



## What is Multiculturalism?

**Professor Gregory Jay, University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee**  
[gjay@uwm.edu](mailto:gjay@uwm.edu) [revised July 2011]

---

### 1. Who did we learn about in school today?

Like most words, "multiculturalism" needs to be understood from both an historical and a conceptual perspective. Historically, "multiculturalism" came into wide public use in the West during the early 1980s in the context of public school curriculum reform. Specifically, proponents argued that the content of classes in history, literature, social studies, and other areas reflected what came to be called a "Eurocentric" and male bias. Few if any women or people of color, or people from outside the Western European tradition, appeared prominently in the curriculums of schools and colleges in the United States. This material absence was also interpreted as a value judgment that reinforced unhealthy sexist, ethnocentric and even racist attitudes.



Observers noted that teaching and administrative staffs in schools were also overwhelmingly white and/or male (whiteness being pervasive at the teaching level, maleness at the administrative level, reflecting the politics of gender and class as well as race in the educational system). Eventually parallel questions were raised about the ethno-racial or cultural biases of other institutions, such as legislatures, government agencies, corporations, religious groups, private clubs, etc. Each of these has in turn developed its own response and policies regarding diversity and multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism also is directly related to global shifts of power, population, and culture in the era of globalization and "postcolonialism," as nations around the world establish independence in the wake of the decline of Western empires (whether European, Soviet, or American). Globalization transformed previously homogeneous cities or regions into complex meeting grounds for different ethnic, racial, religious, and national groups, challenging the political and cultural system to accommodate this diversity. Many of the previously homogeneous nation-states of Europe then experienced an influx of immigration by people of color and different cultural and religious beliefs from the areas those nations had once ruled as colonies. The children of these new immigrants, like those before them, presented fresh questions to teachers who were unfamiliar with their languages,

belief systems, customs, and ways of life. How these children were to be educated, and how the curriculum was to be reformed to meet their needs, became matters of continued debate.

Finally, "multiculturalism" may also have become a popular term as "race" lost much of its former credibility as a concept. Scientists agree that, in terms of DNA genetics, "race" has no significant meaning as a way of categorizing human differences. Intermarried families offer the puzzle of a parent and child considered as belonging to two different "races"--clearly an absurd idea given that race was thought of as biologically passed from parent to offspring. Thus "culture" and "ethnicity" began to replace "race" as terms for distinguishing among distinct human groups. In the U.S., African Americans responded that we were not yet living in a "post-racial" world, despite Barack Obama's election, and that a focus on "feel-good multiculturalism" that "celebrates diversity" can become an excuse for not continuing the struggle against racism.

## **2. Is there any justice in this world?**

The concept of "multiculturalism" also has a history rooted in theories of human rights, democracy, human equality, and social justice. The concern to create a more "culturally diverse" curriculum owed much to the intellectual and social movements associated with the U.S. Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s. These included Black Power, La Raza/Chicano Power, the American Indian Movement, and the Women's Liberation movement, each of which challenged the norms and effects of educational policy. Perhaps more importantly, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) --- which outlawed explicit school segregation --- led to the admission of large numbers of non-white students to public and some private schools (also occasioning the "white flight" that has largely succeeded in re-segregating schools in most major cities). Teachers and school administrators then saw a student body with very different faces. This demographic cultural diversity was accelerated by postcolonial immigration from non-Western European nations during the last two decades -- especially from Mexico, Latin America, and Asia. This pattern was largely caused by progressive arguments leading to the liberalization of U.S. immigration laws in the mid-1960s, which had formerly used ethnic and racial bias to restrict non-European immigration. Multiculturalism thus also denotes an approach to "culturally relevant pedagogy" that takes into account the cultural diversity in the classroom, the social conditions of the students, and the differences in their background knowledge and learning styles.



## **3. Melt or get out of the pot!**

The historical emergence of "multiculturalism" as an ideology brings with it many complicated conceptual problems, causing a rich debate over what multiculturalism is or should mean. America's traditional conception of itself as a "melting pot" of diverse peoples joined in a common New World culture has been challenged by those multiculturalists who consider the "melting pot" metaphor a cover for oppressive assimilation. To them, the only way you were able to melt into the pot is by assimilating -- becoming similar --- to the dominant or "hegemonic" white culture. The United States's Naturalization Act of 1789 declared that only "white" immigrants could eventually become citizens. In fact, admission to the socio-cultural pot of acceptance was restricted at first

only to certain European ethnic groups (the English, Dutch, German, French, and Scandinavian), so that others such as the Irish, the Jews, the Italians, the Greeks, and the Slavs all experienced discrimination in the process. Hotels, clubs, and housing developments routinely advertised ethnic discrimination against these groups, just as Jim Crow segregation was seen in the ubiquitous “white” and “colored” signs placed on water fountains, waiting rooms, theaters, and parks.

Many multiculturalists reject acculturation and assimilation in principle, as violations of human rights, as well as out of a recognition of historical truth. “Critical Multiculturalism” became a movement insisting that American society has never been only “white,” but always in fact multiracial and diverse. The Native Americans had been here for thousands of years, the Spanish were the first settlers, Africans arrived as early as 1620, Mexicans became citizens by the thousands in 1848 when the U.S. conquered half of Mexico in the War of 1848, and Chinese and Japanese emigrated to labor here throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Recovering the memory of this history, critical multiculturalism seeks to preserve distinctly different ethnic, racial, or cultural communities without melting them into a common culture. Thus this form of multiculturalism is also called “cultural pluralism,” as it envisions a society with many different cultures living equally and side-by-side. Critical multiculturalism critiques the former culture of white supremacy, a culture of legalized bigotry and discrimination, and so advocate an emphasis on the separate characteristics and virtues of particular cultural groups.



#### 4. Islam, Immigration, and the “Failure of Multiculturalism”?

In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, debates over multiculturalism and cultural pluralism center less on the issues of race prominent in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and more on religion and immigration. The “melting pot” idealism of cultural pluralism appeared challenged by seemingly unbridgeable and sometimes violent religious differences. These differences became sharply public and international in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001 on New York and Washington, when Saudi Arabian hijackers avowing an Islamic jihad against the West flew planes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, precipitating a reaction that included wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Bombings by Muslims in Europe likewise started a debate over whether immigrants from Muslim countries were capable of assimilation.



On February 5, 2011, British Prime Minister David Cameron set off an international controversy with a speech at the Munich security conference in which he condemned “Islamist extremism” and in part blamed its rise in England to “state multiculturalism”: “Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism,” he said, “we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We’ve failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We’ve even

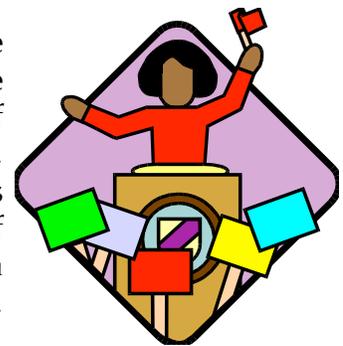
tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values." The Islamic communities of Britain have been a breeding ground for "terrorists," according to Cameron, and to the extent that these communities do not assimilate to the majority culture's ideology of "universal human rights" and secular democracy, Cameron claimed, their separatism shows the failure of multiculturalism. Critics of Cameron's speech saw it as lending support to "Islamophobia" and as downplaying poverty, racism, and discrimination as causes of dissatisfaction among immigrants and communities of color.

On July 22, 2011 a Norwegian fundamentalist Christian terrorist, Anders Breivik, launched an attack in Norway in which he slaughtered over seventy young people at a youth camp as well as bombing parts of downtown Oslo. Breivik's online manifesto used language similar to that of Cameron and other right-wing leaders as he condemned "multiculturalism" and the immigration of non-white, non-Christians to Europe. Debate in the aftermath led to reflections suggesting that toleration of right-wing anti-multiculturalism was itself the real "failure" as Europe struggled, like the United States, to construct societies that embraced a diversity of racial and ethnic groups.

In the United States, immigration has always been a powerful political issue, as "nativists" have periodically warned against the flow of new foreigners, from the Irish and Italians and Jews to the Mexicans and the Hmong. From the 1980s onward, anti-immigration sentiment increasingly focused on Latinos, especially Mexicans, although many individuals targeted in such campaigns were in fact Mexican *Americans* whose ancestors had been citizens dating back to the 19th century. Most of the tension arose out of an economic contradiction: on the one hand, American businesses and households relied on the low-wage and non-unionized labor of Latinos, particularly the undocumented; on the other hand, the decline in job opportunities experienced by many in the majority culture led them to blame immigration and to call for stronger measures against it, including border fences and police document checks. While some claimed that Hispanics were refusing, unlike white ethnics, to assimilate, bilingualism was no stronger among Latino communities than it had been historically with Poles and Germans in similar urban settings. Meanwhile American majority culture continued to borrow from and incorporate the food, song, literature, and art from South of the Border.

## 5. Is identity political?

One problem with certain strands of multiculturalism is their reliance on "identity politics." "Identity politics" refers to the tendency to define one's political and social identity and interests purely in terms of some group category: race, ethnicity, class, gender, nationality, religion, etc. Identity politics became more popular after the 1960s for many of the same reasons that multiculturalism did. The critique of America's "common culture" led many people to identify with a particular group, rather than with the nation --- a nation, after all, whose policies they believed had excluded or oppressed them. People increasingly called themselves by hybrid names: Native-Americans, African-Americans, Latino-Americans, Asian-Americans, Gay-Americans, etc., in an explosion of hyphenation.



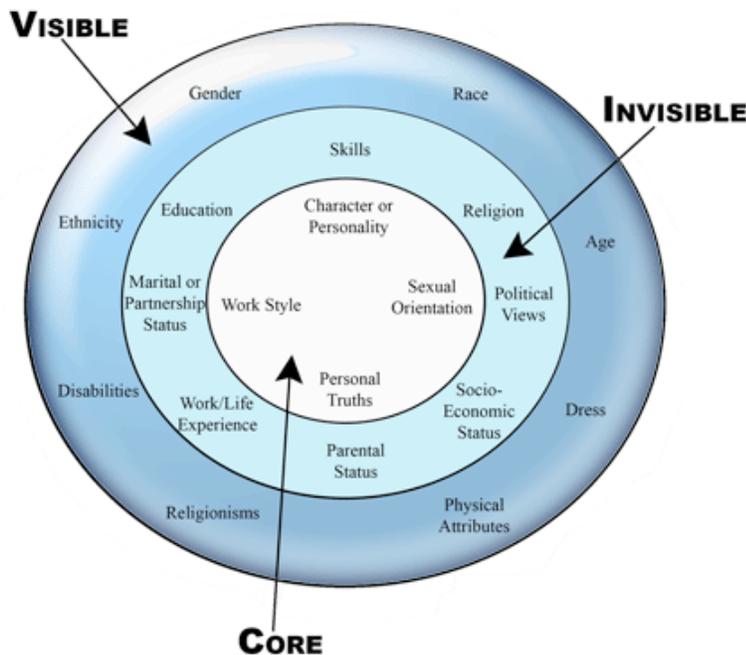
This movement for group solidarity did in many cases provide individuals with the resources to defend their interests and express their values, resources that as disparate individuals they could not possibly attain. As the American economy began to decline in the late 20th century, the scramble for a piece of the shrinking pie increased the tendency of people to band together in groups that together might have enough power to defend or extend their interests. American society is now often seen as a battleground of special-interest groups, many of them defined by the racial, ethnic, or cultural identity of their members. Hostility between these groups as they compete for scarce resources is inevitable. In defense of identity politics, others point out that these divisions between cultural groups are less the voluntary decisions of individuals than the product of discrimination and bigotry in the operation of the economy and the social institutions. It is these injustices that divide people up by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, etc., privileging the dominant group and subordinating the rest, they claim.

### 6. Breaking up is hard to do.

Still, most analysts admit that in practice individuals belong to numerous different groups and have complex socio-cultural identities. The theoretical word for analyzing people in terms of their group affiliations is "subject position." Each person occupies a variety of subject positions -- is positioned socially, economically, and politically -- by virtue of how his or her subjectivity is shaped by group identifications. When we analyze our identities, we can break them up into numerous facets of ourselves, until it seems that we might never be able to put them back together again.

A person may think of herself or be treated at one moment as a woman, at another moment as Asian, at another moment as upper-class, at another moment as elderly, at another moment as

Christian, at another moment as a lesbian--each time being either helped or hindered by the identification, depending on the circumstances. The various parts of our cultural identities may not add up to a neat and predictable whole. Multiculturalism, then, insofar as it groups individuals into categories, may overlook the practical reality that no one lives in just one box. Recent proponents of multiculturalism, indeed, have emphasized the multiculturalism within each individual, as each of us can map our multiplicity through the many points on the "diversity wheel."



## Questions:

I. Is multiculturalism the same as multiracialism or multiethnicity?

- A) yes, if race or ethnicity = culture
- B) no, if culture is independent of race and ethnicity

II. Is multiculturalism a political concept?

- A) yes, if it means the equal rights and respect accorded to distinct cultural groups or traditions by laws and governmental practices
- B) no, if it simply refers to the existence of distinct cultural groups within the same nation-state, regardless of their relative legal status

III. Does multiculturalism mean some kind of egalitarianism — equality of opportunity or equality of outcome?

A) If multiculturalism means equal rights and respect for distinct cultural groups, then do individuals deserve equality of opportunity regardless of race or ethnicity (or other defining category)? How does one define equality of opportunity?

B) Does the egalitarianism of multiculturalism require equality of outcome or result? That is, if 50% of the population in your city is Hispanic, should 50% of the police force or teachers or corporate executives be Hispanic? If only 5% are Hispanic, how do you explain the difference in outcome, especially if you maintain that there has been an equal opportunity to try?

1. Does the inequality of outcomes prove racial or ethnic discrimination? Is it the result of the social and sometimes legal/governmental discrimination practiced by some cultural groups against others? Does this mean that social and economic inequalities produce cultural differences?

2. Does the inequality of outcomes prove cultural differences in values and behaviors between groups? Are there groups that have better outcomes because of the relative superiority of their values, ideas, institutions, social practices, etc.? Does this mean that cultural differences produce economic inequalities?

3. Are inequalities of outcome statistically significant for whole cultural groups, or are these principally a matter of differences between individuals, who have distinct talents, skills, temperaments, etc.?

IV. How does multiculturalism change the way we write history, given that history is usually about the struggles of groups for land, power, wealth, social recognition, and cultural expression?