

CHAPTER IV

American Diversity and Public Discourse

OUR TRADITIONS OF DIVERSITY AND UNITY

The first chapter of this book cites evidence that our literacy has been declining and that the long-range remedy for restoring and improving American literacy must be to institute a policy of imparting common information in our schools.¹ But before we can agree on such a radical change in school policy, we must deal clearly with some of the usual disputes about intervention in the school curriculum. Such conflicts have been, but need not be, divisive, slogan-ridden, and confused. Some of the old disputes may very well be moderated by our new knowledge of literacy. Some choices regarding the contents of the school curriculum are more purely technical than they have been assumed to be.

But technical research cannot provide a neutral, scientific answer to the problem. The illusory hope for such a formal solution has only encouraged evasion and fragmentation. To deal effectively with the school curriculum, we must consider more than technical goals: we must also consider specific contents. But in a diverse society, who has the right to define nationwide requirements? In the American context, the tradition of pluralism in education is so important that the subject deserves a chapter of its own. Although the structure of a solution to the problem of declining

literacy is straightforward, our tradition ensures that the political accomplishment of the solution cannot be correspondingly simple. The reader may already have inferred that I am committed to pluralism and local control in education. It is my belief that we can work within those traditions and still achieve a far higher level of national literacy than we now have. I hope that the schools themselves will act on the implications of the new findings about literacy and independently recognize our need to teach more shared information on a national scale.²

Because our country started out with a powerful commitment to religious toleration, we developed habits of cultural tolerance to go with it. Since the nineteenth century, when we managed to accommodate a tremendous influx of new citizens from many different nations and cultures, pluralism and tolerance have been part of our self-portrait. We believe that our diversity brings us a special strength and vitality. Paralleling our cultural diversity, and in fact preceding it, has been our tradition of political diversity, which developed out of the balance of powers between the states and the federal government.

But cultural pluralism has always been a moderate tradition in this country. We do not see the with cultural animosities like warring Serbs and Croats. Our discussions have produced few influential defenses of cultural separatism. The dominant model of American pluralism has been that of the "hyphenated American": the Italo-American, the Polish-American, the Afro-American, the Asian-American, and so forth. Moreover, even the emotion-ridden arguments between cultural pluralists and cultural assimilationists have been about the most appropriate degrees of diversity within a basically moderate framework. The arguments revolve around such questions as: Shall we aim for the gradual assimilation of all into one national culture, or shall we honor and preserve the diverse cultures implicit in our hyphenations? Shall we slow down the pace of new immigration in order to retain the present amalgam of cultures or shall we continue to respect the tradition of America as a refuge for all groups?

In the context of these traditional arguments, we must set aside as a completely different issue the current debate over linguistic pluralism or separatism. Our most ardent proponents of cultural

pluralism did not support linguistic pluralism. The great American apostles of pluralism — William James and Horace Kallen chose among them — assumed that our diversity would develop in a context of a common language. They assumed that although we might act and think very differently, we would talk and argue with each other as members of a single language community, peacefully and in literate English. Our diversity has been represented by the motto on all our coins — E PLURIBUS UNUM, "out of many one." Our debate has been over whether to stress the many or the one.

If we had to make a choice between the one and the many, most Americans would choose the principle of unity, since we cannot function as a nation without it. Indeed, we have already fought a civil war over that question. Few of us accept the extreme and impractical idea that our unity can be a purely legal umbrella, which formally contains but does not integrate our diversity. On the other side, the specific content of our larger national culture is not and must not be detailed, unchanging, or coercive, because that would impinge on our equally fundamental principles of diversity, localism, and toleration. A balanced, moderate position is the only workable American position, and it is bound to be the one that will prevail.

If our system had not encouraged localism and diversity, we would in any case have developed them. If our diversity had not arisen from immigration, local accident, and other historical causes, we would have evolved local differences anyway. Localism is constantly being reinvented all over the world, since the large, modern national state does not and cannot lend enough social glue or emotional meaning to satisfy the human desire for community. Among the democracies, France, that supposed model of cultural homogeneity, continues to preserve local and even contranational traditions of the most diverse kinds. In his absorbing book *Peasants into Frenchmen*, Eugen Weber shows that, contrary to common opinion, a truly shared French national culture did not really come into being until well into the twentieth century and even then did not supplant local traditions as thoroughly as many have thought.³

The worlds of the private and the familial and of the group — the neighborhood, the professional association, the club — are the worlds in which we mainly live. Erving Goffman and other social

psychologists have shown that all of us inhabit numerous local cultures and adopt hundreds of small-scale cultural roles within the large-scale culture.⁴ Moreover, the American tradition encourages the development of all these local cultures and associations as a matter of fundamental legal and ethical principle, with the result that our nation has a deliberately contranational element built into it. Our code is designed to protect local and individual interests against the wider nation, just as it is designed to protect minorities against majorities.

This tradition was encapsulated for me in a moment during the television drama of the Watergate hearings. Senator Sam Ervin, in the full glory of his local twang, decided to remind us that what had become an amorphous spectacle called Watergate had in fact to do with a basic principle: our protection of the local against the national, of the private against the public, the individual against the state. Ervin's words had nothing to do with the abstract breaking of this or that statute but with the deliberately built-in limits of state authority. The words he quoted were spoken by that great defender of the American colonists, William Pitt the Elder, and they became permanently etched in my mind in a Southern drawl that rang like poetry:⁵

The poorest man may in his cottage
bid defiance to all the force of the Crown.
It may be frail;
its roof may shake;
the wind may blow through it;
the storms may enter,
the rain may enter, —
but the King of England cannot enter.

I can still hear Ervin saying, "But thuh King of Inglnun kennawd ennuh."

It is fortunate that such life-enhancing localism has been part of our tradition, because the brute fact of history in every modern nation has been the increasing dominance of the national culture over local and ethnic cultures. Studies of the demographic structures of American cities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

show the continuing dispersion of ethnic groups away from separate neighborhoods and into the broader city.⁶ People have gradually located themselves according to economic status rather than cultural background. This pattern of cultural assimilation and increasing homogeneity has been reinforced by the growth of regional and national over purely local economic arrangements. Under these circumstances local flavor may sometimes take on a self-conscious, desperate character — one reason for there being so much talk about pluralism these days. When we had more of it, we talked about it less.

do these not form their own cultures

To acknowledge the importance of minority and local cultures of all sorts, to insist on their protection and nurture, to give them demonstrations of respect in the public sphere are traditional aims that should be stressed even when one is concerned, as I am, with national culture and literacy. But this book is not, and no single book could be, an inquiry into the multifarious local and ethnic traditions that are found in the United States. It is for the Amish collectively what our American traditions are, to decide what "American" means on the other side of the hyphen in Italo-American or Asian-American. What national values and traditions really belong to national cultural literacy?

The larger national culture must be extremely capacious and somewhat vague. That is the case in a large monocultural country like France, and it is even more emphatically so in a deliberately diversified one like our own. What is common to our broad culture? Besides the English language and the national legal codes, American culture possesses first of all a civil religion that underlies our civil ethos.⁷ Our civil ethos treasures patriotism and loyalty as high, though perhaps not ultimate, ideals and fosters the belief that the conduct of the nation is guided by a vaguely defined God. Our tradition places importance on carrying out the rites and ceremonies of our civil ethos and religion through the national flag, the national holidays, and the national anthem (which means "national hymn"), and supports the morality of tolerance and benevolence, of the Golden Rule, and communal cooperation. We believe in altruism

and self-help, in equality, freedom, truth telling, and respect for the national law.

Besides these vague principles, American culture fosters such myths about itself as its practicality, ingenuity, inventiveness, and independent-mindedness, its connection with the frontier, and its beneficence in the world (even when its leaders do not always follow beneficent policies). It acknowledges that Americans have the right to disagree with the traditional values but nonetheless acquiesce in the dominant civil ethos to the point of accepting imprisonment as the ultimate means of expressing dissent.

Although these principles have not been immune to internal attack in American history, they have nonetheless proved durable. Our national culture was created at the start of the modern age, when dogmatic, sectarian religion had already come under the devastating criticism of the Enlightenment, and when American civil religion, in the vague form in which our founders created it, began to accommodate itself to the secularism of the modern age. This civil religion, "big-tented and tolerant," as Charles Krauthammer calls it, lends coherence to the larger American public culture and is the basic source of American values.⁸

Although some modern secularists do not accept public religious expressions of any sort, and do not regard them as the necessary source of social bonding and civic virtue, their position has not been sustained by history. The American civil religion, as expressed in our national rites and symbols, is in fact a central source of coherence in American public culture, holding together various and even contradictory elements of its tradition. Secularists who deplore any public references to God, and regard benevolent social ideas as ultimate civic principles, are, in the end, just another species of hyphenated Americans — secularist-Americans — who form a large class but acquiesce in the second side of the American hyphen like most of us who sing the national hymn, pledge allegiance ("under God") to the flag, know that all are "endowed by their Creator" with inalienable rights.

When George Washington in his Farewell Address said that "religion and morality are indispensable supports" of the American commonwealth, these sentiments were by no means peculiar to him. Those who collaborated in writing his address included Alexander

Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, and their sentiments resembled ideas expressed elsewhere by other founders, including Jefferson.⁹ The American founders were well aware of the parallel that precisely because established sectarian religion must be forbidden, a nonsectarian civil "religion" must be put in its stead to secure a good and harmonious democracy. Since the people are to govern themselves, they must govern on high, broadly religious principle for the larger public good as well as for their own private good.

Such religious sentiments must have expression in rituals and sacred texts. The civil religion honors the values of tolerance, equality, freedom, patriotism, duty, and cooperation; it has symbols and rites like the flag, public oaths, and the holidays. It also has its own bible, a knowledge of which is at the heart of cultural literacy. The bible was not decided upon by a synod once and for all. No doubt some of its "books" — the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, some parts of the Bible itself — will always belong in it, but our consensual form of civil religion is much like our legal system in that it allows for change and amendment.

I am not the first to make this observation about our civil bible. Horace Kallen, that enthusiast for cultural pluralism, proposes that the following make up its canon:

Its book of Genesis would of course be the Declaration of Independence, which is also the simplest, clearest, most comprehensive yet briefest telling of the American Idea. It sets the theme and whatever follows is a variation upon it.

Kallen lists his preferences for additional sacred texts.

George Washington's letter to the Jewish Congregation at Newport; Jefferson's First and Second Inaugurals; his Virginia Aristocracy; certain articles from the *Federalist*; the Constitution; certain decisions and statements of John Marshall's. The Bible might include James Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance"; James Monroe's promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine; the Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery So-

ciety; Horace Mann's Twelfth Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education; the Seneca Falls Declaration on Women's Rights; Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech; John Brown's speech to the Court that sentenced him . . .¹⁰

And so on for a couple of paragraphs, through the Truman Doctrine and the reports of Truman's Commission on Higher Education and on Civil Rights.

Kallen's list is dated, too long, and too narrowly based in his own values. It takes too little account of the distinction between what is broadly and consensually established among Americans over the generations and what he thinks it would be good to throw in. But Kallen rightly includes contemporary documents because the American bible is constantly being brought up to date through new additions, as is the American Constitution through new interpretations. Cultural revision is one of our best traditions.

There is, of course, a very good reason why the principle of cultural revision should parallel our principle of legal change and constitutional reinterpretation. They are fundamentally similar. The Constitution has biblical status for the nation, but it is understood to be amendable because it serves a principle more ultimate than itself — that of the sovereignty of the people. The bible of the American civil religion is based on fundamental principles of justice, freedom, and equality that permit progress and change.

One recent addition to the current American bible is the "I Have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., which self-consciously draws on earlier texts of the American bible to make its new contribution, just as the writers of the New Testament deliberately reappropriated the words of the Old. I have placed in italics King's quotations from and allusions to documents that belong to the cultural literacy of every American.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: *We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal*. . . I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plains, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory

of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. . . . This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning. My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring. . . . When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!

THE VOCABULARY OF A PLURALISTIC NATION

Civil religion gives American culture its direction and defines its fundamental values, but it does not determine the diversified contents of American national culture. American national culture is neither coherent nor monolithic, and no convincing attempt fully to define its character has ever appeared — not even Alexis de Tocqueville's brilliant sketches of 1835. The national culture, as contrasted with the national civil religion, depends on a highly diverse vocabulary of communication rather than a coherent system of fundamental values and principles. Like the bible of the civil religion, the national vocabulary changes with the consent of those who use it, but because of its use in communication, it is fundamentally conservative and its core contents change very slowly.

Suppose we think of American public culture as existing in three segments. At one end is our civil religion, which is laden with definitive value traditions. Here we have absolute commitments to freedom, patriotism, equality, self-government, and so on. At the other end of the spectrum is the *vocabulary* of our national discourse, by no means empty of content but nonetheless *value-neutral* in the sense that it is used to support all the conflicting values that arise in public discourse. This vocabulary is hospitable to God and mammon, pornography and prudery, Catholicism and Zen. It is

our medium for engaging in argument and agreement about highly diverse political and cultural issues. Between these two extremes lies the vast middle domain of culture proper. Here are the concrete politics, customs, technologies, and legends that define and determine our current attitudes and actions and our institutions. Here we find constant change, growth, conflict. This realm determines the texture of our national life.

Although it is in some respects more important than the other two, the middle realm lacks the stability of either our national religion or vocabulary. It shifts more with the times than our other two domains. The lines between these three realms cannot be firmly drawn; each influences the others and is influenced by them. But the middle domain is the only one whose contents are worth arguing about.

Because the middle domain is so significant, contentious, and value-laden, we must be all the more solicitous for the integrity of the vocabulary of public discourse itself. There is no point in arguing about either our civil religion or our vocabulary. They are our national givens, our starting points. Our civil religion defines our broadly shared values as a society, and our national vocabulary functions, or should function, as our broadly shared instrument of communication. Only through a capacious and widely shared vocabulary can our democracy deal effectively with the contentious issues of the middle domain.

If our civil religion is "big-tented and tolerant," how much more capacious and tolerant is our national vocabulary. (Again, I mean something very broad by the word *vocabulary*; I mean cultural literacy — the whole system of widely shared information and associations.) This everyday vocabulary is much more pragmatic and tolerant of diversity than even the civil religion. What counts in the sphere of public discourse is simply being able to use the language of culture in order to communicate any point of view effectively.

Some have objected that to publish the contents of our national vocabulary would have the effect of promoting the culture of the dominant class at the expense of minority cultures. But historically, the publication of vocabularies and dictionaries has not fixed the vocabulary of any national language. Nor does the national vocabulary reflect a coherent culture of a dominant class or other

group in the same way that a local dialect does. It is primarily an instrument of communication among diverse cultures rather than a cultural or class instrument in its own right. In fact, one of the main uses of a national vocabulary is to enable effective and harmonious exchange despite personal, cultural, and class differences. This was well understood by David Hume.

Men of the most confined knowledge are able to remark a difference of taste in the narrow circle of their acquaintance, even when the persons have been educated under the same government, and have early imbibed the same prejudices. . . . As this variety of taste is obvious to the most careless inquirer; so will it be found, on examination, to be still greater in reality than in appearance. The sentiments of men often differ . . . even while their general discourse is the same.¹¹

To regard a standardized cultural instrument as a class culture is facile oversimplification. It is, as Orlando Patterson observed, bad sociology, and it is certainly an incorrect historical observation about language.¹²

To put this point in perspective, consider a historical moment remote enough from the current American scene to provide a clear and disinterested insight into the inherently classless character of cultural literacy. In the England of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, long before dictionary makers began a conscious effort to standardize the national language, there existed a very strong tendency toward standardization of public discourse in the great towns. The big cities of Europe and Asia were the first cultural melting pots; America has no historical monopoly on that phenomenon. Within these growing cities, neither diversity of social class nor diversity of regional dialects could inhibit the inexorable process of linguistic and cultural standardization that occurred when great numbers of people moved to town from the provinces.

This process, as it then occurred in London, is an illustration of Patterson's observation that mainstream culture is not a class culture and that outsiders and newcomers influence its forms as much as they are influenced by them. Provincial newcomers of all classes who migrated to London gradually changed the local London speech

as much as they themselves were changed by it. In the documents preserved from that era, we can find, even from one decade to another, evidence that local London forms were being "driven out by forms previously only found in other districts, especially those of the North."¹³ Even the place names of London — and place names are perhaps the most conservative cultural forms of any words in ordinary use — show the effects of the new eclectic speech. Isenmonger Lane became Ironmonger Lane, Crepelgate became Cripplagate, and so on, all under the influence of the provincial immigrants.

Dialects rubbed up against each other in the public streets and halls of London. The great city was a meeting place for public interactions of all sorts. There, people of all types — artisans, tradespeople, and aristocrats — were attracted by the magnetism of London's money, amusement, and excitement. The need for a common medium of intercourse among all these different classes of people gradually pulled into use a common, composite speech for use in public discourse. The local London dialect actually disappeared and was gradually replaced by something that had never existed before — an amalgam that had no single identifiable parent. It did not represent the speech of any particular location, class, or ethnic group.

The old claim that this London speech, which became the basis of our standard written English, was just the upper-class dialect of the royal court is incorrect. The members of the court itself came from all parts of England and spoke different native dialects. King and courtier alike had to learn the common London speech; it formed the upper-class speech of the court, not vice versa. The dialect that formed the basis of our own national language was, in origin, the democratic speech of the marketplaces and alleyways of the big melting pot of London.

In *Marking Nation, and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View*, Otto Jespersen traces the same process of forming an eclectic common speech in many of the big cities of Europe.¹⁴ The famous Italian standard of speech idealized the process memorably: *lingua toscana in bocca romana* ("Tuscan speech in Roman mouth"). The great cities forged the beginnings of the common, classless languages of all the great European nations.

Neither in origin nor in subsequent history have national languages been inherently class languages. It is true that after national dictionaries were formulated, the standard languages were more likely to be acquired by people who were rich enough to be educated than by poor people. But the distinction is one of schooling, which we have made universal, not of economic or social class. Ideological phrase dropping about the connections between cultural literacy and social class should therefore leave us unimpressed. Historically, the modern democratic nations arose at the same time as the great national literate languages, and, ever since, democracy and literate culture have been essentially connected.

It is, therefore, a very odd cliché that connects literate national culture with elitism, since it is the least elitist or exclusive culture that exists in any modern nation. Literate culture is far less exclusive, for instance, than any ethnic culture, no matter how poverty bound, or pop culture or youth culture. It has no in-group, no generational or geographical preference. It can be mastered in the country or in the city, in a shanty or a mansion, so long as the opportunity is given. But it must be given effectively by schooling that produces literacy, not by ceremonies of schooling that do not.

By accident of history, American cultural literacy has a bias toward English literate traditions. Short of revolutionary political upheaval, there is absolutely nothing that can be done about this. It is not a weakness of our literate culture that it has its origins in English traditions, for, like all the other literate traditions connected with great national languages, the English tradition is broad and heterogeneous and grows ever more so. For many centuries it has embraced a wide range of materials, as evidenced in Hugh Blair's *Rhetoric*, which contains elements from many lands and cultures. Yet Blair's book did not contain any items from his native land. Many national cultures are neglected in our national vocabulary — not just Scottish, Welsh, and Irish, but also German, French, Spanish, and Italian. Dozens of other cultures could consider themselves disenfranchised by the continued dominance in our nation of English literate culture. What have Americans to do, in any ethnic or national sense, with 1066 or Chaucer or Milton? Nonetheless, we have kept and still need to keep English culture as the dominant

part of our national vocabulary for purely functional reasons.

After more than two hundred years of national life, the main elements of our vocabulary have transcended the sphere of contention and dispute. We do not argue whether Abraham Lincoln in his log cabin belongs in the vocabulary of literate Americans, any more than we argue about spelling. No matter how value-laden or partisan some of these common elements were in their origins long ago, they now exist as common materials of communication. History has decided what those elements are. They are the medium of public discourse, the instruments through which we are able to communicate our views to one another and make decisions in a democratic way.

It is cultural chauvinism and provincialism to believe that the content of our vocabulary is something either to recommend or deplore by virtue of its inherent merit. Think how well the French or Chinese have done without Shakespeare or George Washington, and how well we have done without Racine or Lao-tse. No doubt it benefits the French and Chinese to learn about Shakespeare and Washington, just as it benefits us to learn about Racine and Lao-tse. But the benefit we derive is to come to the tolerant understanding that no single national vocabulary is inherently superior or privileged above all others.

That is the virtue of broadening our horizons by encountering cultures other than our own. We discover not only that other cultures have produced other successful vocabularies for dealing with life, but also that all of the great national vocabularies, including our own, have a relativity about them. Each vocabulary would be different if history had been different — if Shakespeare had never been born, for instance, or if he had chosen not to write about Hamlet. The specific contents of the different national vocabularies are far less important than the fact of their being shared.

Any true democrat who understands this, whether liberal or conservative, will accept the necessary conservatism that exists at the core of the national vocabulary, which must serve all sorts and conditions of people from all generations. Changes at its core must occur with glacial slowness if it is to accommodate all the people and serve as our universal medium of communication.

Many Americans who have graduated from high school in the

recent past have been deprived of the cultural vocabulary that was commonly possessed by educated persons in past generations. Some repair work is necessary for them and for the members of the current school generation. They must be reintroduced to the current vocabulary that continues to be the foundation for literate national communication. The new illiteracy is sometimes excused by the argument that our schools are now educating larger portions of the population. The point is that we are *not* educating them. We undertook the great task of universal education precisely in order to produce a truly literate population, but we have not succeeded in that task in recent years. We must assure that new generations will continue to be enfranchised in our medium of national communication as securely as they are enfranchised at the polls.

There is a second respect in which the national vocabulary must be enhanced for the current school generation. As national and international life has come to contain an increasingly technical element, the idea of literacy has gradually come to include a larger vocabulary of shared scientific and technical knowledge. Especially today, when political decisions in our democracy have an increasingly technical element, our schools should enhance scientific and technical vocabularies. We require not only that ordinary citizens be scientifically literate but that technicians and scientists master the nonscientific literate culture. To explain the implications of their work to others, experts must be aware of the shared associations in our literate vocabulary and be able to build analogies on those associations.

Both of these proposals — bridging the generation gap in cultural literacy and enhancing its scientific component — are closely tied to basic principles of the American republic. I have in mind the Founding Fathers' idea of a literate and informed citizenry. Essential to this concept is the principle that, when desirable, the main features and implications of the most arcane specialty can be explained to literate and educated citizens. Economic issues can be discussed in public. The moral dilemmas of new medical knowledge can be weighed. The implications of technological change can become subjects of informed public discourse — not about technical details, but about the broad issues of the debate. Otherwise we are in danger of falling victim to technological intimidation.

The founders of our republic had in mind a Ciceronian ideal of education and discourse in a republic. Cicero claimed that he could explain Greek science and philosophy or anything else to his fellow Romans in ordinary Latin terms, and he did. Our founders greatly admired Cicero's aims. Thomas Jefferson used the concepts in the Declaration of Independence and constantly referred to Cicero's writings in the notebook he kept. John Adams quoted Cicero at length in his *Preface on Government* and said of him that "all the ages of the world have not produced a greater statesman and philosopher combined."¹⁵

The Ciceronian ideal of universal public discourse was strong in this country into the early twentieth century. In the Roman republic of Cicero's time, such discourse was chiefly oral, and the education of Cicero sought was in "rhetoric" rather than "literacy." But the terms are equivalent. Literacy — reading and writing taken in a serious sense — is the rhetoric of our day, the basis of public discourse in a modern republic. The teaching of Ciceronian literacy as our founders conceived it is a primary but currently neglected responsibility of our schools.