

Diversity or Death

In the beginning was the Indian and no diversity. On this intrepid continent, the rivers and the lakes lay underneath one moon. The mountains and the prairies and forests stretched, immeasurable but close, from snowy space to flowering wild trees within two boundaries of one unfathomable ocean. And birds and grizzly bears abounded under one ferocious but supportive solar light. And constellations in the evening skies pursued their dark track cycles and returned, one twinkling mystery forever fixed above this one but ample Earth. And there was no diversity.

In the beginning was the Indian and winters spent in prayerful memories of spring, and summers spent in faithful preparation for perpetual necessities—for fire and for berries and for salmon and for venison preserved against the long nights leading to a final, frozen sleep.

In the beginning was the Indian and there was reverence for mornings, reverence for rocks, reverence for the rain, and obedience to the winds and to the changing temperatures of any day. In the beginning was the Indian and no diversity.

Tribal groupings that exceeded 700 separate but interrelated societies just existed side by side, or distantly. No single Native American nation declared itself the ruling normative social event which would, therefore, determine any other people as deviant or mainstream.

But then, when Christopher Columbus and when the English and when the Germans came to this same continent, they—these invading Europeans—invented ideas about human beings differing from themselves and these ideas allowed these aliens to designate the aborigines as heathen savages deserving genocidal displacement and assault.

In the beginning there was no diversity. Diversity implies a standard. A man is not a standard.

But, to the Europeans who arrived, belatedly, in North America, there were no other men, or women, or children living here. An Indian is not a man.

And so, those emigrating newcomers arrogated privileges of normative identity to themselves. They proclaimed them-

selves the in-group that defined everyone else, everyone different, as peripheral, at best, or rather more likely, as "uncivilized," and, later, as "three-fifths of a man." By dint of homicidal force, the only valid man and the only valid culture must derive from European history and presence.

For sure, this was an upside-down, imperial process of empowerment: first, attempting to exterminate the Native American occupants of this voluptuous terrain; then proceeding to import a million-fold involuntary African population; and then expanding westward on the strength of bloody conquest of Mexican territories, Mexican peoples, whom we are pleased, today, to acknowledge as Chicanos.

Europeans established themselves on the land of this New World. But not everyone who was not European died. Not everyone not European disappeared from this America. And, lo, the "issue" of diversity arose.

Today, suddenly, it seems, the heterogeneity of these United States has been discovered. Demographic projections for the year 2000 and beyond emphasize the steadily receding prominence of white Americans: Increasingly, the majority American population will neither be "white" nor native speakers of English. Increasingly, in other words, the demographic facts of national life will mirror the racial and ethnic and linguistic realities that obtain, worldwide.

Since our compulsory public school system now fails this impending new American majority, the American business community, for example, has become extremely pessimistic: Who will constitute the American labor force unless deep and immediate changes take place in our classrooms, coast to coast?

In the realm of what's called higher education, here, "diversity" has become a code word for interracial, inter-ethnic conflict heated to explosive levels of intensity. At the University of California, Berkeley, for instance, the most recent entering freshman class, for the first time, ever, did not body forth a white majority: Those demographics accurately reflect the composition of California statewide. At this same university, the faculty remains 91 per cent white and 89 per cent male, and the curriculum maintains its traditional, Eurocentric bias.

Against such an unarguable mismatch, progressive Berkeley students have formed a multicultural and multi-ethnic

United Front that recently organized an 80 per cent successful strike. Demanding "diversity" and the hiring and recruitment of people of color, this coalition also called for across-the-board, intensified affirmative action and the establishment of a gay and lesbian studies center.

HONK FOR DIVERSITY, the placards read. OT: HONK FOR ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL EQUALITY.

Some of these student leaders seem to believe that "diversity" is new. But the Earth has always been diversified as to the peoples living, or trying to live, here. Power, on the contrary, has been a peculiar phenomenon concentrated in few places and few families—or interest groups—relative to the whole.

What's new, then, is not "diversity" but, rather, our efforts inside the United States to redistribute power so that people of whatever color or culture or sexual persuasion shall possess equality before the law and due representation in government and due representation in the academic curricula and on the faculties and in the student bodies of our democracy.

If we do not know Chinese, if we know little or nothing about India or Japan, then how will we, Americans, hope to deal in the Twenty-first Century? And on what basis—other than arrogance fortified by the Marines?

If we do not know Spanish, the language of the fastest growing segment of our total population, if we know nothing about Afro-American history and culture, if we persist in the traditional American attitude that the only good Indian is a dead Indian, then who will we, Americans, become?

How shall we hope to cohere as a union of disparate but faithful citizens?

How shall we dare to assume any moral authority anywhere?

Either we will redistribute power so as to provide for equality of participation and respect and protection or we will perish as a democratic state at the very moment when, from Berlin to Lithuania to Johannesburg to Tiananmen Square, the fever for freedom under law becomes the global conflagration that burns with a fervor to rival the light of the stars above.

And in this new reckoning with freedom, and with the academic and legal and political and linguistic requirements of freedom inside a democracy, let us not forget the freedom to love: If we even tolerate any oppression of gay and lesbian Americans, if we join those who would intrude

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upon the choices of our hearts, then who among us shall be free?

Freedom is not divisible. Equality cannot be qualified.

Opposition to diversity is opposition to life itself.

And we who diversify the species *even as we breathe*—ethnically/racially/sexually—we must move, together, for the empowerment of the diversity we prove or we must agree to the consequences of our own docility: our death.

And so I am heartened by such good news as one can find:

! The Madison Plan at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Instituted by Chancellor Donna E. Shalala, this plan aggressively seeks to transform the fourth-largest state university in the United States so that its faculty and student body and curriculum qualify for the Twenty-first Century, as defensible, democratic public education.

! The American Cultures Requirement at the University of California, Berkeley, which, as of the fall of 1991, will at least recognize the necessity of some knowledge

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of majority peoples' lives, past and current.

! Progressive students at Duluth, Minnesota, who have organized on the basis of gay and lesbian rights and who have themselves become integral allies of the fight for Native American treaty rights.

! Progressive students at Haverford,

Pennsylvania, and at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, who have signed up for direct action on behalf of the Chippewa Indian treaty rights now jeopardized by the Ku Klux Klan kinds of racist propaganda and attack.

! The Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (P.O. Box 9, Odanah, WI 54861, Phone: (715) 682-6619), which has published "A Guide to Understanding Chippewa Treaty Rights."

I believe this is our chance to return to the beginning of America. In the beginning there was the Indian. In the beginning there was human life and animal life and variegated terrain as infinitely distinct and precious as the cells that underlie existence.

The advent of Europeans to this continent disturbed the just and peaceful equipoise implied by our survival. That happened a long time ago, and that disruption haunts our destiny today.

But we are fortunate. Not all of the currently powerful are blind. Not all of the currently privileged despise the clear commandments of a democratic state. And, not all of all the rest of us have died. ■