Chapter 8

The Virtues of Multiculturalism

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If democracy is rule of the people, then we confront, in practice, not democracy but democracies: the rule of different peoples, each people ruling in its own way, each rule bearing the marks of particular pasts, particular conflicts, particular aspirations. We concern ourselves here not with Democracy, but with democracy in America.

When Edmund Burke, the defender of both English tradition and American revolution, looked to the future of America, he foresaw an English nation. "It is the English Constitution, which, infused through the mighty mass, pervades, feeds, unites, invigorates, vivifies every part of the empire, even down to the minutest member." "English privileges have made it all that it is; English privileges alone will make it all that it can be." America would grow, it would change, it might "put the full breast of its youthful exuberance to the mouth of its exhausted parent" but it would remain English, bound not only by adherence to "liberty according to English ideas and on English principles," but also by "the close affection which grows from common names, from kindred blood." 2

For Burke, peoples were made on the land, in the habits of daily life. They shared a common experience in the flesh, a common ancestry, common roots. History was ancestry. History was a constitution written in the flesh. History was memory. 2

In America, the English may have
...planted England with a stubborn trust.
But the cleft dust was never English dust. 3

"The land was ours before we were the land's," as Robert Frost wrote, and we have yet to grow into it. We are ruled not as Burke would have us, by habit and unconscious practice, but by the practiced conviction that change might be for the better and that, therefore, the unexamined life is not worth living. The Americans who bred and taught me, my friends and enemies,
those I see on television and those I pass on the street, have uncommon names and well-mixed blood. We look not to an English past, but to a various and diverse future.

No people can mistake history for memory in the simplest sense. Little of what we remember as a nation lives in our separate memories. Most of what we take for our history is foreign to our private memories and personal experiences. The second birth into civility that, in Rousseau’s words, “from a stupid and unimaginative animal makes an intelligent being and a man” also alters our being in time. In becoming citizens we acquire a form of being that extends beyond the limits of our separate bodies. Our private memories are supplemented by public and political histories. Insofar as we are citizens, we take those histories for common memory.

For Americans, the taking of history for memory has required that we replace the pious fictions of ancestor-worship with acts of democratic imagination. In order to take history for memory, we have been obliged to turn from the dictatorship of the flesh to a thoughtful election of our pasts.

Most Americans cannot assimilate national histories to the memories of our ancestors. My ancestors, peasants from every backward corner of Europe, did not touch this land until the late nineteenth century. One would have to go nearly back to Adam to find any link between these and Washington, or “Plymouth Rock and all that inbred landlord stock.” Yet Washington and Winthrop, Mather and Williams, figure in my histories. These are my people. We are bound together by name, imagination, and desire. I have elected to have a history in common with these, to mark these, foreign to my ancestry in the flesh, as my progenitors.

The opponents of multiculturalism would have me confine my ideal ancestry, my imagined history, to Europe. Why? These alone are not adequate to the constitution of my nationality. My nationality is constituted in the works of W. E. B. Du Bois as well as those of James Madison, in the words of Langston Hughes as well as those of Walt Whitman, in the acts of Osceola as well as those of John Marshall. If I, as an American with no English ancestry, have a past in England, I see no reason why I should not have a past in Africa, a past in Asia.

After all, I do, like my country, have a past in Asia. My father was a naval officer who served two tours of duty in Vietnam. While he was in Vietnam, my family lived in a suburban neighborhood in Orange County. That neighborhood is now called “Little Vietnam.” Between those two tours of duty, we lived in Bangkok. I learned the Ramayana, acquired a taste for mangoes and
unripe coconut, and saw the workings of imperialism at school and on the streets. Like my country, I have a past in Asia.

What Hannah Arendt called "the Europe-determined world of the United States" is not large enough for Emerson, Whitman, or Longfellow, for the revelations of the Mormons or the cadences of Gullah speech. Emerson and Thoreau gave themselves a past in India. The Randolphs prided themselves on their descent from the woman Vachel Lindsay called "Our Mother, Pocahontas." Those who took it upon themselves to create not merely a new nation, but a new world order, refused the boundaries of a "Europe-determined world" for Locke's more expansive vision of America.

What we debate here is neither multiculturalism nor democracy: it is the constitution of democracy in America—not the geographic or demographic nation, but the ideal and temporal nation, the nation in history. We—we multiculturalists—do indeed aim at remaking those ideal and temporal boundaries. We have found elements of the American past in Africa, in Asia, and in American cultures preceding the arrival of the Europeans. We recognize that the histories and the canons that have occupied places of privilege in the American academy and in American popular culture do not do justice to America.

I argue—in terms that accord with the values the opponents of multiculturalism profess—that multiculturalism does more than justice to America. Multiculturalism does America good. It secures virtues we have at our best, and presents obstacles and correctives to vices we have at our worst. It offers us an invitation to reclaim ancient virtues.

Democracy in America has certain modern, bourgeois virtues that I would like to praise. The first is responsibility.

The pretense that history is the objective record of "what happened" is at best evidence of a naivete inappropriate to a scholar. When we write our histories we are engaged in a constitutional enterprise. We choose which aspects of the past we will regard as constitutional. We designate those historical moments when we (as a people) have been—and when we have failed to be—true to our word.

We multiculturalists take the second enterprise—the memory of our faults—to be as important to our constitution as the first. We cannot have the histories of our choosing. Honor forces us to acknowledge our sins and our failings as a people. Yet though we cannot have the histories of our choice, we do have a choice among histories. We choose what in the past we will remember, record, recall.
Justice may not end with paying one's debts, but assuredly it begins there. Insofar as it reminds us of the contributions and (let us not mince words here) the suffering of subaltern groups in America, multiculturalism holds us to an ethic of responsibility, it calls us to account. In doing so, we perform for the nation the service Socrates performed for the Athenian citizen. "I shall question and cross-examine him, and if I find that he does not possess virtue, but says he does, I shall rebuke him for scorning the things that are of most importance and caring more for what is of less worth."

In calling ourselves to account, we bear witness to what we wish to become, what we have been, and the space between them. We engage in a democratic automachia, we become "self-made men." It is this enterprise that makes our culture more than "the dead hand of the past." It is this enterprise that makes us more than "the booby heirs," as Randolph said, of an illustrious lineage in decline. This activity makes us founders: authors of ourselves and our nation.

When we reduce our culture to an inheritance we diminish both the founders and ourselves. We deny the founders' ability to make a nation capable of overcoming itself. We deny their ability to surpass themselves. We refuse the authority the Constitution ascribes to us. We deny the possibility that we may constitute a new world order. When he lost faith with the republic, Herman Melville wrote:

The Founders' dream will flee.
Age after Age will be
What Age after Age has been.
(From man's changeless heart their way they win.)

That is no democratic faith.

Democratic citizens place their faith in change. The democratic project entails faith in the capacity of citizens to put an end to the rule of history, to take upon themselves the work of providence, to become their own creators. They will not be what age after age has been. They will be the authors of a new world order. They have another bourgeois virtue. They are inventive.

Democratic citizens not only invent themselves, they endeavor to remake the world. Imagination and the capacity to invent oneself anew, to make a new world order on the foundations of the old, bottom the American constitutional enterprise. Those who would link democracy to capitalism should look to these virtues, for they link "the free market" to the commonplace practices of free peoples enlisted in the constitutional enterprise of self-overcoming.
Those who commend the competitive nature of “the free market” should not attempt to silence debates over the canon.

Opposition to multiculturalism attempts to limit our knowledge of alternatives, to constrain our writing of history, to constrain our reading, to impose upon us a cultural and canonical hierarchy that is not subject to question. This position is inconsistent with many works in the canon it purports to defend. It removes from “Western Political Thought” the very virtue that they errantly suppose unique to it: the capacity for critique.

The opponents of multiculturalism desire the illusion of a culture of consensus, without differences, without division. Cultures are constituted in debate as well as in consensus. Those who oppose themselves to multiculturalism, arguing for adherence to a traditional canon, desire the illusion of a culture that remains constant and unchanging. They are permitted to believe this possible only while they remain ignorant of the history they purportedly prize.

Those who study the canon learn early on that its content has changed with time and context. We see the Presocratics fall in and out of favor, we see Maimonides forgotten and remembered. We see Aristotle contend with Plato, and Aristophanes ridicule him. We see Pope mock Dryden. We forget Filmer. There are, in America, generations who read Calhoun and generations who neglect him. Winthrop and Mather, Henry and Taylor, Webster and Clay, Adams and Dewey, are sometimes read, sometimes honored, sometimes forgotten.

The opponents of multiculturalism do no more justice to the texts they profess to honor. The works within even the most hidebound conceptions of the canon direct their readers outside the boundaries the opponents of multiculturalism would have us observe. Those who read the Symposium or The Bacchae find in those works elements of an unfamiliar, often alien culture. Those elements they find familiar—men in drag, for example—may be no less disturbing to traditionalists. Neither Athens nor Jerusalem can be called a wholly Western place. Those who read those works as an inheritance, adhering to an imagined Greece as a remembered place, will find that Plato and Herodotus direct them beyond it, to a deference for Egypt and Minoan Crete. Weber and Hegel, Nietzsche and Kojève, would have their readers look to their future in China and Japan. The refusal of multiculturalism requires its followers to be deaf to the teachings of the texts they read.

If it were possible to isolate a body of works whose claims to greatness would remain unexamined—or whose greatness would remain unequalled—
The Virtues of Multiculturalism

we would have occasion for shame and sorrow. The belief that we can neither examine nor surpass the works that we venerate marks a lapse of faith, a failure of nerve. In it we declare that we cannot be, as a people, greater than we have been.

An unreflecting deference to an unexamined past entails a refusal of the duties of democracy. Rather than attempting to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, we would endeavor to deprive our posterity of the qualities they require to rule themselves, to constitute themselves, in the most fundamental sense. That is no democratic education.

The opposition to multiculturalism not only stifles democratic virtues, it feeds—and feeds upon—democratic vices. The opponents of multiculturalism, in their disdain for the work of African Americans, Latinos, women, and others (many others), evince a primitive majoritarianism. They bow down to Randolph's "King Numbers."

A more demanding democracy requires that merit matter more than majorities. Unless you wish to make the argument that merit belongs only to the works of—whom? Europeans? whites? men? men writing before the twentieth century?—considerations of merit will produce... multiculturalism.

The opponents of multiculturalism are much given to charges that women and minorities are attempting to find a place in the canon (or the curriculum) without merit. These charges would be more just were they reversed. In assuming that politics alone could make a place for women and people of color in the canon, the opponents of multiculturalism assume that merit could not possibly belong to them. The refusal to reexamine the canon is the issue of either an ignorant complacency or a desire to maintain an unearned privilege.

Multiculturalism encourages the bourgeois virtues of responsibility and invention, the valued (and profitable) practices of competition and self-making. Multiculturalism requires that honors be earned, and distinctions given on the basis of merit.

Certain vices Tocqueville saw in the American democracy—a relentless tendency to mediocrity, the tyranny of the majority—may be ameliorated by multiculturalism. Those who fear that multiculturalism will exacerbate sectarian hostilities would do well to recall Federalist 10. Madison looked not to the muting but to the multiplication of sects and interests to diminish the hazards of faction and the tyrannical potential of the majority.

I have argued that multiculturalism tends to preserve democratic virtues and tends to diminish democratic vices. I would like to make another claim:
that multiculturalism may enable us to recover certain virtuous practices

democracies have neglected: magnanimity, friendship, and learning.

In one form, often seen among the religious, magnanimity reveals itself
in the generous excess of mercy and forgiveness. In the form of a martial
patriotism, it sparks unnecessary, irrational heroism. In its constitutional
form, magnanimity sets itself against the limits of history. This is the ambition
that looked not to secure the once-established rights of British subjects,
but rather to create a new world order. This is a virtue surpassing responsi­
bility. From this virtue comes the desire for a polity where “justice rolls down
like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” This is a virtue of excess.

Aspects of multiculturalism cultivate this virtue. By drawing attention
to the limits of history, by calling people to account and prompting them
(in the well-used rhetoric of the jeremiad) to overcome themselves, multi­
culturalists enlist themselves in an admirably excessive project. The desire
to include all, to comprehend all, has animated the projects of Lewis and
Clark, NASA, the Library of Congress, and the land grant universities. Madis­
son’s vision of security in size and multiplicity, no less than Whitman’s
poetry, testifies to an American faith in the virtues of excess.

There are dangers in these excesses. Lockean universalism and a dispo­
sition to democratic evangelism have led to conquest and colonialism. An
appetite for learning can become a passion for collection. Nietzsche saw this
as one of the defects of modernity. “The modern man carries inside him an
enormous heap of indigestible knowledge-stones that occasionally rattle
together in his body.” Such people are always acquiring knowledge that
they never make their own. The recognition that historical learning must
be made one’s own, however, leaves the question of what may be one’s own
unanswered. The example of those who are to be born posthumously and
those who are nurslings of older ages suggests that neither nationalism nor
a simple linear chronology can determine the limits of what may come to
be one’s own.

The second virtue we should cultivate more carefully is friendship. The
ancients had a high regard for friendship; moderns have neglected it. In
friendship, difference is understood not as in tension with community, but
as the very basis for it. Common sense and experience apprise us of our
inadequacies. We turn to others to supply our lack.

We should, however, be attracted to difference not only by need, but by
desire. Friendships are formed in the desire for more knowledge: the knowledge
possessed by a friend, or common desire for knowledge that surpasses them
both. Friendships are formed from the desire for more beauty, more virtue, more instances of the sublime. Those who study difference—and the different—may be similarly moved. Neither friendship nor multiculturalism requires one to abandon one’s peculiar virtues. What they offer is an invitation to recognize virtue for its own sake: because it is good, not because it is one’s own.

Multiculturalists know that the study of difference is no simple undertaking. We have been among the sternest critics of the Enlightenment. Yet I think we who are critical of the Enlightenment tradition advance its project more loyally than its partisans. Multiculturalists do not pretend to an understanding of history that is definitive, comprehensive, singularly authentic, or entirely objective. (They thus have a greater claim to honesty than those academics whose startling hubris has made such claims commonplace.) Yet they approach these ends—whose impossibility they acknowledge—more nearly than previous histories. They present a more comprehensive recollection of the past. Theirs is a representation of the past less subject to the interests and preferences of the powerful, more fully representative of past conditions, events, and forms of life. Their histories acknowledge their incompleteness. They invite those who read them to pursue what is missing. They invite alternative interpretations. They demand that the reader abandon the passivity of the disciple for the activity of the scholar.

The academy that multiculturalists advance is obliged to question the composition of its canons, the completeness and the objectivity of its histories, to look again at neglected—and venerated—works and question their merits. These are the ordinary duties of the scholar. The nation that multiculturalists advance is obliged to become mindful of its temporal and ideal boundaries, to consider what it has been, what it is, and what it wills itself to become. These are the practices of constitutional democracy.

What then prompts fears of multiculturalism? Is America so small that it cannot contain these differences? Is the canon’s claim to merit so slight that it cannot withstand question or scrutiny? If so we need a greater nation, and a greater canon.

Notes

1. Edmund Burke, *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies*, ed. Jeffrey Hart (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964), 139, 141, 57, 137. As the matter of Burke’s speech suggests, however, much variety went into the making of that seemingly uniform England. One might also consider Daniel Defoe’s poem “The True-born Englishman.”
2. Burke recognized, however, that historians, politicians, and peoples choose between histories. In the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke castigated the French revolutionaries for choosing the wrong history.


   I think that I have seen you, not as one,
   But clad in diverse semblances and powers.


6. I have in mind Emerson’s poem “Brahma” and his other references to Indian and Persian thought, Longfellow’s poem “Hiawatha,” and the scriptures of the Church of Latter Day Saints that give Jesus Christ a past in America. The quotation from Hannah Arendt comes from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 191.

7. Vachel Lindsay, “Our Mother, Pocahontas,” in *Selected Poems*, 115–17. For Lindsay, in this poem, American identity entails a refusal of Europe.

   We here renounce our Saxon blood.
   Tomorrow’s hopes, an April flood
   Come roaring in. The newest race
   Is born of her resilient grace.

   We here renounce our Teuton pride;
   Norse and Slavic boasts have died:
   Italian dreams are swept away,
   And Celtic feuds are lost today.

Robert Frost echoes this argument in “The Gift Outright,” the poem he read at Kennedy’s Inauguration.

