

The Gains and Pains of Assimilation: Discussion Review

Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez. An Autobiography. Boston: David R. Godine, 1982. 195 pp. \$13.95.

"Once upon a time, I was a 'socially disadvantaged' child. An enchantedly happy child. Mine was a childhood of intense family closeness. And extreme public alienation.

"Thirty years later I write this book as a middle-class American man. Assimilated."

Richard Rodriguez's memoir is not just autobiography. It is also an attack on bilingual education and affirmative action, and has already aroused controversy as a result. But Rodriguez's opposition to these programs grows out of deeper and broader concerns: what it means to be an American, the nature of assimilation, the role of language in personal identity, and the distinction between our public and private selves.

Rodriguez is the American-born son of Mexican immigrants. He was educated, strictly and well, by the nuns of the Irish Catholic parochial schools of Sacramento, California. He was by his own account the too-good student: passive, eager to please, uncritically devouring the classics his teachers would mention so that he could check them off his list. College at Stanford, graduate school at Berkeley and Columbia, a dissertation in English Renaissance literature. (Assimilated: not Spanish or Latin American literature, not something more "relevant" to his "situation," like history or sociology.)

In many ways Rodriguez's is the typical child-of-immigrants-makes-good story. His parents remained foreign, essentially Mexican, but worked hard and ambitiously for their children's American success. "Your parents must be very proud of you," people said to him when he began to excel in school. But like many children of immigrants, he was not proud of them; he felt shame at their "alienness," their unease in American society, their lack of education. In time, however (the realization dawning when, lonely in the British Museum, he was writing his dissertation), he came to long for the world that he, now an American, had left behind.

But Rodriguez's longing to be part again of his parents' world is not, he says, the search (recently become familiar) for his exotic ethnic roots. "Aztec ruins hold no special interest for me. I do not search Mexican graveyards for ties to unnamable ancestors." What moves him is, rather, a more universal urge to recapture the intimacy remembered (or so it seems) from childhood. Rodriguez's longing is the more intense because

Spanish, the language of his childhood, so obviously differs from the English of his schooling, his adulthood, and his public self. But the difference, he thinks, is more one of degree than of kind. "Intimacy is not created by a particular language; it is created by intimates . . . It is not possible for a child—any child—ever to use his family's language in school." "Intimacy cannot be held" by refusing to give up one's first language, because finally intimacy has little to do with language—more to do with sound than with sense.

Does Rodriguez think, then, that supporters of bilingual education are vainly in search of lost intimacy? He doesn't quite say so, but this psychoanalytic reduction of their motives is suggested. Surely bilingualists have better reasons than this for their view. Basically there seem to be two. One is that bilingual education eases the transition to a new culture; the other is that it preserves the old, or some part of it. Now, it may be misguided to support bilingualism as a means of adjusting to a new society (the more so the younger the child), but if it is, the mistake is pedagogical, and does not, as Rodriguez claims, constitute "scorn" for the "value and necessity of assimilation."

To the other justification for bilingual education—that it preserves the immigrant's heritage—Rodriguez's charge is at least relevant. But it rests on the premise that in fact assimilation is valuable and necessary. In support of this Rodriguez has some interesting, albeit obscure, things to say. Assimilation, he believes, is essential for the achievement of "full public individuality." In private, separateness from the crowd is a prerequisite for individuality: those who love us think we are unique. But in public, individuality is achieved only by those who are in some sense members of the crowd. "Only when I was able to think of myself as an American, no longer an alien in *gringo* society, could I seek the rights and opportunities necessary for full public individuality." Thus the immigrant must leave his native culture—and part of himself—behind if he is to succeed in the new society. In the attempt to preserve or recapture roots, bilingualists (as well as promoters of Black English) perpetuate the class divisions they ostensibly wish to eradicate. The problem is not, as some radicals claim, that "ghetto schools 'oppress' students by trying to mold them, stifling native characteristics," but rather, says Rodriguez, the opposite: not that these schools change students too much, but that they don't change them enough.

This argument against bilingualism is most effective

when directed to Rodriguez's particular target. That is because for the most part native Spanish-speakers in the United States, like speakers of Black English, belong to a disadvantaged class; their culture and their class are associated in such a way that the latter probably can be overcome only at the price of the former. (It is another question to what extent the connection between the two is extrinsic and accidental, and to what extent features of the culture actually work against mobility or are incompatible with middle class ways.) But this connection need not hold in every case of preserving a culture within a culture. Jews and Chinese in many places, East Indians in Africa have achieved middle-

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class status in alien societies without entirely surrendering their heritage. They have not, of course, achieved completely the standing of members of the dominant culture. But at least in part, this is just to say that they haven't assimilated. Is this bad? Whether we think so depends partly on whether we think their separation is voluntary or is imposed by others. Have they achieved "full public individuality"? Whether they have, and what exactly this means, requires a much fuller investigation than Rodriguez provides.

What value, then, should we place on assimilation? "Assimilate" means to make similar; it means to transform what was into something different. Assimilation by its nature changes who we are, forges a new identity. This has, of course, two sides: something is gained, and something is lost. Rodriguez eloquently records the loss; but the sorrow he expresses comes of awareness of the distance between the old self and the new, and the growth and self-reflection this signifies are goods that, following Socrates, few of us would trade away. So paradoxically we long for something we would not choose if we could.

The tension between assimilation's gains and losses emerges sharply with respect to cultures strongly associated with deprivation or oppression. Insofar as people's lives are defined by deprivation and poverty, by seeking to eradicate these conditions we seem to say their lives—that is, the way they now live their lives—are not worth preserving. Is it possible to advocate fundamental social change while at the same time valuing lives as they are now lived, unchanged? The obvious reply is that people are defined not just by class, ethnicity, and the like; they are more than this. But this answer is not entirely satisfactory, both because so much of what we are is determined by class and its accoutrements that it's hard to know what's left when these are stripped away, and also because much of what we value is connected with these and would probably disappear if class distinctions did. We express these

tensions when simultaneously we lament the blandness of American culture and seek to widen access to it, when we rejoice in the variety and depth of other cultures and endorse measures that tend to destroy them.

Rodriguez's opposition to affirmative action is less persuasive than his rejection of bilingualism. His basic objection is not, as one might have expected, that affirmative action programs are demeaning (especially to people like him who would do well even without them), but that they don't help those who most need it. Affirmative action gave Rodriguez an advantage in the academic job market over white applicants with essentially similar backgrounds; it didn't help truly disadvantaged Hispanics. Of course it didn't; the truly disadvantaged don't often apply to the Yale English department (as Rodriguez did). But this is not a good argument against affirmative action. First of all, a particular black or Hispanic may be privileged compared to other blacks or Hispanics but still suffer disadvantages compared to his WASP competitors. He or she might, e.g., encounter discrimination (perhaps residual and unconscious), and affirmative action programs counteract this. But such programs may be justified in other ways as well; they may speed integration or allow members of disadvantaged groups to become role models. These reasons do not imply that the particular individuals benefited are themselves disadvantaged or deserve special treatment. Finally, affirmative action programs exist not only for elite academic positions but also for less privileged ones, like construction and clerical jobs; in such cases they will benefit those lower down on the economic ladder.

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It would be a mistake to conclude from these criticisms that *Hunger for Memory* is not a good book. Its merits, moreover, are not merely literary. Rodriguez is persuasive, though less by argument than by description of his own experience in his own mournful voice. I do not mean this as a criticism. This book is not a substitute for empirical research or sustained argument, but it serves an equally crucial and complementary purpose, by reminding scholars and policymakers of the true subject of their work, the experiences of real people. For this, there is nothing better than getting as close as you can to the pure subjective feel of becoming a middle-class American.

—Judith Lichtenberg