The final scene: David (a Russian-born Jewish composer) and Vera (a Russian-born Christian settlement house worker), lovers, stand hand-in-hand against a sunset silhouette of the Statue of Liberty.

VERA: Look! How beautiful the sunset is after the storm!

DAVID: It is the fire of God round His Crucible. There she lies, the great Melting Pot—listen! Can you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There gapes her mouth the pot that engulfs the future—down in it, in the crock, the newborn crucible feeders comes from the ends of the world to pour in their human freight. Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian—black and yellow—

VERA: Jew and Gentile

DAVID: Yes, East and West, North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross—how the great Alchemist melds and fuses them with his purging flame! Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God...

“The Melting Pot” (1908), A play by Israel Zangwill

Isracl Zangwill, an English Jew, coined the phrase “melting pot” and it was quickly taken up by the press and the politicians. In fact, President Theodore Roosevelt gave Zangwill permission to dedicate The Melting Pot to him. Roosevelt, like many influential Americans during the turn of the century wave of immigration, saw more problems than promise in the United States’ growing diversity. His solution—to downplay differences in favor of a “truly American” identity, to look only to the future and forget the past—was for many years the official prescription. Like Zangwill’s play, this prescription presumes that the United States is a kind of crucible—that it has a cultural character and identity apart from the people who make up its population.

Divine Right and Cultural Dominance

This imaginary crucible was fashioned in the image of those who held power in the U.S. early days. They found it useful to believe that the dominance of the Western Europeans who settled here in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries was a God-given right—even a duty. Listen to Andrew Jackson speaking to Congress in December, 1830, on the subject of removing American Indians from the South.

“What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute, occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with all the blessings of liberty, civilization, and religion”?

Harry Boyte, in the Citizen Heritage Center’s pamphlet Cultural Dominance: Progressives and the American Heritage, traces this self-serving philosophy through its religious manifestations.

“...Dwight Moody, who preached a ‘Gospel of Wealth’ much favored by large industrialists of the Gilded Age because it upheld the ‘sacredness’ of capitalism. I have heard of reform, reform until I am tired and sick of the whole thing,” declared Moody, who raised vast amounts of money with his argument that “there can be no better investment for the capitalists of Chicago than to put the saving salt of the Gospel into these dark homes...” and “...preachers in the south who praised textile mill owners as ‘prophets of God doing what God wanted done.’”

Human Rights and Cultural Democracy

But Boyte also highlights the commitment to justice in American religious tradition, and in contrast to the Americanism of “rugged individualism” and raw lust for power offers the other side, where “...traditions of community self-help, civic idealism and neighborhood are also a part of the American heritage. This is the legacy of quilting bees and barn raisings; of gift-giving among Native American tribes; of volunteer fire departments, rescue squads, self-help groups; of impoverished ghetto residents who raised orphaned children and shared what little they had...”

From the first in U.S. history—from the decentralized, cooperative and democratic Iroquois Nation to Tom Paine (who John Adams found “...so democratical, without any restraint or even an attempt at any equilibrium or counterpoise, that it must produce confusion and every evil work”) and so on till the present day—the idea of cultural democracy has existed in contrast to the domination of Protestant Western European culture and the ideologies of divine right and melting pot that go along with it. Cultural democracy has always been the contender—not the dominant idea or the official policy, but the counterforce against official policy.

In this article, we want to make a plea for cultural democracy as official policy. Such a policy would work against both the melting pot idea, which seeks to disguise and destroy differences, and indeed against the very idea of a “superior” culture which ought to dominate American society and public policy.

1. THE SHAMEFUL HISTORY OF THE MELTING POT

“...in a 1927 presidential address to the National Education Association, the Illinois superintendent of public instruction said ‘the great American school system is the very pit of this melting pot. Here the ancient foreign prejudices are melted out of the youth and the best that was brought and the best that is here are fused together.’ Forty years later a widely adopted American history textbook claimed that, as a result of the educational and other institutions, by the middle of the twentieth century the melting process was astonishingly complete.”

Arthur Mann

The One and The Many (1979)

The most obvious manifestation of our heterogeneity is ethnic diversity: the most obvious attempts to impress a uniform, topdown culture have been those intended to suppress ethnic diversity—either by eliminating minority people.
“No corporation now existing or hereafter formed under the laws of this state shall, by the acts or agencies of this corporation, employ, directly or indirectly, in any capacity, any Chinese or Mongolian..." 

These provisions were not formally repealed until 1952. In 1962, General Ulises S. Grant issued General Order Number 11, expelling all Jews within 24 hours from the department under his command. Henry Ford, the auto magnate, maintained an anti-Semitic museum, and used his newspaper, the Dearborn Independent, to quote from anti-Semitic tracts and exhort his readers against what he called the "Jewish menace"—and Ford was in good company in the ranks of big American industrialists. The wave of Irish immigration in the nineteenth century also brought reaction.

The natives responded in convulsive bursts of violence and prolonged warfare. A native mob burned a convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts in 1831; another mob sacked a Catholic Church in Philadelphia in 1846... Mean­ while, Yankee employers everywhere in the seashore cities published advertise­ ments, "No Irish Need Apply."

In 1972, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission reported that "Spanish Detention slips" were used to isolate and punish children who spoke Spanish in a school district near San Antonio, Texas. In the Commission's "Hispanic-American Study Report II.," students reported being compelled to pay fines to the teacher if they spoke Spanish in school—in one case, 1¢ per word. Others reported being made to stand in a corner, being compelled to do extra homework, or being made to write several pages saying "I must not speak Spanish in school."

II. FREEDOM AND PEOPLESHEED

Co-existing with this shameful history of melting-pot policy is another history of aspirations and acts on behalf of cultural democracy. These acts are acts of courage in protest—read the Spring, 1981 issue of Southern Exposure, "Stayed on Freedom," for a thousand statements as inspir­ ing as Fannie Lou Hamer’s 1966 interview in which she offers the quintessential statement of cultural democracy...

... if we are free people as Negroes, if we are free, then I don't think you're supposed to tell me how much of my freedom I'm supposed to have.

They are also acts of courage in endurance, such as promoted John Collier, who rejected the Federal Office of Indian Affairs and New Deal Administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to write in 1947: "Indians and their societies disclose that social heritage is far more enduring the way it is commonly believed. On how small a life-base, on a dimensionstan­ dard of life-base for how many generations, the motivations and expectations of a society and its world-view and value system and loyalties, can keep themselves alive; how these social possessions, which are of the soul, can endure; like the roots and seeds on the Mohave desert, though long ages, without one social rain; and how they rush, like these roots and seeds, into surprising and wonderful blossom when the social rain does come at last. Perhaps no other ethnic groups have revealed this more artfully, more convincingly as the Indians have done. Indeed, this capacity for perdurance is one of the truths on which the hope of our world rests—our world grown so pallid in the last century, and now so deathly pallid, through the totalitarian horror. The sunken stream can flow again, the ravaged desert can bloom, the great past is not killed. The Indian experience tells us this."

Land of the People

In this stirring article "Populism and the Left," (Democracy, April 1981), Harry Boyle invokes the concept of "peopleshed": "The sense of a constituted peopleshood is the essence of what Simone Weil meant when she defined roots by saying 'a human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in its cultural traditions certain values, certain aspirations and certain purposes for the future.' It is also the insight developed by John Schaar when he described the psychological bases of patriotism as 'a whole way of being in the world captured best by the word 'reverence,' which defines life by its debts; one is what one owes, what one acknowledges as a rightful debt or obligation. The fit of the land, people, language, gods, memories and customs...the very tone and rhythm of a life, the shapes of perception, the texture of its dreams and fears comes from membership in a territorially rooted group.'

"Consciousness of a national peoplehood coexists with and is nourished by discreet communities that make up 'the whole people,' in turn each community distinct. A 'people' is the birth of an idea, the welter of persons that its expressed and bound together by a common theme through American black history, as Manning Marable has recently shown...Martin Luther King Jr., especially was able to mobilize ordinary black power through a consciousness of belonging to the American heritage.' In King's terms, the move­ ment represented 'the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage.' It was a great 'Crusade for Citizenship,' carrying 'our whole nation back to the wells of democracy dug deep by the founding fathers.'

Cultural democracy is the idea that the people of the United States can work to create what is meaningful in its cultural history, and can foster the con­ sciousness of all citizens and the deliberations of all policy makers a sense of peoplehood which comprises many peoples coexisting in freedom and equa­ lity.

or by systematically devaluing and discouraging their cultures.

Nathan Hare, in his 1966 article "Brainwashing of Black Men’s Minds," tells us that "Children learning to read on white Dicks and Janes internalize the hatred of black men early in life." Peter Farb’s book on North American Indians and the development of the industrial state examines the education foisted on children: "Most... attention was concentrated on the Indian children, who were snatched from their families and shipped off to boarding schools far from their homes. The children usually were kept at school for eight years, during which time they were not permitted to see their parents, relatives, or friends. Anything Indian—dress, language, religious practices, even outlook on life—was, uncompromisingly prohibited.

Learning the Language

All manifestations of diversity—regional accents, for instance—have stood in the way of the melting pot. Philip Amoull, head of the Baltimore Theatre Project, tells this story about his own education as an actor: "In 1965, when I had completed my graduate program at Catholic University, I had a meeting with my major professor and I'd finished the thesis and I was looking forward to going out into the real world.

"He was going over my papers and he said 'Philip, you have not taken the speech diagnostic test.' I didn't know what that was. So I said, 'Well, let me take this. What do I do?'

"An appointment was made and the next day I went over to the speech pathology offices and I was ushered into a chamber. There was a book of James Joyce open, a microphone, and two people sitting on the other side of the glass with head­phones. What it was is you couldn't get an acting M.A. unless you didn't sound like you were from someplace.

"And of course I was just an old Tennessee boy that grew up in Memphis. In my first acting, I had a walk-in in Othello. I said 'Othello, Desdemona. Won't see you.' and the director said 'Well, Philip. I'd like to see you' and there you are. Fortunately, I knew what they wanted, so I passed the test.

Eliminating the Unmeltable

Before the melting pot could do its work, the unmelttable had to be dealt with, beginning with the native American Indians:

"In the years from 1783 to 1812 the one consistent element in American policy in the Old Northwest was the desire to acquire the land between Ohio and the Mississippi. The host of subsidiary objectives were all subordinated to this end. What had started out in 1783 as naked desire for land had, by 1812, been transmuted into lofty moral purpose. By 1812 American leaders were not only trying to convince others, but apparently had also convinced themselves that they were working for the ultimate benefit of the Indian...

"... the Indians (wrote George Washington in 1780) will ever retreat as our Settlements advance upon them and they will ever be ready to sell, as we are to buy. That is the cheapest as well as the least distressing way of dealing with them... the gradual extension of our Settlements will as certainly cause the Savage as the Wolf to retire: both being beasts of prey tho' they differ in shape."

Reginald Horsman "American Indian Policy in the Old Northwest, 1783-1812" William and Mary Quarterly (1961)

The continuous forced migration of the Indians compelled the Sioux chief Spotted Tail to say in 1868 "Why does not the Great White Father put his red children on wheels, so he can move them as he will?"

The inhuman treatment of American Indians was quickly followed by the rise in the United States of the unspeakable barbarism of slavery. From David Walker’s Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World (1830):

"... to prove further that the condition of the Israelites was better under the Egyptians than ours under the whites, I call upon the professing Christians, I call upon the philanthropist, I call upon the very tyrant himself, to show me a page of history, either sacred or profane, on which a verse can be found, which main­ tains, that the Egyptians heaped the unsupportable insult upon the children of Israel, by telling them that they were not of the human family."

A Heavy Burden

U.S. history is burdened with such shame. The Constitution of the State of California, adopted in 1879, included sections stating that...
The Idea of Cultural Democracy

The first use of the term "cultural democracy" was by J. Drachslr in his 1920 book Democracy and Assimilation: The blending of immigrant heritages in America.

"Drachslr adopted the position that different ethnic groups should have the right to maintain an ethnic identity and even proposed a variety of ways this might be brought about. ..."But policy for the arts is the area in which change and reform must first come—not because so much power or money is at stake, but because arts policy is emblematic of cultural policy. The way in which a government treats the clearest expressions of its peoples· heritages, values and aspirations—the arts—may foretell and symbolize its cultural policy as a whole."
V. LEARNING FROM OTHERS

This inspection should not draw only on our own past and resources, but also on the experiences of other nations and regions of the world. Augustin Gillis, in Cultural Development, notes that his contents remain by UNESCO Director-General René Maheu inspired by the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights section on culture: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of a community."

It is not certain that the full significance of this text, proclaiming a new human right, the right to culture, was entirely appreciated at the time. If everyone, as an essential part of his or her being, has the right to share in the cultural and social activities of the community—or of the different communities to which men and (that of course includes the ultimate community—mankind)—it follows that the authorities responsible for these com-

monities have a duty, so far as their resources permit, to provide him with the means for such participation... Everyone, accordingly, has the right to culture, as he has the right to education and the right to work... This is the basis and first purpose of cultural policy."

We would like to offer a fundamental statement of cultural policy which we believe will have the same kind of relevance to the debate over cultural policy in the U.S. as is the Declaration of Independence. Adopted by the UNESCO-sponsored Conference on Cultural Policies in Latin America and the Caribbean in January, 1978, the governments of the region jointly:

Proclaim the following principles governing cultural policy in Latin America and the Caribbean:

1. All the cultures of the region possess the same dignity.
2. Every group or people of groups has both the right and the duty to determine independently its own cultural identity, based on its historical antecedents, its economic context, and the cultural and social change.
3. Each of the cultural components of Latin America and the Caribbean must be duly and justly esteemed, preserved and developed in accordance with its character, purpose, and destiny.
4. Cultural authenticity is based on recognition of the components of cultural identity, whatever their geographic origin and however they have mingled.
5. Cultural autonomy is inseparable from the full exercise of sovereignty, territorial integrity and power, and contribution to abroad communication with the world. It is therefore of vital interest to Latin America and the Caribbean that the enclaves and isolation of all kinds that still affect such autonomy in the region should be eliminated.
6. It is the responsibility of the State to promote and support cultural development in accordance with the specific characteristics of each group, and to guarantee freedom of creation.
7. Cultural development is closely linked to communication, education, science and technology and consequently the policies for each should be concerted within the context of integral development.
8. The arts and the media region have a special role to achieve integration which, while respecting the specific qualities of each people, will result in a common destiny for Latin America and the Caribbean.
9. Latin America and the Caribbean, a region that is open to all the peoples of the earth, has a mission to serve mankind and the interests of universal peace.
10. Latin America and the Caribbean share the yearning for justice, sovereignty, self-determination, and cultural development by people and nations, with the right to education, work and culture.
11. Everyone has the right to develop and enjoy the cultural and social activities of which they are capable, and to maintain relations with the other regions of the world, which, like itself, are on the path to development.
12. Latin America and the Caribbean respect the cultural identity of all people and firmly demands respect for its own, and respects all forms of cultural domination.

Join the many neighborhood arts groups and friends across the world who are speaking out in favor of cultural democracy as we work to ensure the basic, human right to culture for all.

A Note to Our Readers: We have chosen the language used in NAPNOC notes is respectful of all our readers, but this month we have been forced to quote from a great deal of historical material, much of which is sexist in vocabulary. We beg your tolerance.

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