

DEBUNKING DIVERSITY'S DISCONTENTS

Joshua Yates

Joshua Yates is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Virginia and a Graduate Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. For the past two years, he has worked as a research assistant for the U.S. component of an eleven-nation study of cultural globalization sponsored by The Institute for the Study of Economic Culture and Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies.

Smelser, Neil J. and Jeffrey C. Alexander, eds. *Diversity and Its Discontents: Cultural Conflict and Common Ground in Contemporary American Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

IN AN ESSAY ENTITLED "THE USES OF DIVERSITY," Clifford Geertz commented that "Like nostalgia, diversity isn't what it used to be." Referring to the once conventional view and general experience of the world as discrete, integral societies in distant communication, Geertz acknowledged that such a simple view was no longer possible. In a time of increasing global interconnectedness between cultures and greater differentiation within them, he reasoned, we have inevitably begun to think about diversity rather differently. "Confronting landscapes and still-lives is one thing," he pointed out, "panoramas and collages quite another."¹

¹ Clifford Geertz, "The Uses of Diversity," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25.1 (1986): 114.

The ensuing fifteen years since Geertz made his remarks have only served to corroborate them; we do indeed think of diversity differently today. Where once questions of difference had been exclusively framed in assimilationist terms, debates are now almost entirely cast in the idiom of cultural pluralism. This new formulation finds its roots in the early 20th century thought of Horace Kallen, who compared the diversity of life in America to that of a symphony orchestra with its numerous instrument groups each distinct but able to play in unison when properly orchestrated. There is, though, an important difference between Kallen's formulation of cultural pluralism and its most recent dispensation as multiculturalism. Kallen and other early proponents were mainly promoting their version of cultural pluralism against a conformist theme represented by the "melting pot." As one commentator has remarked,

the vision of America as a political canopy providing protection for a variety of descent-defined groups was the dialectical product of a distinctive historical moment: a moment at which unprecedented ethno-racial diversity collided with an Anglo-conformist movement made more aggressive by WWI.²

It wasn't until the 1960s that the idiom of cultural pluralism became a positive program in its own right. Less concerned with how various ethnic groups, economic classes, religious affiliations, or even racial distinctions are to be "melted down" into the single quintessential American citizen, the thrust of public debate has moved toward consideration of how such diverse groups might retain their various cultural (and other essential) identities and *still* be quintessentially American. Many Americans have, in fact, become highly suspicious of how we once thought about diversity. Hence, the popular change of metaphor from "melting-pot" to "mosaic" remains apt.

At the heart of these changing vocabularies persists one of the most pressing, if perennial, concerns of American civic life: the dilemma of *e*

² David A. Hollinger, *PostEthnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic, 1995) 93.

pluribus unum. Put simply, this is the vexing question of how such a diverse population can live together as a unified civic nation. Throughout U.S. history, this particular dilemma has struck at the heart of American national identity and public order as have few others. One need only consider the well-known clashes between Protestants and Catholics (and later, Jews) over public education or the virulent controversies over immigration at the turn of the twentieth century. And, of course, we need not be reminded of our nation's dismal legacy with respect to Native Americans and African Americans.

In recent years, what may be called the “culturalist turn” has generated highly polemical public controversies, for instance those over school curricula, dubbed the “canon wars,” and the recurring battles over “multiculturalism” and “political correctness.” Traditionalists and progressives alike have spilt gallons of ink (and a good amount of bile) over the liabilities and possibilities such a culturalist public philosophy lends to the maintenance of the commonweal. Animating all such disputes is a question: how much unity is necessary for a democratic society to thrive? Or, put the other way: how much diversity puts democratic order at risk?

Two of the more well-known critics of the culturalist or multiculturalist position are political historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain. Schlesinger, by no means a card-carrying conservative, has nevertheless captured the central concern of many conservatives in the title of his widely debated and best-selling book, *The Disuniting of America*. At issue is a deep concern over the revival of what Schlesinger calls “ancient prejudices” which only serve to divide Americans by inflating differences. The consequence of resorting to the “cult of ethnicity” is that the historic trajectory of American society has been reversed as it destroys “the bonds of cohesion—common ideals, common political institutions, common language, common culture, common fate—that holds the republic together.”³

³ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton, 1971) 13.

Elshtain voices similar concerns over what she calls “the politics of difference.” Echoing a point made by political theorist George Kateb, Elshtain contends, “to the extent that citizens begin to retribalize into ethnic or other ‘fixed identity’ groups, democracy falters.”⁴ Nevertheless, even when criticizing the culturalist turn, critics typically do so in cultural terms. Their concern is over what constitutes the needed basis for a common civic culture.

Perhaps surprisingly, far from disagreeing with the concerns raised by cultural conservatives, many of those who endorse the culturalist shift share their basic assessment. They agree that their movement does indeed fragment the traditional character of American national identity, but this fact ought to be encouraged and celebrated rather than mourned and condemned. Iris Marion Young, a well-known advocate for multiculturalism, has argued for a society of discrete but equal groups who, although not pretending to share a common vision of the good, grant every other group the right to pursue its own vision. To this view, American society isn't fragmented *enough*. For instance, with respect to definitions of “the” family, or of marriage, more dismantling of traditional Eurocentric conceptions is believed necessary.

It is against this new form of public discourse regarding the grounds of American solidarity, and against the two opposing sides in this debate, that a recent collection of essays directs the critical light of social science in often helpful, though sometimes flawed, ways. In *Diversity and Its Discontents*, sociologists Neil J. Smelser and Jeffrey C. Alexander bring together an impressive group of leading social scientists—including Robert Wuthnow, Seyla Benhabib, Frank Furstenberg, and David Hollinger—to probe the depth of cultural conflict in America and to assess the common claims of present social crisis.

The editors and contributors alike go to great lengths to show that this new way of thinking about diversity has not only obscured, but also misled Americans about the state of their union. The strains of diversi-

⁴ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic, 1995) 74.

ty are far from new, they remind us; what is new, and uniquely problematic, is that conflict arising from difference (of whatever stripe) has been framed in exclusively cultural terms. “A glance at earlier twentieth-century periods of intense, polarized cultural conflict highlights not only the uniqueness of the contemporary cultural emphasis,” Smelser and Alexander suggest, “but also the unique polarizing nature of this rhetoric” (3). They assert that despite the deep ideological gulf that separates those opposed and those celebrating the culturalist shift in public discussion about diversity, a striking commonality exists: “Those who have created the contemporary sense of cultural polarization find common ground in the claim that, in contemporary America, common ground no longer exists” (6). Such a discourse tends to escalate into hyperbolic rhetoric that sees only certain social crisis. Both sides of the conflict engage in what Robert Wuthnow calls, in his contribution to the volume, a “discourse of discontent.”

Yet, the object of this collection is to accomplish more than a simple explanation of the “discourse of discontent” as a coherent set of cultural discourses and competing ideologies. The editors characterize their enterprise as a “political sociology of the cultural turn.” It is, they insist, to find out whether these discourses are “realistic descriptions of contemporary American society or whether they distort it in potentially damaging ways” (5). As a matter of course, they offer the answer to their inquiry up front. “As we shall show,” the editors state in the introduction,

the evidence suggests that although the critics of the right and the left refer to society-wide crisis and polarization, their theories and rhetorics neither penetrate nor reflect the routine politics of the nation, institutional activities at the grass roots, or the attitudes, cares, and interactions of the proverbial person in the street. (5)

Indeed, by compiling the most current analyses by experts researching American families, immigration, work, sexual practice, civic association and participation, and the like, the editors attempt to show that, contrary to the claims of the cultural rhetoric of discontent, there is, in fact, a consensus on basic American values. However, the self-perpetuating

clash of polemics resulting from diversity's discontent diminishes the "intellectual middle ground," what Schlesinger himself (ironically) once referred to as the "vital center," where ideological consensus and crisis resolution can take place. Furthermore, viewing diversity exclusively through the prism of culture inevitably masks systemic problems, such as economic and racial inequalities, which are in turn aggravated by the tremendous strain of contemporary social-structural change—i.e., increasingly complex institutional arrangements, new forms of democratic participation and engagement, and new levels of cultural diversity.

Smelser and Alexander conclude their introductory remarks in a rather sanguine tone; the discourse of discontent aside, they believe there is evidence of a deep process of institutionalization at work in the U.S., creating new lines of consensus and solidarity. Essentially, the "reformist" projects of the 1960s have been largely realized:

Faced with the pressures of growing institutional complexity and cultural diversity, new forms of democratic integration have developed.... As these normative innovations have developed, social polarization has lessened rather than increased, and a new consensus has been developing beneath the ideological surface. (17)

In other words, the social upheaval which began in the late 1950s, accelerated in the 1960s, and gained critical mass in the 1970s and 1980s as rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, crime, and the like peaked, should be interpreted as a momentary disruption caused by social norms falling out of sync with intense social-structural change. (Francis Fukuyama has recently made a similar but grander claim, only according to him, the alarming trends found among 1980s' cultural indicators mark the high-water mark of a 100-year-long "great disruption.") Moreover, the fact that such social indicators have recently shown marked improvements—as average Americans appear to be "renorming" themselves (and as they appear less convinced by the diatribes of cultural critics on the Left or the Right)—gives testimony to the continuing strength and vitality of the American experiment in democracy. Of course, there are still economic and racial evils to address, but no great crisis looms darkly on the horizon.

There is much to say in favor of this collection's aims and conclusions. First, it is high time that analytical rigor and theoretical sophistication be introduced into debates that have often suffered from ideological exuberance and empirical paucity. This volume amasses a mountain of relevant data against which to evaluate the claims of those most profuse in the discourse of discontent. Generally speaking, the proffered evidence has led contributors to measured judgments about where troubles do in fact exist and to highlighting where they have been overdrawn.

This volume also provides a needed service by insisting that the weight of concern over cultural crisis in American life rests with cultural elites themselves and not with average Americans. Indeed, numerous public opinion surveys confirm that Americans continue to share fundamental "American" values such as democracy, liberty, and equality. This point bears frequent reminding in a society where invoking cultural crisis sells books and captures headlines. These scholars are surely correct, therefore, in their admonition that such hyperbole will mislead average Americans who, believing their public square much more fragmented than it actually is, will likely succumb to even higher levels of discontent, distrust, and, ultimately, ambivalence.

Perhaps the most fecund contribution offered within the volume comes from Wuthnow's chapter examining the sources of cultural discontent in America. Recasting an argument he made popular in *Loose Connections*, Wuthnow contends that it is not so much that Americans have rejected traditional American values out of hand, but that the conditions under which they are able to realize them inevitably make them more elusive and difficult to sustain in practice. "Institutions," he writes, "have become more *porous* as they have become more complex, permitting social ties to be broken more easily and yet requiring that they be maintained more flexibly and at greater distances as well" (28). Thus, social malcontent is not simply reducible to the strains of diversity. It has its deeper roots in recent social change, which combatants over multiculturalism tend to ignore.

For all that this collection does to clarify and empirically ground the underlying assumptions fueling the public debates over diversity in

American society, a few issues about some of its conclusions need to be raised.

First, though emphasizing that much of the culture of discontent has its roots in the changing institutional realities of postindustrial life, the contributors seem to ignore the very structural reasons driving radical and traditionalist elites to cultural explanations. There are structural pressures—pressures not associated with social change—which constrain public resolution of difference to interest-driven, often zero-sum political solutions. Such pressures inhere within the very fabric of American politics: its two-party system and winner-take-all electoral process, its reliance on sound-bite media, its special-interest-driven campaigning, and the like—all contribute to a highly charged and extremely polarized political atmosphere, and no shortage of vitriolic rhetoric.

Another shortcoming of this collection surfaces in its failure to distinguish sufficiently between “ideal” and “substantive” politics. This distinction goes to the heart of the claim made throughout the book that Americans are not as divided as cultural critics presume—that Americans are, in Alan Wolfe’s memorable phrase, “one nation, after all.”⁵ While it may be true that most Americans continue to be committed to general American ideals such as justice, fairness, liberty, and equality, judging by numerous public opinion polls, those same Americans are also deeply dissatisfied with how such ideals are realized in practice, especially at the level of politics.

In an effort to dispel baseless anxiety over unfounded claims of impending social breakdown, the contributors of this volume gloss over very real kinds of disaffection felt by Americans about the current state of society, as well as the depth of disagreement which exists over the meaning of those very values most Americans say they embrace. After all, it is one thing to agree about social ideals in the abstract and quite another thing to reach agreement about their meaning in practice. Moreover,

⁵ Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* (New York: Viking, 1998).

where the volume does touch upon such important distinctions, it typically dismisses the possibility that any real threat exists. Instead, nearly every chapter announces that an emergent process of normative mediation and innovation is rendering any notion of culture war outdated. Such normative entrepreneurialism is, on this view, itself a validation of the classical value of innovation. Wuthnow initiates this common chorus as he emphasizes new forms of participation in civil society: “Neither the current culture of discontent nor the rhetoric of reform,” he says, “has paid much attention to these innovative forms of civic engagement” (33). Claude S. Fischer echoes Wuthnow’s claim in his chapter on diversity in contemporary city life. Fisher maintains that despite the lack of thick moral consensus among residents, American cities illustrate that a “thin” or what he calls an “amoral” order is possible. While admittedly a tenuous affair, it may be the best option open to contemporary Americans.

In Steven Seidman’s chapter, “Contesting the Moral Boundaries of Eros,” this chorus reaches its most cogent crescendo with his notion of a “communicative sexual ethic.” Seidman contends that Americans are divided between two different moral logics when it comes to intimacy: a “morality of the sex act” logic and a “communicative sexual ethic.” “In the former,” he writes,

sex acquires a determinate moral and social meaning as part of a cosmology, which may be understood in the language of religion, natural law, or secular reason.... By contrast, a communicative sexual ethic assumes that sex acts have no inherent meaning but gain their moral coherence from their interactive context. (175-176)

He insists that Americans who embrace the latter continue to place a high premium on the importance of family (variously defined), freedom (of the standard liberal variety), and moral integrity (read “sincerity” or “authenticity”). Nevertheless, it is clear to Seidman that a significant shift of moral terrain has occurred. In short, the number of Americans who embrace the former logic is declining. Seidman supplies the reason: the more traditional view “inevitably suppresses, devalues, pathologizes, and renders immoral a heterogeneous cluster of

practices, many of which seem freely chosen, involve only adults, are meaningful to the agents, and lack any obvious 'harm' to the individual or to others" (185). This traditional view, he believes, is no longer credible. "Indeed," Seidman concludes, "from the vantage point of a reflexive, pluralistic culture, the presumption of a nonsituated, objectivist moral position has diminishing plausibility" (185).

Yet, it is precisely by acknowledging the very real divergent moral logics, as well as the changing contexts in which certain logics lose their credibility that Seidman's chapter, if inadvertently, offers the most accurate assessment of the state of American culture. Not only with respect to intimacy and sexuality but to all manner of issues relating to culture in the deepest sense, Seidman more than any other contributor alludes to what those engaged in the discourse of discontent believe is at stake: "to the extent that substantive sexual and intimate values and practices such as normative heterosexuality, marriage, and nuclear families, have defined American national identity, these cultural clashes take on the weight of struggles over the very meaning of America" (169).

"Traditional American values," we are told by the editors, "rather than being fragmented or deconstructed, have not only provided a stabilizing anchor for these pragmatic responses but have stimulated them" (17). That this is partially the case there is no doubt; one can find a kind of pragmatic spirit at work in American culture from the very beginning of the Republic. But this is only part of the story. Such historic emphasis on finding the optimal means to individual or collective ends has always been tempered, if not employed, by widespread agreement on what the substance of the ends ought to consist of. Hence, it is not that we are today witnessing an altogether new cultural complex of values, but that the traditional viscosity of American public culture has altered—some components have grown in importance while others have receded. Thus, while the collection can accurately argue that there is no real conflict over basic American values, it ignores the fact that such values no longer mean the same things they once did. It might be more accurate to claim that American values have in fact faced a thorough deconstruction, only now they are being reassembled in ways that resonate with general abstracted ideals like freedom, equality, and integrity, but nevertheless amount to different values in practice.

Finally, one must ask whether the contributors to this volume take culture seriously enough, and therefore give diversity its due. When the editors seek to reassert an existing “middle ground” over the claims of cultural critics on the Right and far Left, they give reason to believe that *they* (and not simply the cultural critics) hold a rather “thin” appreciation of “what kind of solidarity is required in a highly differentiated, diverse, and inclusive society” (7). After all, does seeking a “middle ground”—where the terms for solidarity demand the bracketing of first principles—really appreciate the serious differences that exist at the deepest level of culture? Is it fair to conclude that there is no reason for concern—or celebration, depending upon one’s angle—just because Americans continue to embrace basic American ideals on paper, as it were? Can we afford to ignore, as they have largely done, actual existing disagreements over how such ideals should be realized in public life—differences brought to light most recently by the rural/urban divide in the popular vote? I must conclude that we cannot. The “surprising degree of convergence” (8) found so refreshing among the social scientists featured in this collection, while certainly helpful in empirically grounding current disputes over the state of American civic health, could be taken to belie an increasingly new form of Americanism. To the extent that these authors appear eager to dismiss claims of deep cultural rupture in American public life and instead to insist, rather blithely, on the functional sufficiency of normative innovation for the ordering of public life, they are in effect championing a new pragmatic philosophy of assimilation among the knowledge class. In which case, Geertz would be wrong after all; diversity may, in fact, be very much like it used to be.