

In Defense of Civic Culture

Jim Sleeper

1993

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The growing racial, religious, and cultural diversity of the United States is a fact -- indeed a juggernaut, unstoppable even if the country's liberal immigration laws were reversed tomorrow. The 1990 Census counts only three-quarters of Americans as non-Hispanic whites and finds that whites as a group are older and less fertile than people of color. "If current trends continue," writes demographer Martha Farnsworth Riche, "the United States will become a nation with no racial or ethnic majority during the 21st Century ... Without fully realizing it, we have left the time when the non-white, non-Western part of our population could be expected to assimilate to the dominant majority. In the future, the white Western majority will have to do some assimilating of its own."

America's increasing "multiculturalization" offers an historic opportunity to enrich democratic pluralism here and throughout a world that still looks to the U.S. for alternatives to endless tribal warfare. This essay maintains that, precisely because the country is becoming more diverse, Americans of different and increasingly mixed backgrounds should be working overtime to find and affirm common principles.

The democratic precepts enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution form the common core of our national identity. Around these vital principles has grown a less formal but palpable civic culture, emphasizing such characteristically "American" virtues as tolerance, optimism, self-restraint, self-reliance, reason and civic activism in the public interest as a function of both benevolence and enlightened self-interest. These values are taught and "caught" in the workplace, schools, churches and in neighborhood organizations. To become an American is to internalize and uphold these common values, which permit us to forge unity from diversity.

America's civic culture has advanced certain fundamental premises, values and rules that are transethnic and transracial in essence, even if they have not always been so in application. Without that common culture as its inspiration and guide, the American experiment could not have survived and cannot endure. The immigration that is expanding our cultural diversity is a tribute to the power of that inspiration: American political culture, condemned not so long ago as a fount of imperialism and oppression, is in reality a magnet for people from every country and civilization.

But the promise of a multicultural America must be defended against the new "identity politics" propounded by activists and institutionalized by bureaucracies on campuses, in government offices, and in private corporations. Identity politics makes race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation the primary lenses through which people view themselves and society. Turning the mere fact of racial, ethnic, and sexual difference into the most basic organizing principle of society, it portrays American civic culture as an elite trick or imposition upon minorities on behalf of an oppressive "Eurocentric," patriarchal, or capitalist agenda, rather than as the common, if contested, ground it really is.

This essay defends America's civic culture against the claims of this new ethnocentrism. It presents three examples of how the identity politics agenda is shaping public discourse and policy in ways that threaten true multiculturalism and promote social fragmentation.

Electoral politics: Racial activists are leading minority voters into isolation and impotence in the name of empowerment. An expansive reading of the Voting Rights Act has opened a Pandora's box: People of the same skin color now must be linked no matter how much that defies other considerations, such as geography and indeed, in some areas, racial integration itself. The underlying assumption is that voters define themselves mainly in racial terms, rather than as homeowners or suburbanites, etc. when they vote -- and that the government must reinforce this racial self-definition. This policy wrongly enforces the idea that minorities must vote racially to be empowered and, in effect, says that there is no basis for trust beyond one's own group. The Supreme Court seems to have recognized the problem and to be moving the nation toward the reconsideration of the more extreme forms of racial districting.

Education: Ethnocentric advocates want to put race consciousness and group pride at the center of school curriculum, in the name of empowering the oppressed. But the more we celebrate our respective ethnic experiences, the harder we must work to teach the compensatory values of tolerance and respect. Yet ethnocentrism often assumes innate racial constraints on children's capabilities and leads us back to the doctrine of separate but equal schools, rather than towards interracial tolerance and exchange.

The Economy: Most inner city blacks lack the social infrastructure -- family structures and cultural resources -- that make possible the lending societies and the coordinated family labor that have helped immigrant groups such as the Koreans advance. But economic demands based on historic grievances are no answer, for they flout the tenet of self-reliance and alienate all those who embrace that tenet -- the bulk of the U.S. population, including a substantial proportion of people of color.

Government cannot create the social infrastructure, but we should explore private efforts to bolster social, cultural and entrepreneurial programs and determine whether government can assist them. Public investments can be directed toward rebuilding the authority of key institutions such as schools and police. However, the electorate is likely to support these investments only insofar as they are accompanied by concomitant moves to replace the existing welfare system with one that promotes work.

Perhaps the most important point in this essay is this: civic virtues must be taught. These virtues cannot be imposed since they are expressions of freedom, but they can be taught to young people and immigrants and regenerated by community-based organizations and movements for social justice. Educators should teach that self-esteem isn't enhanced only by taking pride in one's own origins, but more importantly by taking pride in a mastery of the civic virtues. Policymakers should couple rights and entitlements with obligations and incentives that nurture self-reliance and commitment to the whole.

When the culture and alternative traditions clash, the former must prevail. It is one thing to argue that we must purge the common culture of its racist, sexist or elitist elements; it is another to demand that the common culture celebrate one's own preferences or to abandon the hard work of forging shared values. Defenders of American pluralism need to make clear that whenever multiculturalism turns into identity politics or ethnocentrism -- that is, whenever it becomes an ideology that forecloses a common culture and a polity based on shared principles -- it undermines freedom and therefore the basis for multiculturalism itself.

IN DEFENSE OF CIVIC CULTURE

The growing racial, religious, and cultural diversity of the United States is a fact -- indeed a juggernaut, unstoppable even if the country's liberal immigration laws were reversed tomorrow. The 1990 Census counts only three-quarters of Americans as non-Hispanic whites and finds that whites as a group are older and less fertile than people of color. "If current trends continue," writes demographer Martha Farnsworth Riche, "the United States will become a nation with no racial or ethnic majority during the 21st Century ... Without fully realizing it, we have left the time when the non-white, non-Western part of our population could be expected to assimilate to the dominant majority. In the future, the white Western majority will have to do some assimilating of its own."

The increasing "multiculturalization" of America offers an historic opportunity to enrich democratic pluralism here and throughout a world that still looks to America for alternatives to endless tribal warfare. The Mexican writer Octavio Paz thinks it "just possible that in the next century the United States will become the world's first truly multiracial democracy." That vision should certainly be defended against unwarranted fears of new racial, religious and cultural diversity. As social critic Randolph Bourne recognized early in this century, when Americans accept their differences in a context of certain shared principles and values, the myriad cultures present and emerging here become wellsprings of spiritual strength and social justice in a great, transnational experiment. A more multicultural America offers an exciting opportunity to extend freedom and democracy to people who haven't had it before and to enrich it for those who have.

But the promise of a multicultural America must be defended against the new "identity politics" propounded by some activists and institutionalized by bureaucracies on campuses, in government offices, and even in private corporations. Identity politics makes race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation the primary lenses through which people view themselves and society. It tends to encourage new and old minority groups to withdraw from -- or assault -- a mistrusted "majority" culture in the pursuit of their separate communal destinies.

Turning the mere fact of racial, ethnic, and sexual difference into the most basic organizing principle of society, identity politics portrays American civic culture as an elite trick or imposition upon minorities on behalf of an oppressive "Eurocentric", patriarchal, or capitalist agenda, rather than as the common, if contested, ground it really is.

But the irony is that, especially in the wake of the collapse of the utopian ideologies and amid the troubling resurgence of religious fundamentalism and nationalist passions, America's civic culture remains one of the world's few great resources for both individual freedom and social justice. The best way to advance these values is to nourish and renew our common civic culture, not promote its balkanization in identity politics or its dissolution in a largely empty rhetoric of class warfare. That means struggling, like the early civil rights movement, to affirm principles that transcend race, gender, and religious denomination, even as we try to expose racism, sexism, and other injustices. It means challenging activists, educators, and public officials who, ironically, in the name of combatting racism and sexism, are working to ensure that we classify each other by color and ethnicity. They risk repeating racism's primary sin -- subordinating what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the content of our character" to "the color of our skin," gender, or sexual orientation.

This essay holds that precisely because the country is becoming more diverse, Americans of dramatically different and increasingly mixed backgrounds must work harder than we have recently to find and affirm common principles. Some of these were hammered out by the country's founders, who understood how important it is to check the utopian ambitions which impassioned, "liberating" factions bring to the pursuit and exercise of power. The Constitution's separations of church and state, of executive, legislative and judicial powers, and of federal and state prerogatives, all force cultural, religious, and economic interests to bargain in the public marketplace, where they must justify their demands upon the polity by principles more widely shared than their own. Constitutional provisions for liberty of conscience and freedom of expression protect individuals not only from government but also from oppression by their own racial, religious or cultural communities.

Around these vital principles has grown a less formal but palpable civic culture, emphasizing characteristically "American" virtues such as tolerance, optimism, self-restraint, self-reliance, reason, and concern for the public interest as a function of both benevolence and enlightened self-interest. These virtues are taught and "caught" in the daily life of local institutions and in the examples set by neighbors, co-workers, and public leaders. Of course, other, often contradictory values are also imparted; what's important is that the first set survives as a sort of overlay, a living standard that tempers and guides public passions. Becoming an American should mean committing oneself to internalize and uphold these values.

In the very majesty of its freedom, America has generally tolerated subgroups that abstain from the civic culture. But defenders of American pluralism need to make clear that whenever multiculturalism turns into identity politics or ethnocentrism -- that is, whenever it becomes an ideology that forecloses a common culture and a polity based on shared principles -- it undermines freedom and therefore the basis for multiculturalism itself. It is one thing to argue that we must purge the common culture of its racist, sexist, or elitist elements; it is another to demand that the common culture celebrate one's own preferences or to abandon the hard work of forging shared values and mores.

When the pursuit of ethnic and racial diversity becomes an ideology in its own right, the central and all-pervasive goal of a polity or institution, it submerges intellectual and political diversity in a sea of enforced relativism: Each group's "culture" -- sometimes little more than an artificial solidarity cobbled together to resist both real and imaginary outside pressures -- is exempted from critical assessment, even from within the group itself. Real differences among members of the same group and real similarities among members of different groups are ignored. The spirit of common purpose evaporates, leaving us isolated in our camps.

This essay argues instead for intensifying the work of building a common culture. It traces the historic role of America's civic culture in assimilating immigrants and progressively extending the boundaries of social equality and citizenship. And it criticizes efforts to advance an ethnocentric agenda under cover of "diversity" in three key areas of American life: elections, public education and economic policy.

The Value of the Civic Culture

The United States emerged from a particular Anglo-Saxon culture and so was riddled from its inception with deep contradictions, racial and otherwise. Yet it was the first nation in history crafted consciously to advance rights which its founders claimed for "all men." Most other countries trace their origins to prehistory, to divine interventions that, according to their ancient myths, commingled blood, soil and spirit to found great nations. The U.S. has not been innocent of such myths, from those that justified the expropriation of Native Americans and the slavery of black Americans, to the country's many religious and secular evangelists. In their name, great brutalities have been committed. Yet, always, America held out the promise that, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, in this "asylum of all nations, the energy of ... all the European tribes [and] of the Africans, & of the Polynesians will construct a new race..."

Few other nations have presumed to burst the bonds of ancient myth in order to advance universal, inalienable rights, and at this pass, only the U.S. has even begun to fulfill those rights for a populace of truly international diversity. That is why America alone has been a magnet for substantial immigration from virtually every other country; it is the first truly multiracial civilization since ancient Rome to nourish the seeds of its own transformation.

From abolitionism to suffragism, from the civil rights movement to the women's movement, men and women have struggled to expand the reach of the founding documents and to realize Emerson's vision. They have renounced old, parochial prejudices and feuds -- and sometimes surrendered more precious legacies, too. John Quincy Adams told a German moving here that newcomers "must cast off the European skin, never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than backward to their ancestors."

But what, precisely, does it mean to become an American? The ambiguity of the answer has been the country's genius as well as its peril. "Imagine, my dear friend, if you can," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote back to France, "a society ... having different languages, beliefs, opinions: in a word, a society without roots, without memories, without prejudices, without routines, without common ideas, without a national character, yet a hundred times happier than our own." The historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. notes that Tocqueville saw civic participation as "the great educator and the great unifier: Immigrants, Tocqueville said, become Americans through the exercise of the political rights and civic responsibilities bestowed on them by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution."

In other words, new Americans relied not only on their own courage and industry, but also on the resilience of the founders' core documents and institutions, which, however imperfect, guided the great experiment. Demands for inclusion were legitimated not simply through the claimants' raw electoral numbers or economic clout, but, more subtly, through their willingness to claim the founders as their own ancestors and, following the vision of the Federalist Papers and the Constitution, to master the rules of separated powers and sophisticated coalition-building -- that is, of pluralist politics.

Of course, "Americanization" has never been a one-way street. Within the white population, Italians, Germans, Irish Catholics, and Eastern European Jews transformed the dominant Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture even as it transformed them. It is almost universally accepted among cognoscenti of American popular culture that the romantic, small-town ethos touted by Ronald Reagan as actor and president was largely a confection whipped up by second-generation American-Jewish writers who left New York for Hollywood in the 1930s. Just as often, contention has eclipsed consensus: Irish immigrant leaders in 19th-century New York only reinforced prevailing WASP suspicions that they were unfit for the rigors and responsibilities of citizenship when they demanded public funds for parochial schools, as much as some black leaders do now in demanding publicly funded Afrocentric education.

Yet black and other nonwhite cultures, too, have transformed the "dominant" cultural consensus in ways both hidden and acknowledged: Blacks and Chicanos, predating most whites on these shores -- and Native Americans, predating all whites -- have shaped American culture, politics and economics for centuries. As the black scholar Cornel West notes, the racial commingling at the core of our tradition is as profoundly indivisible and easily accessible as jazz, which couldn't exist without both African rhythms and European instruments. Meanwhile, ironically, some ethnographers find that many recent immigrants of color, from Chinese students to home-owning Caribbean blacks, adhere to supposedly WASP norms better than do many older Americans, white or black.

Is there, then, really an American cultural and political "mainstream" to assimilate to? Or have we always made it up as we've gone along? Even amid demographic churning, America's civic culture has advanced certain fundamental premises, values, and rules that are transethnic and transracial in essence, even if not always in application. Without that common culture as its inspiration and guide, the American experiment could not have survived and cannot endure. The immigration that is expanding our cultural diversity is a tribute to the depth of that inspiration: American political culture, condemned not so long ago as a fount of imperialism and oppression, is in reality the world's most powerful magnet for people from every country and civilization.

The Assault on the Civic Culture

Yet the notion of an enduring civic culture faces challenges on several fronts. First, the enormous economic opportunity that sustained America's immense absorptive capacities has been compromised, if not by the economy's actual shrinkage, then by widening disparities in income and opportunity. If individual upward mobility is thwarted too long, stagnation could prompt retreats from the civic culture into ethnic and racial camps warring for economic advantage.

Second, as the sociologist Alan Wolfe has shown, even amid affluence, market forces and state bureaucracies have made complex encroachments on institutions of the civic culture -- families, neighborhood organizations, churches,

and schools. New configurations of investment and of mass marketing and communications have transformed and uprooted communities, weakened family ties, and eroded the habits of reading, thinking, and public debate that sustain a democratic political culture. If recent electoral politics is any guide, the retreat from what Richard John Neuhaus has called "the naked public square" is approaching the dimensions of a rout.

Today's ethnocentric alienation includes a particularly tragic historical irony: The very dismemberment of the slaves' African cultures left them and their descendants uniquely dependent upon -- and therefore often uniquely committed to -- America's living up to its creedal promises. Through leaders as diverse as Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King, Jr., blacks spoke truth to white power as the quintessential, often the most loyal, Americans. Yet their all-too-recent admission to full legal citizenship has been accompanied by growing skepticism among blacks about its benefits, a skepticism evident not only in the declarations of racial activists but also in some black literature, ethnography and opinion polling.

This skepticism may be less a response to continuing racism than a reaction to the perception that the civic culture is losing its moral authority for whites as well as people of color. Yet it also reflects failures of leadership among racial activists, whose alienation is couched primarily -- and against mounting evidence to the contrary -- in claims that the civic culture remains inherently, implacably racist. Embracing that view, some members of long-resident American racial minorities are pressing claims for what amount to group rights as the only reliable basis for inclusion. Such claims assume that, just as slavery was written into the Constitution and white settlement was based on the expropriation of Native Americans, so racism was "lathered into the foundations of the Republic," as Roger Wilkins has written. The civic culture's every fibre is presumed hostile to the full inclusion of blacks. There could be no "inclusion," then, in this view, without a sweeping transformation of the "including" entity -- an unmasking and dismantling of racist hypocrisies. In its most extreme version, this view presents the founders' very conception of liberty as poisoned and much of the political culture that has grown from it as irredeemable. Such extreme claims feed a corrosive cynicism about the civic culture that blights aspirations to join it -- to "act white," in the current derisory idiom.

To the extent that the demographic, economic and social upheavals mentioned above weaken the civic culture, the new ethnocentric charges and cynicism take on an apparently compelling legitimacy that gives some white Americans pause. As legislators, judges, educators, opinion makers, and other leaders respond with race-specific and ethnocentric remedies -- doing so out of guilt or political expediency as often as out of sober conclusions that charges of racism have merit -- they unwittingly revise the terms of admission to the American experiment for people of all backgrounds and persuasions.

In the 1980s, for example, immigrants from India -- among the most highly educated and skilled newcomers to this country -- were divided about whether to seek government classification as "socially disadvantaged" on the basis of race. The Indian League of America worried that that would needlessly antagonize blacks as well as whites. But the lure and perverse logic of special protection proved too great to pass up: Another group, the Association of Indians in America, won the designation of "socially disadvantaged minority group" for all Asian Indians from the U.S. Small Business Administration, entitling them to special assistance.

Blacks do have reason for resentment: Indians have done well in business without significant federal support. All Americans, black as well as white, who oppose an ethnic balkanization of society have reason to lament the designation on principle. It advances the notion that the commonwealth can be parcelled out under a rubric of group rights.

With the foregoing propositions in mind, consider now some ways in which the racialization of public discourse and policy threatens to move the country from benign multiculturalism toward dangerous ethnocentrism.

Electoral Politics: Affirmative-Action Citizenship

There is no more compelling demonstration of the perverse consequences of ethnocentrism than in electoral politics, where racial activists are leading minority voters into isolation and impotence in the name of empowerment.

In enacting the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the federal government responded to a disciplined, interracial movement and thirty-five years of civil rights litigation demanding the inclusion of blacks in the polity on the most fundamental of terms -- the right to exercise the franchise on the basis of the principle of one person, one vote. The original Constitution had counted each slave as three-fifths of a person for purposes of apportioning congressional districts and denying blacks the vote. Even after the 15th Amendment affirmed blacks' voting rights in 1870, Southern whites devised endless stratagems to disfranchise them. The VRA, which outlawed these, was nearly a century overdue.

The act has accomplished the bulk of its mission, as evidenced by the dramatic rise in black registration and turnout and in the number of black elected officials, North and South, as well as by the changed tunes of even such one-time segregationist politicians as Alabama Gov. George Wallace and South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond. And congressional amendments, judicial interpretations, and administrative rulings continued through the 1970s and '80s to expand the VRA's reach not just to protect blacks' (and, after 1975, Hispanics') right to vote, but also to ensure that the votes they cast to promote their interests weren't diffused or swamped by racial gerrymandering, shifts to at-large elections, and other artifices. The need for these extensions was obvious wherever the invidious intent of white politicians was clear.

Even in northern cities, where the record was ambiguous, the VRA properly prevented politicians drawing congressional and other district lines from dismembering concentrations of black voters to keep them from electing representatives of their choice. In central Brooklyn, for example, a black community more than large enough to fill a congressional district had long been parcelled out among several predominantly white districts -- a deliberate strategy to keep blacks from electing someone responsive to their concerns. Thanks to a suit brought under the VRA, lines were redrawn in 1968 to permit the election of Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman in Congress.

But, as even some voting-rights activists now admit, expansive readings of the VRA soon opened a Pandora's box: Activists succeeded in amending the act in 1982 to permit its use in the 1992 reapportionment to maximize the number of black and Hispanic representatives likely to be elected, even in places like New York where no egregious recent discrimination has been shown. With the test of proving invidious intent on the part of district-line drawers removed from the VRA, advocates were positioned to block any reapportionment that doesn't sustain or increase the number of black and Hispanic politicians' victories. The VRA is now interpreted to say, in effect, "If by any stretch of the imagination you can link far-flung minority areas solely by race -- areas otherwise separated by geography, economic interest, and even by ethnicity within the racial group itself -- you must do so."

The assumption that voters define themselves mainly in racial terms, rather than, say, as homeowners or renters, city dwellers or suburbanites, workers or entrepreneurs, when they choose representatives -- and that government must reinforce racial self-definitions -- flouts the civic culture. As Justice William O. Douglas warned, "government has no business designing electoral districts along racial or religious lines... [When it does,] the multiracial, multireligious communities that our Constitution seeks to weld together as one become separatist; antagonisms that relate to race or to religion rather than to political issues are generated; communities seek not the best representative but the best racial or religious partisan. Since that system is at war with the democratic ideal, it should find no footing here."

The new racial gerrymandering also offends voters, black and Hispanic as well as white, who resent government officials' corralling them by race or surname alone, shaping their electoral options on the basis of how they happen to have identified themselves in the Census. In some districts that became mostly black in the 1970s and '80s, black voters chose to return white congressmen they felt were responsive: Peter Rodino (D-NJ) and Joseph Addabbo (D-NY) were re-elected several times with most of the black votes in mostly black districts. The same happened in 1991 in two New York City Council districts drawn to enhance the likelihood of a blacks' winning election; white incumbents won, anyway, one with more than half the black vote.

The assumption that Americans want to vote in racial blocs also falters before white voters' electoral records. Even before the VRA was passed, blacks such as U.S. Senator Edward Brooke (R-MA) and several borough presidents of Manhattan were elected by overwhelmingly white electorates. Herman Badillo, a Puerto Rican, was elected president of the Bronx in the 1960s, when its electorate was only 10 percent Hispanic. In Virginia and Mississippi, predominantly or substantially white electorates have chosen Gov. Wilder and black congressmen such as Alan Wheat and Mike Espy (now Secretary of Agriculture), showing that minorities needn't -- and shouldn't -- win elections by corralling voters racially.

Ignoring such persistent vindications of American civic culture, voting-rights and ethnocentric advocates continue to insist that minorities can be "empowered" only by being lumped together. They cling to this perverse logic even in the face of its cynical exploitation by Republicans. The GOP discovered that using the VRA to pack minorities into urban districts (by folding suburban clusters of minorities into them) increases the number of black and Hispanic officials somewhat but leaves them more isolated from colleagues, since they have not had to work with whites in order to win. Moreover, it "whitens" suburban, potentially Republican districts, whose representatives no longer need answer to potential minority swing votes in their midst.

Because ethnocentric advocates think in racial, not civic, terms, they are easy prey in this game. Journalist Peter Brown dubs their collaboration with GOP operatives "the ultimate political one-night stand." There is little doubt which group will feel abandoned come morning. In exchange for short-run gains, ethnocentrists are bargaining away minorities' long-term inclusion in the civic culture on the equal terms won by Wilder and Espy. (Indeed, Espy

protested a VRA-driven reapportionment that put him in a mostly black district, since he felt it important to show that blacks can represent whites.)

People have often voted ethnically, of course, but when government itself enforces the idea that minorities must vote racially to be "empowered", it erodes a vision of society where, as Boston University Professor Abigail Thernstrom puts it, "horizons of trust extend beyond our racial and ethnic groups." For example, New York City Council line-drawers in 1991 embraced the narrow premises of identity politics to create a "gay" district, which elected the city's first known HIV-positive councilman. As a purely political matter, that may have made sense: The districting commission was responding to a relatively compact, highly mobilized constituency. But what about the presumption by New York's 1992 congressional districting plan that Puerto Rican residents of high-rise public housing on Manhattan's Lower East Side have more in common with South American-immigrant single-family homeowners across the East River in Queens than they do with predominantly black public-housing residents who live just across the street, but in another district, in deference to Hispanic "empowerment."

Maybe these differently situated Hispanics do have much in common; maybe not. We don't know, because most South American immigrants are aliens or unregistered, and even Puerto Ricans, citizens at birth, vote at low rates even though their right to vote is unobstructed. Voting-rights advocates say low turnout itself proves that "racist" politics have "discouraged" Hispanics. They offer no evidence; if anything, the diffusion of Hispanic settlement suggests that both racism and pan-ethnic identification are weaker for Hispanics than for blacks. In any case, the expanded VRA spares ethnocentrist advocates the inconvenience of proving any racist injustice. It frees them to impose on citizens of Hispanic origins a series of constraints and options they may or may not want.

Treating recent Hispanic immigrants as members of an historically oppressed group in order to create Hispanic districts under the Voting Rights Act exposes the folly of institutionalizing identity politics: If all people of color deserve special protection and remedies, what is to prevent other new immigrant groups from demanding their own special districts? As government responds to their demands, how can it not exacerbate conflicts among minorities themselves? How does any of this advance a larger, interracial civic culture?

In New York, Hispanic activists have already gone to the Justice Department to charge that reapportionments influenced by powerful black politicians discriminate against them. Blacks have responded that siphoning off Hispanic voters to create additional, nominally Hispanic districts might entail placing more white voters in the districts of black incumbents, imperiling them and so creating what VRA language calls "retrogression" -- a diminution in the prospects of minority victories overall. A state panel tried to dodge one such conflict by drawing several Asian neighborhoods, themselves ethnically distinct and tenuously related, into a proposed new "Hispanic" congressional district in order to give it the requisite population.

The Supreme Court recently reaffirmed that view in *Shaw v. Reno*, which opens a bizarrely shaped "black" district in North Carolina to legal challenge and stricter judicial scrutiny. As the court put it, "A reapportionment plan that includes in one district individuals who belong to the same race, but who are otherwise separated by geographical and political boundaries, and who may have little in common with one another but the color of their skin, bears an uncomfortable resemblance to political apartheid ... Racial classifications of any sort pose the risk of lasting harm to our society. They reinforce the belief, held by too many for too much of our history, that individuals should be judged by the color of their skin."

Where does this end? Unfortunately, as GOP opportunism shows, a larger vision of the civic culture has few defenders in the electoral arena. The time has come to reassess the 1982 amendments and, indeed, to revise them. In the meantime, when race-based organizations such as the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund press for racial gerrymandering in the name of voting rights, they should not be honored as "civil rights" organizations. They are ethnic advocacy groups that no longer plausibly advance their claims in terms of the betterment of the whole. Democratic and Republican politicians may cater to them, but, as Justice Douglas warned, the state and the law should not.

Education: Cookie-cutter Diversity

There is virtually a national consensus by now that new voices must be woven into our textbook accounts of America's development and that all students should know how their own and others' cultures have shaped this nation. We've agreed to rewrite our national history, a project both exciting and unsettling to many. As the black historian Harold Cruse posed the challenge years ago, history books should "truthfully reveal how the black people's presence, hovering in the background of white men's thinking and plans, shaped white men's political and economic decisions, influenced white men's military strategies, delayed or advanced westward expansion, arrested or encouraged industries, created wealth by being wealth [as slaves] that laid the basis for banking systems, and

influenced national character."

None of these claims is exaggerated; those who think otherwise have been poorly served by insufficiently multicultural instruction. But militantly ethnocentrist educators, recruited by advisors to New York State Commissioner of Education Thomas Sobol to propose a new "Curriculum of Inclusion" for all schools, public and private, had more far-reaching goals. They wanted to put race consciousness and group pride at the center of a curriculum to "empower" the "oppressed." Some even claimed that rational thought and efforts by recognized scholars to achieve objectivity through research and academic discourse aren't noble embodiments of universal values but are Eurocentric ruses to disarm people of color intellectually in order to facilitate their exploitation.

Ethnocentric claims speak powerfully to white guilt and black desperation. As a Newsday editorial noted, "With civilized norms collapsing in inner-city neighborhoods, it's hard to fault black educators and others for grasping at alternatives to a Western humanism that isn't working for so many black youths." Some school systems in mostly black cities -- and even the Portland, Oregon system, whose students are mostly white -- have adopted Afrocentric curricula in an attempt at redress.

The more we celebrate our respective ethnic experiences, the harder we must also work to teach the compensatory values of tolerance and respect for diversity that make our explorations possible. Nor should tolerance excuse a relativism that begins by assuming that all groups' parochial truths have equal merit and ends in paralysis or in cultural wars unconstrained by any search for common ground: "No scholarship is free of political and cultural biases," Newsday noted, "but serious scholars resist them. 'Knowledge' is constantly revised through a process of peer criticism and review that keeps its distance from both established and revolutionary powers. Truth isn't whatever those chanting the loudest say it is; nor do people necessarily speak truth because they're oppressed."

Beleaguered educators in troubled urban communities find it increasingly difficult to resist ethnocentrists' claims that a curriculum driven by identity politics offers children more, amid familial and communal disintegration, than a curriculum that struggles to reweave the values of the larger civic culture into their daily lives. Even educators who doubt that the civic culture is inherently racist and sexist are lured by the promise that ethnocentric curricula will bolster children's shaky self-esteem. But those curricula are often embarrassingly simplistic: While few deny the harm racist educators have done to kids, "The role of the school in promoting assimilation, whether from a foreign culture or from an entrenched subculture, is a far more complicated matter than most multiculturalists have made it," notes Kay Hymowitz, a writer who has studied multicultural pedagogy closely.

The first problem is purely logistical: "In California, where the Board of Education services eighty-two different ethnic groups, or New York, where the number exceeds one-hundred, such an approach tends to produce a Babel of bureaucratic directives..." Hymowitz writes. Labeling groups of people in ways that feel arbitrary to the individuals involved only exacerbates the problem. "In a Queens, New York district with a large population of Koreans, parents were angered by a social studies unit on Asia that they felt paid inordinate attention to Japan... In a similar sort of dispute, a number of Italian groups have protested the unperson status of Christopher Columbus in the current reforms. One of the central assumptions of multiculturalists -- that bias can be found in the information which is omitted as well as that which is openly voiced -- appears to have come back to haunt them."

The second problem is more profound: Ethnocentrism often assumes innate racial constraints on children's minds and capacities. At the behest of a black member of the New York State Board of Regents, a booklet entitled "Increasing High School Completion Rates" with the following findings of a black researcher was distributed to 15,000 educators:

"Children's racial ... backgrounds ... influence the manner in which they learn ... For example, qualities noted in African-Americans include:

- tendency to approximate space, number and time instead of aiming for complete accuracy;
- focus on people... and their activities rather than objects;
- possession of a keen sense of justice and quick perception of injustice;
- general tendency not to be 'word' dependent but proficient in nonverbal as well as verbal communication."

Here is an educational program to make Harold Cruse cringe. Fortunately, the booklet created a storm in the fall of 1987, and not only among blacks: Hispanic parents protested a statement that their children are known for their

"acceptance of work in moderation"; Asians were furious to learn that their children are known for their "intolerance of ambiguity." The heights of absurdity to which racial thinking can ascend, in anxious whites as well as in aggrieved blacks, are evident in the political scientist Andrew Hacker's argument that because blacks are "more attuned to their bodies and physical needs" than whites and also more "spiritual" and less given to linear thinking, they are unlikely to succeed in "white" institutions such as physics departments or airlines, where people "are expected to think and act in white ways" -- unless "they are willing to deny large parts of their selves." How airlines or physics departments are supposed to accommodate the black culture which Hacker describes, he never explains. For that matter, Japanese physics professors and airline owners are unlikely to concur that there is anything inherently "white" about the ways they run their operations. Psychologists Signithia Fordham and John U. Ogbu note that the long history of whites' low expectations and hostility has engendered a defensive group solidarity among blacks that penalizes successful black students for doing well. "Thus," they note, "many bright black youngsters go to great lengths to conceal their academic achievements -- both because they fear being shunned by peers and because they doubt that whites will truly accept them even if they do succeed."

But mightn't separate Afrocentric schools, like Jewish yeshivas and Catholic parochial schools, impart the discipline, deep cultural knowledge, and, yes, the ethnically or religiously grounded self-esteem that public schools don't provide? Of course. But the question forced upon the civic culture by Afrocentrists is whether taxpayers should in effect fund parochial schools within the public system. The argument for doing so is that public schools were complacent in white society's degradation of black culture and self-esteem; the country has a debt to its long-standing racial minorities which it doesn't have to immigrants.

But, as the institutionalism of white racism in the "separate but equal" public schools of the past has shown, there is equal danger in the state's endorsing and supporting particular religious or racial cultures. That it once did so on behalf of whites is no excuse for repeating the mistake.

Ethnocentrists who see in multicultural education only an escape from the "hegemony" of the civic culture are doomed to offer a Babel of endless miscommunications. Worse, their very premise that the civic culture is oppressive amounts to a big lie. Professor Schlesinger, a dissenting member of New York's "Curriculum of Inclusion" panel, responded to the panel's claim that European colonization had eradicated "many varieties of traditional culture and knowledge" by asking: "Like infanticide? slavery? polygamy? subjection of women? suttee? veil-wearing? foot-binding? clitoridectomies? Nothing is said about the influence of European ideas of democracy, human rights, self-government, rule of law."

Moved by his experience on the panel to write a book, "The Disuniting of America," Schlesinger carried his argument further. The crimes of the West, he notes, "have produced their own antidotes. They have provoked great movements to end slavery, to raise the status of women, to abolish torture, to combat racism, to defend freedom of inquiry and expression." Contrast Salman Rushdie's fate in the Muslim world with his reception here, Schlesinger advises; think of Chinese student rebels carrying a model of the Statue of Liberty in Tiananmen Square. "Today it is the Western democratic tradition that attracts and empowers people of all continents, creeds, and colors."

We haven't always lived up to our legacy, but it remains the only hope, even to those most bitter about its many betrayals. Fantasies of compensatory racial and ethnic destinies are a mirage; faith in a transnational American, however elusive, is what's real.

New York's Commissioner Sobol ultimately recognized that Schlesinger was right. He set aside the advice of the panel and convened a more eminent group of scholars to revise the state curriculum. True multiculturalists should settle for nothing less.

The Economy: Grievance and Grit

Demands based on historic grievances violate the civic culture whenever they seem to flout its tenet of self-reliance; they alienate all whose own cultures emphasize that tenet. That was evident in discussions of the rioting and looting in South-Central Los Angeles sparked by the acquittals of police officers who had savagely beaten black motorist Rodney King. Raw racism may indeed have motivated cops and jurors in the King case, but its role in the failure of South-Central blacks to develop economically is not so clear. That ambiguity and confusion holds lessons about the hazards of using identity politics to make claims on public policy.

South-Central Congresswoman Maxine Waters claimed that "opportunities have been made available to some [Korean merchants whose stores had been looted] that have not been made available to others [blacks]." Strictly speaking, that was not true: targeted Small Business Administration loans, job-training programs, and other programs designed to assist business development are at least as available to blacks as to others. Waters would have been

more accurate to say that past racism's bitter legacies have left blacks without the education, skills, and cultural networks necessary to take advantage of business opportunities. That, more than current racism, explains the paucity of black entrepreneurs.

In fact, in 1990, 14 percent of black families had incomes over \$50,000 -- up from 6 percent in 1967. The income of black married couples now tracks closely with white couples through the \$50,000 range. Unfortunately, only half of black families are headed by couples, compared to 83 percent for whites, and this accounts for the fact that since 1969, black median family income has remained only 60 percent of whites'. The sociologist William Julius Wilson finds that black male unemployment is the largest cause of single-parent-family formation in the inner city.

Wilson also writes that the civil rights movement's legal and political victories did not stop disinvestment and unemployment from ravaging inner-city communities: No sooner had blacks won the basic civil rights necessary for economic progress than new forms of technology and investment pulled the economic floor out from under them by removing jobs from cities. That disinvestment may have looked like a cruel hoax, but it wasn't necessarily racist in inspiration; what it did do was compound racism's legacies by stranding those already disadvantaged. Residential segregation that prevents blacks from following jobs to the suburbs is an affront to the civic culture and must be challenged. But racial activists who exaggerate the impact of current racism on the problem only deepen black isolation.

Again, a tragic historical irony echoes: Even with the much higher barriers blacks faced in previous generations, their communities often managed to cohere and endure; indeed, their commitments and contributions to the larger civic culture often stood in heartbreaking contrast to their forced exclusion. The bitter irony of our recent history is that the partial but substantial removal of barriers to citizenship has too often been accompanied by alienation and economic abstention that worsens blacks' economic and social prospects.

Koreans, Arabs, and other immigrants have filled the resulting economic vacuum not because they get special privileges on the basis of their race, as Waters implies, but for two reasons: First, they organize lending societies in which several families put up modest sums to stake one of the group's members; the money is paid back as the business succeeds. Second, the business does succeed because its proprietors live several to a room and work long hours in tight family units in order to get by on low incomes. Anyone who has ever started a small urban business knows this painful truth: Most inner-city blacks simply don't have the family structures and cultural resources to sustain the trust that makes possible the lending societies and the coordinated family labor that builds businesses.

Paul Starr, co-editor of *The American Prospect*, has proposed that these cultural deficits be addressed through what amount to private rather than public reparations. While public institutions, from the Constitution itself to neighborhood public schools, participated in the degradation of blacks and Native Americans, government has a constitutional responsibility in the present to treat all citizens equally. But the appropriateness of government's role in reweaving a community's bonds of discipline and trust is not the only issue. Because government cannot always attach responsibilities to entitlements, it cannot win the taxpayer support for the funds it needs to intervene effectively. Starr suggests that an extensive private social infrastructure can help reweave the inner-city civic culture. He proposes a National Endowment for Black America to receive capital contributions and support social, cultural, and entrepreneurial programs. As such efforts gain ground and legitimacy, the state may find ways to support them without overstepping its bounds.

The welfare policy experts Lawrence Mead, a conservative, and Mickey Kaus, a liberal, argue from their respective points of view that inner-city communities could better help themselves if significant public resources were concentrated on restoring the authority of public institutions such as schools and police and on providing work where private jobs are insufficient. Electoral support for such huge public investments can be won, they argue, only by closing down the welfare system and making work mandatory for all able-bodied adults. The evidence suggests that American voters will support measures that empower the working poor by shoring up their moral authority as well as their economic prospects, instead of sustaining poor people whose dependency reinforces their isolation from the civic culture. Studies cited by Mead show that voters will subsidize a clear commitment to education and work because self-reliance and restraint are central tenets of the civic culture.

New public social investments can gain ground, then, when they are advanced in a spirit of social reciprocity, but people do have to work in order to stake a claim to fairer rewards. Mead credibly urges liberals who are horrified at the thought of replacing welfare with mandatory work to recall Marx's dictum that movements for social justice spring from movements of people who are already working. A lumpenproletariat cannot be organized; poorly paid black and Hispanic female hospital workers can be, and they can win a great deal of public sympathy in the process. When the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire killed 145 workers in 1911 -- and the owners, tried for manslaughter because they'd flouted even the minimal safety codes of the day, were acquitted -- the outraged and wretchedly poor garment

workers of the Lower East Side did not take to the streets to riot and loot. They organized multitudes of New Yorkers to march in a disciplined silence. The power of that discipline forced the state to enact reforms that have bettered and even saved workers' lives to this day. Government may or may not be able to restore moral and practical authority to the working poor of the inner city. But without that authority, no effort can succeed.

Just as ethnocentrists lose public support when they violate the civic culture's tenet of self-reliance, so they lose support when they fail to advance their demands on behalf of the betterment of the whole, not just of their own interests. In a long strike by New York Daily News workers in 1989-90, two prominent black columnists sided with management, claiming that since some unions had discriminated racially, the strike was not blacks' fight. (Management, suddenly a champion of civil rights, made the same claims in advertisements designed to alienate liberals from the workers.) Jesse Jackson replied, in a rally supporting the strikers, that union-busting is an overriding issue; racial divide-and-conquer strategies must not succeed in lowering the wages of all workers, black as well as white.

Moreover, Jackson argued, if blacks stood with the unions (even the most restrictive of which did have black and Hispanic members), they'd chip away at racism by forcing white workers to get past their prejudices in their hour of need. Another leader sharing Jackson's view was Dennis Rivera, president of the local hospital workers' union, whose predominantly black and Hispanic women members gave the strikers crucial support. The multiracial strike won; workers of color won new leverage against union racism because they'd framed their grievances on behalf of the whole.

Vindicating the Civic Culture

There are many other stories from the front lines of the conflict between genuine multiculturalism and narrow ethnocentrism and identity politics. But the three skirmishes described here reinforce the basic propositions on which a multicultural America must be built:

1. The civic culture comes first. Contrary to the claims of those who posit the "Eurocentricity" and inherent racism of the civic culture, it is American constitutional principles and civic values that are truly liberating -- subversive, in the best sense, of parochial factionalism and oppression. As the dramatic failures of this century's utopian ideologies have shown, the principles of liberal democracy alone offer the footholds and moral legitimacy to individuals and groups seeking freedom. Imperfect though American pluralism is, there is even less true multiculturalism -- that is, less genuine acceptance of ethnic, racial, and sexual diversity -- in much of Africa, the Islamic world, Asia, and Europe.

For that reason, educators designing or adopting multicultural curricula should make sure they emphasize the contributions of the world's cultures to America's civic culture and its great, transnational experiment -- not tell fairy tales about magnificent alternatives to democratic pluralism that do not, in fact, exist. As Octavio Paz observed, America's transnational experiment has a chance of leading humanity to a higher, multiracial common ground -- if we can keep faith with it. Public education has no higher purpose than to teach American children this truth.

2. Civic virtues must be taught. Participating in American civic culture means internalizing and honoring certain virtues, mentioned at the outset, which some critics characterize as "WASP," "patriarchal," and worse. They're wrong, not only because people of all colors and both genders exemplify these virtues, but also because these virtues cannot be imposed since they are expressions of freedom, which itself cannot be imposed. Civic virtues can, however, be taught as young people and new citizens are initiated into the civic culture. They can be regenerated by community-based organizations and movements for social justice. American leaders as various as John Dewey, Saul Alinsky and Martin Luther King, Jr. understood that ways must be found to support and enhance such learning.

For that reason, educators should teach that self-esteem is enhanced not simply through pride in one's own cultural origins, but, more importantly, by taking pride in one's mastery of civic virtues and graces that all Americans share and admire in building our society. And policy makers should couple rights and entitlements with obligations and incentives that nurture the civic virtues of self-reliance and commitment to the whole.

3. The various truths of identity politics cannot be imposed upon public institutions. In juries, legislatures, and schools, Americans must agree to set aside their differing ethnic, racial, religious, and other perspectives and to abide by race-transcending truths that can be shared with people of otherwise irreconcilable persuasions. This layering of truths, called pluralism, is the essence of the American Way: Constitutional principles such as the elevation of individual over group rights may coexist with and be enriched by other traditions, but, when they conflict in the public arena, the civic culture must prevail.

Those who would replace the civic culture with a mosaic of cultural camps are not multiculturalists but ethnocentrists. The civic culture may tolerate them, as it does the Amish, Jewish Hasidim, Islamic Fundamentalism, or other sects preaching religious, sexual, and other salvations; but it cannot allow them to direct public institutions and practices such as legislative districting, through law. In turn, we must protect the countless Americans who are struggling to break free of confining familial, religious, and racial structures and to draw the boundaries of their new communities in other ways. In the public arena, the civic culture should be treated as a set of higher values that take precedence over the parochial truths of subgroups.

Because the civic culture long excluded peoples solely by race, there is a strong impetus to extend or restore political rights and benefits on that basis. "In order to get beyond racism," as Justice Harry Blackmun put it, "we must first take account of race ... In order to treat persons equally, we must treat them differently." But transitional redress to the historically oppressed must not lead to institutionalizing group rights.

Because freedom is arduous, struggling new groups such as the Asian Indians may be tempted to accept -- as whites, too, have done -- whatever protection or benefits political leaders decide to grant by race. But whenever the state confers such benefits, whether to whites in the past or people of color now, without having convincingly demonstrated proximate discrimination to justify the preferments, it weakens individuals' freedom to define themselves in other ways. It compromises their ability to win admission to the civic culture on the basis of their commitments and contributions rather than of what they are presumed to have suffered by virtue of color or surname. The effect is to dull the liberating genius of American pluralism and to transmute the fact of multiculturalism into the gridlock of ethnocentrism.

For that reason, activists crafting remedies for past political exclusion should avoid corralling their intended beneficiaries by race or ethnicity. Except when they are redressing proven and proximate discrimination, public officials, whether they are judges, legislators, or commissioners of education, should avoid electoral and curricular remedies that unduly constrain people to think of themselves first as members of racial and other minorities and only second as American citizens. Paradoxical though it may seem to ethnocentrists, racism's bitter legacies are not always best redressed through race-specific remedies.

We citizens should accord our greatest respect not to leaders who merely mobilize their own ethnic or racial communities, but to those who -- like Lincoln and King -- demonstrate the ability to reach out across lines of color and creed to touch and mobilize people from all groups.

In one of the most devastated neighborhoods in Brooklyn, for example, the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood is attempting to strengthen the men in his working- poor, black congregation by stimulating their pride in blackness, in the endurance and creativity of their African heritage. But Youngblood also calls them to something broader: the work of East Brooklyn Congregations (EBC), an interracial, interdenominational organization of fifty black, Hispanic, and white churches and a synagogue, which he chairs. EBC, which organizes thousands of Brooklynites to build new housing and schools, works with the national Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Youngblood recalls his impressions, as a relatively parochial pastor, of his first IAF training session: "It was one of the most informative and challenging ten days I've ever spent ... I learned that all people have a stake in American society, that blacks will not do it alone, whites will not do it alone. Being with the IAF people, the motliest crew you could imagine, I realized that I do have a piece of the rock as an American citizen, with the right to see the democratic ethic realized to its fullest potential in my lifetime."

Not surprisingly, Youngblood and IAF look askance at the rhetoric of victimization; IAF's cardinal rule is, "Never do for others what they can do for themselves. Never!" It is notoriously unreceptive to political appeals based in racial solidarity and racial grievance: At a huge ground breaking rally for EBC housing in 1982, Youngblood made sure that hundreds of members of a predominantly white sister organization from nearby Queens attended.

The civic culture becomes more racially and culturally inclusive when groups such as Youngblood's transcend racial and religious parochialism to meet the larger society half way. The risk of the alternative, making racial and ethnic differentiation the organizing principle of society, should be clear even to ethnocentrists. The increasing diversity of the nonwhite population itself makes it impossible to speak honestly of a single "minority agenda" -- even in the face of racism, sometimes presented as a foil against which all nonwhites supposedly share a common plight and purpose. In reality, as recent attacks on Korean merchants in Los Angeles showed, some of the deepest hostility to newcomers of color comes not from whites but from other Americans of color.

If we've learned anything from hostilities in Lebanon, Nigeria, and the former Yugoslavia, it is that "white" culture is not the only source of racial and ethnic hostility. On the contrary, we have been spared those countries' bitter fates thanks precisely to the "hegemony" of an American political culture that springs from the European Enlightenment and the

self- transcending vision of white men who held slaves and agonized about that contradiction, though they never resolved it. Understanding that paradox is the beginning of wisdom in multicultural America.

DIALOGUES ON RACE AND CULTURE

This is the first in a series of essays to be published by the Progressive Foundation's Project on Cultural Politics as "Dialogues on Race and Culture." The Project on Cultural Politics seeks to raise the level of public discourse on issues such as race, gender, ethnicity, morality and civic education and to reinforce the political and cultural precepts that unite our increasingly diverse republic. The editors of the series are Will Marshall, the Foundation's director, and Dr. Ruy Teixeira, the director of political studies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim Sleeper is an editorial writer for the New York Daily News and author of "The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York" (Norton, 1990).