

Puritans' Progress

Lawrence Mead and the Question of American Culture

Peter Skerry

Culture is too important to be left to the literati. But what do we mean by culture? Don't ask me, I'm a political scientist.

For a generation or more this has been social scientists' de facto answer to that question, though voiced less from modesty than expedience, risk aversion, and even cowardice. Ever since the controversy over *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, a 1965 report in which Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then assistant secretary of labor, attempted to draw attention to the developing problem of the female-headed black family, social scientists—with some notable exceptions—have steered clear of “cultural variables.”

But to leave it at that is too easy. It even risks sharing in the facile condescension in which literati all too readily indulge when talking about social science. And it may well be that these two broad fields of inquiry, the humanities and the social sciences, have fundamentally divergent understandings of culture. In any event, understanding the cultural dimension of social and political affairs is more important today than ever, especially when the very nature of the nation-state has come under scrutiny from diverse points along the political spectrum. Once-dominant notions of civic nationalism positing an American national identity rooted in abstract principles of liberty, equality, and individual rights have in recent years been challenged by various perspectives advancing more organic notions of nationhood, rooted in specific religious values, language, geography, and history as well as political principles and ideals. While much of this resurgence or rethinking of national identity has been occurring among

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Right: Engraving of Puritans; World History Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.



conservatives, there have been admirable efforts by liberals—notably by Israeli political theorist Yael Tamir in her 2019 book *Why Nationalism?*¹

Another political scientist who has stepped boldly into this arena is Lawrence Mead, a longtime professor of politics and public policy at New York University. Mead is not your average political scientist. Although not an international academic superstar like Francis Fukuyama, or even one who has wrapped an arresting finding in a clever metaphor like “bowling alone” and ridden it to fame and fortune, like Robert Putnam, he is hardly an obscure academic. Indeed, his research and writing have had a significant impact on US social policy. His 1985 book *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship*, in which he argued that the American welfare state is not too generous (or, for that matter, too stingy), but insufficiently demanding of its beneficiaries, greatly shaped the outcome of the welfare policy debates of the late 1980s and the 1990s.² At the same time, Mead is no narrow technocrat, nor even a particularly quantitative analyst. A student and protégé of Samuel Huntington and Henry Kissinger, he drew on his early concentration in foreign policy in his work as a speechwriter for the latter.

So when a scholar of Mead’s stature addresses America’s place in the global order in an era recently marked by Trumpian hypernationalism, his thoughts merit attention. All the more so since the book containing those thoughts, *Burdens of Freedom: Cultural Difference and American Power*, focuses on the domestic sources of our strengths and weaknesses, with the impact of immigration on contemporary America at the center of its analysis. Still more striking is that while he rejects “the scathing terms” in which Donald Trump “has spoken of the poor, minorities, immigrants, and failed states,” Mead insists that “[Trump’s] subtext is sound—the need to deal more realistically with our challenges. Our chief problems now arise from cultural difference rather than ideological conflict.”³

As Mead acknowledges in the introduction to *Burdens of Freedom*, “This book was difficult to fund and publish because it flouts the academic consensus against culture.” Indeed, he does not merely emphasize the importance of culture as a relevant factor in analyzing economic, political, and social outcomes. More controversially, he argues for the virtues of Anglo-American individualist values. Perhaps to account for his belief in those values, Mead volunteers, without elaborating, that he comes “from a Puritan family in America,” although he rather curiously and subsequently adds that his great-grandfather was of Cuban origin.⁴

However Mead presents himself, what emerges most clearly is his intellectual provenance in early-twentieth-century Progressivism. Indeed, with his frequent invocations of Hegel, his defense of the administrative state, his silence on the aggrandized role of the contemporary judiciary, and his criticism of the framers, Mead can be fairly characterized as a neo-Progressive.

American Values at Home and Abroad

Mead maintains that America’s global power and prestige rest not so much on a political regime premised on individual rights and limited government but on our culture of “moralistic individualism.” Emphasizing the dissenting Protestantism of the founders, he highlights the importance we continue to place on assuming responsibility for our individual lives. Whereas much of the world’s people live from “the outside in,” passively and fatalistically accepting what some external authority imposes on them, those of us in the West generally—but especially in America—live “from the inside out,”

self-consciously taking on our lives as our own individual projects. This suggests that, contrary to what Americans typically believe, our way of life is characterized not by unlimited freedom but by the burdens of assuming responsibility for what each individual chooses to do with that freedom.

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transmute freedom into obligation.*

Our society, by this reading, is premised on individuals internalizing agreed-upon norms and then interpreting them for themselves. As Mead sees it, our institutions transmute freedom into obligation. And while this culture was forged over the centuries in Western, Christian Europe, especially in Britain, he regards the United States as its last, embattled bastion.⁵

This perspective brings Mead perilously close to being arraigned on the frequently invoked charge of “blaming the victim.” To be sure, a few stalwart social scientists have ventured onto this terrain. Orlando Patterson comes most readily to mind, but so does William Julius Wilson. Both of them also happen to be African American.⁶ Lawrence Mead—just to be clear—is not.

In any event, Wilson cites evidence from his own research demonstrating how the negative attitudes of African American youth toward menial work in small retail businesses resulted in employers hiring more compliant and responsible young Latinos.⁷ Yet Mead strikingly fails to cite this work. He does highlight the undeniably low

high-school completion and college attendance rates of Hispanic youth, and attributes these to “a lot more than a lack of ‘human capital.’” Indeed, as Mead elaborates about Hispanics generally, “There is a fear to take leave of family, choose one’s direction in life, and compete for success. Even Hispanic students who reach college often feel ‘profoundly lonely’ there due to ‘separation from family, from home.’”⁸

He rejects the notion of Asian Americans as a “model minority.”

There is recent, highly relevant research to support this blunt and controversial assertion.⁹ Yet once again, Mead neglects to cite it. Nevertheless, elsewhere in *Burdens of Freedom* he elaborates on this same point with considerable—but hardly unqualified—insight, even empathy:

In America...the poor tend to shrink from a challenge rather than embracing it. New opportunities provoke anxiety rather than confidence. The disadvantaged tend to remember past defeats, to play it safe, to resist change. In this way, they can preserve what little security they have, rather than gambling it on some better future. That cautious worldview, although shaped by America, is also a legacy of the non-Western world.¹⁰

Mead’s take on Asian Americans is similarly incendiary, but again not without some basis in fact. He begins by rejecting the notion that they are a “model minority”:

Even successful Asian immigrants, like Hispanics, are less individualistic than the American norm. Like non-Westerners generally, they tend to adjust to the expectations around them. Their families expect them to succeed, and so they do. They succeed, however, within a pre-existing structure. In school and then college, they expect to be rewarded for repeating what teachers tell them. That is because rote learning is largely what education means in Asia... Asians in America typically do better in school than they do afterward. Many of them fear to step free of family and act or think for themselves, as mainstream American culture expects. Even second-generation Asian Americans tend to show these traits, because their parents still think in Asian terms. In an individualistic society, leaders are expected to ask questions, not just answer them. They must assert themselves, deal with unstructured problems, and take more risks than most Asians are comfortable doing.¹¹

Many will object to the tenor and substance of such characterizations of Hispanic and Asian values. Yet Mead is no cultural determinist. He acknowledges that Asians, Hispanics, and other immigrants from “non-Western cultures” can adapt successfully to this intensely individualist society—as indeed they are, judging by the performance in last year’s Democratic presidential primary debates of candidates like Julián Castro and perhaps especially Andrew Yang. But Mead’s point is that, on balance, the number of

non-Western immigrants arriving in America these days is overwhelming our capacity to absorb and properly assimilate them.

Given his provocative, even offensive perspective, it is worth noting how Mead quickly backpedals and equivocates about its implications. As he acknowledges early on, “All cultures have value,” and “*neither Western nor non-Western ways are superior to the other in any general sense*”¹² [italics in original]. And as he subsequently elaborates,

The emphasis in Western culture is strongly on individual and societal mastery of the outside world—so strongly that other values are slighted. One of these is simply the contemplation of reality for its own sake... that emphasis is strong in Asian culture.... Contemporary Western society, however, seeks principally to understand and manipulate reality in order to attain wealth and power.... The West is also relatively weaker in aesthetic sensibility than the non-West...especially in poorer countries, music and the other arts are more central to people’s lives. Life is more colorful than in the West, both literally and figuratively.¹³

Mead then pointedly concludes, “The West’s heavy emphasis on mastery leaves it less able to cope with tragedy—the things that cannot be mastered.”¹⁴

Yet for Mead, this is hardly where the matter rests. “Though all cultures are valuable,” he asserts, “not all are equally influential.” As he later amplifies, “A masterful culture must inevitably dominate a culture that has other priorities.” Indeed, as a foreign policy analyst, he emphasizes that “the struggle for primacy should be seen as a contest of cultures more than nations.” And to well-meaning, idealistic Americans inclined to think that “the only thing that oppressed peoples need is ‘freedom,’ American-style,” Mead counsels that “for countless millions who struggle just to survive...they must inevitably be ruled by others—or by chaos.”¹⁵

“Non-Western” Minorities?

While Mead’s primary focus here is on how such non-Western values are playing out in the United States, he has long been preoccupied with the continuing challenges facing large numbers of African Americans. Mindful of the ravages of slavery, Jim Crow, and migration to northern ghettos, he also highlights the gains made—amid and despite “sudden episodes of racist violence”—since the civil rights movement, attributing them in no small degree to blacks’ adaptation to America’s “individualist moralism.” As he observes, “When black Americans travel to Africa, they find they are far more individualist than the still largely traditional society their ancestors came from.” Yet he comes to the somewhat inexplicable conclusion that “the majority of black Americans...still display a passive and reactive temperament more typical of the non-Western world.”¹⁶

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Relegating the heritage of African Americans primarily to the non-Western world, Mead is at pains to praise their contributions to American culture: “The black impact on the arts, and especially on music, has been transformative,” he writes. “Without spirituals, jazz, gospel, and many other forms invented and developed by blacks, America simply would not be the paragon it is. Blacks also figure prominently in US politics, the media, the military, and college and professional sports.”¹⁷

In addition to being smarmy, Mead’s analysis suffers from even deeper flaws. Perhaps most troubling is his consignment of black Americans to the same problematic, non-Western cultural category as Hispanic immigrants:

The great fact about both blacks and Hispanics is that—unlike most other Americans—they *did not come here from Europe*. Thus, they came here *not as individualists but with the more cautious and collectivist mind-set of the non-Western world* [italics in original]. This heritage best explains the two great impediments to minorities’ progress in America—a relatively passive response to opportunity and an inability to maintain order in their own families and neighborhoods.¹⁸

Mead’s claim about the cultural basis of obstacles to minority mobility may have more merit than critics are prepared to acknowledge, but it exposes two underlying problems.

First, Mead minimizes the critical importance of slavery in understanding the continuing obstacles to African American advancement. Although he doesn’t ignore that history, or the difference between being transported here in chains and arriving voluntarily, he appears to contradict those critical distinctions by placing blacks and Hispanics in the same non-Western cultural category.

Second, Mead scants evidence strongly suggesting that African Americans and Hispanics are on different socioeconomic trajectories. It is true, as he points out, that “most Hispanic children are today born outside marriage.” Fifty-three percent of Hispanic births in 2015 were to unmarried women, compared to 29 percent of non-Hispanic white births. Yet as the data he presents demonstrate (but whose implications he persistently ignores), for blacks that rate was 70 percent.¹⁹

Mead goes on to cite similarly troubling incarceration rates, which in 2009 were 1,822 per 100,000 Hispanic males, compared to 708 per 100,000 white males. The comparable rate for black males is much higher than either of these: 4,749 per 100,000.²⁰ Yet once again, he insists on putting blacks and Hispanics in what he depicts as the same problematic, non-Western category. Moreover, Mead simply ignores data indicating the divergent paths blacks and Hispanics are following in contemporary America. For decades now, half of Hispanics in the United States have consistently identified themselves racially in the decennial census as “white,” even though ambiguity persists about the remainder who consistently opt to identify as “non-white.”²¹ But on the other side of the ledger—again ignored by Mead—is the evidence

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that Hispanics simply do not experience the same degree or kind of residential segregation as African Americans.²² Most tellingly, intermarriage between Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites is far more common than between blacks and non-Hispanic whites.²³

Mead acknowledges that many black Americans have made it into the middle class and even beyond. He also recognizes that unlike blacks, “Hispanic Americans...never were enslaved.” He nevertheless concludes, “They, like blacks, are a non-Western group that gained new opportunity from civil rights but has not always used it well.” Indeed, Hispanics are similar to “the majority of black Americans,” who exhibit “a passive and reactive temperament more typical of the non-Western world.”²⁴

Mead’s perspective, though not without some merit, is jarring, off-putting, and wide of the mark. Yet it echoes what liberals, progressives, and even some conservatives have grown accustomed to doing: considering blacks and Hispanics as similarly

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situated “people of color,” whose histories and continuing experiences of racial discrimination in America call for special recognition and remedies. While it would be foolish to deny that impoverished Hispanics—especially Mexicans in the agricultural regions of the pre-World War II Southwest—experienced deprivation and discrimination, they were never subjected to the systematic cruelties and degradations of chattel slavery and Jim Crow. Furthermore, the gains registered by the millions

of Hispanics who have arrived in the United States in the postwar era trace a trajectory markedly different from that of African Americans.

Then too, Mead is concerned to distinguish immigrants who came here in the great wave that culminated with the outbreak of World War I from Hispanics and Asians who have been arriving in recent decades. The former were of course from Europe and, according to Mead, partook of the individualist culture fostered by Western Christianity. So while the latter may “have enriched America,” they are “non-Western” and have consequently “made our society less individualist.”²⁵ As he concludes,

There is thus a danger that America could come to resemble Mexico or Brazil, in which non-Western peoples greatly outnumber those from a European formation. Like those nations, the United States would still be an important country, with a significant culture, but it would no longer display the strong dynamic and civic qualities that once empowered it to lead the world. It could still show those strengths only if the non-Western intake were slowed enough so that more of the newcomers could become individualist themselves. The key to successful multiculturalism is assimilation.²⁶

Contrasting the present with the past, Mead argues that “today, it is more likely than ever in history that people will flock here simply to escape the ‘sea of pain,’ not because they otherwise choose to become American.” Earlier immigrants coming from Europe were “already individualist in outlook, so most hit the ground running. Most of today’s

immigrants, however, are not individualists coming in.” And because the latter come from “largely passive and deferential societies,” they must “take on a new and demanding psychology, where they accept far more responsibility for their lives.” As a result, “their assimilation has been much more troubled.”²⁷

Mead does not conclude that we cannot assimilate such immigrants. Yet he does argue that the “process is lengthy and not automatic” and “requires that immigration numbers be limited enough so that assimilation can occur and the society take other steps to promote it.”²⁸

Mead’s policy recommendation here is not unreasonable. Yet his analysis of the motives and dynamics driving immigrants today, compared with those earlier in our history, is dubious.

It certainly is the case that many immigrants today arrive not necessarily intending to settle permanently and “become Americans,” much less citizens. Undocumented immigrants in particular tend to be what economists call “target earners,” who arrive with specific savings goals in mind and plan to return home once these are reached.

Many, however, end up remaining here, even while dreams of returning home often linger and ambivalence about staying sets in, particularly if home is relatively nearby, in Mexico or Central America. One outcome is low rates of naturalization. Another is an ethos of indecision and uncertainty that gets passed on to the next generation, whose future is nevertheless almost certainly in the United States.

While Mead’s take on *contemporary* immigrants is largely accurate, much the same could be said about immigrants a century ago, whom Mead so confidently declares to have been proactive individualists who assumed responsibility for themselves and their families and “chose to become American.”²⁹ In his haste to differentiate today’s influx from yesterday’s, Mead ignores the overwhelming evidence that those European immigrants arrived here with considerable ambivalence and misgivings. Large numbers eventually returned home, which is why they were disparagingly called “birds of passage.”³⁰ And as steamship travel made the transatlantic journey cheaper and quicker, larger numbers of immigrants—from Italy, Greece, and elsewhere in Southern Europe—returned home.³¹

Others came out of desperation, often fleeing for their lives. These are “the huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” as celebrated in Emma Lazarus’s sonnet. The poet specifically had in mind East European Jews fleeing tsarist oppression. But others were in comparable straits. Today we would refer to these as refugees. Yet whatever we call them and however much contemporary attitudes and policies toward them may be shifting, such populations have long been understood to come here out of desperation, not according to some rationally devised, methodically implemented life plan. Yes, many refugees to these shores have been sophisticated entrepreneurs and highly educated professionals who have contributed greatly to American life. Others have been of humble origins and less impressive accomplishments. The point is that, regardless of their attributes, their “choice” to become Americans was often a forced one that did not obviously reflect their initial preferences and plans. They too contradict Mead’s romanticized view of those who arrived here from Europe in the past.

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Immigrant workers in a California strawberry field.

Immigration and Religion

Some of Mead’s takes on earlier generations of European immigrants are not merely wrong-headed but surprising. One is his extraordinarily benign view of the Roman Catholicism those immigrants brought with them. Understandably lamenting the religious intolerance that Catholics as well as Jews encountered here, he then says, “Although first seen as a threat to Protestant America, the Catholic church that came to the country with Irish and Italian immigrants proved to be a strong force for their integration.”³²

For a self-described “Puritan” who highlights the critical role of dissenting Protestantism in the development of the individualist culture he identifies as the essence of American primacy, this is a remarkable assertion. After all, throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Rome’s hostility to republican government was literally an article of faith. Monsignor John A. Ryan was the most liberal American Catholic clergyman of his era. For his sins, he was mockingly dubbed “the Right Reverend New Dealer” by a prominent adversary, the fascist sympathizer Father Charles Coughlin.³³ Nevertheless, until his death in 1945, Ryan maintained his long-held position that Catholicism should ideally be “the religion of the state.”³⁴

As for the Catholic Church promoting the integration of the faithful into the American mainstream, Mead is again wide of the mark. Well into the post-World

War II era, Catholics were discouraged from participating in the YM/YWCA, which was warily regarded as a hostile Protestant evangelical organization intent on making converts, as indeed it had been for much of its history.³⁵ The resulting “Catholic separatism” and self-imposed “Catholic ghetto” were being by the late 1940s and early 1950s decried by liberal Catholics associated with the journal *Commonweal*.³⁶ In that same period, the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray was silenced by Rome for his writings advocating freedom of religious conscience, which the Catholic Church did not actually embrace until the closing sessions of the reformist Second Vatican Council in 1965.³⁷ In other words, in 1960 one did not have to be a bigot to have reservations about electing a Catholic president.

Bungling another aspect of immigrant religion, Mead overlooks the fact that significant numbers of Latin Americans have been leaving the Catholicism of their upbringing and converting to evangelical Protestantism. This is occurring in their countries of origin as well as in the United States, where the Pew Research Center made an unprecedented finding in 2019: that less than a majority of Hispanics, 47 percent, identified as Catholic.³⁸ Similar if less dramatic developments are evident among Asian Americans. Ironically, even though these trends support Mead’s insistence on the importance of culture to understanding immigrant adaptation, and point to the appeal of Protestant individualism, he pays them no attention.³⁹

Mead’s argument goes further astray in its insistence that contemporary immigrants from Asia and especially Latin America exhibit fundamentally different cultural traits from those of European immigrants of generations ago. He ignores considerable evidence that Italian immigrants from those earlier decades, especially those from Southern Italy, have much in common with today’s Hispanic, especially Mexican, immigrants. Not unlike young Mexican Americans, Italian American youth had a school dropout problem. Italian immigrant families also exhibited weak ties to the Catholic Church and other mediating institutions. In both instances, such patterns reflect excessively strong family bonds that hinder individual initiative, attachment to civic institutions, and overall integration—a dynamic that is rightfully at the heart of Mead’s concerns. Historical comparisons are fraught with complications, of course, but Mead completely ignores research demonstrating the overall similarity of these two immigrant profiles, work that is aptly summed up in the title of historian Joel Perlmann’s book *Italians Then, Mexicans Now*.⁴⁰

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Acceptance of Diverse Lifestyles

None of this is to suggest that immigrants today, especially the unskilled, do not pose a range of serious challenges. Nor is Mead’s emphasis on culture misplaced, though structural economic, social, and political problems also loom. Yet his insistence on how much the culture of contemporary immigrants differs from that of their predecessors is

unpersuasive. Among other considerations, he ignores how the mainstream *American* values to which immigrants today must adapt have also changed—and in troubling ways.

Mead's understanding of contemporary American culture is confused, or at least confusing. At one point he observes that "the Puritan mind-set survives in the strong work ethic, the demanding public ethics, the strict sense of personal responsibility." He even remarks on "the somewhat prudish social attitudes of Americans today."⁴¹ Prudish? One can only wonder if Mead has watched cable television lately.

Less puzzling and more noteworthy are Mead's overall assessment and apparent approval of contemporary America's "acceptance of diverse lifestyles." He highlights the Supreme Court's legitimation of same-sex marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges* as well as the legalization of marijuana in various jurisdictions. In that vein, he dismisses Sayyid Qutb's revulsion "at what seemed to him the moral squalor of American life," when the Islamist intellectual visited here in the late 1940s. Mead then paraphrases Tocqueville to the effect that our "superficial indulgences...are undergirded by a formidable institutional system." In a similarly smug tone, he goes

on to comment on Arabs and Muslims today who "are offended and disoriented by *what seems to them* [emphasis added] the West's permissive society."⁴²

What's missing here is any acknowledgment of the cultural change America has experienced since Qutb's visit. The Islamist's negative response

to what he witnessed then—at a dance held by a church in Greeley, Colorado—*was* overwrought and extreme.⁴³ But in the intervening seventy years, American mores have changed in dramatically visible ways, in some instances for the better and in others for the worse. But putting all of these on the same plane and reducing them to "superficial indulgences" is obtuse. This is certainly not how many Americans, not just a few backwoods fundamentalists or unemployed machinists, regard these changes. To many they reek of self-indulgence, if not decadence. Yet, again, all this escapes Mead's notice.

Given Mead's concern with the maintenance of American primacy, it is striking that he is also oblivious to how contemporary American mores are being rejected in precisely those parts of the world whose cultures diverge from ours, cultures from which come many of the immigrants whom he fears we cannot assimilate. Resorting to clichés about the global appeal of American music and Hollywood films, he seems to be stuck in a Cold War frame of reference that ignores how twenty-first-century Americans are regarded with curiosity and suspicion for what millions regard as our indifference or even hostility to family and our obsession with sex and drugs.⁴⁴

For his own part, Mead approves of the legalization of marijuana, citing it as evidence of our "acceptance of diverse lifestyles."⁴⁵ Yet when he later highlights Mexico and Central America as places "where endemic drug violence reigns," he fails to connect such violence to the demand for drugs—and not just marijuana—here in the United States. Acknowledging our drug abuse problems, he nevertheless attributes them to the poor and disorganized, never to the more affluent and successful. "Many lower-income Americans struggle with the burdens of freedom," he writes. "They are becoming less individualist, and that is the chief threat to continued American primacy."

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Mead concludes that America's social problems "are severe only among those at low incomes."⁴⁶

Moralists and Meritocrats

Drug abuse, obesity, births outside of marriage, family dissolution, and detachment from the labor force are indeed more prevalent among the less educated and low earners. The consequences for them are also more enduring. Yet Mead conveniently sidesteps the degree of responsibility the educated and more affluent bear for many of the problems besetting their fellow Americans. Acknowledging that we in the United States have moved in the direction of granting individuals more discretion, choice, and autonomy in our private lives, he neglects to say that much of the credit, or blame, for such reforms lies with those well-educated, affluent "moralistic individualists," who have demanded them on the basis not only of their own preferences and predilections but of their understanding of what is best for others. Yet those changes have not typically benefited those who have experienced "a loss of the self-command that formerly empowered Americans to advance themselves."⁴⁷ Mead cannot bring himself to acknowledge that reform advocates have been oblivious to the negative impact of their efforts on fellow US residents who share neither their opportunities and resources nor their perspective on life.

Mead at least recognizes one shortcoming of our moralistic individualist culture and the striving meritocrats who assume its burdens and reap its rewards: "Individualism," he observes, "leads people to pursue their own inner goals, while moralism motivates them to find shortcomings in the world as it is." Such moralism, he notes, is nowhere more evident than in matters concerning race and immigration: "Our leaders, moralistic to a fault, sometimes suggest that we must atone for our affluence and past racism by throwing our borders open to the world." Mead attempts to set such elites straight: "Until the recent era, it was always assumed that immigrants should embrace the burdens of freedom. We must return to that tradition."⁴⁸

Although hardly an outright restrictionist, Mead is preoccupied with the daunting cultural challenges posed by today's arrivals and argues for reductions in the overall number who are admitted. Yet he also insists on the importance of more energetic efforts to assimilate these newcomers. What Mead fails to adequately address, however, is that contemporary elites have substantially abandoned the notion that assimilation is a legitimate or achievable objective. He tends, rather, to place responsibility for our challenges exclusively on immigrants, and virtually none on those of us who tolerate or, perhaps more to the point, benefit—whether materially, psychologically, or politically—from the seemingly irresolvable challenges posed by our immigration policy.

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Mead regards the presence of eleven million undocumented residents as a challenge to our civic culture, attributing it largely to Hispanics who regard the possession of the appropriate visas and work permits as “a matter only of ‘papers,’ a detail,” an indifference derived, he asserts, from their dealings with corrupt and feckless government bureaucracies in their native countries. Mead does go on to make the entirely reasonable case for full implementation of E-Verify, a computerized system set up by the federal government to determine the validity of Social Security numbers that workers provide to their employers. Acknowledging that “the main resistance to this solution comes from businesses seeking low-skilled labor,” Mead nevertheless makes it clear that his objective is to “prevent the undocumented from getting legal jobs,” and thereby “press most of them to leave the country—without deportation.”⁴⁹

Stunningly, Mead is utterly silent about the millions of American employers who clearly regard their workers’ possession of the proper papers as a mere “detail”! More to the point, such employers are apparently not to be held responsible for their illegal actions. And the “only” penalty to be imposed on the undocumented—many of whom have raised children who, having been born here, are American citizens—is to be encouraged to leave. In essence, this is the obtuse and ham-handed proposal of “self-deportation” advocated by 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

As I write these words, the United States and the world continue to grapple with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The issues raised by Mead and others, myself included, have percolated through our policy debates for half a century or more. They may now appear quaint and obviated by these events. They are not. After all, the pandemic and our responses to it reflect different facets of the same technological, political, and cultural challenges posed by globalization that we have already been failing to confront.

Of these, cultural differences are undoubtedly the hardest to grasp and the most politically charged. For *culture* is not some readily defined set of congruent values, ideas, or even practices, but a dynamic agglomeration of typically conflicting desiderata constantly shifting and changing in response to societal imperatives. As the anthropologist Lloyd Fallers once put it,

Both “society” and “culture” are abstractions from the same phenomenon—social action.... But the requirements of cultural consistency and of functional integration are somewhat different. Putting one’s thoughts in order and putting one’s affairs in order are rather different activities for either a person or a community. They proceed along different lines, but tend to react upon one another so as to produce not a one-to-one matching of ideas and social relations, but rather a continuing process of mutual adjustment and challenge.⁵⁰

All the more unfortunate, then, that an analyst of Lawrence Mead’s talents has offered up such a tantalizing but decidedly disappointing effort.

Notes

- ¹ Yael Tamir, *Why Nationalism?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).
- ² Lawrence M. Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1986).
- ³ Lawrence M. Mead, *Burdens of Freedom: Cultural Difference and American Power* (New York, NY: Encounter Books, 2019), 66.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, xi, notes 43, 307, 44, 326.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 73, 231, 188.
- ⁶ See Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Washington, DC: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1998), and Orlando Patterson, ed., *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); see also William Julius Wilson, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2009).
- ⁷ William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1996), 140–145.
- ⁸ Mead, *Burdens of Freedom*, 239.
- ⁹ See, e.g., Matthew Desmond and Ruth N. Lopez-Turley, “The Role of Familism in Explaining the Hispanic-White College Application Gap,” *Social Problems* 56, no. 2 (May 2009): 311–34.
- ¹⁰ Mead, *Burdens of Freedom*, 217.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 233.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 70, 11.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 87–88.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26, 94, 12, 178.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 215, 216.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 225–26.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 238, 211.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 211–12.
- ²¹ Richard Alba, *Blurring the Color Line: The New Chance for a More Integrated America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 38.
- ²² William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 177–82.
- ²³ Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, *The Diversity Paradox: Immigration and the Color Line in Twenty-First Century America* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010), 83–100.
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- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 237, 230.
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- ³⁰ Michael J. Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
- ³¹ Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *Global Immigration and the World Economy: Two Centuries of Policy and Performance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 77–80.
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- ³³ Francis L. Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer: John A. Ryan* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1963).
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