



Diversity: The Invention of a Concept

Peter Wood

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Diversity is America's newest cultural ideal. Corporations alter their recruitment and hiring policy in the name of a diverse workforce. Universities institute new admissions rules in the name of a diverse student body. What its proponents have in mind when they cite the compelling importance of diversity, Peter Wood argues in this elegant work, is not the dictionary meaning of the word—variety and multiplicity—but rather a set of prescribed numerical outcomes in terms of racial and ethnic makeup. Writing with wit and erudition, Wood has undertaken in this entertaining book nothing less than the biography of a concept. Drawing on his experience as a social scientist, he traces the birth and evolution of "diversity." He shows how diversity sprawls across politics, law, education, business, entertainment, personal aspiration, religion, and the arts, as an encompassing claim about human identity. It asserts the principle that people are, above all else, members of social groups and products of the historical experiences of those groups. In this sense, Wood shows, diversity is profoundly anti-individualist and at odds with America's older ideals of liberty and equality. Wood warns that as a political ideology, diversity undercuts America's long effort to overcome racial division. He shows how the ideology of diversity has propelled the Neo-racialists on the political Right as well as those on the multi-culturalist Left. But even if the diversity movement did not exacerbate racial and social division, he believes that it would be a questionable cultural ideal. As Wood points out, "Our liberty and our equality demand that we hold one another to common standards and that we reject all hierarchy based on heredity—even the hierarchy that comes about when we grant present privileges to make up for past privileges denied."

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