

The Future of Ethnicity, Race and Nationality

Walter L. Wallace. 1997. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers. 199pp.

Walter Wallace, a distinguished Princeton sociologist, has written a new volume of tremendous significance, *The Future of Ethnicity, Race and Nationality*, which should open up debate in a critical, but neglected area. This treatise explores the question of whether the world's racial, ethnic and national diversity will blend into one undifferentiated whole. To be blunt, Wallace's opinion is that "global species consolidation" will take place.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, key social theorists like Karl Marx, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emile Durkheim and John Dewey delivered important disquisitions on this subject. By and large, they concluded that the territorial, genealogical and historical divisions of mankind were being effaced by modern processes of individualism and capitalism, leading, in the opinion of some, to new divisions based on class, occupation or status. Walter Wallace concurs with this assimilationist assessment, updating the paradigm of global assimilation with current empirical material from our era of accelerated globalization.

Wallace's theoretical premise is vast, sweeping and parsimonious. He claims that there exists a Grand Cycle of human somatic and cultural evolution which began 100,000 years ago as human beings slowly began to migrate from their point of origin in east Africa. For approximately 90,000 years, humanity's wanderings led to genetic and cultural drift as new geographic environments, interacting with genetic mutation and natural selection, produced an increasingly differentiated Homo Sapiens. Origin myths (ie. ethnicity), territoriality and culture tended to follow the original racial differentiation.

However, starting about 10,000 years ago, the differentiation process came to be replaced by a consolidation (or reconsolidation) process. Tribes began to meet each other, engage in conflict and consolidate into ethnic groups. Then, during the past five thousand years, ethnic groups began to aggregate into nations or empires. Finally, in the past century, we are beginning to see the rise of continental and global institutions which herald the dawn of an impending global species consolidation. (14-16)

The grand theory of species consolidation, outlined above, appears in the first three chapters of the book and makes for excellent reading. Sadly, the author loses focus

somewhat in chapters four and five, which appear to venture all over the map in an attempt to expound a comprehensive, neo-Parsonian theory of ethnic and race relations. However, in chapter six, Wallace returns to the theme of species consolidation with some bold predictions. Among these predictions: the world will adopt a universal language, likely based on (but not entirely composed of) English, while racial, ethnic and national diversity will disappear over the *longue durée*. (140) In his conclusion, the author reveals his cards, putting forth the prescriptive case for global species consolidation. Here, Wallace stresses that species consolidation, besides being inevitable, will endow humanity with a better chance at long-term survival. Nuclear and environmental disaster, bacteriological and cosmic apocalypse, global crime - all can be better contained if humanity comes to be consolidated under one racial, cultural and political roof.

Many commentators will likely upbraid Wallace for the same reasons they might criticize Talcott Parsons. Namely, that the analysis presented is too sweeping, and the theoretical canvas too grand. I shall decline the opportunity to join this chorus. Instead, I applaud Wallace's boldness, breadth of vision and logical rigour - even as I disagree with his basic premise. Wallace correctly argues that only two paths are open to humanity with respect to race and ethnicity: consolidation or differentiation (i.e. multiculturalism). He is likewise correct to point out the parochialism of the current ethnic and race relations discourse. Too many observers take a position as multiculturalists or assimilationists with respect to one facet of ethnic or race relations and one particular society(s), yet fail to situate this belief within a coherent world-wide theory.

Wallace's contention regarding the options open to humanity are sound, and his description of the racial/ethnic differentiation process rings true. However, things become a bit less clear when we examine the "consolidation" stage. First of all, it is striking that over the past three hundred years, which in many ways represent a major world-historical disjuncture, political consolidation has been proceeding in an inverse direction from that postulated in the book. That is, empires like the Ottoman or religious constellations like the Dar-ul-Islam have fallen apart while smaller nation-states have risen in their place.

This process continues today - witness the dramatic expansion in the number of recognized nations in the past hundred years. This underscores a key flaw in Wallace's reasoning: he fails to see that politics and civic culture can be disassociated from

ethnicity and race. Thus the United States, a pluralistic society, evinces a high degree of political nationalism, but shows low ethno-racial boundary maintenance. The reverse holds for Germany.

Turning to processes of political globalization, these have recently made some headway against national sovereignty (as they have in the past), but I cannot see how one moves from this modest trans-nationalism to forecast a global polity. The European Union, for example, has lost much of its post-war idealism, and its propensity for institutional "deepening" appears to be slowing down. In other words, limited global institutions, yes, one world, no.

Wallace's argument is weak in its treatment of the political unit known as the nation-state, but can it not be sustained with respect to race and ethnicity? Again, the picture is more complicated than Wallace allows. Ethnic groups have certainly fused (look at the Angles and Saxons or Trinidad's emerging Indian-African population), but most groups' myths of origin are often elastic enough to accommodate racial change. The Jews and American Indians are merely the most obvious examples of this phenomenon, maintaining (as Fredrik Barth might have noted) ethnic boundaries while absorbing new personnel. Even so, Wallace's argument for ethnic demise may ultimately prevail if racial differences are effaced and if this becomes a widely recognized fact.

But is racial consolidation inevitable? I would have liked to have seen more discussion on this point. The finitude of the earth's carrying capacity and the inevitability of at least some inter-racial marriage seem to suggest that Wallace is right. On the other hand, ethnic cleansing/genocide, differential birthrates between cosmopolitan centres and homogeneous hinterlands, genetic manipulation and other differentiating scenarios must be satisfactorily ruled out before we can write the era of race out of the history books. In the end, therefore, Walter Wallace has made a powerful *normative* case for global species consolidation, and his fascinating theory of species consolidation should be required reading for all race and ethnicity scholars. Nevertheless, he has not convinced this reviewer that consolidation will trump global multiculturalism.