

**ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER Jr: THE DISUNITING OF AMERICA**  
**W.W. NORTON, NEW YORK, 1992. 160p. N.p.**

If you have ever doubted the important role that history plays in orientating and identifying a nation and a state you should read this stimulating and provocative monograph by one of America's highly esteemed liberal historians. Although the South African circumstances are exactly the opposite of the American experience, the debate on the role of history and history teaching in society deals with the same basic issues and attitudes.

Schlesinger takes a very strong stand against the multicultural approach to education in general and the teaching of history in particular. The "cult of

ethnicity" is not only rejected but condemned. He refers to it as "a cult ... (that) threatens to become a counterrevolution" (p. 43). The real motive behind it is a political motive (p. 95). It represents "a reversal of direction from assimilation to apartheid" (p. 131) and will result in "resegregation, and tribalization of American life" (p. 18).

In this process history is used as a weapon and the curriculum becomes the "battlefield of ethnocentrism" (p. 72). Multiculturalism is a reaction against Anglo- or Eurocentrism. Afrocentrism views the purpose of history in the schools as therapeutic: to build a sense

of self-worth among minority-group children. Schlesinger rejects Afro-ethnicism as the invention of a tradition, the falsifying of history. The ethnic identification with a common slave and African culture which forms the basis of Afrocentrism, is very problematic. The Black American came from a variety of tribes that spoke a variety of languages: "Any homogeneity among slaves is derived not from the African tribe but from the American plantation" (p. 81).

The purpose of Schlesinger's monograph is twofold: to warn against the disuniting forces that motivate multiculturalism and to restate the case for the "American creed", the melting pot, with its balance between **unum** and **pluribus**. The "ethnic revolt" is a denial of the idea of a common culture and a single society. The attack on Eurocentrism is a rejection of the most basic ingredient of the American creed. Schlesinger accepts that American history and schoolbooks were shaped by the Anglocentric approach, but like it or not, American history has been shaped more than anything else by British tradition and culture. "To deny this would be to falsify history. But history can also be falsified by the suppression of the uglier aspects of Anglo rule". (p. 53) Three of these uglier aspects must be faced squarely: discrimination against immigrants and non-white minorities; Anglocentric myths; and exaggerated patriotism.

Accepting the diversity of the American nation and the centrality of common American values, Schlesinger defends the pluralistic approach which vindicates "cherished cultures and traditions without breaking the bonds of cohesion". (p. 136). In a pluralistic approach

history is neither a weapon nor a servant: "Our schools and colleges have a responsibility to teach history for its own sake - as part of the intellectual equipment of civilized persons - and not to degrade history by allowing its content to be dictated ... "

Schlesinger puts the case for a thorough study of the history of Western civilization: "Whatever the particular crimes of Europe, that continent is also the source - the unique source - of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and cultural freedom ... "

What is the significance of this passionate plea for the study of history for South Africa? The differences between the USA and SA are obvious: there is no melting pot in South Africa - cultural diversity is no accident of history - it is the embryo of South Africa. There is no need to invent ethnic identities - they are the most striking factors in South African history.

The potential similarities are interesting: will history in South Africa be taught for its own sake or serve the political ideal of a common nationhood? Will South Africa achieve **unum** and **pluribus**? In the case of South Africa, this will happen only if the truth prevails. Any effort to use South African history as a weapon to forge people into a unnatural common identity is bound to create the opposite effect. Let history be studied for its own sake - as a part of the intellectual equipment of a civilized person - and leave the concepts of nationhood and multiculturalism to the theoreticians.

H.B.