EBOO PATEL

An Alternative to Antiracism

Horace Kallen, Alain Locke, and the diverse bounty of cultural pluralism

N THE FALL of 2010, I began opening my public talks with the sentence "Are we entering a new era of American racism?" I would start by laying out the historical facts, from the genocide of Native Americans to the horrors of slavery and the ugliness of antisemitism, and said that there were echoes of that racist past in the Islamophobia we were seeing in the present day.

It had been about two years since Donald Trump started questioning Barack Obama's religion and birth origins, claiming that he was a secret Muslim who had been born in Indonesia. The Obama team did everything they could to ignore it, but because so much of the mainstream media treated the narrative as legitimate, Obama finally released his birth certificate and said, for the umpteenth time, that

while he respected Islam and Indonesia, he was a Christian who had been born in the United States.

The accusations triggered something in me. I had spent the years after 9/11 ignoring racist and Islamophobic comments that I was receiving online, but my patience had reached its limit. So when I heard a campus diversity director use the word *antiracism* at a conference of student-affairs administrators, I thought to myself, "That's a useful concept." I decided to start integrating it into my public talks and media commentary.

I bought into what I viewed as the core idea of antiracism: When there is obvious racism present, you can't be neutral about it, you need to be actively against it. I started thinking of antiracism as something like a sharp kitchen knife. Sometimes, while making dinner, no other piece of equipment will do.

But as the antiracism approach came to dominate diversity work in the years that followed, the problems of its overuse became clear. I give roughly 50 keynote speeches a year on diversity issues, most often on college campuses and at higher education conferences. Antiracism and its close cousin intersectionality were the conceptual canopy that allowed participants in those diversity workshops to spend far more time discussing the various ways they were oppressed and accusing other people of being oppressors than they did sharing stories of the meaning and inspiration they derived from their own ethnic, religious, or racial identities.

It was as if all the spoons and forks had been removed from the silverware drawer of diversity work and replaced with sharp knives. This is a problem. Using diversity efforts as an opportunity to relentlessly emphasize the bad things other people have done to your identity group is like eating cereal with a sharp knife. Self-victimizing stories rob people of their agency and have been linked with depression and other mental health challenges. As the sociol-

ogist Musa al-Gharbi puts it: "The more people perceive themselves to be surrounded by others who harbor bias or hostility against them, and the more they view their life prospects as hostage to a system that is fundamentally rigged against them, the more likely they become to experience anxiety, depression, psychogenic and psychosomatic health problems, or to behave in antisocial ways."

Moreover, when you point a sharp kitchen knife at someone else it becomes a murder weapon. The social equivalent of this is called cancellation.

In *The Identity Trap*, Yascha Mounk demonstrates how this approach to diversity work is rooted in the intellectual traditions of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and critical race theory associated with thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Herbert Marcuse, and Derrick Bell. What all of these intellectuals had in common was their insistence on an us-versus-them theory of power dynamics linked to identity. It is interesting as a provocative perspective, but wrongheaded when it becomes the entire paradigm, and downright dangerous when it turns into a regime with the ability to coerce and punish. (Bias response teams on college campuses are an excellent example of antiracism becoming a regime.)

There is, I believe, an older and better paradigm for diversity work in America: the model of cultural pluralism, based principally on the work (and friendship) of Horace Kallen and Alain Locke. Kallen helped launch a Jewish campus movement called the Menorah Association, served as a professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and helped to found the New School for Social Research in New York. Locke, an on-again-off-again professor at Howard Univer-

sity, edited and wrote the introduction for *The New Negro*, a book considered by many to be the definitive text of the Harlem Renaissance. Interestingly enough, they knew each other, and well.

In the fall of 1907, when studying at Oxford as the first black Rhodes Scholar, Alain Locke was, on account of his race, not invited by the other Rhodes Scholars to the Thanksgiving meal held by the American Club at Oxford. Kallen was disgusted by the insult. The two had met previously in a Harvard philosophy class, with Kallen as teaching assistant and Locke as student. They realized that they shared a number of the same intellectual and cultural influences.

One such influence was Barrett Wendell. When he first entered Harvard, Horace Kallen believed that being fully American required him to abandon the Orthodox Judaism of his family. Wendell, a professor of history and literature at Harvard, convinced Kallen of an alternative view: Expand your understanding of Judaism beyond religious ritual, and then consider the wide and positive influence of that cultural heritage on the world. Among those who were most influenced by Jewish thought, according to Wendell, were the Puritans and the Founding Fathers of the 1776 generation. If Kallen wished to be more American, he should look to his Jewish identity for inspiration to contribute to the nation and its traditions.

Wendell had a similar influence on Locke. Like Kallen, Locke had entered Harvard hoping to master the Western intellectual tradition and thereby blend into the American melting pot. Wendell believed that advancing the nation's culture through arts, literature, and intellectual life was a patriotic duty, and that this was best done by encouraging the flourishing of a variety of ethnic, racial, and religious forms.

A second influence Kallen and Locke shared was William James. The two of them sat in the front row together for William James's influential Hibbert Lectures at Oxford University in 1908. In those talks,

later published in an influential volume titled *A Pluralistic Universe*, James argued against the era's dominant philosophical view that the universe was singular and "hung together" in a unidimensional way. James was such a committed opponent of this predominant view that he wanted to rename the cosmos "the pluriverse." The metaphor he employed to represent this cosmic diversity was a federated republic.

Kallen picked up the federated metaphor and applied it to the cultural diversity of early-20th-century America, writing that the nation was best understood as "a democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily and autonomously in the enterprise of self-realisation."

He was intentionally arguing against the two dominant models of American identity in the early 20th century. The first model he called "Kultur Klux Klan." This was based on the violent anti-black, anti-Catholic, and antisemitic tactics of the actual Ku Klux Klan, and it adhered to any view or program holding that "true Americans" were white Protestants and that everyone else was an alien.

The second model that Kallen argued against was the melting pot. The phrase had become popular through Israel Zangwill's 1908 play of the same name. It is important to note that when *the melting pot* was coined as a term, it was intended as a progressive step forward. The Kultur Klux Klan held that Jews, Catholics, and other recent immigrants could never be American. The melting pot idea held that everyone could become an American — you simply had to change your name, stop speaking your native language, eat different food, and blend in.

Kallen's cultural pluralism held that this was both impossible and undesirable. All groups carried their cultural histories and family ancestries. As he wrote:

> Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, to a greater or lesser extent: they cannot

> change their grandfathers. Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, in order to cease being Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, would have to cease to be.

And why should they? Particular identities have value. Practicing culture is what gives meaning to life.

Kallen believed that particularity also gave vitality to democracy. In both the Kultur Klux Klan and the melting pot models, America derived its identity and its strength from uniformity. For Kallen, influenced by William James's pluralism, American democracy was defined by diverse groups bringing their distinctive cultures and cooperating together. America, in Kallen's view, was not a melting pot but an orchestra:

> Every type of instrument has its specific tonality, founded in its substance and form.... So in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization.

Jewish culture, which Kallen referred to as Hebraism, made up one set of instruments in the orchestra.

African-American culture was another set of instruments, and although Kallen had put the orchestra, metaphorically speaking, on the stage, it was Alain Locke who got it to play.

The "father of the Harlem Renaissance," Locke committed himself to nurturing black arts and philosophy, a commitment that began while he was still an undergraduate at Harvard, under Wendell's

influence. In a talk he gave in 1907 to a black church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Locke said,

> If we are a race we must have a race tradition, and if we are to have a race tradition, we must keep and cherish it as a priceless — yes as a holy thing — and above all not be ashamed to wear the badge of our tribe. . . . I do not think we are Negroes because we are of varying degrees of black, brown, yellow, nor do I think it is because we do or should all act alike. We are a race because we have a common race tradition.

He absorbed influences from everywhere, and welcomed contributions from everyone. A true cultural pluralist, Locke studied everything from the Coptic Christian minority in Egypt to the Italian Renaissance, and employed it all in shaping his model of what a distinctive African-American arts tradition could be. When it came to rendering black beauty, Locke hired a white artist, Winold Reiss, to do the portraits for *The New Negro*, because Reiss's work was, in Locke's view, aesthetically unparalleled in beauty.

Locke loved Harlem because it was a gathering place for black people from across the world, everywhere from the rural South to Europe to the West Indies. Moreover, Locke was gay, and the arts scene in Harlem was, for the 1920s, welcoming to people of all sexualities.

Locke rarely referred to African Americans as victims or marginalized, and encouraged his community to live up to the high standards set by their own cultural traditions. After all, European painters such as Picasso were drawing from African art to develop cubism and other modernist forms. Clearly, black people had been developing culture at a gold standard for centuries. Why stop now?

When Alain Locke said "I am not a race problem," he meant that race was not simply a problem; it was an asset. He took that view

into the work he promoted. While *The New Negro* contained essays and poems that spoke of the adverse affects of racism (how could it not—this was, of course, the era of lynchings, cross burnings, and segregation), Locke did not want to suggest that black culture was defined by a response to white racism. In fact, Locke would send notes back on works that he thought overemphasized white racism, one example being a poem by Claude McKay that claimed that for black people to be free, they needed to kill their white fathers.

Locke wanted the emphasis to be on black pride, black production, and what we would now call "black excellence." As he wrote, "The question is no longer what whites think of the Negro but of what the Negro wants to do and what price he is willing to pay to do it." The Harlem Renaissance should be so central to America's self-conception that it would be considered, in Locke's words, "another statue of liberty on the landward side of New York."

Kallen and Locke did not look to America simply as a place that would ultimately allow their respective groups the right to speak their language, practice their culture, establish their institutions, create their distinctive arts, and preserve their traditions. They believed America would be enriched if their communities had the freedom to do this, and also if other groups had the freedom to do the same. As Kallen emphasized frequently, the vitality of American democracy required the contributions of its diverse communities.

John Dewey's major question about Horace Kallen's cultural pluralism was whether it emphasized cooperation enough. Referencing Kallen's orchestra analogy, if diverse groups were all encouraged to express their cultural and religious identities in proximity to one another, it could produce loud and unpleasant noise as easily as harmonious

music. This is a highly relevant question for us today, as we watch college quads become sites of screaming matches between diverse groups each claiming the right to express their distinctive identities. This is neither the symphony of Kallen's imagination nor the jazz that characterized the Harlem Renaissance.

The story of Jewish integration into America suggests such a model of cultural contribution. From the late 1800s until World War I, a wave of immigration brought 20 million immigrants to the United States. More than 1.5 million of them were Jews, largely from Eastern Europe. Like other ethnic groups, American Jews established aid networks to help their brethren enter and assimilate into American society. Soon many of those organizations joined forces under the umbrella of a new organization: the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, or HIAS.

HIAS's role evolved over time, including assisting Jewish displaced persons after World War II, and evacuating and resettling Jews from Muslim countries. Once Jewish resettlement, thanks to its success, was less of an urgent global need, HIAS directed its operations to assist refugees from all backgrounds resettling in America. Today, it resettles Cambodian Buddhists and Somali Muslims, and continues to attract the ire of antisemites and racists for doing so. "We used to help refugees because they were Jewish; now we help refugees because we are Jewish."

As far as HIAS was concerned, its organizing principle, the biblical commandment to "welcome the stranger," had not changed. But its particular religious values brought about a broader mission to serve a pluralist America. Many other Jewish public organizations, backed by the rabbinic concept of "repairing the world," lead Jewish-inspired efforts to support people of diverse faiths and backgrounds. Dewey had a similar insight: The expression of diverse cultural groups makes American democracy interesting, but cooperation through differences is what makes American democracy work.

Those of us who lead faith-based initiatives would do well to move toward this model of pluralism. A different way of envisioning this sort of program is to think of the United States not as a melting pot, but as a potluck nation.

Potlucks are civic spaces that both embody and celebrate pluralism. They rely on the contributions of a diverse community. If people don't bring an offering, the potluck doesn't exist. If everyone brings the same thing, the potluck is boring. And what a nightmare it would be if you brought your best dish to a potluck and you were met at the door with a giant machine that melted it into the same bland goo as everybody else's best dish. The whole point of a potluck is the diversity of dishes.

Potlucks respect diverse identities by enthusiastically welcoming the gifts of the people who gather. They facilitate relationships among people by creating a space for eating and socializing and making surprise connections. And they cultivate in people the importance of not just the individual parts and the connections between them, but the health of the whole. Everybody benefits from a clean kitchen, enough dishes and silverware, and a safe and open place to eat and socialize. When it comes to a potluck, these are the structures of the common good. Everybody plays a role in their upkeep.

American Jews know how much they've contributed to that common good, and at this moment of rising antisemitism, I hope the Jewish community knows that there are those outside of it who know it as well. Several years ago I was traveling with my family in a Midwestern city. Walking in a local museum, I pointed out to my children the names of the Jewish benefactors, to highlight to them that the Jewish contribution to America has been for the benefit of all Americans, not just Jewish Americans. Please don't stop. The American potluck, or as Horace Kallen would say it, the American symphony, needs the Jews. ✴