



## Schlesinger on Multiculturalism: Complex Question, Simplistic Response

NANCY L. MAEKER

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1991; reprint, New York: Norton, 1992), raises a legitimate concern for all who care about this nation: how to balance both diversity and unity without sacrificing either. He argues that the common Anglo-Saxon American identity is being threatened by the “cult of ethnicity” (119). My question is simply: Has there ever been *an* American culture? My answer: Yes, there has been a *dominant* culture, in which Schlesinger participates and therefore grieves in the face of possible change; but, no, the United States has never had one unifying culture.

To be of the opinion that our nation has always struggled with the balance between the common good and individual rights is not to say that it does not have an invaluable legacy of ideals, institutions, and governmental structures. Rather, as Gunnar Myrdal states: “America is continuously struggling for its soul” (27). And that struggle takes place within what Diane Ravitch aptly labels “a common culture that is multicultural” (135).

Arthur Schlesinger’s position seems paradoxical. On the one hand he readily regrets the “curse of racism” as the “great failure of the American experiment, the glaring contradiction of American ideals and the still crippling disease of American life” (14), but on the other hand he overlooks its resulting effects. In my opinion Schlesinger only obliquely acknowledges how power misused by a dominant group results in an off-setting resistance from those disaffected by the powerful. He even strikes an almost-victim pose in saying that the “phenomenon of white guilt” is “not a bad thing in many respects, but still a vulnerability that invites cynical black exploitation and manipulation” (71). While not excusing what he labels “exploitation and manipulation,” a family systems model can give some understanding to the dynamics. Anyone who is abused within a system can become an abuser—though this seems to come as a surprise to Schlesinger. Those who have been abused by power will often seek to use power as they have experienced it.

With that understanding, I would argue for a more systemic approach for dealing with the conflict at hand. The issue is one of power and equity of power.

Who determines what is good history and what Schlesinger calls “bad history” (75)? How is the determination made as to whether history is used “as a weapon” (45ff.) or as objective truth? Perhaps the most realistic approach is to acknowledge that all historical accounts are contextual and communicated out of a particular perspective. Furthermore, that is perhaps as it

should be. So the question becomes not whether a particular history is told from a particular point of view but whose perspective is expressed in the historical presentation. After all that is the kind of study Old Testament scholars do in regard to the history of Israel. Knowing that the story is told about the Israelites from the perspective of various Israelite strands does not diminish the inherent truth of the story. In fact the story, as well as the historical understanding, is enriched by that knowledge.

The goal in American culture, then, is to give a more complete history—one that is broad enough to include the historical accounts from a variety of voices and perspectives. While this goal is certainly not “therapeutic” (80) or meant to “feel good” (98), the result may indeed promote self-esteem and cultural pride. Cultural self-identity is a prerequisite for both valuing one’s own culture and for seeing value in the culture of others.

It therefore seems evident why people of color are awakening, sometimes in an assertive style, to the need to learn and tell about their own history, cultural roots, language, and contributions made to the American and global societies. For African Americans to look toward Africa for cultural identity is no more a sign of Afrocentricity or “playacting” (103) than for German Americans to look back to Germany or Norwegian Americans to identify with Norway. Furthermore, Schlesinger’s point made by Ishmael Reed, that if Alex Haley would have “traced his father’s rather than his mother’s bloodline, ‘he would have traveled 12 generations back to, not Gambia, but *Ireland*’” (85) displays a disregard for the reason Alex Haley’s roots also go back to Ireland. Schlesinger also cynically ignores the identity that our society places on anyone of mixed heritage. Does Schlesinger honestly think that Alex Haley (or anyone of similar mixed background) could have claimed his identity as *Irish*? This account illustrates why we need further discussion to unravel the complexities of our multicultural context. What seems evident based on surface facts does not necessarily tell the whole story.

I agree that Arthur Schlesinger’s worry regarding an imbalance between *unum* and *pluribus* is a valid concern which needs attention. A diversity of voices should be encouraged to speak and be heard in open, public, power-sharing, healthy discourse. And at this point the church has the opportunity to give perspective and unifying leadership in a public arena. Although the church has not always practiced public discourse well, we can lay claim to an even greater legacy which includes such ideals as those found in Gal 3:28-29 and 1 Corinthians 12. We have an opportunity to provide the forum for healthy conversation in our multicultural context which is the United States of America. After all, as the church we are “the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:27).

## **Schlesinger on Multiculturalism: Right Issue, Wrong Book**

RICHARD W. NYSSE

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Arthur M. Schlesinger has written a horrible book on a subject that needs attention. *The Disuniting of America* protests “the cult of ethnicity,” a cult which according to Schlesinger “abandons historic purposes, replacing assimilation by fragmentation, integration by separatism. It belittles *unum* and glorifies *pluribus*” (17). Schlesinger repeatedly asserts, in good liberal fashion, that he favors cultural pluralism but not on the terms set by “multiculturalists.”

Schlesinger argues that the “inherent fragility of a multiethnic society” was solved in the United States by “the creation of a brand-new national identity, carried forward by individuals who, in forsaking old loyalties and joining to make new lives, melted away ethnic differences” (13). The initial European immigrants, he claims, “*wanted* to forget a horrid past and to embrace a hopeful future....to forge a new *American* culture” (13). To what extent these assertions are true is debatable. More important is the shift from what Schlesinger construes as eagerly done in the past to what Schlesinger now insists must be done. Schlesinger’s description becomes prescription; the voluntary project has become mandatory.

According to Schlesinger multiculturalism asserts “that immersion in the history of one’s own group will overcome feelings of racial inferiority both by instilling pride in past ethnic accomplishments and providing ethnic role models to inspire future performance” (90). He asks, fully expecting a resoundingly negative answer, “Why does anyone suppose that pride and inspiration are available only from people of the same ethnicity? Can only relatives be role models?” (90). If “only” is removed, however, the rhetorical force of the questions is changed. In fact, Schlesinger’s nearly hagiographic references to his own father demonstrate that “immersion in the history of one’s own group” can instill pride.

Schlesinger’s counterproposal is that students “be ‘continually’ encouraged to understand the American culture in which they are growing up...to make [students] contributors to a common American culture” (90). But elsewhere he

concedes the problems faced here, especially by African Americans. “For blacks the American dream has been pretty much of a nightmare, and, far more than white ethnics, they are driven by a desperate need to vindicate their own identity” (60). Unfortunately, this concession has no consequences in Schlesinger’s argumentation. Nothing changes. He patronizingly concedes that African Americans may have a greater need for *psychological* regrouping than other ethnic groups had or have, but he yields nothing culturally.

Earlier the book suggests that the problem could be explored in terms of white refusal to allow anything but the status quo: “Assimilation and integration constitute a two-way street. Those who want to join America must be received and welcomed by those who already think they own America....Not only must *they* want assimilation and integration; *we* must want assimilation and integration too. The burden to make this a unified country lies as much with the complacent majority as with the sullen and resentful minorities” (19). But, of course, Schlesinger never counts himself among the “complacent majority.” Schlesinger’s desired “assimilation and integration” is, in fact, a one-way street; he wants the minorities to assimilate to his world, which does not essentially change. He thinks it is nonsense that the “cult of ethnicity” dismisses the work of liberals as nothing more than “Eurocentric multiculturalism” but he does precious little to dispel the charge. His book is, in fact, evidence that the charge is accurate.

Equally disturbing is Schlesinger’s assumption of moral superiority. He never grants those whom he opposes equity as debating partners; rather he terms them “angry, ambitious, and perhaps despairing zealots and hustlers” (87), “romantic ideologues and unscrupulous hucksters” (131). When he quotes his opponents, he laces their quotations with pedantic grammatical corrections; “[*sic*]” occurs repeatedly. Schlesinger’s condescension and arrogance are rarely absent for more than a few pages. While he does admit that some white guilt is appropriate, he

will not yield more than a tiny fragment of his moral superiority.

Schlesinger's tributes to pluralism seem largely aesthetic. He speaks of "cherished cultures" and "splendid diversity" (138), and he states, "The movement from exclusion to inclusion causes a constant revision in the texture of our culture. The ethnic transfusions affect all aspects of American life—our politics, our literature, our music, our painting, our movies, our cuisine, our customs, our dreams" (135). These tributes, however, are deeply patronizing. The terms "cherished," "splendid," and "texture" as well as the list of altered aspects of life are largely aesthetic in nature. Even the metaphor of "transfusion" is belittling; the ethnics are allowed to be no more than an enhancing blood in someone else's body.

Schlesinger's beloved "melting pot" lacks moral integrity for he is never in the pot. He is forever outside the pot, stirring and marveling at what great stew he has produced. And everyone in the pot is supposed to be saying "thank you" to him for his wonderful hospitality. My response? No thanks. There are some very unhelpful, even harmful, ideas parading under the banner of multiculturalism, but I am unwilling to join Schlesinger's manner of opposing those notions.