

# MULTICULTURALISM: DEALING WITH INTRA-DIVERSITY

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*This observer holds that "multiculturalism" is an unattainable goal until each ethnic or minority group can deal effectively with its own intra-diversity.*

Approximately every five years we experience a jargonal flash: new euphemisms to reflect the nation's latest concern for minority groups' upward mobility. In the middle 60's the euphemism was equal opportunity; in the late 60's—relevance; and in the early 70's—affirmative action.

An interesting similarity among these jargonistic symbols is that, without ever being fully defined, each symbol has had a debilitating effect upon the upward mobility of minority groups in this nation.

The thrust for equal opportunity never really included equal access, and, therefore, blacks found many doors opening into empty rooms. The thrust for relevance deteriorated into "doing your own thing," yielding a generation of undisciplined black illiterates. The thrust for affirmative action has become synonymous with increasing upward mobility in the middle-class white female—qualified blacks taking second seat to qualified and even less qualified white females.

Today, the new euphemism is "multiculturalism": And there is little or no agreement about its meaning. Some have defined multiculturalism in terms of a common culture: a culture with the capital "C" that we all embrace as American citizens. Others have defined it in terms of multidiversity: the coexistence of multiethnicity. Harry Broudy defines multiculturalism in the following way:

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.<sup>1</sup>

Broudy pointed out further that "the advocates of multiculturalism do not agree on how far toward such separatism they wish to go"<sup>2</sup> in this nation.

A critical observation as to the fundamental reason for this lack of consensus: We are treating multiculturalism as if it were a national concept. It is not. Multiculturalism is an international concept. Multiethnicity and multidiversity are national concepts; and unless we develop the capacity to nationalize the multiethnicity that exists in the United States, we will never internationalize our cultural differences. Stated more fundamentally, each ethnic and minority group must develop a capacity to deal with its own intra-diversity, before multidiversity can exist on a national level.

Another critical observation not reflected in the literature on multiculturalism is that many ethnic and minority groups have just begun to develop the group maturation necessary to cope with the intra-diversity within their own groups.

Presented next are experiences which have

<sup>1</sup> Harry S. Broudy. "Cultural Pluralism: New Wine in Old Bottles." *Educational Leadership* 33(3): 174; December 1975.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

been or are presently taking place within the black and the women's movements to demonstrate that intra-diversity has posed some serious problems for these groups. These experiences will be compared to those of Jews in this nation and their capability to deal with their intra-diversity.

## Blacks

In 1958, the blacks of Montgomery, Alabama, staged a successful bus boycott. Although there was great diversity among the "colored people" in Montgomery, people of all professions and religious denominations joined together against a long standing policy: "Colored sit in the back; white sit in the front." It was a brief time in history when members of one community of black America were able to deal with and around intra-diversity. They locked hands on the most fundamental likeness that existed among them—"color." They coalesced around an issue that affected the total black community.

Since the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the subsequent prostration of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, black America finds itself scrambling to reconstitute the black unanimity that seemed to have emerged during the late 50's and 60's. Several black leaders have made attempts to carry on the united front, only to watch it slowly collapse. A united black America seems to have escaped them all.

Have our black leaders failed to realize that black America is a "melting pot"—that it is the most diverse ethnic group within this nation—that although the Montgomery boycott had national impact, it was only a community project—that black America is a microcosm of a nation—that this microcosm constitutes enough people to be the seventh largest nation in the world?

The scope of the intra-diversity of black America cuts across religious, political, and social values and differences. Owing to such diversity, it is little wonder that the black politicians failed at two attempts to organize a black American political organization: the Black Convention held in Gary, Indiana, 1972, and its reconvention in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1974. They failed to recognize the scope of black America's intra-diversity, and therefore, failed to take advantage of the

great resources that make up this diverse black nation.

Before black America and its leaders can deal honestly with its own intra-ethnicity and its own intra-diversity, it must first come to the realization that there is no "one" black commu-

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nity—no "one" black family—no "one" black anything. Without such realization, we will never be able to develop a strong united black America around the political, social, and economic issues that affect us as a people.

Black America must stop waiting for white America to hand to it solutions to its problems. Black America must begin to assume some responsibility and commit itself to its own multiethnicity and multidiversity. Black America must call upon its own scholars if it expects to rise above its intra-diversity, and expects to put an end to producing black illiterates by the tens of thousands. For a nation that does not utilize its scholars will not produce any.

At this point in time, it is premature for black America to be engaged in conversations and confrontations about multiculturalism.

## Feminists

Feminist leaders are making the same error as black leaders. They have not come to accept and respect the many diverse elements of their sex: the blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and the many other poor white and diverse feminist groups. This lack of acceptance and respect has only encouraged some poor white women to continue to obstruct the upward mobility of other minority groups which would be possible through integration and desegregation. These women are afraid of losing one of the few things they possess, their "whiteness."



For black women it is much worse. They have no white skin that identifies them with a majority. Although many of them have encompassed the feminist movement, the movement is not designed to encompass them.

Only three years ago, less than five percent of the law and medical school freshman classes was female. Today, in many of the major law schools, one-third of their freshman enrollment is female. But black females account for less than one-tenth of one percent. For the Puerto Rican, Chicano, and the Native American women, it is still worse.

Gwendolyn Baker, an assistant professor at the University of Michigan, very cleverly gave this perspective to the women's movement:

Women or the feminist movement may be explored, but the full impact of this movement will be ignored completely unless we consider the interests, concerns, and responses to the issues involved of women of various ethnic groups. The values and interests a black, Native American, or Chicano woman places on the feminist movement are quite different from those of a white middle-class woman. The differences in perspective and/or responses are primarily due to the ethnic experiences each has had in this country.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, the feminist leaders agreed to strongly consider gay feminists. Was this because most gay feminists are middle-class white women, or was it because feminist leaders have recognized there is strength in diversity? It is doubtful that the latter reason predominates.

The movement will peak out long before it reaches its potential unless it begins to deal with its intra-diversity. The upward mobility that a few women have experienced has not been due to the feminist movement alone but has been mostly due to the fact that middle and upper middle-class white women have access to the white males who are in power. As long as the

women's movement continues to ignore the existence of intra-diversity and intra-ethnicity among the women in this nation, conversations and confrontations about multiculturalism are of little value and serve only to further the euphemism.

## Jews

Something may be gained if blacks and other ethnic and minority groups would take a look at the degree of acceptance of intra-diversity among the Jews in this nation. For many generations the Jews have acknowledged that the ability to rise in unity on issues affecting them as a race was dependent upon their ability to cope with diversity within their own ethnicity.

The Jews have demonstrated as a minority group that there is a set of common skills and abilities which must be mastered if one expects to be successful in this nation—that those skills include speaking and writing standard English, and learning basic reading and computational skills. It is apparent that Jews realized that, if they were to be successful in nationalizing their ethnicity, they must ensure that all Jewish children have maximum opportunities for developing these skills. These common skills are promoted in every Jewish community, club, fraternity, sorority, synagogue, and by every Jewish parent. Multiculturalism has meaning to this ethnic group and internationalism of their ethnicity has become a goal.

They further realized that in order to advance themselves as a minority group they would have to tolerate their own intra-diversity—and join together and work as “one” ethnic group.

Only when ethnic and minority groups in this country acquire the ability to work effectively together, to respect each diverse element of their own group, and to recognize that education is the foundation for the development of the members of their group, will they be able to effect a major change in the national or international conscience toward multidiversity and multiculturalism. [E]

<sup>3</sup> Gwendolyn Calvert Baker. “Cultural Diversity: Strength of the Nation.” *Educational Leadership* 33(4): 259; January 1975.



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