

The Multiconfusion of Multiculturalism

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As I understand it, culture signifies the amalgam of values, moral, literary and aesthetic, encapsulated in one or more closely related languages, the expression of the historically developed views of a people, whether they be ethnically homo- or heterogeneous. We Americans are the neatest, if not the only example of the latter, while most of the rest of the world exemplifies the former.

I have been unable to locate with certitude the time and place of the first use of term "multiculturalism." Despite this failure, though, one may comment on the linguistic formation of the term, viz., the addition of the abstract ending -ism to the adjectival from cultural. This formation is not without significance, for, if I am correct, it explains why multiculturalists are more interested in systems of description than in culture itself. Hence the close logical connection between the rise of multiculturalism and the phenomenon of political correctness in speech. For, in both cases, what is important is the verbal formation by itself, apart from any intent of the speaker.

As with any system, multiculturalism is built on certain suppositions. The strength and the truth value of the system rest therefore on the strength and the truth value of the suppositions. I find that multiculturalism, as it has developed and expressed itself, on both the national and the university scenes, is the global expression of three separate, but related theses, whose truth and accuracy will determine its truth and accuracy.

The first thesis is that, up to this point, American universities have either ignored or downgraded the study of any culture other than that of Western Europe. As anyone in the field can testify, to the degree that the study of non-European cultures has been neglected, the principal cause has been the

lack of student interest which has produced a low level of financial support in the normal budget. Only when external events have intervened was money gone into these cultural areas. Thus the Vietnam War produced a windfall in the funding of East Asian studies, and, to a lesser degree, the oil crisis of 1973 increased funding to Arabic and Islamic studies. In this first thesis we find, then, what will become the distinguishing feature of multiculturalist analysis: the melding together of the true and the false, and most often of all, a proper phenomenological observation, whose existence is then explained in what one may charitably say is some fanciful causality. In this case, for example, the neglect of concern for non-European cultures is laid to a conspiracy that simply does not exist and never has. The sadly more realistic causality of student non-interest, often combined with student laziness in the study of foreign languages, is conveniently ignored, perhaps because it is too prosaic.

The second thesis is perhaps the one that lies at the heart of the multiculturalist creed. One may state it as follows: All cultures are equal, and it is not possible to say that any one culture is superior to any other one. Because of this position, one finds in the writings of multiculturalists a jungle of references to disparate cultures, invoking their authority on any given question with little or no differentiation. Hence, too, their justification for running down traditional central characters in history and substituting for them obscure characters whose chief claim for attention is often either their gender or their color and little else. This second thesis embodies a very particular philosophical position, namely, the exclusion of culture in whatever form from the realm of rational judgment.

But why does the judgment occur and even persist that one culture is superior to another? The multiculturalist response is sure and certain: A dominant culture is only dominant insofar as its followers are able to suppress other cultures. These are heady assertions indeed and deserve our most serious examination.

Why does multiculturalism insist on the equality of all cultures? For two reasons, I believe. First, that no culture be offended by being told that in the scheme of things it is less important than another. Second, because it confuses the intrinsic and extrinsic value of a given culture.

A culture's intrinsic value signifies what that culture engenders in the life, the individual life of one who possesses it. Presuming that all cultures in some way speak of the true, the beautiful, values and standards, to the individual who holds that culture, in this sense all cultures are equal, for each supplies to one who embraces it a framework for individual judgment and action. So, for example, the aesthetics of beauty for an African can only

validly grow from an African culture and in this respect cannot be judged inferior to that of another culture. In this intrinsic, individual sense, then, all cultures are equal. But, and it is indeed a big but, in terms of extrinsic value, i.e., their societal effect, all cultures are not equal, and it would be both perverse and silly to claim they are. Let us be specific. For whatever reasons, and they will be many, complex and, to some degree, obscure, the societal effect of European culture has led historically to an economic, political and scientific superiority that must lead one to conclude that this European culture in these respects is superior to other cultures. Note, I did not say morally better or more humane. These categories constitute matters of quite separate judgment. But no rational person can question that the distinguishing marks of Western culture—rational investigation and consequential application—has made it preeminent among world cultures. And it is this self-evident preeminence of Western culture that leads us to consider the thesis of multiculturalism: that cultural superiority is only achieved by political suppression of rival cultures. Once again, in this assertion, as in others, we have a combination of truth and falsehood. Yes, it is true that political suppression of the conquered culture has often taken place in history. But there are counter-examples as well. So, Rome which conquered Greece militarily was, as Horace gracefully put it, conquered culturally by the conquered land. The Islamic Empire strove at first to segregate itself religiously and culturally from the people it conquered. But the lure of social and economic advantage overwhelmed the planned and preferred segregation of the Arab conquerors. More recently we have the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which might serve as a multiculturalist model: Vienna imposed fashion, cooking and style, while leaving intact indigenous cultures. In short, the multiculturalist analysis of the relationship between culture and politics is simplistic and far too sweeping in its assertion of the political nature of culture. No people lack some form of politics. That their culture is proportionate to their political power is less than certain. One may perhaps offer the Mongols as an historical case. In their sweep across the lands of Islam they conquered and destroyed well, but that was the limit of their achievement.

What is significant in these observations is that it is history herself which refutes the theses of multiculturalism. How then shall one believe that multiculturalism represents a proper historical attitude for this country to take at this or any other instant in our tumultuous story? Even more to the point, how can multiculturalism offer such a flawed historical analysis, so flawed that it well-nigh refutes itself? Because multiculturalism sees culture as the way to and claim on political power. Their position is neatly cir-

cular: political power imposes culture which, in turn, produces more and greater political power. Granted their logic, their reasoning is impeccable. But who is it that becomes powerful through the *application* of their reasoning? Those groups who by their prior political failure, color, gender or sexual preference, for too often they will claim these as the reasons for their failure, were kept out of the ruling circle. Hence the exaltation in the curriculum and at scholarly conventions of history from the loser's point of view, not that we may be broadened by such consideration, but in order to uncover a mythical historical conspiracy that will prove that the vanquished ought to have been the victors. We have here something close to Nietzsche's demand for a transvaluation of values. Multiculturalism has meant in practice the substitution of one extreme for another. If one is male, white, of European origin, heterosexual, one is at best an insensitive bigot who must be trained to value diversity. If one is female, of color, non-European (it is difficult here to place Hispanics), gay, lesbian or bi-sexual, one is now in the "in" group, beyond criticism and so beyond truth which is dependent on such criticism. What started as perhaps a demand for balance, tolerance and reasonable protection of diversity has in practice become the exaltation of endless excuses for any lapses. So the strange and pitiful spectacle of Maya Angelou's charge of racism against the game show "Jeopardy" because it has too few non-white contestants.

Yet behind the absurdity of seeing racism in everything, which is as mad as seeing it in nothing, and using it to explain every defeat and disappointment, there is a certain Alice in Wonderland logic supplied by the theses of multiculturalism. Since culture is a function of political power, any and all cultural failings may be assigned to varying degrees of political suppression, for otherwise all cultures would be equal. Hence the whole concept of personal responsibility is endangered. For the multiculturalist the emphasis is more on the group than the person and to the group is transferred the major responsibility, at least for failure. This attitude explains, I believe, why black writers who attack Jews in statements both outlandish and dangerous will yet maintain that neither they nor their statements are anti-Jewish. They are simply the proper analysis of political exploitation, which led to economic exploitation upon which white, Jewish success has been built. That facts do not justify such analysis means nothing, for, as in all -isms, it is the -ism that is the sole, valid interpreter of the true meaning of the facts, not the other way around. And this attitude, in turn, helps to explain why, if a Jew wrote the same of blacks, it would be proof of his racism. Things mean what I want them to mean. It is this dogmatic certitude that makes debate with the multiculturalist so difficult a task, for any criticism of multi-

culturalism can only—by multiculturalism’s own standards—spring from racism or sexism or both. Given, then, the evil source of the criticism, any weapon used against it is justified, even if the limits of fairness must stretched or totally disregarded. That is why to be accused of racism or sexism in the context of multiculturalism is already to be guilty as charged. There can be no more innocent until proven guilty because any delay in announcing the guilt of the accused is equivalent to comforting the enemy and conspiring with him. If it is felt that this statement is somewhat exaggerated, may I invite you to peruse available records of what has happened to opponents of multiculturalism on the university level, whether they be faculty or students. Indeed, among several characteristics that mark multiculturalism as a new and different phenomenon is the attempt to silence student criticism thereof and not simply that of the faculty.

It would be appropriate, I believe, to give credit now to the book that really brought some degree of popular attention to the question of multiculturalism and its peculiar vision of America. I refer to Richard Bernstein’s *Dictatorship of Virtue*, published by Knopf in 1994. I must note that, while rich in anecdotal material, this work has an analytic flaw that weakens the author’s critique of what he sees as multiculturalism. The author sees in this -ism an example of what an analyst of the French Revolution has called *déravage*, which Bernstein understands in the sense of slipping, giving the reader the idea that multiculturalism strayed, for reasons unknown, from a noble idea and so landed in its present mess. But this is not, I believe, what the French analyst meant when he described the Terror as a *déravage* from the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Rather, the word is to be understood in its quite normal figurative sense of a *changement non contrôlé*, an act of change that is not controlled. It is this meaning which more accurately portrays the true nature of multiculturalism. First, it was a change. In its case a massive one. From a cry to cherish, respect, and, if need be, protect diversity, which term seems to be the historical precursor of multiculturalism, there arose a new shout—that diversity is itself the *summum bonum*, that to attempt to stress the need for unity is but a cover for the discredited “melting pot” idea of an America that is no more. May I here offer a comment. Multiculturalism exhibits a profound historical ignorance of what the “melting pot” really was. Quite apart from any individual acts of prejudice and bigotry, the aim of the melting pot philosophy was to reconfigure the public persona of the immigrant, i.e., to see to it that the language of his public discourse would be at least an approximation of standard English and that his public political philosophy would be in conformity with the American Constitution. What a person did, spoke, thought or cooked at

home was of no interest to the melting pot idea. Contrary to this idea of the necessity of some public unity, multiculturalism, at least in its extreme, would splinter the linguistic unity of the nation, depriving us of this vital link of communication among ethnically diverse people. This is truly a *changement*. Indeed, it is a revolution. And an uncontrolled one. For those who might have controlled the excesses of multicultural zeal, frightened that they would be called bigots or worse, essentially abandoned the field to those whose aim was a new segregationism which has led on most campuses to the existence of ethnic, cultural clubs whose principal purpose seems to be that we associate with our own kind. So, in place of the idea of a university as a place which empowers one to overcome parochial divisions, multiculturalism cements and glorifies these divisions, essentially destroying the unity of the university. It steadfastly clings to its fundamental confusion that to be divided is the essence of being diverse. The damage already done on the university level by this unchecked, unchallenged and uncontrolled -ism is now rapidly descending into the texts and techniques of American high schools where even more damage will be wrought.

Nothing of multiculturalism has anything to do with virtue or its imposition. For virtue, first of all, stands in the middle. Multiculturalism is but another expression of the extreme. Virtue likewise emphasizes doing good, while multiculturalism centers on feeling good, even if the good feeling must be based on encouraging absurdities such as the anti-historical myth that all of Greek philosophy was stolen from Africa and turning Columbus from saint into sinner, when neither title is historically accurate. Mr. Bernstein is inaccurate, therefore, when he conceives of multiculturalism as a dictatorship of virtue. Multiculturalism is concerned neither with virtue, education or intellect. Unabashedly it is a pure power play, for, true to itself, culture is but an arm of politics and politics is but the route to power.

What should be deduced from this analysis of multiculturalism and its multiconfusion? Primarily that there is little, if any, academic content in it. It is rather solganeering which takes place in academia and under the cover of its pietistic slogans masks a fundamentally anti-intellectual attitude. One must hope that academics and administrators will at last muster the courage to shout that the emperor has no clothes, or, more apropos of our topic, that multiculturalism has no culture.