

## [Ideology \(Multiculturalism\)](#)

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Date: Fri, 9 Feb 1996 13:19:56 -0500  
From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)" ([idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu](mailto:idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu))  
Subject: Re: Ideology(and multiculturalism)

Date: Thu, 8 Feb 1996 14:39:05 -0600

From: Rosemary Grant ([fr010@mail.connect.more.net](mailto:fr010@mail.connect.more.net))

I recently read about a new construction of knowledge that is taking place in some schools. For instance, according to the account, a professor and/or students can develop, construct, or create their own knowledge based on premises such as a need for a multicultural curriculum. This means that if we don't like a body of knowledge because it doesn't meet the standards that we think it should have, then it's inclusion is up for grabs. If we think we should change it, we can. Hmmmmm!  
Does this sound familiar, and does it fit with your understanding? I'm worried about this.

Respectfully,  
Rosemary Bradford Grant

Monett High School, history & humanities instructor 1-417-235-5445  
UMKC adjunct, fax 417-235-7884  
Monett, MO 65708

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Date: Sun, 11 Feb 1996 14:49:58 -0500  
From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)" ([idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu](mailto:idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu))  
Subject: Re: Ideology(and multiculturalism)

Date: Fri, 9 Feb 1996 20:43:43 -0500  
From: [Everdell@aol.com](mailto:Everdell@aol.com)

Rosemary Bradford Grant writes: "I'm worried about this. Respectfully,"

Respectfully, so am I.

But I don't have the facts - do you? All I've done is meet a multiculturalist or two and talk. They may be much more common in polemics by right-wingers than they are in Brooklyn.

The worry is intellectual. Knowledge may not be a seamless web, but there certainly ought to be a 'we' to it. That is, there ought to be more than one very confident little group to blame for what we can and cannot know. One fact seems encouraging. The "multiculturalists" I have met are not inventing knowledge - only rejecting it. Willful ignorance, I think, is mere philistinism - better than

invented knowledge, which is Orwellian self-delusion from the start. On the other hand, willed ignorance seems to me to be the exact opposite of "multiculturalism," properly understood. Neither choice appeals. Both can be hell on high schools, which is where I teach.

-Bill Everdell, Brooklyn

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Date: Mon, 12 Feb 1996 13:00:49 -0500  
From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)" ([idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu](mailto:idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu))  
Subject: multiculturalism

Date: Sun, 11 Feb 1996 15:32:06 -0500 (EST)  
From: Ben Fischer ([bdfische@mailbox.syr.edu](mailto:bdfische@mailbox.syr.edu))

On Fri, 9 Feb 1996 20:43:43 -0500 Bill Everdell wrote:

"The "multiculturalists" I have met are not inventing knowledge - only rejecting it. Willed ignorance, I think, is mere philistinism - better than invented knowledge, which is Orwellian self-delusion from the start."

The multiculturalists I've met (and I count myself among them) merely believe that there is value in studying culture different from one's own, and that in certain cases the historical record has been perverted to obscure some of these other cultural groups. While I am well aware that this more destructive kind of multiculturalist exists, in my experience they form a small minority of the whole. Every group has its fringe elements.

regards,

Ben Fischer  
[bdfische@mailbox.syr.edu](mailto:bdfische@mailbox.syr.edu)  
Check me out at: <http://www.loci.com/HO/sports/sportshome.html>

I think there should be a rule that if you play the Vatican, they have to leave all their crosses and rosaries in Rome. It just wouldn't be fair. And no incense at half-time.

-The Edbag

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Date: Mon, 12 Feb 96 10:47:13 EST  
From: Clyde Root ([MALC0007@VMA.CC.ND.EDU](mailto:MALC0007@VMA.CC.ND.EDU))

Dear Bill:

I cannot agree with you more. I think history is concrete in facts. It is the interpretation and meanings that get us into trouble. I believe we ought to be fair to all cultures and the more that we study them the more we can come to appreciate them. I do not feel that we should delete or add materials to create multiculturalism. Either it is there or it is not. Let's stop diluting our wonderful history. But also let us be true in writing it for future generations.

Clyde R. Root

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Date: Mon, 12 Feb 1996 11:42:00 -500  
From: Richard Swerdlin ([Swerdlin@COEFS.COE.unt.edu](mailto:Swerdlin@COEFS.COE.unt.edu))

Bill Everdell:

"Isms" unfortunately are overused by some as a means of discouraging more calmer consideration of issues. There is nothing new about this questionable use of language.

In essence, it is better to narrow matters and address particular issues. "Multiculturalism" is too ambiguous. The same can be said for "family values", considering the users of such terms.

Richard Swerdlin  
([swerdlin@coefs.coe.unt.edu](mailto:swerdlin@coefs.coe.unt.edu))

P.S. Years ago the NY Daily News used to dismiss CCNY as a "pinko factory". I attended CCNY (1948-52). At the time, said newspaper struck me as rather backward. Assuming the paper is still published, it may still have this negative character.

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Date: Sun, 18 Feb 1996 12:15:44 -0500  
From: [Everdell@aol.com](mailto:Everdell@aol.com)

Dear Clyde Root,

Well, incurable moderate that I am, I don't think I agree with you that "history is concrete in facts." The intended meaning dictates not only which facts we find significant but often even dictates what memories are trusted and what facts are facts - as in, for example, a good criminal trial. "To be fair to all cultures" requires an encyclopedic knowledge that I don't think any of us can attain to, not to mention an equally unattainable absence of point of view; but I think you are right that the ethical imperative is to study them anyway and to try on other people's moccasins when we can. Whether "we should delete or add materials to create multiculturalism" is not an answerable question either

because it is logically impossible to construct any curriculum without doing both. What I do think is that historians should fight bad history wherever they find it, as Mary Lefkowitz has just done (for a digest, see George Will, Newsweek, 19Feb96, p78). As for "diluting our wonderful history," I again do not see how any history can fail to be diluted by increasing knowledge, population, time, and debate, and I have thought for many years that one of the fundamentally bad things about my country was that we tried to teach our own history in the same amount of school time as, say, the French, even though our history is only a minuscule two to four centuries long and we have a tiny population for most of it. No wonder Ronald Reagan, for example, had such a laughably parochial and uneducated approach to the various meanings of American history. Most Americans are like him in being utterly unable to compare their own history intelligently with anyone else's. I agree, finally, that we should "be true in writing [history] for future generations," but there are contradictions in that task, too. My own view is that history should be written and documents of all kinds saved which have no significance for some future generations, or even for our own, but which will hopefully have them for others. As a teacher I like to do something I call "setting fuses," teaching things that I think will have significance for students in both the long- and short-term future, but may seem to have a completely different valence when I teach them. The object is to teach to the present generation, as honestly as possible, lessons that sum the knowledge of citizens living, dead, and even possibly unborn. Call it the long view of democracy.

-Bill Everdell, Brooklyn

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Date: Sun, 18 Feb 1996 12:16:01 -0500

From: [Everdell@aol.com](mailto:Everdell@aol.com)

Ben Fischer writes: "The multiculturalists I've met (and I count myself among them) merely believe that there is value in studying culture different from one's own."

I'd go further. Not only is there value in studying other cultures, it's the prime value of a humanistic education. But it's not attainable - only approachable; because you cannot possibly study a culture unless you have a culture. Studying, too, is a cultural activity.

He adds: "and that in certain cases the historical record has been perverted to obscure some of these other cultural groups."

To which I would add: "unavoidably." The historical record is an aspect of culture. This limitation is permanent, but some are less limited than others. One should try to learn more, not less - though I must admit that I have freed up an enormous amount of mental space for early 20th-century philosophy by being a fierce philistine about late 20th-century US sports."

I don't know who won the Super Bowl. "Every group has its fringe elements," as Ben Fischer says.

-Bill Everdell, Brooklyn

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Date: Sun, 18 Feb 1996 14:10:14 -0600 (CST)

From: Christopher Forth ([CFORTH@MSUVX1.MEMPHIS.EDU](mailto:CFORTH@MSUVX1.MEMPHIS.EDU))

Ben Fischer wrote:

"The multiculturalists I've met (and I count myself among them) merely believe that there is value in studying culture different from one's own."

To which Bill Everdell responded:

"I'd go further. Not only is there value in studying other cultures, it's the prime value of a humanistic education. But it's not attainable - only approachable; because you cannot possibly study a culture unless you have a culture. Studying, too, is a cultural activity."

I may be mistaken, but I've been under the impression that traditional humanist education was aimed at the development of the inner person through a study of one's own culture through its canonical texts. Historically, as Edward Said and others have shown, attention paid to other cultures was usually done to highlight the superiority of the Western model (as opposed to the "effeminacy" and "atavism" of the "Oriental" mind). It seems here that multiculturalism is somewhat opposed to the humanist educational program, at least as it's historically manifested itself. Are we talking about a different sort of "humanism" here?

Ben Fischer added:

"and that in certain cases the historical record has been perverted to obscure some of these other cultural groups."

And Bill Everdell replied:

To which I would add: "unavoidably." The historical record is an aspect of culture. This limitation is permanent, but some are less limited than others. One should try to learn more, not less - though I must admit that I have freed up an enormous amount of mental space for early 20th-century philosophy by being a fierce philistine about late 20th-century US sports."

I would certainly agree that culture imposes certain conceptual limitations on the knower, but I disagree as to the permanence of such limitations--the very fact that we're speaking about "culture" rather than "nature" implies impermanence or historicity. Perhaps it would be more useful to inquire into those aspects of culture which \*appear\* to be permanent--that is, to look at what in culture is generally reproduced over time so as to appear almost natural. If by "permanent" you are referring to the inability fully to overcome one's own culture to \*become\* one's object of study, then of course I agree.

As I understand it, multiculturalism is not aimed at merely adding to the historical record, but at changing the rules by which the record itself is constructed. Referring to Said once again, 19th-century Orientalists also felt that by accumulating data they were really contributing to an understanding of other cultures; but until one investigates the conceptual and classificatory schemes

through which knowledge is produced, simply adding new data doesn't \*necessarily\* effect change (though sometimes it can). Thus, I think that multiculturalism carries a implicit critique in addition to the accumulation of new facts.

Christopher Forth  
Univ. of Memphis  
[cforth@cc.memphis.edu](mailto:cforth@cc.memphis.edu)

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Date: Mon, 19 Feb 96 15:25 EST  
From: On-cho Ng ([OXN1@PSUVM.PSU.EDU](mailto:OXN1@PSUVM.PSU.EDU))

Some further thoughts on "multiculturalism":

That multiculturalism is a worthy cultural project is indubitable in the minds of many, including mine. But sometimes I wonder if the promotion of multiculturalism has not degenerated into a sort of radical cultural relativism. The message is that since every culture has its unique ways, everything is relative. Some people do things one way, others other. What results is balkanization of cultures. If this is the case, is multiculturalism not a barrier of cross-cultural understanding? I guess what I'm saying is that multiculturalism should be the meaningful interplay between universality and particularity. I'm sure some will cringe at the suggestion of universality. But it seems to be that the study of history, particularly that of ideas, can scarcely give short schrift to some universal human yearnings. I have in mind, for instance, mysticism as a religious expression. How do we actually study it in a comparative and multicultural perspective so that the universal fabric of mystical yearnings can be shown to be a particular homespun product of a specific culture?

On-cho Ng  
History Dept.  
Penn State

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Date: Tue, 20 Feb 1996 10:18:49 -0800 (PST)  
From: Lois Shawver ([rathbone@crl.com](mailto:rathbone@crl.com))

On Tue, 20 Feb 1996, On-cho Ng wrote:

"That multiculturalism is a worthy cultural project is indubitable in the minds of many, including mine. But sometimes I wonder if the promotion of multiculturalism has not degenerated into a sort of radical cultural relativism. The message is that since every culture has its unique ways, everything is relative. Some people do things one way, others other. What results is balkanization of cultures. If

this is the case, is multiculturalism not a barrier of cross-cultural understanding? I guess what I'm saying is that multiculturalism should be the meaningful interplay between universality and particularity. I'm sure some will cringe at the suggestion of universality. But it seems to be that the study of history, particularly that of ideas, can scarcely give short shrift to some universal human yearnings. I have in mind, for instance, mysticism as a religious expression. How do we actually study it in a comparative and multicultural perspective so that the universal fabric of mystical yearnings can be shown to be a particular homespun product of a specific culture?"

Can't our study of different cultures lead us into an exploration of how this universal yearning takes different forms? And, moreover, can't it help us see how in our own culture we often suppress this yearning? In that our culture suppresses the consciousness of death by trapping us in a metaphysics of presence?

..Lois Shawver

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Date: Tue, 20 Feb 1996 15:33:00 -0500  
From: emran (e.a.) qureshi ([qureshi@bnr.ca](mailto:qureshi@bnr.ca))

Hello,

Please define radical cultural relativism. Do you feel that there exists a hierarchy of cultural or civilizational systems (not values)? Neo-conservative ideologues such as Bernard Lewis (the Armenian genocide specialist) and Samuel P. Huntington decry extremist multiculturalism, namely, the notion that other cultural or civilizational systems are on par with Western civilization. Actually their notions seem very similar to the worldview of those that colonized much of the 'new' world (inferior cultural/civilizational systems that need to be imbued with notions of Western civilization). How does one guard against ethnocentric values being propogated as 'universal' values - say Wahabi (Saudi) and American notions of capital punishment? How does one decide whether a balkanization of cultures has taken place? I am not opposed to notions of universality say for example notion of human rights etc. But to suggest that multiculturalism is a barrier to cross-cultural understanding seems absurd. Should we revert back to the Hegelian view of the Orient or Africa?

Emran Qureshi

ps if you are sending email to me, please send it to  
[equreshi@husc.harvard.edu](mailto:equreshi@husc.harvard.edu)

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Date: Wed, 21 Feb 1996 08:17:38 -0500

From: [Everdell@aol.com](mailto:Everdell@aol.com)

Christopher Forth writes: "I may be mistaken, but I've been under the impression that traditional humanist education was aimed at the development of the inner person through a study of one's own culture through its canonical texts."

I have heard this almost as often as Forth has, but I'm not sure I agree. The original humanists in 14th-century Italy, I think, recognized that the Greece and Rome that they were coming to know and love were different in time and different in culture from their own Italy. Eventually, they (eg. Bruni) discerned an intervening "medio aevo" (an era whose canon did not include the pagan classics) to account for a difference that became increasingly clear. At any rate, I try to deprovincialize my students by teaching them that "the past is a foreign country and they do things differently there," eventually hoping to replace the "they" by "we." The object may be the inner person, but increasing the inner person's appreciation of difference is the goal. Increasing the appreciation, moreover, without allowing them to patronize the different, which is harder, and requires occasional risky generalizations about "humanity."

Thanks for all the mail.

-Bill Everdell, Brooklyn (just west of Queens, aka "Little Asia")

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Date: Wed, 21 Feb 1996 14:10:04 -0500 (EST) From: brian burchett <[bburchet@mozart.helios.nd.edu](mailto:bburchet@mozart.helios.nd.edu)>

On Tue, 20 Feb 1996 emran (e.a.) qureshi <[qureshi@bnr.ca](mailto:qureshi@bnr.ca)> wrote: >  
> How does one guard  
> against ethnocentric values being propogated as 'universal' values -  
> say Wahabi (Saudi) and American notions of capital punishment?

Not by filling students minds with the idea that all cultures are morally equal. Once that happens (it seems to be already) they are unable to find fault with the hideous torture the Iroquois inflicted on their enemies, or African female circumcision, or infanticide for sex selection purposes in China. And once that happens, they have no basis for judging the inhumane practices of our own history. The slaveholding South is arguably another culture with its own standards of right and wrong. South African apartheid is just another culture with its own standards, and so on, and so on. If all cultures are equal, then the relativistic multiculturalist has no basis for condemning intolerant cultures. Indeed, multiculturalism becomes simply one "value" of one particular culture, and has no more moral authority than ethnocentric cultures. The whole project collapses in on itself.

Brian Burchett  
Notre Dame



Date: Wed, 21 Feb 96 17:21:39 -0500  
From: Hughie Lawson <[a06432f@msumusik.mursuky.edu](mailto:a06432f@msumusik.mursuky.edu)>

On Sun, 18 Feb 1996 Christopher Forth <[CFORTH@MSUVX1.MEMPHIS.EDU](mailto:CFORTH@MSUVX1.MEMPHIS.EDU)> wrote: >As I understand it, multiculturalism is not aimed at merely adding to the >historical record, but at changing the rules by which the record itself is >constructed. Referring to Said once again, 19th-century Orientalists also felt >that by accumulating data they were really contributing to an understanding of >other cultures; but until one investigates the conceptual and classificatory >schemes through which knowledge is produced, simply adding new data doesn't >\*necessarily\* effect change (though sometimes it can). Thus, I think that >multiculturalism carries a implicit critique in addition to the accumulation of >new facts.

I want to make a few comments about this issue, from the viewpoint of a 1960 BA soon to enter the ranks of the retired. If my views are typical of more than a few of us, they may shed some light on the generational aspect of the controversies on these topics.

Much confusion occurs in the discussion of this subject and of postmodernism because spokesman for these viewpoints describe them in general terms as innovations in critical thought. This causes perplexity in older persons who believe that they learned some of these critical perspectives in the course of their own more traditional educations.

Let me just list a few of these critical perspectives.

1. an awareness that historical interpretations change over time;
2. an awareness that different cultures view things in different ways;
3. an understanding that possession of power, or lack of it, affects viewpoints;
4. an understanding of the terms like *weltanschauung*, climate of opinion, and so on;
5. an acceptance of the principle of the interdependence of fact and interpretation;
6. a belief that our own climate of opinion both enables and limits what we can understand;
7. a familiarity with the unmasking style of interpretation.

It is perplexing to see these principles attributed to multiculturalism, when we old codgers thought we had picked them up in the course of reading the Bible, Herodotus, Marx, Freud, William James, John Dewey, the cultural anthropologists, etc., etc. When these principles are stated in such general terms it leads to the "what true in this is not new" reaction, which has often overcome my thinking on the subject. So that I will have a word for the list, let me call it "perspectivism", not in any clearly defined philosophical sense, but simply as a word that may label the kinds of ideas in the list above.

For some of us in the fifties the problem was how to accept the insights of perspectivism and yet be able to say that the Nazis really were bad and that our parents were right to spend all those lives destroying Hitler's system, and (more controversially) that the Soviet system was also bad and ought to be checked and if possible undermined. This led to a "yes but" stance with respect to

perspectivism, perhaps best exemplified in existentialism.

But times changed, and with them a more affirmative, less qualified stance on perspectivism came forward, because, especially where gender, race, and the non-western world were concerned, many received views began to look like prejudices.

Many of us easily accepted new historical interpretations in these three areas. But accompanying the new interpretations (in race, etc.) was an uncompromising, more radical affirmation of perspectivism in theoretical statements. The new perspectivism was not as qualified by "yes but" nuances. For this reason, the new theoretical statements threatened those of us who had studied the Heath pamphlets of the late fifties, but still had tried to find a way to some kind of objectivity in scholarship in the face of the historical relativism that these readings made them face.

For my example of this response, reading *\_That Noble Dream\_* was unnerving, not because I found objectionable the author's conclusions on the historical questions he addressed. Rather it was the theoretical preconceptions that seemed to guide the work, which seemed like an unreflective perspectivism that might erode the possibility of my believing the book.

In my view, many who speak as multiculturalists misunderstand the theoretical objections, interpreting them all as revanchist manifestations of an underlying commitment to patriarchialism, unacknowledged racism, and imperialism. Some objections may be this, but I believe most are not.

At the same time, many of my age group may fail to understand that that many younger persons acquired the insights of perspectivism through educational and life experiences that in their minds are identified with multiculturalism or postmodernism. For us to attack multiculturalism on theoretical grounds (because it threatens our own hard-won intellectual gains) seems to call into question the insights of perspectivism for younger persons. I think we spend a lot of time talking past each other, misunderstanding each other.

Well, nature will take care of this. We'll pass from the scene and the younger ones will interpret us as they see fit. And this will happen to them in their turn. Before I become senile though, I want to float this little essay. It would be very interesting to find out if it makes any sense to anybody. Critiques, refutations, rebuttals, all are welcome.

Hughie Lawson, Murray State

Hughie Lawson, Murray State <[a06432f@msumusik.mursuky.edu](mailto:a06432f@msumusik.mursuky.edu)> Date: Thu, 22 Feb 1996 12:52:59 +0100

From: Perry Tapper <[TAPPER@zlin.vutbr.cz](mailto:TAPPER@zlin.vutbr.cz)>

It seems to me that we all need some sort of base from which to understand the world around us. Without it, we may slip into the idea that we are living a "meaningless" or "absurd" life. I think the importance of multiculturalism is to understand other cultures by seeing them in relation to our own.

Perry Tapper

Palacky University

Olomouc

Czech Republic

Date: Thu, 22 Feb 1996 14:34:57 -0600 (CST) From: Richard Swerdlin  
<[Swerdlin@COEFS.COE.unt.edu](mailto:Swerdlin@COEFS.COE.unt.edu)>

Many years ago, in a Sociology course in college, there was a stream of negative references to "middle class" customs. The professor was giving the impression that Pacific and African "cultures" were "more sensible". The same professor however was a bit too selective in presenting information. There was no reference to "crime & punishment or "law & order" in these other cultures.

In line with the above, I could not tell my pupils or college students that cutting off the hand of a thief, or cutting out a tongue, etc., was "reasonable" treatment of offenders. If said measures were "reasonable", then how could Hitler be criticized?

Overall, I do not buy the notion that every human variation is "equal" in "reasonableness" or "value". Frankly, said notion is a form of nonsense. It reflects a misguided interpretation of "diversity" or "multicultural education".

Extendedly, I did not encourage my pupils to listen to filth in the guise of "music" or "song". There is "free speech", but this should be accompanied with "responsibility" for use of it. I use the term "filth" knowingly, since it makes sense to call a spade a spade. I would not knowingly contribute financial or moral support to such filth.

Realistically,  
Richard Swerdlin  
([swerdlin@coefs.coe.unt.edu](mailto:swerdlin@coefs.coe.unt.edu))  
U. of North Texas  
(denton, TX 76208

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Date: Thu, 22 Feb 96 15:00 EST  
From: On-cho Ng <[OXN1@PSUVM.PSU.EDU](mailto:OXN1@PSUVM.PSU.EDU)>

Apparently, my very initial affirmation of the value of multiculturalism fails to forestall the indignation of Emran Qureshi who seems to think that I equate universality with Western values. Nowhere in my posting do I make such a suggestion. Nor do I in any way endorse the Hegelian (or for that matter Kantian) universalism that rigidifies ideas and values in the name of the categorical imperative. The barrage of names (Hegel, Lewis and Huntington) of conservative, neo-conservative or neo-colonial persuasions has no relevance to the main import of my argument. I merely caution against the seeing of trees but not the forest. The forest is the universal human yearning for meaning and justice. My point is that while we should by all means examine the varied religious (Buddhist, Islamic, Christian...) and philosophical (existentialism, nihilism...) quests for meaning, and appreciate how, for instance, Marxism addresses the problems of domination and exploitation, we should also seek to establish multiculturalism as a discursive and argumentative practice that reveals some fundamental (universal) principle of living. Most important, such practice must be pursued \_in

common with others\_. I suppose one can say that here, I'm following Habermas's idea of creating a sort of communication community. I don't see how one can read a sense of hierarchy into my reflection on multiculturalism. In fact, Emran's warning about the confusion of hegemonic ethnocentrism with universality is one that I take dearly to heart. But I think that we have enough conceptual resources, given our multicultural postmodernity, to construct a sense of the universal which is not simply an endorsement of coexistence of myriad ways. Thus, by radical cultural relativism, I mean the dissolution of an authoritative and discriminating sense of the cultural self defined in common with others and its replacement by unconditional acceptance of all ways under the sun. After all, Emran has no problem with embracing human rights, for example, as the foundation of a sort of universality. But then, how universal and indeed ultimately socially efficacious is the notion of unalienable natural rights? Witness the current litigious penchant of this society and I wonder if many of us do not bemoan the belittling of obligations and duties as values.

On-cho Ng (History Dept., Penn State University)

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Date: Thu, 22 Feb 1996 15:32:18 -0500 (EST) From: [NORTON@LVC.EDU](mailto:NORTON@LVC.EDU)

On Tue, 20 Feb 1996 emran (e.a.) qureshi <[qureshi@bnr.ca](mailto:qureshi@bnr.ca)> wrote: >  
 > How does one guard  
 > against ethnocentric values being propogated as 'universal' values -  
 > say Wahabi (Saudi) and American notions of capital punishment?

Brian Burchett replied:

"Not by filling students minds with the idea that all cultures are morally equal. Once that happens (it seems to be already) they are unable to find fault with the hideous torture the Iroquois inflicted on their enemies, or African female circumcision, or infanticide for sex selection purposes in China. And once that happens, they have no basis for judging the inhumane practices of our own history. The slaveholding South is arguably another culture with its own standards of right and wrong. South African apartheid is just another culture with its own standards, and so on, and so on. If all cultures are equal, then the relativistic multiculturalist has no basis for condemning intolerant cultures. Indeed, multiculturalism becomes simply one "value" of one particular culture, and has no more moral authority than ethnocentric cultures. The whole project collapses in on itself." (End of Burchett)

I am inclined to sympathize with the transcendentalist position over that of the relativist, but your criticisms of multiculturalism suffer logical weaknesses. You seem to confuse "multiculturalist" with cultural anthropologist. The latter is obliged to treat all cultures non-normatively as part of the requirements of the discipline.

Those multiculturalists that I know seem all too ready to condemn the specific practices you cite, but cultures contain large complexes of values, traditions, habits, and behaviors. Would you condemn all of an African culture because female circumcision is one of its practices? Would you laud all of American culture because the majority pursue gender equality? Clearly, such judgments are far too simplistic and unfair. In short, I see no reason why one cannot have an open mind--inclined toward

cultural appreciation without blanket approval--to multiple cultures. This attitude, however, does not preclude the condemnation of practices that one finds universally repugnant to the human prospect.

John Norton  
Lebanon Valley College  
[Norton@lvc.edu](mailto:Norton@lvc.edu)

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Date: Fri, 23 Feb 1996 7:52:59 +0900 (JST) From: [JLM@twics.com](mailto:JLM@twics.com)

Hughie Lawson writes,

- "1. an awareness that historical interpretations change over time;
2. an awareness that different cultures view things in different ways;
3. an understanding that possession of power, or lack of it, affects viewpoints;
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It is perplexing to see these principles attributed to multiculturalism, when we old codgers thought we had picked them up in the course of reading the Bible, Herodotus, Marx, Freud, William James, John Dewey, the cultural anthropologists, etc., etc."

There speaks a voice of sanity.

Here speaks a voice of melancholy.

At an earlier point in my life I interpreted hostility to the work of my predecessors as an unresolved Oedipus complex. More recently I have turned to thinking about where the fierce competitive drive behind that complex comes from. There is, I am sure, a certain basic biological pecking-order background here, but increasingly I incline to the belief that the most radical exponents of multiculturalism are themselves the most ideal examples of the commodity fetishism described by Marx as a core feature of capitalism. I.e., all cultural differences are now to be reduced to a common abstract value and fetishized as "givens" that determine people's lives. Since, moreover, the market demands novelty ("original" research, "new" ideas) participants in it are driven to discard previous work and leave it on the midden of history where it may be found and resurrected as something new(or at least of nostalgic interest) by the generation after next. The results are much like those Levi-Strauss attributes to *The Savage Mind*. With rare, rare exceptions, we are all bricoleurs cobbling together bits and pieces of a fragmenting world.

Is there a middle ground?

John McCreery

Yokohama  
February 23, 1996

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Date: Thu, 22 Feb 1996 17:13:14 -0600 (CST) From: Christopher Forth  
<[CFORTH@MSUVX1.MEMPHIS.EDU](mailto:CFORTH@MSUVX1.MEMPHIS.EDU)>

>On Sun, 18 Feb 1996 Christopher Forth <[CFORTH@MSUVX1.MEMPHIS.EDU](mailto:CFORTH@MSUVX1.MEMPHIS.EDU)> wrote:  
>>As I understand it, multiculturalism is not aimed at merely adding to the  
>>historical record, but at changing the rules by which the record itself is  
>>constructed. Referring to Said once again, 19th-century Orientalists also felt  
>>that by accumulating data they were really contributing to an understanding of  
>>other cultures; but until one investigates the conceptual and classificatory  
>>schemes through which knowledge is produced, simply adding new data doesn't  
>>\*necessarily\* effect change (though sometimes it can). Thus, I think that  
>>multiculturalism carries a implicit critique in addition to the accumulation of  
>>new facts.

To which Hughie Lawson responded:

>Much confusion occurs in the discussion of this subject and of postmodernism  
>because spokesman for these viewpoints describe them in general terms as  
>innovations in critical thought. This causes perplexity in older persons  
>who believe that they learned some of these critical perspectives in the  
>course of their own more traditional educations.

I did not mean for my statements about multiculturalism (above) to stand as some sort of polemic against my elders, but was merely trying to add a bit a nuance to an earlier definition of what multiculturalism is trying to do. In fact, what I added was only done to draw attention to the theoretical twists developed in other areas that are themselves hardly reducible to "multiculturalism" as a bloc. Perhaps I should not have used the word "critique," which only suggested a more critical approach to the historical record at the level of the presuppositions that historians make. Here some have pointed to implicit biases within scholarly language itself that is not quite reducible to mere "subjectivism." At any rate, I was not claiming that multiculturalism \*invented\* a critical stance towards texts.

Hughie Lawson then proceeds to list several things that he claims have already been present in more traditional approaches to history, which he calls "perspectivism":

>1. an awareness that historical interpretations change over time; When stated so simply it is certainly hard to disagree; yet is this all that some scholars in recent years have been saying? Many have pointed to the capacity of the historian to \*make\* history through his/her linguistic representations. I am not saying that any of this is totally new, but this does strike me as a bit different from the statement above. That people think differently about their past at different times and the more epistemological question about whether the past may ever be represented transparently seem to be two distinct points, though one could combine them. Please keep in mind that I am not necessarily endorsing the latter perspective, but am only trying to be clear about what

some people are saying.

>2. an awareness that different cultures view things in different ways; On the surface this too seems simple enough, but there is a difference between a cultural bias that one could perhaps "bracket" in order to see the world more clearly, and a cultural bias that is \*synonymous\* with clear vision. Of course one could find pre-multiculturalist thinkers who have voiced the latter, but who has been saying otherwise?

>3. an understanding that possession of power, or lack of it, affects viewpoints

Anyone who has read Foucault realizes that this statement does not quite apply to what he and others have been saying about power and knowledge. Yes, of course one should credit Nietzsche with developing this innovative approach to power (Foucault certainly did).

>4. an understanding of the terms like weltanschauung, climate of opinion,

>and so on;

While I too understand these terms (and never thought I was innovative by doing so), I'm not sure what point is being made here.

>5. an acceptance of the principle of the interdependence of fact and

>interpretation;

>6. a belief that our own climate of opinion both enables and limits what we

>can understand;

I've tried to address these points above.

>7. a familiarity with the unmasking style of interpretation. If by "unmasking" is meant the move from an apparent level to a deeper more foundational level, then there is surely a difference between this statement and what some people have been saying over the past 10-15 years. If anything seems to characterize many "postmodernist" positions, it seems to be the notion that all is surface without depth. Of course this is a more extreme position, and I'm not certain how many historians subscribe to it, but I don't think that the issues being discussed here need be limited to what historians are doing.

Hughie Lawson continued:

>For some of us in the fifties the problem was how to accept the insights of

>perspectivism and yet be able to say that the Nazis really were bad and that

>our parents were right to spend all those lives destroying Hitler's system,

>and (more controversially) that the Soviet system was also bad and ought to

>be checked and if possible undermined. This led to a "yes but" stance with

>respect to perspectivism, perhaps best exemplified in existentialism.

I think that many who have been sympathetic to recent trends wrestle with the same issues described here without maintaining the uniqueness of their position. For Habermas and others this has been a central reason to be critical of the claims made by poststructuralists. But I do think we should be receptive to the plurality of perspectives that are often placed under such a rubric. Many scholars are sympathetic to some theoretical claims, but are less willing to accept others.

>In my view, many who speak as multiculturalists misunderstand the  
>theoretical objections, interpreting them all as revanchist manifestations  
>of an underlying commitment to patriarchialism, unacknowledged racism, and  
>imperialism. Some objections may be this, but I believe most are not.

Here I would agree that a generational component--which often compels a certain communication breakdown with more established colleagues--sometimes gets in the way of the search for understanding. However, it seems clear that even the most apparently non-racist people can often unknowing employ concepts that are implicitly racist. Of course, chastising someone for not being conscious of what one does unconsciously is hardly helpful, and will no doubt create tensions. On the other hand, I think it's possible to become aware of the ways in which we are created--not once and for all, but enough so we can alter our ways of seeing things (especially if they contain implicit biases). I'm not suggesting that we will then arrive at some sort of clarity or a place beyond biases, but at least we become a bit more aware of how culture works. In fact, as stated in one of the points above, culture limits and enables what we perceive--but often we are afraid to find out just how much.

Once again, I've not necessarily been endorsing any of the above, but only wanted to point out that (at least as far as Hughie Lawson's list is concerned) there are some differences. Whether or not they are really innovative is another matter.

Chris Forth  
[cforth@cc.memphis.edu](mailto:cforth@cc.memphis.edu)

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Date: Thu, 22 Feb 1996 14:45:45 -0600 (CST) From: Richard Swerdlin  
<[Swerdlin@COEFS.COE.unt.edu](mailto:Swerdlin@COEFS.COE.unt.edu)> Date: 02/22/1996 02:43 pm (Thursday) From: Richard Swerdlin

Perry Tapper:

We agree. I have encountered many students of all ages, who have an overly narrow view of things. In essence, "differences" seem to puzzle or frighten them. This does not necessarily involve vicariously travelling to a distant part of the world. For example, the sight of Amish people at a Cincinnati, Ohio restaurant was sufficient to really catch the attention of more ordinary patrons in that city. Even "differences" in the US can be an eye-opener.

Amusingly, while I recall being urged to read the "National Geographic", why was a teacher unhappy over my looking at pictures of topless persons in Africa and Asia? Relatedly, it still amazes me how some people in Texas wear suits and ties, even in temperatures in the 100's.

Variety seems to be the spice of life, although occasionally it may induce a bit of indigestion.

Richard Swerdlin  
([swerdlin@coefs.coe.unt.edu](mailto:swerdlin@coefs.coe.unt.edu))

U. of North Texas



Denton, TX 76208

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Date: Fri, 23 Feb 1996 20:18:00 -0500  
From: emran (e.a.) qureshi <[qureshi@bnr.ca](mailto:qureshi@bnr.ca)>

On Thu, 22 Feb 96 On-cho Ng <[OXN1@PSUVM.PSU.EDU](mailto:OXN1@PSUVM.PSU.EDU)> wrote: >  
>Apparently, my very initial affirmation of the value of multiculturalism  
>fails to forestall the indignation of Emran Qureshi who seems to think  
>that I equate universality with Western values. Nowhere in my posting  
>do I make such a suggestion. Nor do I in any way endorse the Hegelian  
>(or for that matter Kantian) universalism that rigidifies ideas and  
>values in the name of the categorical imperative. The barrage of names  
>(Hegel, Lewis and Huntington) of conservative, neo-conservative or  
>neo-colonial persuasions has no relevance to the main import of my  
>argument. I merely caution against the seeing of trees but not the  
>forest. The forest is the universal human yearning for meaning and  
>justice. My point is that while we should by all means examine the  
>varied religious (Buddhist, Islamic, Christian...) and philosophical  
>(existentialism, nihilism...) quests for meaning, and appreciate how,  
>for instance, Marxism addresses the problems of domination and  
>exploitation, we should also seek to establish multiculturalism as a  
>discursive and argumentative practice that reveals some fundamental  
>(universal) principle of living. Most important, such practice must be  
>pursued \_in common with others\_. I suppose one can say that here, I'm  
>following Habermas's idea of creating a sort of communication community.  
>I don't see how one can read a sense of hierarchy into my reflection on  
>multiculturalism. In fact, Emran's warning about the confusion of  
>hegemonic ethnocentrism with universality is one that I take dearly to  
>heart. But I think that we have enough conceptual resources, given our  
>multicultural postmodernity, to construct a sense of the universal which  
>is not simply an endorsement of coexistence of myriad ways. Thus, by  
>radical cultural relativism, I mean the dissolution of an authoritative  
>and discriminating sense of the cultural self defined in common with  
>others and its replacement by unconditional acceptance of all ways under  
>the sun. After all, Emran has no problem with embracing human rights,  
>for example, as the foundation of a sort of universality. But then, how  
>universal and indeed ultimately socially efficacious is the notion of  
>unalienable natural rights? Witness the current litigious penchant of  
>this society and I wonder if many of us do not bemoan the belittling of  
>obligations and duties as values.  
>

I perhaps overreacted to your posting. Please forgive me. These days I spend my time reading Commentary/National Review/ The American Spectator and other disgusting conservative journals.

They all tend to rag on about the multicultural threat. Most of the arguments are of the sort: supporting multiculturalism = supporting clitoral infibulation.

These arguments are of the sort used in:

- >Not by filling students minds with the idea that all cultures are morally
- >equal. Once that happens (it seems to be already) they are unable to
- >find fault with the hideous torture the Iroquois inflicted on their
- >enemies, or African female circumcision, or infanticide for sex selection
- >purposes in China. And once that happens, they have no basis for judging
- >the inhumane practices of our own history. The slaveholding South is
- >arguably another culture with its own standards of right and wrong.
- >South African apartheid is just another culture with its own standards,
- >and so on, and so on. If all cultures are equal, then the relativistic
- >multiculturalist has no basis for condemning intolerant cultures.
- >Indeed, multiculturalism becomes simply one "value" of one particular
- >culture, and has no more moral authority than ethnocentric cultures. The
- >whole project collapses in on itself.
- >
- >Brian Burchett
- >Notre Dame

I don't have a problem with criticizing barbaric behaviour or practices that violate human rights etc. Read my initial posting and don't selectively snip and quote. Barbaric practices should and need to be criticized. Whether they occur in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, China, Russia, Serbia or wherever. I would suggest that we do have universal norms for say human rights. When those norms are violated then we shouldn't be afraid to criticize them wherever they occur. Criticize the practices and the ideology that informs that behaviour.

But, I have a very, very big problem with saying that some cultures are morally inferior. What do you mean by that? This form of a hierarchical categorization of humanity seems incredibly fraught with danger. How would you classify Jewish culture? Muslim culture (a favourite choice for describing morally inferior cultures)? African culture (another favourite choice for describing morally inferior cultures). As an aside, these arguments are used to denigrate Afro-Americans residing within the inner cities of America. As an example, see Dinesh D'Souza's 'The End of Racism'. How should we treat the product of a morally inferior culture?

What I said was:

- >I am not opposed to notions of universality say for example notion of
- >human rights etc. But to suggest that multiculturalism is a barrier
- >to cross-cultural understanding seems absurd.

This is getting complicated, but in response to:

- > In line with the above, I could not tell my pupils or college

>students that cutting off the hand of a thief, or cutting out a  
>tongue, etc., was "reasonable" treatment of offenders. If said  
>measures were "reasonable", then how could Hitler be criticized?

>

>

> Overall, I do not buy the notion that every human variation is  
>"equal" in "reasonableness" or "value". Frankly, said notion is a  
>form of nonsense. It reflects a misguided interpretation of  
>"diversity" or "multicultural education".

>

> Extendedly, I did not encourage my pupils to listen to filth in  
>the guise of "music" or "song". There is "free speech", but this  
>should be accompanied with "responsibility" for use of it. I use the  
>term "filth" knowingly, since it makes sense to call a spade a spade.  
>I would not knowingly contribute financial or moral support to such  
>filth.

>

What does this have to do with my posting (aka the rantings on about "filth", "free speech" and "calling a spade a spade")? BTW, I love "filth" and "free speech". Filth and free speech belong together. On that note, I would encourage everyone to read 'The Missionary Position: Mother Theresa in Theory and Practice' by my friend Christopher Hitchens.

Digressing wildly,  
Emran Qureshi  
Ottawa, Canada

Date: Sat, 24 Feb 1996 07:24:43 -0500

From: [Everdell@aol.com](mailto:Everdell@aol.com)

Hughie Lawson hits the nail on the head as far as I am concerned when he writes:

"At the same time, many of my age group may fail to understand that that many younger persons acquired the insights of perspectivism through educational and life experiences that in their minds are identified with multiculturalism or postmodernism. For us to attack multiculturalism on theoretical grounds (because it threatens our own hard-won intellectual gains) seems to call into question the insights of perspectivism for younger persons."

And in so doing he reveals one of the harder things to find out on the net - his age. I suspected he might be my contemporary and wish him well on his retirement. As for me, I can't retire yet - still have tuitions to pay.

-Bill Everdell, Brooklyn

Date: Sun, 25 Feb 1996 09:00:09 -0600 (CST) From: Steve Gunter <[sgunter@comp.uark.edu](mailto:sgunter@comp.uark.edu)>

Friends,

I heartily endorse the recent post which pleaded for those of us interested in ideas to defend speech even so called "filth" from those forces which seek to silence the voice of the human experience.

In my senior k-12 "ideas" class (our motto "Think For Yourself") students gathered materials for "The Politics of Music". I knew the songs might be "raunchy" and "nasty" and violent. I did not ask for permission from authority-folks at school HQ.

One student warned the class that what he was about to play would have the F-word and many other street terms and references to sexuality and urban life in general. We asked the most religious person in the class if we could or should carry on. She courageously said, "If I pretend that this music does not exist I am a liar and have deceived only myself". Wow, that was "way kewl" as the kids say!

As the song ended, Willie-the student who selected it-said "the point is not the 'cussin but what is causin' the cussin'" Now friends that led us into a deep intellectual discussion and virtually every person in the room (32 in number by the way) took an active part. Ideas are alive today if we dare to study them with open minds.

%%

Steve Gunter

Bentonville, AR 72712

%%

Keep On Thinking Free!

Date: Thu, 29 Feb 1996 07:37:16 -0500

From: [Everdell@aol.com](mailto:Everdell@aol.com)

Steve Gunter describes a class in the politics of music. Is it possible that any member of the class might have said that the music was not very good music - an aesthetic judgement? "Religious" persons like myself would not raise the slightest objection to the use of impolite language, but teachers might try to inoculate their classes against bad writing and incoherent thinking - and even simpleminded harmonies. As a high-school history teacher, I would make sure that the class experienced the documents at as close a range as possible, uncensored; but I would hope that they would find, as I do, that the document reflected the simplicity, immaturity, and the occasional barbarism of a number of their fellow-citizens, as much as it did their often legitimate anger. I would want my students to understand that it would be possible for them to outgrow this music later without being ashamed of youthful enthusiasm and without at the same time outgrowing their developing love of music - and of justice.

Plato, I note, thought justice existed, but would have censored music. I guess this makes me only half a Platonist.

Bill Everdell, Brooklyn

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