

Cultural Pluralism: New Wine in Old Bottles

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Subtle but definitive differences exist between the older and the newer concepts of cultural pluralism. A distinguished educator makes an insightful analysis of the two approaches.

WHENEVER another bandwagon to reform American public schools is launched, it may be taken as a signal that somebody has dug up some old bottles and is trying to sell new wine under an old label. For bandwagons, besides being bright, shiny, and noisy, need a motto wherewith to capture attention and pull in customers. For this purpose such slogans as career education, competency-based education, accountability, humanized education, basic education, and value education are eminently useful, because they conjure up sentiments and traditions that no self-respecting citizen or school person would wish to deny. But the predicament to which the bandwagon is responding may not be that for which the old bottles and their labels were designed; it may be new and strange wine indeed.

Cultural pluralism is a case in point. It is an old bottle with venerable labels carrying the mind to the Statue of Liberty, the American Dream, the freedom of the new

world vs. the despotisms, wretchedness, and limitations of the old, naturalization ceremonies and tears in the eyes of the new citizens drawn from a bewildering variety of nations and ethnic enclaves. Cultural pluralism was a concept developed by Horace Kallen in which he attempted to allow for some degree of cultural diversity within the confines of a unified national experience.¹

One feature stood out in the old version of cultural pluralism American style, namely, that over and beyond hospitality to ethnic, religious, and national differences, there were common aspirations for a decent and prosperous life in a free, democratic society. Perhaps equal opportunity and political equality were more slogans than descriptions of reality; but no amount of revisionist history can negate the fact that, for some immigrants and their children, economic and social mobility became a reality. The streets were not paved with gold,

¹ Horace Kallen. "Democracy vs. the Melting Pot." *The Nation*, February 18 and 25, 1915. A careful discussion of the various attitudes toward immigrant cultures is contained in Chapter III of a forthcoming book by Paul Violas to be published by G. P. Putnam's Sons.

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as many an immigrant had been led to believe, but if one were willing to work very hard, sacrifice a lot—much more than the established families—get some schooling, and take some risks, one could “make it.”

These immigrant groups, one can be fairly sure, did not like to give up their customs, language, and traditions. These cultural differences were to be respected (not derided or denigrated) and on certain occasions (such as holidays) celebrated with folk song, costume, and ritual; but they were not expected to become autonomous cultures to be set over against the common culture. After all, these immigrants had chosen to come to this country.²

This common culture was predominantly white, Protestant, and Anglo-Saxon; but it had been absorbing elements and flavors from many sources that were being incorporated into the language, diets, and the very ethos of this country. Americans are rarely mistaken for English, French, or Germans regardless of their origins or those of their ancestors.

A Different Vintage

The new cultural pluralism is of a different vintage. It was fermented in the early and mid-60's, when the Civil Rights and Great Society legislation was being translated painfully and erratically into economic and educational programs.

In the first place, the ethnic minorities directly involved in the push for cultural pluralism were Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Indians. Of these, only some of

² In this respect the Blacks and the Indians pose a moral problem quite different from that of ethnic groups that voluntarily came to this country. If it was morally wrong to bring the Blacks against their will to this country and for the Indians to be pushed or swindled out of their land, then the preservation of the indigenous cultures of these groups is more valid than the preservation of the culture of the Slovenes or the Irish or the Italians. However, whether the present generation of Blacks and Indians would be best served by such preservation and whether such preservation would morally atone for the original wrongs is debatable.

the Mexicans were immigrants in the ordinary sense of that term; and even they were connected with the special problems of migrant labor and a common border as the other immigrant groups were not. These minorities suffered from a low socioeconomic status that was caused or sustained by discrimination in schooling, housing, and jobs. The new cultural pluralism is not invoked to liberate or raise the consciousness of immigrant Irish, Poles, Jews, Italians, French, Chinese, and Japanese. On the contrary, among the most stubborn foes of the economic and educational reforms of the 60's were the earlier ethnics, who had achieved membership in the various layers of the middle class. They perceived themselves as bearing the brunt of the burden of these reforms.

In the second place, the current press for cultural pluralism does not always share the traditional ideal of a common culture with interesting but not fundamentally important variations. In the more extreme and militant forms, it is a demand that minority cultures be regarded as separate and equal. Each cultural group presumably is to participate in the various activities of the nation on its own terms, and it is expected that the public schools will facilitate their doing so.

How much diversity is compatible with the existence of a viable society is itself an interesting question. Social organization necessitates varying degrees of interdependence, whereas cultural diversity that claims complete autonomy for each cultural group can only result in aggregates of groups with a minimum of dependence on each other. Taken seriously and interpreted strictly, it leads to cultural separatism or atomism.

The advocates of cultural pluralism do not agree on how far toward such separatism they wish to go. They are united, however, in demanding that the schools take into account the linguistic and other cultural differences that children of minority groups bring to the classroom, and that the schools refrain from imposing the majority culture both in its language and ethos on these children.

Schools are asked—and even man-

dated—to create special programs for children with bilingual home backgrounds, that various dialects be given equal status with the standard English dialect; children are to be encouraged to study their ethnic origins and cultures. Much can be said in favor of these demands. Some are justified by the exigencies of instruction and some by the importance of ethnic pride to the self-concept of the pupil. But these claims can—and in some instances have—become claims that only Blacks can teach Blacks and only Puerto Ricans can teach Puerto Rican children. There is even the suggestion that all instruction throughout the grades be conducted bilingually.

Writing of bilingual schooling, Bayard Rustin, noted leader in the Civil Rights movement and President of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, said:

... the concept of bilingual teaching is all too often being advocated as a means of creating a separatist, alternative culture in which the speaking of English does not play a pivotal role. ... We must recognize that the object of education is to help students cope with an increasingly complex society. Those who minimize this goal are doing inestimable harm to the very children who need quality education more than any other group. Instead of producing students who are fluent in two languages, the proponents of cultural isolation would produce bilingual illiteracy on a massive scale.³

Accepting the need for bilingual instruction as a means to quicker and more efficient entry into the common culture is far less debatable than to use bilingualism as a way of refusing to participate in that culture. Even more debatable is the wisdom of "accepting" a dislike for formal schooling, the work ethic, and the standards of health and morals prevalent in the majority culture. Indeed, if "feeling comfortable with" or "being turned on by" are the final criteria for legitimacy of a cultural pattern, then we must be prepared to "accept" without "getting uptight" the gang, drug, and crime cultures that some groups "feel comfortable with."

³ Bayard Rustin. Quoted in: Albert Shanker. "Where We Stand." Advertisement in *The New York Times*, July 6, 1975.

Whatever may be the ultimate metaphysical defense for such a view, it is simply not the case that the potentials of diverse cultures for coping with a modern technological society are equal; and the public schools ought not to conspire to foster the illusion that they are.

An even more important consequence of the view that all cultures are separate, autonomous, and equal is that some groups will be encouraged not to participate not only in the culture of this country but also in the intellectual and artistic achievements of the human race. To these achievements many races and cultures have contributed, albeit not equally or uniformly. Nevertheless, one theme unifies the diversity of knowledge, art, and religion—the attempt to define and realize the peculiar virtues (excellences) of the human species.

As far as the school is concerned, this theme is expressed in and transmitted through the scientific, humanistic, and artistic subject matters we call the disciplines. The modes of inquiry and the forms of feeling exhibited in these disciplines are not class-bound or culture-bound. To be disciplined by these disciplines is what has customarily been called liberal education and quality education. Cultural pluralism was never intended to bless the evasion of this kind of education.

If the new cultural pluralism is used to justify such an evasion, it will be of doubtful value to those whom it is intended to liberate. We should look with some skepticism at proposals for alternative curricula, the substitution of "relating" for cognitive achievement, and the distortion of scholastic standards to accommodate cultural differences; they may only "con" the children of minority groups out of their right to the real thing.

The old cultural pluralism denoted an ideal of the kind of unity in diversity that a great orchestra or indeed any great work of art exhibits, where the whole is discernible in every part and every part gets its full meaning from the whole. Once the new cultural pluralism absorbs the flavor of this ideal, it can mature safely in the old bottles. □

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