Fall 2001

(Review) Are We All Post-Culturalists Now?

Eric Adler
Connecticut College, eadler1@conncoll.edu

There is no epiphany in Pedro Juan's stories. His writing never gets off the ground or out of the dirt; that would give the lie to all these lives. Rather these fictive lives and this writing are a dark if riotous mirror in which some ultimate human essence survives. The brief, fleeting openings to the "spiritual"—without any overtone of irony because in this underworld irony is a civilized tone which is meaningless—are little windows, portholes, through which a gasp of air is drawn.

Gutiérrez's language is brief, with a minimum of qualifiers, stripped of adjectives and adverbs, a style of dirty nouns and violent transitive verbs. "A person lives in chapters," he writes. Each chapter-story is a microdrama, sketched in with a few deft and vivid strokes. The narrative rhythm accelerates to such a tempo that at times it has the staccato of the telegraphic, to pin down quickly the pathetic transiency of the street or the bed: "I said to hell with it all, and I wrote some naked stories. My stories could run bare-assed into the middle of the street, shouting, 'Freedom, freedom, freedom.'" Perhaps this is the last word which should be left to Pedro Juan.

Alain Arias-Misson

Are We All Post-Culturalists Now?

FADED MOSAIC: THE EMERGENCE OF POST-CULTURAL AMERICA. By **Christopher Clausen.** Ivan R. Dee. $25.00.

AT THE CONCLUSION of *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (2000), a spirited, mordant defense of the Western tradition, Roger Scruton avers that the ending bars of Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* are "a beautiful proof that Western culture. . .is radically multicultural." Scruton, one of Britain's foremost conservative intellectuals, would hardly be expected to have concern for the imperatives of the multiculturalist ethos. Elsewhere, in fact, he has denounced the politicization of university curricula resulting from the ascendancy of multiculturalism in higher education. As such, his nod to the term displays the great power it now wields. But perhaps the title of Nathan Glazer's explication of American multiculturalism sheds the most light on the authority the movement possesses: *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (1997).

But are we? And, if so, what does that mean? In *Faded Mosaic: The Emergence of Post-Cultural America*, Christopher Clausen, an English

professor at Pennsylvania State University, argues that we are not "all multiculturalists now"—nor, in essence, have we ever really been. The book could change the nature of the multiculturalist debate. For Clausen hardly delivers a typical screed that excoriates the proponents of multiculturalism. Rather, he proves just as critical of "assimilationist" stances as he does of the "diversity" apparatchiks.

Clausen's criticisms of the multiculturalist project are novel precisely because he does not find fault with the tenets of the movement, but doubts the very existence of multiculturalism in American life. True multiculturalism, he argues, would demand an understanding of and immersion in cultures so radically different that deference to all of them would cause major rifts in society. How could one abide by the caste system of India and the individualism of the Renaissance, and remain true to the spirit of both? In essence, it can't be done. Proponents of multiculturalism don't earnestly desire Americans to delve into the heart of the world's myriad cultures; they yearn for something else—something much less involved and disconcerting than true multiculturalism.

Indeed, the end result of America's infatuation with other cultures is a superficial and thoughtless concern for the artifacts and ephemeralities of non-Western societies that grant one a false sense of kinship with "oppressed" peoples. This, Clausen demonstrates, is a far cry from true multiculturalism.

Clausen also offers criticisms of "cultural relativism," a notion intrinsically linked to the spirit of multiculturalism. Having traced its origin to classical anthropologists, he argues that

> What cultural relativism now usually amounts to in practice is that only those aspects of non-European cultures that seem most compatible with Western feminism and at least a minimal notion of human rights are held up as examples of diversity. Few American multiculturalists are enthusiastic about the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia. . .or, worse yet, Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Thus we find that, according to the true spirit of so-called multiculturalism, cultural relativism goes only so far, and is a highly selective endeavor. Multiculturalism itself, furthermore, compels its followers to survey a mere patina of non-Western cultures.

Conservative critics have argued many of these points before, placing special emphasis on practices such as female genital mutilation in parts of Africa and ritual female immolation in India as a means to discount

the multiculturalist project. But never before has the entire movement of multiculturalism appeared so simplistic, so ephemeral, so bankrupt.

And Clausen's criticisms of the multiculturalist project do not end there. He realizes that most Americans have, in recent years, become less and less tied to their own cultural moorings. "For all but a tiny proportion of the North American population," he writes, "the connection with an ancestral culture is now so vestigial that whether to assert or ignore it has become entirely a matter of choice." Finding increasing mobility and ever-improving technology in large part responsible for this predicament, Clausen implicitly links the weakening of cultural mores to a vision of the world's future associated with Marshall McLuhan's "global village."

Thus committed multiculturalists are championing sundry distinct cultures precisely when the distinctiveness of these cultures is fading from American life. In this sense, multiculturalism's supposed embrace of non-Westerners is a backward-looking endeavor: it celebrates cultures as their hard-and-fast distinctions die away.

For this reason, Clausen proves critical of the defenders of American assimilation—those who promote the "melting pot" vision of immigration. To what are new citizens asked to assimilate? Indeed, in a time in which the imperatives of all cultures have drastically weakened, the dominant WASP culture of America has by no means escaped this lessening of influence. Americans hardly live in a rigid, monolithic country, as cultural studies gurus assert; rather, posits Clausen, they inhabit a "post-cultural" world—a world more afflicted by ennui than by the rigid demands of any given culture.

Though Clausen's critique of multiculturalism is powerful and compelling, his tracing of the origins of post-culturalism seems less convincing. By claiming that technology and a strong central government are chiefly responsible for the rise of cultural relativism, Clausen gives short shrift to the avant-garde Parisian intellectuals who outlined many of the precepts Americans now hold dear—albeit in watered-down form. One can understand why Clausen chooses to do this; ever since Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), argued that Foucault, Barthes, et al. were "Nietzsches of the left" in order to excoriate the views of American radicals, conservative critics have harped on the influence of these thinkers, often finding them responsible for the ideology of multiculturalism and political correctness. Clausen, perhaps wishing to grant his critique a greater degree of originality, distances his work from these arguments.

But this does not mean that these continental thinkers had as little effect on modern cultural life as Clausen claims. In fact, many Americans who unthinkingly believe in the multiculturalist project would be aghast to discover the link between multiculturalism and the views of Foucault, Barthes, and their peers—views they would generally regard as repellent.

Indeed, Clausen chooses to focus mostly on the structural and cultural causes for what he terms post-culturalism at the expense of intellectual issues. Thus he—like unreflective partisans of multiculturalism—does not mention the long tradition of Western self-criticism that results from an examination of other cultures. In fact, deference to other cultures, traceable even in Herodotus's *Histories*, plays a large part in the intellectual history of the West, and can be discovered in important works of Western thought, by such authors as Michel de Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In a sense, then, Americans are not stranded in a post-cultural world; rather, they are following a well-worn path in their supposedly new-found concern for non-Western cultures. It is not surprising that this recent emphasis on "diversity" and multiculturalism has been the preoccupation of Westerners; it would be startling if, say, Iran, given its intellectual traditions, were the home of radical multiculturalists. Clausen's failure to discuss this issue makes his argument tread dangerously close to the ahistorical rants of multiculturalism's devotees.

One can, moreover, quibble with Clausen's neologism, "post-cultural." Can a society ever be truly "post-cultural"? Perhaps "post-traditional" would be a more accurate, though less sexy, adjective, but even it fails to convey the heart of American cultural life—a life infected by an unhealthy dollop of faux multiculturalism and a smidgen of self-serving cultural relativism.

Despite these flaws, *Faded Mosaic* is a crucial addition to the multiculturalist debate. For Clausen's depiction does not simply highlight the divisiveness usually considered a result of the multiculturalist worldview; rather, it questions the legitimacy of the entire enterprise. Though it would be foolish to assert—even wryly—that "we are all post-culturalists now," *Faded Mosaic* describes aspects of modern American life with a disheartening accuracy.

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