

INCLUSION: A PERSONAL NOTE

by Allen Weinstein



The editors of *Elections Today* should be complimented for the appropriate timing of this issue focused on “Inclusion.” A number of our fellow citizens who became Americans at birth might profit today from a reminder of how *un*-nativist the achievement of citizenship remains in the United States—even in this fearful time of homeland defense alerts. In our “nation of nations,” ethno-cultural diversity is the norm. Thus, the current

excessive societal unease about recent immigrants from Arab or Islamic societies remains indefensible in the context of our national past. As historian Michael Barone reminds us in his book, *The New Americans*:

America in the future will be multiracial and multiethnic, but it will not—or should not—be multicultural in the sense of containing ethnic communities marked off from and adversarial to the larger society.... Some claim that today's minorities are different because they are different races, but a hundred years ago the Irish, Italians and Jews were considered to be other races....[We] are not in a wholly new place in American history. We've been here before....On the whole,...assimilation was successful. It has made us a strong, creative, tolerant nation.

Not that Jewish-Americans of my generation need a reminder of how dramatically our fortunes changed—and flourished—through such assimilation. Having grown up in an immigrant ambience during the 1940s, with parents who spoke Yiddish as often as English at home, I recall vividly the ethnic demarcations of my neighborhood that separated Irish, Italian, Polish, Jewish and other “minorities,” block-by-block, sometimes house-by-house, only to merge in the blended ethno-cultural world of the public school system or the public university. For my mother, “assimilation” had come first in the garment sweatshops of the Lower East Side in which she labored before marrying my father; for him, it would evolve within the small-business world that he inhabited.

Slowly but surely, often prodded along by government actions—during the New Deal, World War II, or the post-War years (i.e., the G.I. Bill)—such assimilation wove together the immigrant fabric of American life, to be joined beginning in the 1960s by substantial numbers of African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and other previously excluded groups. Even today, it would be foolish to assert that this long and complex process of assimilation has been completed for all groups. But it would be comparably foolish not to recognize that *all* of the United States’ contentious

ethno-cultural “tribes”—including our most recent arrivals—in some manner are already engaged in this inclusive process.

Are there uniquely American lessons in our pluralist assimilating mechanisms for a world in which both older and newer societies find themselves with significant local minorities not fully included in their country’s patterns of citizenship? Perhaps, but to me, from the perspective of the past two decades spent as a global democracy activist, few if any overriding lessons from America’s distinctive historical experience appear transferable to other countries.

The post-Cold War international community appears caught between diametrically opposed tendencies: a greater measure of regional and global integration, both economic and political, as opposed to a dramatic increase in ethno-cultural “tribalism” and the breakdown of national cohesion. Even in the trans-Atlantic community, the record remains mixed. It took belated but decisive military action by NATO to bring to an end the bloody conflicts between Orthodox Serbs and (alternately) Roman Catholic Croatians, Islamic Bosnians and Islamic Kosovars. At the same time, though, quiet pressures by NATO and the European Union encouraged the resolution of long-standing conflicts between Hungarians and Romanians over the cultural framework of citizenship as minorities in the other’s country. Still other ethno-cultural challenges in Europe, including integration into the EU of Turkey’s Muslim population and the Catholic-Protestant divide in Northern Ireland, evade rapid resolution. Elsewhere in the world, a number of other ethno-culturally based international conflicts continue to breed violence.

Whether the American record provides constructive examples for resolving the internal group conflict issues of inclusion, belonging and citizenship in other societies, even those in other democracies, remains arguable. Americans might continue to spend their time more productively pursuing solutions to our own group-based issues—for example, encouraging the full acceptance and assimilation of recent immigrants from Arabic and Islamic countries: issues that continue to challenge this obsessively self-corrective country. Not that there is any danger of the United States being excluded today from involvement in global conflict resolution, at a time when this country’s actions offer at least the promise of serious dialogue among contending groups in Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Northern Ireland, and numerous other trouble spots. 🗳️

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