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Cultural Commentary: “Murcan,” Through and Through

by William C. Levin

When Dick Arme (Republican, Texas), retiring Majority Leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, heard that Boston had been chosen to host the 1994 Democratic convention, he said that the choice of Boston made sense because “If I were a Democrat I would feel a heck of a lot more comfortable in Boston than, say, in America.”

I was offended. I am a Bostonian and a Democrat and am as easily baited by such insults as a Texas congressman would be if his willingness to electrocute teenaged prisoners had been questioned. And I am an American who argues that Massachusetts actually is one of official states. But I must confess that I am well protected from such slights. The fact is that I am able to put my Boston/Democrat/Massachusetts identity aside pretty quickly after loathing Dick Arme for just a few moments. (May he make piles of money in private industry only to be jailed for illegal accounting practices and be granted probation only on condition that he co-host a small-market radio call-in program with Mollie Ivins.)

Yes, I am a Bostonian and a Democrat. These are part of my identity. I moved here for college in 1964 and have never considered living elsewhere. That nearly 39 years accounts for just about 70% of my life, and though people born in a place may reserve the term “true native” for themselves, seventy percent is a passing grade in my book. And I have been a registered Democrat since I was old enough to register to vote. Native enough. But identity is a funny thing. I am also a husband, teacher, home and boat owner, and many other things. I find that on any given day these elements of my identity are likely to be much closer to the front of the identity line than the city I live in or my political party affiliation. When I get up in the morning I never hoist my brief case thinking, This Boston Democrat is ready to commute, by gosh! No, I am at such a moment a husband (“Bye, honey. I’ll pick up dinner”), and a teacher (“What in the world am I supposed to cover in the research methods course today?”).

The multiple-components understanding of identity becomes clear when we in the behavioral sciences attempt to measure it. In 1960 a social psychologist named Manfred Kuhn attempted to measure identity (he used the term

“self-concept”) with a measure called the “Twenty-Statements Test.” Sometimes the solutions to apparently difficult research problems are pleasingly simple. Kuhn’s method of measuring self-concept required one simple question—“Who am I?”—answered with twenty different responses. For example, a person might answer that she is a female, lawyer, Bostonian, American, Catholic, home owner, sister, daughter, tennis player, runner and so on, until she had given twenty responses. The sum total of the answers is assumed to form the multi-faceted identity the respondent carries. Kuhn found that the identities people revealed on his test varied greatly among his respondents, though he did find patterns. For example, children tended to define themselves in very specific, behavioral terms, such as saying that they were nice to a brother or good at games. By contrast, adults tended to define themselves in broader, more abstract categories such as father, teacher, Protestant, or homeowner.

Subsequent research using the Twenty Statements Test has revealed that adult Americans differ greatly in the way they think of themselves. Given that our identities are typically formed of a conglomerate of sub-elements (with the possible exception of Texas politicians, who seem to have room for only one or two items on their list of responses to the Twenty Statements Tests—as in Texan, Republican, uh, Texan, Republican. Did I say Texan yet?), it should come as no surprise that the relative importance of any one of these identity elements is found to vary with the circumstance in which the individual finds him or herself. For example, when I am at home having dinner with my wife, that component of my identity that is the teacher is less salient than are my husband and homeowner aspects. This is not to



Dick Arme.

suggest that identity is just a moment-to-moment reconstruction project. Much of the research on identity clearly shows that the overall package of elements that forms the identity of an individual is relatively persistent and stable. But we do know that the ways in which individuals reshuffle the components of their identities is adaptive to the circumstances in which they find themselves. For example, research by the sociologist Louis Zurcher found that during the turbulent 1960's college students tended to define themselves in terms of personal and behavioral characteristics such as 'smart,' 'fun-loving' or 'committed,' while in the more stable 1950's college students tended to define themselves in terms of social categories and memberships such as 'Protestant,' 'college student' or 'middle class.'

In my undergraduate class on the subject of discrimination in society, I have often begun my semester by asking my students to individually answer the Twenty-Statements Test. My aim is to make it clear to them that each is, to one extent or another, a member of a group which has probably been subjected to prejudice and discrimination at one time in American history. Those students who identify themselves as 'Irish-American' or 'Italian-American' can then be shown the vicious cartoon depictions of their immigrant ancestors that were published in mass circulation American magazines before the turn of the century. It is my hope that then the material of the course will seem as immediate and real to all the students as it usually is to my African American and female students. However, within the last few years, and especially this year, the answers my students have given to the test have not worked out as I expected.

First of all, the ethnic group memberships generally have been slipping down, and eventually off the students' lists. Specifically, hyphenated, white ethnic group memberships such as Irish-American or Italian-American are often not important parts of my students' identity structures, if they make the list at all. When I ask students how they made their identity selections, I hear more and more that they are 'just American,' and do not think of where their family members emigrated from, except on rare occasions. Part of this is due, of course, to the process of assimilation. Most of my students are now many generations removed from the painful stories of the flight from persecution, poverty and starvation that motivated their ancestors' arrival

here. They live in places like Bridgewater, Whitman, Pembroke and Scituate where ethnic foods may be searched for (if they are there at all) in specially marked sections in the supermarket. They live in the suburbs, for goodness sake, where there are no ethnic neighborhoods to keep the language, the stories and the knowledge of ethnicity alive. Often these were not only forgotten over time, they were horrors from which their survivors wished to flee as soon as possible.

But I also believe there is a more important reason that my students are so willing to call themselves 'just American' just now. In addition to the trend of assimilation, there is the overwhelming influence of terrorism and terrorism threats against the United States which since September 11th of 2001 seem to have powerfully rewritten all of our identity lists. In response to the attacks on America that come from beyond our borders we are Americans in a way we seem to reserve for times of urgent need such as war. For months after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, there wasn't an American flag to be had from any source. They were all displayed on our lawns, highway overpasses and truck windows. We became Americans first because we felt we needed to, and, though the early intensity of the response has waned some, we are still responding to events as Americans all. It is still in the political and cultural air that it is unpatriotic to question the prosecution of what has been called the war on terrorism.

It is a well-documented principle in sociology that external threats increase internal cohesion in a group. Attack a country and its people, in an adaptive response for their own survival, will draw together while ignoring any previous internal differences among themselves. We are Americans more than usual because we feel we have to be if we are to defend ourselves. This time a component of our identities has jumped up for more than a moment. We are not just fending off a casual insult. We believe we are fighting for our lives.

—William Levin is Professor of Sociology
and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review