

Does America have (or need)

a Staatsvolk?

The Dispossessed Majority, by Wilmot Robertson, *Cape Canaveral, Florida: Howard Allen, 1972, 1973. 586 pp. \$12.00.*

The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics, by Michael Novak, *New York: Macmillan, 1972. xxii + 321 pp. \$7.95.*

I

IT WOULD BE simplistic to label the ongoing "Black Revolution," within which black nationalism and separatism have grown in salience at the expense of earlier integrationist theory, as the essential cause of more recent assertions of ethnic identity and interest—such as those of Hispano-Americans, American Indians, Italians, Slavs, and even the supposedly assimilated Germans. Both seem to be aspects of the same complex phenomenon, which writers such as Glazer and Moynihan suggest may represent a limit or even a reversal of the familiar "melting pot": a process of ethnic differentiation within a larger society that is beginning to see itself as multi-ethnic rather than homogenous. This trend has culminated locally in resolutions of the Dade County and Miami City councils declaring their respective areas "bilingual and bicultural" and a bill now before the Florida legislature calling for instruction in two languages in any district having four hundred or more children whose family language is other than English.

The bureaucrats in Washington, saddled with court decisions, laws, and programs designed to face problems as perceived half a generation ago, are still dispensing incentive grants designed (as an Office of Education official said to me last month) "to bring minority children into the main-

stream of American life." Some of us are wondering, however, whether this mainstream—at least as purveyed by the mass media—has not become a cultural *cloaca maxima*, and where it will take us if we continue to float listlessly on its murky waters.

The Dispossessed Majority and *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* are books dealing with the problems of American national identity and the content of American culture from very different points of view. In the first, Wilmot Robertson contends that the American commonwealth as we know it is the creation of a composite though ethnically limited North European nation, essentially Nordic in type but with Alpine and diluted Mediterranean components, which constitutes a majority of 64.6 percent of the United States population. He divides the remainder of the United States population into "assimilable" and "unassimilable" minorities, the criterion being divergence from the preferred Nordic type. The assimilable groups include the Irish, many of whom Robertson considers fully assimilated into the majority, the Magyars, Finns, and Balts, the Slavs of southern as well as eastern Europe, plus the Canadian and Louisiana French. The list of "unassimilable" minorities is headed by the Jews and the Negroes but also includes southern Italians, Greeks, Asians, and persons of Indian descent including the Mexican-Americans. Robertson amasses considerable evidence to show that the racial and cultural background of the "unassimilables" bars their true reception into the majority culture: they are limited to a pseudo-assimilation which, in the case of intellectuals, results in superficial and snide literature, entertainment, and art—teetering on the balance between satire and kitsch—with effects that are, on balance, destructive of patriotism and societal morale.

It would be hard to disagree with Robertson's description of the sorry state of arts and literature in the United States today. His conclusion, however, that minority penetration and domination are the prime

causes of contemporary decadence depends on two prior assumptions which he does not even bother to state but which need critical examination. The first is that an identifiable and authentic majority American culture exists—as distinguished from the specifically English-American culture surveyed by Van Wyck Brooks in *The Flowering of New England*, or the southern culture celebrated by writers such as Stark Young, William Faulkner, and Robert Penn Warren. The second is that there are identifiable (even though largely unconscious) inherited cultural disparities, or, to borrow a term from C. G. Jung, clashes of archetypes, that prevent minority writers and artists from experiencing without distortion the *Geist* of the host culture. In the latter case art forms and styles may vary in cultural differentiation: there is, for instance, a cosmopolitan mainstream in classical music in which the ethnic origins of performers are irrelevant, as distinguished from the ethnically specific rhythms and intervals of Calypso, Flamenco, or the Anglo-Celtic school represented by Vaughan Williams and Arnold Bax. Literature is authentic when the writer is clear about his internal or external cultural perspective. Philip Roth's Portnoy is convincing, but his Gentile characters are incongruous; Santayana, on the other hand, could write about Puritans with sympathy and perception, because he never tried to be one.

II

THE CONCEPT of an authentic American majority culture is explicitly rejected by Michael Novak, who urges Americans of every provenance to explore their ethnic and cultural identity. This, he feels, is an essential step toward inter-group understanding.

Persons who are secure in their identity act with greater freedom, greater flexibility, greater openness to others. People who feel inferior or unacceptable lash out in anger.

Novak, drawing on his Slovak background to describe East European life in the industrial cities of the American Northeast and Midwest, dwells on the antagonism between the Northeastern Liberal Establishment with its essentially WASP tradition and the "Middle America" represented by the PIGS: the Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Slavs. Echoing Norman Podhoretz, he predicts an era of white ethnic assertion. The East Europeans, he declares, feel that someone else has defined their existence, and they are particularly tired of Anglo and Jewish moralizing.

What Robertson assumes to be an authentic majority culture that might be flourishing today were its key administrative and opinion-forming positions not so extensively occupied by minority members, particularly Jews, Novak pictures as a deadly, homogenizing superculture projected by television: the cool, modulated, standard speech of Northeastern Liberals.

There is a special tone of voice intellectuals have, the equivalent of a clergyman's special tone, which one shifts into, as in a Volkswagen. There are tones of voice called "writer," "professor," "commentator," "expert." In such tones, one may affect talking just like any other human being. But once the gear shift is shoved passed neutral, on comes enlightenment with a roar. (pp. 126-27)

"Americanization," as Novak describes it, is the process of assimilation into the superculture. The first step is the abandonment of community and family in favor of the atomic existence dictated by Protestant individualism. The loss of language, accelerated by the monolingualism of American primary education, both symbolizes and reinforces this alienation. The victims are "Americanized" into a consumption culture reflecting the marketing goals of commercial television. Should they aspire beyond purely material satisfactions, the best that awaits them is what Dwight Macdonald calls a "middlebrow" culture, which "pretends to respect the standards of high cul-

ture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them" to please the thousands of customers rising from the masses.

If it is true, as Robertson contends, that the North European nation formed around an Anglo-Saxon core is the only really American segment of the population, the *Staatsvolk* whose cultural as well as political hegemony is essential to national survival, then it is likewise true that this hegemony has been badly shaken if not shattered. Peter Schrag, whose *The Decline of the WASP* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1970) contains a few interesting perceptions laced with a good deal of hyperbole, writes of

an impersonal, technological age which had outrun the WASP ethic . . . a land which seemed to lack a cultural focus, where the center had been abandoned, and where nothing employing the old ethic of Americanism seemed to be capable of controlling the self-actuating power of large institutions. (p. 69)

It is Schrag's contention that Anglo-Saxon principles and shibboleths are rapidly being replaced by a spectrum of explicitly non-WASP cultural material—a judgment with which Novak would tend to agree, at least so far as eastern and southern Europeans are concerned. Robertson's recital of facts is not so different from those of Novak or Schrag, but accompanied by a dignified wringing of hands rather than gleeful chortling over WASP discomfiture.

A clue to what has brought about the cultural *bouleversement* admitted by both Robertson and Novak is contained in Chapter I of the Schrag book, but with no evidence that Schrag himself understands its significance. "Americanization," he observes, has been adaptation to an Anglo-Saxon norm, involving the deliberate shedding of "alien" cultural heritage. He quotes Theodore Roosevelt:

We welcome the German or the Irishman who becomes an American. We have no use for the German or Irishman

who remains such. We have no room for any people who do not act and vote simply as Americans, and as nothing else. . . . But where immigrants, or the sons of immigrants, do not heartily and in good faith throw in their lot with us but cling to the speech, the customs, the ways of life, and the habits of thought of the Old World which they have left, they thereby do harm both to themselves and us. . . . If [the immigrant] tries to retain his old language, in a few generations it becomes a barbarous jargon; if he retains his old customs and ways of life, in a few generations he becomes an uncouth boor. . . . (p. 20)

Robertson agrees with T. R. in supporting the rapid and total assimilation of "assimilable" minorities, who, he thinks, may even provide the leadership of a majority resurgence. The "unassimilable" minorities, on the other hand, should be left and indeed encouraged to go their separate ways.

It is, however, precisely the effort to forge a standardized *Staatsvolk* through steamroller assimilation that led to ultimate cultural breakdown. The vacuity of the American "mainstream" became apparent in the literature of the 1920's (e.g. Sinclair Lewis, Fitzgerald, and Dreiser) and to be an intellectual of any pretension meant automatic alienation from the mass. To a growing extent, media projections of the American ideal were concocted by non-WASP (and in many cases politically alienated) writers and directors, while the roles of "typical Americans" were often played by renamed (and when necessary cosmetically altered) Poles, Italians, and Jews.

The causal relationship is easy to see. If "Americanization" meant shedding cultural tradition and heritage, then it was in every case a process of cultural impoverishment. Conversely, the receiving culture was progressively diluted: the tradition and "collective subconscious" of the English-Americans and those longest Anglicized had to serve the needs of millions of newcomers who were linked only remotely to English archetypes and who had been forced to

bury their own. It was thus inevitable that the "majority culture" should become increasingly synthetic and meaningless, and increasingly vulnerable to commercial manipulation. Robertson is correct in his basic assumption that the assimilative powers of any culture are limited. What he does not see is that the assimilative limit of American "majority culture" was reached several generations ago and that attempts to carry the process further have thrown the educational system as well as the cultural establishment into chaos, since the "mainstream" is no longer flowing anywhere in particular. America, in other words, has lost its *raison d'être*—which exists, but needs to be rediscovered.

III

THE COMMON denominator linking Novak and Robertson is unfortunately not to be found in any English-language literature known to this writer. We must look to the German sociologist Eugen Lemberg, whose *Nationalismus* (Hamburg: Rowohlt's Deutsche Enzyklopädie, 2 vols., 1964) provides the typology necessary for understanding ethnic identity problems in the United States. In his unique sociological analysis of European and to some extent American history, Lemberg shows that there are a number of different integrators, such as race, ethnicity, religion, language and cultural community, and conceptions of history which, alternately or in combination, provide the cohesion necessary to sustain a viable political system. The two models most nearly opposite are the ethnic-linguistic nation reflecting J. G. Herder's romantic theories and the territorial polity based on loyalty to a dynasty, a constitutional system, and/or a geographic region. In the latter case, a salient regional characteristic may be bi-ethnicity, as in the case of Bohemia before ethnic-linguistic nationalism created an artificial and unnecessary enmity between Czechs and Germans, or multi-eth-

nicity as exemplified by the Austrian federalism successively championed by von Löhner, Palacky, Renner, and Popovici. Had these statesmen succeeded in their efforts, Danubian Europe would today be a federation of self-governing nationalities rather than a region of states under Russian hegemony plus marginal states under a more or less permanent threat of Russian penetration or aggression.

The United States, Lemberg demonstrates, was from the beginning a territorial republic, rejecting explicitly ethnic, linguistic, and religious criteria of national allegiance. British nationality was asserted by the revolting colonists only so long as they still hoped for accommodation with London; neither the Declaration of Independence nor the Constitution defines American nationality in ethnic or linguistic terms. American political theory does not regard an English-American a pillar of the state any more than a German-American, Polish-American or Jewish-American—nor entitled to special privileges. It was, rather, the national intention that (with the aberrant and temporary exception of blacks) all ethnic groups enjoy equal rights and status. As Lemberg observes, Americans treat English as a language of communication, not as a criterion of national identity. They are, as the English think, careless about purity of speech, and American English is known for its ability to absorb words (*e.g.* from Yiddish) that would be unthinkable in Mayfair or Buckingham Palace.

Ethnic groups within the United States, however, are no less prone to jockey for competitive position than those of the Habsburg Monarchy. English-speaking Americans took advantage of their greater numbers, seniority of citizenship, and their higher economic and social status to impose a cult of "Americanization" which was actually Anglicization—but which, as we have seen, resulted in the progressive dilution of Anglophone culture. This assimilative concept seemed at first to have a certain validity, which induced American blacks to accept "the first stages of dena-

tionalization, defined by ethnography as admiration of the alien type, the effort to deny one's own characteristics, and finally self-identification with the ideology of the (however unwillingly) assimilating group." (Lemberg, I, pp. 259-60) It was only later that blacks shifted to a positive image of their identity. This movement is now culminating in cultural self-differentiation, so that integration (except in the sense of equal economic opportunity) has ceased to be relevant—even though some years may elapse before Washington bureaucrats find this out.

IV

IN ANY CASE, the "Black Revolution," as Novak shows, has precipitated a wave of ethnic self-examination resulting in rejection of the "melting pot" theory coupled with efforts to rediscover and restore cultural heritage. The issue at stake is no less than the self-definition of America—restoration of the cultures that make up the larger nation and the recapture of American imagery from Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley. Rejecting WASP rationality, Americans of South and East European origin are reasserting their heritage and their communities, displaying, as it were, the hyphen with pride rather than shame.

The function of ethnic belonging is to integrate a person's sense of reality, the stories that tell him how to live, the symbols that move him. These are the matrix in which his conscience receives instruction. By contrast, the American system of individualization and rationalization leaves all but a certain human type profoundly deprived. . . . American democracy operates as a shield for WASP hegemony and to reinforce a WASP sense of reality, stories, and symbols. (Novak, p. 228ff.)

Robertson and Novak examine the ethnic revolution now shaking American culture from two diametrically opposite points of view. Each of their two books is essential

for understanding the total problem, since each provides facts and perceptions not offered by the other. Robertson considers the Anglo-Saxons, original and assimilated, to be the *Staatsvolk* of the United States; only their revitalization can save the Republic from ruin. Novak, on the other hand, would do without a *Staatsvolk*.¹ His ideas point toward recognition of the United States as a multicultural and multilingual society, in which Anglo-Saxons are merely one ethnic community among many—though still in a favorable position, since they happen to speak the common language of communication. The logical implication of his theories is multicultural education, following experiments in Florida and California, so that every American child would be at least bilingual. Members of each ethnic group would then be free to live with their own kind or in a mixed community as they see fit, and to engage in cross-cultural contacts without the existential fears that pervade society today.

As between the Robertsonian and Novakian approaches, this writer prefers the latter. He differs from Novak only in questioning that gentleman's belief that the Democratic Party could be a suitable vehicle for ideas so eminently sensible.

Reviewed by KURT GLASER

¹Neither author uses this necessary word, but the English circumlocution would take too much space.