

## Métissage

by Françoise Vergès

Colonisation has always been one of the foundations of French national identity. From the debate during the French revolution about the extension of rights to free men of colour, to the debate in 1848 about the abolition of slavery and the granting of voting rights; and from the programme of the Popular Front in 1936 granting the right of representation to colonised Africans and Asians, to the more recent debates about the legal redefinition of French nationality: the empire, and its aftermath, have long haunted the French and their representation of themselves.

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from former colonies, starting in the 1950s, has shaped how the French understand their own identity. Inhabitants of the remains of the French empire - of Réunion, New Caledonia, and Martinique, for example - have also raised questions about the meaning of Frenchness. Descendants of slaves, indentured workers, and immigrants have all challenged the foundations and representations of French identity, of French 'oneness'. Though many of them do not challenge the principle of cultural assimilation, they do call into question rigid republican jacobinism. Successive governments have largely responded to the political issue of multiculturalism with a rigidity that raises doubts about the unity of French national identity. Their attempts to deal with post-imperial multiculturalism have produced discourses which only appear to respond to contemporary challenges.

One of these discourses - which has emerged recently - celebrates *métissage*, the mixing of cultures and people. *Métissage* is an aesthetic response to a political issue. French singers, writers, thinkers and politicians have become enamoured of *métissage*. A day does not pass on which one doesn't tread a declaration affirming their love of *métissage*. *Cuisine métissée*, *décoration métissée*, *haute*

*couture métissée*, *musique métissée*: to be chic today is to adopt a style *métissé*. *Métissage* has become a trope which designates tolerance and love of the Other. People now search their 'roots' for diversity. It is quite unfashionable to have two parents who come from the same village in Périgord. What is fashionable is to have a multi-ethnic ancestry which combines as many continents as possible. It's better to have a 'mixed' father and 'mixed' mother, so that one can describe oneself as being of combined North African, Caribbean, Asian, German and Spanish ancestry.

*Métissage* is intended to be a response to the racist discourse of Le Pen and the National Front. It is certainly a discourse which wants to be liberal and anti-racist, to be a rebuttal of the ideology of blood purity. This celebration of diversity should be welcomed. Yet a lingering doubt remains that the celebration is hiding something. And, indeed, when one researches the genealogy of *métissage* in medical, legal, philosophical and political discourses one discovers a history of negative stereotyping of the *métis*, a history in which - as an intimate part of colonial and imperial history - *métissage* is associated with a pathology of crime, incest, parricide, and betrayal.

How, then, should one understand the sudden love affair with *métissage*? Is France discovering how diverse its inhabitants are? Is France looking with tolerance and friendliness at the hundreds and thousands of people arriving from the former empire?

It would seem so. Yet both the government and the *Assemblée Nationale* are now discussing laws even more stringent than the infamous Pasqua law on immigration and the Méhaignerie law on citizenship. Every day people are arrested, imprisoned, and expelled for being 'illegal aliens'.

These laws have created legal absurdities which no one seem to know how to resolve. Parents of children born in France may be expelled but not their children; families who have lived in France for fifteen years are suddenly denied medical assistance, welfare,

and social security benefits. In short, alongside a discourse celebrating tolerance, mixing and diversity there is an increase in repression.

The discourse on *métissage* is a form of therapeutic and narcissistic multiculturalism for post-imperial France. Therapeutic because it allows the French to avoid - by repressing the history of *métissage* - the conflicts which a discussion of their colonial history would entail. Narcissistic because it gratifies the view that the French have of themselves as the true heirs of the Enlightenment. The *métissage* that they celebrate is an idea stripped of its history. It has become an aesthetic notion, an *ideal* multiculturalism, the goal of which seems to be the fusion of differences: these differences will, it is hoped, produce an aesthetic object, the *métis*, the existence of which verifies the possibility of living in harmony, despite the fact of conflicting histories, claims, and needs.

Post-imperial France has found a form of multiculturalism which unites its revolutionary past - with its claim of fraternity and equality - with its colonial-imperial past; yet, as the latter remains unmentioned, the vision of the community which is projected rests on repressed memories. France has taken a trope which belonged to its colonial empire and adapted it to its contemporary situation. But, in this move, *métissage* has lost its history, has become a screen on which a dream is projected: a desire for harmony at a moment when groups coming to France from the empire are questioning French jacobinism and disrupting France's unity as a Catholic society.

Republican jacobinism has been unable to answer the challenge posed by these groups. This challenge could be described as a *métissage* that does *not* repress its conditions of formation, that will *not* be contained in the domain of the aesthetic, and which *does* address questions of social inequality, racism, and justice.

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## The Two Values Crises in the United States

by Eric M. Uslaner

Many American liberals have lamented the loss of public-spiritedness that leads to a more co-operative society. Conservatives have argued that the fundamental issues dividing the left from the right focus on moral questions such as abortion and family values. Both are right, but they are largely talking past one another.

Still others maintain that the enduring issue in American politics remains economics. Analyses of the 1992 contest all concentrate on the key role of national economic conditions in Clinton's victory. They are mostly wrong. *The dominant conflict in American politics in the 1990s revolves around moral issues.*

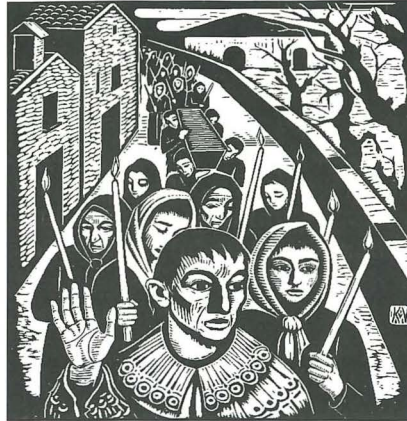
The liberals - more accurately, the communitarians, who include Bill Clinton - worry about what has gone wrong with the social fabric of the United States. What made the US distinctive, from its early origins to the 1960s, was voluntarism. In the frontier, people helped each other build homes (hence the term 'logrolling' and its implications for building coalitions as well as houses). They gave to charity. The United States was the land of the individual motivated by self-interest. But it was also a nation of people who looked out for others, tempering their avarice through Tocqueville's 'self-interest rightly understood'.

Today, Americans are increasingly isolated from their neighbours and communities. People don't socialise with their neighbours as much as they did two decades ago. Associational membership, the American trait that impressed Tocqueville more than anything else, has plummeted.

Conservatives argue that America faces a crisis of family values and lost morality. They focus less on how people interact with neighbours and community than on relationships in the family and the 'moral community'. Communitarians centre on the city of man and woman; conservatives look to the city of God. Liberals

complain that we have become too selfish to care about others. Conservatives worry that we are too willing to accept others' demands regardless of their moral content.

These two values crises seem linked to each other. Both deal with the decline of the moral order. Almost implausibly, they occupy rather different spheres. The first is



societal in the broadest sense. Its roots lie in how people view each other and its consequences rest in how they treat others. The second is political. Its roots lie in ideology and its consequences rest in how people vote. In political terms both values crises are not connected.

On the street, and in the halls of our national legislature, people are less likely to feel any sense of collective identity with others. Since the traumas of the Vietnam War, the racial disturbances, the energy crises, Watergate, and the end of sustained economic growth in the 1970s, our national debate has become far less civil. Civility establishes the bonds that are essential for trust.

At the individual level, people who are trusting are optimistic about the future and have faith in science and its capacity to make the world better. Trust in other people goes to the core of 'social capital', a willingness to help other people in an atmosphere of reciprocity. They are participatory and tolerant, community-oriented and sociable. However, trusters are *not* politically distinctive: they line up neither on the left nor the right, neither as Democrats nor Republicans.

American elections are typically portrayed as driven by

party identification or retrospective evaluations of presidential performance, largely based on the state of the economy. With the exception of abortion, moral issues have not played a major role in voters' choices.

The theme of the 1992 presidential campaign was the economy: 48 percent of voters reported economic issues as the most important problem in the campaign. Thirty four per cent indicated that ideological issues were paramount, while just 9 per cent gave top priority to moral issues of any type.

Even though the economy was central in voters' minds, it was neither the only factor nor even the *determining* consideration in shaping electoral decisions. Research by Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, and by Alvarez and Nagler, has found that abortion attitudes mattered in the choice among the three major candidates. They were right - but they didn't go far enough.

Probit analysis of the Clinton, Bush, and Perot votes in the 1992 presidential elections, using the American National Election Study, show that party identification alone had the potential to affect the Clinton vote by 70 per cent and ideology by 13 per cent.

Beyond these variables, the economy did *not* predominate. Trust in government - with an impact of 13 per cent - was third, followed closely by two moral issues: 'blacks work their way up like other groups' and 'adjust morals to a changing world'. Overall the equation correctly predicts 85 per cent of the cases - a considerable improvement over the Alvarez and Nagler model that focuses almost exclusively on the economy.

The Bush vote indicates a lesser role for party, but a greater impact for ideology (more than twice as powerful as it is for Clinton).

Moral and social issues played a key role, ranking third (adjust morals to changing world), fifth (abortion), and sixth (blacks work their way up) out of 15 predictors. People who favoured traditional moral values were 13