

The Goals of Multicultural Education: A Critical Re-evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

Pluralism and multiculturalism come from the same source — liberal political and educational theory — but they lead in different directions and represent distinct social visions. Pluralism seeks a society in which people from different cultural formations and orientations are allowed, if they wish to do so, to express their way of life within a separate cultural sphere, and are treated as equal individuals in a common public sphere. Pluralism wants equality of opportunity in the public sphere and freedom of association in the cultural sphere. Unlike the assimilation position, pluralism does not seek to destroy past memories and to obliterate cultural diversity. It does, however, allow for the dissolution of that identity should an insufficient number of individuals choose to pursue it. For the pluralist, society has no special obligation to maintain or support cultural structures. It must simply maintain the individual conditions which make choice possible. It must assure, for example, that children are not brainwashed or indoctrinated and that they develop an awareness of various alternative forms of life and the skill required to assess them. Thus unlike the assimilation position, pluralism is not hostile to cultural expression, but there is, as one commentator puts it, a certain quality of benign neglect.¹ In contrast, multiculturalism values cultural difference and authenticity, and seeks to maintain it in ways that are not solely dependent on the momentary interests of individuals. Indeed, one concern of multiculturalist theory is that access to dominant, hegemonic, and unchallenged cultural forms may work to the disadvantage of local cultural affiliation. Multiculturalism thus differs from pluralism in a number of ways.

First, it holds that the public is already cultural. Its business is carried out in English, not French, not German, not Spanish; its institutions are shaped by the traditions of some groups and not others, and its educational and employment benefits are distributed unequally according to factors of ethnicity, race, and social class. Unlike pluralists, multiculturalists do not envisage even the possibility of a culturally neutral public sphere. Their ideal of cultural fairness is not to maintain a wall of separation between culture and public, but to assure that no group dominates the public sphere in a way that serves to exclude from it the bearers of other cultural forms. Hence, the public sphere is viewed as an arena for cultural negotiation where the goal is inclusion, culture and all. The public looks more like an open bazaar than a Whig courtroom.

Second, whereas pluralism *allows* cultural identity to flourish, the multicultural ideal *encourages* it to do so. In other words, benign neglect is not sufficient for the multiculturalist. Nor is it adequate to exhibit cultural diversity simply to teach lessons about the inclusive and benign character of the American nation — that is, as a means to a larger national goal. American policies of exclusion are as important to expose as are its policies of inclusion. Hence multiculturalism seeks to give expression to the experiences of cultural groups, not from the point of view of some

abstraction called “the American nation,” but from the point of view of the members of different racial, and ethnic groups, or from the view of people with different sexual orientations.

Third, whereas freedom of association and equal opportunity are the dominant principles informing pluralism, affiliation and cultural recognition are the principles that inform multiculturalism. Multiculturalists argue that these values are in fact the preconditions of individual growth that undergird liberal ideals.² Multiculturalism hence views individuals as part of collectivities that provide meaning to their lives, and it seeks ways to support these collectivities.

In this paper I seek to show the conditions under which these different sets of values may come into play within the public schools and I show that multiculturalism and pluralism can be compatible with one another when certain factors about culture and personal identity are taken into account. I want to focus on three principled reasons that traditionally have been associated with public schools and with pluralism and to ask whether the goals of multicultural education are compatible with them. The first of these principles, *equality of educational opportunity*, is a vocational one. It is intended to assure that children will be rewarded, both in school and afterwards in the work place, according to their merit. If schools follow this principle they not only act according to an established principle of fairness, but they also provide a continuing stream of talent for the nation as a whole.

Equality of educational opportunity is intended to compensate for inequalities of opportunities that arise as an indirect result of other liberal commitments. For example, as a result of the commitment to individual choice, liberal society is also committed to allowing private wealth to be used to benefit one’s own offspring. Other social systems might challenge this benefit on the grounds that it continues even after death when a person no longer has any wishes at all, and is not around to worry whether past wishes will be honored. However, extending the commitment beyond the life of the original creator of the wealth serves certain important social purposes. By acknowledging that living people have interests that extend beyond their own individual lives, and that serve to give their lives meaning, it provides certain constraints on state authority; it serves as an incentive for long term projects, and it contributes to a sense of extended responsibility.

Yet if this right remains unchecked, there are serious indirect social costs. One of them is that if these advantages go unaddressed, they distort the development and rewarding of talent. Less talented members are advanced over more talented ones because family background provides advantages that overwhelm relative deficits in talent. Equal opportunity seeks to mitigate this advantage by holding that children have a right to receive an education that is consistent with their capacities regardless of the circumstances of their parents.

The second principle, *freedom of association*, is a social and a political reason, and it is critical to maintaining democratic societies. This reason holds that individuals have rights to form whatever friendships, alliances, and interest groups they wish as long as in doing so they do not hinder the right of others to do the same. This principle requires schools to provide children with the capacity to understand

the implications of the social choices they make. Under this conception of education, children are not to be treated as if they were destined to relive the lives of their parents. Nevertheless, “understanding the implications of different lifestyle choices” includes the *choice* to maintain the same political, cultural, and religious associations as one’s parents. Because “having a choice,” entails having alternatives to that which one chooses, this principle requires that children be introduced to ways of life that are different from that of their parents, and that they be taught about the diversity of human cultures.

The third principle, *individual growth*, is a person-directed reason. Individual growth holds that children have a right to develop their talents and tastes in whatever way their inclinations and capacities allow, constrained only by the need for others to do the same. This principle requires the schools to challenge children in ways that they might not experience at home or in the community, and to expand their understandings and broaden their horizons.

All of these reasons have a social correlate. If individual children are to be granted equal opportunity — the right of free association and personal growth — they must also learn that it is important for others to have these rights too. This correlate is important because it is essential for stabilizing these principles within the fabric of the liberal democratic state. If children are not taught that the rights they have for themselves are rights that should be extended to others, then the principles are not workable.

In this paper I want to explore three goals of multicultural education in light of criticisms that they are incompatible with the principles of public education in a liberal society, and I want show how those criticisms can be answered. The three goals are: 1) providing students with information about the diversity within their own society; 2) encouraging respect for the practices of other cultural groups; and 3) helping students from disadvantaged minorities develop pride in their own cultural heritage. Before I explore each of these objections separately, let me provide a single picture of concern.

GENERAL OBJECTION TO AIMS OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Many liberals object to the multicultural project in the following way: If pride means having a favorable attitude towards one’s own group — an attitude which also sets one apart from others — then one of the implications of this goal is that one should act on one’s attitudes by favoring members of one’s own group. But why, it may be asked, should anyone outside of that group be expected to support this goal, and how does this implication fit with the goal of public education in terms of the need to develop universal standards and meritocratic institutions? In other words, how can the development of cultural pride be justified as a goal for public school education?

Moreover, given that cultural pride is designed to advance the solidarity of particular subcultures, this, the critic continues, will short change those individual students who find subcultural identity confining and limiting.³ An exclusive emphasis on cultural pride will lead children to think of themselves in one-dimensional terms and will inhibit the tendency to explore other dimensions, including other

cultural dimensions of the self. If cultural pride leads to this result by cutting off contact with members of other groups who have expanded interests, then the result will be to inhibit growth and development.

Similarly, some forms of multiculturalism are bad for the nation as a whole, especially if they overemphasize points of difference with other groups and underemphasize points of similarity. Instead of thematizing all citizens as related to one another through the nation as a whole, the emphasis on cultural pride devolves into an emphasis on cultural exclusivity and national disunity.⁴

The goal of respect brings similar questions: For example, there is an ambiguity in the notion of cultural respect. One side of this ambiguity negates individual autonomy and freedom, while the other side negates the special status that multiculturalism gives to culture. To see this ambiguity, consider the question: What are we respecting when we respect another culture? We might be respecting the culture as such — as a pattern of collective practices and meanings — or we might be respecting people's rights to express their traditions in the way they choose. If, on the one hand, cultural respect is respect for cultures as such, we seem obliged to filter out information that might lead to cultural disrespect. Yet this seems inconsistent with notions regarding the free flow of information, and may inhibit a child's ability for personal growth and independent judgment. If, on the other hand, cultural respect is really another form of respect for the individual, then we should not be obliged to teach about any particular cultures; rather, we should simply be obliged to teach about the need to respect individual choice.

The final goal of multicultural education — to inform children about other cultures — also presents problems of interpretation and execution. Information is not neutral. It serves certain purposes and issues from certain centers of experience and not others. The question that needs to be addressed is: What should be the educational aim of such information? Critics are concerned that the information will be filtered in such a way as to highlight only the positive features of the cultural group while overemphasizing the negative factors in the nation's response to those groups. They fear that this will serve to undercut national identity. I take each of these aims in order, beginning with cultural pride.

THE APPLICATION OF THE GOALS OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN A LIBERAL SOCIETY

Cultural Pride: If cultural pride simply means teaching children to feel partial towards members of their own cultural group, then there is no justification for using public resources to advance this goal within the public schools, and people may justifiably ask: Why should *my* tax dollar be used to teach *your* children to favor people like you, and to disfavor people like me for no other reason than that they are like *you* and *not like me*? Unless the development of cultural pride has some other basis, there is no justification for supporting it.

In addressing this criticism, I argue that schools are justified in affirming the merits of certain groups when at least two conditions prevail. The first is where the meanings and practices of the group are not working in the way that they should, and where members are excluded from full participation in the larger society because of

cultural factors. This single condition, however, is not in itself sufficient to call forth a program that seeks to develop cultural pride.

When this single condition exists, the school needs only to develop programs that will help the child learn better the ways to interact with people in the larger society. This may include, for example, bilingual programs. However, the aim of these programs is not primarily to help the child maintain proficiency in her own language, but to use her own language as a bridge into the teachings of the host nation. The presence of this condition alone is not sufficient to justify the introduction of units that are specifically aimed at providing the child with a more favorable view of her own culture, but it is a necessary condition for it.

The second condition involves a prevailing explanation for these failures that target the local cultural practices, meanings, and interpretations themselves. Hence rather than seeing the problem in terms of a mismatch between local and officially privileged national practices, this explanation views it as a problem strictly with the local practices and with those who maintain them.

These explanations are often the lingering effects of oppression and they need to be corrected by a clearer understanding of the reasons for the development of certain practices, meanings, and interpretations. And, since many of these reasons are bound to involve the history of oppression, there will be oppositional factors that are involved in the reexamination. What then appears to the outside observer to be an exclusive emphasis on developing a favorable attitude towards one group is in reality the result of a pedagogical reinterpretation of a cultural rupture.

Cultural Respect: This brings us to the second goal of multicultural education—the requirement that we respect other cultures. This goal too is not as unproblematic or as benign as it may initially appear. Why should we respect other cultures, and what does it really mean to do so?

The question of tradition and traditional culture provides a way in which to open up this question and to examine the issues involved. In the modernist literature, traditional culture is described as backward looking, authoritarian, and fatalistic. The editors of a book on issues of tradition describe traditional societies as depicted in the sociological tradition:

The tradition-informed way of life is hierarchically differentiated: both within particular traditions, and with regard to how other ways of life are evaluated. Little or no validity is accorded to those who might speak with their own, out-of-place voice. Identities are inscribed, rather than being at stake for discursive controversy. Indeed, the authorial taken-for-grantedness of identities preclude the necessity of questioning those discourses which serve to legitimate the order of things.⁵

Now some may object to the accuracy of this as a description of what we take as traditional cultures, and may properly view it as overly general. I suspect that this objection is correct and that traditional cultures are not all traditional in the same way. However, suppose that this description of traditional culture is accurate for at least some set of cultures that are called “traditional,”⁶ then what would respect mean and what, if any, grounds could be provided to the school for teaching children respect for these cultural forms?

The answer to this question involves a consideration of the character of the present conditions in which respect is being requested. Multiculturalism is not respect for cultural formations under any and all conditions. Rather, it is respect for such formations under the background of modern social conditions. Under these conditions, certain possibilities for choice are present which were not present under earlier situations in which traditional social forms dominated. Today, traditional cultures exist within a social context in which the members share a certain political and social space with members of other traditional societies, and with people who are unambiguously modern. Hence, respect is not asked for a cultural group that dominates its members thought and action without alternative forms available; rather, respect is asked for traditional cultures whose members are almost always at the edge, and who are constantly renewing or rejecting the hegemonic dominance of their cultural authority.

Now to understand the concern for cultural respect in this way is in fact to understand it as an element within a modern, liberal framework, and not as an element within a traditional framework. It is a way of celebrating and preserving opportunities for choice, even opportunities that, once chosen, constrain choice in the way that some traditional groups do.

Yet this suggests too that the standard description of traditional cultural groups noted above is not completely accurate either. A traditional group that exists within the context of modernization is different than one that stands alone. In the latter, there is little awareness of other possibilities, and hence choice outside of that tradition is but a remote possibility. Within the context of modernization, however, traditional culture is itself an object of choice, and its members must renew their identity within such a framework.

Thus, part of what it means to respect traditional culture must be answered in terms of the meaning of such respect within the context of modernization, and this is likely different than simply respect as such. It is a respect grounded within the liberal tradition of individual choice. This is a minimal conception of respect. We are not respecting a tradition as such, but the availability of a tradition given a situation in which the individual has the possibility to choose otherwise. Respect here requires an understanding of the role that culture plays in the development of a self. Our culture has much to do with how we become the persons we are. It not only provides the scaffold for our development, it also provides the initial conditions — the other who is the same as us — for self recognition. It allows us to think of ourselves in Glover's term, as an "I," and to understand that this "I" entails a certain unity of consciousness — that it is a person.

Cultural Information: The final goal of multicultural education — to inform children about other cultures — also presents problems of interpretation and execution. Information is not neutral. It serves certain purposes and issues from certain centers of experience and not others. The question that needs to be addressed is: What should be the educational aim of such information? There are a number of different answers to this question depending on whether one is focusing on political or educational concerns, and on whether one is concerned with questions of equity or with questions of personality and growth.

The difference can be seen in terms of the contrast between the dyad domination/subordination and the dyad advantaged/disadvantaged. The former assumes that an inequality exists because certain rights are denied, while the latter also assumes an inequality, but is inconclusive with regards to the reason for the inequality, and leaves open the issue whether any given disadvantage is the result of a morally impermissible act. Disadvantages can have many different causes — some of which may be morally neutral, and others morally impermissible.

Consider, for example, the fact that almost all Americans speak English, and only a relative few speak Russian or Japanese. This means that in this country, native speakers of English will have large advantages that native speakers of Russian or Japanese will not have or will need to work harder to obtain. People who wish to become lawyers will have an advantage if they are raised either in the United States or England rather than in the former Soviet Union, and the advantage will have as much to do with habits of thought as it will with language differences. The same would hold for children raised in the United States or England who wished to practice law in Russia.

Culture matters, and it provides those who are favored with positions within the dominant culture with certain advantages that those raised in other cultures do not have or will have to struggle to obtain. Those who think that by itself this is somehow wrong or unjust have a burden of proof to satisfy. This seems obvious except for those who mistakenly believe that societies can be culturally neutral,⁷ or those who believe that any inequality, regardless of its cause or its reason, is unjust. What is unjust is if these inequalities remained unaddressed over a number of generations, or if people are blocked from living adequate lives because they were culturally different.

When children learn about other cultures under the advantaged/disadvantage dyad, the object is to show that the society is open to many different people, and that the root to achievement has many different origins. This was the lesson that most European immigrants learned, and it is the program that pluralists, as opposed to multiculturalists, still advocate.⁸ Under this model, there is a nesting of cultural goals within national ones, and the view is presented that, despite pressures to the contrary, merit should be (and largely is) a dominant consideration in social advancement. Yet to teach children only this message, and to teach it in a way in which it were advanced as the truth of American society is problematic because it ignores the reality of another dyad — domination/subordination — a dyad which certainly describes the historical situation of African Americans and some other non-European peoples.

For many African and Native Americans, the domination/subordination script fits their historical experience more closely than does the advantaged/disadvantaged script. Nevertheless, while each of these scripts is adequate to a certain range of historical experience, either may be used in ways that inhibit educational possibilities. This is especially so if used to provide a deterministic cast to future choices. When used in this way, they seem to require students to program their future lives on the experiences of their parents and grandparents. Moreover, neither script is adequate to contain the many facets of an individual's identity. People belong to

cultural or racial groups, but they are also identified by their sex, and by their class position within those groups, and increasingly they are identified by their sexual orientation. These other facets of identity should not invalidate these scripts, but they should provide different centers of experience from which to find additional meaning.

Teachers can help students develop higher order multicultural thinking skills by exploring with them the various stories about cultural and national identity *as scripts* which they can validate, challenge, and negotiate. For example, at some point in their educational career, students should be able to understand how the advantaged/disadvantage script relies on a certain conception of national identity which the domination/subordination script rejects. The domination/subordination script can be examined in terms of the way it shifts the status of some Europeans from disadvantaged to dominator by reclassifying them from a national to a continental identity. Hence, Greek-Americans, Italian-Americans, etc., who once viewed themselves as the victims of Anglo-Americans are re-categorized under the oppositional script as “Americans of European background.” When self-understanding is trumped in this way, by another person’s self understanding, then education calls for a dialogue over difference. At the higher levels, multicultural skills involve learning how cultural identities of different kinds, including one’s own, are scripted, and how such scripts may be rewritten to give voice to alternative experiences.

1. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 50. Kymlicka is actually describing what he sees as a dominant form of contemporary liberalism.

2. *Ibid.*, 51. Kymlicka traces this concern to, among others, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Giuseppe Mazzini. Also Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and “the Politics of Recognition”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Taylor traces this connection back to Herder.

3. This objection is put graphically by Ravitch: “I recall reading an interview...with a talented black runner. She said that her model is Mikhail Baryshnikov. She admires him because he is a magnificent athlete. He is not black; he is not female; he is not American-born; he is not even a runner. But he inspired her because of the way he trained and used his body.” Diane Ravitch, “Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures,” *American Scholar* 59, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 354.

4. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 101-18.

5. *Ibid.*, Paul Heelas, Scott Lash, and Paul Morris, eds. *Detraditionalization* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 4.

6. I use this awkward phrasing because I suspect that there are different ways in which to be “traditional” and that they vary considerably in how they conform to the “ideal of the traditional society” as described by modernist writers.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Schlesinger is an example.