

Our Monochrome Values

Amitai Etzioni

What is going to happen to ‘white’ values?” I was repeatedly asked by an interviewer on a television program recently. His concern was aroused by the detailed data the U.S. Census Bureau was about to release on the racial composition of American society. Although the precise breakdown of the U.S. population into 63 racial categories (including racial combinations) was not yet known, figures depicting the basic changes in America’s demography had already been issued. U.S. Census data is often said to point to a rise of a “majority of minorities” (beginning in California, following in Texas, and thereafter spreading all over the United States). But it is far from obvious what these figures mean, let alone that they entail a decline of the founders’ European values.

I told my interviewer that our core values—respect for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (as well as the communitarian quest for a more perfect union), the democratic way of life, and the Bill of Rights—either deserve our commitment because we find them compelling or they should be rejected. It matters not the race of whoever first articulated them. Imagine discovering that the ancient Greeks really got their ideas from Egypt or Libya, as some claim. Would they be less valid? Would anything change if we learned that John Locke was a Moor?

Also, the fact is that most Americans from all social groups want the same basic things, although this cannot be completely illustrated here without taking much more space. Most Americans seek, among other things, prosperity and peace, a brilliant future for themselves and their kids, safe streets, and honest government. (Next time you read about racial discrepancies found in public opinion polls, note that the differences played up often amount to less than 20 percent, which of course means that the similarities—usually not referred to—amount to more than 80 percent.) Granted, there are differences on select issues, especially when they directly concern racial relations—for instance, between the views of African Americans and others on the outcome of the O.J. Simpson trial. But these are exceptions, not the rule.

The very notion that there are two American camps, the majority and “the minorities,” is a very dubious construction. Not only do most minority members agree with the majority on most issues, but there are only a few issues on which they agree with one another. The two major nonwhite groups, Asian Americans and African Americans, are particularly disparate, with the first much more conservative than the latter. And Hispanic Americans do not even agree with one another about what race they are. In the 1990 Census, 52 percent defined themselves as white, 3 percent as black, and 43 percent chose “Other Race.”

Furthermore, the very notion that there are monolithic “minorities,” a term tossed around daily, ignores the fact that differences within each minority often exceed differences among them. Many Cuban Americans’ attitudes are closer to Asian Americans’ than to Puerto Ricans’, whose viewpoints are closer to those of African Americans. Japanese Americans share little with Filipino Americans, and so on. Among those surveyed in the National Latino Political Survey, approximately three-quarters of Puerto Ricans and two-thirds of Cuban Americans and Mexican Americans chose to be labeled by their country of origin, as opposed to “pan-ethnic” terms such as “Hispanic” or “Latino.”

Last but not least, Americans of different backgrounds intermarry, and they—especially the young—do so at an ever-rising rate. Before too long, the majority of Americans will not be minorities or The Majority, but people whose parents, in-laws, uncles, and cousins are like those of Tiger Woods: Americans of all kinds. These multiracial and multiethnic Americans will blur the sharp edges now attributed to the various social groups, moving America ever closer to a monochrome society—although its appearance will be more akin to chocolate milk than to that of pale-faced Americans.

The importance of all this is that if people were to stop looking at pigmentation and other factors that are skin deep—jumping to the conclusion that there is a close relationship between race and the way one thinks, believes, and behaves—they would see that America is much less diverse than racial statistics are often said to imply.

Does all this mean that American society will remain basically unchanged? Certainly not. From its inception as a society of immi-

grants, it has been the genius of America to incorporate newcomers and adapt, growing richer by absorbing some of their unique features. Thus, the U.S. may well become more focused on nations south of its border and on the Pacific Rim than on Europe, but this will entail few basic substantive changes in American foreign policy. We shall still favor free trade, oppose nuclear proliferation, support human rights, and so on. And teaching children more about non-Western cultures will encourage a broadening of our educational horizons, not an abandonment of the “classics.”

Will we be a society free from racial and ethnic conflict? America never has been. However, we long ago learned to resolve, in peaceful ways, most of these conflicts most of the time. We have nothing to fear but those who try to promote fear.