

# Democracy and Ethnography

Constructing Identities in  
Multicultural Liberal States

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## Chapter 2

### Diversity as American Cultural Category

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Anna Quindlen, an editorialist for the *New York Times*, titled an editorial against xenophobia "Making the Mosaic" (1991). She builds it around "Ms. Miller's third-grade class in Public School 20 in New York City." There, she tells us, "The current student body comes for the Dominican Republic, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Puerto Rico, Columbia, mainland China, Vietnam and El Salvador." There, she continues, "These various faces somehow look the same, upturned and open, as though they were cups waiting for the water to be poured." There, she ends, "new Americans are being minted, [...] bits of a mosaic far from complete."

Her point is political. She is resisting any policy aimed at restricting entry into the United States. Her point is also related to an academic dispute that has run in parallel to what is a fundamental issue in the foundation of America: How is the immigration experience to be interpreted? She summarizes this dispute and her solution in the opening sentence to her editorial: "There is some disagreement over which wordsmith first substituted 'mosaic' for 'melting pot' as a way of describing America, but there is no doubt that it is a more apt description."

My goal here is academic more than it is political. I am writing as an anthropologist and I must discipline myself to stay within the confines of academe. In the spirit of the editors of this volume, I am concerned with diversity less as a result of cultural difference and much more as a *cultural process* that produces particular forms of difference within a historical and institutional context. I take it that, whenever human beings move geographically and become intimately intertwined with other human beings, they

arrivals find themselves reconstituting, and thus reproducing, the arguments earlier arrivals used against those who were already settled.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

My first personal experience with the problem came early in my first field research in the United States (Varenne, 1977). I was being introduced at the beginning of a small party. There was a round of first names that ended with mine. My host's mentioning of the fact that I was a "foreign student" appears to have reminded him that something was missing in this round, and he started around a second time requesting of his friends a nation of origin: "Italian," "Irish/Polish," "Italian, though my father was not." The turn came to a woman who first said that she was "nothing." This would not do and, after a brief series of exchanges, she was identified as "Scottish/English." The round ended and we proceeded to the business of party making.

I knew enough about the United States at that time to recognize that I had just participated in one of those scenes that are most often held up as somehow fundamentally American. This was a social drama, the performative version of textual versions, the version from Quindlen I quoted earlier being but one modern version. Indeed, I had already read many of these versions as I got my intellectual introduction to America during the years preceding my fieldwork. I had read Glazer and Moynihan who taught me first about the "melting pot" by telling me that it had not worked (1963); I had glanced at Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1971); I had looked at some of the earlier sociological writings that attempted to give a theoretical justification for "melting" aspect of what they could not handle as a metaphor. I had also read Lloyd Warner's account of a parade in Yankee City (1959), and I had heard Milton Singer discuss its relevance to a discussion of ethnicity that would move us away from the essentialism implicit in both versions of the melting metaphor, whether it was the assumption that, after melting, an essential Americanism would establish itself—the nativist hypothesis—or the assumption that, after generations of interaction, something essentially different persists in the descendants of the immigrants that came over various seas—what was not yet named the "multiculturalist," "mosaic" hypothesis.

My experience, a few miles from Chicago, was, first, a confirmation that these little paragraphs such as Quindlen wrote were not simply a matter of talk or ideational interpretation. They also involved concrete, practical action. Some of this action could be handled as more or less empty, though perhaps prescribed, ritual. But often this ritual was "dramatic" in the sense V. Turner

discussed (1986). It often involved the emotions and interests of the participants, and thus became a form of political action that no one can escape who lives in the United States. In a vocabulary that I borrow from ethnomethodology, action marked for ethnicity is a particular kind of accountable practice. In Yankee City, for the tercentenary parade discussed by Warner, as it was again when organizers built the other parades and reenactments discussed by Milton Singer (1986, 1987), the display of what we now call ethnic "diversity" is both prescribed and problematic. At such a time, one cannot simply ignore "the contribution ethnic groups" have made to the development of America. One cannot either let each organizing group do quite what they please. Ethnicity must be represented, but it must be represented in a *particular* fashion.

A most striking recent example is the organization of the St. Patrick's Day parade in New York City. Things being on a larger scale in New York than they are in Yankee City, there is not one occasional parade celebrating all ethnic groups, but a parade of parades which, on the yearly calendar dear to structural-functionalist anthropologist, gives a space to emerging ethnic groups to display their particular place in America. The Irish emerged more than 200 hundred years ago but America has been changing over and around what may be their Irish selves and it slowly transforms what is problematical in a display of Irishness. Wearing green and waving banners struck with a golden harp is one thing, displaying Catholicity (as in the bow to the Cardinal as he stands on steps of the Cathedral) is something that comes and goes as more or less scandalous. Forbidding homosexuals from parading under their own banner is something else altogether. The latter is the stuff out of which newspaper editorials are written, and political careers built or broken.

My introduction to the group of friends in Appleton was similarly a moment for doubt and celebration. I was, by all accounts, an outsider. As I came to see it, transforming outsiders into insiders and then back again into outsiders, was the dominant routine practice of these small groups. A proper outsider would not however negotiate his entry into the group in quite the brazen fashion that I was using. I was burning a lot of intermediary steps by simply exercising my right to "drop in any time." I had the excuse of being not only an outsider, but also a foreigner. This turned out to be key. As the introduction proceeded, my unique status was subtly transformed into the status everyone in the room had: I was remade into a French-American. I was now just as different as everyone else, and thus not different at all. In the process, I was made less problematic than the woman who claimed she was "nothing." Foreigners may be "welcomed," "educated," and "counseled." An insider who claims "nothing" is placing himself outside the community with a different kind of difference that is truly dangerous.

## AS AMERICAN AS (AMERICAN) DIVERSITY

It is part of the intellectual and political common sense that America is "different" because it was made by immigrants. Japan, it is said, does not have the problems America has "because it is homogeneous." There is, however, no evidence that major population movements into a particular geographical area necessarily produce what has evolved in North America between the 32nd and 48th parallels. The United States has evolved differently from Argentina or Australia and we must be able to analyze the pattern of this difference. This is a general problem as anthropology has come to the relative consensus that no human society is homogeneous in the old sense. Indeed modern readings of philosophers of language and discourse like Bakhtin (1981) all emphasize the many ways through which attempts at centralizing hegemonic interpretations of the world eventually fail as the centrifugal forces of the marketplace tear away at any apparent or temporary homogeneity. All societies, even apparently "homogeneous" ones, are made up by the comings and goings of various groups in various circumstances.<sup>4</sup> All societies are complexes of groups with different interests and local histories relating to other groups in the development of a global history. For all societies, then, dealing with the "other" is a continually renewed problem. Boundaries are never settled. Like the proverbial wall that separated Robert Frost from his neighbor over the hill, they must continually be reconstructed under new conditions.

For those who are interested in America, then, the problem is not the tracing of the coming and settlements of various groups to the continent in general, and the United States in particular. This is a particular kind of social scientific task that only begins to handle a more general problem, that is the ways such movements are handled by the earliest immigrants as they develop the set of institutions, politicolegal and symbolico-interpretive, which later immigrants find and, up to a certain point transform, perhaps in fact by reviving what has always been their strength. Eventually, particular forms of boundary construction became institutionalized in the particular political space where "America" is powerful (dominant? hegemonic?), and those who cross the boundaries of the United States must now deal with them. Ethnicity, in the United States as elsewhere, is less about the history of immigration than about the construction of the person as Other in a particular way. Diversity is a symbol of America, the product of an interpretive evolution. The issue, thereby, is not only one of asserting the extent of the persistent differences, it is also one of understanding how "difference" is reconstructed in the local and not so local practices of people in the country.

What is needed, then, is an anthropology of immigration as told from the point of view of what Margaret Mead once called perceptively the "third"

generation. In what is really a brilliant—though perhaps unwitting—structural analysis, she traces the three positions one can occupy in the United States: the position of the new immigrant still rooted in love-hate relationships with the old country (the "first" generation), the position of this immigrant's child typified by a denial of the relevance of the old country (the "second" generation), the position of the immigrant's grandchild typified by a matter-of-fact identification with what is now an "ethnic" group (the "third" generation). Most strikingly, Margaret Mead dared say, "We [Americans] are *all* third generation" (my emphasis; 1965, chapter 3). This was obviously not meant to be taken statistically. It was meant to summarize the peculiarly American interpretation of the encounter with the Other: in a proper America, the Other is not abolished, rather his difference is reconstructed to be made to fit with similar differences made to operate in the same manner. Thus, in the introduction round I talked about earlier, the specific content of "Italian," "Pole," "Scot," "French," was subsumed, just as the content of "Cambodia," "China," "El Salvador," and so on, is subsumed in Quindlen's editorial. At such times there can be no discussion of what the content of any of these categories might be. My Frenchness was not at issue, but rather the equivalence of my difference to that of the other people in the room. What had to be affirmed was that all the categories or groups with which we could be identified were equivalent, and secondary to our fundamental qualities as human beings who were all the same because we were all different.<sup>5</sup> As the constitution affirms: "All men [human beings] are created equal," *not* "all Americans," and even less "all Anglo-Saxons."<sup>6</sup>

The best recent exegesis of the process through which immigration and difference is made into something paradigmatically American is to be found in Werner Sollors's work on the melting pot as metaphor, myth, and performance in American literature and political rhetoric (1986). In his work, the melting pot is treated as something, a symbolic thing obviously, that has served people in the United States, recent immigrants, as well as their great grandchildren, to handle their fate not only descriptively but also prescriptively. In this way, he moves the debate beyond a concern with the "truth" or "efficiency" of the myth (Is it true? Does it work?), to a concern with its contribution to the ongoing history of the United States.

Sollors started with Israel Zangwill's paradigmatic play *The Melting Pot* (1909).<sup>7</sup> He analyzes sensitively its immediate sources in turn-of-the-century New York Jewish socialist circles. He pursues these sources in the various attempts by European writers transplanted on the West Coast of the Atlantic (people like Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, etc.) to explain what appeared to be happening there that they wished to foster. Something new was being done that could not happen in Europe itself: a new man would finally realize

politically the Christian rejection of Judaic law. St. Paul met the Indian princess Pocahontas, and in her womb developed something that would encompass the whole of humanity. Sollors does not quite emphasize, as I am doing, that this is a European dream as well as a possible American reality. It may initially have been more of a Protestant European dream but it is clear that, by Zangwill's time, at the turn of the twentieth century, it had become a broader dream, a dream for an institutionalization of universalism that had begun in the United States, but was of course not complete.

Sollors argued that, initially, the melting pot is more a radical political symbol than a conservative sociological theory. It is a discursive practice, a statement within a broader political conversation, a weapon against what was then called "nativism," another tradition in American thinking that continues to strain, and continues to fail, to redefine America according to the tenets of traditional nationalism.<sup>8</sup> In Zangwill's time, and probably throughout the 1920s and 1940s, though in a more hidden manner, the image of the melting pot is a radical image in the struggle between the newer immigrants and the older ones.<sup>9</sup> Even now, when the actual image has lost its power, the other images that are being proposed (rainbows, mosaics, etc.) are to be used in the same manner: they are weapons against those who would close the frontiers in the name of some substantive quality that only native born people encultured near the ideological centers, that is, "Americans," would possess, a soul or spirit that would be so deeply ingrained that "foreigners" (or people encultured in various ghettos) could not possibly gain access to it. America, in the other image, is the place where these souls cease to make a difference, and this must happen whatever contingent soul Americans themselves might develop over the centuries. America is not British, it is not Anglo-Saxon, it is not Northern European, it is not European, and it will not be African or Asiatic. It will remain "democratic" where the "demos," the people in "we, the people," is continually reconstructed as a plurality of individuals, and not as a community with particular properties. Not that communities, at every level, do not have properties, but that these must not have consequences in those public spheres that America organizes. To paraphrase Sollors (1986: 261), America may not, indeed must not, be American.

The paradox of the melting pot imagery is that it is centrally built around the evidence of difference. There are many tellings of the myth—for it is a myth in the strongest sense of the term—and there are many performances. The actual telling or performance can vary widely. Zangwill's play is one such telling. The famous pageant organized by Henry Ford is a performance with (if Sollors is right) quite a different underlying political message. The casting of many a movie from the glory days of Hollywood is still another.<sup>10</sup> Quindlen recites the myth in the editorial I quoted earlier, and my

friends in Appleton improvised on it to deal with a delicate interpersonal situation. There is one prescribed sequence, however, and that is the reciting of a list of exotic peoples. This sequence cannot be more encompassing than the one that appears at the end of Zangwill's play: "Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian, black and yellow, Jew and Gentile, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross," (1975 [1909]: 200). This ends with an invocation of God, not the God of our fathers but "the God of our *children*."<sup>11</sup> Without all these people with the many different gods of their fathers, there would be no America, or, rather, there will never be no America (the multiple negatives are essential here), since America is the ideological space where America must never be completed. As I understand it, the myth might be paraphrased as follows:

In the beginning, peoples from all over the earth came to a new continent. They forgot their earlier attachments and disputes. Together they have been building something new that is a model for the old countries they left behind. Many years later, the flaws of the original building are showing and people from all over the world are joining together in restoring and expanding a work in process that should remain a model for the universe.

## THE "MELTING POT" AS MYTH AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

The strength of Sollors's work lies in his taking this myth seriously as myth. I am also aware that to talk of the melting pot as a myth is somewhat dangerous since the word *myth* is commonly used by the critical tradition to refer pejoratively to some groundless tale. A myth in this common sense is a matter of belief that one must abandon when social science has demonstrated that it does not correspond to "reality." This limited understanding of the power of myth must be challenged. Myths are not so much about belief as they are about verisimilitude: they heighten our experience by representing it, that is making it present in a particular salient form. Myths are not to be evaluated for their truth value but rather for their meaningfulness. The "melting pot" is not about the number of melted Americans but rather about the experience of walking down Broadway, hearing its many voices, and trying to make one's own heard.

In myth, authorship is of interest only to academic historians and the aesthetic quality of the telling is of secondary concern. Zangwill may have coined the phrase "melting pot" but he is all but forgotten. Glazer and

Moynihan, like many contemporary critics, like to emphasize that Zangwill's play is "a bad one." They dismiss it as the work of a dissatisfied Jewish socialist immigrant on the way to transforming himself into a Zionist. They even argue that the play is really more about Russia than it is about America, with the Irish and the German thrown in "for comic relief" (1963: 290). This may be so but one might at least entertain the possibility that America is precisely made of dissatisfied immigrants dreaming of a better world in Europe (or, now, Asia). The same argument might be made of the original "pilgrims."<sup>12</sup> Many others came to the United States as a last resort, or even totally against their will, but their experience cannot be dismissed.

In any event, Zangwill as an author who proved a somewhat dissatisfied immigrant is not pertinent. The play, by all accounts, was very successful. The phrase is still with us. Aspects of its plots were reproduced hundreds of times by the myth factories of Hollywood where other immigrants made their case for integration into a particular kind of America through the manipulation of possibly reconstructed traditional arguments about the universality of democracy. What is important about the phrase "Melting Pot" is that it apparently captures something. It was, and it remains theater, allowing one to become spectator to one's own fate, appreciate it aesthetically, and also criticize it. Zangwill's play, in the long run, was appropriated "*sur le mode collectif*" (Lévi-Strauss 1971: 560) and transformed from a statement by an identifiable author into a myth that no one, not even sociologists fifty years later, can ignore. The myth is still alive—in the sense that a language that is spoken, written, and evolving is alive rather than dead. It is particularly alive in the intellectual discussions that take it seriously enough to demonstrate that it is not "fact."

The literature that specifically criticizes "the melting pot" by taking it literally now has a long history. Eventually I want to celebrate it by showing that this critique fully reproduces the myth by expanding an essential ingredient of it, what we might call the "dramatic" moment in the American interpretation of humanity. In the play there is a long episode when "reality" has intruded and tragedy threatens. For a while the hero reintegrates the prejudices of his group; he refuses to accept the possibility that anyone might be transformed, or that there might even be something appropriate to a search for a transformation. The intellectual conversation that moves America also recognizes moments when some group might fall prey to either of two temptations. Zangwill points to situations when, somewhere in the United States, some may take on the mantle of being "the" new American man—which has thereby become old and thus un-American. The same conversation, he notes, points at groups who may be succeeding in closing themselves in a ghetto refusing the transformative process that all who come to America must go through.

The critical literature that concerns me here reads the actual text of Zangwill's play as being an argument for an achieved homogeneity in the population of the United States. Rather than taking the phrase as a description of the streets of New York, they take the phrase as referring eventually to what would come out of the pot, that is a "melted" identity where differences would have been erased. This is indeed the version of the myth that Henry Ford used in the dramatic performances he organized in his factories (Sollors 1986: 89–91). For him perhaps, to celebrate the melting pot was to celebrate one particularity, a limiting form of Americanism that specifically denied the relevance of difference (ethnic or religious—to which we would now add sexual orientation, physical handicap, and so forth). This is the version of the myth that became offensive to generations of ethnic activists, and that has now become the "official" version when the myth is recited as a cautionary tale about what America must *not* become. There is little evidence that it is the version as it originated in the writings of Crèvecoeur and others in the eighteenth century, or in Zangwill's play and many others in the 1920s and 1930s. Conversely, Sollors has no problem ferreting out all the passages where people like Novak harken back to the other version of the myth as they talk about "cauldrons" or "crucibles" to evoke the situation of people in the large urban centers of the United States where ethnicity is most alive. It is thus typical within the genre that Anna Quindlen's editorial against the melting pot should end with a phrase about the "*new Americans being minted*" (my emphasis). In such conclusions to attacks on the official myth, as it was in Zangwill's play, the message is one of universalism and freedom, along with a call for the construction or strengthening of institutions and ways of being that foster universalism and freedom. It is also one of individual transformation.

This ideological commitment to America must go through a reaffirmation of the centrality of particular forms of social difference in the United States: there would be no melting pot if there was nothing to melt. It must be possible to demonstrate the continued relevance of the initial condition assumed by the great version of the myth: "In the beginning, and today still, people from all over the world . . ." The myth *requires* an affirmation of difference, and sociologists provided it at the very moment when it may well be the case that the traditional European immigrant groups were becoming undistinguishable from each other. As Glazer and Moynihan wrote in the conclusion to their era-opening *Beyond the Melting Pot*: "The point about the melting pot is that it did not happen" (1963: 290). This closes their analysis of Zangwill's play, which they transformed into a set of hypotheses:



- the children (or grandchildren) of immigrants to the United States, wherever and however they arrived on the continent, will
  - a. start interacting with each other in ways impossible in their old country.
  - b. stop identifying with the areas of the world their parents came from and the specificities (language, religion, political ideologies) that typified them.

As hypotheses, these statements belong to the realm of verifiability—to the extent at least that one could agree on the operational definitions of, for example, ethnic identification: Does it have to do with living in a different behavioral world? Using the label in some contexts? Remembering where one's grandparents were born? Glazer and Moynihan, having taken on themselves the disciplinary mantle, can then come to the following conclusion:

It is true that language and culture are very largely lost in the first and second generations, and this makes the dream of “cultural pluralism”—of new Italy or Germany or Ireland in America, a League of Nations established in the New World—as unlikely as the hope of a “melting pot.” But as the groups were transformed by influences in American society, stripped of their original attributes, they were recreated as something new, but still as identifiable groups. (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963: 13)

What evidence do they offer, and what evidence do they ignore to arrive at these conclusions? The book is essentially a series of vignettes summarizing the political economy of groups presented “in order of visibility”: Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish. The logic of the grouping is not discussed. Rather, the reader is referred back to a political common sense that obscures major issues. They do not talk about the rate of intermarriage among identified members of various groups. They do not discuss the implications of the uniformization of the conditions of everyday life as people moved to the suburbs. The list of matters that can be addressed in such a discussion is long indeed. Most important perhaps, the movement of the Irish, and then the Italians, into the center of the political arena, and then their movement into positions of economic privilege is ignored even though it was already well on its way and may be the strongest evidence of integration—if not assimilation. John Kennedy's then recent statement about being American before he was Catholic is not presented as proof of what Zangwill's play had hoped for: that in America, Catholics who had massacred Jews in Europe would now join with them, and with the descendants of slaves, to form the electoral base of one of the two

major political parties in the United States. Glazer and Moynihan could not have known that the decade that was starting when they were writing their book would also be the time for a major ideological movement among the children of the people they studied, a movement devoid of reference to ethnic particularisms. There is something fundamentally American in the 1960s symbols of universal love and the search for still another new beginning that would heal humanity through the transformation of each person within it. In the Age of Aquarius, as in the age that Zangwill thought he saw dawning over New York harbor, human particularities will be transcended through the destruction of the hierarchies that support them.

One has but to look at the list of the groups that would not melt in New York City to realize how dated Moynihan's analysis has become: Jews, Italians, and Irish are now “Euro-Americans” or “white ethnics,” and any serious attempt at differentiating among them soon becomes contentious. In New York City the Black category has become infinitely more complex than it was in the late 1950s as Caribbeans, and now people from various parts of Africa, have been moving in. The Puerto-Rican category has all but disappeared from common parlance as newer immigrants insist on a relationship with Cuba or the Dominican Republic. “Hispanic” may have been designed to deal with these differences and establish a new difference to oppose to Black or White, but the category, and others like “Latino” or “Chicano” that compete with it, does not hide the deep political divisions at play here. A new Moynihan would now probably want to mention various Asian groups, not to mention Middle Eastern ones.

In some ways, of course, this “change” is not quite a change to the extent that *Beyond the Melting Pot* could still be written with an altered cast of characters: New York City, and by extension the United States, is still not a place where ethnic origin makes no difference. One is continually made to group people through the application of criteria such as place or birth, or political activity. Indeed, one is continually *required* to identify oneself in the multitude of administrative forms through which the American State enforces the categories of official relevance.<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, ferreting out actual “differences” between the older ethnic groups—those whose bulk arrived four or five generations ago—become more and more difficult. Ten years after *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Parsons, expanding on an essay by Schneider (1969), already wondered whether the ethnic differences that had been talked about did not belong more to the realm of political symbolism than to the realm of sociological reality (1975). All there would be about the talk of ethnic differences would be precisely the talk about it, the labels, identifications, and the discourses (textual and dramatic) that rely on them and thus reconstitute them.

## THE CULTURE OF THE MELTING POT

Such a conclusion, however, stays within a literal reading and fails to catch a more fundamental ideological principle. The peculiarity of the melting pot myth—as social theory rather than as hypothesis about social history—lies in its understanding of human nature, what we might think of as its philosophical anthropology. The myth—and I am talking here of both its popular and critical versions—is founded on a particular view of the constitution of persons within groups. Over the centuries, the vocabulary has changed, and the references to religious salvation may have been transformed into a psychological language. Still, from Crèvecoeur to modern critics, the melting pot myth is fundamentally about identity as socially constituted. It is never so much about the *institutions* to be constructed than about the *person* that will live these institutions and eventually validate them. The model has two aspects, one oriented to fully formed adults that must be placed in a situation where they can express themselves as they really are. The other aspect is more difficult as it concerns persons who are not fully formed, children on the one hand, and newcomers on the other. In either case, whatever is constructed is founded on the principle that American democracy is not quite a natural state that one will necessarily embrace if one is let free to develop away from any constraints. Deliberate ideological activity is necessary to develop the freedom of the persons involved. The dilemma may be best caught by thinking briefly about the place of education in American ideology. Indeed we might write of a Myth of Education that would be the foundation of the Melting Pot. John Dewey, as a person most committed to America, clearly understood that transforming a child into a full participant into a democratic system is by no means a mechanical process (1966 [1916]). Democracy is a particular form of social life, a particular culture we would now say. It is not inscribed in human genes. Conversely, proper human beings must be totally formed to their culture, otherwise their participation is suspect. Thus, the ideological task is clear: a democratic education must deliberately mold an individual in such a way as to reveal the uniqueness of the individual. How to do this will always be a matter of debate given the paradoxical nature of the ideological injunction: Social forces (institutionalized as schools, curriculums, pedagogies, etc.) must exercise themselves in such a way as to deny their own participation in the making of the people on which they are exerted.

One has but to place G. H. Mead alongside John Dewey to grasp the intellectual struggle that moved their colleagues and students at the University of Chicago when they tried to account for the fate of immigrants to the city at the same time that they developed a theory of personhood that was

also democratic. To the very extent that pragmatic and symbolic interactional theories of social construction emphasize the fundamental activity of the individual, they must develop a complementary theory of shared meanings: in the proper community all individuals share the same codes, the same understandings, the same orientations, the same values. They are, for all intent and purposes, “alike,” if not melted into each other. In the origin myths of this proper community, as told over the centuries by people like Berger and Luckman (1967: 56), already fully served human beings get together, and internalize each other’s habits and their personal responses to these.

A problem however does arise when social psychological theories of society are transformed into theories of human development, socialization, and enculturation. Dewey, Mead, and all their followers more or less matter of factly built over the premise that, through interaction in a community (family), participants, particularly young children, come to adopt or internalize the dominant ways of this community. Through this interaction a child acquires the language, and more important the “culture,” of its significant others. When this has been done, in the first few years of life, change is difficult and possibly illegitimate. Schools and other institution must adapt to the culture “of” the child. All the ambiguity is in this conjunction of possession. On the one hand, not to respect this culture is to do illegitimate violence to the individual’s free constitution. On the other hand, the child is presented as having mechanically become something that has obviously not been chosen.

In research terms, a commitment to interactionist theories of cultural identity must lead to summaries of “American characteristics” and investigations into their relative prevalence. The best of these may be found in the Parsonian work of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961). A very similar, though perhaps less systematic, approach also characterizes the more recent work of Shweder and his students and colleagues (Shweder and Bourne, 1984): Americanism is a state of the self, a value-orientation, a particular way of conceptualizing the person. More or less wittingly, a social psychology that started as an attempt to take into account the independent activity of individuals ended supporting a slightly modified nativist understanding of America. It is not surprising that, eventually, this would produce a combination of empirical and ideological backlash: not everyone in the United States is “American” by the standard of American social psychology, and this cannot be so on these very same standards. Communal difference is ideologically fundamental and empirically evident, and yet it is made theoretically impossible. There is a problem here.

Most criticisms of the melting pot focus rather narrowly on one type of evidence: there would not be one America, but several. No one has proposed a listing of these various Americas, though one might start with a melting-pot

style listing of adjectives identifying people with exotic places over the seas. The listing must be presented as possible though indefinite. A new group may always have to be added. Each of these groups, whatever criteria they may be based on (ethnic, racial, religious, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), theoretically are dealt with in the same way that "America" is dealt with in the nativist approaches: they are all characterized by certain value orientations predominantly shared among the relevant people. Thus "Italian-Americans," "women," or "African-Americans from certain rural counties," are presented as "Americans" are in the other type of work: within their own communities they are all the same (or more alike among themselves than they are with members of other communities—to some level of statistical significance). The fundamental tenets of social psychology with its attendant theories of socialization and enculturation remain standing. The verisimilitude of the original state in the melting pot myth is reaffirmed: in the beginning that is also a continuing present, a multitude of groups come together and struggle peaceably to find institutional, but even more important, personal ways of respecting each other.

### AMERICA AS A CULTURE

We are now quite familiar with literary analyses of sociological writing that underline the ideological underpinnings of both theory and practice. Sollors's work, and that of others whom he has brought together in a more recent collection of essays (1989), demonstrates that such analyses can be constructive as well as deconstructive. My intent here is oriented toward building an analysis of America that recognizes the melting pot as one version of even more fundamental myths while attempting to escape the theoretical straitjacket of interactionist approaches to culture. In other words, I am relying on what may be an un-American theory of culture: one that is based on historically evolved constraints, resistance, and cultivation, rather than on internalization or sharing. From this perspective America is not a characteristic of Americans. Rather, it resides in what people who live in the United States cannot escape. Only through such a shift can one understand, and celebrate, the cultured uniqueness of America.

Let us return briefly to the round of introductions I reported on briefly earlier: Was it an occasion to express identities, or was it a prescribed ritual display, in its form, timing, and limitation to the specified setting? It may have been both, particularly if I could agree that my identity was indeed "French," as my host was sure it had to be, and if it was so organized as to represent itself in exactly the manner that the display suggested. If it had not

been, or if I had rejected the anthropological discipline of accepting whatever the people I knew constructed for me, then of course I might have had a problem that may have led to my withdrawing or being rejected. Other symbols of identity were in fact more central to participation than was ethnic origin: my friends were quite sure that I could not possibly wish to wear the suit and tie I wore on a Sunday to go to Presbyterian or Methodist services: I had no choice but to wear blue jeans and T-shirts into which I dutifully changed. In either cases, the dress-in-setting was supposed to express "my" self, and to insist on anything else was suspect.<sup>14</sup> Besides dress, alcohol and drug consumption, style of partying, before and after a party behavior, and so forth, all were interpreted as expressions of identity that were also markers of my identity: in secularized puritanism, one knows a person through his symbolic works.

Let us look at another, less local, case. It is well known, though somewhat embarrassing to many Americans (those currently using the interpretive structures provided by America), that color is an all or nothing affair in political identification, whether in terms of interpersonal matters, local politics, or the most public and least local of settings. A person is or is not "Black." There is no room in Congress for a caucus of "half-breeds," "octoroons," and other categories of racial intercourse that were quite developed in earlier Americas. This directly contravenes the understanding of blood descent so well analyzed by Schneider (1968).<sup>15</sup> In a recent issue of *Ebony* (April 1993), Randolph, a journalist for a magazine closely identified with the Black experience in America,<sup>16</sup> frames a feature article about the actress Halle Berry as a tale of adversity confronted, dealt with, and eventually recompensed, first by professional, and then personal success. The key is set in an opening sentence: "Although her memorable roles in a string of hit movies . . . have made her the hottest Black actress in Hollywood, this daughter of a White mother and a Black father would be the first to tell you she has led an uneasy life." This is immediately expanded by a mention of her "identity": "Her internal turmoil started early in life, largely because of the confusion about her racial identity." This is followed by stories of prejudice in a predominantly White high school, and culminates with something that is first treated as coercion, and then transformed into a personal, existential, choice that was the only proper one to the very extent that it was predetermined. This is told in reported speech that emphasizes that we are indeed hearing Halle Berry's voice (rather than that of some journalist):

My mother cleared it up for me when I was very young. She said when you look in the mirror you are going to see a Black woman.



You're going to be discriminated against as a Black woman so ultimately in this society, that's who you will be. And that's made my life very easy... I *needed* to make a choice and feel part of this culture. I feel a lot of pride in being a Black woman. (emphasis in the original)

An ironic reading is tempting, particularly if one emphasizes the unacknowledged contradictions in talk about discrimination, a life made easy, and choice. Berry's story could be told as one of possibly tragic, and certainly pathetic, coercion. First a "realist" White mother, then peers in high school, and then a whole society (Hollywood casting agents and directors, editors of *Ebony* looking for a prominent person to sketch who would be considered Black by everyone, etc.), all held Halle Berry to being "Black." In the process, the crowd who produced the tale make culture a matter of self-determination.

My goal here is not to play the irony game. We have no choice but to take seriously actresses and magazine editors who, through whatever personal, political, or commercial processes, did not write Berry's tale on the collective mode.<sup>17</sup> One should recognize the possibility that all the people involved here may, at times, be existentially aware that culture (race, ethnicity) is not a matter of choice. One should also face the fact that they may not easily find the words, and the space to say them, to affirm that one "is" never quite Black or White but that, in America, one inevitably will be *identified* as one or the other. In America, one must even assume this identification personally: One must "feel part" of the assigned culture that must be "one's own" culture. In America, one must *be* American.

## AMERICA IN CONVERSATION

Understanding America as the historical remnants of old constructions, that newcomers, children or immigrants, find on their way as they build their own lives is but a first step in understanding the process of a life in the United States. In the brief analyses of the processes of racial identification I conducted, I used the verb of obligation, if not coercion: "must." Theoretically, this *must* is to be understood as "is accountable to."<sup>18</sup> Halle Berry was held accountable by her mother, her peers, and Hollywood, to being Black—she could not *ignore* that all these people were doing to her and with her. She could have *refused* the identification through specific actions that would always have had consequences. She would have had to pay a price since very few persons, and certainly not any person of consequence, would have ac-

cepted a self-identification as "White."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, I, in the round of introductions I evoked earlier, could not prevent my hosts from dramatizing the Melting Pot Myth, but I could, as I continue to do, refuse to "pledge allegiance." There is a distinction to be made here. An American in Japan cannot ignore the Emperor; a Japanese in America cannot ignore the skepticism toward any tradition. Neither has to accept the conditions of their everyday life as the right way to be in the world, and they may even work at changing what they find themselves conversing with.

Indeed, when one looks at the history of the United States, and this is true of the history of any society, one never sees simple habitual acceptance and mechanical repetition of old truths. From the earliest, in the seventeenth century already, the smallest communities were racked by dissension about the appropriate means of institutionalizing the messianic space that had opened on the Western shores of the Atlantic Ocean. The War of Independence had many aspects of a civil war. One hundred years later an even more violent war was fought precisely on the grounds of the relationship with possible others who were also coinhabitants, and coparticipants, of the same social space. The slaves were no longer Africans who could be returned to their old country; neither could they be removed to a reserve and given the ambiguous autonomous status that was given to those human beings who used the land before other human beings moved across the Atlantic. Through Reconstruction, the major burst of immigration at the turn of the century, and now through what may be another major burst, things were never settled. People struggled with each other and the traditions that already organized the landscape. But they had no choice but to respond to, and then use, these traditions for their own purposes, whether aggressively (in the first generations of a new migration) or defensively (later on). Immigrants may not melt, but they have no choice except to enter in conversation with everyone else and, in these conversations, to use the only mythical language that is efficacious in an American context: the language of the socially constituted self ("*I am* a so-and-so") with particular rights ("as such *I am* entitled to..."). In this conversation, such a call is responded to with a recognition of the call to a self ("indeed *you are* a so-and-so") and then with a reminder of a long list of responsibilities ("You must respect other selves in the manner in which you hope they will respect you"). In America one may have any self one may develop, but the relationship with other selves, in myth and political discourse, is fully regulated.

The Myth of the Melting Pot somewhat hides the principle of its constitution by emphasizing the agency of the individuals caught together on the streets of New York City, and silencing the institutions that organize life there—from the grid pattern that one inherits from eighteenth-century rationalism, to

the speeches of journalists and politicians talking about "mosaics." The mosaic metaphor goes further in this process by emphasizing the constituted self (rather than the active one), and de-emphasizing the continual and intimate intercourse of different selves with each other—the strength of the melting pot image. The mosaic metaphor, instead, emphasizes boundaries, and encourages boundary-maintaining activities (uni-ethnic parades, but also block voting, and also perhaps gangs enforcing the purity of one's enclave). The salad bowl metaphor seems a sarcastic one, particularly if one thinks about what happens to salad once it has stayed in a bowl for a few hours. Eventually, however, all these images reconstruct a particular world of universal import—though perhaps not quite the way Thomas Paine intended it when he wrote in the introduction to *Common Sense*, "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind" ([1776] 1976: 63). All cultures are of universal import in their very particularity, but only America has found itself at the time and place whence it might diffuse itself around the globe in little more than two centuries.

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## NOTES

1. I mean "great version" somewhat like Redfield's talking about Great Traditions. His distinction between "folk society" and "civilization" ([1953] 1962) may be read, in modern jargon as a distinction between "popular" and "hegemonic" cultures (Fiske, 1989)—as long as we keep in mind that the distinction is an analytic one: in the everyday life of people, whether in villages or capital cities, material from both poles are always both resources and constraints.

2. The argument is an expansion of the Chock's work on the "redaction" of ethnicity (1980, 1981, 1989).

3. I am self-consciously using the masculine pronoun here to emphasize the hegemonic aspect of this myth on both men and women. Some have wanted to distinguish the "reality" of individualism to the "reality" of community by seeing the former as "masculine" and the latter as "feminine" (Johnstone, 1990). I see them as mutually constructed within a larger interactional context in which male voices have always been very loud.

4. Indeed, it is only modern conventions about nation-states that makes it commonsensical to deal with Japan as if it were *one* society. There would be much historical reason to think of it, as part of a larger, and quite heterogeneous group, made up (to simplify) of China, Korea, and Japan. Since the Meiji era perhaps, and certainly since the end of World War II, Japan's "society" is a pole within a "world system" in which the United States is a dominant participant.

5. The same line of argument was used when people of different denominations met formally in "community" services. Difference (between Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, etc.) was stressed and then encompassed symbolically.

6. From the point of view of a theory of culture as ordered conversation, what is interesting in the famous passage that legislated that slaves in the Southern States be counted as two-thirds persons, is that it was eventually deleted as the stress on the universality of the principle was reaffirmed, with overwhelming force, during the Civil War.

7. For those who would prefer a more recent example from a popular medium, another example might be the film *Mississippi Massala* in which the daughter of an Indian family who escape from massacre in Uganda, falls in love and elopes with the son of a Black family. Like Zangwill's play, *Mississippi Massala* moves from naive love, to the recognition of familial and community opposition, to the recognition of personal prejudice, to the overcoming of first this prejudice, and then the more general one as at least some of the communities recognize the illegitimacy of their attempts to control their children. The last images of the film are of the couple moving into their own future, away from both their old countries.

8. I adopt here Louis Dumont's analysis (1991) of German nationalism as developed in the nineteenth century as prototypical of an ideology that evolved in reaction to the French enlightenment in its universalism.

9. The dramatic fate of W. I. Thomas at the hand of his peers at the University of Chicago (Capetti, 1989) underscores that, whatever one may think of the theories of socialization and enculturation that his sociological tradition developed, one must not see in them nativist theories.

10. In a classic Western movie such as "Shane," both the heroes (Shane as the flawed savior, and the family that temporarily adopts him) and antiheroes (the rancher and his hired hand, the store owner) are unmarked ethnically. The people whom Shane saves, however, are marked through accent, dress, or favorite music.

11. Sollors points out how Erickson dedicated *Childhood and Society* ([1950] 1970) "TO OUR children's children" (Erickson's multiple emphases). Margaret Mead, in her little book on the 1960s (1970), celebrated a new kind of third generation that was coming to adulthood at that time: they were "prefigurative" people that who were at work building a radically new world in which their parents were immigrants. The often noted glorification of abstract childhood (and the neglect of actual children) in

American culture would thus seem to be rooted at the deepest ideological level. Parents, that is actual America, will always be "second generation" in relation to the children's "third," and the real America is still to be constructed.

12. W. Penn himself returned to Europe at the end of his life, taking with him a project for the creation of the United States of Europe for which his Pennsylvania was considered to be a precursor. He, too, may have been a dissatisfied immigrant (De Rougemont, 1961: 100-105).

13. The use of the labels can be overinterpreted however. Moynihan himself argued persuasively for the inclusion of a question about self-identification in ethnic terms that is in fact the subject of one of the papers in this collection. As Yanow argues in this collection, the drawing of the choices made available to the people—and the problems raised by people as they answer them—is evidence that the matter is not a simple one of reflecting realities. Most American ethnic realities (children of marriages between people of different groups, people who belong to groups that can legitimately claim two positions—Black and Hispanic, for example, or people who insist on calling themselves "American," etc.) cannot in fact be measured through the questions.

14. What would have been even more suspect, if it had been widely known, was my apparently equally enthusiastic participation in both settings. Which, could I have been asked by a suspicious native, was my "real" self, with whom was I really in community? The serious form of this question centers on the issue of nationality. Eventually, a resident of the United States "must" recognize a new identity, ask for the status of citizen, and pledge allegiance to the flag—freely.

15. As Schneider showed, American kinship is implacably bilateral: one is equally the child of both parents and inherit equally whatever properties are deemed to descend through blood. There is no "choice" possible here. There is no space in this system for a blood characteristic like color to be assigned unilaterally. Thus Judaic theories about the primary role of the mother, and any other unilateral theory of descent, must be suspect. This mechanistic system, however, contravenes democratic principles of choice and transcendence. Schneider begins to deal with this when discussing "love" ("diffuse and enduring solidarity"). One must go must further: blood may be stronger than water, but love (free movement toward another person) transcends them all.

16. See the essay by Urciuoli in this collection for a discussion of a similar magazine identified with the Hispanic experience.

17. The whole episode fits in the "dramatic" moment in the Melting Pot Myth of which I talked earlier: the heroine has taken on "her" group, she is proud of it, and is ready to fight for it. Without an ulterior recognition of the common humanity of members of all groups and their equivalence, this narrative moment would become the pretext to a tragedy, or a way of interpreting an actual tragic occurrence.

18. The reference here is to the work of ethnomethodologists (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Garfinkel, 1967).

19. The situation is not so far-fetched given the apparent refusal by some Spanish speaking immigrants from the Caribbean to have anything to do with Blackness, whatever the color of their skins.

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