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Review of Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism

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some independence by defining what they will and will not do (not windows); by asserting some autonomy in this way, women are able to cope with the social stigma associated with cleaning up others' personal dirt. By explicitly comparing the experience of nannies with cleaners, however (cleaners felt they were more autonomous in spite of their lower education and pay), Gregson and Lowe were able to examine what specific characteristics of both jobs and workers foster autonomy. For example, (1) cleaning, because it can be put off, offers more flexibility than caring for children—cleaners in the British study took days off when they needed or wanted them; (2) working for multiple employers gave women more freedom to risk being fired because they were not wholly dependent on one employer; and (3) cleaners, most often married women, usually had another source of family income. By interviewing employers as well as employees, Gregson and Lowe were also able to illustrate differences in how women employers and their domestic workers defined their relationship: For example, only employers, not their employees, describe the other as "like family."

The two books complement each other well, affording two distinct historical-cultural and historical perspectives on domestic work. Dill's life histories span a large part of the twentieth century, and record a work experience that was common among older African American women, but is (fortunately) fast disappearing—the experience of living for decades in a white household, and often raising white children in what Dill calls a "bizarre kinship." Gregson and Lowe's book details contemporary forms of domestic work, and it points to some of the ways paid domestic work appears to be changing even in the United States; in many neighborhoods the African American or Latina maid has been replaced by a cleaning team (often white) that descends on empty suburban houses for a brief whirlwind of activity before reloading its "Mighty Maids" or "Maid to Order" van and moving on. This new form of paid domestic labor potentially frees domestic workers from a dependent, personal, and hidden relationship with their employers, and is more likely to be open to labor organization. For these reasons, it may offer the best hope of autonomy and personal dignity for women who do others' dirty work.

If cleaning has the potential to become more public, and thus more amenable to regulation and worker protection, nanying, as Gregson and Lowe point out, is a private and personalistic solution to what are public problems—the care of our children and the working conditions of their caretakers. These private solutions threaten neither class nor gender hierarchies.


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David Hollinger, an intellectual historian, has written an ambitious work on U.S. race relations that deserves wide attention. Postethnic America challenges the dominant role of race in U.S. society, especially the rigidity and the essentialism of an "ethno-racial pentagon" that demands individuals to submit to one of the five categories (African American, Asian American, Euro-American, Indigenous, and Latino) for the purpose of group membership, with profound results for individual identity and social life. He laments the ethno-racial pentagon for stripping individuals of their complexity, for reducing American politics to protonationalism, and for undermining the capacity of Americans to appreciate, or even think about, our common destiny. In its place, Hollinger calls for the forging of a new kind of American nationality, built on the cosmopolitan and inclusive impulses of the American democratic tradition, and, simultaneously, on the recognition that racial prejudice has played a central role in the making of American society (including the recognition that racially based affirmative action is still needed to redress past injustices). To this project Hollinger brings an expansive and interdisciplinary reading list and a clear moral vision of what it means to be American.

The main strength of Postethnic America is Hollinger's ability to weave a metanarrative that charts the conflicted and divided nature
of intellectual and political discourses about the significance of primordial ties (mostly race, ethnicity, and religion) and their appropriate role in shaping American life. In charting this history, Hollinger shows how race has occupied epistemological and political positions that have been qualitatively different from other primordial ties, especially ethnicity. That difference stems from the involuntary nature of racial membership and the intensity of the political, economic, cultural significance it has for individuals: Racial minorities do not have a "racial option" that resembles the "ethnic option" exercised by whites (Mary Waters, *Ethnic Option*. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990]). Hollinger is also able to show the uniqueness of U.S. racial formation, where a hierarchical system of power and a tight control of racial boundaries (hypodescent, one-drop rule) have resulted in a system of inequality that is more rigid and ascriptive than that of most other multiracial societies; in the United States, it does not make "common sense" for Alex Haley to trace his roots back to Ireland instead of Africa. Altogether, Hollinger's appreciation of the significance of race, his support of affirmative action, and his theoretical distinction between race and ethnicity make him an unusual critic of multiculturalism in a climate where most foes of multiculturalism dismiss the significance of race or the legitimacy of racial based policies.

Given his positions and arguments, it is curious that Hollinger has packaged his book as one that attacks multiculturalism. It is clear from *Postethnic America* that multiculturalists are not the ones who drove the United States to the ethno-racial pentagon. Indeed, Hollinger points out that multiculturalism was an insurgent movement that came in response to the assimilationist and exclusionist movements that relied precisely on racial membership to subjugate racial minorities. In addition, Hollinger concedes that it is not the multiculturalists who pose the greatest threat to a cosmopolitan future in America, but the "Far Right," who are bent on imposing on all Americans their own narrow and particular racialized, gendered, and classed vision of America. Hollinger's decision to place multiculturalism at the center of his critique of American society is especially unfortunate since his book intensifies, rather than ameliorates, the current popular discourse that has viciously mauled multiculturalism, while leaving the more politically powerful and ominous Far Right unscathed. A more conceptually troubling aspect of *Postethnic America* is Hollinger's assumption that there exists a coherent and unified intellectual position called "multiculturalism," whose members are committed to the ethno-racial pentagon for organizing American civic life. However, his reading of multiculturalism is shallow: He has very little appreciation of the diversity of viewpoints within the multiculturalists' debate. Had he more closely examined that debate, he would have found that many of his concerns about the parochial nature of American racial politics, or the lack of cosmopolitan spirit in American life, are shared by a great many multiculturalists, including Cornel West and Ronald Takaki, whose message and methods resemble Hollinger's. Perhaps when all the bashing finally kills multiculturalism and we are all bound by the *Contract with America*, Hollinger and other nonconservative critics of multiculturalism, including Todd Gitlin and Richard Rorty, will long for the finer days of political correctness.


**Alford A. Young Jr.**

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In *Facing Up to the American Dream*, Jennifer L. Hochschild attempts to consolidate the findings of over 40 years of survey research on the differences in perceptions of mobility opportunities that blacks and whites maintain about themselves and about each other. Her quest is to explain why black and white Americans agree on the basic ideational content of the American Dream, but differ in their views on the possibilities for blacks and whites to achieve it. As a part of her approach toward interpreting and explaining these differences, Hochschild articulates what she believes are the four tenets of the American Dream: 1) that everyone can pursue the American Dream; 2) that every-