

The Death of Diversity

Diversity was once just another word. Now it's a fighting word. One of the biggest problems with diversity is that it won't let you alone. Corporations everywhere have force-marched middle managers into training sessions led by "diversity trainers." Most people already knew that the basic idea beneath diversity emerged about 2,000 years ago under two rubrics: Love thy neighbor as thyself, and Do unto others as they would do unto you. Then suddenly this got rewritten as "appreciating differentness."

George Bernard Shaw is said to have demurred from the Golden Rule. "Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you," Shaw advised. "Their tastes may not be the same." No such voluntary opt-out is permissible in our time. The parsons of the press made diversity into a secular commandment; do a word-search of "diversity" in a broad database of newspapers and it might come up 250 million times. In the Supreme Court term just ended, the Seattle schools integration case led most of the justices

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By Daniel Henninger

into arcane discussions of diversity's legal compulsions. More recently it emerged that the University of Michigan, a virtual Mecca of diversity, announced it would install Muslim footbaths in bathrooms, causing a fight.

Now comes word that diversity as an ideology may be dead, or not worth saving. Robert Putnam, the Harvard don who in the controversial best-seller "Bowling Alone" announced the decline of communal-mindedness amid the rise of home-alone couch potatoes, has completed a mammoth study of the effects of ethnic diversity on communities. His researchers did 30,000 interviews in 41 U.S. communities. Short version: People in ethnically diverse settings don't want to have much of anything to do with each other. "Social capital" erodes. Diversity has a downside.

Prof. Putnam isn't exactly hiding these volatile conclusions, though he did introduce them in a journal called Scandinavian Political Studies. A great believer in the efficacy of what social scientists call "reciprocity," he wasn't happy with what he found but didn't mince words describing the results:

"Inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbors, regardless of the color of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more, but have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to huddle unhappily in front of the television." The diversity nightmare gets worse: They have little confidence in the "local news media." This after all we've done for them.

Colleagues and diversity advocates, disturbed at what was emerging from the study, suggested alternative explanations. Prof. Putnam and his team re-ran the data every which way from Sunday and the result was always the same: Diverse communities may be yeasty and even creative, but trust, altruism and community cooperation fall. He calls it "hunkering down."

Give me a break! you scream. What about New York City or L.A.? From the time of Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio" through "Peyton

Place" and beyond, people have fled the flat-lined, gossip-driven homogeneity of small American "communities" for the welcome anonymity of big-city apartment building—so long as your name wasn't Kitty Genovese, the famous New York woman who bled to death crying for help.

It's a wonderfully thought-provoking study, suitable for arguing the length of a long August weekend and available as a lecture on Prof. Putnam's Harvard Web site, the "Saguaro Seminar." Astute readers, however, have already guessed who's thrilled with the results.

Pat Buchanan, reflecting an array of commentaries on the study from the American right, says, "Putnam provides supporting fire from Harvard Yard for those who say America needs a time-out from mass immigration, be it legal or illegal." The "antis" believe the Putnam study hammers the final intellectual nail in the coffin of immigration and diversity.

The diversity ideologues deserve whatever ill tidings they get. They're the ones who weren't willing to persuade the public of diversity's merits, preferring to turn "diversity" into a political and legal hammer to compel compliance. The conversions were forced conversions. As always, with politics comes pushback. And it never stops.

The harvest of bitter fruit from the diversity wars begun three decades ago across campuses, corporations and newsrooms has made the immigration debate significantly worse. Diversity's advocates gave short shrift to assimilation, indeed arguing that assimilation into the American mainstream was oppressive and coercive. So they demoted assimilation and elevated "differences." Then they took the nation to court. Little wonder the immigration debate is riven with distrust.

The diversity ideologues ruined a good word and, properly understood, a decent notion. What's needed now is for a younger black, brown or polka-dot writer to recast the idea in a way that restores the worth and utility of assimilation. Somebody had better do it soon; the first chart offered in the Putnam study depicts inexorably rising rates of immigration in many nations. The idea that the U.S. can wave into effect a 10-year "time out" on immigration flows is as likely as King Canute commanding the tides to recede.

Here, too, Robert Putnam has a possible assimilation model. Hold onto your hat. It's Christian evangelical megachurches. "In many large evangelical congregations," he writes, "the participants constituted the largest thoroughly integrated gatherings we have ever witnessed." This, too, is an inconvenient truth. They do it with low entry barriers to the church and by offering lots of little groups to join inside the larger "shared identity" of the church. A Harvard prof finds good in evangelical megachurches. Send this man a suit of body armor!

My own model for the way forward in a 21st century American society of unavoidable ethnic multitudes is an old one, a phrase found nowhere in the Putnam study or any commentary on it: the middle class. Its assimilating virtues may be boring, but it works, if you work at getting into it.

Of course Hillary Clinton believes this can't happen here because the middle class has been "invisible" to George Bush. As with diversity, progress is always just beyond the horizon.

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People in ethnically diverse settings don't care about each other.