Beyond the Economic Debate: The Cultural Complaint

I think God made all people good, but if we had to take a million immigrants in, say, Zulus, next year or Englishmen and put them in Virginia, what group would be easier to assimilate and would cause less problems for the people of Virginia? There is nothing wrong with us sitting down and arguing that issue, that we are a European country. . . .

... Every immigration policy is going to let somebody in and keep somebody out. It's going to have different criteria. What I am saying is culture, language, background are not illegitimate criteria for us to discuss when we discuss legal immigration.

— PATRICK BUCHANAN, December 8, 1991

[M]any modern American intellectuals [are] just unable to handle a plain historical fact: that the American nation has always had a specific ethnic core. And that core has been white. . . .

The American nation of 1965, nearly 90 percent white, was explicitly promised that the new immigration policy would not shift the country's racial balance. But it did. . . .

... It is simply common sense that Americans have a legitimate interest in their country's racial balance. It is common sense that they have a right to insist that their government stop shifting it. Indeed, it seems to me that they have a right to insist that it be shifted back.

— PETER BRIMELOW, Alien Nation

Advocates calling for greater restrictions on immigration in this country do not limit their arguments to economic themes. For some, the millions of newcomers to this country in recent decades represent a challenge to their conception of America itself. For these
critics, such as Republican presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan and journalist Peter Brimelow, cultural and racial issues may be more important.

In this chapter, we will look at the flaws of the Euro-immigrationist and cultural assimilationist positions. These flaws can be merged into two general propositions. The first is the normative premise that America has a strictly white, Christian, European heritage. The second is the Euro-immigrationists' and cultural assimilationists' misguided claim that immigrants of color fail to acculturate.

In his last two campaigns for the Republican presidential nomination, Buchanan has made criticizing current immigration policies an integral part of his political platform. Buchanan attempts to couch his attacks in cultural assimilationist terms, but the core of his claims is race-related. To Buchanan, the notion of immigrants retaining their native cultures is ruining America. “[P]ut[ting] America first . . . mean[s] our Western heritage is going to be handed down to future generations, not dumped onto some landfill called multi-culturalism.” ¹ Given the demographic composition of today's immigrants, the thrust of Buchanan's assimilation claim collapses into a racial claim because Asian and Latino immigrants, who constitute the majority of today's immigrants, do not come from a Western European racial or cultural heritage. To Buchanan, retaining this heritage is the adulteration and degradation of American culture. Likewise, former Ku Klux Klan leader and 1992 Republican presidential candidate David Duke claimed that immigrants “mongrelize” our culture and dilute our values.² And to journalist Peter Brimelow, “immigration is a potential ally” to those who would attack and “further deconstruct the American nation [as do] multiculturalism [and] bilingualism.”³

Buchanan, Brimelow, and Duke are not the only champions of a failure-to-assimilate attack on immigration. According to the former Senator Alan Simpson, a major architect of U.S. immigration policy, “[i]mmigration to the United States is out of control.” “[A]ssimilation to fundamental American public values and institutions may be of far more importance to the future of the United States.” “Is it in the national interest to bring in people through chain migration with no skills, who do not learn English, who join their extended family but don't join our society?” In Simpson's view, immigrants must accept the “public culture of the country—as opposed to private ethnic culture.”⁴

Similarly, consider the Federation for American Immigration Reform
(FAIR), touted as the nation's "main restrictionist lobbying group."  
The organization is calling for a moratorium on legal immigration (a position adopted by Buchanan) so that Americans may give themselves some "breathing space" to perform the "task of assimilation."  
Reform Party presidential candidate Richard Lamm, a former Colorado governor and chair of FAIR's advisory board, adds, "[America] can accept additional immigrants, but we must make sure they become Americans. We can be a Joseph's coat of many nations, but we must be unified."  
Even some self-described liberals insist that immigrants demonstrate their desire to join other Americans and become "one of us."  
While the "mainstream" views of Simpson and FAIR resemble the arguments of extremists such as Buchanan and Brimelow, important conceptual differences exist within the rhetoric of failure-to-assimilate advocates. The language of those who rely on assimilation arguments to oppose the immigration policies of the last three decades can be placed into two sometimes overlapping categories: race-based objections, and culture-based (i.e., nonrace-based) objections. Conventionally, commentators labeled these two categories "Anglo-conformity" assimilation, but given the blending of European immigrants over the years, the term "Euro-American conformity" seems more appropriate.

**Race-Based Objections**

Buchanan, Brimelow, and restrictionist immigration groups such as the Americans for Immigration Control (AIC) advocate a Euro-immigrationist philosophy that favors white, European immigrants in the belief that the country can assimilate more easily. Buchanan and Duke's statements reveal the racist nature of their approach to immigration. Their vision for America is white and Christian. Duke submits, "We've got to begin to protect our values. We've got to begin to realize that we're a Christian society. We're part of Western Christian civilization." He says that because of "illegal immigration, . . . [o]ur traditions are being torn away. Our values are being torn away." He also promised that if elected, there would not "be any Haitians setting foot on American soil." Similarly, Buchanan argues that our heritage is white. "Why are we more shocked when a dozen people are killed in Vilnius than [by] a massacre in Burundi? Because they are white people. That's who we are. That's where America comes from."
Central to Buchanan and Duke's assertions is the premise that white Christians alone founded and built this nation. Therefore, only white Christians merit entry; only they can be “American.” Buchanan and those like him ignore the enormous contributions people of color have made to this country, notwithstanding the suffering and oppression they have endured. For Buchanan, Duke, and Brimelow, new immigrants of color entering the country threaten the nation's racial and religious “purity.” Thus, to race assimilationists such as Buchanan and Duke, the obvious solution is to enact race-based exclusionary immigration laws.

In the same vein, the right-wing AIC supports the notion that the United States should “consider calling a halt to the mass influx of even more millions of hungry, ignorant, unskilled, and culturally-morally-genetically impoverished people.” Its spokespersons argue that while “America's apparent decline obviously has multiple causation, a factor of overriding importance is that its ethnically mixed population no longer rallies around common values to the extent necessary for successful attacks on internal and external problems.” The AIC correlates race with adhesion to common values. For it, the failure of certain segments of the American population to rally round a core is a function of race and ethnicity. To preserve cultural cohesion, immigration laws must control the race and ethnicity of entering immigrants.

CULTURE-BASED OBJECTIONS

The assimilationist position that raises cultural objections may not be couched in racial language. These assimilationists often express their alarm over the recent increase in non-English speaking immigrants in nonracial tones. Governor Lamm of FAIR, which has had a significant leadership overlap with the English Only movement, says, “We must have English as one of the common threads that hold us together. We should be color blind, but we can’t be linguistically deaf. . . .” Senator Simpson feels that “if linguistic and cultural separatism rise above a certain level, the unity and political stability of the nation will in time be seriously eroded.” The cultural assimilationist rhetoric of FAIR complains that “large-scale” immigration lowers American living standards and dilutes American culture.

Even the presidential candidate and former Senate majority leader
Bob Dole, often identified as a moderate Republican, indicated his support for English as the dominant language. Although Dole supports limited instruction in schools in the immigrants' native language, he does so only if the school's purpose is "the teaching of English. . . . [W]e must stop the practice of multilingual education as a means of instilling ethnic pride, or as therapy for low self-esteem or out of elitist guilt over a culture built on traditions of the West." For some, a feeling of cultural "superiority" underlies many of their attitudes about how immigrant children should be taught in schools. One public schoolteacher from the group "Save Our State," which pushed for the anti-illegal immigrant ballot effort Proposition 187 in California, felt that Americans

should not have to apologize for the superiority of our culture. . . . That does not say that we are calling other countries inferior, but let's face it . . . . it is our Constitution, it is our capitalist free enterprise system, it is our good-heartedness that makes us superior. And I don't think we should apologize for saying this to our children.

While this culture-based argument studiously avoids race and ethnicity, the argument's implications are distinctly race-based. Given the huge numbers of immigrants who enter this country from Asian and Latin American countries whose citizens are not white and (in most cases) do not speak English, criticism of the inability to speak English coincides neatly with race.

Moreover, the presence of nonwhite immigrants in the United States threatens cultural uniformity because the immigrants bring with them their own languages and cultural practices. Many cultural immigrationists believe that large-scale Latino and Asian immigration contributes to an increasingly bilingual society, creates substantial problems in schools, and changes our national identity in unwelcome ways. Social, political, and cultural issues are now "uppermost in the minds of many Americans concerned about the consequences of immigration." English-only initiatives have become increasingly common, and their advocates voice the following sentiments:

Summer has ended and school bells are ringing once again. But what will your children or grandchildren learn in our schools this year? . . . [T]hey may soon be taught that America is a hateful place founded by racists and murderers. Or that holidays like Columbus Day or Thanksgiving celebrate genocide and slavery and should be
banned . . . [or] that they are descendants of the European "ice people" whose lack of skin color identifies them as an inferior race! . . . Many of these educational "experts" are also behind the drive for so-called "bilingualism." I put it in quotes because these people really want to do away with English and everything European. . . . America has a language, a history and a culture. It does not want or need to import others. For two hundred years immigrants have come to our shores looking for something better than what they were leaving behind. . . . They neither expect nor want America to turn itself into a banana republic so they can feel more at home.23

Underlying this ferocious rhetoric is the fear that immigrants will leave their nonwhite mark on the American landscape: that there will be revisionist histories outlining the full story of how America developed through genocide, slavery, oppression, imperialism, and expansionism as well as through commitment to independence, justice, and individual rights; that our language will expand to include new terms and idioms, not all of Anglo-European extraction.

At bottom, cultural assimilationists envision America in terms as narrow and racially exclusive as do the race assimilationists such as Buchanan and Brimelow. Despite the difference in diction and approach, both groups share the same philosophical race-based core. They believe that the United States has a Western European cultural heritage that must be maintained, and that current levels of immigration threaten to alter or dilute that culture. This concern for "our" culture and heritage is the essential normative premise of cultural assimilationists and Euro-immigrationists.

Nonetheless, the distinction between the Euro-immigrationists' racist rhetoric and the cultural assimilationists' cries for preserving the English language and American culture serves an important purpose. It allows us to dismiss the racist, inflammatory rhetoric of people like Patrick Buchanan and Peter Brimelow as the views of politically expedient extremists and to begin the task of seriously examining the issues behind the rhetoric of both the cultural assimilationists and cultural pluralists.

**America's Multiracial and Multicultural Heritage**

The Euro-immigrationist and cultural assimilationist positions are flawed in two important ways. The first flaw is the essentially normative
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premise that America has a strictly white, Christian, European heritage. The second is their misguided claim that immigrants of color fail to acculturate.

While Buchanan and others dismiss multiculturalism as "landfill," multiculturalism challenges the premise that America is a white, English-speaking, Western Christian nation. Not only did Native American tribes long predate the arrival of white Christians, but the early European settlers spoke Spanish, German, Dutch, French, and Polish in addition to English. Before Chinese exclusion laws became permanent near the turn of the twentieth century, about 300,000 Chinese had entered the country. Filipinos established a community in Louisiana as early as 1565. Spanish-Portuguese Jews, the Sephardim, settled in the New World in the mid-1600s.24

Mexicans, initially propelled by Mexico's historical territorial claims in the Southwest, have long established patterns of migration to the United States.25 Over 9.5 million Africans were captured and brought to the Western Hemisphere as slaves.26 In the first decade of this century, about 2 million Italians, 1.6 million Russians, and 800,000 Hungarians immigrated.27 In short, the heritage of the United States does not derive solely from people who are white, English-speaking, Christian, and European. Nonwhite peoples have a long history in America, most of which is unflattering to the white, European Christians that Buchanan and others extol. The genocide of Native Americans, brutal enslavement of African Americans, and exploitation and oppression of Asian and Latino Americans are harsh reminders of our nation's past. In spite of the oppression, people of color have contributed to America's history and development and are a vital part of its heritage.28

Immigrant Acculturation

While the race assimilationists tend to focus on the theory that America is a white, European-based society that should stay that way, the culture-based critics of immigration tend to focus on acculturation. Many of the Simpson, Lamm, and FAIR arguments consist of complaints that immigrants fail to absorb American culture. Buchanan, for example, has called for a five-year moratorium on immigration as a "time-out" that will allow the nation to "Americanize and assimilate the people who [have] come."29
Study after study demonstrates, however, that the vast majority of immigrants take on cultural traits of the host community. Some traits replace old ones, but most are simply added.\textsuperscript{30} For example, immigrants entering the United States today learn English \textit{at the same rate} as other immigrant groups before them. First-generation immigrants tend to learn English and pass it along to their children, who become bilingual. Immigrants want and encourage their children to learn English. By the third generation, the original language is often lost.\textsuperscript{31} Throughout the United States, the demand for English as a Second Language (ESL) training far outstrips supply, leading adult newcomers to encounter long lines and waiting lists before gaining access to classes.\textsuperscript{32}

Cultural assimilationists frequently accuse the Latino community in particular of not assimilating or learning English. Yet Spanish-speaking immigrants residing in the country for fifteen years regularly speak English. They usually read English fluently within ten years, and most from Mexico and Central America read English—rather than Spanish-language newspapers. In addition, about 93 percent of all Mexican immigrants agree that U.S. residents should learn English.\textsuperscript{33}

Although complete acculturation of all immigrants is impossible, immigrants and refugees of all ages become acculturated to some extent. Even before coming to the United States, some adult immigrants and refugees have been exposed to American culture due to its pervasiveness in the global media. Upon arriving in the United States, most adult immigrants and refugees work, learn English, and often strive to pick up U.S. cultural habits and customs. Many young Asian and Latino immigrants, in particular, aggressively strive to be "American." They are eager to learn English, to get a job, to work hard; in short they seek to achieve a part of the American dream.\textsuperscript{34} Their aspirations are similar to those of the Jewish, Irish, and southern and eastern European immigrants who came in earlier years. Due to school attendance, interaction with peers, and exposure to the media, the children of immigrants, even foreign-born children, generally become fully acculturated. These children speak English, and their customs, habits, and values are nearly indistinguishable from those of their peers.

Aside from their complaint that new immigrants fail to adopt our society's cultural traits, cultural assimilationists also contend that immigrants threaten to dilute our Western cultural heritage. In truth, immigrants \textit{do} affect our culture, but surely not as much as our culture affects them. To describe this process as a dilution shows an ignorance of how
culture in America has developed throughout our history: not as some monolith unmoved by the waves of immigration in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, but as an ever-evolving understanding of what it means to be American. As immigrants acculturate, U.S. society in general has absorbed their customs, cuisine, interests, and values. Our culture and our definition of what it means to be American is constantly evolving. Immigrants play an integral role in helping to create that definition.\textsuperscript{35}

Changes in U.S. culture are of course not solely nor even mainly attributable to the influence of immigrants. Improved technologies, social movements, and economic developments are also crucial. However, a melting pot of sorts does exist. Immigrants do not displace American culture, but they help develop a distinctively new and constantly evolving and expanding U.S. culture.

**Multiculturalism and Assimilation by Choice**

In contrast to the assimilationist approach, cultural pluralism focuses on the benefits immigrants bring. In the historical dispute over immigration policy and assimilation, liberal intellectuals challenged the Anglo-conformity approach with a model of cultural pluralism that actually encouraged ethnic groups to retain their cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{36} Ethnic enclaves such as Little Italys and Chinatowns exemplify such preservation. Cultural pluralists envisioned that, while native cultural patterns could be preserved, the groups would continue to evolve as Americans and would eventually take part in democratic institutions.\textsuperscript{37}

Historically, cultural pluralism was not diametrically opposed to assimilationist sentiment. In fact, cultural pluralists believed that English should be the common language and that all citizens should share and participate in the general society's political and economic life. For pluralists, this seemed to represent a common core of values.\textsuperscript{38} The minimum expectations of English-language competence and acceptance of the nation's political and economic framework by immigrants were important assumptions shared by both assimilationists and cultural pluralists. The similarities end there, however.

Cultural pluralists believed that each nationality and ethnic group should retain its own individuality in language, religion, and culture. Promoting an early version of bilingualism and biculturalism, they felt
that both immigrants and minority groups had a right to preserve their primary identities, and they insisted on the value of the ethnic group “as a permanent asset in American life.” The pluralists suggested that each ethnic group should be permitted a communal life, “preserving and developing its cultural heritage while at the same time participating effectively in the broader life of the nation as a whole.” Pluralists accepted the disintegration of ethnic groups and their subsequent assimilation into American life as long as it resulted from the free choice of individuals and not from coercion.39

Although it needs refinement, much of the historical cultural pluralist paradigm remains valid today. Many, myself included to a degree, subscribe to these conventional views of cultural pluralism and dismiss the concerns of cultural assimilationists as well as the racism of Buchanan and Duke. In celebrating multiculturalism, we offer our own rhetoric, arguing that “[a] rambunctious America is a strong America,”40 and that “[d]espite the costs—and even the pain—that may be caused by immigration, the benefits are incalculable.”41 Behind the rhetoric, moreover, lies substance: pluralism has real advantages.

**Constitutional Principles**

One of the strengths of cultural pluralism is its connection to constitutional principles. Some of the central tenets of liberal democracy—the principles of religious freedom, freedom of speech and assembly, and privacy—encourage and protect diversity. We pride ourselves in maintaining and exercising these constitutional rights, and they are a major reason why so many people seek U.S. residency and citizenship.

Promoting and maintaining one’s own ethnic culture—a fundamental premise of pluralism—is therefore consistent with constitutional principles. Not only do individuals possess a broad zone of autonomy regarding how they think, speak, worship, and behave, but the Constitution prohibits the government from endorsing any one religion or political orthodoxy as “correct.”42 The liberal system, aside from controlling substantive subversion (actual violence, disobedience of valid laws, and the like), arguably is prohibited even from proclaiming itself the “best” or only “correct” system. By preserving the “marketplace of ideas,” our system protects those who choose to promote their own ethnic culture.

These traditional liberal principles suggest that government should
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not demand that immigrants subscribe to any particular language or cultural norm any more than to any particular religion. Rather, the ideological principles of the U.S. system require a hands-off, laissez-faire attitude toward shifting cultural boundaries and attitudes. Liberal democrats may desire that new immigrants assimilate into a certain image, but the process is left to market forces rather than state intervention.

Historically, however, the Supreme Court and Congress have acted at times in ways that conflict with these principles. The Supreme Court has espoused assimilationist thought in several opinions. In *Reynolds v. United States*, the Court seemed to support the establishment of a Protestant hegemony by sustaining state antipolygamy laws; the decision reflected "both a tolerance for the legislative efforts at regulating custom and morality, and a distinct preference for European observances." In *United States v. Joseph*, the Court felt that because Pueblo Indians held land as private owners and had adopted agriculture and Christianity, they had become so advanced, enlightened, and civilized as to escape the confines of Indian status.

Congress, meanwhile, helped institutionalize the assimilationist position through the enactment of restrictive immigration laws in place from 1882 to 1965. These provisions specifically established racial categories of immigrants barred from entering the United States. The Supreme Court upheld these provisions under Congress's plenary power over aliens. McCarthy-era ideologically based exclusion provisions, eased only recently, also conflicted with liberal democracy. Congress, however, still has the power to implement new assimilationist changes to the law, a concern given current efforts in the legislature to cut back the number of immigrants admitted to this country and their rights as residents while they are here.

**ECONOMIC DIVERSITY AND COMPETITION**

One argument advanced in favor of assimilation is that efficiency and competitiveness in the world marketplace demand a common national culture and language. This proposition seems misguided. A multicultural United States provides many advantages in the increasingly interdependent global economy.

Even casual attention to current events of the last decade has taught
us that political and economic developments all over the world—in Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—affect the U.S. economy. The Dow Jones, interest rates, production, the dollar’s value, and economic growth all reacted to democracy movements in Asia and eastern Europe, the Persian Gulf War, South Africa, NAFTA, Bosnia, and economic problems in Brazil and Mexico. Certainly the United States will remain economically linked to Europe, but Europe is only one of many regions that are vital to our economy. The blinders of a Eurocentric view of America limit our vision and viability in the international economic community. There are simply too many cultural differences that have to be considered for the United States to be effective globally. The economy increasingly demands expertise in more than American or Eurocentric ways and customs.

Since Asia and the industrializing nations of Latin America are new areas of economic power, bicultural and multicultural U.S. residents will prove invaluable as American companies develop private trade agreements and cooperative business ventures with the nations and corporations of these regions. Many businesses, advertising agencies, and law firms have already recognized the benefits of taking a multicultural approach in their Latin American and Asian endeavors. Some have established branches abroad, most have invested in culture and language training for employees, and even more have hired bicultural employees. In the age of jet travel, E-mail, teleconferencing, cellular phones, and fax machines, multicultural businesses are engaged in daily transactions in Tokyo, Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila, Beijing, Mexico City, Brasilia, and Caracas as well as London, Paris, and Frankfurt.

**The Advantage of a Diverse Workforce in Domestic Markets**

A diverse workforce is an advantage domestically as well. As the ethnic makeup and demographics of the country change, smart business managers make changes and innovations in response to the needs of the changing population. In short, responding to demographic changes can help increase profits. However, producing commercials with slogans like “se habla español” and advertising in the *Asian Yellow Pages* in order to attract new business must be coupled with the cultivation of a staff that can develop a rapport with the new customers. Thus, more and more
employers are coming to view diversity as good business as well as good public relations.

For example, the success of an AT&T service called Language Line which allows companies in the United States to communicate with their non-English speaking customers and business contacts illustrates the benefits of a diverse workforce. Through a staff of interpreters on conference calls, Language Line allows businesses such as Whirlpool, Lands’ End, Pepsi, and Gerber to communicate with U.S. and foreign customers who do not speak English. As the director of communications for the service explains, “Business is beginning to appreciate there are over 30 million people in this country who prefer to use a language other than English. . . . The U.S. business community is becoming increasingly attuned to the fact that not every customer speaks English.”

Moreover, the gains from a diverse workplace are also independent of the changing demographics. A diverse workplace is also a more innovative workplace. For example, Burger King has implemented diversity and multicultural training seminars for its employees while increasing the percentage of people of color in its workforce from 12 percent in 1986 to 28 percent in 1991. At Burger King and other businesses that have sought diversity, there is “a growing sentiment that diverse employee teams tend to outperform homogeneous teams of any composition. . . . [H]omogeneous groups may reach consensus more quickly, but often they are not as successful in generating new ideas or solving problems, because their collective perspective is narrower.” Thus, the old adage that “two heads are better than one” holds true, except that the more appropriate phrase might be “multiple ethnic perspectives are better than one.”

OTHER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Cultural pluralists rightly argue that the country continues to benefit from new immigrants. Although many question the economic benefit of immigrants, new immigrants, like their predecessors, have the drive and willingness to make a better life for themselves and their families. As a class, immigrants and refugees could very well represent the most determined class of people from their sending nations. Many have had to survive treacherous journeys and overcome severe obstacles. All have had to demonstrate the courage and fortitude needed to follow through
on the difficult decision of uprooting themselves and often their families, by winding their way through immigration mazes and the logistical facets of relocation. With our native workforce often charged with laziness and lack of drive, we stand to learn and to benefit from the hard work ethic of the immigrants and refugees who continue to enter.

More generally, immigrants represent a potential resource for adding to, rather than diluting, American culture. While the United States continues to be an innovative leader on many business, political, scientific, and social fronts, it is not the sole innovative leader in all these realms. We should be open to new ideas from people of different cultures who may have better ways of approaching the gamut of issues facing us, including business operations, protection of the environment, stress, interpersonal relations, and education.53

The ultimate benefit from interaction with those of different cultures does not necessarily flow from learning about new innovations, however. Rather, by learning about other cultures through social interaction with people of other cultures, we begin to learn more about other people. We begin to understand their customs, attitudes, and values, as well as to share information about our own cultures. In this process, we begin to develop tolerance and respect for other cultures and backgrounds. This type of education provides the foundation for a peaceful, productive pluralism that must be fostered throughout the world.54