

Multiculturalism and a Politics of Persistence

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Charles Taylor¹ makes a strong case for what he calls “the politics of recognition,” a politics which he believes can underwrite prescriptive multicultural policies for schools. He builds his case by arguing for the significance of culture to individual identity. Noting how not only misrecognition but also failure to recognize can cause harm, he claims that governments charged with providing basic conditions for citizens’ self-determination are therefore also charged with protecting and promoting legitimate self-determining activities of groups through which citizens structure their identities. His basic point is that mutual recognition is necessary in framing a kind of self-respecting consciousness that is a pre-condition for active civic participation. Further, Taylor argues that equality requires the presumption that other cultures may have worth, though he claims the final judgment of that worth can only occur after our standards have undergone modification in dialogue with other views.²

While from some perspectives this presumption seems presumptuous, it does get us to a multicultural education in the most minimal sense of having the content of education include works from the cultures that have helped shape the identities of the students in our schools. But it also gets us to the more radical notion — one not found in all multicultural education — that we should also read these books in such a way as to call into question our values and indeed change ourselves in the sense of revise our standards for determining the worth of values.

Such a proposal as this raises fears. Many worry that in rethinking the canon, we are sacrificing the ideal of a collective identity. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in his book, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, very clearly voices these concerns:

Instead of a transformative nation with an identity all its own, America increasingly sees itself as preservative of old identities. Instead of a nation composed of individuals making their own free choices, America increasingly sees itself as composed of groups more or less indelible in their ethnic character. The national ideal had once been *e pluribus unum*. Are we now to belittle *unum* and glorify *pluribus*? Will the center hold? or will the melting pot yield to the Tower of Babel?³

While I was initially inclined to dismiss Schlesinger’s concerns, recent political events in Canada have made the question of unity a live one for me, and I’ve come to believe that the question he raises is a fair one. In a recent Quebec referendum on secession, less than 2% separated the Yes and No votes. These results were a profound shock to the rest of Canada, even to those of us who were well aware of the tensions. They shattered our illusion that the country we call Canada is indivisible.

After the shock settled, the federalists reacted to the Quebec vote. Their reaction, said sometimes in anger, and too often smugly, in a spirit of revenge was this: “If Canada is divisible, Quebec is divisible.” It is true, as Will Kymlicka notes, that:

a sovereign Quebec would still be a very culturally diverse country, with immigrants from around the world, as well as a historically settled anglophone community, and various indigenous peoples, including the Cree, Mohawk, and Inuit. Secession rarely if ever creates homogeneous nation-states, it simply rearranges the pattern and size of groups.⁴

In addition to being true, and despite the sometimes vengeful tone it takes as a retort rather than a response, the federalist's slogan also expresses the fear, frustration, and sadness a people experience when their national unity is so obviously in jeopardy. The lesson I take from my Canadian experience is that we can be easily deluded about unity, both about its existence and its nature, its fragility, and its permanence.

So what about multiculturalism? What about multicultural education? Does it threaten national unity? What can be a plausible source of unity in a multinational, polyethnic state? What sort of education can foster unity in such a state? My quest in this essay is to break through some delusions about unity and to identify what could be unifying in a multicultural state — in a state that fosters few illusions. For I take it that we are agreed that we do not want our educational aims formed by a debilitating conception of national unity.

I begin by looking at what have seemed to be the two most viable candidates for promoting a shared civic sense required for cohesion and stability in a modern multinational, polyethnic state: (1) shared values, and (2) shared identity. Both of these have their corresponding educational programs emphasizing moral and/or values education and citizenship education, but I limit my remarks here to the plausibility of the underlying ideas. My intention is to demonstrate just how problematic these are and then to suggest my own favorite candidate.

SHARED VALUES

One proposal often suggested is that even in a pluralistic society like this one, shared values can provide grounds for social unity and mutual concern. The claim is that under the diversity we can find a more solid list of common values — political values shared by cultures within the society that have the potential of establishing commonality. One Canadian government commission, for example, developed a list of seven such values that Canadians of various ethnic backgrounds share. Canadians, they claim, share:

- (1) a belief in equality and fairness
- (2) a belief in consultation and dialogue
- (3) the importance of accommodation and tolerance
- (4) support for diversity
- (5) compassion and generosity
- (6) attachment to the natural environment
- (7) commitment to freedom, peace, and nonviolent change.⁵

Although such an account of “empirically verified” shared values seems promising, Dwight Boyd,⁶ in a skillful and subtle analysis, shows us clearly how such emphasis on gross-level common themes within different value orientations does not and cannot provide a sure basis for social unity. Succinctly stated, Boyd's argument is this: “The list really consists of *names* of values. How they are interpreted to *be* values according to the complex, dynamic web of meaning and justification that constitute different cultures cannot be accommodated by the list itself.”⁷ He adds, “Listing the *names* that different cultures happen to give these

points of interpretation, on the belief that this will establish commonality, serves only to confuse naming and meaning and thus to hide the real problem.”⁸ Boyd rightly notes that such lists of shared values gloss over moral and political diversity and tend to standardize the lists in the direction of the dominant view and thereby entrench that view.

But let us imagine that the list really does describe shared political values. Suppose our list “gets it right.” We face further problems. It is not at all clear that these shared values, by themselves, provide a reason for two or more national groups to stay together in one country. Kymlicka’s observations about the Canadian scene have wider application.

there has been a pronounced convergence of values between English- and French- speaking Canadians over the last thirty years. If the shared values approach were correct, we should have witnessed a decline in support for Quebec secession over this period, yet nationalist sentiment has in fact grown consistently.⁹

More pointedly, Kymlicka notes:

the fact that anglophones and francophones in Canada share the same principles of justice is not a strong reason to remain together, since the Quebecois rightly assume that their own national state could respect the same value. The same is true of the Flemish in Belgium.

It seems then that shared values are not sufficient for social unity. What more is needed?

SHARED IDENTITY

Some who acknowledge that shared values won’t work or are not enough claim that the way to develop unity is through a shared civic identity, through a common shared citizenship status. What has held Americans together despite a lack of shared values, they argue, is the identity they share as United States citizens. Citizenship is not just a legal status defined by rights and responsibilities, it is also an identity, an expression of one’s membership in a political community.

The problem with this view is that in fact there is no common undifferentiated United States citizenship. The fact is, in both Canada and the United States, we have “not only a diversity of cultural groups but also a diversity of ways in which members of these groups belong to the larger polity.”¹⁰ In short, people in the United States are positioned differently with respect to U.S. citizenship. Kymlicka reminds us, for example, that

the member of an immigrant group in the United States may see her citizenship status as centered on the universal individual rights guaranteed by the constitution. Her ethnic identity, while important in various ways, may not affect her sense of citizenship or what it is to be an American (or Canadian or Australian). The United States, for her, may be a country of equal citizens who are tolerant of each other’s cultural differences....But this model of belonging will not accommodate national minorities like Puerto Ricans or Navaho. They belong to the United States through belonging to a national group that has federated itself to the larger community.¹¹

For Puerto Ricans, Native-Americans and others, their way of being a U.S. citizen is different. The United States, for them, is a federation of peoples — English, Spanish, Indian — each with the right to govern themselves. Both Charles Taylor and Kymlicka observe that similarly in Canada, what we might call the immigrant model of belonging will not accommodate the francophones and indigenous peoples

for whom “the way of being a Canadian...is via their belonging to a constituent element of Canada, such as the Quebecois or the Cree.”¹² As Kymlicka notes, “For these groups, Canada is a federation of national groups which respect each other’s right to be a distinct societal culture in Canada.”¹³

So, in countries that are both polyethnic and multinational, we have to deal with diverse cultural groups who have diverse images of the country as a whole and of their own citizenship. People not only belong to separate political communities, but significantly, they also belong in different ways. Observations such as these prompt Charles Taylor to claim that it is obvious that we need a theory of deep diversity on which to build the unity of such a state. “This means that the members of a polyethnic and multinational state must not only respect diversity, but also respect a diversity of approaches to diversity.”¹⁴ To put it more concretely, an immigrant who sees herself as a bearer of individual rights in a cultural mosaic must also accept that Puerto Ricans, Navaho, and Quebecois might belong in a different way and they in turn would accept the legitimacy of the “mosaic identity.”

In his own answer to the question, What will hold it together? Taylor suggests that citizens might find it exciting, they might take pride in working together to build a society founded on deep diversity, and be willing to make sacrifices to keep it together.¹⁵ But as Kymlicka points out, this seems to beg the question. “Why would citizens find this exciting rather than wearying, given the endless negotiations and complications it entails?”¹⁶

Whether or not it begs the question, it still seems useful for Taylor to point out that a society founded on deep diversity cannot be safely unified unless people value deep diversity itself. It is only useful, however, as long as we heed Kymlicka’s further caution: “For citizens to want to keep a multinational state together...they must value not just ‘deep diversity’ *in general*, but also the *particular* ethnic groups and national cultures with whom they currently share the country.”¹⁷

Of course the real problem is, as Kymlicka reminds us, that this sort of allegiance with particular groups is the *product* of mutual solidarity, and not all multinational states have it. So, our question remains: How might we begin to build the basis of such an allegiance?

If we are to move from valuing the abstraction of deep diversity to valuing the diversity of the particular groups with whom we share a country, then we must come to know them. But coming to know groups and persons who are different is notoriously difficult. One thing that makes it difficult is the fact that we have, as Cornel West points out, mediating structures of racism, patriarchy, and class that delimit the public space. If we are to use education to create public spaces in which there can be citizen bonding, and the formation of the subjectivity Taylor thinks is required for a “politics of recognition,” then we must start where Taylor never arrives, and deepen our understanding of the structural connection between the limited public space we now experience in liberal societies, and the defects of the structures of racism, patriarchy and class.¹⁸

It is also difficult because we sometimes fail to remember that coming to know others requires that we adopt a certain stance towards them — an ethical stance if

you will — if they are to yield the knowledge we seek. What exactly this stance or attitude is is hard to say, but I think Nel Noddings makes a good attempt at it.

The idea is to approach others as others. To adopt a stance which allows the other to enter my consciousness in all his or her own fullness — not as a set of facts I have gathered...it's an attitude that suggests an understanding of the other that respects the other's ideal...Similarly when we see evil in the other we withhold judgment long enough to be sure that the evil is in the other and not a projection of evil in oneself...the receptivity is directed not only outward but inward as well.¹⁹

We can perhaps further clarify this stance or attitude which I claim can be a unifying one, by considering a particular example of it. I think the attitude, the stance Noddings is describing is characterized by Cornel West in the following exchanges between Michael Lerner and Cornel West in their book, *Jews and Blacks: A Dialogue on Race, Religion, and Culture in America*.²⁰ The following exchange occurs in the context of their discussion of the million-man march on Washington.

M.L. Don't you see the way that Farrakhan provides whites with a reason to distance themselves from the black movement. Are you saying that you don't see the dangers in Farrakhan?...I'm told that you physically embraced him....This was in public and was seen as a symbolic act....Doesn't it trouble you that this is someone who is perceived by many Jews as an Anti-Semite, many women as sexist, many gays as a homophobe, and that this is the man who now you and other progressive Blacks are associated with?²¹

C.W. In *dialogue* with — to push, to challenge....When you are working on both fronts at the same time — Black operational unity is one front, and the other front is a progressive multiracial front that talks about white supremacy, male supremacy, corporate power, homophobia, and ecological abuse — you will sometimes find yourself between a rock and a hard place because some in the Black united front will hit white supremacy but have other views with which you disagree, and those in the multiracial progressive movement may have conscious or unconscious racist sensibilities with which you disagree. But you must work in both to push them beyond where they are.²²

M.L. So you believe the situation of oppression against Blacks [is such] that it makes alliances with racists and anti-Semites plausible?²³

C.W. But there is no purity in any side...you also have leftists who are racist and homophobic, even as they fight against it...I've never given up on those in the progressive, liberal, or even the conservative movement — pushing them beyond their white supremacist sensibilities — so I refuse to give up on Minister Louis Farrakhan or any other Black person because of their xenophobic sensibility. That is my way of being in the world.²⁴

M.L. But what if the Black Movement by aligning itself with Farrakhan actually has the consequence of weakening the white support that might have been there for reducing poverty and oppression?²⁵

C.W. Progressive movements are difficult to forge. Therefore, we must be willing to push, criticize, and not give up on any one of us.²⁶

M.L. When I broached [a meeting between Farrakhan and Anti-Defamation League or Farrakhan and Jewish progressives] I was suddenly surrounded by angry liberal Jews who were saying to me, "How would you possibly doubt what Farrakhan stands for now that he has repeated this bloodsucking remark?" And my sister in LA when I mentioned being in discussion with other Jewish liberals and progressives on this topic...said, "Go to the Yellow Pages and look up under 'Get a Backbone.'" In other words, such a move is perceived as an ultimate proof that one would not be willing to stand up for Jewish interests even when the other side is kicking us in the face.²⁷

C.W. I don't see you as sacrificing Jewish interests because you want to be in dialogue with someone who is causing Jewish pain....[That view] assumes that [Farrakhan] has no interest whatsoever in trying to move in a humane direction or be humane. That is your basic assumption. And that is the assumption I disagree with. If people believe that he is the

embodiment of evil then every move will be seen as a capitulation to evil. But if you believe that there is a possibility of movement, then you engage. Some people will perceive me as being used, manipulated, naive and so forth. But that is the way I proceed with anybody.²⁸

In these passages Cornel West exemplifies what I call a Politics of Persistence. What I think is especially pertinent about the Cornel West example is that in this case we have a context for misunderstanding, but we see that West persists in staying in the situation, trying to get to know Louis Farrakhan better.

Another dimension of the stance I characterize as a Politics of Persistence is something both Noddings and West also emphasize in their writings, that is to say, self knowledge. In this context we cannot overestimate the importance of understanding ourselves, for once we attend to our own thoughts and fears about matters, we open the possibility of seeing our own misconceptions and delusions that keep our fears in place. If we look closely at our own fears about disunity we might notice some misunderstandings. We might notice, for example, that many of the actions and demands of others for representation rights that arouse anxieties about disunity are actually demands for inclusion. We have many examples: Sikhs in Canada who want to join the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Orthodox Jews in the United States who want to join the U.S. military, and Muslim girls in France wanting to wear the *chador*, where the requests for exemptions from usual regulations governing headgear are motivated by a desire for greater participation in the larger society.²⁹

If we stay focused on this misunderstanding long enough, we might notice a double standard at work. The earlier requests of the Amish, Hutterites, Quakers and Hasidim immigrants for special rights to keep themselves separate did not worry us the way non-white, non-Christian requests for inclusion do. And finally, if we can keep our attention on the situation even longer, we might notice that our fears of multiculturalism are a displacement for even more profound feelings about the longstanding problems between blacks and whites (or any other longstanding buried antagonism within the country).³⁰

In addition to the cultivation of certain attitudes that allow us the possibility of knowing each other within, across, and through our differences, something more is required. In addition to trying to understand our fears about disunity, it may also help us to simply face them, directly, and with shared perceptions. So, heeding the fears Arthur Schlesinger Jr. names, let us risk facing a rethinking of the canon. Let us revisit the Tower of Babel, only this time let us visit it accompanied by Toni Morrison. As she sees it:

The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune: that it was the distraction or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture; that one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached. Whose heaven...and what kind? Perhaps the achievement of paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet.³¹

What is the nature of unity in a multinational, polyethnic country, and what in education might we do to foster that unity? In answering this question I have tried to discourage us from seeking a *unified* set of values or a *unified* identity. Rather, I suggest a stance, an attitude we can take that might be *unifying*.³² Fostering an

education that allows us to understand each other — and *show* that we understand each other — will give us the best chance of discovering that perhaps we can come to value each particular member and culture of our community.

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1. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1992).
 2. Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 70-73.
 3. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (Knoxville, TN: Whittle Direct Books, 1991), 2.
 4. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 191.
 5. Citizen's Forum on Canada's Future, *Report to the People and Government of Canada* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1991), 34-44.
 6. Dwight Boyd, "Dominance Concealed Through Diversity: Implications of Inadequate Perspectives on Cultural Pluralism," *Harvard Educational Review* (forthcoming).
 7. Boyd, "Dominance Concealed Through Diversity," 20.
 8. Ibid.
 9. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 188.
 10. Charles Taylor, "Shared and Divergent Values," in *Options for a New Canada*, ed. R. Watts and D. Brown (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 75.
 11. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 190.
 12. Ibid.
 13. Ibid.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Taylor, "Shared and Divergent Values," 76.
 16. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 190.
 17. Ibid., 191 (my italics).
 18. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 223.
 19. Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 194.
 20. Michael Lerner and Cornel West, *Jews and Blacks: A Dialogue on Race, Religion, and Culture in America* (New York: Penguin, 1996).
 21. Lerner and West, *Jews and Blacks*, 289.
 22. Ibid., 289-290.
 23. Ibid., 290.
 24. Ibid.
 25. Ibid., 291.
 26. Ibid.
 27. Ibid., 292.
 28. Ibid., 293.
 29. For a fascinating discussion about a number of these cases see Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 176-81.
 30. Ibid., 179.
 31. Toni Morrison, *The Noble Lecture in Literature, 1993* (Lecture and speech of acceptance, upon the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, delivered in Stockholm, 7 December 1993, Random House Audio Publishing, 1994).
 32. I first encountered the idea of eschewing the quest for the unified and seeking what might be unifying in Jane Roland Martin's book, *Schoolhome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). See especially chap. 2, "Culture and Curriculum."