CREATING THE SELF AND OTHERS THROUGH MUTUAL RECOGNITION: THE ESSENCE OF MULTICULTURALISM

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Introduction

The United States has always been a multicultural nation from its beginning. The term "multiculturalism" was coined in the early 1990s, and has been so overly used that it may be considered a cliche in America. However, if multiculturalism is to be used only as a variation of definition rooted in racial conflicts and ethnic problems, there is nothing new in that terminology. We could substitute for multiculturalism, for example, cultural pluralism, which has been a more familiar term in America. Nevertheless, it seems to me, there is something new in the term, and there is good reason to examine what is new, what is more than a resurrection of old-fashioned racial antagonisms, and, it is important to understand what it is that is happening in liberal democratic societies today.

The debate over multiculturalism in the U.S. is broadly perceived as a social phenomenon that is often characterized as a manifestation of a "culture war." It should be noted that these discussions center around cultural themes not racial nor ethnic ones. It is true that the current debates have been, in part, influenced by the global political changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period when concurrent revivals of ethnic nationalism cropped up in different parts of the world. As a result of ethnic revivalism, for many people, multiculturalism has come to be associated with ethnic and racial turmoil and upheaval. Yet, multiculturalism, as a concept, contains issues of culture such as values and world views that form new areas of concern.

In this paper, I shall focus on the notions of self perception and group identity in examining the debate over multiculturalism in the U.S.

Backgrounds of the Debate over Multiculturalism in the U.S.

In the U.S., the term multiculturalism has generally been used in the context of racial separatism and/or ethnocentrism, and tends to have a negative connotation. This is quite different from the usage of the term in Canada and Australia. However, even in the U.S. the negative use of the term has not been of long duration. In 1990 Diane Ravitch, former Assistant Secretary of Education, wrote an article in which she differentiated between "pluralistic multiculturalism" and "particularistic multiculturalism," the former viewed positively and the latter not so. But her use of multiculturalism itself was neutral. However, the
renowned historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., supporting the main ideas presented by Ravitch, gave a new and negative meaning to this term when he published his *The Disuniting of America*, which became a national bestseller the next year. Schlesinger defined the term as a somewhat eccentric, cultic and bizarre idea, and associated it almost solely with a notion of Afrocentrism of his own design\(^2\). It is important here, however, to note that we are now trying to characterize the core idea of the movement toward multiculturalism and to explore its sphere from inside.

Although the term multiculturalism was invented quite recently, the social and historical origins of the idea of multiculturalism particularly in education can be traced back to the 1960s when people realized that culture was closely related to achievements in school. The question why so-called minority students did poorly on tests was the central subject examined intensively. One of the most persuasive answers to the question was that minority students were set apart from but evaluated in terms of the norms of white mainstream culture. Of possible prescriptions, blacks, as a demonstration of their militant group pride or whatever, chose to insist that minority values be acceptable at mainstream levels. This is the essence of multiculturalism. A prescription derived from this cultural situation would have to do one of two things: either minority students would have to be taught white norms or minority values would have to be made acceptable at the mainstream level.

In the U.S., by promoting curriculum reform movements educators have remarkably contributed to the understanding of the minority group cultures. The curriculum reforms, in the state of New York and at Stanford University in 1987 were the two breakthroughs that marked the beginning of the idea of multiculturalism. The reform movements resulted in the revision of school curricula that were solely rooted in the European experiences. Stanford University, for example, substituted CIV (Cultures, Ideas, and Values) for the traditional Western civilization course. The differences, which can be easily observed, were that the new course did not restrict the teaching of Western culture but allowed for the inclusion of other cultures and values. This was a fundamental change in the core principle of the curriculum. It was made possible by the acknowledgment that all the disciplines had been instituted by Europeans, in particular, white males, and that the established academism as a whole was foreign to other peoples and cultures outside Europe.

Some people may not see any significant meanings in acknowledging that the famous Russian poet, Aleksandr Pushkin, and the well-known French writer of *The Three Musketeers*, Alexandre Dumas were black and acknowledging that classical Greek civilization flourished as a beneficiary of ancient Egyptian civilization, but for black Americans this kind of information was deemed quite important. Afro-Americans are inclined to view the Western civilization in a relativistic way and advocate that Afrocentric perspectives be made a part of the American stream of consciousness. By this, they mean educators should appreciate the values of African or non-Western cultures as well. This view has come to be adopted in education from elementary schools to colleges and universities. Despite this, multiculturalism has come to be associated more with those Afrocentric perspectives that some critics have derided as “odd and curious” black movements.

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The African American's increasing appreciation of his own subculture together with the rejection of the superordination of Euro-American culture merged into multiculturalism. Critics of multiculturalism tend to be scholars who do not understand the historical sense of minorities. But, although it may be somewhat extreme, it is a philosophy in harmony with worldwide social changes and even in accord with the changed world views of many Americans. The influx of a large number of immigrants who were not of European extraction in the 1980s and 1990s have helped to bring about such change that it is estimated that whites will be a minority by the middle of the 21st century. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the reduction of military tension between the East and the West have also changed American world views. Americans are no longer solidly bound by a political ideology that they are people who are expected to save the liberal world. We have many good examples for this change of historical consciousness today. This has freed people to think more about their ethnic rather than national identity. For example, blacks as part of their program for Afrocentric education teach the specific experiences of black Americans. Hawaiians push for school textbooks in the Hawaiian language. Hispanics advocate bilingual education.

Confronted by these movements, proponents of traditional American values, such as Schlesinger, tried to promulgate the idea that Americans share the values of liberal democracy, human rights, and equal opportunity. These they believe are the core of the American common culture. They regarded ethnic cultures as subcultures, which were less important than the common culture, and warned that ethnic movements were dangerous in that they might accelerate the erosion of the American national culture. These symptoms, in short, indicate an upsurge in nativistic sentiment stirred by the forces that might eventually degrade the American traditional identity. This in turn provoked a sense of isolation among the minority groups and strengthened their doubts about the predominant culture and its norms. What is noteworthy here is that these seemingly self-segregating movements show not only the declaration of discontent among the minorities in the American society but also the awakening of the values of their own culture in relation to the fact that they are Americans. These movements typically displayed in the multicultural education indicate that they are involved in the struggle over whose values will prevail in this society. It is quite convincing that the cultural conflicts over the so-called Eurocentrism and the outbreak of the historical sense of the self, which constitute the major interest of multiculturalism, are called culture wars. Thus, the struggle over values among cultures is better understood when it is examined in specifically the field of metaphysics instead of race and ethnicity per se. In fact, multiculturalism is a national issue in which all the citizens as well as some minorities are deeply involved irrespective of their race.

Senses of Self

As described above, multiculturalism has had negative connotations in the U.S., but we should be careful not to distort the concept without examining its central question. One of the issues that appeared there dealt with Afrocentrism. It is not difficult to see that this aspect is a counter proposition to the predominant American culture whose norms are largely rooted in European values. However, according to Molefi Kete Asante, a prominent proponent of Afrocentrism, Afrocentrism is not an African version of Eurocentrism in that the latter was
hierarchical and value-laden in such a way as to view non-European cultures inferior. On the contrary, Asante says that Afrocentrism represents merely a perspective by which people understand themselves through their own frames of reference instead of other’s. Accordingly, “centricity is a concept that can be applied to any culture.”

The main point of this aspect is to criticize the discriminatory systems and circumstances where non-white students are located and made to see themselves through the norms of whites. This is a new proposition in that it represents a different emphasis from the traditional ideas of equal opportunity and equal distribution of resources. In other words, it is more than a demand that there be legal redress for discrimination. It is, rather, a question of how the children of minority groups can perceive themselves affirmatively and how they cannot gain self-esteem through education. This sense of justice and of the self is not a problem of rights that can be solved by new legislation but a problem of human dignity that requires much more sensitivity to understand and solve. Here we can see a shift of interest from “equal rights” to “equal dignity” that suggests the need for moral recognition of minority children rather than legal recognition of them.

This change of consciousness was a product of the work to review the senses of self and the self-images of minorities. Recognition of the self, however, is not their new discovery but has its own long history. Black consciousness, for example, was analyzed in the very beginning of this century by the black sociologist, W. E. B. DuBois who, in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), pointed out that blacks were not allowed to obtain “true self-consciousness.” The “American world,” he asserted, “lets him [the Negro] see himself through the revelation of the other world.” He also revealed “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

A couple of decades later, another black professor, Alain Locke, happened to rephrase this remark in his book *The New Negro* (1925). “For generations in the mind of America,” he contended, “the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being — a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.”

What is important here, a point made by Locke, is that the “thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude” and “his shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality.” It should be noted that the concept of the “Negro” or “black” was formulated reflecting the hierarchical system of race relations in the U.S. This occurred in a time when many blacks internalized the view that they were inferior to whites. The negative self-images that blacks internalized have been so persistent that opinion polls, conducted in Chicago as recently as 1991 showed that more blacks than whites believe that blacks are inferior to whites.

The central motivation of multiculturalism has been to revise this negative “self” that is a product of others and it has been a moral protest against subordination. This is the point that Asante and his associates who claim the “centricity” are trying to make. Their goal is to rediscover and redefine their true selves and free themselves from definition by others.

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History has been a way of affirming the self. The Jews, for example, having a long history, affirm themselves and that history of overcoming experiences of persecution and succeeding. Black Americans, as above-mentioned, searching for their own affirmative history, are paying attention to excavation of ancient African civilization that might have marked the breakthrough of human knowledge. Native Americans, also, are seeking to rediscover traditional ways of life, customs, and values that flourished before the arrival of Columbus. By this means they hope to find their authenticity. Japanese Americans are trying to hold on to their memories of being defined as aliens ineligible for citizenship after WWI and being sent to internment camps during WWII.

It is needless to say that these minorities' interpretations of history are highly politicized and exaggerated since these recollections as victims have been made sources of power in the U.S. As Shelby Steele, the author of *The Content of Our Character*, writes, "victimization metamorphosed into power via innocence." This can be viewed as a basis for minorities pushing for multicultural education and Japanese Americans seeking compensation for their internment. As observed in the controversies over the Columbus quincentenary, various ethnic and religious groups have their own interests in history because an interpretation of the past can define their social status in the future as well as at present. "A people without a sense of history," Linus Hoskins argues, "are ill-equipped to visualize and plan a future because of an unclear and distorted/miseducated picture of their past."

Identifying the self, thus, has come to be intertwined with what is called the "politics of history." The politics of history may not foster a common sense of history shared by different groups. Historical consciousness, in this sense, can be characterized as romantic for it focuses on ethnic origins and distinctive experiences. What some critics find disconcerting is the seeming rejection of the universalism of the modern West. Yet, on the other hand, a characteristic feature of modernism, the advocacy of freedom and individualism, is easily discernible in the emphasis on self as evidenced in many self-related words witnessed over and over again in the articles concerning multiculturalism, self-affirmation, self-fulfillment, self-realization, self-respect, and self-regard.

Although the philosophical character of multiculturalism is difficult to illustrate, the "awakening of the self" and "revolution of consciousness" are probably the most appropriate words to describe its essence. Accordingly, it is irrelevant to criticize multiculturalism, as Schlesinger does, by arguing that it may lead to a collapse of the nation. He points out the fact that black Americans have no direct contact with Africa and insists that their identity should be American. This reveals the fact that he does not accept the core idea of multiculturalism: self-definition and having one's own frame of reference. Instead, he has distorted the concept and degraded his adversaries. I think it is important to examine what can be regarded as the central issues of multiculturalism.

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Double Meaning of Identity

The core issues of multiculturalism revolve around the problem of understanding the self. We have so far examined some examples of self-understanding primarily focusing on the circumstances of minorities. What is required next is to explore the process of self-understanding as identity in more general terms.

The ardent desire to be freed from self-images and self-perceptions that were invented and imposed by others will be satisfied essentially when blacks begin creating new images that they find satisfying. It is to find an answer to the question who I am that motivates those who have been alienated or unable to explain themselves because of a lack of a shared memory—for example, minorities in America, Japanese children left behind in China after WWII, the adoptees in the U.S. Through the affirmation of a sense of identity, such groups can find a collective answer to this question who I am.

Charles Taylor, one of the philosophers who address the question who I am, says that he can be defined “crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out.” As we grow in life, we internalize a value of a composite of beliefs, faith, ethics, norms, virtues, creed, nature, family, custom, tradition, memory, wealth, and utility. These mental attitudes constitute the major elements that define us, what we usually call mores, habitus, or ethos. These “habits of heart,” moral codes, value systems, and world views help to fashion the folkways of a group by means of interactive dialogues among its members.

When a composite of cultural traits, in general, is referred to as religion, traditional customs, or lifestyle, it means that these representations of culture are believed to be valuable to the members of a particular group across generations. To live a good life, for them, is to live up to the values and the spiritual attitudes that have been nourished among them. What is important here is that those elements that define any people are the joint creation of the collective self and others who believe certain taboos and licenses very valuable. “A self,” reiterates Taylor, “exists only within what I call ‘webs of interlocution.’” Thus identity can be understood as the self-consciousness that is shared collectively in, what Taylor calls, “a dialogical relationship.”

Generally speaking, self-recognition through association with a sense of identity can be witnessed in the tendency to differentiate between “them” and “us.” In short, identity can be acquired in a multiracial and multiethnic society by drawing a line between “them” and “us.” A problem may occur when the shared sense of “we” faces “others” who do not share access to the in-group. It is not a difficult task to draw many lines, deviding a particular group from others, based on different experiences and memories of the past. Yet such lines may become sources of conflict deeply rooted in hatred and hostility as divisions occur. As Edward Said points out, national identities have functioned as the psychological pillars for the legitimatization of nation-states.

What is the case with national identity also applies to ethnic identity. Those identities

that are made on the basis of difference and confrontation have sometimes played a dangerous role. Because this sense of identity has been manipulated and used as a weapon to inflame hostilities among nations of the past, the notion of identity is sometimes criticized as generating "identity politics." This is surely one of the vexing problems regarding multiculturalism.

As we saw beforehand, one of the characteristic features of Afrocentrism has been the challenge to alter the white-made-black-image. To facilitate this, blacks may reach back to the historical past. It should not, however, be forgotten that fashioning an identity by mustering past memories has its danger. The danger is the possible emergence of an intolerant potentially abusive Afrocentrism. It is dangerous to create the notion of others and different cultures that are completely opposite to "us" and "ours." Another danger that Schlesinger alluded to is the potential balkanization of American culture through self-segregation.

Group identity has at times enhanced the consciousness of ethnic and others who were colonized and stimulated the movement toward independence and self-determination. This notion of identity was a symbol of 20th century progress. Yet, the self-determination that assumed nation-states would often lead to alienation of some peoples and to an establishment of another hierarchical social order grew out of the notion that all people should be masters of their own destiny. It is difficult to evaluate the notion of group identity as an inalienable human right today, when the authenticity of nation-states itself is problematic.

The principle of self-determination or the concept of liberation from oppression should not be ignored because they may be dangerous or harmful nor should the notion of identity be eliminated because identity politics may appear to threaten the unification of a nation. The problem is how to broaden the concept of identity, which was and is the sources of the idea of liberation and of self-understanding in a way that it will not become exclusive ideology that might marginalize and discriminate against others. How can it be made possible?

*Multiculturalism as a Discursive Counteraction*

First we should abolish the thought that there is some point of demarcation which separates "them" and "us." Boundaries have been drawn along the lines of race, ethnicity, religion, class, ideology, nationality, region, age, sex, occupation, hobby, school career, and so on and so forth. Whenever such lines have been delineated, individuals have been designated hierarchically and kept apart. In this sense, tendencies toward self-segregation among some minorities occur because they assume other human beings have nothing in common and may pose a threat. This attitude stems from a desire to cast off negative self-images made by others. The tendency to see others as potential foes do not stop them from discoursing on race and ethnicity that were also created by others per se. It is extremely difficult for some minority people to overcome the perverted need for a "racialization of culture," meaning the inclination to view cultures through race.

Those who try to avoid discourse through self-segregation on the assumption that they cannot win against their oppressor actually have capitulated. Others, however, seek to

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achieve "changes within a discourse." Although using terminology similar to that used by superordinate groups, those unwilling to capitulate redefine and use terms in unconventional ways. For example, if one considers the simple phrases "black is beautiful." The existence of the notion of the black, in this case, remains the same even though the content is significantly different.

Prior to the phrases widespread use among young Afrocentric blacks in the 1960s the color black was more often associated with dirtiness, evil, woes, and all kinds of disaster. Black assertion of black as beautiful made whites fear that that implicitly meant that white was ugly.

Among the most important problems regarding multiculturalism is the need to rewrite the perspective. One example of changes in the discourse can be found in the movement toward so-called political correctness. Proponents of PC may at times appear absurd with their insistence that handicapped people be referred to as "differently abled," that the uneducated be termed "differently educated," and that pets be called "non-human animal companions." But within the seemingly nonsensical protestations there is a serious message for all of us: we should be more sensitive to the matter that sexist language or the language that inherently de-means can be hurtful to others. Advocates of PC are rejecting norms based on racial or gender superordination as criteria for some kind of universal rule. They seek to raise such basic questions as: who established the norms, whose or what ability or education serves as criteria? PC proponents seek to avoid a particular point of view that implies the dictatorship of some sort of universalism. In short, the central motivation of the PC movement is to deny the hierarchical discourse that alienates social minorities and marginalizes other particular groups. They seek to avoid a particular point of view that is supposed to be general.

Critics of PC label it "the new McCarthyism" and fault it for depriving citizens of freedom of speech. But PC tries to liberate what have been imprisoned in a hierarchical mold or singular point of view. In this sense, PC does not deny freedom of speech but affirms and practices it. The critics of PC tend to be comfortable with hierarchical relationships in society.

In addition to looking closely at PC, it is necessary to reexamine the practical aspects of the concept of identity. What is important here is to overcome the perspective that presupposes that one's group or self has to be in an adversarial relationship with others. This kind of enlightened perspective is required when we think about identity. Self understanding through mutual relations has come to play an important role in a multicultural society. As DuBois and Locke pointed out self understanding presupposes understanding by others, and the notion of self can be established only in a relationship. More recently, Taylor makes a similar point, "a self only exists among other selves." Taylor's thesis is that identity is shaped by whether or not others acknowledge the individual. He suggests that the lack of acknowledgment can be detrimental to the well-being of a group or individual. He calls the lack of proper acknowledgment "misrecognition." Further, Taylor claims that his own identity has been shaped through dialogues within family, friends, and meaningful others, a process he refers to as his "dialogical relations with others." Michael Walzer, a philosopher and
prominent promoter of pluralism also says, "There is no self knowledge without the help of others."12

Originally, identity was a matter of self-identification that depended on circumstances and relationships with others. Others would acknowledge this self-recognition, as long as it was not incompatible with the forming of mutual respect.

Social scientists must guard against associating multiculturalism with the creation of a hierarchical structures. In this regard, current jargon used in the social sciences ought to be reconsidered. Terms of analysis such as nation, race, and ethnicity presuppose the existence in some pure state of the very concepts these words define and thereby help to create false antinomies such as universalism vs particularism, individual vs society, public sphere vs private, equality vs difference, and integration vs separation.

The social scientist must avoid building superficial contradictions. What is important is to recognize and acknowledge the diversity of cultures. Critics of the Eurocentric approach correctly reject the hierarchical way of thinking that views one particular set of values as universal and orthodox, while alienating all other values. If the problem is merely one of semantics, all sides ought to be willing to make whatever changes necessary to reach accommodation. In the final analysis, the social scientist must exemplify and work toward a perspective of mutual respect.

Conclusion

It is not easy to anticipate in what direction the debate over multiculturalism will move. Some of the arguments discussed here, however, are closely related to American philosophical circumstances often called culture wars. It is requested that we examine multiculturalism whether from the perspective of modernist or post-structuralism.

I focused on the philosophical issues in this paper, but I would like to conclude by addressing more concrete social situations. The world tends to move in a transitional direction, not only in terms of goods, services, information, people, but also values, thoughts, and perceptions. For example, we have seen values, world views, and spiritual attitudes of one region, generation, or social class move rapidly all over the world, regardless of differences of language, nationality, or national boundaries. On the other hand, indigenous peoples around the world, trying to find the sources of their own traditional culture, have come to unite with those who share the same longings. Thus, particular events and world events are mutually connected and reinforce each other, and it becomes quite clear that peoples and cultures are not formed independently of their neighbors.

Consequently, I think discerning people will find many evidences that different cultures and others are tied closely to us. In a sense, this will underscore the view that understanding the self is closely related to understanding others. The notions of "self" and "others" are intertwined. If we understand this, what we are asked is not to regard multiculturalism as a divisive racial or ethnic phenomenon, but to exemplify the perspective of mutual recognition and place that notion at the beginning or starting point of the arguments.

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