

So what? It's inevitable

People move and cultures change

WASHINGTON

HUMANS MOVE, wander, and relocate. The history of humanity is a history of migrations. This bald fact is hard to appreciate from the perspective of one's own life. When projected to a larger screen, however, its basic truth becomes transparent.

Homo erectus wandered out of Africa, the ancestors of Native Americans moved out of Asia, and Anglo-Saxons shipped out from Europe. The formation of the United States was one of many fruits of the migratory impulse. The consequence of migration is a constant grouping and regrouping of human beings. Sometimes groups blend together, or a stronger one assimilates a weaker one, and sometimes groups split up and diversify.

Social evolution is as dynamic as biological evolution. Many believe, however, that their own migration or that of their forebears was the last one, marking the end of history. The occupied territory then becomes an endowed part of the self. Meanwhile, however, human migration continues. Other folks are on the move, pressing into the same territory, first into the country, then into the neighborhood.

Perceptions differ, of course. One's own migration is the search for a destiny, the quest for the promised land, but the other's migration is an incursion, a threat, an act of war. The history of the United States, as well as that of many other countries, is littered with acts of aggression against "the others." The treatment of outsiders has ranged from disdain and discrimination to enslavement and genocide.

While the United States was expanding, this aggression was not only directed at incoming migrations but also at conquered populations. Today, the aggressive themes focus again on immigration. The influx from Europe continues, albeit at a slower pace and from different countries. Ethnically transformed, Native Americans are returning as part of the Hispanic migration. Africans are entering too, not as slaves this time, but because they want to. It has always been an illusion to believe that a certain slice of land belongs to a certain group of people. Traditionally, this illusion has bred racism. It still does, but sometimes in the new guise of defending culture.

JOACHIM KRUEGER

In a column entitled "On immigration, America is committing cultural suicide" (Commentary, May 12), Jean Boyd presented an argument that can be summarized as a syllogism. The major premise is that Western Civilization (WC) is superior to all others. The minor premise is that WC and other civilizations run in the hearts of people and do not change across generations. The conclusion is that immigration from so-called lesser civilizations threatens the survival of WC in the United States. From this, it follows that immigration should be tightly and selectively regulated.

This line of thought is a stark reminder that rational reasoning need not be good reasoning. The conclusions can be disastrous if the premises are false, immoral, or simply unprovable. The idea that WC is superior may be valid in people's hearts, but it does not have a firm factual basis. Anthropologists describe and explain cultures, but, Plato notwithstanding, they do not rank them according to goodness.

If a child claims that "my toy is more fun than your toy," a parent might seek to understand the child's feelings, but it would be pointless to try to determine which toy is truly and inherently more fun. WC, like any culture, is a complex creature. It produced not only William Shakespeare and Thomas Jefferson, but also Adolf Hitler and Larry Flynt. Any

attempt to attach an overall evaluation to a culture is hopelessly arbitrary because it depends entirely on which of its characteristics one chooses to look at.

And what is WC anyway? Like any culture, it is a set of ideas, customs, and artifacts. It is not a group of people. In minds like Boyd's, however, WC appears to be a substitute for race and religion. And why should one credit Christian Caucasians as the standard bearers of WC? Isn't it true that WC owes much of its distinguishing features to Greek philosophy, Italian art, Jewish theology and Arabic mathematics? Isn't it also true that the North American incarnation of WC is uniquely characterized by several non-Western features such as native foods (corn, chocolate, potatoes) and African music (jazz, blues)?

Without these elements, there is no American Civilization as we know it. It is contradictory to appropriate the achievements of other groups as the marks of one's own culture, but to reject members of these same groups as suspect and undesirable. One maneuver out

of this contradiction is to claim that the cultural achievements of other groups were the achievements of the ancients, and that today's groups are burdened with unreformable totalitarian minds.

Therefore, says Boyd, they are undesirable. Chances are, however, that what was true for many European immigrants of yesteryear, is also true for many of today's immigrants. The democratically minded flee totalitarian regimes. This makes them exemplary Americans. The forces of assimilation wipe away many of their distinguishing characteristics within three generations.

This makes them average Americans. But assimilation is rarely perfect. If it were, the United States today would be a copy of England. Immigration transforms. Social evolution suggests that in another 100 years, the United States will have a different demographic profile. Today's majority may well be tomorrow's minority ... and so what? *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

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