

Toward a Multicultural Middle

“Multiculturalism in History: Ideologies and Realities” by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in *Orbis* (Fall 1999), Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1528 Walnut St., Ste. 610, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102–3684.

If there’s one thing that both advocates and critics of multiculturalism can’t seem to stand, it’s inconvenient facts, complains Fox-Genovese, a historian at Emory University.

For the critics, who employ *multiculturalism* as “an automatic epithet of opprobrium,” the inconvenient fact, she says, is the reality of multicultural society, “the increasing intermingling of peoples throughout the world.” In Europe and America, “a tide of immigration” is challenging established institutions and national cultures. It is sparking controversies about jobs and social services and about balancing “the rights of individuals and the cultural autonomy of groups.” High unemployment and cutbacks in welfare programs have exacerbated conflicts in countries such as France and Germany. As the global economy expands, she says, the “multicultural character” of the populations of developed nations is bound to increase—and with it will occur “an intensification of multiculturalist passions.”

Proponents of multiculturalism, meanwhile, also avert their eyes from “unpleasant facts, especially about the [non-Western] culture with which they identify,” Fox-Genovese notes. Preferring to believe that slavery was a uniquely Western crime, for example, they ignore its

historical “prevalence throughout the non-Western world, especially among Islamic and African peoples. . . . And the attempt to convince them that until the late 18th century few people of any culture viewed slavery as a moral evil inevitably shipwrecks upon the shoals of their unyielding presentism.” Nor, she notes, are American academic multiculturalists much interested “in learning the languages of other cultures, much less in respecting their hierarchical principles and traditions.”

Though multiculturalists are reluctant to face it, the fact is that, to a large extent, they “embody the very *Western* traditions they claim to deplore,” says Fox-Genovese. “Multiculturalism as ideology owes more to Western individualism than it does to non-Western traditionalism, and the evocation of specific cultures has more to do with self-representation than with immersion in a traditional culture.”

Neither party to the debate provides much help in adjusting to the world’s new multicultural reality, Fox-Genovese concludes. “What we need is a capacious worldview that invites respect for the cultures of others and loyalty to one’s own”—and a historical understanding of the multicultural present that pays attention to the past and to the facts, convenient or not.

The South’s Interlude

“South-by-Northeast: The Journey of C. Vann Woodward” by Theodore Rosengarten, in *Doubletake* (Summer 1999), Center for Documentary Studies at Duke Univ., 1317 W. Pettigrew St., Durham, N.C. 27705.

The renowned historian C. Vann Woodward, an emeritus professor at Yale University, was born in 1908 in his grandmother’s house in Vanndale, Arkansas, and it seems to him now, looking back, that it was when he was five or so and staying in that house that he first glimpsed what would become the theme of his most resonant scholarly books.

“Across the street from my grandmother’s house . . . was a house owned by former slaves who did well and bought some land,” he tells Rosengarten, a historian currently at the College of Charleston, South Carolina. “Every Sunday afternoon, Miss Sally would come and

visit Miss Ida, my grandmother. . . . She had been the slave of my grandmother’s parents. They . . . had lots to talk about. And my grandmother entertained her in the parlor.” Not the kitchen, but the *parlor!* “That’s when I knew,” he says, “there must have been an interlude”—a time after the Civil War when southerners lived without legal racial segregation.

If southerners had done that once, done it for decades, they could do it again: that was the hopeful implication of Woodward’s *Origins of the New South* (1951), *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, his 1957 history of segregation in the South, and other works. He showed, writes Rosengarten, that legal segregation “developed