The Impact of Multiculturalism on Liberal Education in America

Thomas K. Lindsay
University of Northern Iowa

Declining Education and Inflaming Democratic Discourse

This essay addresses two problems that are intimately related. The first problem has become public knowledge: the decline in educational performance in the U.S.A. On this point, the results of one recent survey suffice. American high school seniors were asked to identify the half-century during which the American Civil War took place. A majority failed to answer correctly – and this was a multiple-choice question. The same study revealed that a majority of American high school seniors, when presented with statements taken from either the United States Constitution or Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, could not identify which of the two texts was the source. It would seem that the two documents that, more than anything else, have shaped this century are virtually indistinguishable to most of today's American high school graduates.

The second problem is the decline in the civility with which public discourse is conducted. Not only is it getting more and more difficult for people to talk to each other, but even less do people listen, preferring a scorched-earth policy over discussion and compromise. From the universities, to the National Endowment for the Arts, to even the Boy Scouts, the culture clash between "traditional values" and "cultural diversity" is stretching democratic sensibilities nearly to the breaking point. On the Right, fear and anger are escalating in response to the perceived moral dissolution. On the Left, "bourgeois" notions of economic and political liberty are denounced as sham rationalizations in the service of class inequality. And from the most recent entrant into the fray, multiculturalism, we learn that mere toleration of diversity, the classical liberal solution, will no longer do: not toleration but nothing less than "celebration" must be the new moral imperative.

But if multiculturalists are unabashedly aggressive in their assaults on Western democracy, no less remarkable is the blanket passiveness with which their claims are met in American institutions

of higher learning. The majority of my colleagues in the university, who believe in and practice mainstream liberalism, somehow find themselves intellectually and morally bound to support the multicultural agenda that is at this moment establishing ever more beachheads on the campuses. Or, if they do not support the new orthodoxy, they believe that their liberalism compels at least their silent acquiescence.

Is Opposition to Multiculturalism Bigotry?

At first glance, this is easy to understand. Among liberal Americans, who can be unsympathetic to multiculturalism's stated quest to give proper consideration to cultures other than America's own, and this as part of a larger project that aims both to broaden their vision and to abolish bigotry? Did not America's classical liberal Founders envision a society that practiced and cherished toleration? Given this, how could they object to the extension of this project to the universities? After all, liberal education at its deepest is the search for a common, basic human nature, unaffected by culture. In this search, liberal education can be the partisan of no particular culture, even of America's. Instead, it investigates and must investigate foreign ideas as well as cultures in its attempt to discover what it regards as the best, the most fully rational way of life.

As the above observations suggest, multiculturalism's quest to produce a people that "celebrates diversity" appears at first to be only a logical, if more committed, extension of the classical liberal project. And were this the case, one could simply identify multiculturalism with liberal education or, more precisely, one could aver that liberal education fosters and requires what I shall call "true multiculturalism" – true openness to the teachings of other cultures. But the harmony between liberal education and the current version of multiculturalism is only apparent. The project being pushed under the name of multiculturalism today bears little resemblance to what I have called true multiculturalism. Rather, the multiculturalism of today is more precisely described as "relativist" – or "radical multiculturalism." Between radical multiculturalism and liberal education lie differences so deep that the success of this version of multiculturalism cannot but spell the death not only of liberal education but also liberal democracy. This becomes apparent on examining multiculturalism's critique of the older, that is, the liberal, view of toleration.

The Attack on the Liberal Reconciliation
of the Individual and the Community

Classical liberal toleration recognizes and aims to relieve the natural tension between, on the one hand, extraordinary individuals (who can also be quite peculiar, e.g., Socrates, Van Gogh, Howard Hughes) and, on the other hand, the moral-political community. To effect this reconciliation, that is, to do justice to both individual liberty and social cohesion, liberalism "tolerates" such individuals, while asking, in the name of social harmony, that they keep to themselves. In so doing, liberalism seeks to ensure the freedom required for "fringe" views and lives, while at the same time recognizing that a certain "closedness" is an inescapable requirement of moral and political health. While citizens in a liberal regime would not be the subjects of Socrates (and some might decline even to be his students), neither would liberal citizens be Socrates' executioners.

But while liberal toleration has been successful over the last two centuries in making liberty acceptable to partisans of democratic equality as well as republican virtue, it has yet to make its peace with that species of post-modernism that I have labelled "relativist-multiculturalism" – and with good reason, for at the bottom of the current version of multiculturalism lies the conviction that all values are equal (because all are equally unknowable by reason); therefore "self-creation," rather than rational discovery (classical liberalism's focus), has become the post-modern standard of human dignity. Given this jettisoning of the idea that there are authoritative standards of virtue and vice, equality in of rights (the classical liberal project) is no longer sufficient, and must be replaced by equality in people's "lifestyles."

Hence, indiscriminate toleration, even "celebration," has supplanted the older, republican concern with civic virtue. But whereas older versions of republicanism sought to subordinate "each to the all" (sought to subordinate each individual to the community's view of the common good), radical multiculturalism looks to subordinate "all to the each" – that is, to each and every, necessarily idiosyncratic, version of self-creation. Stated simply: morality grounded in nature's amorality; equality grounded in reason's impotence at "prioritizing values"; and liberty grounded in the inability to distinguish liberty from license – these are the leading

characters in the multiculturalist drama.

Against my diagnosis, many of my colleagues offer a very common-sensical, in fact, a very liberal, response. They argue that the multicultural agenda, while it aims radically to transform society, will in time come itself to be transformed, that is, to be moderated, by society's moral demands. In this account, multiculturalism's ideological excesses will inevitably produce a backlash from which all but its most ardent proponents will flee to the safer havens of moderation. Accordingly, the celebration crowd will come to recognize that its demands for more than mere tolerance endanger social harmony and, with it, the grounds of its own liberty. Faced with the self-undoing recklessness of their more excessive demands, they will act soberly to retract them. Because Americans live in a mass democracy, because here public opinion finally reigns supreme, multiculturalism, so I am told, will be changed as much as the society it seeks to change. The net result will be a society that is more tolerant and an intellectual class that is more restrained. As a Marxist professor recently argued to me, "Multiculturalism, like everything else that pretends to significance in America, will come in time to be co-opted."

I am less soothed by this forecast than are some of my colleagues, because I cannot believe it. Certainly there is no denying that such appeals to prudence, to moderation, and to self-preservation have been successful for the last 200 years, that is, have been successful during classical liberalism's reign. But will they prove persuasive with liberalism's latest critics? In trying to answer this question, we need first to examine more closely what accounted for liberalism's principled victories over its past opponents.

The Liberal Case for a Common Human Nature

The arguments of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and the Founding Fathers succeeded in making America the first regime to ground its fundamental moral and political principles on the authority of reason alone. As Jefferson makes clear in the American Declaration of Independence, that government alone is legitimate that discerns and embraces the "self-evident truths" of human nature. Primary among these truths are natural equality, inalienable rights, and hence, the merit to be governed only by consent. These truths and their political implications, as articulated in the Declaration, form

what has been called the "American creed" or the American theory of justice.

But to whom are these truths self-evident? They are self-evident, the Declaration implies, only to those who use their powers of reason to comprehend what it means to be a human being, what it is that separates us from the animals, and what it is, therefore, that all human beings deserve. From this rational self-examination, liberalism's founders gleaned that all human beings share at bottom the passion for and subsequent right to life and the liberty life requires. The social contract relies on the capacity of all to employ their reason toward these fundamental ends. On the basis of this view of the universality of reason's service in the moral and political realms, America's Founders thought themselves justified in announcing the universal proposition, "all men are created equal."

Hence, for the American Founders, reason both unites and guides. In point of fact, it does not go too far to say that the American principles of government stand or fall on the basis of the final power of human reason to serve as both the core of America's identity and as its beacon.

The Fall from Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness
to the Lawless Liberty of the Soulless Self

But for radical multiculturalism, reason has fallen from its throne. In the present epoch, both Marx on the Left and Nietzsche on the Right agree on reason's merely subordinate status. With the subsequent rejection of the notion that rationally discerned and grounded rights are the fundamental facts of humanity, that which is now argued to be fundamental – whether it be race, or class, or gender, or power, or creativity, or sexual orientation – no longer unites Americans, as did classical liberalism's world view, but, instead, forever separates them. All of these formulas find fundamental differences to outweigh the sameness to which liberalism looks in positing a universal "human nature" on which liberalism's rights-doctrine relies. Stated simply, humanity understood as unprincipled creativity leaves no truly *common* appeal to make in politics nor any common education to provide in the nation's schools.

For this reason multicultural education balkanizes the study of human nature into "women's studies," "black studies," "gay and lesbian studies," etc. In this light, I find the best short definition of today's

multiculturalism to be this: radical multiculturalism is a quota system for books. Books and their ideas deserve such "proportional representation" in the curriculum only if all ideas are equal. And all ideas can be equal only if reason is rendered powerless.

I want to stress this point: when reason – which is at the core of the liberal definition of human nature – was repudiated, so was any possibility that we could discover objective natural standards on the basis of which compromise might be reached in the name of respecting equal rights. Today, mere equality in rights is not only insufficient, it is insulting, it is oppressive, in the eyes of those for whom only equal dignity can be justice.

Multiculturalism versus Social Harmony
This is why I am less than confident that multiculturalism will come to moderate itself in the face of the demands of social harmony. After all, the downfall of reason and the resulting balkanization of what is now only nominally (and derisively) referred to as "human nature" can justify – for Nietzsche, does justify – the merciless extinction of multitudes in the name of some self-creative act. Absent any objective moral standards, the new individualist cannot be censured for pursuing violence if he should deem his self-creation requires it. In fact, given the post-modernist contempt for liberal toleration – to cite one massive example, the post-modernist Richard Rorty comes close to praising what he calls the "private poem" in the "sadist['s]" "extreme cruelty" – should we expect anything less than violence? Years ago Supreme Court Justice Jackson argued that principles have a way of working themselves out to the "limits of their logic." Therefore, in the face of the post-modernist world view, I cannot help but conclude that classical liberal, prudential arguments for political moderation come much too late.

What is more, the liberal conviction of the goodness of political moderation itself depends on the prior conviction that political life is limited in its ability to provide all goods to all people. For the genuine liberal, the limitations of politics follow logically from the limitations of human nature. As James Madison states the point in *Federalist* 51, "if men were angels, no government would be necessary." This means that any recognition of the limits of politics requires first looking to a standard that transcends politics, that is superior to politics. But today's multiculturalism, grounded in

relativism, denies trans-political standards. At the same time, it argues that the "self" – in the name of which it would transform society – is itself radically derivative of society. As Rorty puts it, "Socialization goes all the way down, and who gets to do the socializing is often a matter of who manages to kill whom first."

Hence, from this post-modern marriage of cultural relativism and cultural determinism, the "self" finds itself both radically above and radically below culture: culture stands as both absolute and groundless. While this may appear as a contradictory proposition, it is so only from the standpoint of (what multiculturalists have of late come to call "logocentric," or "Eurocentric," or "phallocentric") reason, which is now viewed as only one more of the groundless orthodoxies of (to use Rorty's description) the "rich North Atlantic" democracies.

So, again, I cannot help but be less confident than are some of my colleagues in the ultimate effectiveness of their very prudent and very temperate appeals in the face of the intemperance of this new "anti-Science" Science. Arguments for social harmony will be denounced on the grounds that such appeals are anchored in a notion of the limits of "human nature," a notion which is said to be a product of bourgeois prejudice (on this point, and again, both Marx and Nietzsche agree, although for clearly different reasons). In fact, any arguments for moderation based on a view of the limits of political justice must be denounced: "creativity" is alleged to know no limits.

The question then becomes, "How did America come to this point?" After bemoaning the menace of relativist-multiculturalism, those who insist on continuing to defend liberalism and liberal education are also duty-bound to ask what responsibility liberalism itself bears for America's decline. A question: Would it be remarkable if the principles of classical liberalism's "naked public square" have managed, in America's two hundred years as a nation, to "trickle down" to the private sphere? We may have to concede, if grudgingly and with important qualifications, that the moral cohesion and community support offered by the private sphere during America's earlier period were in part the product of a collective hangover from institutions and practices – religion, tradition, and the extended family – that liberalism's own principles helped to "demystify." Their having been already weakened by liberalism, is it truly remarkable that these havens of the private have become easy

prey for those multiculturalists who now view them only as enemies of "diversity"?

If we grant that liberalism at least opened America to its current balkanization, then we need also to ask ourselves whether radical multiculturalism represents, in key respects, the attempt to reestablish community on the ashes left by liberalism and relativism. That is to say, liberalism did away with the trans-political authority of religion, tradition, and the extended family. Relativism, in turn, by denying reason its former power, closed it off from access to trans-political natural standards. Therefore, all that is left as a support for community is the solitary, unsupported "self." The question then becomes how to construct community out of a diversity of uncommon "selves." The answer: only by celebrating diversity, which means that only the community that is not a community can satisfy the self without a soul (fixed nature).

In this light, perhaps we should not be surprised that the "anti-community" community, in order to be set in motion, must uniformly impose diversity-celebration on those who would dare to claim knowledge of and guidance from any standards superior to standard-less self-creation. Stated simply, radical multiculturalism aims to remedy what it perceives as classical liberalism's failure at supporting community, but it does so on the basis of the success of relativism; therefore, diversity-as-monolith (= political correctness) imposes the communal value of value non-imposition (= diversity-celebration) – and all this in the name of the lawless liberty of the soulless self.

The Atomizing Emphasis on "Rights"

Recently a number of thinkers have noticed and become concerned over liberalism's atomizing emphasis on rights. Perhaps the latest is Mary Ann Glendon's thoughtful book, *Rights Talk*. Glendon urges as a counterbalance to this problem a return to vigorous moral discourse in peoples' private lives. Her's is a serious project at which we need to look hard. At the same time, given current political and cultural tendencies, we need also to ask where and to what extent there will remain an autonomous sphere of the private in which to foster and nourish private morality. Some age-old answers to this question are, first, "private associations" and second, and more important, the family. But consider the present and likely future status of both under the post-modernist political agenda. For

the last three years, one such "private association," the Boy Scouts, has come under legal attack for discriminating against prospective Scout leaders on the basis of sexual orientation. Is this an unrepresentative fluke? One might think so were it not for the fact that the leader of the initial attack on the Scouts, Roberta Atchenberg, was subsequently appointed to be assistant secretary for fair housing at HUD.

Consider also the growth of the movement seeking to grant to children the right to sue their parents – for which a Florida judge in 1992 lent the precedent. In the name of the post-modern vision of "liberty," the realm of the private must suffer a shrinking. Therefore, pointing to families and private associations as safe havens for nourishing morality, while a very laudable goal, was a much more viable option in Tocqueville's day (it was he who first proposed this as a remedy to democratic conformism). Because today is not Tocqueville's day, I wonder whether the hostility with which any autonomy-promoting agenda will be viewed by the totalitarian-tending project of post-modernist "emancipation" if fully appreciated today. And in this light, the diversity-enforcing speech restrictions so in vogue at a growing number of American universities appear to be but the first step in a project that requires for its fulfillment its extension to society as a whole.

Conclusion: The Future of a Delusion

It is not simply that radical multiculturalism is bad education, trendy education, education lacking any real substance. All these things it is; but as bad as this is, today's multiculturalism – this new and deluded education in separatism – threatens America with consequences even more far-reaching and pernicious than the "dumbing down" of its children. Because, while radical multiculturalism might not teach today's students even the simplest facts about American history, what it does teach them threatens to bring on them only more separatism, hostility, and violence, leading in time, perhaps, to a new civil war.

Clearly, the picture for America as a multi-cultural society, as presented in this argument, is somewhat bleak. Doubtless, the possibility of a truly liberal way of life requires that people discover once again that there is actually something worth looking up to, that is, it requires that they refute Rorty's claim that "there is nothing to

people except what has been socialized into them." What is required is a relearning of the idea that natural standards can be discovered through reason, rather than merely idiosyncratically created through "private poems." Without the possibility of intellectual freedom or self-understanding (rather than mere "self-creation"), those who today would purge both the American curriculum and its politics of its largely "Eurocentric" focus are likely to carry the day.

How likely is such a renaissance to occur? A strong case can be made for the expectation that many, both in the academy and out, will continue to believe that radical multiculturalism is only liberalism taken seriously. Back in the '20s and '30s the American left had a favorite line. They told us that "communism is only twentieth-century Americanism," and some well-intentioned Americans believed it. The parallel between the older Communism = Americanism formula and the present multiculturalism = liberalism formula is frighteningly perfect.

Union Myopia and the Taxation of Capital

Dwight R. Lee
Ramsey Professor of Economics, University of Georgia
Robert L. Sexton
Professor of Economics, Pepperdine University
Philip E. Graves
Professor of Economics, University of Colorado

As with managers, politicians, or any other groups of decision makers, workers will appropriately weigh the future when it is in their private advantage to do so. Private ownership plays an important role in providing the proper set of incentives. Workers own the future income streams their human capital allows them to generate. As a result, they willingly sacrifice current income in order to invest in their human capital by going to college, taking training courses, and working at low-paying jobs which provide opportunities for valuable experience and future advancement. Empirical work on the rate of return from educational expenditures indicates that future returns are heavily weighted when people are investing in their own human capital.[1]

As far as individual workers are concerned, however, sacrificing current income in the form, say, of a lower current salary in order to invest in the future productivity of the firm for which they work is an entirely different matter. In the first place, each worker would incur personally the entire cost of his or her lower salary while realizing that the future benefits from increased productivity would be spread over everyone with a financial stake in the firm. Each worker would have an obvious motivation for resisting a reduction in his or her salary in order to make such an investment. Secondly, in their roles as workers, individuals will perceive no benefit from improved firm productivity beyond the point in time when they sever their employ-

---

1. See George Psacharopoulos, "Returns to Education: A Further International Update and Implications," *Journal of Human Resources*, 20, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 583-604, for a discussion of many of the empirical studies on the return to education. Also see Kevin Murphy and Finis Welch, "Wage Premiums for College Graduates: Recent Growth and Possible Explanations" *Educational Researcher*, May 1989, pp.17-26.