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FEATURE ARTICLES: REMEMBERING NATHAN GLAZER

A Young Man at the Periphery of the Profession

Peter Skerry[1]

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Abstract
Nathan Glazer's intellectual journey may have left him at the margins of academic sociology but tookhim to the heart of one of the most politically influential circles of American writers, policy analysts, andthinkers of the twentieth century. Yet he was not a political person, but a uniquely honest and humble socialcritic and analyst.

Keywords Nathan Glazer · Jews · Intellectuals · African Americans · Hispanics · Experts · Culture · Sociology · Affirmative action · Neoconservative

This disparaging characterization of Nathan Glazer is from social scientist Daniel Lerner,[1] commenting on Glazer's critical review of Samuel Stouffer's *The American Soldier* in the November 1949 issue of the recently launched *Commentary*. Only five years out of City College, the twenty-six-year-old Glazer likened the findings of this landmark of behavioral science research to the "earthworms" that Goethe's Faust depicts as the pathetic outcome with which greedy man must content himself in his tragic quest for the treasures of true knowledge.

To those more familiar with the mature scholar and public intellectual, the image of Glazer as a sarcastic upstart is jarring, if not downright against type. As for Lerner's put-down, forty years later in an autobiographical essay, "From Socialism to Sociology," Glazer acknowledges that he never had much of a commitment to either.[2] Yet, he has been truer to sociology than many of its practitioners, and truer to the canons of dispassionate inquiry and political commentary than those taking pot shots at academia from the outside. Sociology for him has not been a mere profession, in Lerner's terms, but a vocation, a preoccupation with attempting to understand the world that suffuses one's being and involves much more than a set of tools or techniques or a career choice. Meanwhile, over the course of Glazer's long career at the center of American—in fact, international—intellectual and political life for over seventy years, sociology (and the social sciences generally) have become not only more professionalized but also more politicized.

"The Putt-Putt Man"

To be sure, Glazer's presence "at the periphery of the profession" has also reflected his manner of self-presentation, his tendency to be self-effacing and less than forceful, though never lacking sure-footedness or confidence. In his autobiographical essay, he explains that he got to attend college because as the youngest of seven children he was not expected to go to work and contribute to family expenses like his older siblings. As he emphasizes: "I showed no sign of being the brightest; indeed, some evidence indicates that I was not."[3]

Glazer once described himself to *New York Times* journalist James Traub as "a junior member" of the City College circle. Perhaps Glazer simply had in mind his being a few years younger than old friends like Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol. Yet as Traub notes, when appearing with Bell in Cambridge at a public viewing of "Arguing the World," the acclaimed documentary

[1] Daniel Lerner, "'The American Soldier' and the Public," Continuities in Social Research: Studies in the Scope and Method of "The American Solider" eds., Robert K. Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950), 227.

[2] "From Socialism to Sociology," in *Authors of Their Own Lives: Intellectual Autobiographies by Twenty American Sociologists*, ed. Bennett M. Berger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 190–209.

[3] Ibid., 193.

✉ Peter Skerry
skerrype@bc.edu

[1] Department of Political Science, Boston College, 331 Kenrick Street, Newton, MA 02458, USA

about the New York intellectuals,[4] Glazer "sat back" and deferred to his more voluble colleague.[5]

At issue here is not just Glazer's manner of self-presentation, but his journeyman's stance toward work. At a dinner of the editorial board of *The Public Interest* in New York, at which Daniel Bell turned over his coeditorship to Glazer, I am told that Bell described Irving Kristol, his founding coeditor, as the hard-to-please skeptic that any good journal of opinion needs when responding to manuscripts coming in over the transom. Yet just as important was the editor willing to find merit in pieces that might not be obvious, and then put in the time to make them work. As Bell put it, Kristol was "the nyah man" who would be counterbalanced by Glazer, "the putt-putt man."

Nothing seems unworthy of Glazer's attention, including mention in one of his essays of the profusion of dog droppings on the sidewalks of Paris, a city he clearly admires. What he has invariably brought to his work is a certain humility toward his subject matter and evident empathy for the people and institutions he writes about. Seldom indulging his own biases or opinions, he typically explains the bases of his assumptions and conclusions, not only to the reader but also to himself.

Glazer has never disdained the task of responding to critics, including reevaluating his work and rethinking his positions, sometimes in the most obscure publications. This aspect of his intellectual demeanor was particularly evident during the late 1980s and into the 1990s as Glazer recanted his earlier opposition to affirmative action, culminating in his widely discussed 1997 volume, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*.[6] Such openness to criticism is all the more remarkable in this age of academic superstars, who may have at one point labored in the fields with their colleagues but have long since grown accustomed to the big house, where they are seemingly no longer bound by the disciplinary canons to which they used to submit and are now free to intone on any number of subjects without benefit of much evidence, or even effort.

Never a Member of Anyone's Team

Glazer brings to mind Karl Mannheim's free-floating intellectual. In his method, style, and interests, he has been remarkably *sui generis*. Among the many books written or edited by Glazer, it is striking that his acknowledgments include relatively few mentions or tributes to colleagues or doctoral students (of whom there have been strikingly few). In one volume, he thanks his longtime friends—and Cambridge neighbors—Dan and Pearl Bell. In another, there is a brief tribute to Elliott Cohen, founding editor of *Commentary.* Mostly, there are frequent acknowledgments of help from his long-time administrative assistant, Martha Metzler, and invariably from his wife, Lochi. Again, the point is not that Glazer has an inflated view of his abilities, but that he is very much an intellectual loner—not out of stubbornness or egotism, but out of preoccupation with issues and controversies, writing about them, and then reevaluating his thinking in light of subsequent criticism, controversy, and evidence. As a result, he has never really been a member of anyone's team.

For instance, just as he began expressing his doubts about liberalism's social policy ambitions in articles such as "The Limits of Social Policy," Glazer was getting an influential hearing in Washington through the good offices of his coauthor, Daniel P. Moynihan, President Nixon's domestic policy advisor. Yet during the 1972 election campaign, Glazer refused to sign on to a "Democrats for Nixon" ad in the *New York Times.* In fact, he voted that November for McGovern, and then in 1980 for Carter—hardly the profile of a neoconservative.

Such vignettes make it difficult to take seriously critics like Dinesh D'Souza, who, in the pages of William Kristol's *The Weekly Standard*, characterized Glazer's change of position as articulated in *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* as that of "a tired old warrior's plea not to be called a 'racist' anymore and to be permitted to resume a normal life in the peculiar cultural milieu of Cambridge, Mass."[7] Nat Glazer is hardly immune to social pressure, but his elusive demeanor shields him from it more than most. Much more difficult to envision is Glazer shielding himself from emerging evidence on an important policy issue, especially one on which he has previously taken a position.

Judaism without Spirituality

Glazer's intellectual independence is nowhere more evident than in his extensive writings on American Jews in general and Jewish intellectuals in particular. To be sure, there can be no doubt about his self-understanding as a son of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from Poland. Yet over the years he has written about his coreligionists with the objectivity and incisiveness of an outsider.

In "Ethnic Groups in America," he characterizes the contradictory concepts of "the melting pot" and "cultural pluralism" as "propaganda directed toward the older groups of the American population by the newer," emphasizing "particularly by Jews."[8] And in a December 1964 piece in *Commentary* on emerging tensions between Jews and Negroes, he acknowledges a continuing history of prejudice against the latter and argues it largely

[4] Joseph Dorman, *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in Their Own Words* (Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 103.

[5] James Traub, "Nathan Glazer Changes His Mind, Again," *The New York Times Magazine* (June 28, 1988): 23–25.

[6] Nathan Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[7] Dinesh D'Souza, "Our Iroquois Fathers: Nathan Glazer Declares us all Multiculturalists," *The Weekly Standard* 31 (April 21, 1997): 43–44.

[8] Nathan Glazer, "Ethnic Groups in America," *Freedom and Control in Modern Society*, eds. Morroe Berger, Theodore Abel, and Charles H. Page (New York: Van Nostrand, 1954), 158–9.

reflects "the standard Jewish ethnocentrism which excluded all outsiders."[9]

In a retrospective piece about *Commentary* during its first years of publication, Glazer expresses surprise and belated criticism of himself and his colleagues for being so out of touch with their Jewish roots, including the various Jewish defense and communal organizations. He makes a similar but more trenchant point in "Jewish Intellectuals," a contribution to the sixtieth anniversary issue of *Partisan Review*. Here he reflects on "why a magazine that was in such large measure created by Jewish editors and writers had so little to say about Jews, Jewishness, or Judaism."[10] His response is that such intellectuals were drawn to universalist claims—whether of Marxism or Communism, or of literary and artistic modernism—that permitted them to escape what they viewed as Jewish parochialism.

Yet Glazer has hardly confined his criticism of Jews to the intellectuals. Writing in 1957 in *American Judaism*, he gently disparages post-war, suburban Jewish life as "banal," caught between "on the one hand, the clichés of liberal religion, and on the other, a kind of confusion in which loyalty to the Jewish people is identified with Jewish religion."[11] Subsequently, after the dramatic turning point of the 1967 Six Day War, when American Jews suddenly came to identify with and embrace Israel as they had not done before, his disaffection with American Jewry grew all the more intense. Writing in 1990, he concludes: "The Jewish religion, Judaism, has become the religion of survival. It has lost touch with other values and spiritual concerns."[12] Even the revival of Orthodoxy, Glazer laments, is based not on spiritual values but on Jewish survival.

Though not a believer or even an observant Jew, Glazer is strikingly respectful and serious about religious faith, unlike most liberal intellectuals. And unlike many conservative elites whose regard for religion is typically on account of its social or political utility, Glazer repeatedly asks the troublesome question: how can faith—Judaism in particular—sustain itself without a genuinely spiritual basis?

Admonishing Not Dismissing Experts

If Nathan Glazer seems destined to stand apart from the tribe into which he was born, he has also been an interloper in the tribes among which he has lived and labored—tribes that don't even realize that they are tribes! His posture clearly reflects the skepticism of social science-based, elite-driven reform that came to characterize *The Public Interest*. But unlike others associated with that journal, Glazer never developed an outright disdain and contempt for specialized knowledge and expertise.

From Glazer's perspective, experts are colleagues presumptively worthy of a hearing, neither to be cravenly deferred to nor arrogantly dismissed out of hand. He has long been wary of elites in love with their own ideas, especially those self-consciously motivated by high-mindedness or public-spiritedness, especially modernist universalism, which obscure from view the tastes and preferences of those presumed to be in need of help.

Yet at the same time, Glazer has always considered that such elites may well know "a better way"—more efficient, more effective, more equitable, more societally optimal—to address the needs of a given group or sector than the general public. In fact, the intended beneficiaries themselves typically lack sophistication and probably basic information. But he also understands that the latter are likely to understand their own needs in the context of their own realities better than most elites. Moreover, their preferences get shaped, reinforced, and gratified by powerful social, cultural, and especially market forces that idea-smitten elites invariably denigrate, underestimate, or overlook.

For example, Glazer has urged that if planners and architects spent more time trying to understand how the world looks from the perspective of typical urban residents, they would recognize that families, especially mothers, like to be able to watch their kids play outside where they can get to them easily and quickly—not seven stories up in a building with faulty elevators. Even better, they might realize that families, as opposed to singles, tend to prefer single-unit dwellings for which *they* are responsible, over units in communal settings with amenities—trees, benches, plots of grass—for which *no one* is responsible.

In his 1966 forward to E. Franklin Frazier's classic, *The Negro Family in the United States*, Glazer reflects on the challenges facing government officials devising policies to impact such an intimate realm. He describes a recent conference in Berkeley at which academic experts expressed misgivings about policy-makers imposing inappropriate middle-class values on Negro families. Not unsympathetic to such concerns, he then quotes with approval "a Negro woman in the audience," whom one supposes was not an academic: "Just give us the tickets; we'll decide where to get off."[13]

Sociology and Culture

In a similar vein, Glazer has never dismissed the aspirations and cultural life of ordinary Americans as deficient or

[9] Nathan Glazer, "Negroes and Jews: The New Challenge to Pluralism," *Commentary* 38 (December, 1964).

[10] Nathan Glazer, "Jewish Intellectuals," *Partisan Review* 51 (Double Issue, Fall 1984, Winter 1985): 674–9.

[11] Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 131.

[12] Nathan Glazer, "American Jewry or American Judaism?," *Society* 28 (November–December 1991): 17.

[13] Nathan Glazer, "Foreword," *The Negro Family in the United States*, ed. E. Franklin Frazier (Chicago, IL: Phoenix Books, University of Chicago Press, 1966), xiv–xv.

inadequate. Nor has he indulged in the kind of ironic, condescending embrace of popular culture evident among some conservatives. Such slumming is beneath an observer of Glazer's humility and seriousness, who after all collaborated with David Riesman on mid-twentieth century's most influential study of American character and culture, *The Lonely Crowd*. Half a century later, at a lecture at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences honoring Riesman, Glazer identifies his colleague as working in the tradition of Tocqueville, whose emphasis on the critical importance of *moeurs* (customs, or what today we refer to as culture) over formal institutions and laws helped carve out sociology's distinctive domain from political science. Like Tocqueville and Riesman, Glazer has devoted much of his scholarly work to understanding and writing about the importance of culture as a critical but elusive force in society and politics—one that cannot be reduced to derivative factors, such as income and wealth inequality, as so many social scientists attempt to do. A reflection of divergent individual and especially group values and histories, culture is not readily or reliably addressed by public policy.

Affirmative Action Reconsidered

Glazer's qualities of character and intellect are evident in his widely noted and controversial change of heart on affirmative action. Having helped formulate the intellectual challenge to affirmative action in 1975 with his book, *Affirmative Discrimination*,[14] by 1987 Glazer had come to support racial preferences in some contexts, for blacks in particular. Then, in 1997 he published the aforementioned manifesto, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*,[15] in which he argued not only that multiculturalism was here to stay but also that he was reconciled to it, however reluctantly.

The result was predictably widespread acclaim from liberals and substantial and sometimes nasty criticism from many conservatives. Nevertheless, Glazer's shift has been partial, hardly a 180-degree reversal. As he explains in his 2005 article in the *Dubois Review,* edited by his Harvard colleague, Henry Louis Gates, Glazer maintains sharp distinctions between affirmative action in government contracting (which he opposes) and in higher education (which he supports).[16] In another piece, he similarly refuses to attribute continuing high levels of residential segregation to white prejudice, as do the leading academic authorities on the subject.[17] As James Traub observed in a widely noted *New York Times* article, "Nathan Glazer Changes His Mind, Again," Glazer's qualified support for affirmative action hardly involves a change in his skepticism about the efficacy of government programs in overcoming the challenges facing poor blacks.[18] Here again is Glazer's career-long conviction that cultural factors substantially account for differential group outcomes and cannot easily be countervailed by public policy.

Nevertheless, Glazer has neglected to consider how affirmative action and multiculturalism have themselves contributed to new problems. In this regard, I am not referring to the isolation of poor blacks from middle-class neighbors and colleagues resulting from the mobility that these controversial policies have helped many blacks attain—a problem with which I have no doubt Glazer is familiar. Instead, I am suggesting that attention and resources have been diluted and diverted away from African Americans, who must after all share the fruits of affirmative action and multiculturalism with other designated minorities, especially Hispanics.

To be sure, Glazer acknowledges that "other racial and minority groups are covered by affirmative action"[19] and has even suggested "eliminating Asians and Hispanics from the affirmative action categories."[20] Yet our preoccupation with "diversity" has typically meant that various racial or minority groups get viewed through the same lens and evaluated by the same criteria. And in the process, the various beneficiary groups become more or less interchangeable and fungible. One way or the other, the uniquely compelling challenges facing African Americans are easily obscured in a multihued fog of good intentions and bad feelings.

Many blacks presumably do not accept such encroachments on their hard-earned gains. For that matter, many Hispanics are more likely to regard themselves more as ethnic immigrants than as members of an aggrieved racial minority like African Americans. In fact, for many years now anywhere from 50 to 60% of Hispanics have identified themselves racially on the US census as "white." And while their leaders may at times identify Hispanics with America's classic immigration story in order to placate or appeal to mainstream America, they are just as likely to frame their demands in the rhetoric of racial justice and minority rights. As a result, the identity of Hispanics is typically conflicted or "ambivalent."[21] But particularly when asserting their claims in the courts and in legislatures, Hispanics invariably define themselves as an aggrieved racial minority.

The cruel irony here is how the clearest impact of our immigration policy over the last forty years—its negative

[14] Nathan Glazer, "Foreword," *The Negro Family in the United States*, ed. E. Franklin Frazier (Chicago, IL: Phoenix Books, University of Chicago Press, 1966), xiv–xv.
[15] Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now.*
[16] Nathan Glazer, "Thirty Years with Affirmative Action," *Du Bois Review* 2 (Spring 2005): 5–15.
[17] Nathan Glazer, "Black and White after Thirty Years," *The Public Interest* 121 (Fall 1995): 61–79.
[18] James Traub, "Nathan Glazer Changes His Mind, Again," *The New York Times Magazine* (June 28, 1988): 23–25.
[19] Glazer, "Thirty Years with Affirmative Action," 12.
[20] Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination*, xxii.
[21] Peter Skerry, *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

effects on African Americans—has been almost completely obscured from consideration or view. African Americans, especially those with a high-school education or less, constitute the one group that has most definitely *not* benefitted from the sustained infusion of low-skilled Hispanic immigrants, whether legal or illegal. Moreover, as sociologists William Julius Wilson, Richard Taub, and their colleagues have demonstrated, in a city like Chicago, blacks compete with Latino immigrants not only for jobs, but also for public services, including education. We should not, then, be surprised when in the past couple of years the Current Population Survey reports that while Hispanic poverty rates nationally have edged down, African-American rates have remained stagnant and at relatively higher levels.

Undeniably, Nathan Glazer would not be surprised by such findings. Indeed, he has argued throughout his career that the different cultural resources that various groups bring to the competition importantly determine where they end up placing. And as I have already indicated, his original opposition to affirmative action was in large part based on his conviction that such factors are not easily or reliably impacted by government programs.

Yet Glazer's focus on cultural factors now explains, paradoxically, why he did not adequately anticipate the consequences of including Hispanics under affirmative action. For while he believed that Hispanics arrive here with values more or less like those of other immigrants, he reconciled himself to an inclusive application of racial quotas in large part because of his overriding concerns about African Americans. And he apparently assumed that Hispanics would prosper with or without affirmative action.

Nevertheless, there are alternative scenarios. As Christopher Jencks has suggested, unskilled and uneducated immigrants, especially their children, may assimilate downward to today's "laissez faire culture" and succumb to casual sex as well as drug and alcohol abuse, which their more affluent peers can indulge with greater impunity. While some trends among Hispanics—especially with regard to obesity, drug abuse, and female-headed households—lend credence to this scenario, Glazer's more optimistic assumptions may well prove to be more accurate. Undeniably evident at the present time, however, are the competition and conflict between Hispanics and blacks that I have highlighted. More to the point, this is a competition in which many blacks are likely to regard Hispanics as making gains at their expense.

In a 1995 essay on "Immigration and the American Future," Glazer observes that "we are a far more tolerant country" than in the past.[22] Yet the political institutions that once moderated conflict—strong, locally rooted political parties and a functioning, decentralized federalism—have virtually disappeared, and those that exacerbate strife and controversy—the media and national advocacy groups that thrive on them—are greatly strengthened. One result is that organizations representing disadvantaged minorities—including Hispanics and blacks—routinely and persistently downplay or deny whatever progress has been made in order to gain the attention and resources necessary to sustain themselves. As a result, we may be a more tolerant society, but we are continually presented with much different, negative self-portraits.

Michael Walzer has written that "politics at its best is the art of overcoming pride and every sort of individual caprice while still associating honorable men."[23] Strictly speaking, Nathan Glazer is not a political person in this sense. He has not devoted himself to the art of association. But he is an honorable man and a good citizen whose life's work has consistently and continually demonstrated the capacity of "overcoming pride and every sort of individual caprice." And while he may not have always gotten it right, his example is all the more admirable in an era when the academy has become a bastion of political correctness and meritocratic privilege, aspiring at best to nothing higher than professionalism.

Peter Skerry, Senior Editor of *Society*, is professor of political science at Boston College and Senior Fellow, Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa plc and is available at: https://www.routledge.com/When-Ideas-Mattered-A-Nathan-Glazer-Reader/Lenkowsky/p/book/9781412864169

[22] Nathan Glazer, "Immigration and the American Future," *The Public Interest* 118 (Winter 1995): 56.

[23] Michael Walzer, *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War and Citizenship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1982).