

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

relatively late, an invention of a small, monied elite who exploited the myth of race to solidify its hold over the region. . . . Segregation was, in a word, reversible.”

Origins of the New South was Woodward’s answer to W. J. Cash’s *Mind of the South* (1940), which took the pessimistic view that for the region to give up white supremacy would mean renouncing tradition and nature, that the modern was just a continuation of the old. Three years after *Origins*, Woodward, at the invitation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, wrote a brief on Reconstruction for the plaintiff in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark school desegregation case.

Then, in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, “talking,” as he said, “to white people back

home,” Woodward told them that segregation was rooted in the politics of the 1890s, not in ancient custom or tradition, and he argued that it was not worth preserving. That same year, 1957, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus sent the National Guard into Little Rock’s Central High School to thwart racial integration.

Decades of attacks and revisionist criticism have prompted Woodward to alter his view of Reconstruction somewhat. He “no longer disputes that ‘de facto segregation was very strong right after the war,’” says Rosengarten. “But after work and outside of church, he maintains, whites and blacks could be found together ‘in bars, at balls, in bed, everything.’” Just as Miss Sally and Miss Ida could be found in his grandmother’s parlor when he was a boy.

The ‘Hate Crime’ Chimera

“What’s So Bad about Hate” by Andrew Sullivan, in *The New York Times Magazine* (Sept. 26, 1999), 229 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

There’s much talk these days about “hate crimes,” that is, crimes committed out of hatred for the victim because he or she is a homosexual or in some other way “different.” Many favor laws prescribing special punishments in such cases. This makes little sense, argues Sullivan, the gay author of *Virtually Normal* (1995) and a *New York Times Magazine* contributing writer.

Hatred, he argues, is a very vague concept—“far less nuanced an idea than prejudice, or bigotry, or bias, or anger, or even mere aversion to others. Is it to stand in for all these varieties of human experience—and everything in between? If so, then the war against it will be so vast as to be quixotic.” And if *hate* instead is restricted to “a very specific idea or belief, or set of beliefs, with a very specific object or group of objects,” then the antihate war will “almost certainly” be unconstitutional.

Proponents of hate crime laws usually have “sexism,” “racism,” “anti-Semitism,” and “homophobia” in mind as the varieties of hate that should win criminals extra punishment. But these advocates’ implicit neat division between “oppressors” and blameless “victims” is simplistic, Sullivan says, and “can generate its own form of bias” against particular groups, such as “white straight males.” This approach, like hate, “hammers the uniqueness of each

individual into the anvil of group identity.” It also ignores the fact that “hate criminals may often be members of hated groups.” According to FBI statistics, for instance, blacks in the 1990s were three times as likely as whites to commit “hate crimes.” And, writes Sullivan, “It’s no secret . . . that some of the most vicious anti-Semites in America are black, and that some of the most virulent anti-Catholic bigots in America are gay.”

“Why is hate for a group worse than hate for a person?” Sullivan asks. Was the brutal murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998 worse than the abduction, rape, and murder of an eight-year-old Laramie girl by a pedophile that same year? Proponents of hate crime laws argue that such crimes spread fear beyond the immediate circles of the victims. But all crimes do that, Sullivan says.

Proponents also claim there has been an “epidemic” of hate crimes in recent years, but FBI statistics, he notes, do not bear that out. In 1992, there were 6,623 “hate crime” incidents reported by 6,181 agencies, covering 51 percent of the population; in 1996, 8,734 incidents reported by 11,355 agencies, covering 84 percent of the population. Moreover, most of the incidents involved not violent, physical assaults on people, but crimes against property or