Not Born on the Fourth of July: Cultural Differences and American Literary Studies

GREGORY S. JAY

The scenario has become familiar. After a long history of apparent uniformity and consensus, a nation suddenly collapses. Political institutions and ideological arguments that had once been its supposed foundation are blown down like a house of cards. Beneath the appearance of a monolithic history and singular future there abruptly bursts forth the reality of irresolvable differences. Citizens increasingly see themselves primarily as members of particular regional, ethnic, religious, economic, or social groups rather than as individuals with a common society, culture, or system of beliefs. A shrinking economic pie and a ferocious struggle for limited resources polarizes citizens into competing interest groups. Political correctness becomes an ideological routine that obscures the subordination of disempowered groups exploited by a hegemonic elite. The political culture descends into exchanges of condemnation, recrimination, and even gunfire; the fracturing of any sense of community leads to an appealing equivocalism and lack of compunction. Argument centers on proving who has been the most victimized and who the most reprehensible. The classic question of politics—"What is the common good?"—is replaced by the question "What's in it for me and my friends?"

Citizens of the United States may take this scenario as describing such former nations-states as the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia or as pertinent to current tensions in Britain or Germany. Yet it also, with many qualifications, mirrors the social and political discourse characteristic of the United States in the twentieth century given way to postcolonial, postmodern, multicultural future. Since global patterns

link the cultural crisis in the disparate parts of the world, the forces driving cultural change in the United States ought to some degree to be interpreted from such an international perspective. For example, we see around the world different nations struggling to find a way to balance the claims of individuality, ethnic or racial solidarity, democracy, economic development, and nationalism. The principles of self-determination and freedom abstractly enshrined in theories of democracy clash with the desires of cultural, ethnic, or religious groups to create social systems predicated on their own traditional beliefs. Perhaps most significant, the globalization of the labor force and the mobility of international commodity capitalism create economic competition that often exploits the resources of patriotic nationalism and of racial, ethnic, and gender bigotry.

Postcolonialism often leaves former dependent states in splintered ruins, while the former imperial powers themselves suffer internal breakdowns that partly stem from an influx of postcolonial refugees. At the level of political ideology, any recourse to the rhetoric or policy of universalism, humanism, and common culture seems bankrupt from the start, victim of its own "act of hypocrisy" and bad faith. Yet the economic interdependence of the globe's regions continues to increase, defying the tide of nationalism as corporations continue to transgress political borders. Likewise the technology of communication, from personal computers and fax machines to the prospective fiber-optic "information highway," does not respect the lines drawn by fascists on a map as the exchange of images and consumer goods bridges peoples to create commonalities in the practices of their everyday lives. My computer can connect me to the world, though of course my ownership of one says something particular about my privileged place in the universe.

Across the globe, one question repeats itself: Is the elemental democratic or agent of political theory and culture to be the individual or the social group? A series of corollary questions follows: How do we respond to the fact that the creation of any national identity always involves the exclusion of certain citizens, whether through the simple omission of their beliefs from the culture's dominant institutions or through the violation of outright genocidal or democratic freedom possible for the individual if the social or political treatment of the individual according to how that culture values the group to which it assigns that individual? Can a person resist such oppression individually, or only through changing the way the group is represented? Switching from questions leads to an appeal of history, can the nation-state be a visible political or cultural entity now that the technology of industrial production, transportation, and communication makes global mobility so pervasive? Are such categories as race or ethnicity any longer visible as fundamental components of cultural identity? Or have our crises precisely been the products of wrongly thinking we could transend such categories in appeals to universal principles (whether those of Marxism or Western humanism)?

In trying to frame the current cultural discord in the United States today, then, I submit that the situation here is not unique, though it does have a very specific
and unusual history. The history of our discords must be remembered if we are not to treat the present crisis as a kind of biblical Fall from a previous Eden of communal harmony. I believe the divisions in American culture today can only be understood historically, and understood first of all as a symptom of the nation’s recurrent historical amnesia. As a nation we do not like to remember the past. Freedom from the past, after all, has been our national myth, and that innocence has often been a key to our achievements. We tell ourselves that we received our unique identity in a moment of revolutionary forgetting, when we declared ourselves independent of the old world. We think a new world can be made because we have shed the old world and formed ourselves. At some time or another, every American has been Jay Gatsby. Unfortunately, we have gone on fabricating stories about ourselves through repeated acts of amnesia, forgetting our own divisive history in the process of creating our common future. How else could a nation of immigrants wake up one morning to a debate over the meaning of multiculturalism? What so many insurgent groups in the United States today have in common—from African and Native Americans to women, the working-class, recent Asian immigrants, and gays and lesbians—is their insistence that we have an ethical and political responsibility to remember our history differently. That is why the debates over school and university curricula are so important and so symptomatic, since they reflect the argument that the history of oppression in America has been a function of the oppressive character of the way history has been represented and taught, in mass media and popular culture as well as in the schools. Revisionists go beyond debating ideas to focus on the material institutions that produce cultural identities, and so the agitation of political activists has surprisingly joined forces with the skepticism of poststructuralist academics anxious to deconstruct the ideologies of Representative Man. If politics is in some degree essentially about the distribution of power, and if knowledge about the powerless tends to be biased or distorted, then redressing the imbalance will be seen by some as a “political” rather than an “academic” matter. But teachers cannot help the fact that they inherit schools, textbooks, and ideas that reflect the biases of the past. Surely it is the responsibility of teachers to correct those biases as best they can. These educational biases are in part caused by the way that political power has been distributed in the United States, so as to largely exclude people whose perceived identity (seen in terms of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, or gender) does not conform to the politically correct line. This political motive behind traditional educational biases means that those who seek to tell the story differently will inevitably be accused of “politicizing” the curriculum when in fact they are simply trying to point out the effect that politics has already had on what we study and what we value.

We should not have been surprised, then, when the exaggerated story of political correctness gained such rapid and powerful ascendency in the public sphere. The same structural and ideological biases that dominated higher education also shaped the personnel and policies of the major broadcasters, magazines, think tanks, and government officials. Even “marxists” and other “left” intellectuals joined the ranks criticizing feminists, multiculturalists, and literary theorists, for these academic movements challenged the cultural politics of the Old Left as well. Thus from all sides we heard about how a conspiracy of tenured radicals, leftist activists, and minority scholars has undermined U.S. colleges and universities, imposing upon them a uniform ideological program of neo-marxist totalitarianism that rejects Western civilization in favor of Afrocentrism, deconstruction nihilism, Hollywood feminism, and MTV. We are routinely told that the agents of political correctness have brought politics into the ivory tower, indoctrinating their students and tolerating no opinions that do not match their own. This ludicrous exaggeration of the power of groups that are still very much on the margins reflects the degree of fear on the part of the establishment that these groups and their concerns may actually now be winning some influence.

Such attempts to blame progressive intellectuals for imposing a standard of political correctness on our campuses perversely misread the history, which is that educational institutions have always been partly in the service of dominant social and political institutions. After all, most colleges are owned and run by churches, corporate boards, and governmental bodies. Where were today’s born-again champions of democracy, freedom of thought, and evaluation by merit during all the years that women were denied admission to many of the nation’s top colleges and universities? Where were they during all the years that Jews, blacks, and others were similarly discriminated against? Why were the Atlantic, Time, Newsweek, the New York Times, and the rest of the media relatively silent during the decades when curriculum and teaching practices amounted to a “thought police” on behalf of white Anglo-Saxon males? Who cried out then about “political correctness” on campuses? In contrast, I simply left out, then redressing the imbalance will be seen by some how relevant the reforms are, how precisely they have hit the target, and how far the powers-that-be will go in protecting their privileges. Just take a look at what the Reagan and Bush administrations reversed the gains made by women and minorities since the 1960s and you can imagine what conservatives have in mind for education. Defending and
"privatization" has already gone far in destroying the autonomy of schools. Perhaps the Clinton administration will stall or reverse these policies, though its opponents have a powerful ideological and financial machine already attacking such a prospect. As for free speech, it was the justices of the Supreme Court of the United States who ruled that doctors at clinics receiving federal funds may not even mention abortion to their patients. They are the real thought police, and they remind us of the court that decided, in the Dred Scott case, that blacks had no rights that a white man need respect. Fortunately the Supreme Court does not yet have jurisdiction over our course syllabi; if they do extend their political control from the womb to the classroom, there are apparently many opinions we will be forbidden to express.

The politics of PC in American culture, then, unfolds as part of a contradictory global transformation that has local effects. Whereas the internal history of American higher education explains some of the present controversy, that history in turn belongs to a larger history that shapes it and that today overdetermines the campus as a site of racial, economic, political, and social unrest. I want to review that larger history in an effort to better situate present debates over the politics of cultural identity.

**Born on the Fourth of July?**

In a previous essay on the need for a multicultural practice in the teaching of the literature of the United States, I questioned the existence of "American" literature, pointing out that most efforts by critics to invent it had relied upon nationalist agendas that were ultimately political rather than aesthetic or cultural. At the level of critical theory, one can deconstruct the various interpretive paradigms that were used in the past to fabricate the illusion of a singular "American" literature. At the level of everyday experience, one can easily show that the diversity of written texts produced in the colonies and the United States is almost without precedent in a multicultural dialogue rather than a single voice of the national spirit. In the words of the *Hand Anthology of American Literature*, "From its start, the New World community was multicultural and multilingual. ... The New World, comprised of defined spheres of influence over territories claimed and counterclaimed by European sovereign powers, early offered signs of the necessary mingling of red, white, and black that remain its earliest, best promise." The United States became a postcolonial nation on that foundation and went on to become a reality—"a new nation that would itself become an imperial, colonial power. Throughout its history, however, this lack of a homogeneous or pure racial, ethnic, or cultural origin means that the United States would have to struggle to produce a common national culture, even if this meant violently repressing the differences within its borders.

Since the Revolution of 1776, literary journalists, critics, and artists have repeatedly called for a uniquely "American" literature. All about them, however, that uniquesness was already taking the form of a polyvocal, even multilingual, writing that would continually resist formulation into a homogeneous canon. But, as Paul Lauter has concisely demonstrated, literary critics at the colleges and universities largely succeeded during the period from 1920 to 1970 in drastically narrowing the canon of authors and works and in creating textbooks, curricula, departments, professional organizations, and interpretive studies based on that canon. Throughout this era, from the early essays of Van Wyck Brooks through the decisive works of Vernon Louis Parrington, E. O. Mathiessen, Richard Chase, and Lionel Trilling (who, like Nathaniel Hawthorne, really was born on the Fourth of July), definitions of the American literary canon hinged on the critic's search for a usable past and were motivated by the desire to construct a set of authorizing cultural documents to give foundation to specific notions of a democratic culture. In retrospect we can see how limited those notions were, especially as they tended to depend on an ideology of American individualism that emptied the human being of his or her material, historical features—such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. The tendency to focus on common human traits and conditions is of course understandable whenever one considers the historic diversity of wave after wave of immigrants who, to this day, continue to alter the physical and cultural face of the United States (as today postcolonial immigration also brings a crisis of cultural identity and social power to such traditionally homogeneous nation-states as England, France, and Germany).

Born during the height of the European Enlightenment, the United States was founded on philosophical doctrines that emphasized the universal rather than the particular. This philosophy produced a legal system of justice predicated on the ethos of an abstract human subjectivity equally shared by all rational creatures. The ringing phrases of Thomas Jefferson's language in the Declaration of Independence forever linked the establishment of the nation to that humanistic idealism.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The subject of the Declaration of Independence grammatically and politically—"the" we—produced in discourse and on paper before it appears in reality. This "we" creates the theatrical illusion of a preexistent, universal subject who originates and speaks the revolutionary utterance. But this utterance is what rhetoricians call a "performative" speech-act: it performs an action as well as declaring a set of facts. The "we" of the American people is born during this performance. We become our own subjects, subject no longer to King George but to the higher "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God." As Jay Fliegelman points out, the Declaration represents the Revolution as both an unavoidable necessity and a free act of will, exhibiting an uneasy dialectic between mechanistic determinism and individual agency characteristic of the period. The Declaration speaks predominantly in the passive voice of what is "necessary for one people" to do after such "patient sufferance" of the willful actions against them of the king. By making their invention of their own...
rebellious subjectivity sound like a necessity imposed upon them, the colonists mitigate their guilt and obscure the artificial character of the union they declare. In this "unanimous declaration" we bear truly of any Compact or agreement whatever; they further expressed "their astonishment that it have Never been considered that every Principle from which America has Asserted in the Courts of their Unhappy Difficulties with Great Briton Pledges Stronger than A thousand arguments in favour of your petitioners' seeking freedom from slavery."

Black and white abolitionists throughout the entire nation continued to throw the slave owner Jefferson's words back in the face of the political establishment and to make that one sentence ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal") the most often and ironically quoted text in abolitionist literature. David Walker's stay Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, perhaps the most fiery anti-slavery pamphlet before the speeches of Frederick Douglass, pointedly singled out Jefferson for analytic ridicule. Walker responded at length to Jefferson's assertion of the racial inferiority of blacks in his Notes on the State of Virginia. He also quoted the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence and asked, "Compare your own language ... with the unjust and bloody insults and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us... I ask you candidly, was your sufferings under Great Britain, one hundredth part as cruel and as tyrannical as you have rendered ours under yea?"

When in 1831 William Wells Brown wrote the first novel of an African American, he called it Clotel, or The President's Daughter. Brown based his novel on the rumors that Jefferson had fathered two mulatto slave daughters who were subsequently sold south. The epigraph on Brown's title page was Jefferson's by then notorious sentence about equality from the Declaration of Independence.

The summation of this tradition of anti-slavery responses to the Declaration was the escaped slave and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass's spectacular oration "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," powerfully delivered on July 5.

What to the American slave is his Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is a constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty an empty lie; your sound of rejoice and heartiness; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your thouns of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him a bane. Sick, fraud, deception, impurity, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on earth guilty of prac-
independence," wrote Abigail, "— and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire that you would remember the Ladies." Observing to her husband that "your sex are Naturally Tyrannical," she asked for specific laws to protect women from the "cruelty and indignity" suffered under the "unlimited power" of husbands. "If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Revolution and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation." John Adams responded, "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh." Exploding the witty tone of Abigail's letter to his own end, he noted that the revolutionaries had been accused of fomenting a general anarchy and a disruption of traditional social hierarchies: the Tories claimed that children, apprentices, students, Indians, and Negroes all grew "insolent to their Masters." But your letter," he continued, "was the first it profitably regulates on the more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discouraged!" He went on to say, "We know better than to repeal our masculine systems," and he repeated the myth that men were the victims of the "Despotism of the Peticoat." He jokingly (perhaps) accused King George's government of iniquity among the women as it did among "Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadans, Indians, Negroes, Hannoversians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholics, Scotch Renegades." By this argument, the same made by Washington in the Declaration's struck passage on slavery, the Founding Fathers meant to declare their independence from women as well as from King George. Their construction of the American political ethos carefully separated a masculine claim to inalienable (property) rights from claims made by the groups whose clamoring for representation they thought ought to be squelched. John Adams's sarcastic linking of women's claims to those of Negroes, Indians, and other oppressed groups would, of course, return as a serious political argument in the hands of feminists and abolitionists in the nineteenth century and remains a logical connection for many cultural analysts to this day. By the late 1820s, women were increasingly apt to compare their situation to that of the slaves, all the more so in their efforts to speak in public and exercise political power were met with contempt, ridicule, and violence. One of the first of these women, Angelina Grimké, herself the daughter of a slave owner, wrote Catharine Beecher in 1837 that "the investigation of the rights of the slave has led me to a better understanding of my own." Using the ideological rhetoric of sentiment, domesticity, and Christianity, Grimké established equality on the basis of morality: "Human beings have rights, because they are moral beings: the rights of all men grow out of their moral nature; and as all men have the same moral nature, they have essentially the same rights. ... My doctrine, then, is that whatever it is morally right for man to do, it is morally right for woman to do."

This radical feminist assertion of the ethos of a common moral nature intends to override the particular discrimination against the character of women and blacks used to delineate their subordinate social and political place. In 1845 Margaret Fuller under-
scored how America's declaration of "national independence" be blunted by the servility of individuals, and she too drew the by-then standard analogy between women and slaves: "As the freight of the negro assumes that one man chaste by right holds another in bondage, so should the friend of Woman assume that Man cannot by right lay even well-meant restrictions on Woman."32

As Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gavett point out in Declarations of Independence: Women and Political Power in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction, women's rights activists and women novelists in the nineteenth century often took up Jefferson's rhetoric for their own subversive purposes.33 The participants in the historical 1848 Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls (which Frederick Douglass attended) left this account of preparing their manifestos, which they would call the Declaration of Sentiments:

And the humbling fact may as well be recorded that before taking the initiative step, those ladies resigned themselves to a faithful perusal of various masculine productions. The report of Peace, Temperance, and Anti-Slavery conventions were examined, but all alike seemed too tame and pacific for the inauguration of a rebellion such as the world had never before seen.... After much delay, one of the circle [Elizabeth Cady Stanton] took up the Declaration of 1776, and read it aloud with much spirit and emphasis, and it was at once decided to adopt the Seneca document, with some changes such as substituting "all men" for "King George."34

In substituting "all men" for "King George," the women turned the strategy of universalization to their own ends, the same strategy that had left them out of the original Declaration when the men's reference to "men" obscured their exclusion of women. To these rebellious ladies, all men were King George. The women's strategy recast the figure of the oppressor, from the particular tyrant King George to the universal tyranny of men over women. And in their Declaration, the women boldly wrote into Jefferson's most famous truism: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal."

By rewriting, with a significant difference, the words of the founding document of the nation's cultural identity, the women of Seneca Falls gave voice to something repressed at the nation's origin, even something whose repression was constitutive of that origin. Their Declaration became an uncanny return of the repressed, producing a mocking echo within the universal expression of American truth, replacing his torty with her story. The women's version stated: "The history of mankind as a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her."35 The women of Seneca Falls exposed the masculine ethos of the Founding Fathers even as they involved the values of liberty (not last of all in the liberties they took with Jefferson's text).

By the 1830s, a ironic reference to the Declaration of Independence was standard to the rhetoric of the women's rights movement. Sara Parker, who under the pen name of Fanny Fern became perhaps the most famous women journalist of her day, delighted in satirizing the injustices of patriarchal tyranny from the bed-
of social power among particular cultural groups (by race, class, gender, etc.), the response of those oppressed will necessarily be double-edged: on the one hand, they will claim membership in the very universal category of humanity from which they have been excluded and entitlement to the rights that go with it; on the other hand, they will insist on affirming the value of the particular social group to which they feel tied and whose fate has largely determined their destiny as individuals. Somewhat paradoxically, we understand universal rights by recognizing the historical, concrete, and contingent lives that they have found themselves as if they were wives or mothers or daughters. True citizenship for women would mean the right to hold property and the achievements of a just wage. Any "political" rights granted in the absence of these reforms was of little worth and deceptive, for it would throw a cloak of respectable universal citizenship over the particular reality of women's inequality in a patriarchal society. The claim of women to the universal principles of freedom and equality, however, provided a rhetorical device through which to move men off the pedestal of privilege they had erected for themselves.

What the antislavery and women's rights literature demonstrates is that every attempt to rectify a past injustice involves some appeal to universality and that these claims usually produce more social and cultural dissension along with any actual progress they achieve in the treatment of individuals. When women and African Americans appropriate Jefferson's voice, they recover the national rhetoric by having it spoken through an unauthorized body. This uninstitutional appropriation of language and ideas seems to express the extension of universality to the formerly excluded subject, but the ironic embodiment of this entails seems to underscore the limits of pluralism. Women and African Americans cannot lay claim to equal rights within a socially uprooting the practical distribution of social power and cultural authority. Equal rights cannot be painlessly achieved by rhetorical or legislative fiat; some persons have had their bodies, wealth, and rights taken from them, and undoing this injustice means depriving a once-privileged group of its rights. This has taken for granted as its own rights. This redistribution of wealth and power must also be formulated in moral terms, as a general ethos of justice to which we submit regarding our own particular self-interest. Can Cultural Identity Be Ethical?

The Enlightenment rhetoric of universality portrays a relatively harmonious society, but that peace obscures the interdependence of rights and power. The resistance of men and slave owners to the women's rights and abolitionism reformers, like the resistance in the United States today to affirmative action, Indian treaty rights, or gays in the military, stems from a real understanding that the application of universal principles results in particular change. Since the original postulation of a universal subject had actually been predicated on an unequal distribu-

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cism, and rank exploitation of anxieties and fears. Social and immigrant groups that cannot look forward to assimilation turn more readily to insisting on the pre-
servation of what cultural identity they do have, since no route toward a common
identity or common culture appears open. In an era of scarcity, competition for
jobs, houses, college admissions, and other necessities takes the shape of group
conflicts as individuals band together to strengthen their hand in the struggle for a
piece of the shrinking pie. Scarcity also makes it vastly more difficult to redistrib-
ute wealth in order to right past injustices such as the denial of equal opportunity
to women and minorities.

Individuals belong to social groups that have been the regular victims of
bigotry and discrimination even harder to get some small increase for them-
selves and step up the ferocity of their denunciation of the group that has bene-

cified from their exploitation or oppression. Whites, particularly men, often re-

due to this challenge band together to meet the common cause and compassion. On the one hand,

woman and minorities see the discrimination against them as groups more clearly

to the social policies of entry-level manufacturing jobs, government employ-
m
t and retail expansion. Thus one should get the current tendency to por-

white men as the unfairly victorious targets of left-wing hate groups by point-

ou its faulty moral logic and the continuing position of preeminence

most social groups have in U.S. society. If reforms in society and education and gov-

erment result in targeting the privileges white men have for so long, it is not out
t of a personal hatred of them for their gender or their race but out of a political
analysis of the unjust distribution of social power and knowledge.

As the colleges and universities, a similar story unfolds. The momentum of the

civil rights and women's movements and the growth of a variety of institutions and ideas,

ity on the periphery of the academic center, to someday past intellec-
tual injustices through collective action. Autonomous though usually precariously

underfunded programs in Women’s Studies, Black or African American Studies,

and similar innovations require study and appreciation of campus administration

and curriculum. Throughout the Reagan and Bush years, however, the money

and political support for these programs dried up, along with financial aid for the

poor and victims of discrimination. Twenty-five years after the Civil Rights Bill,

black enrollment in higher education actually began to decline despite affirmative

action programs. The fall into poverty of northern black industrial communities

that lost their share of the wealth produced by urban manufacture (now exported to

the Third World) had a devastating impact on the ability of blacks to attend col-

lege. By 1990, after a decade of expanding requirements, tuition raises, and cuts in

financial aid, white students too began to feel the economic pinch, and massive

numbers of white college students began taking part-time jobs to pay their way

trough school. Again, many whites irrationally blamed affirmative action pro-
grams for the decline in college enrollments and together offered them rather than

pointing the finger at the government officials who stoke the fire from the poor and mid-

dle-class and gave to the rich under Reagan’s regime. Young Americans of college

age now stare hungrily at each other, seeing not friends or companions in a com-
munity culture but competitors in a grim struggle for money and power.

In debates about multiculturalism and the diversity of educational offerings, one

sometimes encounters objections to the constant reiteration of “race, class, and gender” as

seemingly the only categories requiring revised representation. Why, critics ask, should we restrict

ourselves to this holy trinity? What about the other, theoretically infinite, kinds of differences that

separate people, such as religion and religion? Why not affirmative action to represent evangel-

ical Christians or Irish Catholics or Jews or Episcopalians or Quakers? As some
group says it? The answer lies, I think, in the connection between our knowl-
edge about social groups and the relative power that social groups have in a given


culture. Within the context of the United States, a strong argument has been made

that acts of bigotry and discrimination against people on the basis of race, class,

gender (including sexual orientation) are some of the most prevalent in our his-
tory and society. These groups—persons of color, women, the poor, gays and

lesbians—are on the whole less socially powerful and are more easily targeted by other
groups. Although abstract ideas about justice and equality might suggest the arbi-

trariness of privileging race, class, and gender, a historical understanding of the

particular history of the United States shows the dominant role these categories

have played. The fact that everyone can claim to be partly persons of some prejudice

do not mean that all have been equally harmed or that degrees of oppression are

ignorant.

The lack of power of specific social groups has been reflected in the way they

have been represented in educational materials and programs. This is not, of course,

misrepresentation (or lack of representation) in turn reproduces the social
disempowerment. So the reiteration of “race, class, and gender” does not follow

from some wrongheaded assertion that only these groups have suffered or that only

these groups have cultural riches that require bring identity politics into the

argument is that the traditions of other groups during America’s history have

relatively more access to representation and so do not require so much energy to

gain a place in the fabric of some larger culture or political entity. In this way, we

can understand why questions of educational purpose and scholarship cannot be
easily disentangled from political questions, especially when an education often

provides the most ready access to better paid jobs and social power.

We should also remember that cultural and economic assimilation in the

United States has historically been relatively easy for those of European descent,
more difficult for those of Hispanic descent, and virtually impossible for those of African descent. Native Americans, of course, were placed beyond the pale and subjected to genocide. Assimilation of Asian Americans remains problematic even as they form powerful economic groupings in California and Hawaii. Racial prejudice, then, the ancient human habit of making one's own personal identity dependent on the illusion of being superior to someone else, continues to be decisive in American life. Today there is a demographic swing toward growth in those very sectors of the population that have been traditionally the most difficult to assimilate. This has contributed to the ever-tighter mentalities in terms of differences in the nation as a conglomerate of distinct social and cultural groups rather than as a social contract among highly individual and independent persons.

Indeed, many now point out that the nation should be a goal at all, since it usually means the assimilation of less-empowered groups to the cultural values and institutionalized powers of dominant groups. The cities of Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago are increasingly made up of racially and ethnically distinct neighborhoods, composed together of a kind of multicultural metropolis. A recent article on demographics in California was titled "Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World." As the cultural critic Todd Gitlin observed at a recent conference at the University of Michigan, there has been an almost complete reversal of the political landscape as concerns the debate between universalism and particularism. Whereas in the eighteenth century liberal progressives of the Enlightenment swore allegiance to a common humanity transcending matter particulars, today leftist reformers insist that political change must start with, and always respect, the unbridgeable differences between heterogeneous peoples. At this rate, we will soon have difficulty finding anyone who was born on the fourth of July, who thinks of him- or herself as "simply an American." Obviously academic scholars can only indirectly affect the fundamental economic factors that are accelerating the breakdown in cultural consensus in the United States. As educators we can work vigorously to change the policies and material practices of our own institutions, seeking to make them more democratic, more respectful of cultural diversity, and more in the service of the broadest possible spectrum of American society. We should not protest injustice in faraway places and ignore its persistence in our own backyards. As intellectuals or cultural historians, we can object to the language of novelty currently used about the "disuniting of America." We can point out that the consensus was never very comprehensive in the first place and that acceptance of it was often not a matter of choice. We can also celebrate the multicultural demographics of the American population as something to be proud of and something requiring a new vision of the nation's history and purpose. Revisions to nationalist patriotism, whether in the political sphere or in the forms of cultural activity, should be seriously resisted. Intellectuals have a responsibility to remind the public at large of how such patriotism has historically been used as a weapon of violence against many of our own citizens and as an excuse for selling lies about our past.
tion of (or resistance to) power cannot found a community or a political philosophy; the former cannot do justice to social relationships involving conflicting self-interests, and power without a concept of the good is only instrumental and thus nihilistic. Social inequalities will not be alleviated without structural changes in the government and the economy, to be sure, but these cannot be motivated or justified except through arguments about the evils of unbridled self-interest and the irresponsibility of the weak to power. Divorciating these points will involve careful historical argument about the particulars of social, economic, and political life, even as scrupulous theoretical debate about what constitutes the good universally and in a given instance. A discourse on ethics remains vital to the ongoing process of creating mechanisms that do justice to the competing claims of different cultural groups and of individuals who in their everyday lives often differ with themselves. The importance of this ethical moment needs to be reinserted and retrieved in the current climate, where "the political" (often vaguely if at all theorized) reigns. In the agency and decisions of the ethical subject the competing demands of the universal and the particular seek their only practical justice. In the ethical the subject's responsibility toward the social meets the subject's responsibility toward the individual. In ethical decision acts of judgment become synonymous with the realization of human character and social existence. To be true to the ethics of our time is to transcend the accusations and scapegoating and name-calling, unless we acknowledge our ethical political responsibility to each other we can expect an endless history of self-righteous violence.

Cultural criticism, to be worth the effort, must have an affirmative dimension, though this may take complex, even ironic, forms, as my discussion of the subversive affirmations of the Declaration of Independence demonstrates. Ralph Ellison continues this tradition in the "Epilogue" to Invisible Man, where his narrator gives this final gloss to his grandfather's deathbed injunction to "conquer 'em [whites] with yeses, undermine 'em with guns, agree 'em to death and destruction." Could he have meant—hell, he must have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built not just as a whole, but let at least some people, who did the violence. . . . Did he mean to affirm the principle, which they themselves had dreamed into being out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past, and which they had violated and compromised to the point of exhaustion even in their own corrupt minds? Or did he mean that we had to take the responsibility for all of us, for the men as well as the principle . . . ? I can see of us, or, more vividly still, to affirm the principle, the plan in whose name we had been transferred and sacrificed . . .

Mediating in Shadow and Act on the black writer's contradictory relation to the American dream and its fictional tradition, Ellison observes that "through as passionate believers in democracy Negroes identify themselves with the broader American ideals, their sense of reality springs, in part, from an American experience which white men must not only have but had, one with which they are reluctant to identify themselves even when presented in forms of the imagin-