Multiculturalism and the Fight for America’s National Identity

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Abstract: Multiculturalism is a threat to our freedom, not a benign model for mutual respect. It is concerned with one culture, the West, and particularly with America, which it wants to alter dramatically. Constitutional republicanism as we know it can exist only through the active participation of one united people working within the confines of the nation-state. Our current experiment with multiculturalism is dangerous because the sharing of a common culture and a common language creates the trust quotient necessary for our republic to succeed. The U.S. must end separatism and reembrace patriotic assimilation in order to protect its national identity and create real social solidarity.

2016 has been the year of national identity, not just in America, but throughout the industrialized West. Political entrepreneurs who have recognized the salience of this issue have experienced success—on the right and the left and on both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, many of our most insightful public intellectuals, from Samuel Huntington on the right to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., on the center-left to Eric Hobsbawm on the Marxist left, predicted that we would be at this point—that right around now, our debates would be centered around identity and its symbols.

You do not have to be a nationalist to want to address this issue. I do not consider myself a nationalist. I have always thought of myself as a patriot, though, one who deeply believes in the exceptionalism of this country and in its goodness. Charles De Gaulle said patriotism is when love of your own people comes first; nationalism is when hate for people other than your own comes first. Put me in the
first category: America’s national interest should always come first in any calculation.

In addressing this issue, it would help, I think, if we broke up our conversation into three important areas.

The first is to ask the question: What are the main threats to America’s national identity and to the concept of the nation-state in general? I will argue that one of the main threats is the current promotion of subnational group identities or identity politics in general—multiculturalism, diversity, and so forth.

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Number two, does it really matter if we’re evolving on these issues? Yes, it does. America’s unprecedented levels of liberty and prosperity are linked to traditional American ways, virtues, and habits. This country is based on the belief that individuals, not groups, are endowed by their Creator with rights and that the government exists to guarantee those rights for individuals, not groups. And multiculturalism at home has an international counterpart in transnationalism. Liberals believe that our problems today are too large for us to solve them at the national level, so we must cede sovereignty to multilateral institutions.

Finally, number three, there are solutions to these problems. They are not acts of God. The solutions may not be easy, but they are certainly preferable to the alternatives. They are also easier to implement than the programs that liberal elites have rammed down our throats for decades. Yes, they will require political will, articulating winning arguments, and the fortitude necessary to withstand blowback from those we cannot convince. This may not be as hard as it sounds, however. Many liberals are getting it: They are beginning to understand that one of their most cherished goals, social solidarity, can only be accomplished in a republic that is not riven by internal division.

the multiculturalist threat

First, I should define what I mean by multiculturalism. One reason it is sometimes hard to describe multiculturalism is that its proponents offer nothing but anodyne blandishments when they’re asked to define it. It is nothing, they say, but simply respect for other cultures and letting others do as they please. It is about tolerance.

For those who do believe that this is what multiculturalism is, I gladly tell you that I have no problem with this multiculturalism. I was born in Cuba, of Spanish grandparents, and raised there, in Europe, and in New York. I married a Scot who was born and raised in Edinburgh, of Northern Irish Protestant parents. Two of our children were born in Belgium, where we lived for close to six years, and one of them was baptized in Hong Kong, where we lived for eight years. I also speak three languages and can read two additional ones.

I say these things not because I’m in love with my bio, but to make clear that if anyone were to deserve the title of multiculturalist, it would be me. However, it is a title that I reject, and for good reasons.

Multiculturalism has nothing to do with liking Victor Hugo, Mongolian throat singing, Szechuan cuisine, or Mayan history. In fact, multiculturalism has nothing to do with knowing anything about other cultures. Some of the most culturally ignorant people I know are multiculturalists. And it is not about tolerance.

Multiculturalism as a social model is concerned with one culture and one culture only, the West, especially America and its heritage, because it wants to destroy or at least alter it and replace it with something else. The multiculturalism I am concerned with is the blueprint for replacing the American narrative with a counter-narrative that is animated by values of the left such as state control over our lives, dependence on government to apportion participation in society, and thinking of people as groups rather than as individuals and their families.

Critical Theory

This blueprint builds—consciously or not—on the work of Marxist European thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse, Georg Lukacs, and Antonio Gramsci, whose “Critical Theory” has greatly influenced American progressives. Their idea was that because revolutions did not occur fast enough, it was better to take over societies from within existing institutions. As Antonio Gramsci wrote: “In the new order, Socialism will triumph by first capturing the culture via the infiltration of schools, universities, churches
and the media by transforming the consciousness of society."¹

One of the main goals of politics according to Critical Theory is to delegitimize the norms and ideas that gave us the American project.

Another step was to undermine society’s narrative by casting doubt on its legitimacy and replacing it with a counterhegemony. My colleague and friend John Fonte has done wonderful work in explaining this.² One of the main goals of politics, according to Critical Theory, is to “delegitimize” the norms and ideas that gave us the American project. The goal is to transfer power from the dominant group to the “oppressed” groups.

The third and most important element—the one that added the “multi” to the cultural—was splitting society into adversarial groups. Conveniently, Critical Theory holds that society is divided along racial, ethnic, and sexual lines. There is a “dominant” group (white males), and there are “marginalized” groups (ethnic, racial, linguistic, and sexual minorities).

Ethnicity

The proletariat could not be relied upon to carry out revolution, especially in highly mobile America, where economic status is fluid. Ethnicity is much stickier, especially when you have the long arm of the Census Bureau instructing 300 million people to identify themselves as one of the five groups in the ethno-racial pentagon of Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and non-Latino whites.

These are synthetically made groups that correspond to none of the markers usually associated with real ethnicity—culture, race, language, history, and so on. Yet the powers that be in the government and culture are constantly trying to conjure up bonds of affection to these groups.

Commands to fall in line with your ethnic group are much more emotionally laden than those that depend on class. And ethnicity is really sticky if you give individuals in four of those groups economic incentives to always tick their box.

How was this all done? The contours of the new approach were designed in the decade of the 1970s. We progressively asked people to categorize themselves into these five synthetic groups in order to give those with “a history of discrimination” protected class status.

In 1977, the Office of Management and Budget issued Directive 15, which mandated the classifications we have to this day. Later, other identity groups based on sex and sexual orientation were progressively added to the mix. And that was that.

There were no clandestine Monday night meetings, no conspiracy really—just people in the bureaucracy and the foundations acting on a vague consensus. Many had good intentions. If you read what they wrote at the time, they wanted to get help to what they saw as communities in need and dismissed worries that their actions could split the country.

The Ford Foundation, one of the leading actors in this play, believed that the advances of the civil rights movement would not last unless the constituency was expanded beyond the originally intended beneficiaries, African-Americans, so Ford invested itself into expanding the franchise. It provided the seed money to create both La Raza and MALDEF,³ and it funded a groundbreaking UCLA study that set out to reclassify people of Mexican origin as people of color.

This is how and why adversarial groups have been built. Gramsci’s observation in Prison Notebooks that “[t]he marginalized groups of history include not only the economically oppressed, but also women and racial minorities” influenced the thinking of many. Gramsci and his friends took Marxism out of the hands of boring economists and gave it to a much more interesting and creative class, conceiving Cultural Marxism. But make no mistake: Cultural Marxism serves the same ends as economic Marxism.


³. National Council of La Raza and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund.
Of course, even if many of the bureaucrats who designed the groups system may not have been conscious Gramscians, Cultural Marxism is the conscious inspiration of those in the commanding heights of the culture—the academy, the entertainment industry, and the media—who celebrate multiculturalism and denigrate America from the Founding on down. Cultural Marxism begat cultural studies.

And let us not forget the key role played in the promotion of the budding Chicano movement by the very leftist President of Mexico in the early 1970s, Luis Echevarria, a subject I touch upon in an essay I wrote this summer for *National Affairs*.

He and his people sought to divide the loyalties of Mexican Americans by saying things like “Chicanos should not look to Wall Street or Washington to find their identity. Our destiny is to the south with a people like us.” The Chicano movement was a nice complement to Echevarria’s pro–third World policies.

Post-industrialization, too, has lulled us into accepting the premise that we can sever our traditional affection for the nation, the church, and the family. It was not for nothing that Vox last week published a piece with the headline “How Godless Capitalism Made America Multicultural.”

Which brings us to our second point: Why does it matter?

**Why Multiculturalism Matters**

Multiculturalism matters because what is at stake is nothing less than our sovereignty, self-determination, political unity, and ability to hold our leaders accountable—in other words, our very freedoms. It may be a truism and a tautology, but it is worth repeating that constitutional republicanism as we know it can only exist through the active participation of one united people working within the confines of the nation-state. It is the finite unit at which people have debates and come together to agree on principles.

The sharing of a common culture and language creates the trust quotient that is necessary to succeed. Francis Fukuyama wrote an entire book on how high-trust nations enjoy enormous economic and cultural advantages due to lower transaction costs. Robert Putnam at Harvard and many others have written about what happens when neighborhoods diversify: Individuals volunteer less, mistrust more—hunker in.

Volunteerism is a crucial component of America’s identity. I can vouch for this after living in seven or eight countries as a foreign correspondent. America’s identity is rooted in a unique culture that includes an exceptional attachment to volunteerism, constitutional government, and deriving satisfaction from a hard day’s labor—virtues intricately linked to America’s abundant freedom and prosperity.

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Sharing a common culture and language permits and encourages the economic competition needed to improve our standard of living because it allows it to transpire as harmoniously as possible within the boundaries of social cooperation. We knew this already in the 19th century, when someone who spent a lot of time thinking about these matters, the liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill, stated that:

Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist.

In fact, multinational states have many problems. Even when they are free and prosperous, like Canada and Belgium, they have difficulty staying together. They frequently require a strong hand, and when

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that hand is withdrawn, we see separatism erupt, usually accompanied by mayhem and bloodletting. Rarely, if ever, are such states free.

In the modern era, Josip Broz Tito, Saddam Hussein, and Mikhail Gorbachev held together the multinational states of Yugoslavia, Iraq, and the Soviet Union through force. The withdrawal of that force led to the disintegration of their states. This should remind us why our current experiment with multiculturalism is so dangerous. We are playing with powerful, volatile forces that we do not fully understand. As the liberal intellectual Arthur Schlesinger put it, “Countries break up when they fail to give ethnically diverse peoples compelling reasons to see themselves as part of the same nation.”

Even short of dismemberment, multiculturalism poses a clear and present danger in the age of international terrorism because it makes life easier for radical recruiters. We all need to be part of something bigger than ourselves, especially young men. If we no longer imbue our people with patriotic fellow feeling, someone else will come along with another message.

Even short of that, academics who study the subject of ethnic and linguistic fractionalization within a society concur that the more fractionalized a country is, the more it will suffer negative consequences in quality of government, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita growth, tax compliance, and one more thing that suffers in fractionalized countries: share of transfers over GDP. As one paper put it, “It seems that governments have a much more difficult task achieving consensus for redistribution to the needy in a fractionalized society.”

In other words, social solidarity suffers in a highly fractionalized state, and this is important as we move on to our final point: solutions. Social solidarity is something that concerns both conservatives and liberals. By stating the problem in this way, we hope to forge the coalitions that we need. We conservatives acting alone will not be able to implement solutions.

**Solutions**

There are people who think that this is a problem too enormous to solve, that the horses are out of the barn. In the Vox op-ed I referenced moments ago, the editors highlighted the following statement: “American national identity has already changed, and there’s no going back.” I beg to differ, and I hope you do too.

The electoral and societal revolts we have seen on both sides of the Atlantic in the past 15 months are an indication that the people have intuited what has happened and do not like it. Politicians can only follow. The American public, sensing at the all-important gut level the link between America’s identity and its exceptionalism—between volunteerism and liberty and between hard work and prosperity—again and again tell pollsters they do not want the country to change.

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Conservative intellectuals have been writing about this for years—authors such as John Fonte and Peter Berkowitz. But liberals have added their voices, too, including Jonathan Haidt at NYU and his colleague Jonathan Zimmerman. In the U.K., we also have Trevor Phillips and Kenan Malik. These are the people I call latter-day Patrick Moynihans, Nathan Glazers, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jrs. They understand that solidarity and redistribution—paradoxically the best reason for creating these groups in the first place—become politically untenable without social cohesion.

America has had the secret formula for being able to take in millions of immigrants and at the same time have a unified national culture. It is called patriotic assimilation—the marriage of patriotism and assimilation.

We have been a land of immigrants since the 1600s, when German Pietists began to stream into Pennsylvania. Millions of immigrants have

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come here from Ireland, Germany, Italy, Eastern Europe, Albania, the Levant, Armenia, and they all became Americans.

Only America can truly do this because only America is a creedal nation created by far-thinking men after “reflection and choice,” in the words of the Federalist Papers. Then, for reasons I have already discussed, we abandoned the formula. But the model is still there—and it is the truly inclusive one.

The Founders understood that their new country was a land of immigrants which therefore needed assimilation into one polity. Washington was the first to speak about assimilation, to use the word in that context, and Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, and all the others agreed: Constitutional republics require an active citizenry. It is why Noah Webster put in place an educational system that would nurture Americans.

Lincoln, too, agreed, saying in 1858 that when immigrants internalized the creed that “all men are created equal,” they “have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration [of Independence], and so they are.” This always reminds me of something similar Paul says in Galatians. It is through belief, Paul says, that “there is neither Jew nor Greek... [I]f ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Patriotic assimilation worked precisely because here in America, the bonds were to the creed of the founding documents and adherence to the American virtues and national culture.

This is why Justice Clarence Thomas argued in his dissent from the Fisher case that the Constitution “abhors classifications based on race,” and that “does not change in the face of a ‘faddish theor[y]’ that racial discrimination may produce ‘educational benefits.’” Patriotic assimilation worked precisely because here in America, the bonds were to the creed of the founding documents and adherence to the American virtues and national culture I have described.

What We Can Do
Let me end with five things we can do to protect and strengthen America’s national identity.

- **End separatism.** First and foremost, let us stop encouraging separatism on the basis of what Berkowitz calls “an incoherent multiculturalism that denigrates identification with the nation-state while celebrating every other kind of partial identity.” Concentrating on this is key.

If we conservatives internalize the division of the country and believe that we have a nation splintered into immutable sections, we are lost. Unfortunately, this is what we are doing and why our only two responses so far are to either do “minority outreach” or go all out to get as many white votes as possible. Neither of these options will do, for even if they succeed in the short term, we are dooming the republic in the long term. The only acceptable response is *E Pluribus Unum.* Even if we closed the immigration door tomorrow, we would still need to end the separatism that passes for multiculturalism.

- **End affirmative action.** To do that, one of the first things we need to do is end affirmative action. Racial preferences only serve to preserve groups by bribing individuals to tick the box.

- **Return to the ethos of assimilation.** Assimilation did not mean then, nor has it ever meant, abandoning the pride that comes from knowing your familiar roots, or the taste for grandma’s cooking, or maintaining your ancestral religion. It does mean America is our only country.

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Teach patriotism. But before we try to Americanize newcomers, we must re-Americanize the natives. The very successful counter-hegemony campaign has left us with what Berkowitz rightly calls “a crippling loss of self-knowledge.”\(^\text{14}\) Just as with individuals, if we erase a nation’s memory, the nation will not know where it came from and where it is going. Historic purposes will be wiped out. Let’s drive Howard Zinn and others of his ilk out of our schools. Patriotism must be taught; it’s not something that comes in our DNA.

Protect individual liberty. Finally, America’s historic purposes will only be served if we refuse to let our leaders tie us like Gulliver at Lilliput. Transnationalism is the real scam, not the Founding. Nation-states have proven to be the best vehicles for the protection of individual liberties. Freedom is an unalienable right granted to us by our Creator, but it is national governments that respect or violate these gifts from God. Florida and Wyoming are free because the United States is free, just as Guangzhou and Guangxi are unfree because China is unfree. As Jeremy Rabkin puts it, “Your freedom still depends on where you live.”\(^\text{15}\)

Multiculturalism is a threat to our freedom. It is not a benign model for mutual respect. This matters to our liberty. And just as the problems we are seeing today are man-made, they can be man-unmade.

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14. Ibid.