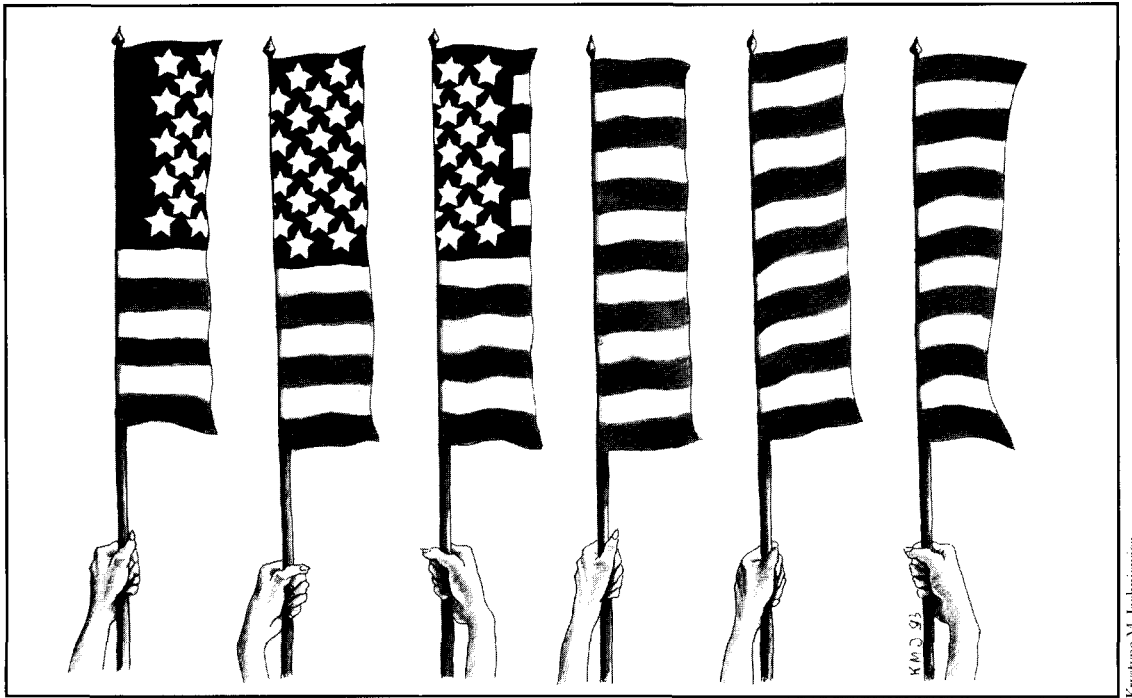


# Cultural Diversity and Unity

by Claes G. Ryn



There is plentiful historical evidence that cultural diversity and immigration need not undermine a society's cohesion. They can be sources of enrichment and renewal. Especially in a vital civilization, groups of different religious, ethnic, and national origin may be pulled, however reluctantly in particular cases, into a dynamic and fertile consensus.

One problem with immigration into the United States today is that, at current levels, it complicates assimilation. The number of foreign-born residents is higher than at any time in American history. Over 40 percent of the residents of New York City speak a foreign language at home. In Miami the figure is 75 percent. At the same time, many immigrants resist integration into a common national culture; some groups pursue separate ethnic or racial identities.

The impact of mass immigration and separatism cannot be assessed without considering the ever-present need to balance unity and diversity. It is important to ask whether American culture still has sufficient centripetal and harmonizing pull to avert social fragmentation. Whatever other problems may attend multiculturalism and immigration, they are straining an increasingly fragile social fabric. The question arises whether there are sources of order in American society, actual or potential, that can moderate and balance the centrifugal influences. Or does the strain on society need to be reduced?

Most Americans sense deepening social tensions but have difficulty identifying their central cause. A strong case can be

made that the fragmentation of society stems, in its most important dimension, from disintegration at the moral core of civilization. Arguments presented elsewhere (as in my recent book *The New Jacobinism*) can here be only summarized. American society faces large-scale legal and illegal immigration and multiculturalism at a time when a certain traditional ethic, a virtue of character and personal responsibility, is losing its strength and prestige.

The older virtue can be conveniently summarized in the phrase "love of neighbor." It stressed personal obligations to individuals up close. This virtue made possible a society that was at the same time decentralized and morally cohesive. The cohesion derived from recognition of a universal moral authority and from citizens' efforts to harmonize their lives accordingly. They were not unified mainly through doctrinal agreement. Neither were they unified mainly by national boosterism. Conflict was reduced through acts of self-discipline and kindness. Social harmony was understood to require moral character and good conduct first of all. There were no shortcuts to a better society. A larger social good, including the preservation of freedom, was seen as possible only if imperfect and sinful human beings would restrain and improve themselves. The importance of local and central government was recognized, as was the need for religious, moral, intellectual, and cultural authority, but the primary responsibility for dealing with problems was understood to rest with those who were most immediately concerned.

From this understanding of virtue and social life grew a decentralized, group-oriented society. The common good did not require conformity to a comprehensive plan—the conception of unity favored by the French Jacobins and their de-

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*Claes G. Ryn is a professor of politics at The Catholic University of America, chairman of the National Humanities Institute, and coeditor of Humanitas. His most recent book is The New Jacobinism (National Humanities Institute).*

scendants today. Diversity did not have to be abolished. On the contrary, the common good was seen to entail respect for and adjustment to the legitimate needs and interests of individuals, groups, localities, and regions. Diversity would be made compatible with unity through self-restraint and consideration for others—again, not merely in theory but in actual conduct.

Today the virtue of moral self-discipline and effort is being replaced by the ever more brazen self-gratification of individuals and groups. People who shy away from the rigors of the old virtue of character but who still would like to think of themselves as moral have available to them new conceptions of “virtue.” These have the convenience of not demanding any difficult improvement of self. It is now possible to qualify as virtuous either by emoting sweet benevolence or by keeping the right ideas in one’s head. These modes of morality often blend in one and the same person. The more sentimental virtue is altruistic sympathy, tearful “compassion” for favored suffering groups. The more rationalistic form consists of incessant talk about “justice” and “rights.” Both forms evade the need to shape character and thus neglect the most basic requirement of civilized life.

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The problem of order and freedom was summed up by Edmund Burke: “Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites. . . . Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without.” Lack of self-discipline among society’s members increases the need for externally imposed controls. The present is clearly a time of weakening internal checks. The tidal wave of crime is only the most obvious example. To the great strain on social order is now added cultural separatism and large-scale immigration, legal and illegal. The conclusion seems inescapable: social cohesion will increasingly have to be imposed from without.

The current problems of the United States were anticipated with remarkable prescience and precision three-quarters of a century ago by Irving Babbitt. (It is a national misfortune that Americans have paid less attention to one of their own truly great thinkers than to lesser European lights.) Babbitt even took up the problems of immigration and multiculturalism. In 1924 he wrote in characteristic style: “We are assured . . . that the highly heterogeneous elements that enter into our population will, like various instruments in an orchestra, mere-

ly result in a richer harmony; they will, one may reply, provided that, like an orchestra, they be properly led.” Otherwise the outcome may be an unexampled cacophony.”

Babbitt’s erudite and realistic analysis of the moral circumstances of the modern world offers invaluable insight into the prerequisites of order in a culturally more diverse America. He addressed the needs of an era in which Christianity would retreat as a disciplining and harmonizing influence and in which a shrinking world would create growing interaction between different populations. He formulated the central problem as follows: “The special danger of the present time would seem to be an increasing material contact between national and racial groups that remain spiritually alien.” These circumstances require special moral and cultural effort, including identification and cultivation of the ecumenical element in the higher religions and ethical traditions. Nobody could be more critical than Babbitt of sentimental and abstract universalism. Unmistakably and unabashedly American, Babbitt represents a cosmopolitanism that would respect and seek the common ground with other cultures without trying to efface existing identities.

A very different and currently fashionable view of how to achieve social and political unity confuses civilized consensus with ideological unity. Order is supposed to result when all are taught the same allegedly universal democratic ideas. According to this view—which may be called the civics approach to social order—not even porous borders need present any serious problem, provided that the new arrivals are properly instructed.

The civics approach fails to understand the nature and social and political importance of personal character. It underestimates the extent to which moral and social order evolve historically. The civics approach seems to hold great appeal for such commentators as William Bennett, Chester Finn, and the late Allan Bloom who view law and order and civilized life as flowing from proper instruction and thinking. But in reality they emerge from the protracted effort and cooperation of many generations. Social order derives in very large measure from cultural continuity, from the careful absorption and cultivation, in practice as well as theory, of the best of the historical heritage. A living past helps inspire and structure the present. A slow initiation into civilized life comprising a broad range of human concerns is not the same as learning to mouth certain “principles” said to contain “the wisdom of the West.”

A failure to understand society as a historically evolving community marks the thinking of John Locke. For him order and freedom rest on the rationality of the individuals who live at a particular time. Locke has little sense of the degree to which peaceful conditions presuppose strength of character and other civilized dispositions in individuals and of how much these traits owe to the efforts of earlier generations as transmitted through living traditions.

For Locke, order and freedom have their source in abstract, ahistorical rationality. He does not recognize that the ability to reason is itself historically and socially evolved and that reason is very far from being some purely individual faculty. Locke simply places rationality and other civilized preferences among the natural attributes of an imaginary, pre-social, discrete individual. The particular self, as it exists outside of every cultural context, is assumed to have the resources necessary for an ordered existence. Individuals become socially

interchangeable.

A similar ahistorical view of society is reflected in the cliché that the United States is a young country. Except in the sense that America was settled in new geographic territory, the United States is of course no younger than any other country in the Western world. Its roots stretch deep into the distant past. The Framers of the Constitution and the American people at large were imbued with classical and biblical prejudices and habits that helped shape the work at Philadelphia. From the point of view of what insures American social and political order, the least significant part of the Constitution is the written document. Far more important is the unwritten constitution, all of those religious, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic habits and attitudes that are implied in the written text. Without them the Constitution would not have been conceived as it was, and without them it could not have been successfully put into practice.

It is common to speak of the United States as the result of a “founding,” as if the country had been made up more or less from scratch by people with good ideas, as if “lawgivers” had bestowed a plan on the American people that gave them a common identity and purpose. For Allan Bloom, America was the implementation of a rational plan for “freedom and equality.” “This is a regime founded by philosophers and their students,” wrote Bloom. “America is actually nothing but a great stage” on which theories have been acted out. “There are almost no accidents.” American order and freedom were thus spun out of a few enlightened minds. Abstract ideas, not historically formed personalities, built the United States. In Bloom’s interpretation, the Framers were on much the same wavelength as Rousseau and the French Revolutionaries. They had a plan for an egalitarian and majoritarian order, which the American people adopted.

It is in this kind of thinking that one finds the roots of the civics approach to social order. The solution to problems related to immigration and multiculturalism is instruction in the right ideas. It was the intent of the Framers, Bloom insisted, to phase out cultural particularity: “By recognizing and accepting man’s natural rights, men found a fundamental basis of unity and sameness. Class, race, religion, national origin or culture all disappear or become dim when bathed in the light of natural rights, which give men common interests and make them truly brothers.”

In Bloom’s view, historical identities threaten ideological unity and should give way to like-mindedness. The America of which he approved asks people “to give up their ‘cultural individuality’ and to make themselves into that universal, abstract being who participates in natural rights or else be doomed to an existence on the fringe.” The Framers, in this view, did not desire a harmony of many different legitimate interests but ideological homogeneity. For Bloom, what was admirable about America is separate from its uniqueness as a historically shaped country. America is held together and “ennobled” by natural rights that exist apart from, and even in conflict with, cultural traditions and identities.

Abstractionist universalism thus looks to correct thinking to supply the needed ordering of person and society. But ideas acquired in the abstract are no substitute for that slowly and laboriously acquired self-restraint of individuals and groups on which a free society most depends. Advocates of the civics approach fail to appreciate the connection between present order and historically formed culture. Although they may refer

ceremonially to the “principles of the West” or the like, they are often suspicious of—even hostile to—the actual Western past as being far inferior to present correct thinking. The civics approach tends to become instruction toward preconceived ideological conclusions—indoctrination rather than education. Insofar as this approach neglects the varied and extended absorption and nurturing of the civilized heritage that fosters real personal responsibility, the social cohesion that it desires must be supplied in practice by ideological intimidation and, finally, by police and law courts.

**I**t would seem highly relevant to immigration policy that the United States is an extension of European and especially English civilization. The form of government that the Framers set up was indistinguishable from the unwritten constitution, including the virtue of character. Although that ethos overlaps in some respects with non-Western civilizations, America’s political institutions and other traditions connect the United States primarily with Europe. The long-term effect of large-scale immigration from societies that are largely untouched by traditional Western civilization is unclear. While it is possible that immigrants from Asia, for example, will add to the American pool some cultural traits that are needed or that will cause desirable cross-fertilization, the present troubles of American society can hardly be overcome by trying to import culture. A cultural resurgence of the necessary depth and scope must surely spring from within the historically rooted American national character itself. In the absence of that kind of revival, large-scale immigration and cultural separatism within the United States are likely to aggravate the problem of fragmentation.

If only a resurgence of American culture can buttress social order, it should be stressed that sound patriotism always has an ingredient of cosmopolitan and aristocratic breadth. The needed creative and unifying spark cannot be supplied by populist nationalism. To pin the hopes for a national renewal on an idealized common man or “middle class” is misguided and even dangerous. For all his possible strengths, the common man is and remains a limited creature prone to narrow views and lack of imagination, even in the best of times. He is at least as prone to the weaknesses of human nature as others. Unfortunately, the illusion survives that the common people are a repository of virtue and wisdom.

One of the least salutary parts of Thomas Jefferson’s mixed and contradictory legacy is his populism: elites should always be mistrusted (especially if they are kings, nobles, or priests), but the common people are OK. Government must be cleansed from time to time by the right-thinking masses. Populism seems plausible today, because present elites are so clearly dominated by decadent, escapist attitudes. But it would be a great mistake, especially in our disoriented era, to look to “the people” for sources of purity and social unity. Populism is only another form of escape from the real problem, which is that Western civilization as a whole is disintegrating at the moral center. The people in general may today be less obviously corrupt than the elites in some respects, but that is not because of some natural propensity to virtue greater than that of elites. The mass is just slower to change and lags behind the more daring and creative elites. The people seem culturally conservative today only in comparison with more adventurous leaders. If the mass of common men have such sound instincts, who is digesting all those television pro-

grams, movies, records, musicals, and novels? Who is paying all those college and university faculty and electing and re-electing all those congressmen?

True, among the common people are the millions of decent and responsible individuals without whom American society would fall apart. Popular culture at its best forms the wholesome ballast for the ship of state. Populist rhetoric may be defensible for political leaders who are trying to dislodge destructive elites, but no illusions about the wisdom of the masses should surround populist appeals. Such appeals are a sign of desperation; they are in effect a declaration of cultural and political bankruptcy. Populism of a more programmatic, ideological kind plays with fire. It masks an unsound drive for power. It pursues a stifling and merely artificial social unity. John Adams was more representative of early American political thought than Jefferson when he said that the people

can be as tyrannical as any king.

If a renewal of American and Western civilization is still possible, it requires advanced ethical, intellectual, acsthetic, and political creativity and leadership. New elites must form and replace or sway the present ones. What could be more superficial than the idea that a couple of electoral triumphs for "the people" might set America right.

It can be plausibly argued that America's elites show few signs of sobering up. Continued neglect or mishandling of acute social problems may produce more explosive fragmentation. The day could come, even in the United States, when power-seeking demagogues focus the resulting popular resentments on immigrants and outsiders and propose drastic measures to "save" society. Should that day come, all bets are off. To avert that prospect, courageous but realistic leadership is needed now.

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## Just Folks

by *R.S. Gwynn*

As penance for your class's wrongs  
You sojourned in the Congo,  
Conducting tribal sing-alongs  
To the beat of your bongo.

And when the plaintive messages  
Arrived from Alabama,  
You tuned up, leading choruses  
Of "If I Had a Hammer."

Then later, at the Pentagon's  
Chain fences, never bolder,  
You deftly crooned "Give Peace a Chance"  
In the ear of a soldier.

But somewhere down the picket line  
The issues grow remoter:  
Ballads to boycott beer or wine  
Won't move the average voter.

Now in a local motel bar  
Nostalgia's what you market  
To make the notes on your new car.  
You're careful where you park it.

Still, you can rouse us with a song,  
Leading the mellowed voices  
Unsure of which side's right or wrong  
Or even what the choice is.

So wail Leadbelly's "Bourgeois Blues"  
Weaving home in your Volvo.  
Friend, you've more than paid your dues:  
*Ego te absolve.*