

New York University
Multinational Institute of American Studies
Study of the United States Institute on U.S. Culture and Society

THE RECONCILIATION OF AMERICAN DIVERSITY WITH NATIONAL UNITY

The central focus of your program is America's reconciliation of cultural and social diversity with national unity. We shall explore the successes and failures of the United States in achieving this reconciliation, and try to account for them.

Almost from the beginning of permanent settlement in North America there was a conviction that a well-ordered society should sustain the diversity of its component groups. This localism was supported by a condition of decentralization that enabled local districts to remain autonomous communities and by a belief that this autonomy was a key to liberty. In the nineteenth century, drawing on the romantic premise that differences were valuable and should take precedence over conformity to a universal standard, this communal localism came to embrace a pluralistic conception of society initially based on regional and religious differences. More recently, pluralism has been redefined in terms of ethnic and racial differences, and has often been used to provide groups who regard themselves as out of power with the means to resist absorption and, at times, reject those who differ from themselves.

The desire to build a national republic, the making of a homogeneous future from a heterogeneous past, ran counter to this tradition of localism. Looking to eliminate boundaries between groups, those favoring national unity drew on another tradition, rooted in seventeenth century Calvinist conceptions of salvation and in eighteenth century political theory that emphasized the equality of individuals. For them the well-ordered society consisted of detached and mobile individuals held together by a common set of beliefs, an "American Creed" of abstract principles that any individual could adopt. After the Civil War, in the drive for national integration, intellectuals elaborated the meaning of this democratic creed, and American business and professional leaders built unifying networks of communications and social control. In recent years, national integrationists have argued that our success in managing diversity, especially ethnic and religious diversity, is that we have made diversity itself one of our unifying ideals. Some have also argued that modern racism presents an enormous obstacle to further success.

How we manage to maintain a balance between these two traditions, to reconcile diversity with national unity, is one of the most fruitful areas of current writing and research in the field of American studies. Caught up in the recent public controversies over multiculturalism, this theme has become central to the debate over the shape and design of college and university curricula and research in American history, literature, politics, and culture studies. By focusing on the lives of ordinary people, and emphasizing the diversity of the American people and the exploitation of the powerless, the "new" social historians and other social scientists over the past three decades undermined the coherence of the conventional narrative of American history. Their emphasis on institutional patterns and power relationships (social mobility, child rearing, sexuality, the politics of subordinated people, patterns of work, family organization, etc.) also diminished the significance of the values and abstract principles on which the ideology of national unity was based. Similarly, in literature, the recognition and identification of socially constructed boundaries that define race, gender, sexuality, and national identity, made the preoccupation with the past, with historical memory, and with temporality a problematic aspect of narrative. The resulting incoherence of the story of the American nation, as well as a more general fear of "disuniting America," reawakened the interest of American scholars in cultural values and in reintegrating the American narrative. This prompted some, like Eric Foner and John Higham to call for an examination of the intellectual and cultural sources of social cohesion in American society, and research based on a "pluralistic integration" model of American development. Others, like Roland Berthoff and

Seymour Martin Lipset, insisted on the restoration of the balance between unum and pluribus in the story of the American people. Still others, like David Hollinger and Katherine Verdery, called for the enlargement and renewal of a vision of American universalism so as to show that minority and majority cultures are becoming more interconnected and alike. Central to these concerns is a discussion of the extent to which we have succeeded in managing our social and cultural heterogeneity within a matrix of national unity.

There is a tension between forces for unification and diversification in all societies, but heterogeneity makes this tension especially intense in the United States. At a time when, in many parts of the world, religious and ethnic divisions are being tragically reasserted, I thought it might be of interest to examine how, in responding to diversity and unity, the United States has forged a relatively flexible approach to national identity that some have argued can accommodate persons of almost any background. The central theme of the program is explored through four sub-themes that together provide the basis for a broad examination of how the United States has managed to balance national integration with diversity.

The first sub-theme of the program, *Local Autonomy and Pluralism*, will examine the origins of our pluralistic tradition, beginning with the fragmentation of Anglo-America into local identifications and separate clusters. In the absence of a powerful centralized national state, and in hope of securing liberty through communal autonomy, Americans early permitted innumerable separations to flourish. We will also look at some of the contemporary manifestations of pluralism. Among the issues that we will consider are some of the following:

- the ways in which primordial loyalties and Puritan separatism strengthened group cohesiveness and fostered pluralism;
- the idea that group solidarity and autonomy are essential to individual creativity and the spontaneity of cultural expression;
- the extent to which America has succeeded in protecting the right of each religious sect to compete openly with all of the others, and how religious liberty contributed to a pluralistic ethic based upon equality of groups;
- the pluralistic structure of our system of governance, and whether the emphasis of Congressional Republicans and the Trump Administration on decentralized policy making will foster economic savings, innovation and experimentation in the provision of social and health services, or, by weakening the regulatory responsibilities of the national government, undermine the quality of such services.

This section of the program will include a tour of New England, during which you will have an opportunity to examine such issues as: the impact of economic change on community cohesiveness; the provision of community social services; the relationship between technological integration and the emergence of impersonal and utilitarian values derived from occupational function rather than ideological faith; and the extent to which new information technologies that encourage freedom of expression affect participatory democracy at the community level.

The program's second sub-theme, *Individual Liberty and the American Creed*, will look at how Protestant denominationalism, egalitarianism, individualism and voluntarism contributed to the forging of a new solidarity based on universal rights, which eventually replaced the sense of group identity that the colonists had lost through competition and migration. We will also look at how economic growth and

mobility produced a fluid social structure in which people were treated as individuals rather than as members of a particular class or ethnic group, as well as the ways in which obdurate primordial loyalties and group distinctions, as well as increased economic inequality, have hindered this individualistic and universalistic conception of America.

Issues that will be considered include some of the following:

- the ways in which individual “equality” has been redefined to accommodate a society increasingly divided by religion, race and ethnicity;
- efforts to promote social equality through compensatory discrimination (affirmative action, preferential admissions, etc.), and whether such efforts threaten the right of the individual to be free of unwarranted government intrusion by limiting individual rights to privacy, employment, and education;
- the role of Protestantism in the emergence of an integrative national American creed that scholars like Robert Bellah and Seymour Martin Lipset would later call America's “civil religion;”
- whether there is any agreement among Americans of different racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds about what should be taught in the schools, and the extent to which American schooling promotes individualistic values;
- the individualistic character of business enterprise in the United States, and how American business practices differ from those of other capitalistic nations;
- the reasons why American workers, in contrast to those in most other industrialized nations, have never successfully organized into a national, class-conscious political party;
- and whether efforts to control messages and images transmitted by electronic media compromise the right to individual privacy and expression in America

Near the conclusion of this part of the program, a panel discussion on “Poverty in America: Social Responsibility and Individual Self-Reliance” will consider why America tolerates greater disparities in income and more relative poverty than most other industrial nations, and why the elimination of poverty has been one of America’s most troublesome social issues. This is an issue, like many others concerning social and economic equity, that has been embroiled in disputes between those who favor individual equality and those with a pluralistic conception of society who seek to redress social inequality by empowering disadvantaged groups. An examination of how the United States has responded to poverty will provide you with an opportunity to bring together the first two sections of the program.

The third sub-theme of the program, *Cultural and Social Heterogeneity*, will look at the origins and character of religious, ethnic and racial diversity in the United States, and how our traditions of decentralization and local communal autonomy sustain diversity. With what is arguably the most heterogeneous population of any major country in the world, Americans learned quickly that no one group had sufficient dominance to force its customs, traditions and values on the rest of the people.

Among the issues that we shall consider are some of the following:

- the challenge of Catholic and Jewish immigrants to the dominance of the Protestant majority, the rigid classification of people by race, and the ways in which increased attention to ethnic and racial diversity have altered the meta-narrative of the American story;
- how changes in traditional gender roles, ethnic and racial identities over the past three decades relate to changes in the residential preferences of family members, trends in marriage and divorce, the number of children who are conceived, the economic role of mothers, and the increase of non-traditional families;
- the kinds of communal organizations Blacks established in the North, the ways in which these organizations contributed to the drive for civil rights, and whether obstacles to establishing such organizations, both cultural and economic, were more formidable for Blacks than for white immigrants;
- the extent to which there are significant differences based on race, gender, ethnic identity and religion in the position of voters on such political issues as public schooling, reproductive rights, immigration restriction, federal tax cuts, affirmative action, and public safety and crime;
- the argument that the United States is moving toward a social state in which group consciousness may become less particularistic and more universal, and in which multiculturalism may become one of the abstract unifying principles of American society;
- and the recent resurgence among conservative groups in American politics of opposition to economic globalization and cultural cosmopolitanism.

This section of the program will conclude with a six day tour of northern New Mexico, during which you will consider historic and contemporary ethnic and race relations in the Southwest, focusing on Latinos and Native Americans. As part of this tour you will be able to examine ethnic confrontation and assimilation on the borderlands of the old and new West, the history and contemporary conditions of the Pueblo Nations, the economic and social consequences of Albuquerque's rapid development, and current controversies over immigration policies and the proposed construction of a wall between the United States and Mexico.

The last sub-theme of the program, *National Unity: Social and Cultural Integration*, will explore how the porous quality of American nationality, and the institutional framework that supports it, mediate between feelings of identity rooted in particularistic religious, ethnic and racial interests, and a more unifying sense of identity based upon a conception of universal abstract rights. It will consider the social basis for the emergence of a distinct American culture, and the political dimensions of our integrative national ideology. It will also consider the impact on national unity of the recent emphasis on remaking the United States into a closed society, which will sharply limit immigration, eliminate most forms of foreign aid, and severely curtail international educational and cultural exchanges. As part of this section of the program there will be a four day trip to Washington, D.C. during which you will examine the nature of the democratic process in America and how it differs from democratic practices in other countries.

Specific issues to be examined will include some of the following:

- the construction of identity in an image-based consumer culture, and the ways in which ethnicity, race, gender, class, age, and sexuality are shaped by and reshaped in popular culture;
- why, in contrast to most European societies, Americans understand their culture abstractly (individualism, liberty, democracy, etc.), rather than as the product of an organic historical development, and whether it is possible to develop a conception of American culture that reconciles divergent aspects of their cultural behavior (democracy-racism, individualism-nationalism, etc.);
- the ways in which American schooling promotes civic education and fosters a shared set of values, and how schools balance the goal of equal educational opportunity with that of attaining a high level of student achievement;
- whether mass culture is a social construct rooted in a dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture and/or scientism, or a loose amalgam of values and traditions that reflect the diverse origins of the American people;
- how interest groups set the government's agenda, and play an essential educational role in the American political system by keeping the elected informed;
- the extent to which American music and art in the twentieth century forged a distinctly American idiom that reflects the variety and diversity of American society;
- whether the current emphasis of American scholars on transcending the distinctive national behavior, institutions, culture of the United States serves the interests of scholars in other countries who teach and write about American culture and society.

At the heart of our inquiry over the next six weeks is the question of how well, and in what ways, the United States has succeeded in managing social and cultural heterogeneity within a matrix of national unity. While we have no definitive answers to this question, we are hopeful that in our mutual exploration of this theme, you, as well as our staff, will gain a better understanding of an issue that is central to American nationality and the dimensions of "Americanness."