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“What is Multiculturalism?”

Article · January 1999

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Multiculturalism
REVISED AND UPDATED FOR 2012 EDITION
Myra Mendible in *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, Gale Group

Multiculturalism is a catchall term that refers generally to a set of related cultural movements and trends which emphasize the diversity of U.S. culture and society. Its various projects seek to recognize, encourage, and affirm the participation of ethnic minorities in all aspects of American life. They tend to celebrate the contributions made by diverse groups and to consider those contributions as vital to the economic, social, and cultural fabric of the United States. In higher education, multiculturalism began to assume definitive shape during the 1980s, as universities revised their programs, textbooks, and curricula to reflect a more inclusive view of American culture. This change in focus toward women, minorities, and non-Western texts and perspectives would generate heated debate among academics and spark the so-called “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s. On one side of the debate, critics argued that multiculturalism promoted factionalism and undermined the foundations of Western culture; proponents claimed that it advocated tolerance and equality. In any case, multiculturalism's impact would extend well beyond academe. It would shape fashion trends, advertising campaigns, television programming, even corporate slogans, and continue to influence late-twentieth century popular tastes in everything from music to food, home decor to literature.

Multiculturalism can be said to resonate from the cultural eruptions of the 1960s, when civil rights, Native American, “new ethnicity,” and women's liberation movements in the

United States shattered images of a coherent national identity. The force and urgency of these protests challenged the authority and credibility of “the establishment,” and shook the public's confidence in the social and political structures that validated it. Students marched in protest against America's involvement or intervention not only in Vietnam, but also in neighboring Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition to questioning social conformity, economic inequality, and political legitimacy, voices rose in defiance against long-held cultural assumptions and myths. As thousands of demonstrators across the nation expressed their defiance of U.S. policies and systems, Americans struggled to redefine their roles, values, and allegiances. Many strove to foster some sense of communal belonging, forging a place for themselves within a more pliant cultural framework. Others questioned the desirability of aspiring to a unified national identity in an increasingly transnational world. The ensuing crisis of identity--on both the national and personal level--paved the way toward a number of institutional and social changes. In the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, America's collective self-image would change inexorably, slowly transforming itself to reflect shifting demographic and social realities.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Americans began catching glimpses of this emerging self-image on their television screens--as sitcoms and TV dramas integrated their casts.

Popular programs such as *Good Times*, *Chico and the Man*, *The Jeffersons*, *Sanford and Son*, and *CHiPS* featured blacks, Latinos, and other minorities as starring cast members.

During the 1974-75 season, two of these shows, *Sanford and Son* and *Chico and the Man*, earned second and third place ratings, respectively. Alex Haley's bestselling book, *Roots*, achieved tremendous success when it aired as a made-for-TV movie in 1977. The six-part

mini-series, which chronicled several generations of the author's family from their African origins through slavery, fueled a popular trend to discover and adopt formerly repressed “ethnic” identities. Seeking one's “roots” became fashionable, as did changing one's wardrobe, name, or hairstyle to reflect one's ancestry. In some cases, these external transformations reflected a genuine attempt to build ethnic pride; in others it was simply a new fad, a hollow display of ethnic style without political substance. The melting pot ideology that had endorsed an assimilation ethic, gradually gave way to new metaphors (such as the “salad” or “stir-fry”), which promoted the retention of discrete cultural traits.

This celebration of “difference” (identified with “postmodernist” theory and art) found its niche in the popular imaginary, adding dashes of color to a post-1960s American canvas. For the first time in America's young history, being visibly “different” (belonging to a racial or ethnic subculture group) held commercial appeal. Hollywood responded to this appeal with several films (and sequels) with black leads. Movies such as *Superfly* (1972), *Shaft* (1971), and *The Mack* (1973) exploited images of black (mostly male) defiance of white authority and power. The 1970s saw the emergence of these mass images of blacks as pimps, drug dealers, or shady police officers. Elements of black street culture exploited and popularized in these early films would reappear a decade later. A variation of these “Blaxploitation” film images would drive the white music industry's marketing campaign for “gangsta” rap in the late 1980s and 1990s. Throughout much of that decade, hip-hop music outsold rock among white teens, and the clothing that accompanied it--baggy pants and oversized Polo shirts--infiltrated Middle America. Other historically oppressed groups would also gain audiences. The commercial appeal of “difference” led to the

release of a slew of movies such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Thunderheart* (1992), and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) remake in the 90s. These films reformulated the standard “cowboy and Indian” genre, presumably legitimizing Native American cultures and histories. Native American perspectives, virtually invisible in history books and films up until the later twentieth century, gained status and recognition, *Hollywood* style.

Mainstream audiences across America lined up to see Native Americans depicted, not as savages bent on murdering innocent white women and children, but as a people staunchly defending their way of life. Too often, however, even in these films, the protagonist was either a white person or a Native American portrayed by a white actor.

These twists in Hollywood image making gradually reconstituted the public's collective memory of historical events and personages. In most cases, these films recycled conventional plots, simply adapting the point-of-view or integrating the cast. Even so, they did help refashion the sensibilities of a generation of Americans. In part, they helped to prepare general audiences for a multiculturalist re-examination of U.S. history-- including a re-interpretation of such grand historical narratives as Manifest Destiny, the Great Frontier Myth, and egalitarian democracy. During much of this period, documentary filmmakers were taking critical looks at Hollywood's version of multicultural awareness: *Images of Indians* (1979) and *The Media Show: North American Indians* (1991) examined Hollywood film stereotypes of Native Americans; *From Here, from This Side* (1988) envisioned cultural domination from the Mexican point of view; *Slaying the Dragon* (1987) explored the imaging of the “docile Asian female” type; and *Color Adjustment* (1991) chronicled the history of black representation on TV. But these

critiques did not for the most part impinge on the popular mindset--as the heightened visibility of minorities fueled both complacency (“they are making progress”) and discomfort (“they are taking over”).

The re-imaging of America did foster new images of blacks, Latinos, Asians, and other ethnic group members as middle-class consumers. Recognizing the potential buying power represented by the largest minority groups in the country--African American, Latino, and Asian--advertisers began targeting these long-ignored segments of the U.S. population. Major retailers such as Sears introduced “ethnic” clothing lines--with “ethnic” broadly defined as the use of bright colors and patterns. Cosmetic companies began catering to darker skin tones, using Latina and African-American models to promote their products. New interest in regional cultures influenced architecture and interior design, so that Hopi Indian art, Mexican pottery, and Southwest crafts might be seen vying for prominence in any suburban home. In the emerging global economy, multiculturalism translated into multinationalism--as American corporations targeted foreign markets. Businesses responded to an increasingly polyglot, multicultural environment by offering employee training programs aimed at teaching foreign languages and customs or heightening awareness of diversity issues. Similarly, European companies climbed on the multicultural bandwagon, some using indigenous people as models or spokespersons. The Italian multinational, Benetton, ran one of the most successful ad campaigns in history by capitalizing on the diversity theme. The slogan, “United Colors of Benetton,” featured along with the faces of Latino, African, and Asian “types,”

established the company's multiculturalist image and helped market their high-end clothes worldwide.

While the “crossover” success of television shows, movies, music, and ads featuring minorities suggested that popular audiences were increasingly receptive to social change, critics continued to point out the contrast that existed between mass-mediated images of successful minorities and their social realities. The heightened visibility of blacks and other minorities on TV and in films signaled progress to some, but to others it fell short of the mark. They argued that education must reflect its constituency and serve as the catalyst for a profound change in national consciousness. This called for a revamping of an educational system that traditionally excluded or undervalued the contributions of blacks and other minorities within a pluralist U.S. society. Classroom teachers, after all, were not dealing with images--but with an increasingly heterogeneous student population. By 1990, minority youngsters accounted for about 32 percent of total enrollment in U.S. public schools. According to census projections, this figure would continue to rise. Multiculturalists argued that course materials and content scarcely registered this demographic reality.

Subsequent curriculum changes sought to provide a broader knowledge base, extending beyond what has been referred to as a “Eurocentric” approach to education. Such an approach tended to assume the centrality of European thought, history, and culture, relegating all others to a peripheral or even subordinate role. Standard core courses in schools and universities traditionally stressed the achievements and merits of “Western”

civilization, often reducing the rest of the world to irrelevance. Multiculturalists insisted that exposure to a variety of ethnic perspectives and traditions was both intellectually enriching and socially responsible.

As its influence spread throughout U.S. colleges and universities, multiculturalism generated considerable controversy. In history and English departments, particularly, multiculturalism led to the reevaluation of standard texts that had formed the basis of Western culture. In some cases, this reevaluation revealed gaps, contradictions, and inconsistencies that raised questions about significant events or offered competing versions of history. As more and more voices claimed their right to be heard, “official” accounts were increasingly challenged or revised. Newly minted textbooks and anthologies referenced Native American folktales and cosmologies; the diaries and journals of Spanish explorers in the “New World”; slave narratives and spirituals; along with women's histories and political essays. While examining these varied texts and contexts, students might explore the relative worth of ideas and artifacts, sometimes dismantling their own cultural assumptions in the process. They might consider the links between social grouping and status or power, question existing hierarchies, or explore their conceptual and economic frameworks. Critics would claim that multicultural readings gave rise to identity politics, a politics based on notions of identity defined by race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion. They accused multiculturalists of “politicizing” education, of turning the classroom into a political soapbox for professors with their own agendas or gripes. Advocates of the new pedagogy countered with claims of their own: they argued that education had *always* been political, as its institutional

goals and methods traditionally served a dominant ideology. They questioned why selectively excluding women and minorities from the canon was not deemed “political” but intentionally including them was. Both cases, advocates reasoned, reflected underlying power struggles and tensions.

These issues stirred vigorous debate among academics, often dividing departments into pro-and anti-multiculturalism camps. During the 1980s and 1990s, advocates of multiculturalism waged war on the literary canon, introducing new works into their courses and discarding others deemed outdated or irrelevant. As some administrators and faculty moved to institute a multicultural curriculum, others voiced opposition, often criticizing not only the revised content but also the methods by which it was implemented. By the late 1980s, many university English departments had begun redefining themselves and their function in relation to the broader cultural landscape. In the process, challenging questions presented themselves. What disciplinary boundaries, if any, should delineate the critical study of literary texts? Should English departments broaden their focus to include major works written by non-English speaking authors in their core curriculum? Should they integrate poetry and fiction by women, U.S. minorities, and minoritarian cultures into existing courses or develop special program areas such as women's or ethnic studies? Most literature by non-Europeans traditionally fell under the rubric of “World Literature,” a category which conflated Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and others into one indistinct cultural mass. Multiculturalists maintained that these diverse cultures not only produced art and literature worthy of recognition, but also offered valuable insights and perspectives on philosophical,

religious, ethical, and social questions. Some argued that rather than being peripheral, the study of non-Western civilizations and traditions was integral to understanding the complex interconnectedness of human experience. English studies programs progressively changed their parameters, becoming increasingly interdisciplinary in content and methodology. This trend toward interdisciplinary study would spread across programs, breaking down the traditional boundaries between history and literature, psychology and sociology, or philosophy and science.

Literature written by people of color, however, had successfully infiltrated the mainstream by the 1980s, with novels by Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Alice Walker among the bestsellers. Silko's *Ceremony*, published in 1977, became the first published novel written by a Native American woman (Silko is Laguno-Pueblo Indian). Walker's Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, was made into a critically acclaimed film directed by Stephen Spielberg. Morrison, the first black woman to receive the Nobel prize for literature, had already established an international reputation by the time her novel, *Beloved*, won a Pulitzer prize and was made into a major motion picture in the late 1990s. In 1993, Amy Tan's bestseller, *The Joy Luck Club* was also made into a popular film, along with Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. These and many other successful “crossover” books suggested that multiculturalism--whatever its putative flaws or disputed benefits--had already moved into the popular arena.

Its influence was also felt in personal, professional, and social relationships. Couples grappled with issues of equality, friends and teachers with questions of tolerance and

respect, managers with the challenges of communicating with their multicultural clientele. As more women and minorities asserted their rights in the workplace and in the classrooms, individuals faced new legal, professional, and social questions: What constitutes sexual harassment? Discrimination? Which words or behaviors are considered racist? Sexist? A breach of racial etiquette? What hiring practices need to be instituted to ensure equity, and when are those practices discriminating against formerly privileged white males? The ensuing race, gender, and ethnic politics led to a backlash among those who objected to multiculturalism's methods or goals. The epithet "political correctness" was coined to describe what some considered being a dictatorial, restrictive new code of conduct. In some cases, it merely served as a means to dismiss actual abuses or offences. Multiculturalists, portrayed as the "PC Patrol," became a favorite target of conservative talk show hosts, comedy shows, and radio disc jockeys. Just as nineteenth-century caricatures of the suffragettes had ridiculed and trivialized women's efforts to gain the right to vote, so did these contemporary images of "Feminazis" and PC enforcers often distort multiculturalism's principal aims and effects.

At the onset of the twenty first century, America's demographics mirrored in fact what was still debated in theory. Multiculturalism had made tremendous inroads, but it also confronted emerging challenges. On the one hand, the tragic events of September 11, 2001 roused nativist sentiments in American society, fueling another backlash against multiculturalism and reigniting debates about its meanings and effects. On the other, the new millennium also marked the election of the first African American president of the United States. Given America's racial history, Barack Obama's election suggested that

the walls which kept African American men and women out of the higher echelons of political power were, if not obliterated, at least crumbling. Embodied in this mixed race, cosmopolitan American president some saw a bellwether of multiculturalism's triumphant progress, others of its deficient or even threatening effects. To still others, Obama's election signaled America's emergence as a "post-race" culture where the old hierarchies of race and ethnicity had become irrelevant.

"Post racial" discourse would represent yet another roadblock in multiculturalism's path to legitimacy, as it bolstered calls for the elimination of race-based affirmative action programs or initiatives aimed at increasing minority representation. Identified by its opponents as a form of regressive tribalism or condemned to irrelevancy by a presumably color-blind, post racial American culture, multiculturalism was yet to settle into a complacent middle age. Instead, in a world grown progressively more interconnected by technological, economic, and political cross currents, multiculturalism would be neither a panacea for social injustice nor the bane of so-called "Western" culture. It would reflect seismic shifts in social attitudes, and just as importantly, register globalizing trends that had been transforming global interrelations for decades.

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