

*The Multiculturalism of Fear.* By Jacob Levy. Oxford, U.K.:  
Oxford University Press, 2000.

THE CENTERPIECE OF THIS book is Levy's claim that theorizing of multiculturalism ought to be primarily oriented toward addressing the cruelty and humiliation of persons that can result from multicultural interaction. One immediately thinks of the oft-made claim that politics after Auschwitz must be centered around avoiding another Holocaust. Levy, however, points more generally to "bloody ethnic violence," "police beatings and subtler measures which remind members of a minority community that they are not full citizens of that community," etc. Here we find some libertarian potential, as Levy focuses on the state as the most dangerous instrument of intergroup cruelty and humiliation. Levy sometimes seems to be presenting an account of liberalism's proper stance toward multicultural issues, but, alas, the nature of this liberalism is rather amorphous. It is certainly not libertarian in nature. This is witnessed by Levy's claim concerning the moral status of a counterfactual occurrence wherein the U.S. government changes its official census category for blacks/African-Americans to "n\*\*\*\*\*".<sup>1</sup> Levy writes of this occurrence: "As it happens, I think that symbolic wrongs like this are not rights-violations and are probably not be justiciable" (sic). One can certainly grant Levy that, on the accounts offered by many respectable communitarian and liberal political philosophies, the type of wrong he is pointing to is not to be counted a rights-violation, but some other type of wrong. The libertarian, however, will certainly count it as an egregious violation of the rights of a U.S. taxpayer, whatever his or her racial background, if some of the taxpayer's wealth is taken for the purpose of funding the propagation of demeaning and racist speech toward African-Americans.

So if we are not getting libertarian-esque liberalism, what are we getting? The type of multicultural liberalism/liberal-communitarianism that interests Levy is deeply pragmatic and positivist in nature. There is certainly something very interesting about it. Levy is articulating a very widespread attitude on the part of elites in our society

---

<sup>1</sup>Quotation censored by the reviewer.

concerning the existence of particularist identities. This attitude is twofold. On the one hand, it involves the feeling that such identities are annoying and/or distasteful, at least when not pretended to be of little importance. On the other hand, it involves the view that it is equally annoying and (intellectually) distasteful when liberals, Marxists, *et al.* claim that there is some moral imperative involved in getting people to actively abandon these identities. After all—goes this brand of elitist reasoning—concerning Western countries, one may plausibly hold that much of the abandonment in question is inevitable in the long-run, due to government control of immigration and education: with the attendant implications of this control for the (im)possibility of mounting an effective resistance to the ethnically and racially amalgamating effects of the culture industry. Moreover, in the near term, one has got to look at the costs involved in not-much attending to individuals' multicultural demands, versus the costs of getting them to abandon identity-attitudes widely disliked by elites. Clearly the first option is the less costly one, even if one includes a few basic side-constraints, such as agreeing that genocide and racist police-beating are immoral. Hence, we find Levy arguing that we are to severely downgrade multiculturalist demands for positive recognition of particularist identities, and are to attend instead to issues of cross-cultural conflict among presently-ossified identities, insofar as these conflicts involve truly horrendous negatives.

Levy traces his account of multiculturalism to Montesquieu's focus on the intractable nature of certain particularist identities. This is probably a sound portion of the book; however, it did not interest me very much, as it did not seem to me to shed much light on the problem of multiculturalism, given that I was in little need of convincing that people's ethnic identities are very often profoundly important to them. Perhaps more atomistic-minded folk would appreciate the Montesquieu-discussion somewhat otherwise.

In any case, I found much more intriguing the discussion of Herder. This discussion points to the problematic linkage we find in Herder between a diversity of value among peoples and the supposed incommensurability of the discourses attaching to various *Völker* (peoples). In other words, we often find conflated in the literature on multiculturalism the claims that: (1) there are values realizable only within a given particularist context, and (2) there is no ultimate standard for value and morality. Levy rightly rejects this conflation, and the Herder-esque relativism found in claim (2).

In discussing Herder and similarly-minded nationalists, Levy correctly points out that traditional nationalism has no place for universal nationalism, because the possibility of being properly

included in more than one national group means that some nation-state will always fail to contain individuals who are taken to be properly counted as part of that nation-state. To have claimed that Alsace belonged with France was to contentiously deny that it belonged with Germany; and *vice versa*. Of course, Levy is here not offering an argument for world-government—or even just the EU. Rather, Levy is simply pointing out that the architect of coercive territorial systems must break some eggs to make an omelet, and so is to try to hammer out systems in whatever manner results in the least-egregious damage. For libertarian devotees of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, this certainly sounds sensible!

However, looking more closely at Levy's arguments, it seems that Levy rather misses the point as far as a Western context is concerned. However, before I launch into a critique concerning this issue, a caveat is in order: Levy seems to want to take non-Western contexts to be our proper focus, due to the terrible multiethnic terrors occurring in some of these contexts. But, particularly given Levy's status as a white American teaching at an elite American university, this desire rather seems to cut against the pragmatic strain in his argument. For I have a feeling that most intellectuals residing in the developing world either would not care much about the type of argument Levy offers, or else are the sort who wish to beat further the drums of white guilt concerning the crimes of our colonial, slave-trading, slave-owning, segregationist, and genocidal ancestors.

In any case, if we confine ourselves to a Western context, then we find that today most nationalism is not about being able to have some perfect alignment of nation and state, but about the ability of those who *wish* to join a nation and to exclude others from it, to do so. One can certainly uphold a universal nationalism of all nations of this sort: one can hold that everyone ought to have the right to contract so as to associate with those desired to be associated with, so that no one is improperly coerced in or out of national associations. (For example: there is government's coercive enforcement of this-or-that view of what constitutes proper educational offerings, and this-or-that view of the placement of roads and of what constitutes the proper extent of access to roads; along with government's forcing of wealth redistribution for purposes other than the protection of property rights [on a model of self-ownership].)

True, not every nation desired will come into being. So Levy is correct in what he claims. I may want to set up the Teutono-Celtic nation of Northern Californians in Avignon (or whatever), while the current residents of France have some other ideas about this. Alas, my nation fails. But I ought ideally to have the right to engage in

such quixotic projects free from government interference in my non-coercive activities, just as the French ought to have the right to try to stop me, free from government interference in their ability to halt my travel on French roads, etc. No doubt devotees of nationalism only-all-too-rarely explicitly embrace this type of libertarian ideal. But, who knows, perhaps it operates in the consciousness of many at some level or another.

We must abandon traditional nationalism, yes. But not all is lost for Herder's dreams if we also abandon much of the rest of the traditional vision of the nation-state. Indeed, it seems to me that even just a few good solid steps in this direction would really do wonders for particularist values.

Levy is fairly explicit about his relative lack of appreciation for such values in and of themselves, as opposed to his appreciation of the need to accede to the realities stemming from their widespread incorporation into the identities of the globe's residents.<sup>2</sup> Inevitably, this lack of the first type of appreciation colors Levy's conception of what the nationalist is after: Levy takes an externalist view, and conceives partisans of particularist identities to be engaged in some type of delusive power-game that simply has to be accommodated. So, for example, Levy takes it to be puzzling that one would think any great moral conflict to arise from having to choose one type of cultural-way-of-being in the world to the exclusion of another, given that the existence of such ways-of-being is completely compatible with moral universalism. "For cultural pluralism to be importantly related to moral pluralism and moral conflict, these excellences [that might attach to particular cultural ways-of-being-in-the-world] would have to be deeply tied up with moral systems." This I take to be a false claim. The Englishwoman may share exactly the same moral procedures as a given set of Italian liberals; and yet, it seems to me, she and the Italians may come to some great moral conflict if the latter's

---

<sup>2</sup>One should note that Levy seems to imply that indications of this second type of appreciation are somewhat controversial in the current academic environment. My own sense is that, beyond the rules that were also worth keeping in mind in 1971, about the only controversially-violated rules for contemporary academia are: (1) Don't say anything positive about *The Bell Curve* [awful book, by the way] and (2) Be skeptical about the concept of biological race [yes, a confusing topic].

Levy seems to have mastered these rules a little too well: *The Bell Curve*, biological race, DNA, genetics—none of these items comes up in this generally pragmatic work on multiculturalism, whether as part of positive evaluation, or part of negative criticism.

employment of these procedures leads them to uphold values at odds with the values that the Englishwoman comes to uphold. Some examples of what a libertarian would count as forms of improper coercion are: if the upshot of the differing valuations is that the Italians want to use large amounts of EU tax-monies to support educational programs emphasizing the accomplishments of Greco-Roman civilization over later, more-northerly Europeans, while the English-woman had something of an objection to this plan, we would have what I would take to be safely labeled, a moral conflict. For what is a moral conflict, if not a clash of views concerning what ought to occur, where this conflict is not decidable by appeal to valid universal procedures? Now Levy may hold that no such conflicts are possible; my religion of reason, is, however, somewhat differently constituted. Suffice to say Levy does not address this divergence of religious beliefs in his work: but it seems to me that *it*, at least, is one the particular religion in question can resolve.

Marcus Verhaegh  
Grand Valley State University

