and publication of Schlesinger's articulate dissent engendered emotional debate. *Time*, *New Republic*, and Governor Cuomo quickly attacked the report.

Unlike Schlesinger, Glazer was willing to live with it. He had been sobered by

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Committee members from elementary and secondary schools who viewed the report as uncontroversial and found its theoretical debates irrelevant. Educators were already putting much of it into practice and wanted practical help. When Glazer asked one for an explanation, the answer was that the real issue was to get students to read at all. The depressing reports from the educational trenches convinced Glazer that solutions he once championed had failed. His self-deprecating reflections result in one of the gentlest volumes in the 'culture wars.'

Unlike many commentators, he clearly separates the cultural issues for elementary and secondary schools from those for higher education. For the former he accepts that there must be an agreed narrative; to focus on the process of ascertaining truth is too much to ask in the public schools. But who will control that narrative? Glazer urges his colleagues in higher education to relax. He is willing to have scholarly truth occasionally violated to make room for constructive and well-meaning myths. Schlesinger's fear of national disunity strikes Glazer as overwrought, especially when American cultural differences are compared to such fragile societies as Canada: or in the dismembered Yugoslavia and Soviet Union. As a Jewish student in New York City of the 1930s, Glazer didn't see his ethnic group represented in the curriculum and acknowledges that highly achieving Asian students of today don't seem to need such cultural recognition. Yet he is willing to entertain the possibility that Black, and possibly some Hispanic, students may have a different need at the moment.

The battle over social studies curricula bounced from New York State to California to the national stage. The California standards were less contentious than those in New York, but they set the stage for a national battle when their authors became leaders in writing the National Standards for American history. These included some imbalances, notably excessive emphasis on Africa. And university scholars imposed specialists' knowledge and preoccupations upon elementary and secondary teachers that could not possibly be translated into their classrooms. Despite these reservations, Glazer is tolerant of the National Standards. He attributes these failings not to attempts to break up the United States, but to a desire by excluded groups for inclusion. Better to accept moderate multiculturalism with its excesses than to deny these cries he reluctantly concludes.

Multiculturalism often suffers from historical amnesia. Glazer points out that cultural battles for control of the schools are not new in the 1990s, but have periodically gripped America. Protestants and Catholics battled over the King James Bible and funding of parochial schools throughout the 1800s. Germans and other groups successfully attained bilingualism in public and parochial schools. The 1890s were more fundamentally multicultural than the 1990s. But World War I and the Red Scare discredited cultural pluralism and rapid assimilation of European immigrants followed. The decline in immigration, Americanization pressures of World War II, and post-1945 anti-Communism all militated towards relative cultural homogeneity. By the 1950s a widespread cultural consensus had developed among European-Americans with remarkable speed. This was reinforced in the 1960s by the Civil Rights Movement whose leaders demanded access for all to the mainstream culture and to the existing educational system that had trained them. Thus today's multiculturalism reacts against a few decades of uncommon cultural homogeneity. By ignoring the earlier waves of diversity and assimilation in America's

past, Glazer believes, many multiculturalists incorrectly reason that we live in unique conditions that will lead inevitably toward a new pluralist cultural model.

To explain the inspiration for 1990s multiculturalism Glazer offers a surprising answer. He does not attribute it primarily to the dramatic immigration of the last two decades. Asians essentially accept the existing educational system in which their achievement surpasses that of Whites. Hispanics, except for Mexican-Americans in the borderlands, have asked only for some bi-lingualism and cultural recognition. 'Blacks are the storm troops in the battles over multiculturalism' (94). The failure of civil rights to lead to full participation for many African-Americans and the resulting pent up frustration is the essential force behind multiculturalism. Contrary to the assertions of many multiculturalists, Glazer asserts that assimilation is 'still the most powerful force affecting the ethnic and racial elements of the United States' (97), but that it has been obscured by the failure to fully integrate African-Americans.

Glazer admits that he has backed some solutions that have failed. He now recants the case he made in *Affirmative Discrimination* that Affirmative Action was not necessary. The curative forces in society and the government programs have had little effect. Although there has been racial progress in politics and the workforce, residential concentration has not declined. Inter-marriage rates for American-born Blacks are dramatically lower than for any other group. The continuing separation has increased differences in the use of English, and academic achievement is stigmatized by many Black youth as 'White'. The only solution is to 'pass through a period in which we recognize difference, we celebrate difference ... and we raise up for special consideration the achievements of our minorities and their putative ancestors' (159).

Although the tone is conciliatory, the book will still annoy many who glorify cultural diversity based on race and predict that it is America's future. Glazer rejects both. He is willing to live with temporary excesses of racial pride to cure past failures. Unlike many of the more strident voices in the 'culture wars,' his is humane, thoughtful, and grounded in the failures of America's urban public schools. But to Glazer multiculturalism is a temporary penance rather than a desirable or likely future. He believes America neither will nor should emulate truly multicultural societies such as Canada, Russia, or India. He is willing to give latitude to multiculturalists because he believes their ultimate goal is inclusion. When past racial injustices are corrected, multiculturalism will be reduced 'to a passing phase in the complex history of the malting of an American nation from many strands' (161).

Glazer stresses that the essential drive in American society, whatever the exclusions at various times, has been inclusion, a progressive expansion of the groups considered to be full fledged 'Americans'. While that category steadily expanded beyond the original ethnic stock(s) of the Founders, non-whites were beyond the pale. The racial divide was finally crossed in the 1960s and the African-American middle class began moving into the mainstream. Asian-Americans and Caribbean-Americans soon were more advantaged than the average White American. The racial caste system had fallen. But poorer Blacks and Hispanics were left behind, many trapped in increasingly unlivable cities. Thus the assertion in Glazer's title that 'We are all Multiculturalists now' does not use a definition that will satisfy most who carry the banner. His title means that multiculturalism is already

a reality in the nation's classrooms. In his stint on the New York State curriculum coininittee he found that textbooks had become multicultural. In colleges and universities non-White authors and cultures have been in vogue for a quarter century on class readings lists and research agendas. Glazer urges calm. He believes that those who champion a multicultural future and those who believe it threatens American society both ignore America's social realities and history.

Reading this book over four thousand miles and eleven months away from the United States makes this reviewer nod strongly in agreement with Glazer's skepticism that America is or ever will be truly multicultural. From such a distance the pervasiveness of America's broad-based mainstream culture is striking. As a Danish colleague said, 'I can see an American coming.' Most Americans share so many cultural references; styles, and assumptions that claims of 'multiculturalism' seem to miss the forest for the trees. Multiculturalists correctly point to America's considerable diversity but fail to offer international comparisons on which to evaluate their claims that America is 'multicultural' and will be so in the future. Compared with Denmark or other Scandinavian countries the United States appears multicultural. But in comparison with Belgium or Canada? Or, more appropriately, in comparison with the other largest countries: China, India, Russia, and Indonesia? Rather than America being multicultural, on a world scale the opposite is true, The United States stands out internationally as a model of relative cultural homogeneity. Where else on earth do so many people share a common language as well as the same television, movies, sports, consumer items, brand names, educational system, professional networks, and economic structure? And most critically for predicting the future, no other society has such a powerful, relatively homogeneous youth culture. Finally, intermarriage rates for Asians of about one in three and for Hispanics of about one in four make it unlikely that these groups will transmit truly distinct cultures very far into the future.

One could argue that homogeneity is the force that should be feared. In less than a half century America went from the extraordinary multiculturalism of the early 1900s to the cultural consensus of the 1950s. The reach of modern media and consumerism adds to forces destroying traditions and encouraging homogeneity. Suburbs, which decimate cultural diversity, expand daily. From this perspective, the multicultural battles are skirmishes that divert our attention from more pervasive social change.

The centrality of curricular debates in the 'culture wars' must baffle most Europeans. Although the cultural content of the curriculum is contested in every country, the late age of specialization gives American educational institutions a unique cultural role. About ninety per cent of American youth attend comprehensive high schools until they are eighteen; taking relatively similar English and social studies courses from nationally distributed textbooks published by companies seeking to please educators in California, New York, and Texas. The nearly half of all youth who continue into higher education encounter two years of 'general education' programs which have contested cultural content. In addition, American high school and college campuses have enveloping student cultures that give American schools social roles unparalleled in Europe.

Glazer's urban focus virtually excludes the Census Department's racial category that encompasses the deepest separation from the mainstream: 'American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut.' This is a reminder that many of the most truly culturally distinct groups in America

are in rural areas and many are white, such as the Amish, Mennonites, and Hutterites. Thus we must be careful about focusing excessively on urban populations and on equating racial differences with cultural diversity.

What will the America of the future look like? The racial mixture has been irrevocably altered by recent Asian and Hispanic immigration. But race does not necessarily convey culture. Other than Native Americans, only Chicanos along the Mexican border live with the conditions necessary to maintaining a culture: residential propinquity and an enduring connection to an alternative culture. But for most Americans, history supports Glazer's belief that cultural diversity based on ethnicity or race will be 'a passing phase'.

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