

A Reply to Ravitch

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I am dismayed that Diane Ravitch would suggest some sort of correspondence between my position and the ideas expressed by Molefi Kete Asante's mudslinging assault on her in *The American Scholar*. The gravamen of Ravitch's complaint is that I am an Anglo-Saxonist equivalent of an Afrocentrist. However, my purpose was not to make a cult of Anglo-Saxonism in an ethnic sense, but to articulate a key facet of our national character that has been obscured by contemporary ideologies. We simply cannot speak the truth about ourselves as a people without acknowledging the persistence and centrality of Anglo-Saxon ideals and norms of behavior in American life. Since I am saying that Americans of all backgrounds have assimilated, and should continue to assimilate, into a common cultural identity (which does not mean denying ethnic traits and traditions), it would seem that Ravitch—with her belief that *ethnic* diversity is tantamount to an ineluctable *cultural* diversity—is actually closer to ethnic filiopietism than I am.

It cannot be stated too strongly: ethnic diversity is not the same as cultural diversity. Ethnic diversity refers to distinctions of ancestry, appearance, emotional style, cuisine, folk tradition, and so on; cultural diversity implies entirely separate and autonomous ways of life. Ruben Berrios-Martinez of the Puerto Rico Independence party told a Senate committee on 30 January 1991:

In the United States...ethnic minorities may retain folkloric and idiosyncratic traits, but they coalesce around the American way of life. There can be no doubt that after two hundred years there exists a well-defined American nationality in the cultural and social sense of that term. The United States is a unitary, not a multinational country.

This notion of a historically and culturally defined American nationality is exactly what Ravitch rejects. When she says, *inter alia*, that the national heritage has been redefined "by many others who do not trace their ancestry to England," the implication is that the groups in question were acting on the American stage in the fullness of their putative cultural diversity; this obscures the essential point that those others not from England were becoming or had already become *Americans*—a process that includes acculturation to predominantly Anglo-conformist ideals and norms. It is emblematic of this fact that the greatest proponents of the Anglo-American ideal in this century were not WASPs but the Jewish immigrants who created Hollywood.

Ravitch, in criticizing my use of Milton Gordon's Anglo-conformity concept, quotes Arthur Mann to the effect that "ethnic diversity has characterized America from the beginning." But Gordon never denied that America had ethnic diversity; he was not, as Ravitch claims, speaking only about *religious* diversity within an otherwise homogeneous white population, but about *ethnic* diversity. His theme was that white ethnics culturally assimilated while maintaining their structural pluralism. Once again, Ravitch has confused the historical ethnic diversity of America—which no one disputes—with "cultural"

diversity, and on that basis dismisses Gordon's account of a common culture historically defined by Anglo-conformity.

Alternatively, Ravitch dismisses the Anglo-conformity model, not because she thinks Gordon was wrong, but because Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life* was published before the great transformations of the 1960s. But that, as I made clear, was my reason for citing him; I wanted to show how recent (and Orwellian) is the redefinition of America as "multicultural." Now, if Ravitch agrees with Gordon that America had an Anglo-conformity common culture up to 1964, but thinks that it has since become multicultural due to the extraordinary social changes of the past twenty-five years, such as the emergence of black separatism and the vast increase of unmelted ethnic groups (not to mention the breakdown of cultural transmission in our families and schools), then she is tacitly admitting that multiculturalism is an aberration in the American experience, not a mere continuation of a historic pattern. In effect, Ravitch embraces that cultural deformation and declares the unmelted ethnics to be the defining model for all of society. Not only does this approach falsify America's historical experience, it also casts doubt on Ravitch's stated concerns about inclusiveness. After all, what place is there in her scheme for the vast majority in this country who don't regard themselves as members of a cultural subgroup, but simply as Americans?

Despite her best efforts, Ravitch cannot extricate herself from the oxymoron of a "multicultural" common culture. Rejecting the charge that she is slighting the Western roots of American civilization, she says the United States has "strong cultural ties with Europe." But the question is: what relative importance do those ties have within a paradigm formulated solely in terms of diversity? Since Ravitch defines America as an ever-changing mix of cultural influences that are "remaking" American society in each generation, then as the country becomes more non-European and multicultural, will America not also have "strong cultural ties" to Asia and Latin America? In that case, what happens to the supposedly "unique" importance of Europe? And are we not then back in the collection-of-equal-cultures paradigm?

While denying that she sees America as a collection of cultures, Ravitch yet insists that our society includes "many diverse cultures." What she means by this can be gleaned from her amazing assertion—hitherto made only by the more radical ethnic spokesmen—that one can be an American "without relinquishing one's native culture, language, religion, food, dress, or folkways." Since these unrelinquished folkways would presumably include Chinese-style patriarchy, West African matrimonial customs, the Muslim chador, Haitian voodoo, and the Santerian animal-sacrificing cult, "collection" does not seem an inappropriate characterization. Somewhat inconsistently, she says that America's "story is one of diverse peoples meeting, mingling, and changing each other." This sounds less like a collection than a kaleidoscope. However Ravitch articulates her model of society, it is inconsistent with the

idea of a national community spanning generations, of a membership that—in Burke's phrase—joins the dead, the living, and the yet to be born.

Ravitch nevertheless argues that the diverse cultures are not a collection, because "[w]e are bound together as a people by a common commitment to the political ideas and values contained in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights." But is it not obvious that even a purely *civic* bond—which Ravitch proposes as our only commonality—cannot be maintained without a matrix of *cultural* commonality? Since many of the folkways in today's burgeoning cultural mix are non-Western, tribal, antirational, or authoritarian, how can they be part of a common civic culture defined by America's Founding principles? The answer is that in Ravitch's view the common culture, which is supposedly based on the Founding, is *itself* an ever-changing, ever "redefined" idea: "To understand where we came from, it is necessary to study [the Founding Fathers] and their works. To understand who we are today as a people, it is necessary to recognize that we are not all Anglo-Saxon; that we come from all corners of the globe"; and so on. In other words, in multicultural America the Founding is only of *historical* significance. The American community is not constituted—as it was for every previous generation—by a shared affective link with the Founding as a source of self-evident truths and moral exemplars, as a focus of common loyalty or sense of peoplehood. By Ravitch's light, the civic culture that binds us is not the Founding heritage, but post-1960s pluralist ideology.

Pluralist ideology, followed to its logical end, severs the link to the past that formed the American mind and character in previous generations; it prevents the transmission of what Robin Fox of Rutgers University has called a "rudimentary common sense of what it is to be an American." As Ernest Renan said, a nation is defined not by ethnicity, but by a shared historical memory and a common heritage. That is what Milton Gordon meant by "identificational" assimilation—the adoption of the historical heritage of the host people as *one's own*. It is a principle that this nation of immigrants cannot afford to forget.