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Two Cheers for the Melting Pot

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BOOK REVIEWED:

Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America*.
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Discussion of social identity in the United States is currently entangled in two incongruous metaphors. The master symbol for ethnic assimilation, the melting pot, is surrounded by plants of many varieties looking about for their "roots." The search for roots is made necessary, it would seem, by the fact that many of the plants were not autochthonous but were produced synthetically. Awkward as this relation of roots to chemistry may be, the popularity of the root-and-plant metaphor is fully in keeping with the two assertions about the melting pot most fashionable during the last twenty years. The point about the melting pot, insisted Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1963, is that it did not happen. The point about the melting pot, declared Horace Kallen back in 1915, is that it undermines democracy.¹ The rediscovery of Kallen's dictum and the appeal of Glazer and Moynihan's in the climate of the 1960s and 1970s is understandable: just when many Americans were developing new and admirable

¹ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1963); Horace Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot," *Nation* 100 (1915) pp. 191-94, 217-20. For a helpful study of the various uses to which the symbol of the melting pot has been put, see Philip Gleason, "The Melting Pot: Symbol of Fusion or Confusion?" *American Quarterly* XVI (1964), pp. 20-46.

sensitivity to the destructive effects of WASP ethnocentrism upon non-WASPS, it was reassuring to know that ethnic life "beyond the melting pot" was real, and was an important bulwark of a free society. The "Americanizers" had failed, thank God! Whatever ills American society had, it was at least resiliently pluralistic in its culture. Whatever reforms or revolutions might be entailed by a critical renewal or revision of democracy, one could at least be sure that the task demanded enthusiastic support for ethnic particularism. To think otherwise was to betray a lingering affinity for the nativism of Henry Adams, or to descend to the political level of Archie Bunker.

The superficiality of the "new ethnicity" has not escaped everyone, but most critics of it have been willing to settle for the puncturing of a few of the more outrageous balloons floated by the likes of Michael Novak and Peter Schrag.² Stephen Steinberg's *The Ethnic Myth* is a more sweeping and aggressive critique of ethnic particularism and its chief ideological support, "cultural pluralism." It brings sharply into focus a number of truths that ought to help demystify the phenomenon of ethnicity and dispell the illusion that the reinforcement of ethnicity can do much to strengthen democracy. If there is a point to be made about the melting pot, it is, according to Steinberg, that the melting pot works, and in so doing serves democracy better than its critics have recognized. Steinberg also argues that an elementary understanding of American social structure and its historical development renders cultural pluralism a dream at best, and at worst an invitation to ignore the class basis of the problems of exactly those Americans who rail against the evils of assimilation.

Arguments over the transforming powers of the American melting pot turn on the significance of indicators that are in themselves subject to very little dispute. No one doubts, for example, that more and more grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the European immigrants of 1880-1924 have been marrying outside the ethnic group of their origin. It is with reference to this particular immigration that the issue of assimilation has been most energetically discussed, and Steinberg draws upon many of the studies showing a decline not only in intraethnic marriage but in the use of languages other than English, in residential concentration, and in the holding of distinctive attitudes toward politics, religion, sex, and vocation. There do remain ethnic enclaves, dominated by the least well-off of the descendants of immigrants and by the professionals whose livelihood depends upon serving an ethnic market. One can insist that these enclaves are saving remnants upon which a new cultural flowering can be based,

² Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); Peter Schrag, *The Decline of the WASP* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971).

but Steinberg warns that many of the forces that have diminished the once-large ethnic communities are stronger than ever. A continual and substantial flow of new immigrants from the parent country was a crucial support for these communities, but this support has not existed since Congress curtailed massive immigration in 1924. Economic opportunities continue to lie overwhelmingly outside the ethnic context; an ethnic culture can scarcely be expected to endure when the basic economic activities of most of its potential members are without an ethnic connection. The survival of such a culture would also depend on a degree of control over education that even the Catholic parochial schools do not provide. Moreover, the blatant prejudice against Poles, Italians, Jews, etc., that once led members of such groups to depend chiefly upon one another has declined since the 1920s. What has most sustained the recent pride in "ethnic neighborhoods," it would seem, is not the fear that they shall cease to be ethnic, but that they shall cease to be white.

Steinberg has much less to say about the Asian and Latin American immigrations of the last fifteen years, but he believes the same rules apply. He sees no reason to doubt that in the long run, descendants of these Asian and Latin American immigrants will assimilate on terms comparable to those on which the Europeans and, more recently, the Japanese have done so. The pace of the process is bound to differ, and will be primarily determined by the economic position of a given ethnic group at the time the process begins. Jews, Steinberg reminds us, were equipped by urban and commercial experience to take greater economic advantage of the American scene than were their peasant contemporaries among other immigrant peoples from Eastern Europe. A similar contrast can be drawn today between the often highly skilled Asian immigrants and their counterparts from Haiti and Guatemala. The case of American blacks is complicated, but here, too, Steinberg singles out economic opportunity as the crucial factor in their destiny in twentieth-century America: "If blacks had been allowed, at the turn of the century, to compete for the industrial jobs that provided opportunity to millions of immigrants, they would today occupy a position in the class system similar to that of Irish, Italians, Poles, and other immigrants who were entering the industrial labor market for the first time" (p. 221).

Steinberg has no use for the popular notion that the *values* inherent in a given ethnic tradition determine the rate and extent of success in America. He delights in undermining the claim that distinctive attitudes toward women and the family controlled the different destinies of Irish and Italian women. The frequency with which Irish women entered domestic service and the infrequency with which Italian women did so depended, Steinberg points out, on economic and demographic circumstances in Ireland and Italy, yielding in the Irish case many more young, single, female immigrants. These Irish women, Steinberg adds, "fled 'the service' just as quickly as they could establish families of their own or gain access to more

desirable employment" (p. 166). Steinberg makes analogous points about the relation between economic opportunity and the values associated with Jewish, black, and Catholic competitors in the great race for wealth and social standing in America. Steinberg consistently underestimates the staying power of systems of value, but this is less troubling than it would be were he not doing battle against the more widespread tendency to treat values as autonomous forces. Steinberg is correct to see the relevant systems of value as subject to modification, and as having been sustained, to begin with, by continuities in the "preentry" social and economic conditions experienced by each ethnic group. Although Steinberg's historical sketches are threadbare and unsophisticated, his summary of selected monographic works serves to get across the essential inequality of the American ethnic groups at their time of entry into the American social system.³

If this point is not altogether new, it needs the reinforcement provided by Steinberg's relentless pounding. The harmonious orchestra of cultures envisioned by Kallen and his successors might make some sense if all ethnic groups had entered American life roughly equal in wealth, education, and occupation. Each group might then be expected to go its own way, treating the American state as merely a useful legal canopy under which to stand while serving its own gods and perpetuating its own customs. Yet even those European groups whose original involvement in America was, to the degree allowed by the dynamics of world capitalism,⁴ a matter of choice were unequal among themselves and were especially unequal in relation to the dominant "ethnic group," the native-born Americans of largely British ancestry. This inequality created pressures upon individuals to become part of the mainstream culture, where opportunities for a fuller life were obviously to be found. In the absence of genuine equality, therefore, the cultural pluralist program threatens to reinforce existing inequalities by discouraging the entry of individuals into the mainstream. Even when blessed with a supply of ethnic groups that have successfully struggled to reduce their own inequality, the cultural pluralist program is flawed. The members of these groups will have become less ethnic while becoming more equal. Without a panorama of distinctive and authentic ethnic cultures, the cultural pluralist program has nowhere to go.

3 For a more carefully written and well-informed popular history of the problem of identity in America, see Arthur Mann, *The One and the Many: Reflections on the American Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

4 The extent to which "voluntary" immigration from Europe was produced by the impact of American capitalist expansion on Eastern Europe has been helpfully explored by Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in American History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 67-79, esp. 67-72.

Insofar as democracy entails the reduction of inequality, Steinberg has grounds for declaring that "democracy and pluralism are not as compatible as the ethnic pluralists would like to think" (p. 260). He recognizes the democratic character of Kallen's aims, and grants that Kallen's ideas helped to protect immigrants from the "100 percent" Americans who would use the melting pot as a weapon of blatant WASP domination. Yet Steinberg sensibly goes on to acknowledge a conflict between the "democratic" principle that "guarantees individual freedoms and specifically proscribes various forms of discrimination," and the "pluralist" principle that "sanctions the right of ethnic groups to maintain their separate cultures and communities" (p. 258). Democracy has been "enhanced," Steinberg observes, by legislation and court decisions that prevent neighborhoods, schools, and private clubs from discriminating "on the basis of race, religion, creed, color, national origin, or sex," but the same enactments and rulings "narrowly circumscribe the areas in which ethnic exclusivity is possible, and therefore make it difficult for ethnic groups to maintain institutions that are essential to their collective survival" (pp. 257-58). Ethnic groups generally try to have it both ways, Steinberg observes: "It is not uncommon" for them "to invoke democratic principles to combat the ethnic exclusivity of more privileged groups, but to turn around and cite pluralistic principles in defense of their own discriminatory practices" (p. 258).

Glazer and Moynihan tried to reconcile the two principles by distinguishing between "positive" and "negative" discrimination: the latter is based on "naked prejudice," while the former is "for the purpose of defending something positive rather than simply excluding someone because of his race" (p. 259). Steinberg properly dismisses this bit of casuistry: "Glazer and Moynihan forget that when Jews and Irish were excluded, upper-class Protestants also expressed a desire to preserve the ethnic character of their neighborhoods and clubs" (p. 259). This reminder is made all the more forceful by Steinberg's informative chapter on Harvard University's successful effort in the 1920s to discriminate against Jewish applicants, and thereby to preserve much of Harvard's traditional character. The Harvard case differs from affirmative action, Steinberg insists, because Harvard's leaders sought "to give preferential treatment to an already privileged group," while "affirmative action programs are aimed at groups so underprivileged that they would otherwise be denied educational opportunity" (p. 252). Thus Steinberg ends up with his own version of the positive-negative distinction. His version is at least based on an empirically visible difference, but readers in search of a theoretical justification of affirmative action as ultimately more "democratic" than the so-called merit system will need to look elsewhere. At least Steinberg is willing to live with, rather than to deny, the tension between democracy and the right of people to act in groups for the purposes of perpetuating particular traditions.

The limits of Steinberg's analysis are measured by his willingness, at the very end of *The Ethnic Myth*, to raise and to leave unanswered the question, Assimilate into what? This is the rhetorical question asked repeatedly by champions of ethnic particularism, and Steinberg walks into the trap with an innocence that he, of all people, should have overcome. "Our society has not created alternatives for the rich and closely knit communities that we identify with our immigrant grand-parents" (p. 262), muses Steinberg, falling uncritically into the idiom of ethnicity's mystifiers, whose clinching argument for ethnic allegiance is always the cold and abstract quality of American life. To get real *Gemeinschaft*, we are invariably told, one must nuzzle up to one's old-world clan; there is no "peoplehood" to be had elsewhere in this supremely modern *Gessellschaft*. Steinberg mocks as the "ultimate ethnic myth" the "belief that the cultural symbols of the past can provide more than a comfortable illusion" (p. 262), but having labored so long to identify this belief as an illusion and to establish the priority of class over ethnicity, Steinberg seems willing to avert his eyes while his readers drift on back to the world of their fathers. To those who ask, "What else is there?" Steinberg has nothing to say.

One thing he might have said is that identity with one's class is enough. To endorse the longing for something more dense and particular, one might argue, is to impede the development of class consciousness, to invite divisions subject to manipulation by more powerful classes, and to turn one's back on the historic universalism of the Left. This view would be consistent with *The Ethnic Myth*, but Steinberg is probably better off not trying to defend it. The legendary reluctance of Americans to identify themselves in terms of class scarcely needs to be belabored here; only someone prepared for a career of lonely prophecy should seek to convince Americans that they must so identify themselves, and that they must, in the process, refrain from forming communities that appear to cross class lines. One has to be terribly sure of the direction of history, moreover, to demand that working-class people, in particular, should in the interests of the historic role of their class do without the sustenance that can be found in communities that cross class lines. Yet Steinberg could have indicated where Americans might look for a sense of peoplehood less likely than ethnicity to obscure the class basis of their discontents, and less subject, perhaps, to mystification.

American nationality is one obvious place to look. Yes, it too has been mystified, and has often enough served as a mask for exploitation, but its democratic potential has been overlooked in the necessary, if sometimes myopic, efforts of the 1960s and 1970s to renounce imperialism. The tradition of lambasting American realities on account of their failure to measure up to American ideals has been inhibited by the suspicion that making too much of "American" ideals has been part of the problem. Who, after all, has had more to say about American ideals than the men who led and defended the Vietnam War? Yet there are good

reasons to try to overcome this inhibition, and to help make more available to Americans the sense of peoplehood that American nationality can provide.

One good reason is that the melting pot has now done so much to de-Anglo-Saxonize that nationality. Commentators on American society have often observed that a de facto Anglo-Saxon particularism once operated quietly under the aegis of the Enlightenment universalism basic to our political tradition and to the standard Statue-of-Liberty myth. National institutions, it was pointed out, have been dominated by "real Americans" of the stock who "built this country," which is to say, who endowed the United States with its language, constitution, and the controlling conventions of its public life. The domination by distinctly WASP elites has diminished during the last half-century. It is easier than ever for non-WASPs to feel that American traditions are truly theirs, available to be built upon or to be reformulated as one sees fit. Decisions concerning just what aspects of American culture deserve to be kept and developed need not be made on the basis of an analysis of the ethnic ancestry of each aspect. Jefferson and Melville were "British Americans," but critical engagement with them need not on that account be resisted by Americans of non-British ancestry or regarded as a duty by Mayflower descendants.

Another good reason for cultivating American nationality is the very degree of abstractness held against it by many of those who envy the more deeply rooted and homogeneous nationality characteristic of France, Germany, or Israel. To be an American, it has often been observed, is only to come into possession of a set of abstract rights. How rootless and superficial a nationality compared with that drawn upon by de Gaulle, Herzl, Bismarck, or Churchill! Yet the porous texture of American nationality has the virtue of mitigating the tribalist potential inherent in nationality itself. We live in an age when ancient religious and ethnic divisions are being reasserted, often fanatically, in many parts of the world: it is not a time for Americans to apologize for their relatively generous and flexible approach to national identity. An ideal sense of peoplehood surely entails a balance between concrete, historical elements and abstract, general ones; the first provides the dense and specific experience into which each new generation is submerged, while the second provides the tools for interpreting and criticizing that experience in terms of what can be discerned about the universe as a whole. American nationality, the product now of more than two centuries of struggle within a single, if evolving, set of abstractions, can be fairly said to embody a distinctive balance between these elements. America is not the only setting of democratic political culture, but simply to be an American is to enter a historic dialogue with democracy.

That this dialogue is an extension and refinement of many themes in Western history has sometimes been felt to render America too commodious and indefinite an entity for one to identify with in the way that one identifies with an

ethnic group. "America," the old saw goes, "is a nation without a people." Yet this apparently problematic scope of American nationality can be another reason for actually preferring it. What looks vast and intimidating from within a local lodge of an ethnic fraternal order can be seen as smaller and more definite when viewed from a more cosmopolitan standpoint. Many of the people who helped form the ethnic groups of the United States had not thought of themselves, prior to immigration, as being *importantly* Italian or Hungarian; they had identified instead with smaller, local collectivities in the old world rendered obsolete by a new social setting in which being Italian or Hungarian came to seem very definite indeed. "Ethnic" identity is always historically contingent. Now that we possess unprecedented awareness of the diversity of the living world, and of the numerous civilizations that have come and gone, America ought not to seem so prodigious. If identification with it requires that one stretch one's soul a bit, it could be well worth the pain.

Does not such a process of enlargement make culture more coarse, sacrificing for a larger communion the finely wrought social webs that can sustain intimate rapport and stimulate the creative elaboration of particular cultural achievements? This results only if the sense of peoplehood is allowed to become an entire way of life. Simply "being American" is not an adequate life, any more than it is enough to simply "be" Norwegian or Jewish or Japanese. Senses of peoplehood are gross. Without this quality, they could not perform the vital but limited function of identifying a people as a people. This identity does sometimes spill across its ideal limits and drown in a conformist torrent the diversity of other, simultaneous identities—narrow or broad in scope, casual or intense in spirit—the precious capacity for which happily distinguishes human beings from other species. We are reminded of this danger by the history of committees on "un-American" activities. But these smaller identities threaten also to lose their ideal proportion, and to imprison people in what Steinberg describes as "parochial disregard for events outside the ethnic province" (262), an obliviousness to the world that can impoverish and endanger residents of any given province. It is a truism that any society experiences a tension between unifying and diversifying forces, but this experience is especially intense in the heterogeneous United States; it is in the course of mediating this constant and often creative tension that American nationality has evolved. So long as the United States remains the institutional framework within which are worked out the rules that most affect Americans of all faiths, regions, and ancestries, American nationality will remain a more realistic investment in social identity than will stocks of local issue.

If a sense of peoplehood is too coarse a thing from which to derive a detailed blueprint for culture, so also is it too coarse to provide any specific political program. Any sense of peoplehood does constitute a minimal foundation for politics, but even so explicitly political an entity as American nationality can be

claimed with equal ease by Ronald Reagan and by democratic socialists. The direction that the American tradition ought to take will of course be contested. Yet in any specific contest, so blunt an instrument as a "sense of peoplehood" can perform only limited service; the temptation therefore exists to forsake altogether this level of abstraction, and to ignore the indications that many Americans are searching for a greater sense of peoplehood than has been available to them. Not everyone shares in this search, but signs of it surely include the recent quickening of religious interests as well as the preoccupation with "roots." Since the quality and quantity of energies put into public life depend in part on feelings of identity, anyone concerned about the state of American public life ought not to be silent when the question is asked, Assimilate into what?

A sense of peoplehood may be a tiny fraction of a polity's life, but it can be terribly important, especially if it isn't there. A renewed commitment to American nationality as the locus of social identity is no substitute for the material and cultural benefits now conferred so largely on the basis of class, but this commitment can at least implicate people in a political language in which to seek more effectively the equitable distribution of these benefits. If the figure of the melting pot is to be replaced in the popular imagination by the figure of the reflective plant looking for its roots, Americans would do well to remember that the plant they have become is a formidable growth upon the extensive and cross-fertilized soil of Western culture. It will not do to try to find in little flowerpots the roots of American trees.