Multiculturalism and American Democracy

Melzer, Arthur M., Weinberger, Jerry, Zinman, M. Richard

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Chapter 12
Multiculturalism and Civic Education
Lorraine Pangle

Multicultural education is a new attempt to solve one of humanity's oldest social problems, the problem of ethnic division and conflict. The idea of multiculturalism was first popularized in Canada in the 1960s, as a result of rising tensions between Quebec nationalists and the English-speaking majority. In response to French discontent, the Canadian federal government began considering measures to strengthen the official status of the French language and culture, so as to put the two "founding races" on a more equal footing. This proposal, in turn, sparked a concern among Ukrainian Canadians and other ethnic groups that their own languages and cultures were being relegated to third-class status. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau thereupon worked out the compromise of "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework," a policy which recognizes and encourages cultural diversity as a desirable feature of Canadian society. Official multiculturalism in Canada has included the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country, government support for the cultural activities of ethnic minorities, direct efforts to combat racism, and most importantly, programs of multicultural education that attempt to give all students a positive regard for the various ethnic groups that make up Canadian society.

The United States, having no such deep-seated language divisions as Canada, has not been pushed into an official policy of multiculturalism. Many American educators, however, have embraced multicultural education for the same reasons that recommend it to their northern neighbors. Both countries have large and diverse minority populations; both have found their ethnic diversity to be a source of conflict, and yet in both there is increasing doubt as to the viability or justice of old expectations that minorities should simply assimilate to the language and customs of the majority. Proponents of a new "cultural pluralism" argue that ethnicity is important to everyone's identity and that a fair and humane society must respect and even actively foster ethnic loyalties. Influential multicultural curricula, such as that of New
York State, emphasize the positive value of having a variety of cultures within the United States, call for a new "cultural democracy," and even assert a "right" to cultural diversity.¹

The New Civics and Its Dangers

American advocates of multicultural education want to transform the entire school curriculum to make it more inclusive and less biased, but their central interest is naturally the social studies program, and especially the teaching of history. They point out a number of flaws in history programs as they have traditionally been taught in the United States. American schools have always neglected the study of other parts of the world, and until recently, they have tended to teach American history in a somewhat self-congratulatory spirit. Noah Webster set the tone for American schoolbooks with the stream of influential spellers and readers he began producing in the 1780s. He filled his books with American content and worked to instill in students a pride in their virtuous republic, contrasting it with the decadence of monarchic Europe. As he argued in his first speller, "Europe is grown old in folly, corruption, and tyranny—in that country laws are perverted, manners are licentious, literature is declining and human nature debased. For America in her infancy to adopt the present maxims of the old world, would be to stamp the wrinkles of decrepit age upon the bloom of youth and to plant the seeds of decay in a vigorous constitution."² In the early nineteenth century, Parson Weems began weaving about our national heroes such pious fictions as the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, which were soon taken up and immortalized by the McGuffy Readers. With the best of intentions, such stories rob history of life by presenting great leaders as less human, less complex, and hence less interesting than they really were. Traditional American textbooks have been criticized, with some justice, for presenting our history as chiefly a series of triumphs, for downplaying both darker incidents and controversial interpretations, and for telling the story from the point of view of white settlers and white slaveholders or liberators, neglecting the viewpoints of American Indians, slaves, and immigrants.

These criticisms, if taken seriously, suggest that American students need a history and civics program that is more objective, more probing, and above all less provincial than the courses their parents received. The criticisms would seem to call for a curriculum that would offer students not only a richer perspective on American history, but also an encounter with radically
different outlooks and ways of life and a confrontation with controversial arguments about many issues. This could be accomplished through a sequence of in-depth studies of cultures or civilizations or regimes from many parts of the world and historical epochs. It could lead to a questioning and a reexamination of the assumptions and beliefs students have picked up from contemporary American society. To that extent, it might prove dangerous, and have more of a corrosive than a constructive effect on their political and moral beliefs. But if teachers took account of this danger and worked to make as strong a case as possible for the American principles and way of life that would be coming under scrutiny, the result could be an excellent civic education that would be politically responsible and liberating at the same time.

When one looks at the specific proposals and guidelines for multicultural education that have been produced in both the United States and Canada, however, one is struck by the extent to which they perpetuate precisely the aspects of the old civics education that critics find objectionable. In particular, it is surprising how provincial they still are, and how few issues they explore. Ontario's recent guideline, The Common Curriculum, is quite typical of programs on both sides of the border. The focus is entirely on the students' own country and the ethnic groups within it. Students are to study the contributions of each group to Canadian society, learn that cultural diversity is good, learn about the evils of racism, and study the ways in which everyone is formed willy-nilly by birth, class, culture, geography, race, and discrimination. Little attention is given either to the beliefs and principles that all Canadians hold in common or to the truly deep differences between Canada and many of the societies from which its immigrants have come. The guidelines for New York State's multicultural geography and history program are similarly narrow in focus. Although students are required to take a smattering of world history, no area except the United States is studied in any depth, and the central concepts around which American history is to be organized are virtually all related to ethnicity, race, and equity. The guidelines for American history pay no attention to, for example, the structure of the federal government, religion, the significance of the frontier, or international relations. The goal of these and similar guidelines in other states is not to provide a broad-based civic education or to expand students' minds through an encounter with a rich variety of cultures, historical figures, and interesting historical controversies. Rather, the goal is to solve specific social problems associated with ethnicity, and sometimes also with gender and disability:
to end inequities by promoting toleration in the majority and enhanced self-esteem for "marginalized" groups.¹

Such social studies as social therapy is, I believe, a dangerous distraction from the real business of teaching and learning. If we conceive of multicultural education as a device for eradicating discrimination and inequities by instilling specific, officially approved feelings and beliefs, it can do significant harm. If, on the other hand, we accept it as a needed reminder that we must broaden and deepen students' study of the world and of genuinely different points of view, a multicultural approach can do much to revitalize American education and can promote social harmony at the same time.

Unfortunately, advocates of multicultural education have for the most part produced programs at least as dogmatic and manipulative as the old ones they criticize. Their guidelines place too much emphasis on molding the feelings, and give too little attention to provoking serious thought. One state, Pennsylvania, states explicitly in its curriculum guidelines that achieving the specified graduation outcomes "does not require students to hold or express particular attitudes, values, or beliefs," but such disclaimers are rare in multicultural programs. More typical are Iowa's instructional objectives, which stipulate that students shall "demonstrate understanding that cultural differences do not imply cultural deficiencies," shall "analyze U.S. diversity as a source of vitality, richness, and strength," shall "understand that no individual or group is inherently superior or inferior," and shall "demonstrate respect for physical and cultural differences by modeling nonsexist, culturally sensitive language and interaction patterns."

Most interesting is the goal that appears in virtually all guidelines for multicultural education, that of persuading students that cultural diversity is good. This assertion is less than self-evident, as the New York Social Studies Review and Development Committee concedes at the very outset of One Nation, Many Peoples: "Certainly, contemporary trends toward separation and dissolution in such disparate countries as the Soviet Union, South Africa, Canada, Yugoslavia, Spain, and the United Kingdom remind us that different ethnic and racial groups have often had extraordinary difficulty remaining together in nation-states." Laying these grim object lessons before us, the authors then simply assert without evidence that diversity is the source of our national strength. There is no doubt that the colorful appeal of cities like New York and San Francisco depends largely upon their ethnic diversity, and American cuisine was indisputably dull before the proliferation of ethnic restaurants, but such things can hardly be put in the scales
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against the threat of national dissolution. Multicultural advocates routinely assert that ethnic diversity provides us with a multiplicity of approaches to solving problems, but since they do not give examples of problems that have proved insoluble without the aid of some special ethnic point of view, this claim is hard to assess. *Individuals* from every corner of the earth certainly have made great contributions to American society, but that is not what is at issue here. Americans from many cultures have also derived strength and comfort from their separate traditions, but it is not clear that they are happier or contribute more to the country than their assimilated descendants who view themselves simply as Americans. The most serious reason for the argument that cultural diversity as such is a source of national strength appears in the next sentence of the New York committee’s report: “If the United States is to continue to prosper in the 21st century, then all of its citizens, whatever their race or ethnicity, must believe that they and their ancestors have shared in the building of the country and have a stake in its success.”

Cultural diversity must be celebrated as a positive good, it seems, because without such a celebration, not all citizens will feel a sense of belonging and dedication to America.

*Ethnic Pride and Self-Esteem*

In place of the old efforts to mold students’ feelings by encouraging a patriotic devotion to national unity, we now have attempts to encourage feelings of ethnic solidarity and an attachment to diversity. Is it appropriate for schools to engage in *either* national or ethnic boosterism, in order to cultivate feelings of pride and belonging? The dangers of nationalism have been as evident in this century as the dangers of ethnic strife, and of course the two are closely related. It would nevertheless be unwise to try to root out or transcend national loyalties altogether: patriotic feeling has been an integral part of every healthy society, and the current American doctrine that our country is no better than others (or indeed a bit worse) is more likely to produce an apathetic disaffection from politics than a genuine love and concern for all of humanity. Patriotism can unify a country and draw citizens out of their private affairs into constructive efforts on the public behalf and noble acts of sacrifice. In the best case, patriotism gives citizens a sense that they belong to something important that is greater than themselves, a sense of what they must live up to, and a hope that indeed they can live up to standards set by others of their own kind who have gone before. Moreover,
American patriotism is less divisive than, say, the patriotism of the Serbs, because it does not depend upon the accidents of birth. What we take pride in, above all, is a set of principles that can potentially be accepted and implemented anywhere. To be an American means to be an immigrant or the descendant of immigrants. Hence our ability to admire Benjamin Franklin or Frederick Douglass and to count them as our own does not depend upon our being related to them by blood, or having ancestors who lived in the same country with them, or even knowing where our ancestors were when these men were alive.

Advocates of multiculturalism, however, tend to assume that the accidents of birth are all-important for everyone’s sense of identity. They seek to give every child, or at least every nonwhite child, the same pride in his or her ethnic group that traditional American texts have endeavored to give American students in their nation. Arguing that self-esteem is an essential condition for success and that a positive attitude toward the group one was born into is an essential condition for self-esteem, these advocates seek to present minority groups as favorably as possible. This is why, although painstaking efforts have been made to remove the biases from American history texts, the controversy over these books rages hotter than ever. Representatives of various minorities, joined by representatives of women, homosexuals, and the handicapped, charge that their own groups are inadequately represented or not depicted in a sufficiently positive light.

The project of rewriting history has been carried furthest by Molefi Kete Asante, Leonard Jeffries, and other proponents of an “Afrocentric” curriculum for black youth. These activists argue that American culture is, root and branch, Anglo-Saxon or Eurocentric culture, forgetting the American founders’ deliberate efforts to take a critical distance from Europe and forge a new country with new principles. They teach that blacks must find their own, Afrocentric culture, suited to African modes of thinking and feeling, and that blacks can never be educated effectively by white teachers. An influential series of “African American Baseline Essays,” edited by Asa Hilliard, has been used in Portland and other cities to teach black children that Africa is the true source of civilization and of Western science, medicine, mathematics, and democracy. They maintain that the Greeks “stole” philosophy from the ancient Egyptians, and that the Europeans have taken credit for it in a massive conspiracy. In a similar vein, Jeffries teaches that in contrast to the warm, humanistic Africans, Europeans are “cold, individualistic, materialistic, and aggressive ‘ice people.’” Quite apart from the unsubstantiated claims
of the Afrocentrists, which have been critiqued by black and white scholars alike, such teachings add fuel to the very fire that multiculturalism was originally intended to quench. One does not put an end to bigotry by turning it on its head, or heal race relations by focusing children’s minds on the question of which race is responsible for more good or more evil in the world.

Even when ethnic cheerleading is not taken to such lengths as it is in the African American Baseline Essays, direct efforts to change students’ feelings about themselves are a central feature of most multicultural education proposals. In the blunt words of a 1989 New York State task force, the social studies curriculum should be revised in ways that will provide “children from Native American, Puerto Rican/Latino, Asian American, and African cultures” with “higher self-esteem and self-respect, while children from European cultures will have a less arrogant perspective.” Other plans are rather more generous in attempting to nurture the self-esteem of everyone. As one of Iowa’s policy statements puts it, “It is important that all students see themselves positively reflected in their curriculum, regardless of their sex, race, cultural background or disability. Students who do not, often feel alienated from the educational process and may soon question their own worth.” Iowa’s guidelines therefore mandate, among other things, that all units of Iowa and American history must include “the contributions and perspectives of both women and men, diverse cultural/racial groups, and the disabled.” One wonders how a unit on, say, the Constitutional Convention could ever be taught. Making the curriculum as objective and unbiased as possible is important for many reasons, but when specific material is included or excluded chiefly on the basis of its presumed effect upon students’ self-esteem, we must question the pedagogical soundness of the selection. When students spend extensive amounts of time examining ads for bias and writing letters of protest to advertisers, sampling one another’s cuisines, recounting occasions when they experienced discrimination, and clarifying their feelings about their ancestors, we must wonder what more substantive lessons are being displaced.

Educators routinely assume that self-esteem is an essential prerequisite for learning, and a tremendous amount of what they do is premised upon this belief, but in fact it is not well supported by empirical research. Studies have generally but by no means consistently found some correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement, but there is substantial evidence that achievement is more of a cause than an effect. Brent Bridgeman and Virginia Shipman have reported that the self-esteem of preschool children tends to
be uniformly high, and unrelated to intelligence, whereas by grade three, children's self-esteem shows much more variation and is more strongly correlated with academic achievement. They conclude that the self-esteem of low-achieving students has fallen as a result of their difficulties in school. A study by Edward Kifer shows likewise that the self-esteem of children diverges over time, and reveals an especially strong correlation with academic achievement in children who have established a prolonged pattern of high or low achievement. Apparently it is the repeated experience of success or failure that tends to create a highly positive or negative self-image. Rubin, Dorle, and Sandridge conclude that "nowhere has it been convincingly demonstrated that raising self-esteem will lead to greater academic achievement," although scattered researchers propose this on the basis of the observed correlations.  

Even if self-esteem is more the result than the cause of achievement for students in general, however, the case may be different with minorities, for advocates of multicultural education argue that minority students' experience of exclusion and stigmatization has affected their self-esteem in particularly insidious ways. Yet it is here that research results are most surprising. Among black students, at any rate, studies have shown that there is no significant relationship between overall self-esteem and academic achievement. Despite the fact that they do more poorly in school on average than white students, blacks turn out to have equal or higher levels of self-esteem. Finally, researchers have found that high individual self-esteem among them is not related to levels of black pride. All of this casts serious doubt on the assumption of multicultural education proponents in general and Afrocentrists in particular that minority children's academic difficulties stem from low self-esteem and can best be overcome through programs that help them to identify more strongly and more positively with their ethnic heritage.

It is even possible that a high self-esteem that is not grounded in an accurate appraisal of one's academic competence may in some ways impede learning. American students as a whole fare poorly on international mathematics assessments, yet the vast majority consider themselves to be good in math. To motivate students to work hard, every teacher must persuade them that it is important for them to know certain things that they do not know. This is always a humbling experience for a student. Humility, however, is inseparable from a recognition of what one needs, and a degree of humility can itself be quite constructive. It would of course be best if the simple desire to learn could provide sufficient motivation for a whole education, but it
rarely if ever does. Everyone seems to need the reward of pride in one's accomplishments and an uneasiness at the prospect of doing poorly to keep oneself moving forward at moments when learning is not intrinsically fascinating. Hence having a self-esteem that is somewhat dependent on doing well at school is extremely helpful.

On the other hand, unless a student has real hope of being able to succeed at studies, it is simply too painful to acknowledge that this is important; one will do whatever one can to keep one's self-esteem from becoming dependent on academic success. Therefore, the goal of a good teacher is to create both humility and confidence, by showing students that they have work to do and that the teacher has faith in their ability to accomplish it. Studies of the teachers and teaching styles that have had the best results with disadvantaged students confirm what common sense suggests. These teachers do not try to build self-esteem unrelated to the work at hand by dwelling on the glories of their students' ancestors or telling the students that they are perfectly wonderful just as they are. Instead, they show through everything they do that academic achievement is important, that they take their students seriously and care deeply about their progress, and that they have complete faith in the students' ability to live up to high standards.

Whatever disadvantaged minority students may feel about themselves in general, this sense of hope, this confidence that they can succeed at whatever they put their minds to, seems often to be fragile in them. Here is where the multicultural approach of telling stories of people of all races and both sexes who have overcome obstacles to lead remarkable lives can be so helpful. One need not be handicapped to be inspired by Franklin D. Roosevelt's accomplishments in the face of polio, or Indian to take inspiration, as Martin Luther King, Jr., did, from Mahatma Gandhi's ideals. However, the tendency of multicultural programs to dwell on the importance of race, sex, ethnicity, and physical handicaps can undermine children's confidence in their power to shape their own lives. Although these accidental qualities are normally not subject to change, their importance to us is. Efforts to sensitize all students to these issues and to show how deeply they affect us can create a self-fulfilling analysis. It is not inevitable that black children growing up will think of themselves as black first and Americans or, say, aspiring physicians second. It is not inevitable that they will see their race and the racism of whites as a central feature of their existence and carry the kind of bitterness within them that such a perception tends to spawn. The real and ugly history of racism in the United States must of course not be papered over. It nevertheless makes a
difference whether teachers encourage students to define themselves by accidents of birth and the problems they create or by students’ own accomplishments, virtues, and aspirations. The hope of Martin Luther King, Jr., that someday all Americans might be measured not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their characters, gives eloquent expression to what has always been one of America’s noblest aims. Persuading students to judge themselves this way is the first step toward fully realizing this goal.

Over the past several years, American colleges have been paying increasing attention to accidents of birth, attempting to raise the self-esteem of some students and to heighten the sensitivity of others, in hopes of ending the inequities and tensions that turn upon ethnic and sexual differences. Millions of dollars have been spent, countless workshops and mandatory orientations have been held, and whole buildings have gone up to house new cadres of campus life administrators. Yet racial and ethnic tensions have not improved and may even have gotten worse, and charges of sexual harassment proliferate by the day. Is it possible that we are encouraging people to see an affront to the essence of their beings in what was only a display of bad manners and to become more the victims of their sex or skin color rather than less so? Is it possible that, with special treatment for all sorts of groups and with such pressures upon everyone to be sensitive, we are creating a backlash? It would not be surprising if programs that encourage students to delve into and express their feelings of racial animosity or to elaborate their experiences of discrimination are failing to reduce racial tensions. Bad feelings usually do not go away when we dwell upon them.

Problems between the sexes are more complex and deeply rooted, but ethnic and racial tensions may well be amenable to the same solution that the early Americans found for religious enmities. As Thomas Jefferson said, observing the various states’ responses to the quarrels that arose from the country’s religious diversity, “Pennsylvania and New York . . . have made the happy discovery, that the way to silence religious disputes, is to take no notice of them.” If United States governments at all levels were consistently to refuse to take any notice of race (a policy that has never been tried), racial conflict might eventually become as insignificant as religious conflict in this country. If all schools were to treat their students’ racial and ethnic origins as a matter of absolutely no relevance to the business of teaching and learning, they might achieve a similar result. Students would remain free to place a high personal value on their race or ethnic origins, just as many now place on their religions, but the schools would be officially neutral on both issues.
Such a policy, carried out in conjunction with humanities programs in which the only history studied was that of the United States and the only literature read was that of white Americans and Englishmen, surely would convey a message that the ethnic heritage of minority students was of little value. But if students were to study the history and literature of the whole world, minorities would be pressured neither to assimilate completely nor to maintain a strong sense of loyalty to their own ethnic group. All students would be encouraged to consider the world as their heritage, and to believe that they can reasonably aspire to be like anyone they choose, from either sex and from any nationality and historical epoch.

All in all, the central failing of multicultural education programs is their attempt to provide therapy for individuals' and society's perceived ills rather than to promote true education. Our society has always been tempted to try to solve its social problems by imposing new mandates on the schools. A century ago, one teacher commented, "You can't open your schoolroom door for a breath of fresh air without letting someone with a mission fall in." Activists hold out the alluring hope that we can make a better society simply by giving children the right attitude to every issue: to drugs, to alcohol, to the environment, to nuclear weapons, to homosexuality, to race relations. The difficulty is that new issues and problems arise every year, and the solutions are rarely as straightforward and unambiguous as reformers would wish. Before long, the slow and serious business of training minds and building character gets lost in a panoply of noisy causes. Yet our social problems remain as troubling as ever. The great irony is that many of the same reformers who are busily shaping attitudes toward the issues of the day also cheerfully assert that our children will live in a world vastly and unpredictably different from the one we know. No doubt they exaggerate, but they have a point. What is needed is not to produce "right-thinking" people, but to nurture the virtues that every individual needs and every society values, and to cultivate minds that can assess unforeseen problems with sound judgment.

From Shallow Relativism to Serious Questioning

For such an education of the hearts and minds of citizens, multicultural studies that explore other cultures as deeply and as sympathetically as possible are admirably suited. Individuals become more thoughtful, and most able to contribute to the public life of their country, when they have an outside perspective on their own society. To gain such a perspective, it is
essential to study other cultures on their own terms, on their own ground, and in their totality. This means going beyond a study of the remnants of other cultures retained by immigrants to North America, to a historical investigation of the countries they come from. Students need to move beneath the superficial differences of dress and cuisine and artistic styles to grapple with the issues that truly define and divide cultures: different conceptions of justice or of political legitimacy or of the best way to order citizens’ common life together, and different religions. Students will profit very little from multicultural studies if they attend only to the colorful elements of other cultures and are not open to the possibility that these cultures have things to teach them about the very most important questions in life. Glib talk about giving students “cross-cultural competency,” or the ability to function in a variety of cultures, willfully disregards these deep and often vexing differences that make culture something more than a matter of style. Thomas Jefferson exemplified a more serious multicultural approach when he tried to reform the College of William and Mary in 1779. Among other changes, he proposed dropping the missionary who was sent to teach English, arithmetic, and Christianity to the Indians, and instead sending a scholar who would study and record their languages and laws. Jefferson was persuaded that Americans could learn a great deal from the Indians both about speculative questions such as the nature of languages and the history of human migrations and about the wise ordering of society.

Without a willingness to learn lessons from other societies about the strengths and weaknesses of our own, multicultural studies in the schools will never be more than window dressing. There will always be a few people who care about such things as the genealogy of human languages, but most of us learn so that in one way or another we may make our lives better. A good multicultural program aims at educating not philosophers but moral human beings and citizens; hence it must focus on the questions of what is just and how we ought to live. If it is responsible, it must support decency; but if it is serious, it cannot escape being controversial: true education is inherently controversial. Now a valuable part of the multicultural education movement has been the desire to move history courses away from the presentation of a single, officially sanctioned story to an encounter with multiple perspectives and conflicting interpretations. Proponents rightly argue that this approach is both more honest and more likely to stimulate interest among students. But they often assume that the multiple perspectives that matter most are not those of, say, Marxists and Augustinians and liber-
als, but those of women and homosexuals and minorities, and that unlike the former perspectives, which can be adopted and modified through reasoned discourse, the latter cannot be understood by anyone outside the group in question.\(^7\) This is an issue of the gravest moment. Is history only a tangle of different narratives, different points of view, each of which is bound by its own horizon, determined inescapably by circumstances, and ultimately self-serving? Or do we at least potentially have access to a common and comprehensive truth, of which the different interpretations and narrative accounts are all more or less distorted, more or less illuminating fragments? If the former is the case, there is little hope for a peaceful and rational resolution of our differences, and little reason for students to be interested in listening to other perspectives. What intrigues them in a controversy is, after all, the prospect of a puzzle to be solved. But even to state the two possibilities is to show the incoherence of the former argument, in asserting the objective truth that there is no objective truth.

Despite this illogic, the denial of objective truth about history in general and moral judgments in particular is extremely common. Instilling in students a belief in cultural relativism is one of the central goals of multicultural education advocates. Tolerance and mutual respect will follow, they believe, once students see that each culture is as good as every other, and that there is no objective basis for judging any of them as deficient. The assertion of the equality of cultures and the assertion of the incommensurability of cultures are, of course, contradictory. If there is really no basis for measuring cultures or their component beliefs and customs against one another, then there are no grounds for asserting that they are equal. Each of these assertions, however, is unsustainable when taken by itself; hence multiculturalists slide continually between the two. If one maintains openly that cultures really can be weighed and measured against one another, it is a little too absurd to assert that, on some objective scale of measurement, taking all the strengths and weaknesses of each into consideration, all of the thousands of cultures the world has seen come out precisely the same. On the other hand, if one tries to argue consistently that no such measures are possible, one gives up one's moral compass. One can make no rational objection to slavery, widow burning, clitoridectomies, infanticide, or many of the other practices that have formed an integral part of various cultures. Nor can one assert anything more than an idiosyncratic preference for liberal democracy. As Mussolini saw clearly, cultural relativism does not support democracy and tolerance any more than it supports any other political system:
If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and men who claim to be
the bearers of an objective, immortal truth... then there is nothing more rel-
avtivistic than Fascist attitudes and activity... From the fact that all ideologies
are of equal value, that all ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist
infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology and
to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable.¹⁸

Indeed, it should not surprise us that those who begin with relativism
should end with a fierce and intolerant assertion of their ideologies, because
relativism is psychologically impossible to sustain. Everyone makes judg­
ments about good and bad, right and wrong, all the time. People may say
that these are just “value judgments,” that they are entirely subjective and
hold no universal validity, but no one can consistently live or even talk as if
this were true. The principles that people believe in, that they want to pass
on to their children and students, hold an entirely different meaning for
them than what they recognize as their private, idiosyncratic preferences.
Everyone holds his deepest principles to be universally valid, whether he
believes above all in the virtue of faith or the virtue of humane tolerance or
the virtue of authentic commitment.

The fact that the relativistic position is both dangerous and psychologi­
cally unsustainable does not, of course, prove that it is false, or that there is an
absolute truth about right and wrong and the just ordering of society, or that
such a truth is accessible to us through reason. It only means that we would
do well to look for such a truth, rather than dogmatically insist that it is not
to be found. Lessing once defined dogmatism as the confusion of the goal of
one’s thought with the point at which one becomes tired of thinking, and dog­
matic relativists seem to grow tired of thinking before they even begin.¹⁹ Dog­
matic relativism is as inimical to the spirit of fair-minded inquiry as is
dogmatic moralism or chauvinism. Although they appear to be opposites,
these positions resemble each other in striking ways. Adherents of both views
are self-satisfied, and hence unwilling to listen to other points of view and
grapple with them seriously. As dogmatic moralists are certain that they pos­
sess the truth and have nothing to learn from anybody, dogmatic relativists
are equally certain that no one possesses the truth and that those who disagree
with them are no wiser than they are, but only different. The dogmatic moral­
ists refuse to examine themselves because they are certain they are good, the
relativists because they feel no need to justify their views since they can defend
the views simply by saying, “These are my values.” Both have an incomplete
self-understanding. Traditional dogmatists tend to deceive themselves by deny-
ing whatever doubts they have; dogmatic relativists do the same thing by denying their critical judgments. Both positions, in short, are shallow.

Students who are taught relativism year after year, although deeply affected by it, are never wholly convinced. As a result, they become an incoherent mixture of these two extremes, with unfortunate consequences for education. Having heard time and again that no society is any better than any other, they have little motive for wanting to know about other societies; indifference is a much more common result of relativism than is true respect for other ways of life. But while relativism can sap their interest in history, geography, and literature, it does not dissolve the judgments that lurk deep within. These judgments tend to remain unacknowledged, however, and hence they cannot be educated and refined through reasoned discourse. The education that students need, and that multicultural studies can provide, is one that will bring them to a deeper thoughtfulness by helping them to integrate and develop their questions, their conscience, their common sense, and their capacity for reasoned judgment. They need to balance commitment and judgment with open-mindedness, and that requires a willingness to engage in serious discourse about what is good and bad, admirable and not admirable. How can teachers push beneath students’ superficial relativism to create such genuine openness?

It is easy enough to show students that they do indeed believe in right and wrong and good and bad social institutions. One need only take extreme examples such as Nazis shooting babies, or slavery, or apartheid. The reason students keep slipping back into a relativistic position, despite their knowledge of these clear cases, is that they believe that they can be good and kind people only if they are tolerant and that they can be tolerant only if they are relativists. What they need is to see toleration in perspective, as one part but by no means the whole of the virtue of humanity. There are things that should be tolerated and things that it is inhumane to tolerate, and only with clarity about basic principles can one tell the difference. Students need to be shown, by the same token, that judgment is not inherently bad. The derogatory word “judgmental” that we now hear so often is one of those careless terms that blurs important distinctions. It conflates valid judgments with those that are hasty and groundless and judgments that are voiced with a constructive purpose with those that are spoken only in order to hurt. Judgments can indeed lead to hurt feelings, although hurt feelings are often the necessary prelude to growth or reformation. Such judgments should be voiced with great caution, then, but not banished altogether.
Students also need to be reminded that the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that there is no truth. It only means that some or all people are ignorant of it, and probably that the truth is difficult to find. Nor is it necessary to persuade everyone of one’s view in order to in fact be right. There may always be diehard partisans of apartheid, yet one may rightly conclude from the evidence that the policy of apartheid is neither just nor well suited to promoting the happiness of nations. What is more important than convincing all opponents is being able to satisfy oneself that one has considered their arguments and has sufficient answers for them.

Inevitably, students will ask, “Who’s to say which moral beliefs are right, or which culture’s system of laws is best?” Teachers can reply that it is the responsibility of everyone to try to judge these things, in open and fair-minded discussion with one another. Students who are studying another society should make every effort to give the benefit of the doubt, and should also give greater weight to the testimony of those who know it firsthand than to their own judgments. There are societies that need barbed wire to keep people out and others that need it to keep people in, and it would be arrogant in the extreme to say that those who seek to escape oppression are wrong because all societies are equally good. The fact that people can assert the equality of all societies or cultures, despite their recognition of the evils of tyranny, suggests a naive ignorance of the power of the political regime to shape all aspects of culture. Reading the works of communist dissidents such as Vaclav Havel and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who have written eloquently about the social and moral ills caused by communism, can help correct this misunderstanding, at the same time that it gives students an inside perspective on totalitarian society and an outside perspective on our own.

Reaching a thoughtful middle ground between relativism and dogmatism means knowing what one’s principles are and what the arguments are for these principles, but also recognizing that at the root of cultural differences lie difficult questions, with cases to be made on both sides. Students should see, for instance, that there are good arguments for a close-knit, communitarian, tribal kind of life, as well as for extensive individual liberty. Even while they believe that democracy is the best form of government, they should recognize that it may not have all the advantages on its side, and that very thoughtful men and women have favored other forms of government. They should see that there is a case to be made for such systems as theocracy and aristocracy, and that we have things to learn by engaging in these arguments. Exploring alternatives and looking for answers to the challenges
they present can lead students to a deeper grasp of their own country's principles. It can make them better democrats, not in the sense of being more partisan democrats, but in the sense of being more thoughtful and moderate, and hence better able to compensate for democracy's characteristic weaknesses or blind spots. For this purpose, reading a sympathetic critique of democracy from an aristocratic perspective, such as Tocqueville's *Democracy in America,* is extremely helpful. At the same time, a recognition of the depth of the issues that divide truly different cultures will help students to see that the United States, for all its vaunted cultural diversity, enjoys virtual unanimity regarding the most important aspects of culture: the political system and the relation of religious authorities to political ones.

**Program Organization and Teaching Strategies**

How would a serious multicultural education be structured, then, so as to foster the kind of thoughtful judgment that is needed? The program would balance the study of America with a study of the Western tradition of which it is a part and with explorations of wholly different traditions. It would include some knowledge of many societies throughout the world and throughout history, and a deeper knowledge of a few. By studying a variety of other societies, students can get a sense of what the range of human possibilities is and of what is constant in human nature. Ohio's guidelines for multicultural education express the usual aim of teaching students to value diversity in American society and, in Justice William O. Douglas's words, to appreciate "the flowering of man and his idiosyncrasies." A more basic and valuable lesson to be gleaned from multicultural studies, however, is the knowledge of what is universal and what is only the growth of our own particular time and place. A recognition of the virtues that are respected everywhere can help correct the thoughtless assumption that morals are completely variable or relative. A study of many different political systems and political experiments gives citizens the foundation for prudence and good judgment in political affairs: an understanding of the natural limits of politics, or of what can reasonably be hoped for from political action and what is a utopian and dangerous dream.

A good program would be structured so as to give students extensive information with which to make judgments about social and political issues. Substantive knowledge of a number of different societies allows one to recall historical precedents and parallels for current developments and to assess
them intelligently for oneself. There is no substitute for knowing a great deal of history, understanding it in context, and being able to make informed judgments about how events are likely to unfold. This is where some of the newer approaches to multicultural studies threaten to leave students seriously deprived. The New York Social Studies Review and Development Committee, wisely recognizing the impossibility of covering all parts of the world and all periods of history comprehensively and in meaningful depth (and at the same time wanting desperately to be evenhanded), advises schools to shift their emphasis away from information and toward the tools, concepts, and intellectual processes that allow one to be an "autonomous learner." Hence they recommend that schools abandon the traditional organization of history and geography courses in favor of courses organized around key concepts. Teachers would then draw relevant examples from a variety of cultures to illustrate each concept. 

Taking events out of context in this way, however, will leave students dependent on their teachers' interpretations of the events, their causes, and the unfamiliar cultures in which they have taken place. Events viewed in isolation as examples of some general point are harder to retain in one's memory than events that make sense as part of a continuous narrative. Students educated in this way will come away without solid knowledge of any other society and without practice in marshaling their own knowledge to form independent assessments of events. In education circles it has become quite fashionable to de-emphasize facts at the expense of concepts or skills, on the questionable assumption that information is easy to obtain whenever one needs it—and on the strange assumption that one must choose between information and concepts or thinking skills. This approach neglects the consideration that students who are never required to move systematically and carefully from facts to general ideas may never feel the need for the knowledge that they lack. Rather than reaching independent conclusions, they will simply adopt the popular ideas of their times. There is much talk these days about critical thinking and much too little attention paid to the habits of patience and thoroughness and respect for knowledge that are its necessary foundation.

In addition to providing students with broad knowledge of the world and a habit of using it well, a good multicultural studies program would also focus in depth on a few societies that stand as challenging alternatives to our own. In the later grades especially, breadth of coverage would be foregone for the sake of depth, and teachers would have freedom to focus on the specific countries and periods that they know well and find most fruitful to
teach. An intimate knowledge of one society that differs deeply from ours can provoke more thoughtfulness and more of a disposition to regard others with respectful openness than giving students a whirlwind tour of many cultures. One need not even go far afield to give students such a perspective. Ancient Greece, though the source of much that we cherish and much that we take for granted, can also provide some of the deepest challenges to us, with its paganism, its public supervision of religion and the arts, its variety of political regimes, brilliantly justified, and its dedication to smallness and military valor.

Allowing teachers to focus on the countries and periods of history that they themselves find most admirable can also help promote respect for other cultures as a whole. This is one of the great limitations of multicultural studies that look only at immigrant groups within North America. It is not reasonable to expect that a society's finest achievements will be particularly visible among immigrants to another country, since the immigrants' energies will be consumed in establishing a new life for themselves and fitting into a new society. American history courses should of course include the study of minorities as an integral part of our history, and the study of immigrant groups can be an excellent prelude to the study of the countries that they came from, especially for younger students. But if the goal is to provoke thought and respect for another group, the best multicultural literature for students to read will not be stories of immigrants' sufferings or of others who have been hurt by their contact with the West, but classics from within those cultures themselves.

Respect for other cultures also comes through learning about impressive individuals within those societies. Young people have a great need for models that they can admire and pattern their lives after, as George Washington did with Cato and as our students continue to do with rock stars and whoever else seizes their imagination. For all their talk about the importance of role models, many educators do not understand students' need for inspiration; and they single out figures for special attention not on the basis of their virtues or the captivating drama of their lives, but on the basis of skin color, gender, and physical disability. The Organization of American Historians recommends that "the history curriculum of public schools should be constructed around the principle that all people have been significant actors in human events." The most thoroughly egalitarian form of history instruction would no doubt be to study lives chosen at random, but this would do nothing to nourish the mind or the heart. Stories and especially biographies
of remarkable people are valuable in the same way that the best novels are: they give us models that we can keep in our minds as reference points all our lives and that we can use to help sort out our own aspirations. If we look impartially for inspiring models in all continents, they will naturally come in all colors. One who admires Anwar Sadat will care little about the color of his skin; and the more eclectic one's stock of heroes is, the harder it will be to be prejudiced.

Once students have a preliminary acquaintance with a society that they are studying, the teachers need to listen carefully to their judgments. If instructors do not elicit and address students' honest responses to the material, the students will remain detached, and the course will seem dry and "academic." Only by engaging students fully can teachers educate their judgments. Honest judgments can of course be explosive, especially if the subject is American ethnic groups. This is one advantage to studying the history and literature of other periods: if the class is investigating ancient Rome or Egypt, no one in the room need feel offended by criticisms leveled against that society. Once students have learned habits of judging carefully and giving the benefit of the doubt in their study of other cultures, they will be able to apply these same habits to their analysis of events near at hand.

The next step after clarifying one's initial judgments, however, is to suspend these judgments and try to understand the case for the other side. Despite their initial prejudices, students are often surprisingly willing to consider the arguments for other regimes and ways of life if they are given the task of defending these in essays or debates. Teachers can help them make serious arguments by pointing them to relevant texts and documents from the society under study. If they are assigned to explain the position of the elders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who banished Anne Hutchinson, for instance, they would be encouraged to resist the initial temptation to judge them in terms of modern conceptions of religious liberty and first to give a sympathetic reading to the early Puritan speeches that show their very different conception of society's purpose and the spiritual duties of magistrates.

Meaningful courses can be structured so as to allow generous scope for the issues that provoke a strong reaction in students and hence engage their interest most fully. These initial reactions or judgments can be used to formulate guiding questions for research. In a unit on India, for example, students are likely to respond more intensely to the caste system or to arranged marriages than to issues of industrialization and sanitation. They might ask how the caste system got started, why it persisted so long, and why it is still
powerful even now that it is illegal. Students would confront the injustice of the early Aryans, who set themselves up as the highest caste; but they would also learn about the Hindu teachings of reincarnation and the soul’s gradual progress to Nirvana, in stages corresponding to the castes. They would consider the strong sense of community and belonging and order that such a system gives to life, and perhaps contrast an Indian community with utopian American attempts to forge close-knit communities.

Rather than criticize the caste system from the perspective of our principles, they would notice that there have been Indian critics of it from the outset and that their perspective is different from ours. Many of the protest movements that sprang up in the Middle Ages, such as the Virasaiva movement of the tenth to twelfth centuries, were egalitarian in a sense, not because they believed in democracy as such, but because they were trying to create a community of saints. They believed that enlightenment could come in one lifetime to members of any caste. If students compare their own tendency to value individual freedom for the sake of getting ahead in life with the Indian focus on spiritual things, their respect for India will grow. This comparison could lead them to a reexamination of their own understanding of human rights. Perhaps what is really best and most important about individual liberty is not its contribution to economic self-advancement, but the fact that it allows for freedom of thought and of conscience—a freedom to live a spiritual life, but also to follow the religion or philosophy that one finds most persuasive. A study of this nature would help students to see that the caste system is neither simply cynical nor simply destructive. Examining its power to persist and the nature of the protests against it can help Americans to see their lives in better perspective. In the end, such a process will give students wiser and more moderate judgments, judgments that reflect more understanding, a sense of the complexity of the issues, and a greater willingness to consider other views in the future.

This sketch of a multicultural civic education is undeniably ambitious. By the end of high school, students cannot be expected to attain a complete understanding of American principles or a full appreciation of what even one other culture has to offer. It is extraordinarily hard to get outside of one’s own terms of reference and the prejudices of one’s own culture to understand another on its own terms. Teachers who are to help students to make a successful start at this ought to have a thorough grounding in history themselves, which unfortunately most jurisdictions do not require social studies teachers to have. They need some understanding of world religions
and of the arguments for and against different regimes, different family structures, and different ways of balancing the claims of the individual against the claims of society. They need, in the best case, some acquaintance with political philosophy. Yet any teacher who is thorough, openminded, and willing to learn can make progress together with her students; and in twelve years of serious and unhurried history and geography courses, students can make an excellent beginning. Even if the best civic education is rarely attained, having a clear vision of the goal is invaluable. A frank investigation of other societies that welcomes judgments about good and bad can be safely engaged in without fear of promoting more bigotry, because the issues that divide societies are hard issues. If questions about how human beings should live together and govern themselves were easy, everyone would adopt the same laws and customs, just as we all sleep lying down at night, and not sitting or standing in stalls. Because the questions are hard, there is almost always something to be said on both sides and almost always something to be learned from the other side. And the experience of learning from each other is in the end the best way to generate mutual respect and goodwill. At the same time, if teachers help students to understand the strongest case for liberal democracy, and if they investigate other countries not with a view to denigrating ours, but with a view to finding constructive lessons for it, such openness will promote not only tolerance but civic health more broadly. We close, then, with a paradox. Just as racism may best be overcome through a broad civic education that looks beyond race to deeper issues, so the best civic education for America may be a liberal education, which looks beyond the civic concerns of our society to contemplate humanity itself.

Notes


4. *Pennsylvania Bulletin* 23, no. 30 (July 24, 1993): 3553; State of Iowa Department of


17. This position is often incoherent. There is great pressure to study literature and scholarship written by women and homosexuals and minorities, on the grounds that only in this way can one get a true diversity of views. It is thought, for example, that whites cannot study or write knowledgeably about blacks. But if we truly cannot understand one another's perspectives, why should a student study with or read the works of anyone of another race or gender?


