

Multiculturalism in America: A new age or the Revival of Assimilationism?

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Does the election of Barack Obama herald a new age of racial and ethnic tolerance? It is a great event to everyone concerned with racial and ethnic prejudice and oppression in America, especially for Blacks, and other minorities who have endured open discrimination supported by the law of the land throughout the long history or their sojourn in America. It is an especially sublime and proud outcome for Americans who were active in the civil rights movements during the 60's and '70's. I would hazard the opinion that none of us could have even dreamed of a black president in our life time.

All modern societies are to a greater or lesser degree made up of different cultural subgroups. These groups are inevitably stratified in terms of their access to power and privilege. All subgroups attempt to integrate or adapt to the dominant culture to some degree, while also striving to improve the status of their particular subgroup by asserting their own priorities, values and ways of life which are distinct from the dominant culture. They all want to both successfully adapt and survive. The orientations, or set of beliefs about minority relations that are associated with these two tendencies might be termed the "problem" orientation (perception of minority as different and unassimilated) and the "rights" orientation (perception of struggle to achieve social equality as a group (Ruiz, 1988)).

An ideological orientation in American society is that of raising awareness of the contribution each subgroup makes to the whole. This can be termed a resource orientation in which cultural and linguistic differences are perceived as valuable in themselves. The resource orientation may be compared to the advantage of biodiversity in an ecosystem in which diversity makes the ecosystem more resilient and adaptable and is also valued by humans for enriching their lives. This orientation includes a claim on the dominant group to acknowledge the role of each subgroup in the society as a whole. It is a claim that rather than merely accommodating or tolerating the existence of ethnic minorities, the majority culture group should actively seek to learn from the ethnic minorities and allow their members proportionate influence in determining all areas of social and political life. It is also a claim that the historical contribution of the minority cultures to American society should be incorporated into the

larger cultural ethos. It is a claim that this contribution has been neglected and distorted by the dominant culture as it is currently represented in the dominant organs of cultural transmission such as history texts, literary criticism, the school curriculum and the structure of academic disciplines.

What the new multiculturalism is advocating might be viewed as a kind of cultural psychotherapy. It is saying that although minorities have been historically subjected to repression, exploitation, prejudice, victimization and even genocide, the dominant culture has none-the-less absorbed values, attitudes, practices, knowledge and artifacts originating in the subcultures. Regardless of power relationships, cultural contact is always a two-way street, effecting a change on all parties. However, it is psychologically impossible for the oppressor to acknowledge the dignity and value of the oppressed. To subjugate, exploit and kill the outsider, it seems universally necessary to deny the victim full status as a human being. The victim must be despised. Anything valuable taken or learned from the victim will be attributed to another source, usually claimed as the invention of the dominant culture. Good examples of this are the many values and practices learned from the Native Americans and how much they contributed to the American ethos of rugged individualism, plain speech and egalitarianism among many others. Native Americans are never acknowledged as contributors to the "uniquely American" form of democracy. The same has been true of the influence of Black English on the regional dialect of the South, not to mention the Black contribution to music and many other aspects of American life.

Minority groups are advocating not only acknowledgement of their valuable contributions to the larger culture, they insist on an end to denial of responsibility or guilt of the larger culture for the persecution. They feel fully justified in demanding various forms of social compensation for historical injustices. Acknowledging collective guilt and righting historical wrongs is often viewed as an excellent prescription for promoting harmony between formerly antagonistic nations. Japan is internationally censured for underplaying in school text books its role as an aggressor in the last world war. Critics insist that a truthful version is essential in shaping the attitude of the Japanese citizenry toward its neighbors. Also, after more than sixty years, the Japanese government is still pressed to make apologies and grant reparation to victims of war crimes in prison camps and to Korean and Filipino women forced into prostitution.

However, it seems much more difficult to apply this philosophy of collective guilt to groups within the society, perhaps because it means acknowledging some kind of violence against the collective social image. This fact might again evoke the analogy of psychotherapy, where the individual suffering internal conflicts is compared to a society made up of different cultural subgroups. In spite of internal conflicts, the individu-

al convinces himself that he operates from a unified consciousness and integrated identity and a harmonious sense of self. The therapist, however, believes that the patient cannot become truly well until the hidden, undesirable aspects of the personality are made conscious and integrated into an honest self-identity.

Historically, the power structure of America has insisted on the right to pursue a policy of preservation of the dominant culture through assimilation, segregation and subjugation. However, I believe it is safe to say that a variety of developments in recent history including the atrocities of the last world war, the continued ethnic, racial and religious conflict throughout the world and the struggles of the civil rights movement in the United States, have contributed to a broad consensus that all ethnic groups legitimately comprising American society should be granted full human rights. This is not to say that racism is a thing of the past in America. But leaders can no longer advocate policies that are blatantly racist and survive. It seems that a majority of Americans are willing to acknowledge the rights of minority groups when they have been legitimized in political or judicial proceedings. This may or may not be an overly optimistic assessment, but the point is that minorities are in the position of adversaries of the dominant culture in a struggle for the recognition of certain rights and claims which may be granted if the dominant culture can be made to see the justice of those claims. This postulated majority of Americans willing to accommodate minority claims to human rights is not a satisfactory situation from the perspective of advocates of multiculturalism. They insist on recognition of each ethnic group as a valuable resource for the larger society, that each be treated uniquely according to their history, values and characteristics. This requires minorities to have equal opportunity to obtain positions of influence and power in society, to be treated with respect and dignity as members of a particular minority group and to have their respective cultural contributions and the truth about their past oppression fully included into the cultural legacy which is transmitted through educational institutions.

Although the struggle for equal opportunity is active in many spheres of social life, it is primarily the voices of educators who have articulated the vision of a new multiculturalism which would shift minority relations from a dominantly rights orientation to one of positively valuing the cultural and linguistic resources that minorities contribute or could contribute to the larger society. This is a very ambitious goal considering that social policy and legal status of many minority issues are grounded in an orientation of problems created by minority characteristics, for example, teen-age pregnancy, high unemployment, escaping taxation and productive employment while making disproportionate claims on welfare and other social services. The orientation of problems to be solved views minority characteristics negatively as the cause of the

problems. Illegal immigrants, predominantly non-English speaking and uneducated are seen as legitimate targets for legal sanctions including denial of basic human rights, social benefits and deportation. Political refugees are tentatively granted haven out of duty to democratic principles which are weighed against social costs. However, economic refugees are not embraced as legitimate by our capitalist democracy. The fact that many social problems are viewed as directly caused or exacerbated by certain minority groups may be an inescapable consequence of the increasingly unstable demographics of the modern world. Perhaps the vision of dignity and equality espoused by the multiculturalists can only be gained by passing through all the stages of orientation with respect to the dominant culture—from problem to rights to resource.

The greatest resistance to the multicultural agenda of educational leaders comes perhaps from within the educational establishment rather than from a societal preoccupation with the problems caused by minority groups. Two of the most contentious goals of multiculturalism are to increase the numbers of minority teachers, professors and administrators to a level that reflects each minority's proportion of the population as a whole, and to establish as a required component of the curriculum for all students some positive portrayal of the particular minority group's contribution to culture and civilization. By teaching the next generation of Americans to value minority contributions to the larger society and the human race while providing the minority contact with the role models of successful minority administrators and teachers, the orientation of policies toward minorities could be shifted toward that of a planned cultivation of their cultural and human resources. A powerful component of the education establishment is strongly opposed to this agenda. This opposition is defended by the argument that the established curriculum transmits a body of skills and knowledge that has survived the test of academic and scientific scrutiny over time. It is claimed that the core of the educational curriculum reflects the world's most powerful and veridical method of organizing and increasing knowledge and technical mastery of our world. The school curriculum is not biased but rather represents the survival in a fair struggle for a niche in the hierarchy of values of what the world has judged to be best, most beautiful, most effective or most true.

To give a helping hand to contestants in the struggle, that is to add cultural products, bodies of knowledge, contrary theories and historical claims and conflicting moral values and aesthetic views to the curriculum is to subvert the very process that gives the established tradition its power and validity. This will weaken and diminish the standards of education and will result in the lowering of the effectiveness of communication throughout society. What is considered important will be contested by each minority culture and the curriculum will degenerate into a relativistic tolerance of all

claims. Just as texts and theories should pass the test of survival in the cultural dynamic, so should faculty be judged on their competitive strengths in academic achievements rather than on the basis of their membership in a minority group. Opponents of multiculturalism in education believe that it has the agenda of promoting the interests of special groups against the common interests of the whole society. They often portray multiculturalism as a plot against American society, its institutions and political system.

Multiculturalism's valuation of languages and language education is perhaps the most controversial aspects of its ideology. Perhaps the language policy advocated by multiculturalism is the most vigorously opposed, most misrepresented and misunderstood aspect of multiculturalism's agenda. However the goals of this language policy may be the most crucial to realizing any kind of multicultural harmony in America. Also, elucidating these goals will bring out the defects in the argument against multicultural education cited above.

The goals of multicultural education in language rest on extending the claim of the right of each ethnic group to maintain their native language and distinctive cultural identity and on the assertion that this language maintenance is a positive benefit to society as a whole. Unlike the logic of the Supreme Court decision in *Lau vs Nichols*, which gave minorities the right to transitional education in their native languages in order to eventually join the mainstream English-language curriculum, multiculturalism advocates a much more prolonged education in the native language so that the students can reach true bilingual, bicultural competence. Bilingual or multilingual immigrants or minorities and who have undergone this kind of education will be invaluable to the community as a whole. Truly bilingual citizens serve as bridges of communication not only between the broad culture and the minority group, but internationally between the United States and other countries where the language is spoken. A truly bilingual educational system can readily be exploited for effective language training of children of the English speaking majority. This resource has been largely ignored or repudiated throughout the history of American education.

If the entire cultural repertoire of a minority group is to share the fate engendered by the American language policy in education, it will become clear that the policy historically has been aimed at keeping minority groups confined to an inferior social status. This does not allow for free competition in the arena of cultural value. For the oppressors must always justify their oppression in terms of the victim's inferiority. The history of foreign language education in America has always valued the textual study of European varieties of foreign languages while deprecating the study of living varieties of the same languages with the country. University literature departments still

give much more attention to European literature and criticism than to Latin American, Chicano or African American literature.

Clearly there has been a revival of the ideology of assimilationism in American in spite the election of a black man to the presidency. One can only hope that the new president will take the lead in promoting the value of the cultural, linguistic and societal contributions of our diverse minorities and cultural groups.

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