Multiculturalism and American Democracy

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Historically, multiculturalism has not often been associated with democracy; more often, it has been the practice of empires and hegemonies, the condition of a policy of divide and rule. In fact, multiculturalism is not easily compatible with democracy, as any day's newspaper can tell us: Yugoslavia managed, more or less, as a one-party autocracy, but it proved unable to survive democratization, and it would be easy to add other painful examples.

Nor is this surprising: a grand tradition in political theory holds that democracy requires a high level of trust in one's fellow citizens, or at least a broad sphere of the taken-for-granted in civil life. As in the New England of Tocqueville's describing, an open politics presumes a more or less closed society. The Federalist's argument for a large and diverse republic, of course, reverses this order of things. It prescribes social openness of a fairly radical sort, making it a first principle to protect the differences in our faculties and opinions. The new order of the American republic, consequently, is not defined by usages and habits, but by forms and laws. The framers' tolerance did have limits: they assumed and relied on a people who observed the decencies and for whom a word was a bond. At bottom, however, they afforded us a relatively open society on the basis of a politics that is closed in critical respects. The Constitution's constraints and barriers only follow the even stricter teaching of the Declaration of Independence, according to which we are allowed to calculate our interests and to bargain them away, but our rights are unalienable, immune to the discountings of interest or culture.

It is worth remembering that there were serious conflicts of culture in eighteenth-century America, most evident in the problem of slavery—for slavery, as Anne Norton reminds us, did create a culture and a tenacious one—but also simmering in the relations between Europeans and aboriginal peoples, in the conflict between religion and secularism, and in the largely forgotten animosities among sects. From the beginning, multiculturality has tested the Constitution and the laws, raising the question of
whether conflicts between cultures can be subordinated to and confined within democratic forms or whether “culture wars” will be fought with weapons other than words and votes.\(^6\)

Slavery, of course, proved too much for democratic politics, and Tocqueville, who feared as much, was also too close to the mark in his pessimism about race. But Tocqueville was impressed by the American entente with religion, especially because the republic seemed on the way to an accommodation with Roman Catholicism; and his argument has a good deal to say about the conditions of successful multiculturality.

Tocqueville observed that any religious doctrine (and he might have added, any culture) has a political tendency that will assert itself if unchecked. Circumstances, however, can alter the effects of belief, its expression in day-to-day life. Thus, despite its aristocratic structure and historic affinities, Roman Catholicism in America had some sympathy for republican government, just as most Catholics supported the Democratic Party, if only because, en masse, American Catholics were poor.\(^7\)

Confrontation with new circumstances unsettles authority and forces a belief or culture to abandon the habitual for the more or less conscious and chosen, separating those things that seem essential—that must be remembered and retained—from those that can be safely left behind.\(^8\) The new world of Tocqueville’s discerning, of course, challenges all ways and faiths to accommodate themselves to democratic principles. Prudence dictates that the majority not be opposed except in vital matters, and even then, with the foreknowledge that defeat is likely: “In ages of equality, kings may often command obedience, but the majority always commands belief.”\(^9\) That counsel is even more urgent in a country like the United States, where democracy has shaped the laws. Religions and cultures are fortunate, consequently, if their tenets are at least compatible with democratic doctrine. Without that consonance, they face political society on an implicit field of battle; and even those, like Tocqueville, who are confident that they can predict the winner may regret the war.

In Tocqueville’s view, Catholics were among the lucky, because America imposed only a kind of purification on a faith already egalitarian at root. As Tocqueville explained it, amid the unequal societies of the feudal era, responding to a world of nations, castes, and classes, the Church—while clinging to the universal sovereignty of God—had “improperly enhanced” the importance of “divine agents.”\(^10\) America, Tocqueville claimed, had allowed and compelled the Church to return to first things, and especially to an emphasis on
human unity. (By contrast, Tocqueville thought that any relation between
democracy and Islam would be more troubled, because so much traditional
legal and political teaching is included in the Koran, at the heart of the creed;
and there is very little, so far, to suggest that he was not right.)

Moreover, among Catholics, American laws were nurturing new political
beliefs. Catholics had accepted a religiously neutral government partly from
necessity and partly to protect themselves against old animosities, but Toc­
queville found them increasingly positive in their support for a separation of
church and state. Even the zealous Father Mullon told Tocqueville and Bea­
umont that state support for religion was harmful; and startlingly, the vicar
general claimed that “enlightenment” was favorable to the “religious spirit.”

As Catholicism was “modified” in a democratic and republican direc­
tion, Tocqueville contended, there was a reciprocal growth of tolerance be­
tween Catholics and non-Catholics, a softening of the boundaries between
communions. Not that Catholicism had dissolved into indistinction: its rites
and beliefs still seemed bizarre to the Protestant majority. But, as Tocqueville
saw it, the Church was winning a respected place in American life, with more
promise for the future.

Uncharacteristically, Tocqueville was overoptimistic: memories of the
Reformation remained a fault line in American party politics at least until
1960, along with the even more tenacious legacy of slavery and the Civil
War. Yet partisan conflicts, as George Washington Plunkitt reminded us,
mark democracy’s ascendancy over cultures; and in the long term, Toc­
queville seems to have been right in thinking that he had discerned a suc­
cess story in the American politics of culture.

What his argument shows us, however, is stern as well as sunny. Eco­
nomic and social circumstances, especially well-being, can combine with
cultural compatibility to make matters much less painful; but in the end,
democracy can accommodate a culture only to the extent that it accepts the
sovereignty of democratic laws, and hence the certainty of at least some cul­
tural attenuation. In America, all cultures and faiths—the established as well
as the excluded—are caught up in an ongoing redefinition in relation to the
laws and to each other, a process of learning, forgetting, and selectively
remembering that lays down both the boundaries of community and the
civil meaning of the term “American.”

Since, as a general rule, the Constitution insists on an individual’s right
to leave faith or community behind, the hold of such cultures depends on
persuasion and social sanctions, and especially on an early education capa-
ble of armoring the soul against the power of majority opinion. In critical respects, consequently, a multicultural politics is always a politics of schooling. As institutions, the schools are a proving ground, for there, if not before, the public can make itself heard. (These days, of course, the media inserts its “hidden curriculum” much earlier and more pervasively.) In the dialogue between the public and the cultures, an element of multiculturalism is only good manners, an acknowledgement of one’s audience that schools commonly have tried to practice. But contemporary multiculturalism goes farther: up to a point, it seeks to enlist public authority on the side of the cultures—though not, significantly, on the side of faith.

For most of its contemporary defenders, multiculturalism is only a means in the service of a generous, democratic end: their real goal is inclusion, the hope of drawing new groups and cultures into a respected place in a strengthened civic life. As multiculturalists observe, there are cracks in some of the old pillars of American civic education. In lean economic times, there are no guarantees of the assurance of work at socially adequate wages that Jefferson saw as the right bower in the game of civic dignity. And multiculturalists are even more moved by the fact that the economy and the media are fragmenting communities and cultures, muting the second voice of America’s grand dialogue in favor of an increasingly radical individualism on one hand and tyranny of the majority on the other. Multiculturalism, in this view, is an attempt to check disintegration and to promote a political pluralism in the image of Randolph Bourne’s celebrated essay, “Trans-National America.”

Notice at the outset, however, that this sort of multiculturalism regards a broadly democratic politics not as one culture among many, but as a superior standard entitled to rule. That assumption is reflected in the common tendency to slide over or suppress the nondemocratic aspects of the cultures being recognized, implicitly rejecting whatever is incompatible with a democratic life and creed. (I will have more to say about this later on.) And, of course, commitment to multiculturalism is ordinarily accompanied by the insistence that racism, sexism, homophobia, and the like are thoroughly unacceptable. Multiculturalism aspires to substitute a salad bowl for the melting pot, but—as the metaphor indicates—it still looks for a politics enclosed by a democratic orthodoxy.

Yet in their thinking about democracy, multiculturalists incline to focus on the social and the cultural, and to slight democratic institutions—a tendency that is especially unfortunate given the close relationship between the Constitution and the very idea of a multicultural republic. In fact, the
multicultural persuasion is apt to stress the presence of slavery and the absence of women in the Constitution, or to argue that even the proclamation of natural equality in the Declaration of Independence refers only to “men,” and implicitly only to white men, and to conclude that the Declaration and the Constitution reflect only the culture and interests of European males in the then-dominant class.

A good deal of this is simply silly. There is ample evidence, for example, that the Declaration’s affirmation of equality was understood to refer to all races, and that the accommodation with slavery in the Constitution—made necessary, paradoxically, by the multicultural goal of including the South in the Union—was regarded as a violation of natural right. Consider the exchange in South Carolina, when one legislator asked that stock-in-trade Antifederalist question, “Why was not this Constitution ushered in with a bill of rights?” Charles Cotesworth Pinckney answered that, among other reasons, “Such bills generally begin with declaring that all men are by nature born free. Now, we should make that declaration with very bad grace, when a large part of our property consists in men who are actually born slaves.”

Even where the multiculturalist critique tells us something important about the Constitution, as it does by pointing to oppressions based on race and gender, it underrates the importance of constitutional forms. The norm of equality makes violations of that rule anomalous, things that have to be euphemized or explained. The exceptions are constantly criticized by the rule, which by setting a direction can become, as Harvey Mansfield observes, “the cause of going if not getting there.”

Democracy, moreover, is a hard school, and the culture of democracy depends on forms, especially in a large republic. Its cornerstone, majority rule, depends on the form by which every vote is treated as equal; similarly, the vast majority of us can have a voice in public councils only through the form of representation, determined in districts and by election. Even our efforts to acquire a more substantial voice through participation require the “art of association,” and hence the discipline of Roberts’ Rules or some other form of order. At best, our politics involves frustrations and indignities, and rapid economic change and the resulting disorder of society weaken the compensations of private life. Americans are eager for a kind of strong government, but their support for democratic institutions is dangerously thin. Multiculturalists, the champions of minorities, have very good reason to give more—and more serious—attention to the institutional frame of American democratic life.
It is a far more serious problem, however, that democratic multiculturalists are tempted to adopt, as a weapon of convenience against established America, the doctrine of the equality of cultures, forgetting that the enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend. This philosophic multiculturalism holds that cultures are incommensurable, “separate realities” or “stories,” so that there can be no ranking of cultures or of the comparative excellence of their parts. And for democratic multiculturalists, that teaching involves at least two towering problems.

In the first place, it disdains cultures themselves, for on their own terms, cultures engage in just this sort of comparison and ranking. When Marc Swartz studied Truk, early in his distinguished career, he expected the islanders to be ethnocentric, proclaiming their ways superior to all others. He found, however, that Trukese often expressed admiration for American technology and deprecated their own crafts. At the same time, the Trukese to whom Swartz talked were shocked by his accounts of family life in America, and especially by the fact that he was not expected, periodically, to work for his brother-in-law, reasoning that their own ways were more likely to unify families (a conclusion that seems tenable, to say the least). The Trukese, in other words, did not see cultures as monads, each locked into the island of its own uniqueness, but as more or less effective answers to human problems. In the same way, Michael Herzfeld observes that the Cretan villagers he studied understand the world on the basis of a “folk theory,” which includes ideas of what it means to be a good man (or to be more exact, to be good at being a man). The superiority of one’s self, one’s village, or one’s nation, in these terms, is inseparable from excellence in fulfilling norms that are asserted as universals. Even a culture that maintains that “our blood is superior to yours” thinks we can be measured by the same rule. Great cultures instruct and challenge us precisely because they ask, and offer compelling answers to, the questions, “What is human? And what is the best life?” To take cultures seriously is to recognize that such encounters lead to arguments and point toward philosophy, just as diversity is only humanity in masquerade.

Second, a belief in the equality of cultures is at odds with the principle of equality. Plenty of cultures, after all, include a hierarchy of castes or classes or teach a hankering after dominion, to say nothing of racism and sexism. To support democratic equality is to maintain that, in this respect, some creeds and cultures are better and others worse: even the secular spirits among the framers, for example, were inclined to find good words for
Christianity—whatever their quarrels with it—because of its devotion to egalitarian teaching in the realm of the spirit. On its own terms, equality is a ruling standard, entitled to judge the cultures, weighing their customs in the scales of nature.

As I have observed, because most multiculturalists are democrats at bottom, they are tempted or disposed to discount any antidemocratic aspects they meet in a culture. But, the fostering of illusions aside, such “playful multiculturalism”—the term is David Carlin’s—loses precisely what is best in a confrontation with a profound and unfamiliar teaching: its capacity to shake our complacency, to force us to articulate first principles, and in general to make us think more seriously about political things. Fuzzing the debate also obscures the likelihood that American citizenship is incompatible with at least some aspects of any ethnic tradition, with the consequence that such citizenship requires that a great deal of any heritage be left behind—a hard truth, but a necessary one for democratic life, and not only in such obvious cases as the Irish and the South Slavs. G. K. Chesterton put democratic multiculturalism in perspective when, not altogether playfully, he likened the United States to the Spanish Inquisition, because while America is not entitled to exclude per se a Catholic or a Muslim, a Japanese or—pace Pat Buchanan—a Zulu, it has both a right and a duty to reject any challenge to equality as the ruling principle of public life.

And while, unlike the Inquisitors, we are not allowed to burn the heterodox—the self-immolation of the Branch Davidians constrains me to add, at least not on purpose—it is incumbent on us to recognize that the “equality of cultures” is a rival principle, one that asserts its superiority over democracy, which it reduces to one culture among many. In fact, it regards all cultures as decisively inferior to the enlightened perspective that sees them as no more than a kind of entertaining storytelling. In the view of those Carlin calls “grave multiculturalists,” the real title to rule rests with nihilists, happy or otherwise, who recognize that true ranking of human understanding.

It is a troubled time for the republic, and we have every reason to draw on what is best in all our cultures and traditions—including, if it needs to be said, voices from the underside and from new or neglected corners of American life. (Among many possibilities, I am thinking of Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and Carlos Bulosan’s remarkable America Is from the Heart.) But when economic circumstances are not cheering and the compatibility of cultures is imperfect, even more than usual the possi-
bilities of multicultural democracy depend on the framing strength of the Constitution and the laws. For democratic multiculturalists, no imperative is greater than the need to rebuild the institutions that connect citizens with their government, and with them, a politics guided by the proposition that all human beings are created equal.3

Notes

1. Among modern examples, British India comes to mind, especially because the British so often justified their rule as essential to multicultural peace. Ironically, those who are attracted to the language of "Hegemon" and "Other" tend to pass lightly over these connections between multiculturalism and elite rule, although, as I will be arguing, there is a sense in which it is not ironic after all.


3. Despite anxieties about immigrants, which found expression in the early naturalization laws, the Constitution's requirements for habituation are extremely modest. The debate in the Convention is instructive. See James Madison, Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966), 409–11.


6. Part of the contemporary version of this test is discussed in James D. Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America (New York: Basic Books, 1991).


11. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 2:23. While Christianity includes political teachings, John Hallowell wrote, it "is not itself a political philosophy or an economic program." Main Currents in Modern Political Thought (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), 692.

12. Tocqueville, Journey to America, 33, 206, 257.


16. For example, in 1993, the Ancient Order of Hibernians won the right to exclude Irish gays and lesbians from the St. Patrick’s Day parade in New York, arguing that the holiday is distinctively Catholic. Yet only a few Americans remember the conflict of Green and Orange, and to most of those who do, it seems curmudgeonly to wear Protestant colors—as I do—on March 17.

17. Uri Bronfenbrenner, “Contexts of Child Rearing,” American Psychologist 34 (1979): 844–50. Of course, communities can create their own schools as supplements to public education or as alternatives to it. But the requirement of accreditation means that public doctrine cannot be altogether excluded.


22. Mansfield, 12.


25. This is an old temptation, to which—as Eric Goldman observed—the American reform tradition is particularly subject. Rendezvous with Destiny (New York: Knopf, 1952). It is, of course, not confined to reformers or to America: “Are you secretly, then,” an anguished Demea asks belatedly, “a more dangerous enemy than Cleanthes himself?” David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion in Hume: Selections, ed. Charles W. Hendel (New York: Scribner’s, 1927), 382.


28. For example, Jefferson’s letter to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803, in Life and Selected Writings of Jefferson, 566–70.


