A Response to Auster

Diane Ravitch

In the Spring 1991 issue of *The American Scholar*, I replied to Molefi Kete Asante, a proponent of Afrocentrism, who accused me of being hopelessly Eurocentric. He wrote in reaction to the same article that Lawrence Auster now criticizes for being insufficiently Anglo-Saxon. I am tempted to introduce the two gentlemen to each other, and let them carry on their argument about Eurocentrism without me.

Like Auster, I believe that there is a common American culture; that point was, in fact, a central claim of the article in the *American Scholar* with which he takes issue. My article stated that

> It is hardly surprising that America's schools would recognize strong cultural ties with Europe since our nation's political, religious, educational, and economic institutions were created chiefly by people of European descent, our government was shaped by European ideas, and nearly 80 percent of the people who live here are of European descent. (P. 348)

Where Auster and I disagree is that he believes our common culture is Anglo-Saxon, and that it is up to all newcomers to jump into the Anglo-Saxon melting pot. He cites as authority for his view Milton M. Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life*. But Gordon's book was written in 1964, before the rise of "the unmeltable ethnics," before the civil rights revolution and black nationalism, before the bilingual movement, and before the dramatic revision of the immigration law. Today, in the 1990s, it is easy to forget that the burning intergroup issue of the 1940s and 1950s was religious prejudice; many people believed that the nation would never elect a Catholic president. Writing in the early 1960s, Gordon believed that the primary cultural differentiations in American life were along religious lines. Auster quotes Gordon at length, but in the part of the quote that was replaced by ellipses, Gordon writes:

> From a nation overwhelmingly and characteristically Protestant in the late eighteenth century, America has become a national entity of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—where membership in, or identificational allegiance to, one or the other of these three great faiths is the norm, and where the legitimacy of the institutional presence and ramifications of this presence of the three denominations is routinely honored in American public opinion. (Pp. 110-11)

Because he was writing before race and ethnicity replaced religion as the chief causes of intergroup tension, Gordon remarked upon the triumph of "Anglo-conformity."

More recent works have recognized that ethnicity is an important factor in American life and is not a static phenomenon. As different groups join our

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national community, the importance of ethnicity in public life changes, as does its bearing on our national identity. For example, Arthur Mann, in *The One and the Many* (University of Chicago Press, 1979), notes that "We seem always to have been a people in the process of becoming" (151). What has made possible our national unity has been, first, a common civic culture based on our democratic political system; second, the dispersion of ethnic groups throughout the United States, instead of being concentrated in special preserves or homelands; and third, a shared national language.

Mann also writes that

> ethnic diversity has characterized America from the beginning. Neither prescribed nor proscribed by law, the ethnic group originated with members who affiliated of their own will; and the collectivity held together to the degree it satisfied varied needs for belonging: religious, educational, fraternal, matrimonial, political, economic, or the need for protection against discrimination. Meanwhile, the state stood aside, silently acknowledging that voluntarism was liberty's way of identification. (P. 154)

Indeed, it is tolerance and inclusiveness that makes America so attractive to people from other lands, and it seems probable that tolerance ultimately promotes assimilation and acculturation, not separation.

Although our nation does include many diverse cultures, we are not simply a collection of diverse cultures. We 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 and elaborated by those (like Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr.) who have extended and articulated the definition of our civic culture in each generation. We have our heroes, our sacred texts, and our symbols, some of which are drawn from our Anglo-Saxon heritage. But our national heritage is larger than its Anglo-Saxon roots. It has been shaped, enriched, redefined, and transformed by many others who do not trace their ancestry to England.

In the United States, one may be a good citizen without relinquishing one's native culture, language, religion, food, dress, or folkways. Contrary to contemporary belief, some people did get melted in the melting pot through intermarriage and experience. Many others did not. In my own neighborhood in New York, there is a wide variety of unmelted ethnic groups, of various colors, various cultures, various religions, various national origins. And they are all Americans. To quote Arthur Mann yet again, "Unlike such countries as Brazil or France, America's definition of nationality was civic rather than cultural. It therefore left space for different ethnic affiliations while upholding to a diverse people the unifying values of the nation's democratic polity and society" (178).

In my article I argued on behalf of the principle of *e pluribus unum*, which represents the interconnectedness of the principles of commonality and diversity. I held these principles up as a positive ideal, in contrast to the

extremes of racial and ethnic particularism that have recently emerged in our schools and universities, demanding special treatment, separate facilities, and filiopietistic studies instead of the critical approach that customarily is associated with academic studies. In disagreeing with me, Auster offers English particularism as the definition of American nationality and insists that only this definition offers proper resistance to the extreme versions of multiculturalism that are now threatening to shred any sense of a common culture.

I believe that Auster is wrong because it is obvious to anyone who observes an American metropolis that our nation is pluralistic; our story is one of diverse peoples meeting, mingling, and changing each other. Our national alchemy is American, and unlike any other nation in the world. I also believe he is wrong for strategic reasons, because one's preferred version of particularism does not offer an adequate defense against someone else's version of particularism.

Indeed, one of the current multiculturalist programs that has found favor in the schools is to teach five versions of particularism: whites get Eurocentrism; blacks get Afrocentrism; Hispanics get Latinocentrism; Asians get Asiacentrism; American Indians get native Americentrism. And there is even a move to create a special curriculum for Pacific Islanders. Students are to study all history, literature, mathematics, science, etc., solely through the perspective of the racial group to which they are presumed to belong. The confusion of race and culture has not slowed down the enthusiasts of particularism.

Auster's embrace of Anglo-Saxon particularism feeds into the ideology of those who claim that children should study "their" history, "their" people, "their" ancestors. In this, he is no different from the Afrocentrists. I argue that our common culture must be inclusive enough to embrace the varieties of the American experience. I also believe that it is wrong for schools—particularly public schools—to teach children how to be ethnic, to train them in their folkways, to assume the burden of transmitting to them their ethnic heritage. When an ethnic group no longer does these things spontaneously, through family, church, neighborhood, and voluntary associations, then the validity of the ethnic connection is questionable. If it has to be taught to children in a compulsory public school, then it probably does not have an authentic existence of its own.

No matter who lives in these United States, so long as it is a democracy with constitutional safeguards for our rights and liberties, we will give thanks to the hardy men who launched the ship of state. Their ideas were so powerful that they created a magnet for people all over the world. The changes that have occurred during these past two centuries are not trivial. We are not precisely what the Founding Fathers intended. To understand where we came from, it is necessary to study them 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 that we will thrive to the extent that we continually reshape a civic community and a common culture that embraces both the one and the many.