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Nathan Glazer, 1923–2019

by Fred Siegel

A remembrance of the sociologist.

The obituaries reporting the death in January of the ninety-five-year-old sociologist Nathan Glazer, who spent an unheard-of sixty-five years in public life, captured the deep respect he garnered. In *Tablet*, the obituary by Martin Peretz, the former owner and editor of *The New Republic*, to which Glazer had contributed, was headlined “The Immortal Mind of Nathan Glazer.” In *The American Interest*, the subheading read: “A giant has passed away.” In the *Forward*, the English-language successor to the *Yiddish Forverts*, which Glazer’s father, a sewing machine operator, had read religiously, the headline read “How Nathan Glazer Dared To Change His Mind (And Ours).” Glazer’s shift from an unabashed critic of multiculturalism to the author in 1997 of *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* was the focal point of a deeply misinformed obituary in *The New York Times*. But all of these obituaries virtually ignored the last two decades of Glazer’s life, when he once again changed his mind.

Nathan Glazer, an informal “Nat” to his friends, was born in 1923 in East Harlem to a Yiddish-speaking family from Warsaw that was both religiously observant and socialist. The youngest of seven children, he knew respectable poverty firsthand, growing up in a four-room tenement supported by his socialist but anti-Communist father whose moderate views left a deep imprint. A graduate of the City College of New York, where he first became friends with fellow anti-Stalinists Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, and Irving Howe, all of whom were to become prominent New York Intellectuals, he went on to earn a master’s degree in anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania and then a Ph.D. in Sociology from Columbia when that field had been dubbed the “queen of the social sciences.”

But long before he earned his academic spurs, he had risen to public prominence. At age twenty-two he had helped transform the little-known *Contemporary Jewish Record* into the influential magazine *Commentary*. Mild-mannered and unassuming among his sharp-tongued and assertive fellow intellectuals, he first earned a degree of fame as a contributing author to David Riesman’s landmark 1950 study *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, which talked of Americans as having shifted from a Protestant “inner-directed” orientation to the “other-

directed" morality of mass society. In 1957 he demonstrated his breadth of interest by writing *American Judaism*, a book that approached the subject from the perspective of culture and ethnicity, which were to become the leitmotifs of Glazer's writings. Most American Jews, he argued on the basis of extensive interviews, readings, and synagogue visits, "are incapable of giving a coherent statement of the main beliefs of the Jewish religion and tend to call 'Judaism' whatever views they happen to hold today." Jews, he insisted to considerable criticism, were becoming more of an American ethnicity than a religious community.

Glazer's 1963 book, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, was written with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a graduate of Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen, who had become an Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Kennedy administration. *Beyond the Melting Pot* built on the arguments about ethnicity Glazer had laid out in *American Judaism*. Together, Glazer and Moynihan forged an influential argument about a middle-class American pluralism.

Moynihan and Glazer, both products of ethnic enclaves, broke with the longstanding Progressive Era assumption that immigrants should blend into a common Anglo-American culture, as dispensed in the public education system, so "that a new American type would emerge, a new nationality in which it would be a matter of indifference whether a man was of Anglo-Saxon or German or Italian or Jewish origin." Instead, explained Lawrence Mead, immigrants could retain their ethnic identities, while still being fully American. Speaking English, upholding American political values, and maintaining a strong work ethic—these are the qualities that make one American. In other respects, including religion and politics, one could remain Irish or Italian, for instance.

The authors thought blacks would also advance as immigrants had, albeit more slowly given the bitter history of slavery and segregation. But in the wake of the July 1964 Harlem riots, Glazer showed the first signs of pessimism. "Negro anger," he explained in *Commentary*, "is based on the fact that the system of formal equality produces so little for them." But "the white community into which the Negro now demands full entrance is not actually a single community The Negro now demands entry into a . . . society that does not exist, except in ideology." Black militancy would, he perceived, lead to practical failure. The upshot would be a politics of resentment.

Glazer's fears were reinforced by the white-hot anger generated by the 1965 Moynihan Report on the decline of the black family. Still, with the economy booming and a black unemployment rate in New York of just 4 percent, Glazer tried to hold on to a measure of optimism."

In 1965 he joined Kristol and Bell in helping to create *The Public Interest*, the most influential policy journal of its time. Created as the Great Society was being assembled, it tried to take an even-handed look at "the second New Deal." But its increasingly skeptical view of the Great Society's attempts to ameliorate poverty led its leading lights to be labeled as "neoconservative," a designation Nat never accepted. He was one with the neoconservatives led by Irving Kristol in agreeing that the loss of authority in public and private life was culturally corrosive. But he refused

to support Nixon and went on to vote for McGovern and Carter even as he was writing *Affirmative Discrimination* (1975), which criticized the liberal policies supported by McGovern, such as school desegregation busing, meant to achieve educational gains for blacks. Glazer valued evidence over intentions and saw that busing, whatever its proclaimed virtues, undermined education. Similarly, he opposed affirmative action because the evidence suggested it would do little for most blacks while encouraging inter-group antagonisms. "The rising emphasis on group difference which government is called upon to correct," Nat wrote, "might mean the destruction of any hope for the larger fraternity of all Americans." "On most areas of public policy," he said, "I consider myself pragmatic, rather than a man of the left or a man of the right."

Nat was troubled by the fact that black progress had stalled in the 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, it became clear that new immigrants from Asia, Africa, and South America were prospering while taking the pluralist path laid out in *Beyond the Melting Pot*. When he spoke with me in the early 1980s, he acknowledged that Black Power had backfired. In 1988, he recognized that presidential candidate Jesse Jackson's calls for a Rainbow Coalition meant that a new guise for Black Power had entrenched itself despite the success of the new immigrants. Representation replaced achievement as the gauge of educational progress. Truth, as James Traub saw, had been replaced by considerations of ethnic self-esteem. By 1997, Nat had taken a half-step backward when he published his rueful, deeply conflicted book *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*. Multiculturalism in education, he acknowledged, had triumphed over its liberal and conservative opponents. Still skeptical of government's ability to engineer progress, he doubted that history as therapy could benefit the inner city, but he saw that the multicultural train had left the station.

This is where, a few comments on Nat's criticism of modernist architecture aside, the obituaries I referred to in the first paragraph end. But Nat Glazer, still emotionally and intellectually anchored to his roots in the neighborhoods of New York, lived for another two decades. That was more than time enough for Nat to consider the practical effects of multiculturalism on black life.

In 2010, writing "Notes on the State of Black America" in *The American Interest*, Glazer noted that

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency in November 2008 marked a paradox in the long history of race in America that has not been much noticed: The installation of the first black President in American history . . . coincided with the almost complete disappearance from American public life of discussion of the black condition and what public policy might do to improve it.

In other words, rather than discuss the failure of multiculturalism to improve black academic performance, the issue was ignored by most of the think tanks (the Manhattan Institute and Heritage aside), although a few academics, such as Douglas Massey and William Julius Wilson, continued to write about the ironic outcomes of government policies. The end of legal discrimination, Nat argued, allowed the black middle and upper-middle classes to flee the inner cities, leaving behind areas of high crime, low employment, and, as Moynihan had warned, low

rates of family formation. And to make matters even worse, as Glazer remarked in “Notes on the State of Black America,” “A new crisis of mass incarceration has developed as well.” He cites the sociologist Bruce Western’s findings that “By the early 2000s, more than a third of young black non-college men were incarcerated” at one time or another.

Glazer pointed out that “some policies that were adopted purportedly to help poor urban dwellers, such as cheap credit and subprime mortgages, only made things worse.” The public policy record of the past several decades, he went on to explain, “is so depressing that it is little wonder few wish to talk about it in public.” “If old remedies are exhausted or have become politically impossible,” he asked “what now is to be done?”

Nat concluded by returning to the themes of *Beyond the Melting Pot*. Cultural factors were the key to a group’s possibilities. And what’s more, government action can do little to affect the outcomes. Such was the testament of a man who kept searching until the end.

Fred Siegel's latest book is *The Revolt Against the Masses: How Liberalism Has Undermined the Middle Class*.

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