

April 2019

## Book Review: Our Compelling Interests: The Value of Diversity for Democracy and a Prosperous Society by Earl Lewis & Nancy Cantor

Cindy L. Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>

Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Davis, Cindy L. (2019) "Book Review: Our Compelling Interests: The Value of Diversity for Democracy and a Prosperous Society by Earl Lewis & Nancy Cantor," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 95 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol95/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

**Lewis, Earl and Nancy Cantor, eds. *Our Compelling Interests: The Value of Diversity for Democracy and a Prosperous Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. xv + 288 pages. Paperback, \$19.95.**

*Our Compelling Interests: The Value of Diversity for Democracy and a Prosperous Society* (2016) brings together information that provides demographic, theoretical, and applied perspectives on diversity. While diversity has been a social and political issue for some time, diversity as defined and practiced in policy has not kept pace with the contemporary reality of American society. This volume points out that diversity is an evolving concept and if not understood as such, will continue to be defined and practiced in a manner that does not match the changing needs of the nation.

The volume begins with a two-part introductory section providing needed background information. Lewis and Cantor state that this is the first in a series that will seek to place diversity in the modern social landscape. The second piece in the introductory section, “The ‘Diversity Explosion’ Is America’s Twenty-first-Century Baby Boom” by Frey, provides demographic and statistical data essential to better understanding the essays and commentaries in the text. Frey notes key changes including growth of new minority groups, decline in the white population, economic advances for black populations, and a shift toward a no majority racial group nation (after the year 2040). After outlining demographic changes, Frey provides a framework to meet these changes, such as a focus on the cultural generation gap.

Part One of the volume contains essays that present key issues in understanding diversity. Sugrue’s “Less Separate, Still Unequal: Diversity and Equality in ‘Post-Civil Rights’ America” focuses on the distinction between diversity and equality. In his essay, Sugrue paints a realistic portrait of how even though there may be increases in diversity or “public” acceptance of

diversity, there remains a deep divide in equality and opportunity in areas from housing to education to the workplace. This raises a series of tough questions that should be addressed about the relationship between diversity and inequality.

Allen's "Toward a Connected Society" provides a conceptual perspective explaining that prior concepts like assimilation and multiculturalism should be replaced by the ideal of social connectedness in order to achieve a cultural transformation leading to a more democratic and egalitarian society. Allen raises a series of challenges that face the creation of a socially connected America such as the traditional American binary concept of black/nonblack. Diversity as a reality has expanded beyond this binary and it is necessary to find a way to move beyond it.

"The Economic Value of Diversity" by Carnevale and Smith provides a clear statement on the importance of diversity for the workplace and points out that diversity in higher education is crucial for this. The authors note that it is not just demographics at play but also structural shifts in the economy itself. They then provide policy recommendations including those focused on how to address inequalities in the higher education system.

Part Two of the volume provides a series of brief commentaries on diversity issues in America. Appiah's "The Diversity of Diversity" begins by explaining how the term diversity has been examined under a range of terms and connects them together with the idea of social identity. He explains that the concept of difference has changed in the contemporary era, but that people continue to fall into "as-thinking," making it important to recognize differences in social identity, when relevant. Gurin's "Group Interactions in Building a Connected Society" focuses on the important role of completing some form of education, not just having the opportunity to

enter the higher education arena. Gurin notes the importance of different groups interacting and sharing with one another including the frequency of interactions and the quality of interactions.

The final two commentaries effectively bring the pieces in the volume together. Katznelson's "Diversity and Institutional Life: Levels and Objects" reflects on diversity and on the contents of the volume overall by dividing diversity into substantive domains and analytical categories. "Diversity as a Strategic Advantage: A Sociodemographic Perspective" by Tienda returns to demographic data but explains that she is less enthusiastic that an optimistic narrative will evolve from the changing demographics, pointing to the continued institutional segregation and continued gaps of wealth. While she sees diversity as potentially being a strength, there are problems accepting and leveraging this strength. There is a return in this chapter, like others, to the importance of education and developing youth and the idea that policy rather than demographics is what is needed to ensure positive change.

As an inaugural volume, I believe the series is off to a good start but will be especially useful once followed up. While many of the demographic and statistical issues will remain on the same path, as the social, cultural, economic, and political landscape changes, so too will the series need to change. Many of the essays come to similar points regarding the importance of diversity, most notably in education and in examining the youth of today, rendering some demographic content repetitive. However, as a series this volume has the potential to show the development of ideas on diversity and democracy during a changing social and political landscape as the volume provides a perspective that sits between the presidential administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. The text was written prior to Donald Trump taking office, and hence the perspective taken by many of the pieces is a snapshot of that moment in time, a

snapshot of that hope, albeit worried and unstable, of the potential of President Obama being able to ring in the beginning of a “post-racial society.” The tone in America regarding diversity has since become much less filled with hope. This is why texts addressing the evolving concept of diversity are especially relevant today.

Cindy L. Davis, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor in Public Administration  
Stephen F. Austin State University  
Nacogdoches, Texas