

FALL 2019 // BOOK REVIEWS

BECOMING WHITE

The much-maligned notion of assimilation—to the new “white majority” culture—will eventually be the order of the day.

by Peter Skerry



REVIEWED



READERS OF CRB WILL FIND MUCH TO like in *Whiteshift*, a refreshingly original, even bold, analysis of the impact of immigration and demographic change on the United States as well as the

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United Kingdom, Canada, and other Western democracies. Its author, Eric Kaufmann, comes to this subject from a genuinely—dare I say it?—diverse, even cosmopolitan, personal history. As the book jacket explains, he was born in Hong Kong but raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, and spent eight years in Tokyo. In recent years he has been teaching politics at Birkbeck College at the University of London. And as he mentions while developing his argument, in addition to his eastern European Jewish roots, he has both Asian and Hispanic blood relations living in the United States. So, it seems fair to say that Kaufmann has some skin in this game.

But this is no self-indulgent excavation of one individual's identity under the guise of scholarship. Quite the contrary. Kaufmann displays an uncommon openness to the many non-cosmopolitans on both sides of the Atlantic. As he puts it: "Because cosmopolitanism is *de rigeur* in the mobile, elite circles where power often resides, its values can crystallize into coercive norms." He is especially attentive to those in the United States whose anxieties and anger over immigration and multiculturalism have finally found political voice in the person of their president, Donald Trump. Readers will find here an insightful and genuinely fair-minded

effort to understand and explain the anxieties over immigration that have been driving Brexit and propelled Trump to the White House. And though Kaufmann is prepared to call out racism when he sees it, unlike most academics he is sparing in his judgments and refuses simply to dismiss explicitly negative characterizations of immigrants as “racist.”

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Instead, he painstakingly argues that the causes of the current populist resurgence are primarily cultural, not economic. As he asserts: “Cultural grievances are the main engine behind the right-wing populism we see today and will continue to be important during the coming century of white decline. This in-group attachment is not racist unless it leads to antipathy towards outgroups or racial puritanism.” Kaufmann grounds this perspective in historical sources as well as analysis of demographic and survey data and even findings from his own focus groups. And as he further argues: “If politics in the West is ever to return to normal rather than becoming even more polarized, white interests will need to be discussed.... Not only is white group self-interest legitimate, but I maintain that in an era of unprecedented white demographic decline it is absolutely vital for it to have a

democratic outlet.”

Lest there be any confusion, Kaufmann is no white nationalist; he’s not even a guilty white conservative! And his argument is utterly prudential, not principled. He concludes that “[p]ermitting freer expression of the majority group’s sense of cultural loss...is, in the long run, probably less dangerous than repressing [it].”

Kaufmann places the blame for our predicament squarely at the feet of those whom he refers to as “left-modernists,” whose history he traces back not to the Progressives, nor to labor activists and working-class socialists, but to artists and intellectuals such as Mabel Dodge Luhan and Randolph Bourne. First dissected by historian Christopher Lasch, these “new radicals” launched a cultural revolution from the salons of Greenwich Village back at the beginning of the 20th century. And as Kaufmann rightly notes, the pluralism espoused by these progenitors of today’s multiculturalists led to their embracing selected, exotic aspects of immigrant subcultures while disparaging and rejecting “a desiccated puritanical Americanism.” As he puts it, “Sixties multiculturalism was a more strident, ambitious and large-scale application of

Bourne's double-standard of applauding the Jew who 'sticks to his faith' while urging the WASP to leave his culture behind and become a cosmopolitan." And so today, we must endure "asymmetrical multiculturalism,' whereby minority identities are lauded while white majority ones are denigrated."

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From Kaufmann's perspective, it should be no surprise that large numbers of Americans who identify as white—repeatedly reminded that they are part of an ever-shrinking segment soon to be a minority in a "majority-minority society"—have long felt demeaned and threatened. Eventually they began to react and push back. But he goes further, and points out that many of these minorities, especially Hispanics and Asians, either identify racially as white or embrace mainstream American values. Then, too, they are intermarrying with whites in ever increasing numbers. The outcome of these combined demographic and cultural trends will be that "today's white majorities evolve seamlessly and gradually into mixed-race majorities that take on white myths and symbols." This is what Kaufmann means by "whiteshift." And while there will continue to be plenty of "unmixed whites," he also makes clear that this process "will involve

a change in the physical appearance of the median Westerner...though linguistic and religious markers are less likely to be affected.” It will also involve a broadening of what constitutes white culture.

He goes on to make explicit what is implicit in this scenario: that the much-maligned notion of assimilation—to the new “white majority” culture—will be the order of the day. Similarly embedded in his perspective is a critique of civic nationalism. Echoing Samuel Huntington, Kaufmann argues that in an era of ideological struggle such as the Cold War, civic nationalism may have been adequate. But in today’s environment, especially with the rise of the populist right, it is “insufficient.” He elaborates:

Civic nationalism, it was hoped, would provide the ethnic majority with the reassurance it needed to stop fretting about immigration. But this logic only works if the majority’s concern is of a piece with that of the state: namely political order, shared values and the smooth running of the economy. What happens if the conservative section of the majority is in fact exercised by the loss of its ethnic identity or of challenges to ethno-traditions of nationhood? Civic nationalism provides no answer to this deeper existential anxiety beyond its reflex to block such

*questions with charges of racism,
xenophobia and pandering to the far right.*

Readers looking for the political ideas and principles undergirding Kaufmann's new "cultural contract" might be disappointed. Although he makes it clear that he subscribes to classical liberal values, his preoccupation with group identities and subcultures means that he is at ease with the formation and articulation of group interests in social and political life. Indeed, it is safe to assume that Kaufmann would be perfectly comfortable with, and indeed supportive of, the ethnically inflected, patronage-based machine politics that characterized state and local affairs in much of America up until the mid-20th century.

In the same vein, he acknowledges his acquiescence to contemporary identity politics—at least when defined narrowly as the pursuit of group interests. He disapproves when "immigrants' normal desires to defend their interests are decried as 'identity politics.'" Indeed, he parts "company with those on the right who believe group sentiments are a problem and we should simply identify as individuals." After all, he regards those mobilizing today around their white identity as acting out of "collective memory" and

responding to “cultural markers like appearance, religion and cultural traditions” that bind them to the group. Such whites are, he insists, “[l]ike African Americans...[and] are not primarily attached to their group as a tool to get more stuff.”

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Whether one agrees or disagrees with Kaufmann’s perspective, it is strikingly honest, original, and insightful. Yet its single-minded preoccupation with demographic, cultural, and ideological forces is limiting. For example, when discussing the causes of immigration restriction in the U.S. in the years after World War I, he argues that “cultural loss” was a critical factor, and then points out that restrictionists nevertheless “felt obliged to fabricate economic and security rationales” for their efforts. Yet given the wave of bombings and general strikes across the nation involving immigrant anarchists and socialists in the years immediately following the First World War, it is difficult to understand what kind of “fabrication” Kaufmann has in mind here. Indeed, 1919 was one of the most tumultuous and violent years in U.S. peacetime history.

Moreover, there is considerable evidence, overlooked in *Whiteshift*, that immigration

restriction in that era was fueled in no small degree by the increasing competition experienced by workers, many of them earlier immigrants, with more recent arrivals. As economic historians Timothy Hatton and Jeffrey Williamson have demonstrated, in that era expanded immigrant networks and the increased speed of steamship travel made it easier, quicker, and cheaper to cross the Atlantic. And as the number of immigrants increased, their education and literacy levels declined. The result was increased labor market competition between the latest arrivals from southern and eastern Europe and those who had preceded them, as well as with native workers. This was hardly a “fabricated rationale” for restriction.

Turning to the contemporary period, Kaufmann’s single-minded focus on the role of “left-modernist” intellectuals in shaping how we think about immigrants and immigration neglects the role of other actors and forces. Here again, the role of economic interests in today’s debates gets ignored. To be sure, the implications of this particular oversight are minimal since there is not much evidence of economic competition between immigrants and American workers today, though there is some. But there certainly are powerful business interests pushing for high levels of

immigration—whether legal or, if need be, illegal—to which Kaufmann pays no attention whatsoever. Similarly neglected are the economic interests of intellectuals, academics, and other such knowledge workers whose incomes and lifestyles render them particularly reliant on plentiful unskilled workers. Certainly their unacknowledged dependence on such manpower must contribute to the intensity with which such privileged members of our society heap abuse on their fellow citizens not in a position to view immigrants as retainers.

Nor does Kaufmann pay any attention to the fiscal strains—above and beyond the taxes they pay—that immigrants place on services, especially at the local and state levels. Yet each of these factors has helped to fuel the now-inescapable disaffection with immigrants. Finally, he neglects the important role that immigrants and their offspring play in lobbying Congress to keep the gates open for their relatives. And this speaks more generally to the scant attention he pays to the politics of immigration policymaking.

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Nevertheless, Kaufmann is hardly oblivious of the need to rethink how we make immigration

policy. He begins with a call for “an accommodation between the freely expressed preferences of cultural conservatives and liberals in which each tries to understand the other.” Not surprisingly, the arbiter of such accommodation would necessarily be the government. Yet curiously, he has in mind a rather technocratic process relying on “an evidence-based approach which takes all dimensions of inequality into account and favours ‘nudge’-style remedies.” “It would then fall to the government,” he elaborates, “to reach an open, transparent accommodation between competing forces.... The discussion over immigration rates should be no more controversial than the debate over tax rates”!

It boggles the mind to contemplate what Kaufmann means when he makes such a claim about such an obviously and inherently contentious issue. He does, however, highlight that he is assuming that the adulation of minority identities and the denigration of white majority identity characteristic of “asymmetrical multiculturalism” would be eliminated in favor of more even-handed treatment. And the result would be open bargaining among equals. More specifically, he proposes that immigration policy be based on a points system “to reconcile the interests of society’s cultural stakeholders” and “balance

the competing interests of its cultural constituencies, weighted by size.”

What is remarkable here is Kaufmann’s explicit acceptance of the legitimacy of “white interests” and the notion that “the desire to slow ethnic change is a legitimate expression of the ethnic majority’s cultural interest.” As he puts it: “Ideally, desires for cultural protection should be openly aired, in a respectful way, by members of majority groups who identify strongly with their ethnicity, without drawing the charge of racism.”

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Yet how exactly his technocratic ideal comports with the messy realities of intergroup cultural comparison and competition remains disturbingly unclear. What is clear, at least to this observer, is that while Hispanics and Asians might find such a regime worth considering, African Americans almost certainly would not. Not for a moment do I envision them ceding to other groups in America, especially recently arrived immigrants, something equal to their claims on the political community. Not without justification would African Americans feel threatened and indeed left behind by having their “cultural interests”—not to mention their

economic and political interests—placed on a par with newcomers who never experienced the depredations of slavery, Jim Crow, and the unresolved legacy of that history.

I can only surmise that the wide scope of Kaufmann's analysis, which includes not only the U.S. but Canada, the U.K., and western Europe, contributed to his neglect of the unique and enduring implications of "the first new nation" having accommodated slavery, however ambivalently. Another problem is the sheer scope and ambitiousness of this 600-page volume, overflowing with survey data, statistics, and charts that, the reader is reminded, are further elaborated on at the author's website. Even the attentive reader can get lost in the details. Then, too, tighter editing might have saved the author from frequent bloopers—including his assertions that John Dewey was "[o]riginally a Congregationalist minister," that Nathan Glazer rejected multiculturalism in *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (1997), that the writer Michael Lind was an editor at the *Public Interest*, and that "the last [American] troops didn't leave Afghanistan until 2014."

But these must be considered relatively minor flaws in an ambitious, admirable, and largely successful effort to reorient a debate that has

roiled politics not only in America but in other Western democracies. And that, as Eric Kaufmann rightly insists, will continue to do so in the coming decades.

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