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David Hollinger's *Postethnic America* seemed an appropriate follow-up to David Roediger's *Working Towards Whiteness*, as Hollinger's idea of a post-ethnic America appears to flow quite naturally from Roediger's approach to "whiteness studies," which documents how varied European and Middle-eastern "races" came to be considered generically white (though I would suggest that the current understanding of whiteness is a little more complicated than that). Hollinger's book is more fascinating reading (shall I say more provocative?) than Roediger's—for an experienced historian. While presumably Roediger is writing to a lay audience, Hollinger is writing to a community of historians, sociologists and ethnographers, in a work that straddles the boundaries of historiography and sociology.

The first part of the book, already 15 years old, covers some familiar ground, though the way he writes it is more interesting. For example, as he talks about Americans’ conscious and unconscious choices of "ethno-racial blocs" he writes that Alex Haley’s choice (to seek out his African roots as opposed to his Irish ones) is no choice at all—although I think in the intervening years between *Roots* and now, Haley’s choice has become a significantly more real one. Hollinger also (thankfully) talks a little about the different perceptions of ethnicity from the distinctly racial pentagon to a more complex and detailed approach. While it’s true that in some situations, people from one "ethno-racial bloc" will not notice or care about the finer distinctions in another, I happen to think no sensitive or intelligent person would fail to try. Do I care about the difference between Dominican and Puerto Rican? Of course! Or about Abenaki vs. Miwok? Sure!

What really grabs you in this book is Hollinger’s attempt to trace multiculturalism from its roots (emerging somewhat oddly out of post WWII universalist perspectives) to current (mid-90s) academic infighting about how we should understand or express our multiculturalism, having eschewed ethnocentrism and universalism almost completely. He outlines the universalist concept, and then the emerging "paradigmatic" concept of history (creating a huge objectivity question in the field) and then the beginnings of multiculturalism, coinciding perhaps, with relativism. Hollinger tracks Richard Rorty’s progression through stages and incarnations of multiculturalism through to the ’90s, effectively showing the sometimes comical twists and turns of the academic perspective as we try to do the right thing by our multiple cultures.

Universalism, the new multiculturalists wrote, was a manifestation of our own Western (and possibly even American) ethnocentrist perspective, and therefore even the hopeful remarks about being one human family that shares the same struggles and emotions are, in fact, false. This led, in the extreme case, to historians, anthropologists and others taking the opposite view—and concluding that we cannot impose our Western/Judeo-Christian ideas of human rights on other cultures. Taken to its full extreme, it creates ethical problems for those of us concerned with the health and quality of life of other human beings, to say nothing of liberty (which, while perhaps a Western idea, has over 5000 years of historical strength as a desired state of being.)

Complicating matters are the cosmopolitan and the pluralist movements before and around multiculturalism, which ask the question, "how do we determine the many groups which are either making up the whole, or which continue to be un-unified parts?" Hollinger’s idea of a postethnic society is one where all categories, layers and aspects of identity are in question—and given equal weight. "Consciously and critically locating oneself amid these layers," where everyone has a choice as to how they identify themselves, and without external identification. Rather than wanting to
eliminate ethno-identity, Hollinger hopes that ethnicity can be boundary-less, multifaceted, and part of a much larger and more complex picture. Interestingly, this has some of the positive aspects of universalism, combined with a modern interpretation of the cultural pluralist thread.

Hollinger addresses the potential problems innate in the pursuit of a postethnic world, fairly eloquently, and a 2000 postscript was added, tracking some of the changes in thought about multiculturalism and the US at the end of the century. I think—I think!—that in the last nine years, America has made that much more progress towards a non-racial perspective—not because of policy changes, different phrasing of census questions, changes in affirmative action, or anything else like this—but simply because the composition of the United States is changing. The number of "mixed" relationships and blended backgrounds, families with multiple ancestral origins, adoptions outside a specific group, and people who choose to be affiliated with groups that they have little or no blood-tie to—all these are areas of growth. If we continue to silence the undercurrent of hate (which does exist, sadly) perhaps in time that too will fade, like an unused, vestigial organ.