Multiculturalism and American Democracy

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Part III

Multiculturalism and Civic Education
Chapter 11
Civic Education in a Changing Society
Linda Chavez

The face of America is changing. It's becoming more diverse and complex than at any time in our history. We're no longer a white-and-black society struggling to integrate two major groups of people who have been in this country for nearly four hundred years, but a multiracial and multiethnic society in which newcomers arrive in record numbers every day. The 1980s will be remembered as a period of one of the highest levels of immigration in our nation's history. Some ten million persons immigrated to the United States in that decade, a number as great as that of the previous peak decade, 1900 to 1910. The 1990s will probably see even more arrivals.

Unlike the immigrants of the early part of this century, who were primarily from Europe, the great bulk of today's immigrants—about 80 percent—come from Asia and Latin America. Much has been made of this phenomenon, and many who favor restricting immigration suggest that these new Asian and Latin immigrants will be less successfully absorbed into the fabric of American society. "I know that earlier large waves of immigrants didn't 'overturn' America," says former Colorado governor Richard Lamm, "but there are... reasons to believe that today's migration is different from earlier flows."

But, in fact, when we look at one of these groups, we find that most Hispanics are assimilating into the social, educational, economic, and language norms of this society despite the image of Hispanics portrayed in the media and perpetuated by Hispanic leaders. A few facts:

- Mexican-origin men have a higher labor-force participation rate than non-Hispanic males.
- U.S.-born Hispanics have rapidly moved into the middle class. The earnings of Mexican American men are now roughly 80 percent of those of non-Hispanic white men.
- Mexican American men earn about 93 percent of the earnings of non-Hispanic white males with comparable education.
• Most differences in earnings between Hispanics and non-Hispanics can be explained by educational differences between the two groups; but at the secondary school level, young Mexican Americans are closing the gap with their non-Hispanic peers. Seventy-eight percent of second-generation Mexican American men aged twenty-five to thirty-four have completed twelve years of school or more, compared with approximately 90 percent of comparable non-Hispanic whites.7

• English proficiency is also key to earnings among Hispanics, but here, too, conventional wisdom about Hispanics is mostly invalid. The overwhelming majority of U.S.-born Hispanics are English-dominant, and one-half of all third-generation Mexican Americans—like most other American ethnics—speak only one language: English.

• What's more, Hispanics, with the exception of Puerto Ricans, have marriage rates comparable to those of non-Hispanic whites. Mexican-origin and Cuban Hispanics are more likely to live in married-couple households than the general population, and almost half own their own homes.8

If these facts come as a surprise, it's largely because most of the analysis of Hispanics fails to note that nearly half of the adult Hispanic population is foreign-born.9 And like new immigrants of the past, Hispanic immigrants will take at least one generation to move up the economic ladder and into the cultural mainstream.

Perhaps a little history is in order here. The current period is not the only time we have viewed new immigrants with distrust and suspicion. We tend to forget that Italians, Greeks, Jews, Poles, and others—whom some people lump together as "Europeans"—were considered alien to the white Americans of the early twentieth century, most of whom were of British, German, or Scandinavian descent. Anyone who believes that immigrants of an earlier day lived in halcyon times of tolerance and acceptance should read through the reports of the 1921 Dillingham Commission, which in 1924 ultimately recommended a quota system to keep out southern and eastern European immigrants and Asians.10

Despite these problems, most of those who came here found the struggle worth the effort. And these groups did, by and large, succeed in America. Today, the many different European immigrant groups are virtually indistinguishable from each other on measures of earnings, status, and education. Even Chinese and Japanese Americans, who endured much greater discrimination than southern and eastern Europeans, have done exceedingly
well and outperformed most other groups on all indicators of social and economic success. But it took three generations for most of these groups to achieve this status. Italian Americans, for example, arrived at the same average educational attainment as other Americans only in 1970—some sixty years after the peak of their immigration to the United States. Is it possible simply to mimic what we did in the past in treating this generation of newcomers? No. Let me concede that we did a great deal of wrong in the past, and immigrants succeeded in spite of, not because of, our mistakes. It would be neither compassionate nor legal to return to a system in which we put non-English-speaking children into the public school classrooms in which the instruction was entirely in English and expect those children to “sink or swim.” The United States Supreme Court in 1974 declared this approach in violation of our civil rights laws. Nor should we hark back to the “good old days” when Anglo conformity was the sole acceptable cultural model. But in trying to right these wrongs, we should take care not to reverse ourselves 180 degrees by attempting to educate each group of immigrant children in their own native language and inculcate them in their own native culture. There is something wrong when two-thirds of children from Spanish-speaking homes are taught to read in Spanish when they enter first grade in American public schools and three-fourths are given Spanish oral language development. If we insist on separate language instruction for all immigrant children—who speak more than 120 different languages in New York City alone—we will close the door on integration, divide ourselves along cultural and linguistic lines, and thereby perpetuate inequalities rather than eradicate them. The proponents of multicultural education are often so obsessed with the excesses of Anglo conformity that they fail to see the benefits of a shared, common culture—not entirely white, Anglo-Saxon, or Protestant—but common nonetheless. And they fail to see the dangers in substituting one orthodoxy with another, no less rigid.

The more diverse we become racially and ethnically, the more important it is that we learn to tolerate differences—and also to celebrate what we all have in common. Whether we came to the United States voluntarily or involuntarily, we all choose to live here now. And more people want to live here than anywhere else in the world. No other country accepts as many immigrants as we do. Surely, even those who criticize our so-called Eurocentric society must admit that it has something to offer or there would not be such long lines of those waiting to get in—very few of them European, by the way. What do we have that these Mexicans, Cambodians, Ethiopians, Filipinos,
and others want? Two things primarily: economic opportunity and political freedom. The two, by the way, go hand in hand, and it is our legal and political institutions that protect both. Now it so happens that those political institutions did not, in fact, develop in Asia or Latin America or Africa or even throughout most of Europe. It happens that the framework for our political institutions comes from England. The basis for American jurisprudence comes from English common law—not Spanish adaptations of Roman law that governed most of Latin America, or from the legendary rulers of China or from the Hsia Dynasty or from Confucianism, or from the Ghanian Empire, the Kush state in Nubia, or from Mali. That is not to say that these others are not important civilizations deserving recognition in their own right, but it is to acknowledge the special importance to our particular political and legal system of the Magna Carta, habeas corpus, and trial by jury, all of which were handed down directly from England. Of course, not all of these concepts were totally indigenous to England; King Henry II adapted from the Franks the system of trial by jury to replace the oath, the ordeal, and the duel, which were used in both criminal and civil cases until the twelfth century.

In our zeal to tell the stories of other civilizations, to include the history of those whose ancestors came from places other than England, we should not attempt to rewrite the history of our own founding and our political antecedents. Nor should we blush at the thought that this history now belongs to children who come from Mexico, Vietnam, and Ghana, or whose parents came from these countries. These children are now American children, and this is their political inheritance as much as it is the inheritance of the child of Italian or Greek or Russian roots. As we hasten to promote diversity, we often forget that what makes this country unique in the world is that we have forged an identity as a people even though most of us share very little in common in terms of our personal histories. There is nothing wrong with holding onto personal history, but—given the incredible diversity of the country as a whole—it becomes increasingly difficult to expect the state to try to pass on that sense of personal history to each and every group. The most that can be expected, I think, is that we make sure that we recognize the contributions each group—once here—has made to the common history of this nation.

Is it possible to study the individual culture of the ancestors of each group represented in America? That depends on how superficial we’re willing to be. We could develop a dictionary of cultural literacy of every major group and teach children to memorize a few facts and dates about each. Given our current success with children’s learning to locate Arkansas on a map of the United States and China on a map of the world, or to tell in what half a cen-
tury the Civil War was fought, or to name more than four past presidents of the United States, it seems doubtful that such a project would carry a lasting benefit. But there are other problems as well. Who decides what represents the “history” of each group? Take Hispanic children, for example. What do we teach them about the Maya, Aztecs, and Incas? They are all important civilizations, but relatively few Hispanics in the United States actually descend from them. And what about the history of Spain? Will Hispanic youngsters read Cervantes and Lope de Vega, or something else?

The problem is no less complicated when it comes to African Americans. In the name of multicultural education, many school systems have adopted an Afrocentric curriculum that mostly focuses on the contributions of ancient Egypt. There is no question about the fact that Egypt is on the continent of Africa, but that is about all traditional Egyptologists and Afrocentrists can agree upon. Is Egypt better understood as a part of the broader thalassic culture of the Mediterranean, which also includes the Middle East and southern Europe? The Sahara, which separates Egypt from the central and southern portions of the African continent, today remains a powerful cultural barrier. Are we to assume it was less so in the past? These issues are rarely addressed by Afrocentric curricula.

So if we cannot—and perhaps should not—try to teach each group its own individual history through multiple ethnocentric curricula, how do we try to deal with this increasingly diverse student population?

1. Black, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian children need the same basic skills that we take for granted that white children need. This is an obvious point, but one that seems occasionally forgotten when we discuss multicultural education. All children in American public schools need to be taught to read, write, and speak standard English well. Their ability to master these skills will affect their life chances more than virtually anything else they learn—or fail to learn—in school.

2. They need to be taught the basic math and science that will enable them to function in an increasingly complex technological society.

3. They need a broad understanding of our form of government and its institutions. We live in a country in which we enjoy great freedom, but we also live in a country in which people are highly apathetic. If we hope to preserve democracy, our young people must develop a better appreciation for our heritage and be committed to preserving it. Somewhere along the way we have
become reticent about instilling in our young an appreciation for democracy. If we expect to preserve our democratic way of life, we had better begin to develop that appreciation once again. And that means emphasizing the duties and responsibilities that go along with good citizenship.

4. We need to teach our children the history of this nation. Here, we sometimes failed in the past to include the contributions made by all the groups that compose this nation. While we should not shy away from teaching the essentially English antecedents of our political and legal institutions, neither should we forget that many who built this nation were not English, white, or male. There are many excellent histories to consult about the contribution of African Americans: W. E. B. DuBois, John Hope Franklin, Carter Woodson, to name only three. There are fewer familiar texts to consult on the contributions of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Chinese Americans, and other Asians, but two good books on the Latinos are *Hispanics in the United States* by Harry Pachon and Joan Moore and *Puerto Rican Americans* by Father Joseph Fitzpatrick. Both are short but comprehensive.

5. All American children need a better understanding of the world in which we live, an understanding that includes something of the history of other nations. They need a grounding in geography, which, if taught well, will also teach them why nations developed as they did. Rivers, seas, terrain, and climate are all important to the development of culture. Of course, learning the language of another country is the best way to develop a real depth of understanding in that culture, and I hope we do not ignore developing second-language proficiency in all of our students. In this respect, immigrant children have a real advantage.

These recommendations are not exhaustive. Nor are they geared only to the child who comes from a nonwhite, non-European background. These recommendations are suited for all of our children.

The American public school system was created on the premise that it would be a common school, one for all children. It has not always lived up to that ideal—certainly not before 1954—but that does not mean we should abandon the ideal. The face of America is changing, but we should not give up on the idea that we are one people and one nation.

Even under this regime there remains a place for the preservation of language and culture for new immigrants or others who wish to retain aspects
of their former traditions. Some would have us believe that assimilation means every group must lose what makes it unique as it swirls about in an indifferent melting pot's colorless alloy. But, of course, this is not what has happened. As a trip into the heart of any American city will reveal, ethnic communities are alive and well, even as their inhabitants enjoy the fruits of social, political, and economic integration. The question is not whether any group has a right to maintain its language, culture, and traditions, but rather whose responsibility it is to do so: the individual's or the government's? This is the center of the multiculturalism debate.

If Hispanics, Koreans, Jews, Greeks, or the members of any other group wish to maintain their individual and unique cultures, languages, or traditions, it must be up to them to do so. Indeed, many groups have been quite successful in preserving their native cultures in the United States. Chinese parents often send their children to Saturday school to learn Cantonese or Mandarin and the history of their ancestors. Jewish children frequently attend Hebrew classes and receive religious instruction that teaches them the tenets of their faith and the history of their people. Greek Americans are among the most successful of any group in preserving their language in the United States; according to the 1980 census, a majority of Greek Americans say they still speak Greek in their homes at least occasionally.

Hispanics who wish to maintain their native language and culture should follow the examples of their fellow ethnic Americans. Frankly, given the tremendous diversity within the Hispanic community, the only successful way for each group to ensure that its members know its history and traditions is to undertake that education itself. If government assumes the responsibility, it is likely to amalgamate and homogenize in ways that make the original culture virtually indecipherable. The government, after all, is capable of lumping all 22 million Hispanics in this country into a single category that manages to include Cakchikel Indians from Guatemala, mestizos from Mexico, the descendants of Italian immigrants from Argentina, Japanese immigrants from Peru, Spaniards from Europe, and the descendants of colonists who settled the Southwest nearly four hundred years ago. Wouldn't it be better to entrust each of these very different groups with the responsibility of maintaining its own traditions without the interference—or assistance—of the government? The overwhelming majority of immigrants think so. They believe that it is the family's duty, not the government's, to help their children maintain their native language.16

Some critics warn that the United States is in danger of fragmenting into competing racial and ethnic groups. Nonetheless, I remain optimistic that
we can—if we commit ourselves—successfully integrate the more than 70 million blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians into our society. That we can create a new *unum* out of the many here and the many more who will come. But to do so will require the cooperation of us all—those who have been here for generations as well as those who are arriving each day. It will require that each of us recognize the covenant that exists between the old and the new; that we respect the rights of individuals to maintain what is unique in their ancestral heritages; but that we understand that our future lies in forging a common identity of shared values and beliefs essential to the democratic ideal.

**Notes**

6. Chavez, 112.
7. Chavez, 113.