American Multiculturalism in the International Arena

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LIKE CITIZENS in many other countries, Americans are debating issues of multiculturalism. But the debate in the United States has a special importance because of the profound influence of American ideas around the world. Unfortunately, this influence has not been entirely propitious. It has been beneficial in some cases, but unhelpful in others, serving to exacerbate rather than remedy important injustices. I'll try to explain why this is so, and how the danger can be minimized.

American Multiculturalism

A wide range of views has been expressed in the American debates about multiculturalism, but I think we can see an emerging consensus, or at least a dominant paradigm, centered on the following three claims:

(a) that some or other form of multiculturalism is now unavoidable ("We are all multiculturalists now," as Nathan Glazer puts it), and that the interesting debate is not whether to adopt multiculturalism, but rather what kind of multiculturalism to adopt;

(b) that the appropriate form of multiculturalism must be fluid in its conception of groups and group boundaries (new groups may emerge, older groups may coalesce or disappear); voluntary in its conception of group affiliation (individuals should be free to decide whether and how to affiliate with their community of descent); and nonexclusive in its conception of group identity (being a member of one group does not preclude identification with another, or with the larger American nation). Only such an open-ended, fluid, and voluntary conception of multiculturalism fits with the openness of American society and its deep respect for individual choice; and

(c) that the greatest challenge to creating such a fluid conception of multiculturalism remains the disadvantaged and stigmatized status of African Americans. Being "black" is an ascribed identity that is difficult for most African Americans to escape or renounce. The child of a Greek-Arab mixed marriage can choose whether to think of herself as a Greek-American or Arab-American or both or neither; the child of a Greek–African-American mixed marriage will be seen by others as "black," whether or not that is how she wants to be seen. Moreover, the result of this ascribed identity is a greater degree of social exclusion and segregation than for other ethnic groups: blacks are more likely to live in segregated neighborhoods, attend segregated schools, and so on. The main challenge for American multiculturalism, therefore, is to reduce the ascriptive, stigmatizing, and segregating elements of "black" identity, so that being black can come to resemble other ethnic identities in America.

I ACCEPT THESE three claims. However, I worry about the way in which they have been defended. Too often, this open, fluid, and voluntary conception of American multiculturalism has been explained and defended *in contrast to minority nationalism*. That is, when American authors explain what a closed, static, and involuntary conception of multiculturalism would look like, they typically point to cases of minority nationalism, whether in Quebec or Flanders, Yugoslavia or Sri Lanka. This contrast confuses, rather than clarifies, debates about multiculturalism in America. More important, it is having a pernicious influence in other countries, inhibiting efforts to understand and accommodate minority nationalisms.

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Postethnic America

Consider the recent work of David Hollinger, whose *Postethnic America* is the most sophisticated defense of the consensus view.[1] Hollinger distinguishes two kinds of multiculturalism: a "pluralist" model, which treats groups as permanent and enduring, and as the subject of group rights; and a "cosmopolitan" model, which accepts shifting group boundaries, multiple affiliations, and hybrid identities, and which is based on individual rights. As he puts it: "Pluralism respects inherited boundaries and locates individuals within one or another of a series of ethno-racial groups to be protected or preserved. Cosmopolitanism is more wary of traditional enclosures and favors voluntary affiliations. Cosmopolitanism promotes multiple identities, emphasizes the dynamic and changing character of many groups, and is responsive to the potential for creating new cultural combinations."

Hollinger strongly defends the latter cosmopolitan form—"according to which individuals decide how tightly or loosely they wish to affiliate with one or more communities of descent"—while criticizing the former. He argues that this cosmopolitan model has worked well for white European immigrants to America in the past, and that it continues to work well for more recent immigrants from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. He recognizes that it will be more difficult to bring African Americans (the descendants of the slaves, as distinct from new African or Caribbean immigrants) under this "postethnic" umbrella. However, he insists that this sort of inclusion is what most blacks want and what justice requires, and that it remains an achievable goal, although certain special measures may be required (for example, more-targeted forms of affirmative action).

I am sympathetic to Hollinger's view about the appropriate form of multiculturalism in America. And I think it can work for immigrant groups in many other countries as well. Indeed, the official "multiculturalism policy" adopted by the federal government in Canada in 1971 is largely inspired by this conception of how immigrant ethnicity should be handled. Some critics of this policy have argued that it falls into Hollinger's "pluralist" category, treating immigrant groups as fixed and self-contained entities. However, on inspection, it is clear that the multiculturalism policy in Canada, both in its intentions and consequences, is much closer to Hollinger's "cosmopolitan" version. It explicitly treats immigrant ethnocultural affiliation as voluntary and encourages the members of different immigrant groups to interact, to share their cultural heritage, and to participate in common educational, economic, political, and legal institutions. The long-term result of this approach has been a significant increase over the last thirty years in rates of interethnic friendships and marriages—higher than in the United States—and to the proliferation of shifting, multiple, and hybridic identities.

LIKE HOLLINGER, I think that the integration of immigrants into this fluid multiculturalism is desirable—and quite a success story. And, like Hollinger, I think that this process can work not only for the older white immigrants from Europe, but also for more recent Arab, Asian, and Caribbean immigrants to the United States and Canada. I have defended this model of immigrant integration both in Canada (where it is already fairly strongly entrenched) and in Europe (where it is still strongly resisted). In this regard, Hollinger's account of a postethnic America is a good model; countries like Austria or Belgium could learn a great deal from it about the successful integration of immigrants.

My worry, however, is about the applicability of this model to nonimmigrant groups, and in particular to groups that have been conquered or colonized, like the Québecois or indigenous peoples in Canada. These "nations within" were originally self-governing, and like other conquered or colonized peoples around the world, have consistently fought to gain (or rather regain) their autonomy, so as to maintain themselves as separate and self-governing societies. They call themselves "nations" and assert their national rights. And indeed both the indigenous peoples and the *Quebecois* do have substantial autonomy within Canada: the former through the system of self-

governing Indian bands; the latter through the system of federalism.

Hollinger never explicitly addresses the question of the rights of colonized or conquered peoples within liberal democracies or the legitimacy of the forms of minority nationalism adopted by such groups. But it is clear that he does not support minority nationalism, which he equates with the "pluralist" conception of multiculturalism. For example, he says that his model rejects "the notion of legally protected territorial enclaves for nationality groups"; and that pluralism differs from cosmopolitanism "in the degree to which it endows with privilege particular groups, especially the communities that are well-established at whatever time the ideal of pluralism is invoked." These passages implicitly reject the essence of minority nationalism in Canada or elsewhere. After all, the Quebecois and indigenous peoples in Canada claim legally recognized rights of self-government over their traditional territories, and the justification for these claims is precisely that these societies were "well-established" prior to British dominion. Hollinger's theory seems to rule such nationalist claims out of court.

Hollinger's critique is explicit as well: he describes Quebecois nationalism as the extreme form of "pluralist" multiculturalism, since it treats the Quebecois as a permanent and enduring group and as the bearer of group rights. Indeed, he says it is a form of "ethnic nationalism" whose claims to self-determination are logically equivalent to racial segregation in the United States.

I think this argument reflects a common misunderstanding of the nature of minority nationalism. To see this, it is helpful to examine how minority nationalisms have been dealt with historically in Western democracies, including the United States.

Accommodating Minority Nationalism

Many Western democracies contain national minorities: Belgium (the Flemish), Britain (the Scots and Welsh), Switzerland (the French and Italians), Spain (the Catalans and Basques), and the Scandinavian countries (the indigenous Sami people). In most cases, these minorities were involuntarily incorporated into a larger state, as a result of colonization, conquest, or the ceding of territory from one imperial power to another.

However they were incorporated, these national minorities have typically sought to gain or regain their self-governing powers so as to maintain themselves as separate and distinct societies alongside the majority. They seek control over the language and curriculum of schooling in their region of the country, the language of government employment, and the drawing of internal boundaries. They typically mobilize along nationalist lines, using the ideology of "nationhood" to describe and justify these demands for self-government. At the extreme, they may seek secession, but most of these national minorities have aimed instead for some form of regional autonomy.

How have Western democracies responded to such minority nationalisms? Historically, they have tried to suppress them, often ruthlessly. At various points in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, France banned the use of the Basque and Breton languages in schools or publications and banned any political associations that aimed to promote minority nationalism; Britain tried to suppress the use of Welsh; Canada stripped the Quebecois of their French-language rights and institutions and redrew political boundaries so that the Quebecois did not form a majority in any province; Canada also made it illegal for Aboriginals to form political associations to promote their national claims.

These measures were intended to disempower national minorities and to eliminate any sense of a distinct national identity. Minorities that view themselves as distinct nations, it was said, would be disloyal and potentially secessionist.

However, attitudes toward minority nationalism have changed dramatically in this century. For one thing, pressuring national minorities to integrate into the dominant national group has simply not worked. Western states badly misjudged the durability of minority identities. Heroes, myths, and even traditional customs can change quickly, but the identity itself—the sense of being a distinct nation, with its own culture—is much more stable. States have, at times, used all the tools at their

disposal to destroy this sense of separate identity, from the prohibition of tribal customs to the banning of minority-language schools. But despite centuries of legal discrimination, national minorities have maintained their distinctiveness and their desire for autonomy.

When a state attacks a minority's sense of nationhood, the result is often to promote rather than reduce the threat of disloyalty and secession. Recent surveys of ethnonationalist conflict around the world show that self-government diminishes the likelihood of violent conflict, while refusing or rescinding political rights is likely to escalate the level of conflict. In the experience of Western democracies, the best way to ensure the loyalty of national minorities has been to move from attack to accommodation.

We can see this shift in most Western democracies that contain national minorities. For example, Canada has adopted a federal system that gives the Quebecois significant language rights and regional autonomy; both Canada and the Scandinavian countries accord self-government rights to indigenous peoples; and Belgium, Spain, and Britain have also moved recently toward giving regional autonomy to their national minorities. In all these countries, the goal of eliminating minority national identities has been abandoned, and it is now accepted that these groups will continue into the indefinite future to see themselves as separate and self-governing nations within the larger state.

In short, an increasing number of Western democracies are multination-states, rather than nation-states. They accept that they contain two or more nations within their borders, and recognize that each constituent nation has a valid claim to the language rights and self-government powers necessary to maintain itself as a distinct culture. And this multinational character is often explicitly affirmed in the country's constitution.

Several multination-states have also recognized that these national rights are best protected through some form of federalism, since federalism allows the creation of regional political units, controlled by the national minority, with substantial (and constitutionally protected) powers of self-government. What we see emerging within several Western democracies is a new form of "multinational federalism"—that is, a model of the state as a federation of regionally concentrated peoples or nations, in which boundaries have been drawn and powers distributed.

These multination federations are, by any reasonable criteria, successful. They have not only managed the conflicts arising from their competing national identities in a peaceful and democratic way, but have also secured a high degree of economic prosperity and individual freedom for their citizens. This is remarkable when one considers the immense power of nationalism in this century. Nationalism has torn apart colonial empires and communist dictatorships and redefined boundaries all over the world. Yet democratic multination federations have succeeded in domesticating and pacifying nationalism while respecting individual rights and freedoms. It is difficult to imagine any other political system that can make the same claim.

Minority Nationalism in the United States

Hollinger's critique of minority nationalism is out of step with the practice of other democracies. Nor does it reflect the American experience with minority nationalism. The U.S. includes several colonized groups that think of themselves as "nations within": for example, Puerto Ricans, the Chamoros of Guam, and the American Indians. These are the paradigm cases of minority nationalism within the United States. (I do not include African Americans, the descendants of slaves brought to America, as a national minority. Hollinger argues, and I agree, that most blacks in the United States have never thought of themselves as a separate nation, but rather have fought for integration into the larger American nation.)

In dealing with its "nations within," the U.S. government has followed the same pattern we have seen in other Western democracies. In the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, efforts were made to suppress these minority nationalisms. For example, when the United States conquered Puerto Rico, it tried to replace Spanish-language with English-language schools and made it illegal to join political parties promoting independence. Similarly, Indian tribes endured a long series of policies (for ex-

ample, the Dawes Act) aimed at undermining their traditional institutions and at opening Indian lands for colonizing settlers.

Today, however, these national minorities are treated in effect as "nations." Political units have been created in such a way as to enable them to form a local majority, and to exercise substantial rights of self-government on a territorial basis. They all possess a distinct political status (for example, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico; the dependent nation status of Indians) not exercised by, or offered to, other territories or subunits of the United States.

Hollinger says little about these cases of minority nationalism in the United States. This is understandable, since they are relatively peripheral, both geographically and numerically, in the American context. Yet they are important theoretically, because they represent the clearest cases where the United States has confronted minority nationalism. And with respect to these groups, the United States is indeed a multination state, a federation of distinct nations. The United States treats these groups as permanent and enduring—and as the subject of group rights.

Postethnic Multiculturalism and Minority Nationalism

This raises a puzzle. If Hollinger is right that minority nationalisms are "ethnic nationalisms" based on the primacy of blood and descent, why have liberal democracies accommodated them? The short answer is that Hollinger has misinterpreted the nature of these nationalist movements.

Consider Quebec. Quebec accepts immigrants from all over the world: it has roughly the same per capita rate of immigration as the United States. Control over immigration is one of the powers Quebec nationalists have sought and gained, and the province administers its own immigration program, actively recruiting immigrants, most of whom are nonwhite. These immigrants are not only granted citizenship under relatively easy terms, but are encouraged by Quebec's own "interculturalism" policy to interact with the members of other ethnic groups, to share their cultural heritage, and to participate in common public institutions.

The result is just the sort of fluid hybridic multiculturalism within Quebec that Hollinger endorses. (Indeed, the level of acceptance of interracial marriage is considerably higher in Quebec than in the United States.) Far from trying to preserve some sort of racial purity, Quebec nationalists are actively seeking people of other races, cultures, and faiths to join them, integrate with them, intermarry with them, and jointly help build a modern, pluralist, distinct (French-speaking) society in Quebec.

Quebec is not unique in this. Catalan and Scottish nationalisms are also postethnic in Hollinger's sense. To be sure, not all minority nationalisms are postethnic: Basque nationalism is largely based on race, and Flemish nationalism has a strong racialist component, as do some indigenous nationalisms. But the extent to which a particular form of minority nationalism is racial or postethnic can only be determined by examining the facts, not by conceptual fiat. And the clear trend throughout most Western democracies is toward a more open and nonracial definition of minority nationalism. In the case of Quebec, for example, the overwhelming majority of Quebecers forty years ago believed that to be a true Quebecois one had to be descended from the original French settlers; today, fewer than 20 percent accept this view.

Hollinger's argument reflects a common misconception about minority nationalism. There is a tendency to assume that it is the extreme form of "pluralist" multiculturalism, and hence diametrically opposed to any form of cosmopolitanism or postethnic multiculturalism. In reality, however, these doctrines operate at different levels. Nationalism is a doctrine about the boundaries of political community and about who possesses rights of self-government. Minority nationalists assert that as "nations within," they have the same rights of self-government as the majority, and form their own self-governing political community. It is consistent with that view to insist that all nations—minority and majority—should be postethnic or "civic" nations. This indeed is one way to understand the idea of *liberal* nationalism: liberal nationalism is the view that nations have rights of self-government, but that all nations, majority or minority, should be postethnic.

Insofar as it is guided by a liberal concep-

tion of nationhood, minority nationalism does not reject cosmopolitan multiculturalism: rather, it is a doctrine about the unit within which cosmopolitan multiculturalism should operate. Should this unit be Canada as a whole or Quebec? Spain as a whole or Catalonia? The United States as a whole or Puerto Rico? In none of these cases is the debate about the merits of postethnic multiculturalism; nor is it a debate between civic and ethnic nationalism. All these nations, majority and minority, share a civic, postethnic model in Hollinger's sense. The debate is whether there is just one civic nation within the state, or more.

Hollinger's view seems to be that cosmopolitan multiculturalism should operate at the level of the state as a whole, not Puerto Rico, Quebec, or Catalonia. But he offers no reasons for this preference, perhaps because he has never considered the possibility that minority nations can also promote and embody a civic, postethnic form of nationalism.

Some people might argue that the appropriate unit for cosmopolitan multiculturalism is neither the state nor some substate community, but rather the world as a whole. On this view, states should have fully open borders, and put no obstacle to the mixing of peoples across state lines. This would be a genuinely "cosmopolitan" form of multiculturalism.

Hollinger himself rejects this view on the grounds that Americans form a nation, cherish their national identity, and have a right to maintain it into the indefinite future. That is, he treats Americans as a permanent and enduring group that exercises rights of self-government. In this respect, his preferred model of multiculturalism is more accurately called "pan-American" than "cosmopolitan." He denies that there is any contradiction in affirming a fluid and shifting form of multiculturalism within the stable and enduring boundaries of a nation.

I agree that "the cosmopolitan element in multiculturalism is compatible with a strong affirmation of American nationality." But it is also compatible with the strong affirmation of Puerto Rican or Quebecois nationality. If Quebecois nationalism is "pluralist" because it implies that multiculturalism should operate within the stable and enduring boundaries of a Quebec nation, then so too is the American nationalism that Hollinger defends. Both involve the same combination of fluid multiculturalism within stable boundaries. And I can see no possible liberal justification for saying that Americans have a right to national existence, but not Puerto Ricans or Quebecois.

Does It Matter?

But why does this matter? After all, minority nationalism is peripheral to Hollinger's book. Moreover, the book was written for a domestic audience, like many other recent American books that make only passing reference to minority nationalism. These references may be misleading or inaccurate, but have they really influenced other countries?

I believe they have. Let me give two examples: Canada and eastern Europe. English-speaking Canadians have been heavily influenced by American debates, and one consequence of this has been a reluctance to accord the Quebecois the sort of public recognition of their national identity that they seek.[2] The American influence has made it more difficult to come to an acceptable settlement with Quebec, even though, as I noted earlier, the United States itself is quite willing to extend this sort of national recognition to Puerto Rico. If American writers had emphasized that it was a part of the American practice to accommodate minority nationalisms, then I believe that Quebecers today would not be so close to seceding from Canada.

The situation in eastern Europe is even more serious. If Quebec were to secede, the result would probably be two relatively stable liberal democracies in the northern half of the continent, instead of one. In eastern Europe, however, the inability to accommodate minority nationalism is a threat, not just to existing boundaries, but to democracy itself and to the existence of a peaceful civil society. There is almost a direct correlation between democratization and minority nationalism: those countries without significant minority nationalisms have democratized successfully (Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia); those countries with powerful minority nationalisms are having a much more difficult time (Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Macedonia).

Given this context, the influence of American debates has been unhelpful in two ways.

First, it has helped to marginalize the liberal intellectuals within these countries, who often look to American liberals for guidance. Influenced by American models, these liberals have little to say about the accommodation of minority nationalism, except to chant the mantra that the solution to ethnic conflict is "individual rights, not group rights." This is unhelpful because it tells us nothing about how to resolve the issues raised by minority nationalism. The current conflict in Kosovo, for example, revolves around whether political power should be centralized in Belgrade or whether the regional government in Kosovo should have extensive autonomy. The slogan "individual rights, not group rights" provides no guidance about this conflict. Without any clear conception of what justice requires in multination states, liberals have become passive spectators in the struggles between majority and minority nationalists.

Second, American debates have, paradoxically, been invoked by majority nationalists to justify suppressing minority nationalisms. Nationalist governments in these countries have not only studied, but also largely adopted the American rhetoric that a good liberal democracy should be a "civic nation." They adopt the language of liberal democracy and civic nationalism partly to impress foreign observers, but also because it provides an excuse to crush minority nationalism and to strip national minorities of their separate public institutions and rights of self-government. We see this trend in Slovakia, Romania, Serbia, and Russia.

It may be surprising that majority nationalists adopt the language of civic nationalism, but they do. And they find this language useful precisely *because* it legitimizes policies that inhibit national minorities from expressing a distinct national identity and demanding national rights.

What we see in eastern Europe, therefore, is an unholy alliance of liberal intellectuals and majoritarian nationalists, both of whom invoke American models to justify rejecting the claims of national minorities. As I noted earlier, attempts to suppress minority nationalism can only be achieved by coercion, and the result has been to create fear amongst the minorities, to exacerbate inter-ethnic relations, and to strengthen authoritarian tendencies within both the majority and minority nationalist movements.

Of course, American writers have not endorsed coercive policies aimed at suppressing minority nationalism in eastern Europe. On the contrary, American foreign policy has often encouraged states to accept some minority claims. Indeed, the American government is currently pressing Serbia to accord autonomy to Kosovo. But Serbian leaders understandably see this as hypocrisy, as yet another case of America trying to impose a settlement on weaker countries that it would never accept at home. After all, don't Americans say that we should fight against ethnic minority nationalism and instead seek to build a single, shared civic nation within each state?

The American position on Kosovo might have more credibility if Americans emphasized that they have accommodated their own minority nationalisms. This is just one of many examples in which the transition to democracy in the multination states of eastern Europe would have been smoother had American writers and statesmen emphasized that accommodating minority nationalism was part of the American reality.

I am not suggesting that American theorists of multiculturalism put issues of minority nationalism at the center of their theories. The situation of blacks is, and should be, at the heart of American debates. But I wish that, if only in passing, Americans would admit that accommodating minority nationalism, far from being un-American or undemocratic, is one (small) part of the American experience. ●

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1. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

2. In a recent article, David Bromwich suggested that Charles Taylor's essay on "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition" is "in some ways a Canadian sermon to Americans" (David Bromwich, "Culturalism: The Euthanasia of Liberalism," *Dissent*, Winter 1995, p. 96). I think this is a misunderstanding. Taylor's lecture is better understood as a sermon to (Americanized) English-Canadians, and his argument is not that American-style liberalism is wrong for the United States, but rather that it is wrong for countries like Canada, which contain minority nationalisms.