

I AM A STRONG BELIEVER IN ASSIMILATION

Ian Shapiro



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■ *If we assume that multiculturalism has indeed failed, as different European leaders have announced, which other policy may work better than that one?*

I am a strong believer in assimilation but I think you can assimilate up to a point — you cannot have unlimited integration. But if immigrant populations assimilate to the dominant culture and learn the dominant languages and the next generation becomes upwardly mobile though the dominant culture, as has been the story in the US from the beginning, then you can have very high levels of immigration consistent with

assimilation. **But if you prefer ‘Balkanisation’ and multiculturalism, then you get separatist groups within your society and, instead of what we call ‘a multi-blooded culture’ in America, you get a culture of difference.** This is very likely to undermine democracy.

■ *Do you think it is actually possible to have linguistic assimilation — that is, to have one language spoken at least as a first or second language — and to have cultural diversity?*

It’s a possibility. There’s many ways to do it. For example, in South Africa they have eleven official languages, which recognises their cultural diversity. On the other hand, everybody knows that, in reality, English is the official language for business and commerce and politics and so on. So, that’s one way in which you can pay homage to cultural difference but still have a strong central commitment to one system of upward mobility within society.

■ *Alright, so you claim that assimilation is the best thing for democracy. And if we look at things the other way around, which type of democracy do you think is best for a multinational society?*

I think that the type of democracy that is best for multinational societies is a situation in which politicians must appeal to more than one ethnic cultural group in order to get elected. What’s worst is if you have Balkanised politics. Thus, you need to have electoral systems that give politicians incentives to appeal across cultural and linguistic divides.

■ *Is that possible?*

Sure this is possible if you have large constituencies, where you have diverse constituencies and where you require people running

for national office to bring in more than one constituency. All of those systems have been tried in effect with pretty good success.

■ *Do you think there is such a thing as universal values — that is, values that would be accepted and practiced by all groups in a given society, regardless of their original culture?*

Well, I think **universal values are individual values, not group values. So, the important thing in a democracy is to get individuals to form political coalitions and alliances across group borders.** Madison said, in *Federalist 46*, that it is very bad to have deep factional divisions in a society in terms of politics, but if you have to have one, then you should have many. It is unrealistic to say: we won’t have any. And then, I think that Madison is right — if you’re going to have cultural divisions, then you want to have a lot of them and have them crosscut one another, so that you don’t have solidifying political alliances.

■ *In September, we will be holding the Global Policy Forum in Yaroslavl. One of its sections will be dedicated to ‘Democratic institutions within multi-ethnic societies’ that I understand you will attend to. Which topics, in your opinion, can be interesting and worth discussing during this particular section?*

Well, I think exactly the topics that we have been talking about right now. Certainly what I plan to talk about is the ways in which different electoral rules make it more or less likely that different groups will become integrated into society rather than become Balkanised and separatist. ■

Yulia Netesova exclusively for the Yaroslavl Forum