

## CASE STUDY - 2

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. *The Cult of Ethnicity* 59

### *The Cult of Ethnicity*

ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER JR.

Arthur Meine Schlesinger Jr. was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1917. Graduating from Harvard University in 1938, he embarked on a multifaceted career as historian, popular writer, university professor, political activist, and advisor to presidents. Among other positions he has held, he served as President Kennedy's special assistant for Latin American affairs. Schlesinger published dozens of books, most notably *The Age of Jackson*, which received the 1946 Pulitzer Prize for history, and *A Thousand Days*, which won the Pulitzer for biography in 1966. Although he never received an advanced degree, Schlesinger was awarded numerous honorary doctorates and for years was distinguished professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In the essay that follows, which was published in *Time Magazine* in 1991, Schlesinger offers a critique of multiculturalism and an endorsement of those values and attitudes that frame our commonality.

#### Before Reading

Do you support various ethnic studies programs and departments on your campus? Would you major in such a discipline? Why or why not?

The history of the world has been in great part the history of the mixing of peoples. Modern communication and transport accelerate mass migrations from one continent to another. Ethnic and racial diversity is more than ever a salient fact of the age.

But what happens when people of different origins, speaking different languages and professing different religions, inhabit the same locality and live under the same political sovereignty? Ethnic and racial conflict—far more than ideological conflict—is the explosive problem of our times.

On every side today ethnicity is breaking up nations. The Soviet Union, India, Yugoslavia, Ethiopia, are all in crisis. Ethnic tensions disturb and divide Sri Lanka, Burma, Indonesia, Iraq, Cyprus, Nigeria, Angola, Lebanon, Guyana, Trinidad—you name it. Even nations as stable and civilized as Britain and France, Belgium and Spain, face growing ethnic troubles. Is there any large multiethnic state that can be made to work?

The answer to that question has been, until recently, the United States. “No other nation,” Margaret Thatcher has said, “has so successfully

combined people of different races and nations within a single culture.” How have Americans succeeded in pulling off this almost unprecedented trick?

We have always been a multiethnic country. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, who came from France in the 18th century, marveled at the astonishing diversity of the settlers—“a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans and Swedes . . . this promiscuous breed.” He propounded a famous question: “What then is the American, this new man?” And he gave a famous answer: “Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.” *E pluribus unum.*

The U.S. escaped the divisiveness of a multiethnic society by a brilliant solution: the creation of a brand-new national identity. The point of America was not to preserve old cultures but to forge a new, American culture. “By an intermixture with our people,” President George Washington told Vice President John Adams, immigrants will “get assimilated to our customs, measures and laws: in a word, soon become one people.” This was the ideal that a century later Israel Zangwill crystallized in the title of his popular 1908 play *The Melting Pot*. And no institution was more potent in molding Crevecoeur’s “promiscuous breed” into Washington’s “one people” than the American public school.

The new American nationality was inescapably English in language, ideas and institutions. The pot did not melt everybody, not even all the white immigrants; deeply bred racism put black Americans, yellow Americans, red Americans and brown Americans well outside the pale. Still, the infusion of other stocks, even of nonwhite stocks, and the experience of the New World reconfigured the British legacy and made the U.S., as we all know, a very different country from Britain.

In the 20th century, new immigration laws altered the composition of the American people, and a cult of ethnicity erupted both among non-Anglo whites and among nonwhite minorities. This had many healthy consequences. The American culture at last began to give shamefully overdue recognition to the achievements of groups subordinated and spurned during the high noon of Anglo dominance, and it began to acknowledge the great swirling world beyond Europe. Americans acquired a more complex and invigorating sense of their world—and of themselves.

But, pressed too far, the cult of ethnicity has unhealthy consequences. It gives rise, for example, to the conception of the U.S. as a nation composed not of individuals making their own choices but of inviolable ethnic

and racial groups. It rejects the historic American goals of assimilation and integration.

And, in an excess of zeal, well-intentioned people seek to transform our system of education from a means of creating "one people" into a means of promoting, celebrating and perpetuating separate ethnic origins and identities. The balance is shifting from *unum* to *pluribus*.

That is the issue that lies behind the hullabaloo over "multiculturalism" and "political correctness," the attack on the "Eurocentric" curriculum and the rise of the notion that history and literature should be taught not as disciplines but as therapies whose function is to raise minority self-esteem. Group separatism crystallizes the differences, magnifies tensions, intensifies hostilities. Europe—the unique source of the liberating ideas of democracy, civil liberties and human rights—is portrayed as the root of all evil, and non-European cultures, their own many crimes deleted, are presented as the means of redemption.

I don't want to sound apocalyptic about these developments. Education is always in ferment, and a good thing too. The situation in our universities, I am confident, will soon right itself. But the impact of separatist pressures on our public schools is more troubling. If a Kleagle of the Ku Klux Klan wanted to use the schools to disable and handicap black Americans, he could hardly come up with anything more effective than the "Afrocentric" curriculum. And if separatist tendencies go unchecked, the result can only be the fragmentation, resegregation and tribalization of American life.

I remain optimistic. My impression is that the historic forces driving toward "one people" have not lost their power. The eruption of ethnicity is, I believe, a rather superficial enthusiasm stirred by romantic ideologues on the one hand and by unscrupulous con men on the other: self-appointed spokesmen whose claim to represent their minority groups is carelessly accepted by the media. Most American-born members of minority groups, white or nonwhite, see themselves primarily as Americans rather than primarily as members of one or another ethnic group. A notable indicator today is the rate of intermarriage across ethnic lines, across religious lines, even (increasingly) across racial lines. "We Americans," said Theodore Roosevelt, "are children of the crucible."

The growing diversity of the American population makes the quest for unifying ideals and a common culture all the more urgent. In a world savagely rent by ethnic and racial antagonisms, the U.S. must continue as an example of how a highly differentiated society holds itself together.

**Thinking About the Essay**

1. Why does the writer employ the word *cult* in the title? What connotations does this word have? How does it affect the tone of the essay?
2. Consider the first two paragraphs of this essay, which constitute the writer's introduction. What thesis or claim does the writer advance? Why does he present his main idea in two brief paragraphs instead of one?
3. Summarize Schlesinger's argument. How does he state the problem and then proceed to offer a solution?
4. Note the many references to historical figures that the writer presents. Why has he employed this technique?
5. Examine paragraph 11, which consists of two very long sentences and one shorter one. How does the writer achieve coherence? Why does he place certain words within quotation marks? What assumptions does he make about his audience in presenting relatively complex sentence structures?