

Mestizo Democracy: The Politics of Crossing Borders (Borderlands Culture and Traditions)

John Francis Burke

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It can come as no surprise that the ethnic makeup of the American population is rapidly changing. That there are political repercussions from these changes is also self-evident. How the changes can, must, and should alter our very understanding of democracy, though, may not be obvious. Political theorist John Burke addresses these issues by offering a "mestizo" theory of democracy and tracing its implications for public policy.

The challenge before the United States in the coming century, Burke posits, will be to articulate a politics that neither renders cultures utterly autonomous from each other nor culminates in their homogeneous assimilation. Fortuitously or ironically, the way to do this comes from the very culture that is now necessitating the change.

Mestizo is a term from the Mexican socio-political experience. It means "mixture" and implies a particular kind of mixture that has resulted in a blend of indigenous, African, and Spanish genes and cultures in Latin America. This mixture is not a "melting pot" experience, where all eventually become assimilated; rather, it is a mixture in which the influences of the different cultures remain identifiable but not static. They all evolve through interaction with the others, and the resulting larger culture also evolves as the parts do. Mestizaje (the collective noun form) is thus process more than condition.

John Burke analyzes both American democratic theory and multiculturalism within political theology to develop a model for cultivating a democratic political community that can deal constructively with its cultural diversity. He applies this new model to a number of important policy issues: official language(s), voting and participation, equal employment opportunity, housing, and free trade. He then presents an intensive case study, based on a parish "multicultural committee" and choir in which he has been a participant, to show how the "engaged dialogue" of mestizaje might work and what pitfalls await it.

Burke concludes that in the United States we are becoming *mestizo* whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not. By embracing the communitarian but non-assimilationist stance of intentional mestizaje, we can forge a future together that will be not only greater than the sum of its parts but also freer and more just than its past.



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