

REVIEWS

We Are All Multiculturalists Now, by Nathan Glazer. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997, 193 pp., \$19.95 hardbound.

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While people making the case against multiculturalism like to imagine themselves embroiled in lively combat, and perhaps even flush at times with the occasional rhetorical victory, the truth is, Nathan Glazer tells us in his latest book, that the war is actually over and the multiculturalists have won. Glazer apparently means for his title, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*, to be seen as provocative only at the outset, and then as simple, self-evident truth by the conclusion. Multiculturalism is the "inescapable reality" of today's America, Glazer argues, and while "it once was taken for granted that public education had as little reason to notice or help maintain separate minority group cultures among students as to notice or help maintain religion, of whatever kind, today a new dispensation prevails and it will not change for a long time. The new dispensation...is commonly summed up in the term 'multiculturalism.'"

Not that Glazer believes the proponents of multiculturalism have won on the merits of their arguments. To the contrary, he is if anything more in sympathy with the multicultural critics who worry about the fragmentation of our society, the fraudulence of multicultural claims, the loss of the centrality of the Western and European ideals that have formed the core of our culture, even in its pluralistic version, and the incapacity of multicultural education to help the very people it purports to help. Nevertheless, Glazer believes, some of the more modest multiculturalist claims have validity, and,

in any event, multiculturalism has won on the ground, so to speak, and has triumphed politically in the public arena and in the schools. And for Glazer there is a kind of rough comeuppance in this development. Multiculturalism is the price America is now paying for its failure, whether due to "unwillingness" or "inability" (some of both, Glazer seems to think), to integrate its black population fully into its civic and cultural life.

Glazer first began to recognize the triumph of multiculturalism when he was serving on the committee to investigate then New York State Commissioner of Education Thomas Sobol's controversial *A Curriculum of Inclusion*, which caused quite an uproar in New York in the early nineties with its revisionist and often preposterous multicultural claims, some of them the input of consultant Leonard Jeffries, an extreme Afrocentrist. But as materials flowed in from all over New York State for the committee to study as background to their report, Glazer was shocked to discover how deeply entrenched multiculturalism already was in the New York State public school system, even while the public debate over *A Curriculum of Inclusion* made it seem as if the outcome were still open. Further, Glazer notes, even outspoken critics of the *Curriculum* like Diane Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., went on to endorse other models of multicultural curricula in other locales and contexts, curricula that were heavy in emphasis on diversity, race, and ethnicity. Ravitch and Schlesinger also at one point signed a statement in opposition to *A Curriculum of Inclusion* that defended traditional scholarly standards but also conceded that historical scholarship has "shamefully neglected...the history of women, of immigrants, and of minorities." "Whether the distinguished signers really believed this last point I am not sure," Glazer comments drily, but he ad-

duces it, with justification, as evidence that “we are all multiculturalists now.”

In his analysis to this point Glazer is a cold eyed realist, and his willingness to face up to the situation rather than to traffic in the ongoing illusions of think tanks and panel discussions is admirable. “For a while we will be devoting great attention to American diversity in our education and public policy,” Glazer warns us sternly, and further states that this will be accomplished “not without some distortion and distention of the larger picture in the process.”

But then for the other half of his thesis, that all of this can happen without harm to our collective body, or at least without “the extremes of rancor and divisiveness that the critics of multiculturalism fear,” Glazer puts on the rose colored glasses so as not to see the evidence his own clear vision brings to light. For example, he maintains that multiculturalism is mainly driven by the desire on the part of blacks to gain a greater share of inclusiveness, yet he has to admit that there is little evidence that feel-good ethnic history, instead of “Shakespeare and algebra,” will bring them closer to that goal. In fact, certain alarming facts suggest the races are growing more estranged on certain points; for example, polls show an amazingly large proportion of blacks disposed to believe there to be a genocidal conspiracy to destroy them with AIDS and drugs. Glazer of course says we must fight such false beliefs but he also allows, regretfully, “that Afro-centric exaggeration will play a substantial role in inner-city schools, and we will continue to see myths taken as truths.”

Furthermore, even if we grant Glazer’s point, that multiculturalism is at bottom about greater inclusiveness for blacks—a point even he concedes may not be convincing, given the anti-American animus of much multiculturalism—when multi-

culturalism inevitably fails to produce that end, won’t we have made our historic problem worse by having put off once again the day of real reckoning with full integration?¹

Glazer also acknowledges that, regardless of the originating impulse, multiculturalism is now the standard of other groups as well, including Hispanics and Asian Americans, all with their own sets of grievances against America. In one of his most telling anecdotes, Glazer reports an incident that occurred while he was serving on a two-man subcommittee that was charged with issuing an introduction to the New York State committee’s recommendations on the social studies curriculum. Glazer found a statement in the literature that he thought would be appropriate, from a 1989 report by the Curriculum Task Force of the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools:

Classrooms today bring together young people of many backgrounds with a broad spectrum of life experience. We can expect an even more diverse student population in the twenty-first century. This diversity enriches our nation even as it presents a new challenge to develop the social studies education that integrates all students into our system of democratic government and helps them subscribe to the values from our past—especially our devotion to democratic values and procedures. The coexistence of increasing diversity and cherished tradition require [*sic*] social studies in our schools to cultivate participatory citizenship....The study of social involvement and often competing loyalties addresses basic questions: “Who am I?” “To what communities do I belong?” “What does citizenship in our nation require of me as an individual and as a member of the various groups to which I belong?”

This is no doubt an example of the more modest multiculturalism that

Glazer hopes for, but he must admit that he was astonished when his co-chair, an Hispanic American professor

vigorously objected to the use of these to me unobjectionable and bland statements. To him they suggested that "there is a fund of common values in the U.S. that should be imposed on all immigrants." He thought the contrast between "increasing diversity" and "cherished traditions" "un-charitable." He felt the use of the words "ours" was exclusionary. He saw in the statement the "xenophobic language of the nativists and the Americanization movement," of "the worst moments of U.S. chauvinism." He objected that the reference to "competing loyalties" depreciated the significance of group distinctiveness and group loyalty for minority groups.

In other words, Glazer concluded, "subgroup loyalty rather trumped American loyalty." But Glazer shrugs these sentiments off agnostically—"How broadly these sentiments would be held among Hispanic Americans, or Hispanic American scholars, I do not know"—rather than being alarmed at what they portend.

Glazer persists in believing that what will save us from the extremes of multiculturalism will be "the elements of the American system that hold us together, in particular the basic political rules that we have adhered to for so long." But the words of the Hispanic American professor indicate that even the merest reference to the special values and processes of the American system may be offensive since they imply a certain set of core principles. Interestingly, the professor did want surety for the "cherished guarantees of the Constitution," but apparently objected to efforts to secure these by teaching young people about the "cherished traditions" that are "ours."

As for Glazer's agnosticism about how widespread the beliefs of the Hispanic

American professor are, suffice it to say that few professors speak thoughts unique to themselves, and as for the rank and file, how could multiculturalism have progressed as far as it has if it didn't have a large degree of support from the groups it speaks for, even if not on every count?

Glazer seems to be relying on American exceptionalism even as he declares that it can no longer be invoked. "The new America that multiculturalism...envisages and is trying to establish as the America we will learn about in schools will not, like the old, take it for granted that this is the best of all countries, as well as the strongest and the richest," Glazer tells us. "We will become more self-conscious about making any claim to a distinctive virtue and superiority, and that is all for the best." He hopes, however, that multiculturalism will not undermine his more modest, preferred vision of America as "still, on balance, a success in world history, a diverse society that continues to welcome further diversity, with a distinctive and common culture of some merit."

First, it is not at all clear that aggressive multiculturalism will permit even that much, but even if it did, will that be enough? Isn't some belief in American exceptionalism needed for the huge demands being made on the American polity at this time? If we are not exceptional why must we perform these miracles of equalization, integration, immigration, globalization, diversification, and so on? Some of the myths of America that multiculturalists undermine may actually be necessary to support the multiculturalists' own demands.

Moreover, Glazer believes that multiculturalism will not subvert his more modest vision of American worthiness because "the basic demand of the multiculturalists is for inclusion, not separation, and inclusion under the same

rules—stretching back to the Constitution—that have permitted the steady broadening of what we understand as equality.” But in its demand for public recognition of group identity, hasn’t multiculturalism already undermined the Constitution and traditional American principles of individualism?

Most important in this regard, multiculturalists object to the teaching of the principles specific to the American polity, the very principles that Glazer says will “hold us together, the basic political rules that we have adhered to for so long.” Aside from such anecdotal evidence as that provided by the Hispanic American professor above, Glazer cites John Patrick Diggins’s assessment of the multicultural national world history standards, an assessment with which Glazer agrees: “The standards rest on assumptions that are dubious if not preposterous,” reports Diggins. “The most glaring contradiction is that its authors seek to inculcate political values characteristic of the Western World that cannot be derived from what they would have students learn about the non-Western world.” For their part, the national American history standards teach that the United States is the “historical convergence of European, African, and native American people.” How will young people learn of the unique historical developments that secured our freedoms—“the specifically Anglo-American tradition of natural rights,” as Diggins puts it—if they begin with falsehoods implying that these freedoms can be derived from almost any cultural context? Glazer’s willingness to remain sanguine in the face of all he sees seems to be based on shaky ground. First of all, Glazer seems not to appreciate what it says about the future of a culture that sound intellectual arguments have lost out to politicized bullying and ethnic and racial group grievances, and in which the intellectual classes themselves are promot-

ing or tolerating bogus history for these groups. This would seem to bode poorly for a nation built on individual equality before the law and rational democratic debate. (It also indicates a certain lack of respect for the groups themselves, who are in effect being indulged out of fear, forbearance, or condescension.)

Then, Glazer seems to underestimate the extent to which the mainstream, whoever constitutes the part of our nation that isn’t a grieving minority, has also succumbed to the assaults. Many have mentally seceded already and have come to care very little for a country that will not even defend itself from outright lies about its founding history. Others have become so diffident about American principles that they can scarcely be called upon to defend them. Young people will often make sure to downplay American virtue rather than suggest its superiority. If Hitler was bad, so we were: we had concentration camps, destroyed Dresden, bombed Japan, obliterated the Indians, oppressed African Americans; even today we are a long way from complete freedom and equality, and so on. Young people responding in this way are not vicious America haters, they are being true to what they have been taught. As Glazer himself has implied, it’s not, well, polite to invoke America’s virtues or to imply any superiority.

Finally, Glazer seems to feel that since he doesn’t see any overt civil war at present, multiculturalism cannot be doing much harm in the macrosociety. He does not seem to realize that his generation, with its fairmindedness, optimism, and belief in America will eventually lose influence, along with the couple of generations after him that came up at least partly in the old dispensation. If the new dispensation will not permit the teaching of the virtues and ideals that underlie the American system, who is going to

carry them on? It seems clear that unless we change course, we have sown the seeds for the dissolution of the American polity some time in the next century, and we will indeed all be multiculturalists then.

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Note

1. At the 1997 conference of the National Association of Scholars in New Orleans, Glazer offered what could be considered a response to this objection: preferential treatment by race for admission to undergraduate and professional schools, especially the elite schools. This will achieve at least the semblance of full integration, he seemed to be suggesting. As customary with Glazer, he did not try to finesse the problem of the lower scores and lesser records of blacks as compared to nonblacks competing for admission to the same schools, but faced it squarely and maintained that these differences are acceptable. But then Glazer went on to say that these differences might result in job niches—more black law school graduates would go into public service and become judges, for example, or more black doctors would go into administration rather than research. That is acceptable, said Glazer, since we've always had ethnic job niches in American life.

But with that Glazer has switched the argument to another track. Having established that blacks have a unique experience in America and are entitled to special claims, he now says that ethnic niches have always been the American way. If that is the case, what is wrong with letting groups find their own paths and their own niches, as many white ethnic groups have done in the past? Glazer's approach succeeds only in pushing racial distribution into the professional fields, but how long will it take before the "niches" start to become fodder for racial animosity as well, as the argument over which positions white vs. black ball players hold continues even in the face

of the inordinately high and overblown salaries everybody in professional ball is paid.

The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History, by Lawrence W. Levine. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1996, 240 pp., \$20.00 hardbound.

Warren Brown

As can be seen from its title, Lawrence Levine's *The Opening of the American Mind* was intended as a response to Allan Bloom's foreboding best seller *The Closing of the American Mind*. Together they testify to an age that, in Dickens's words, is "the spring of hope and the winter of despair," a time when "everything" and "nothing (is) before us." While Dickens informs us that "superlative degree[s] of comparison" are common to every age, he also reminds us that each age is subject to distinct and opposing interpretations as to its nature and merit. For our age the divisive issue seems to center on whether we have arrived at a final beginning or a fatal end. Some, including Levine, find us approaching a juncture in history when age-old oppression has been swept away and the prospect, if not the full presence, of freedom and justice is at hand. Others find in our time the effects of crisis rather than cause for celebration. Citizens of liberal democracies, they argue, have increasingly lost faith in the principles of Western civilization, thereby depriving them of purpose and meaning for their lives. What awaits us is not deliverance but a dehumanizing fall.

Levine claims that the modern American university is unlike any that has come before: today's university is the scene of "a flowering of ideas and scholarly inno-

vation unmatched in our history." To defend this claim he makes another, namely, today's university is like many that have come before: "What is happening in the contemporary university is by no means out of the ordinary...constant and often controversial expansion and alteration of curricula and canons and incessant struggle over the nature of that expansion and alteration." By means of the second claim Levine seeks to ward off critics who "fear change" and attempt "to escape from history" by inventing "a stable past to which we must pay homage." Levine's defense gives no pardons since it takes no prisoners. After granting that the dominant critiques are not "mistaken in every instance," he proceeds to find them entirely mistaken. Without notable exception, he finds critics of the modern university to be "ideologues whose research is shallow and whose findings are widely and deeply flawed." Specifically, he asserts that there is no evidence that the academic world is under the control of the New Left or that white, male conservatives are being denied academic positions. On the contrary, the universities are fulfilling their mission of testing authority; young people are more aware than ever; and Shakespeare continues his presence within the canon. The reason critics have perceived conspiracies where none exist is that they are "paranoid," and they are paranoid because of their ignorance of the past. Failing to see "current struggles in the university in their historical context," they transform common disagreements into climatic dangers. Thus, it is not Heidegger but Henny-Penny who explains alarmists such as Bloom. What the latter takes as a falling sky is nothing more than imposing but welcome clouds that have often loomed on the American academic horizon.

Levine never tires of stressing that critics of modern culture have missed its

"complexity." Yet, given "[t]he complexity of knowledge, the complexity of culture, the complexity of the world, and the complexity of the United States," the reader may wonder how Levine can clarify anything. What becomes clear is that understanding complexity requires appreciating cultural multiplicity and diversity. The simple, not to say simple-minded, courses and central concepts of Western civilization have offered no insight; once their homogeneity had been exposed, their "hegemony" was broken. The dominant curriculum passed away with the passing of a restrictive central concept that previously sustained it: "truth itself was assumed to be fixed and finite." Today's academy bears witness to the growing realization that "[t]ruths crowd out truths, realities impinge on realities; facts clash with as well as complement each other." The academic world has come to mirror the larger universe, and it is "more chaotic, less ordered, [and] less predictable" than we had previously thought. Given the abundance of truths and realities, it is no accident that Levine moves from chaos to inclusion. Every culture possesses dignity since it must be understood not from "the imagined heights of European cultural and genetic superiority" but from "*within*." What is true of present cultures extends to those of the past. We must realize that there is neither a "preferred form for the writing of history" nor any "single group in history" nor "one aspect of the past...[that] is inherently more essential or relevant than the others." World history, American culture, and the modern university are all disassembled; wholes are reduced to their parts but the parts are not subject to further reduction. Complexity permits clarification because culture can be understood by "race, ethnicity, class, and gender."

There is much that could be questioned and criticized in Levine's work.

For instance, he never seems to realize that the concepts of hegemony, race, class, and gender arise from Western culture thereby exposing his own Eurocentric approach to his critique. Nor does he recognize that if history consists of equally relevant moments, there is no reason to celebrate the realization of a multicultural world. Yet, the most revealing defects in his work may come from examples he cites and the authorities he invokes in making his case. In providing evidence that one can lead a multicultural life, he gives personal testimony: "I could have both Moses *and* Lincoln for forefathers, both the Hebrew Torah *and* the United States Constitution for moral and legal touchstones, both Joshua *and* Joe Louis for warrior heroes....I understood from early in my life that I was not expected to *choose* between cultural venues so much as to negotiate, and navigate, between them; to dwell amidst a variety of riches and understand how to accommodate them all." Levine has not negotiated and navigated the currents of opposing cultures but sailed down a main stream. Embracing Moses and Lincoln, the Torah and Constitution, and Joshua and Joe Louis does not demonstrate the wedding of different cultures as much as the lineage of Western culture. He had previously said as much. Prior to this statement, the suggestion that a knowledge of Moses and Lincoln or the Torah and the Constitution was evidence of multiculturalism would have been depicted as a parochial and privileged perspective that was insufficiently complex.

In another example, Levine details how African slaves adapted to their masters' culture while protesting its enslavement of them. They used the Book of Exodus as a source for their spirituals, thereby singing of oppression and freedom in the presence of their owners. Levine rightly credits the skill of slaves in protesting their plight without incurring punishment; he

adds to their nobility in showing how spiritual life infused the heart and soul of a people; and he does them justice by showing how this people contributed to American culture even as they were excluded from it. Unfortunately, justice stops here. The lesson gleaned from this example is that African Americans forged an "expressive culture" because they were not content to "mimic" European Americans. Hence, Levine fails to direct praise toward those deep sources of Western culture that ignited the distinctive voices he so admires. For one who takes Moses as his "forefather" and the Torah as his "moral touchstone," this silence is astounding. To demonstrate that it was not for want of breath, we need only turn to Levine's consideration of America, the Constitution, and Lincoln.

When it comes to understanding America, Levine passes over its founders, Washington, Jefferson, and Madison. Rather he retrieves authorities such as W.E.B. DuBois who, with "his characteristic originality," calls upon "'Americans of Negro descent' to maintain their race identity." Yet, DuBois is far from a hostile witness to America or a friend to the case being made by Levine. In reflecting upon his double identity as a Negro and American, DuBois states he "would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa." Indeed the Negro has learned, better than anyone else, the lesson that America offers: "There are today no truer exponents of the pure spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American negroes." These words are recited with approval by Levine, yet when he follows DuBois's understanding of America with his own, he will deny that America provides a lasting legacy for its citizens.

For Levine, all "pure" spirits, to say nothing of the documents that contain them, are products of culture. Hence,

America has no being; it is a “dynamic *becoming*” and “continually in the process of happening.” Enlisting Tocqueville on his behalf, Levine argues—notwithstanding Tocqueville’s many statements to the contrary—that “America was not a fixed entity to which all newcomers had to adjust.” Ignoring Tocqueville’s opposing account (“not an opinion, not a custom, not a law, I may even say not an event is upon record which the origin of [Americans] will not explain.”), Levine asserts that the birth of a nation does not foreshadow its becoming: “as anyone who studies culture seriously should know, the point of origin is only part of the story.” How large a part is found in the conclusion of Levine’s work: “We must stop talking about...*purity* [so much for DuBois] and begin thinking about *transformations*.” As a constant becoming, America is defined by the desires of its members. Not restrictive creations but liberating recreations hold the key to its identity. The reader can only wonder at the implications of such thinking for Levine’s “moral touchstone,” the Torah.

Given his depreciation of origins, it is hardly surprising that Levine directly repudiates the fundamental principles upon which America is founded. He warns his reader to steer clear of the “seductive and perilous...trap of the Assumed Truth.” Such truths ensnare their victims by posing as “part of the Natural Order.” Indeed, we must resist the tendency to create a national history “which emphasized the Founders’ ideas rather than their reality.” The complexity of American culture is simplified to reveal a hypocritical nation that mouthed equality as it maintained slavery. Levine cites others who share his opinion, yet one prominent authority is notable for its absence. Levine fails to mention pro-slavery advocates who, perhaps more than any other group, repeatedly called the

Founders’ motives and principles into question based on their practices. He would surely distinguish his multicultural argument from that of the slave owner, for he wishes to promote an inclusive as opposed to exclusive culture. Yet, his arguments for the superiority of an inclusive culture would be undone by his previous assertion that all cultures must be judged from within. It appears that Levine’s approach to American culture results not only in the distressing fact that pro-slavery advocates rightly understood America, but, insofar as principles are cultural products judged by their conformity to practice, the confederacy was less hypocritical and closer to reality than was the union.

While it may be a sound rule of thumb to practice what is preached, the rule of rejecting what is preached for its failure to conform to practice can place academic books as well as political regimes in a harsh light. As we have seen, Levine allows others to speak on his behalf only to dispute later what they have said. He parades before the reader “ideas” of Moses, DuBois, Tocqueville, and Whitehead, but the “reality” of the work is not contained in their comments. It is reserved for another to present a truth that is not crowded out by but transcends other truths. At the opening of his Epilogue, Levine alerts his reader “to bear this truth in mind”: “Men make their own history.” The passage is from Karl Marx and confirms what the alert reader had long suspected. Earlier, Levine had asserted that educational reforms in the university did not result from “the ivory tower” but “from fundamental cultural and material transformations and were related to the needs of the people and society.” And, he had clarified his statement that multiculturalism is “a simple matter of *understanding*” with another admitting “what we’re talking about is not simply ethnicity or gender but power.” Yet,

what is most troubling in Levine's conclusion is that he recreates history to find support for Marx's truth in the words of Abraham Lincoln.

Unlike DuBois or Tocqueville, Lincoln is not cited and then forgotten; he is permitted to speak, but his thoughts are not his own. Levine closes his book, as he opened it, with a statement from Lincoln's Annual Message to Congress in 1862: "The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present..We must disenthral ourselves, and then we shall save our country. Fellow citizens, *we* cannot escape history." Lincoln disenfranchises us from past dogmas supporting slavery as he delivers constitutional amendments proposing emancipation. He reminds his listeners that they cannot escape the judgment of history for they are ultimately part of a moral order. They bear the responsibility not of creating new principles but preserving eternal ones—of "giving freedom to the slave, and assur[ing] freedom to the free." Thus Lincoln's intent, in the above speech, is to realize more fully those immutable principles that give

purpose to the nation and thereby limit the laws, even the superior laws, of the land. Never mind that Levine's major allusion to the Constitution, his "legal touchstone," is one that calls it into question. Levine would have us think that for Lincoln—his "forefather"—as for Marx, people may be disenthralled from past principles, for they are nothing more than dogmas discarded with the passing of history; he would have us think that history, rather than the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," is Lincoln's "moral touchstone." Levine's ending does more than conclude his work. It leaves us with a lasting impression and an all too simple question: Can Western culture, America, and the modern university be in better hands when the moral principles of the natural order, and the savior who perpetuated them at the cost of his life, are transformed to serve a truth that deprives them of all right or reverence?

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What the *Los Angeles Times* calls a "rollicking, swashbuckling tale" is the memoir of a Basque transvestite (c. 1600) in the New World. Last June it was released in paperback by Beacon Press, which described this contemporary translation titled *Lieutenant Nun* as "a primary source" on conquest history, gender politics, and the Catholic church of that period. The publisher promoted it for fall 1997 courses as a text that would open the minds of students "to the value of diverse historical voices."