

# H-Net Reviews

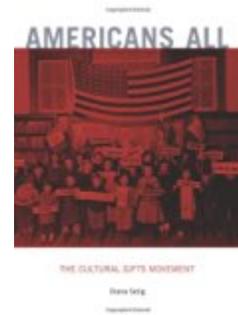
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Diana Selig. *Americans All: The Cultural Gifts Movement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. xiii + 367 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02829-6.

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## The Rise and Flaws of a Multicultural Curriculum

What does it mean to be an American? Between World War I and World War II, that question preoccupied the citizens of the United States. Traditions of town- and ward-based government had broken down with the massive population shift from rural to urban areas and from the South to the North. Immigration from Asia, Latin America, and southern and eastern Europe further crowded the cities and seemed to worsen problems of social division and political corruption. Radical new ideologies like anarchism, socialism, and fascism appeared, all of them hostile to the individual and the free market. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the American Legion responded to these changes by aggressively reasserting older notions of patriotism and social order. Beginning in 1919, political repression crippled the socialist movement, replacing foreign “isms” with a brashly jingoist and pro-business “Americanism.” Waves of lynchings and race riots maintained the color line in cities north and south of the Mason-Dixon line. In 1924, legislation restricted future sources of immigration to the countries of northwestern Europe, leaving millions of immigrants who had already arrived with the paradigm of the “melting pot,” in which becoming American meant subsuming one’s cultural heritage to an amalgamated (but nevertheless white, English-speaking) society. Yet even as the campaign of violence and conformity reached its peak, there appeared a liberal alternative based on tolerance, diversity, and an appreciation of the “cultural gifts” that each nationality contributed to American society. For many educators and activists, being an American meant celebrating one’s unique ethnic heritage and

learning about others.

In *Americans All: The Cultural Gifts Movement*, Diana Selig skillfully examines the multicultural turn in elementary and high schools during the 1920s and 30s. By tracing the fate of cultural gifts programming in the North, South, and (less thoroughly) West, she presents a largely forgotten chapter of American social history. The protagonist of Selig’s story is Rachel Davis DuBois, a teacher at New Jersey’s Woodbury High School in the 1920s. DuBois, a Quaker, was active in numerous civil rights and child study organizations and corresponded with such well-known intellectuals as W. E. B. DuBois (no relation), Bruno Lasker, and William H. Kilpatrick. Like John Dewey, she had faith that “education and science ... [could] improve social conditions and solve social problems.” The only impediment to change, she believed, was the perpetuation of “racial prejudice and discrimination, which limited access to individual opportunity and social mobility” (p. 15). To overcome prejudice, DuBois designed school assemblies in which students would research and perform cultural pageants, make crafts, and listen to guest speakers. “Presbyterian or Baptist children could learn to love such Catholic symbols as the crucifix and the rosary,” she wrote, “or recite an ‘Our Father’ on a ‘Mohammedan prayer rug’ without harm” (p. 58). DuBois shared her anti-prejudice curriculum with private schools in the Northeast until she became the director of the Service Bureau for Intercultural Education, whereupon her curriculum was disseminated to thousands of schools nationwide.

This rapid expansion of the cultural gifts curriculum depended on a constellation of intellectual and institutional forces. Selig emphasizes innovations in social science, such as the cultural relativism of anthropologist Franz Boas, which weakened claims of white superiority, and the behaviorism of John Watson, which suggested that bigotry and tolerance were the result of upbringing rather than immutable human nature. She also argues that, although the movement's most visible proponents were middle-class Protestants, it differed from earlier reforms in that most of its financial support came from Jewish philanthropists—a group who wanted to promote religious tolerance quietly, for fear of seeming self-interested or conspiratorial. Yet the most important factor in the success of cultural gifts was, ironically, also the cause of its failure. Gaining acceptance in a wide swath of schools required teachers to avoid the structural sources of racism and inequality. “The cultural contributions approach, divorced from political and economic concerns, carried less risk of alienating supporters,” Selig notes, but it also led to a series of compromises, omissions, and quandaries that, even at its height, undercut the movement's potential for real social change (p. 82).

In hindsight, the program's most obvious shortcoming was its reliance on racial essentialism. In the process of honoring foreign cultures, most of the assemblies oversimplified them, recasting as virtues the same traits that bigots derided. Thus, Italians were praised for being “expressive,” African Americans “musical,” and Mexicans “mystic, courteous, enthusiastic, stoic, and courageous” (p. 87). Obviously, this technique “denied the complexity of cultural identity” and “perpetuated cultural stereotypes” in ways that society would now find offensive (p. 13). Yet essentialism also skirted subtler questions about multiculturalism and citizenship. For example, Selig observes, DuBois never asked “whether the Italian emphasis on family restricted the individual aspirations so important to American identity, whether Jewish patriarchal traditions limited women's civic participation ... or whether the communal orientation of the Chinese ran counter to the capitalist orientation of American life” (p. 87). Nor did she specify how long second-, third-, or fourth-generation immigrants were supposed to preserve their cultural heritage. Was the “melting pot” to be avoided forever or did she “[imagine] an ultimate merging of once-autonomous groups” (p. 196)?

Proponents of the cultural gifts movement wrestled with another question: how could schools preserve children's innocence and plasticity when they were administered by adults who were already set in their ways? After

all, “no one can create tolerance in others who himself is engulfed in prejudice” (p. 41). Romantics and revolutionaries (both present but peripheral in interwar America) solved this problem by shielding children from society as long as possible, hoping to divorce them from the ideologies of their parents or peers. Liberals like DuBois simply denied the distinction altogether. With irrepressible optimism, they argued that anti-prejudice campaigns could win over children, teachers, and parents at the same time. They “[insisted] on the efficacy of attitudinal change,” Selig writes. With education and rational discussion, “the world would transform one person at a time” (p. 232). This approach was clearly cheaper than confronting the structural foundations of racism—“a low-cost, low-stakes solution to [social] problems”—but rather than dislodging prejudice it often simply reframed it in the language of multiculturalism, creating a sort of well-meaning bigotry. For example, one teacher reflected, “Before taking this course I could not understand why [Jews were] so aggressive—[but] after hearing the history of the Jew as given by Dr. Weinstein, I understand the reason” (p. 110). A fifteen-year-old girl finished her session with a prayer, “thanking God for the contributions of the Negro, enumerating them in some detail, and then concluded, ‘Teach us to be tolerant and to keep the Negro in his place’” (p. 147).

Keeping “the Negro in his place” is the final and most forceful of Selig's indictments of the cultural gifts movement. Even as they preached social understanding, most multicultural activists refrained from challenging the prevailing system of segregated schools and parent organizations. “Brotherhood does not mean marriage or social equality” with blacks, they insisted, expediently (p. 171). African Americans also faced unique challenges within the curriculum itself. DuBois's “focus on individualism treated all groups on equal terms” but failed “to acknowledge that some faced more entrenched obstacles than others in their quest to join the common citizenry” (p. 16). As the Irish, Italians, and Slavs were starting to gain acceptance in American society, she assumed, so, too, could blacks. DuBois did not perceive that some groups' acceptance—or “whiteness”—could come at the expense of others' nor did she see any reason to dwell on the notions of social justice and collective action that would be vital to black advancement. Students were taught to appreciate Negro spirituals but never learned that they “arose from the terrors of slavery,” and they were never introduced to “the harsh realities of the time—the Jim Crow laws, lynchings, disenfranchisement, segregation, [and] maldistrib-

bution of resources” (pp. 88-89). New York City’s Benjamin Franklin High School did not even include African Americans as a cultural group in its assemblies, although black students comprised 13 percent of its student body (p. 200). Elsewhere, teachers applauded the presentations of black ministers and professors but doubted that such respectable, middle-class speakers were representative of all blacks in the United States. “The guest speakers ‘[are] as far removed from the negroes we cope with as we are ourselves,’” they complained (p. 109). With these examples Selig echoes the last two decades of civil rights history, much of which argues that racism against African Americans confounded (and continues to confound) liberal conceptions of democracy, making them the last and most grudging addition to the American body politic.[1]

In addition to its deft handling of race in schools, *Americans All* is an important addition to the expanding body of literature about immigration and education in the early twentieth century.[2] It would be welcome in graduate-level courses in both education and history departments. And, although Selig states that her “intention is neither to promote nor to refute multiculturalism as we know it today,” the failure of liberal educators to effect change in the interwar period holds some obvious lessons for present-day practitioners (p. 18). After all, many educators are “still eager to celebrate cultural traditions [and] still reluctant to examine the socioeconomic systems that buttress racism”—they cheer the *Brown v. Board of Edu-*

*cation* decision without acknowledging continued segregation of schools by race and class; they “tend to recall [Martin Luther] King’s advocacy of racial respect and dignity rather than his demands for economic equality;” and (on the sporadic days set aside for them) they offer uncomplicated, celebratory depictions of non-dominant groups (p. 276). This sort of vapid multiculturalism remains the default position in so many schools because it offers easy answers to the question of what it means to be an American. However, Selig reminds us, to reify the “American way of life” is to fall far short of the *democratic* “way of life” to which supporters of twentieth-century liberalism aspired.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[2]. Complementary titles include: Michael C. Johannek and John L. Puckett, *Leonard Covello and the Making of Benjamin Franklin High School: Education as if Citizenship Mattered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007); Melissa R. Klapper, *Small Strangers: The Experiences of Immigrant Children in America, 1880-1925* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007); and, most recently, Jeffrey E. Mirel, *Patriotic Pluralism: Americanization Education and European Immigrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

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