

BOOKS

Diversity: The Invention of a Concept

by Peter Wood

Encounter Books • 2003 • 308 pages • \$24.95

Reviewed by George C. Leef

Anthropologists study the origins and development of human customs and beliefs. Often that takes them to places like New Guinea, but anthropologist Peter Wood did not need immunizations or a passport to write this remarkable book. It examines one of the strangest of contemporary American beliefs—*diversity*—dissecting this foolish, often destructive mania with consummate wit and skill. To provide a parallel in economics, think of what Henry Hazlitt’s *The Failure of the “New Economics”* did to the Keynesian mystique. Wood’s assault on diversity does comparable damage.

Wood first argues that a fascination with diverse cultures is nothing new for Americans. Our forebears read avidly about the various peoples with whom explorers came into contact. Nor, contrary to popular belief, did they necessarily regard non-whites as inferior. They were simply different. It never occurred to anyone to “celebrate” the fact that people aren’t fungible units.

What Wood means by “diversity” is “a *belief* that the portion of our individual identities that derives from our ancestry is the most important part, and a *feeling* that group identity is somehow more substantial and powerful than either our individuality or our common humanity.” That’s not the way the “diversiphiles” (Wood’s term) pitch the idea, of course. To them, diversity is a big, warm teddy bear of lovely emotions, centering on the idea that everyone would respect and like everyone else if institutions would make sure that members of all “groups” were represented in schools, businesses, and other places where humans congregate. Wood shows, however, that diversity is no teddy bear. Over and over, he

penetrates through the smiley-face sloganeering to show the feebleness of the diversiphile arguments.

Much of the book focuses on the diversity movement in education, where Wood has seen it firsthand as a professor at Boston University. Many pages are devoted to the origin of the movement, which dates from the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1978 *Bakke* decision. Wood explains that Americans have been losing patience with affirmative action (which had metamorphosed into racial quotas by the 1970s), and that the odd happenstance of *Bakke* rescued the quota fanatics by giving them a new justification for insisting that student bodies (and other groups) must be carefully engineered to achieve what Wood calls “aquarium-style” diversity.

In *Bakke*, Justice Powell’s opinion stitched together a tenuous majority for the proposition that it was not necessarily unconstitutional for state universities to consider race as a factor in admissions. His opinion included the idea that there might be a “compelling state interest” in having a “diverse” student body. No other justice joined with Powell on that point, but quota advocates had been handed a brand-new argument and they made the most of it.

Affirmative action had been billed as a temporary measure to correct historical wrongs—a tough sell when the wrongs applied to only one group, and those wrongs were in a rapidly receding past. But diversity could be a permanent program based on the notion that wonderful things happen when the state brings together people of different backgrounds. Wood writes, “Without *Bakke*, the *diversity* argument—the conceit that ethnic and racial diversity are educationally constructive—might have languished along with the labor theory of value and other bits of leftist rhetoric that never caught on.”

College leaders quickly grabbed at the lifeline Powell had tossed out. Since then, they have defended their policies of admitting students and hiring faculty members based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, by saying that it is all done for better education.

But is it? For a long time, diversiphiles got away with mere assertion on that, but the University of Michigan cases that the Supreme Court will decide this summer have brought the issue into the open. Wood examines the evidence that the diversiphiles have presented and finds it weak and deceptive. The much-touted book by William Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River*, he concludes, is just a “soggy apology for diversity.” Professor Patricia Gurin’s study of the educational benefits of diversity, cooked up to bolster the U of M’s case, receives richly deserved scorn as well.

Wood also devotes chapters to diversity in the arts, churches, and business. His insights are just as penetrating in those fields as they are in education.

Henry Hazlitt’s great book didn’t immediately cause the Keynesian edifice to collapse, but it was a rallying point for free-market economists who gradually drove Keynesian thinking off the commanding heights. My hunch is that Peter Wood’s *Diversity* will play a similar role. □

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Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the Modern World from the Mongol Empire to the Present

by Robert L. Tignor, et al.

W.W. Norton & Co. • 2002 • 462 pages
• \$62.50 hardcover; \$20.00 paperback

Reviewed by Andrew Cline

History books for college students are reputedly terrible. Do they merit that reputation? If *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* is indicative, the answer is yes.

The authors of Norton’s new world-history textbook set out to accomplish something they say no history text has done: teach the subject from 1300, instead of 1492, to the present and shift the focus away from the West so that all the world’s peoples are given “fair coverage.”

Cramming 700 years of human history into 462 pages requires a great deal of labor to separate the wheat from the chaff. With a year and a half to fit into each page, many individuals, movements, battles, events, and so on won’t make the cut or will be reduced to a passing mention. The seven Princeton University professors who wrote *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* undertake this historical culling with gusto. They chop, snip, clip, and weave like hairdressers on speed, creating a strange narrative in which Thomas Jefferson seems less important than numerous popular entertainers.

Take the twentieth century, for example. The authors carve out space for such people as Nelson Mandela (mentioned on five pages), Lenin (six pages), Hitler (eight pages), Gandhi (eight pages), Stalin (ten pages), and Chairman Mao (11 pages). But these people get only a mention: Woodrow Wilson, Margaret Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, Lech Walesa, Japan’s Emperor Hirohito, Malcolm X—as well as Boy George, Carmen Miranda, the Village People, Melissa Etheridge, Hideo Nomo, Toni Morrison, Josephine Baker, the Black Panthers, and Sting. It is difficult to see how students can get a coherent view of the century’s crucial events from this kaleidoscopic presentation.

There was so much going on in the twentieth century that the authors obviously wouldn’t have space to include everyone. I mean, they *had* to put Boy George and Carmen Miranda *somewhere*. So, naturally, they left out certain irrelevant figures. Among those not making the cut are J. Robert Oppenheimer, Albert Einstein, Enrico Fermi, Sam Walton, Duke Ellington, Golda Meir, and The Beatles. Of course, reggae musician Bob Marley is mentioned on two different pages and has his own photo.

There is no confusing *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* for an old-fashioned, Western-centric textbook that uses out-of-date concepts like balance and historical perspective. In this book, we are spared long passages on such figures as George Washington, whose entire presence in the book consists of a single reference in the caption describing a painting of Simon Bolivar. It reads, “Bolivar