



“Identity Politics Or A Unique American Identity?”

a review by Dick Burkhart of

The Disuniting of America:

Reflections on a Multicultural Society, 2nd Ed

By Arthur Schlesinger, Jr (1998)

An acquaintance said that this book is still one of the best on identity politics. I quickly discovered Schlesinger makes an outstanding case for holding US identity politics in check, for stirring the melting pot of the world’s most successful multicultural democracy, instead of descending into the antagonisms, separatism, and censorship of tribalism. His message is even more relevant today, with the US President fanning the flames of tribal animosity, while many on the Left

counter with guilt-tripping ideologies of racialized grievance, of self-righteous blaming and shaming, feeding into the cultural wars.

Schlesinger proclaims, “Tribal antagonisms have caused more dominating, fearing, hating, killing than any other single cause since time began” (p 116). “It is ironic that what the multiculturalists began as a celebration of diversity ends as a grim crusade for conformity” (p 162). Historically, “wounded feelings were not deemed a persuasive reason for the cancelling constitutional protections” (p 156) according to the Supreme Court. In fact, “No one needs the First Amendment more than those who wish to change society” (p 162).

Schlesinger notes that current tribal ideologies, now often referred to as Critical Race Theory, have been developed and promoted by elites who are out-of-touch with the masses they claim to represent. Most minorities continue to want to assimilate into mainstream society, to learn the language and culture. Gunnar Myrdal said that “the minority peoples of the US are fighting for status in the larger society; the minorities in Europe are mainly fighting for independence from it” (p 137). And in so doing, the US minorities transform that larger society. For example, the influence of African Americans on US culture has been profound. And, while US culture has strong Anglo-Saxon roots, it is no longer European, precisely because of this melting genetic and cultural melting pot.

Wearing his historian’s hat, Schlesinger gives compelling answers to those ideologues who proclaim that European societies are cultures of “white supremacy”, responsible for all evils of the modern world: “The sins of the West are no worse than the sins of Asia, the Middle East, or Africa” but “Unlike other cultures, the West has conceived and acted upon ideals that expose and combat its own misdeeds” (p 132). The West “is the source of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, equality before the law, freedom of worship, human rights, and cultural freedom”. “There is surely no reason for Western civilization to have guilt trips laid on it by champions of cultures based on despotism, superstition, tribalism, and fanaticism” (p 133). For example, “it was the West, not the non-Western cultures, that launched the crusade to abolish slavery” (p 134).

To conclusion, Schlesinger asks, “Will the center hold, or will the melting pot give way to the Tower of Babel?”. He’s worried, but remains optimistic: “A telling indicator is the rising rate of intermarriage ethnic, religious, even racial lines”, continuously creating a “unique American identity” (p 22 -23).