

Moderating Excess: Monocultural Roots of Multiculturalism

by Benjamin R. Barber



Monoculturalism has multicultural consequences. Pluralism, tolerance, and multiculturalism have distinctive Eurocentric roots that justify the special place of “Western civilization” in the multicultural curriculum.

In the attacks on Western culture and the canon, there is a certain confusion about exactly what is at stake in public education in a multicultural democracy. This confusion also envelops the relationship between the many peoples who make up our society and the one sovereign people that constitutes our nation as a political and legal entity. The motto *E Pluribus Unum* is actually a little misleading, for the great *Unum* — although it once arose out of an early “many” — is in political practice the premise and not the outcome of diversity. In our constitutional regime, diversity and difference are relegated to the private sphere, where they can be promoted and enjoyed, but they are prudently barred from the public sphere, whose object is precisely to ensure the impartiality of citizenship by securing a universal personhood for all citizens. Personhood is intentionally acultural, aiming at a legal formalism in which differences are dissolved.

To take one example, the United States historically celebrated its openness to religion by building a wall between it and government. American Catholics may celebrate Catholicism and American Jews Judaism, but what American citizens celebrate is religious freedom: religious tolerance and the separation of state and church. Much the same is true of race. When, in the Civil War years, America began to try to live up to the putative universalism of its founding ideas (making good on the promise of “We the People”), it did so not by extending the civic compass from whites to blacks but, in the extraordinary words of the Fifteenth Amendment, by proclaiming that the rights of citizens cannot be denied or abridged “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” It did not read the Negro race into the Constitution, it read race itself entirely out. Difference, an occasion for pride in the private sphere, becomes in the public an occasion for prejudice, and hence is prohibited.

The controversial 1991 New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee report “One Nation: Many Peoples” is but one example of a form of multiculturalism that seems insufficiently attuned to commonality. It focuses on the plural “peoples” of New York State to ground its multicultural inclinations, but about the “nation” alluded to in its title it is earnestly opaque — as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Diane Ravitch, and other critics have noted. The report takes a seemingly moderate attitude, claiming to “balance” difference and citizenship, as if they were two sides of a single coin, and in doing so meets the dialectical standards emphasized in the last section. But there is a sense in which a dialectical balance is hard to come by. Understood as incommensurable virtues of quite separate public and private realms, difference and citizenship are finally “balanced” only by keeping them apart — the one, personal and private; the other, public and civic.

This raises a question about public education’s civic mission and its public agenda. Like some of the conservatives we have been criticizing, the New York State committee’s report neither acknowledges sufficiently the overriding interest of public schools in the public education of democratic citizens (which requires an emphasis on the commonality of democratic civic ideals) nor recognizes fully the cultural roots of those ideals in the “dominant culture” it is so impatient to delegitimize. Mimicking those conservatives who want to privatize education, radical multiculturalists sometimes seem anxious to let the “public” fall silently out of public education. Despairing of the private domain, they seem to want education to assume the private duties of cultural socialization traditionally discharged by family, religion, and tradition — by private groups and voluntary associations.

Conservatives want to teach the canon, critics want to teach multiculturalism: Who wants to teach democracy? Private agendas abound: Who will teach the public agenda? Like other universals, the very notion of a public can be rendered illegitimate by a too-critical multiculturalism that insists on seeing American culture as nothing more than a disguise for the hegemony of a single class. Public education (most education in America) is necessarily about the education of public persons, of democratic citizens devoted to a common set of legal and political principles that work both to ameliorate and to transcend difference. These principles are the water in which individuals and distinctive groups swim without colliding. To teach these democratic principles means, in turn, to teach democracy’s history and supporting culture — along with its defects and manifold hypocrisies.

Formally speaking, as an abstract system of laws, democracy’s constitutional and civic framework is independent of culture; genealogically, it is neither free-floating nor culturally undetermined. The principle of universal citizenship, the primacy of law

over human whim, the aspiration to civic participation — above all, the crucial idea underlying multiculturalism that all humans are created equal and have equal rights as individuals and as members of ethnic, gender, religious, and other groups — these are all ideals that can neither be plucked from thin air nor selected at random from some global inventory available to all peoples at all times. As observed above, many cultures evince universal tendencies, but not all tendencies can be universally found in all cultures.

Think for a moment about the ideas and principles underlying anticanonical curricular innovation and critical multiculturalism: a conviction that individuals and groups have a right to self-determination; a belief in human equality coupled with a belief in human autonomy; the tenet that holds that domination in social relations, however grounded, is always illegitimate; and the principle that reason and the knowledge issuing from reason are themselves socially embedded in personal biography and social history, and thus in power relations. Every one of these ideas is predominantly the product of Western civilization. Science, technology, mathematics, literacy, literature, and scores of other cultural artifacts have origins that can be traced to a wide variety of civilizations, including those of Africa and Asia. Democracy has had a narrower provenance. Multiculturalism as an ideal has flourished mainly in the West. There were in Africa magnificent ancient cultures — in Benin, in Zimbabwe, in Mali, in Ghana, and (as is better known) in Egypt — from which Westerners have much to learn; moreover, these civilizations have influenced the early shaping of Western civilization itself. But liberal democracy and its supporting ideology of rights, equality, and autonomous community do not belong to their generic legacy or largesse. They are rooted in Europe and become stronger as European civilization advances. The democratic idea is born in a delicate condition in Judeo-Christian Western Asia and in the civic republicanism of Hellenic Athens and the republican legalism of Rome; it grows in medieval Christian Europe and emerges in the free principalities of Italy, Switzerland, and Germany in early modern Europe. In the new nation-states of France and England, it is tested in the quest for religious freedom from repressive church-related monarchies and in the struggle for self-government in the face of despotism. America's unifying political principles emerge, in turn, as hard-won spoils of this violent, frequently hypocritical, and always powerfully ambivalent history. These unifying and just ideals alone are what privilege "Western civilization" courses and whatever principal texts (the canon) might be associated with them in America's classrooms.

Put simply, multiculturalism has monocultural origins. As a society, we are a rich tapestry of peoples from every part of the globe,



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each with its own proud history and cultural roots. We need curricula attuned to that variety and capable of drawing marginalized peoples into learning. But as a constitutional system offering to these multiple peoples a regime of democratic tolerance, stable pluralism, and mutual respect that (to the degree the ideal is made real) can protect all these constituent cultures, we have a particular, even unique, cultural history. For many, perhaps even most, societies, multiculturalism and the celebration of difference have meant prejudice, persecution, fratricide, tribal war, and anarchy. America is the exception, Yugoslavia more nearly the rule. Current examples of unstable multicultural societies can be found almost anywhere one looks: not just Yugoslavia but in Romania, in India, in Nigeria, in Sri Lanka, and of course in the disintegrated ex-Soviet Union. Even in liberal multicultural societies such as Switzerland, Belgium, Spain, and Canada, cultural minorities exist in various degrees of distrust, animosity, and open rebellion with respect to the dominant majority.

Our own European brand of multiculturalism, before it was modulated by liberal democracy, gave rise not to tolerance and stability but to the War of the Roses, the Inquisition, and the Thirty Years War. And then there was a tragic history of colonialism and imperialism that paralleled the rise of liberal democracy. Where democracy failed in Europe, it produced two centuries of intranational fratricide, several world wars, and the Holocaust. It was refugees from these multicultural conflagrations who sought in America what they believed was a unique brand of political comity; a comity that, they believed, was afforded by a constitutional system devoted, in the ideal at least, to universal equality and rights. The liberal democratic ideals that permit, even encourage, cultures rooted in difference to coexist and cooperate rather than persecute and annihilate, that afford celebration of difference without producing discrimination and internecine warfare, must then be regarded as both rare and precious.

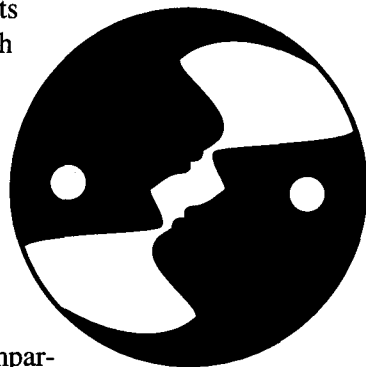
Radical teachers — reductionist, relativist, deconstructionist, postmodern — are children of a predominantly Western tradition and a tribute to its procreative diversity. Critics of the canon are the canon's latest interlocutors and proof of its evolving character. The canon has always had critics; indeed, it is constituted by a series of radical critiques, each one widening the compass of debate and enlarging the pool of debaters. The role of "outsider" coveted by modern critics was invented by some of the greatest "canonical" writers, including Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche, right down to Arendt, Foucault, and Derrida.

The history that defines multicultural ideas would then seem worthy of special attention in a society that, precisely in the name of its variety, wishes to succor and preserve its unity. It is neither Eurocentric arrogance nor white male hegemony that pleads for special attention: it is self-reflective and honest multiculturalism bent on

exploring its own genealogy. Indeed, it is only the sense of commonality that can kindle common responsibilities that oblige Americans to care about the needs and aspirations of groups other than their own.

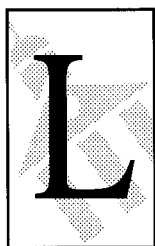
The West defined by its dead white male protagonists has brought many ills to the modern world: colonialism, paternalism, expansionism, imperialism, and an unsavory taste for hypocrisy that permitted the toleration of slavery in the midst of freedom and still permits poverty in the midst of plenty. Of course, the East and the South do not necessarily look much better when their stories are told by dead brown males (try reading the Hindi *Bhagavad-Gita* for its multicultural and transgender perspectives!) or by live yellow males (the Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere was a melting pot in which distinctive peoples were melted in a rather more literal sense than they might have wished) or even by live white females (Are the fringes of the pro-life or pro-choice movements any less monomaniacal and intolerant than the macho-man gun lobby?). Still, with or without the comparisons, the history we teach our children must report and critically debate and perhaps even distribute blame for the consequences of elitist hegemony. But in the shadowed train of its many vices, the Western tradition also brought with it one great set of virtues, a gift of its dialectical history: the ideal of democracy and the rule of law, of personal liberty secured by popular sovereignty. It has given us the democratic tools with which democracy's hypocrisies and disguised hegemonies might be challenged and dismantled. And it has produced those vital ideals of pluralism, tolerance, and the separation of private and public that have permitted American multiculturalism to function democratically rather than destructively.

It would be a terrible irony if one of the results of democracy's American success were to be an erosion of education for American democracy; if the critical perspective parented by Western philosophy were to turn patricidal; if the principles of universal inclusion and tolerance for diversity that have drawn and continue to draw so many different cultures to this land and are the essence of what it means to be an American were to be shoved aside because of a refusal, in the name of difference, to teach their unique history and, along with its vices, the virtues of the culture that produced them.



Shredding the Race Card

by Eric Liu



ast month my sister called me a “banana.”

I’d been kidding her about her love of hip-hop music and dance. She joked that, yes, despite being the daughter of Chinese immigrants, she was indeed “black at heart.” And then she added, lightheartedly, “You, on the other hand, well, you’re basically a banana.” That is yellow on the outside but white in the inside.

“I’m no banana!” I protested. But it was too late. I stood accused.

In the weeks since then, I have wondered what it means to be black, or white, or Asian, “at heart” — particularly for my generation. The answers have been troubling. In times that demand ever-clearer thinking, it has become too easy for us to shut off our brains: “It’s a black thing,” says the popular T-shirt. “You wouldn’t understand.”

The civil rights triumphs of the sixties and the cultural revolutions that followed made it possible for minorities to celebrate our heritages in a way that is empowering to us and enriching to the nation. But the sixties also bequeathed to young Americans a legacy of near-pathological race-consciousness, a culture not of diversity but of division and subdivision.

Today’s society of entitlement — and of race-entitlement in particular — tells us plenty about what we get (and don’t get) if we are black or white or female or male or old or young. It is silent, however, on some other important issues.

For instance: What do we “get” for being American? And just as importantly, what do we owe? These are questions around which minorities like me must tread carefully — focusing on common interests, on civic culture, on responsibility, and on integration sounds a little too “white” for some people.

The suspicion that such rhetoric is a smoke screen for right-wing racism is not without foundation. But both “sides” in the debate about race are equally responsible for the narrowness that pervades the discussion.

Let’s start with the politically correct left. Among twentysome-things, these are, if not the majority, then a most oppressively vocal minority. One ongoing p.c. crusade, the push for “multicultural education,” encapsulates all that is flawed with today’s liberals.

The desire to make curricula more inclusive and historically accurate is unassailable. But the “multiculturalists” are not con-