

GLOBALIZATION IN THE FLESH

by Michael Ventura

April 25, 2008

Watch documentary footage of the 1960 Democratic Convention that nominated John F. Kennedy – remembering that many in 1960 were troubled deeply that the Oval Office could be the prize of an upstart, rich, Catholic Irish-American. Scan the 1960 convention floor: there are no women. Well, I didn't use a magnifying glass, there might be half a dozen, so amend that to read: there are *nearly* no women, and certainly no women with speaking parts (as Hollywood would say). The California and New York delegations may have harbored the odd Chinese- or Japanese-American, and the rare Jew (also with no speaking parts); Harlem's Rep. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was one of the few African-Americans with a voice. But overall, the 1960 Democratic Convention was overwhelmingly WASP.

The nomination and election of John F. Kennedy was, at the time, rightly considered a significant expansion of the American identity. Still, in 1960, no one dreamed they'd live to see an African-American or a woman nominated for the presidency. There were no automated phone menus back then, but if there had been, no one would have dreamed they'd have to push 1 to hear the message in English or that labels in supermarkets would be in English and Spanish. What many did dream was that by the year 2000 – a distant, magical realm – American problems like racism, poverty, and perhaps even war would be things of the past. No one imagined that those problems would mix and multiply into a dizzying complexity beyond the range of 1960s modes of thought.

In 1960, the American identity was embodied by the likes of John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe, Jimmy Stewart and Katherine Hepburn. The America that counted traced its roots to northern, Protestant Europe (except for those wild Irish). WASPS were *American*. Everyone else had to prove their credentials. We saw who counted in the TV commercials of the era: If you sold anything on TV, your salespeople looked 100% WASP. According to Madison Avenue, and many others, everyone who wasn't WASP must certainly want to be.

Since the 1920s, non-WASP immigration had been managed by severe quotas. Asians, as well as Southern and Eastern Europeans, were no longer welcomed with open arms. In New York City, many of my generation were the children and grandchildren of immigrants. The city's non-WASP population was mostly Italian, Jewish, and Puerto Rican. Also among the non-WASPs were African-Americans – many of whom, had grandparents who'd been born into slavery – and the well-established Irish. As a kid, I considered myself white, but if I and my little brothers, with our Sicilian olive skin, went to the Museum of Natural History in Manhattan, we were considered “spics” – a word we'd thought applied only to brown-skinned, Spanish-accented Puerto Ricans (whom we called “PRs”). A street kid knew that identity depended on what street you walked – in your own neighborhood, you were a normal American; everywhere else, you were not quite.

Anyway, it was clear who the real Americans were – they looked like people in the movies and on TV, who, with rare exceptions like Sidney Poitier and Anthony Quinn, almost all looked WASP. Jews were more frequent on TV, where they were allowed so long as they were funny. Jews who were serious actors had to change their names – like

Jacob Julius Garfinkle, whose screen name was John Garfield. It was okay for ballplayers and boxers to have Italian names, but Italian singers took WASP surnames: Dean Martin and Tony Bennett. Frank Sinatra was a hero in every Italian and Sicilian household in part because he kept the pretty vowels of his family name.

The unspoken but widely held assumption of immigrants, their families, and WASP-Americans alike was that we non-WASPs weren't supposed to change America; America was supposed to change us. We were supposed to live up to the WASP ideal.

Through the tumultuous changes of the Sixties and Seventies, the prevalent assumptions about ethnic assimilation proved surprisingly sturdy. African-Americans made progress (of a kind); anti-Semitism became much less prevalent (or had to hide); even Italians became respectable. By the end of the Seventies, the identity of women, African-Americans, and even gays had changed drastically, but the WASP ideal still ruled. In the Eighties, with immigration restrictions all but gone, the American identity began to be transformed. By the time we reached that once magical realm, "the year 2000," the WASP ideal was decidedly uncool and everything to do with the concept of "American identity" had gone so completely haywire as to become indecipherable. Most of us are more confused about our national identity now than seemed possible half a century ago.

Where are we going? What is the America to come?

No one dare say for certain, but there are indicators. I suspect it'll look something like this:

A friend teaches third grade in a fairly affluent, liberal private school in the San Fernando Valley. Not a decade ago, this school was overwhelmingly white, mostly of the WASP variety, with only a handful of Asian-, African- and Hispanic-Americans in a student body numbering about 350 from kindergarten through 12th grade. Knowing my interest in such matters, this friend recently sent me an ethnicity breakdown of her 25 third-graders: Irish-Iraqi, Puerto Rican- Mexican, WASP-Japanese, Sicilian-WASP, WASP-Native American, Peruvian-Guatemalan, WASP, Jewish-WASP, Mexican-WASP, Jewish, WASP, Nigerian-WASP, Irish, Jewish, Scots, Armenian, Mexican-WASP, Korean-Chinese, WASP-Jewish, Irish-English, WASP-Filipino, Swedish, Chinese, Columbian-Irish, Jamaican-Jewish – all affluent little American citizens. By the standards of 1960, when neither Jews nor Southern Europeans were considered really white, the white/non-white ratio in that class is 6-white-to-19-non-white; by today's standards, the class is 11 white and 14 non-white (or non-Euro, if you prefer). Even more tellingly, only 9 (out of the 25) aren't mixtures of some kind.

If the Mexican-WASP grows up to marry the Korean-Chinese or if the Irish-Iraqi grows up to marry the Jamaican-Jew, and if (as is certain) many of their offspring marry likewise – well, in the America to come, the roots of any one family are likely to span the world and include a dizzying number of races, ethnicities, and traditions, plus every religion! In two or three generations, the purely "white" or Euro-rooted American will be the rare exception where once they were the rule and where once they ruled.

That's the future, our future, and it's a future our present "multicultural" and "melting pot" platitudes won't suffice to grasp. In the multi-multiethnic family, the effort to "know thyself" and be true to that self will involve many more variables than anyone in 1960 could have dreamed. The identity-parameters of the Jamaican-Jewish-Irish-Iranian married to the Chinese-Lakota-African-Hispanic, with their two Jamaican-Jewish-Irish-

Iranian-Chinese-Lakota-African-Hispanic children, will be,... different. The globally-referenced society they will inhabit will be utterly different from Euro-American assumptions that once meant “America.”

Globalization isn't only something that's happening to our economy. In one more generation, and certainly in two generations, it will be clear that globalization is happening to *us* – to our bodies, our families, our psyches.

In 1950 James Baldwin wrote a stunning, visionary prophecy: “The world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.” But even Baldwin couldn't grasp, in the context of his time, the enormity of what he was saying. He spoke of African-Americans standing equal to Euro-Americans. The Jamaican-Jewish-Irish-Iranian-Chinese-Lakota-African-Hispanic person of, say, 2040, whose child will add two or five or eight new ethnic hyphens to the line – to a point where few will be able to remember how many and how varied are the roots they embody – will of necessity think in a range unimaginable to us. Each will contain, literally, in their skins and spirits, the heritage of the entire world. In Western countries, and then elsewhere, the so-called “pure” ethnicities will be more and more rare, and a different consciousness of what it means to be human may emerge.

I say “may,” because our flaws are terrible and stubborn, and one never knows. But a person whose very flesh spans all of history and geography may, just may, develop a consciousness that does the same.

A version of this piece will appear in the May/June issue of Psychotherapy Networker.

Copyright by Michael Ventura, 2008