
The Crimes of Christopher Columbus

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Multiculturalism is presented by its advocates in the schools and universities as a benign alternative to monoculturalism. Historian Peter Stearns insists that the multicultural debate "is between those who think there are special marvelous features about the Western tradition that students should be exposed to, and others who feel it's much more important for students to have a sense of the way the larger world has developed." This is the unmistakable appeal of multiculturalism: it is obviously better to study many cultures rather than a single culture, to have diverse points of view rather than a single one.

Yet if multiculturalism represented nothing more than an upsurge of interest in other cultures, it would be uncontroversial. Who can possibly be against hundreds of thousands of American students studying the *Analects* of Confucius or the philosophical writings of Alfarabi and Avicenna? The debate about multiculturalism is not over whether to study other cultures but how to study the West and other cultures. Multiculturalism is better understood as a civil conflict within the Western academy over contrasting approaches to learning about the world.

Critics of multiculturalism such as Allan Bloom, E. D. Hirsch, and Arthur Schlesinger have argued for an emphasis on Western civilization. Bloom asserts in *The Closing of the American Mind* that American students are aliens in their own culture—abysmally ignorant of the philosophical, historical, and economic foundations of the West. Hirsch in *Cultural Literacy* lists numerous literary references, historical facts, and scientific concepts that American students should know but apparently don't. Schlesinger argues in *The Disuniting of America* that students should study Western civilization because it is their own. "We don't have to believe that our values are absolutely better than the next fellow's. People with a different history will have differing values. But we believe that our own are better for us."

Schlesinger's relativist argument for a Western canon is open to the objection, What do you mean *we*, white man? Literary critic Gerald Graff asks, in an ethnically diverse society, "who gets to determine which values are common and which merely special?" Barbara Herrnstein-Smith contends that different groups share "different sets of beliefs, interests, assumptions, attitudes, and practices. . . . There is no single comprehensive culture that transcends any or all other cultures."

At its deepest level, multiculturalism represents a denial of all Western claims to truth. In a recent book, literary critic Stanley Fish spurns the very possibility of transcultural standards of evaluation. "What are these truths and by whom are they to be identified?" In Fish's view, "The truths any of us find compelling will all be partial, which is to say they will all be political." Another scholar, Barbara Johnson, identifies the multicultural project with "the deconstruction of the foundational ideals of Western civilization." Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo urges the rejection of "timeless universals," and

philosopher Richard Rorty declares the need "to abandon traditional notions of rationality, objectivity, method, and truth." The multicultural challenge is cogently summarized by philosopher John Searle:

Religion, history, tradition, and morality have always been subjected to searching criticism in the name of rationality, truth, evidence, reason, and logic. Now reason, truth, rationality, and logic are themselves subject to these criticisms. The idea is that they're as much a part of the dogmatic, superstitious, mystical, power-laden tradition as anything that they were used to attack.

"Culture" for modern scholars (and also in colloquial use) has nothing to do with Matthew Arnold's deployment of universal standards of reason and taste to identify "the best which has been thought and said in the world." Today's advocates of multiculturalism uphold rival propositions: that there are many cultures, that Western standards are invalid for understanding non-Western cultures, that all truths are ideological, and that cultures should therefore be placed on a roughly equal plane. Cultural relativism—the presumed equality of all cultures—is the intellectual foundation of contemporary multiculturalism.

"Show me the Proust of the Papuans," Saul Bellow is reported to have said, "and I'll read him." Bellow did not say that the Papuans lack the capacity to produce their own Proust; he simply suggested that, as far as he was aware, they had not. Yet his remark, by hinting at the possibility of Western cultural superiority, seemed to deny to other cultures what philosopher Charles Taylor terms "the politics of equal recognition." As Taylor correctly describes it, the multicultural paradigm holds that "true judgments of value of different works would place all cultures more or less on the same footing." Multiculturalism is based on a thoroughgoing repudiation of Western cultural superiority. Reflecting a widely held view, literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt termed Bellow's remark "astoundingly racist."

Yet both in the world and in the traditional curriculum, all cultures are not on the same footing. Consequently multiculturalism in practice is distinguished by an effort to establish cultural parity by attacking the historical and contemporary hegemony of Western civilization. To do it, activists draw heavily on such leftist movements as Marxism, deconstructionism, and anticolonial or Third World nationalism. Social critic Edward Said blames Western imperialism for the sufferings of "ravaged colonial peoples who for centuries endured summary justice, unending economic oppression, distortion of their social and intimate lives, and a recourseless submission that was the function of unchanging European superiority."

Multiculturalism is based on the relativist assumption that since all cultures are inherently equal, differences of power, wealth, and achievement between them are most likely due to oppression. Sociologist Robert Blauner argues that these global disparities are replicated within the United States, so that blacks, American Indians, and nonwhite immigrations constitute a kind of Third World within the United States. Additionally, the African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates contends that a curriculum focused on the great works of Western civilization "represents the return of an order in which my people were the subjugated, the voiceless, the invisible, the unrepresented."

To compensate for these historical and curricular injuries and restore cultural parity between ethnic groups, advocates of multiculturalism seek to reinforce the self-esteem of minority students by presenting non-Western cultures in a favorable light. James Banks argues that multiculturalism should fight racism by helping students "to develop positive attitudes" about minority and non-Western groups. Deborah Batiste and Pamela Harris urge in a multicultural manual for teachers, "Avoid dwelling on the negatives which may be associated with a cultural or ethnic group. Every culture has positive

characteristics which should be accentuated." Historian Ronald Takaki argues that blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians were no less responsible than whites for shaping the ideas and institutions of the United States: "What we need is a new conceptualization of American history where there's no center, and there's no margin, but we have all these groups engaging in discourse . . . unlearning much of what we have been told . . . in the creation of a new society."

In order to see the multicultural paradigm at work, we would do well to consider the passionate debate that has raged in the academy over the legacy of Christopher Columbus. Provoked by the five hundredth anniversary of the Columbus landing, virtually every leading advocate of multiculturalism-Edward Said, Stephen Greenblatt, Kirkpatrick Sale, Gary Nash, Ronald Takaki, Patricia Limerick, Garry Wills-lashed out against Columbus or his successors. Yet it is not Columbus the man who is being indicted but what he represents: the first tentative step toward the European settlement of the Americas. Consequently, the debate over Columbus is a debate over whether Western civilization was a good idea and whether it should continue to shape the United States. Many critics argue the negative:

- "Columbus makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent," asserts American Indian activist Russell Means.
- Winona LaDuke deplors "the biological, technological, and ecological invasion that began with Columbus' ill-fated voyage five hundred years ago."
- The National Council of Churches declares the anniversary of Columbus "not a time for celebration" but for "reflection and repentance" in which whites must acknowledge a continuing history of "oppression, degradation, and genocide."
- Historian Glenn Morris accuses Columbus of being "a murderer, a rapist, the architect of a policy of genocide that continues today."
- "Could it be that the human calamity caused by the arrival of Columbus," African-American writer Ishmael Reed asks, "was a sort of dress rehearsal of what is to come as the ozone becomes more depleted, the earth warms, and the rain forests are destroyed?"
- "All of us have been socialized to be racists and benefit from racism constantly," Christine Slater laments in the journal *Multicultural Education*. "The very locations on which our homes rest should rightfully belong to Indian nations."
- Literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt alleges that Columbus "inaugurated the greatest experiment in political, economic, and cultural cannibalism in the history of the Western world."

Let us examine the consistent portrait that emerges in multicultural literature about the legacy of Columbus. The advocates of multiculturalism are unanimous that Columbus did not discover America. As Francis Jennings writes in *The Invasion of America*, "The Europeans did not settle a virgin land. They invaded and displaced a native population." American Indian activist Mike Anderson says, "There was a culture here and there were people and there were governments here prior to the arrival of Columbus." Kirkpatrick Sale contends, "We can say with assurance that no such event as a 'discovery' took place." Novelist Homer Aridjis contends that Europeans and native Indians "mutually discovered each other." Garry Wills, Gary Nash, Ronald Takaki, and other scholars typically speak not of a "discovery" but of an "encounter."

But all of this is wordplay. The real issue, as Leszek Kolakowski points out, is that "the impulse to explore has never been evenly distributed among the world's civilizations." It is no coincidence that it was Columbus who reached the Americas and not American Indians who arrived on the shores of Europe. The term "encounter" conceals this difference by implying civilizational contact on an equal plane between the Europeans and the Indians.

The multiculturalists are equally unanimous that Columbus, as the prototypical Western white male, carried across the Atlantic racist prejudices against the native peoples. Gary Nash charges that Columbus embodied a peculiar "European quality of arrogance" rooted in irrational hostility to Indians. In a similar vein, Kirkpatrick Sale in *The Conquest of Paradise* argues that Columbus "presumed the inferiority of the natives," thus embodying the basic ingredients of the Western racist imagination that was bred to "fear what it did not comprehend, and hate what it knew as fearful." For Sale, Europeans are especially predisposed to violence, while the native cultures live in a "prelapsarian Eden." Sale concludes, "It is not fanciful to see warring against species as Europe's preoccupation as a culture."

It is true that Columbus harbored strong prejudices about the peaceful islanders whom he misnamed "Indians"-he was prejudiced in their favor. For Columbus, they were "the handsomest men and the most beautiful women" he had ever encountered. He praised the generosity and lack of guile among the Tainos, contrasting their virtues with Spanish vices. He insisted that although they were without religion, they were not idolaters; he was confident that their conversion would come through gentle persuasion and not through force. The reason, he noted, is that Indians possess a high natural intelligence. There is no evidence that Columbus thought that Indians were congenitally or racially inferior to Europeans. Other explorers such as Pedro Alvares Cabral, Amerigo Vespucci, Ferdinand Magellan, and Walter Raleigh registered similar positive impressions about the new world they found.

So why did European attitudes toward the Indian, initially so favorable, subsequently change? Kirkpatrick Sale, Stephen Greenblatt, and others offer no explanation for the altered European perception. But the reason given by the explorers themselves is that Columbus and those who followed him came into sudden, unexpected, and gruesome contact with the customary practices of some other Indian tribes. While the first Indians that Columbus encountered were hospitable and friendly, other tribes enjoyed fully justified reputations for brutality and inhumanity. On his second voyage Columbus was horrified to discover that a number of the sailors he left behind had been killed and possibly eaten by the cannibalistic Arawaks.

Similarly, when Bernal Diaz arrived in Mexico with the swashbuckling army of Hernan Cortes, he and his fellow Spaniards were not shocked to witness slavery, the subjection of women, or brutal treatment of war captives; these were familiar enough practices among the conquistadors. But they were appalled at the magnitude of cannibalism and human sacrifice. As Diaz describes it, in an account generally corroborated by modern scholars:

They strike open the wretched Indian's chest with flint knives and hastily tear out the palpitating heart which, with the blood, they present to the idols in whose name they have performed the sacrifice. Then they cut off the arms, thighs, and head, eating the arms and thighs at their ceremonial banquets. The head they hang up on a beam, and the body of the sacrificed man is not eaten but given to the beasts of prey.

When Cortes captured the Aztec emperor Montezuma and his attendants, he would only permit them temporary release on the promise that they stop their traditional practices of cannibalism and human sacrifice, but he found that "as soon as we turned our heads they would resume their old cruelties." Aztec cannibalism, writes anthropologist Marvin Harris, "was not a perfunctory tasting of ceremonial tidbits." Indeed the Aztecs on a regular basis consumed human flesh in a stew with peppers and tomatoes, and children were regarded as a particular delicacy. Cannibalism was prevalent among the Aztecs, Guarani, Iroquois, Caribs, and several other tribes.

Moreover, the Aztecs of Mexico and the Incas of South America performed elaborate rites of human

sacrifice, in which thousands of captive Indians were ritually murdered, until their altars were drenched in blood, bones were strewn everywhere, and priests collapsed with exhaustion from stabbing their victims. The law of the Incas provided for punishment of parents and others who displayed grief during human sacrifices. When men of noble birth died, wives and concubines were often strangled and buried with them.

Multicultural textbooks, committed to a contemporary version of the noble savage portrait, cannot acknowledge historical facts that would embarrass the morality tale of white invaders despoiling the elysian harmony of the Americans. Kirkpatrick Sale dismisses all European accounts of Indian atrocities as fanciful: "Organized violence was not an attribute of traditional Indian societies." Seeking to explain away the gory evidence, Sale adds, "It is hard to think that European seamen would be able to distinguish a disembodied neck or arm as distinctly human, and not from a monkey or a dog, and in any case there is no evidence that they were to be eaten." Stephen Greenblatt acknowledges the existence of human sacrifice but faults the Europeans for not recognizing its "deepest resemblance" to one of their own cultural practices: after all, Greenblatt says, the Spanish themselves symbolically consumed the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, and ritual murder is merely a "weirdly literal Aztec equivalent."

Consider a recent analysis of two books on the Aztecs, published as a guide for teachers in *Multicultural Review*. The first book, Francisco Alarcon's *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation*, receives high praise as "a wonderful celebration of Aztec religion, beliefs, and customs, intermingled with the thoughts and feelings of today's Mexican Americans." The second book, Tim Wood's *The Aztecs*, is denounced for its "sensationalistic and lurid manner. . . . The Aztec practice of human sacrifice is described in gory detail. This book is a distortion of the Aztecs." This review illustrates the way in which the relativist ideology shapes the predispositions of the advocates of multiculturalism.

In the next item of the multiculturalists' indictment, Columbus-and by extension the West-is accused of perpetrating a campaign of genocidal extermination, a holocaust against native Americans. Kirkpatrick Sale charges the successors of Columbus with "something we must call genocide within a single generation." Claude Levi-Strauss charges that millions of Indians "died of horror and disgust at European civilization." Tzvetan Todorov in *The Conquest of America* accuses his fellow- Europeans of perpetrating "the greatest genocide in human history."

The charge of genocide is largely sustained by figures showing the precipitous decline of the Indian population. Although scholars debate the exact numbers, in Alvin Josephy's estimate, the Indian population fell from between fifteen and twenty million when the white man first arrived to a fraction of that 150 years later. Undoubtedly the Indians perished in great numbers. Yet although European enslavement of Indians and the Spanish forced labor system extracted a heavy toll in lives, the vast majority of Indian casualties occurred not as a result of hard labor or deliberate destruction but because of contagious diseases that the Europeans transmitted to the Indians.

The spread of infection and unhealthy patterns of behavior was also reciprocal. From the Indians the Europeans contracted syphilis. The Indians also taught the white man about tobacco and cocaine, which would extract an incalculable human toll over the next several centuries. The Europeans, for their part, gave the Indians measles and smallpox. (Recent research has shown that tuberculosis predated the European arrival in the new world.) Since the Indians had not developed any resistance or immunity to these unfamiliar ailments, they perished in catastrophic numbers.

This was a tragedy of great magnitude, but the term "genocide" is both anachronistic and wrongly

applied in that, with a few gruesome exceptions, the European transmission of disease was not deliberate. As William McNeill points out in *Plagues and Peoples*, Europeans themselves probably contracted the bubonic plague in the fourteenth century as a result of contagion from the Mongols of Central Asia-some twenty-five million (one third of the population) died, and the plague recurred on the continent for the next three hundred years. Multicultural advocates do not call this "genocide."

The reason advocates of multiculturalism charge Columbus with genocide is that they need to explain how small groups of Europeans were able to defeat overwhelming numbers of Indians, capsize their mighty native empires, and seize their land. Hernan Cortes rode into Mexico with around five hundred men, sixteen horses, and a few dozen long-barrel guns. The Aztec force that he faced numbered more than a million. When Gonzalo Pizarro confronted the Inca he had three ships, 150 men, one cannon, and thirty horses. The Incas had several hundred thousand troops ruling over a population of several million. Yet the Aztecs and the Incas were routed.

How did the Spanish prevail? The triumph of the Spanish over the Indians is an interesting dilemma because no army, however well-trained, can overcome such numerical odds. Nor did the slow-loading European rifles provide a decisive advantage. It is true that many Indians were astonished at the mobility of European troops on horseback-the Indians had no horses before the Spanish imported them to the Americas-but the novelty of Spanish cavalry could only have caused temporary confusion in the ranks of the enemy. Undoubtedly one factor that contributed to European victory was the defection to the Spanish side of a sizable number of Indians who came from tribes that had long been colonized and persecuted by the Aztecs and the Incas. Yet these are only partial explanations.

Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian writer and statesman, offers an arresting theory. However small their numbers, however crude their representatives, Europeans came to the Americas with a civilizational ideology that was unquestionably modern, even if embryonically so. Among the ingredients of this modernity were a rational understanding of the universe and a new understanding of individual initiative.

By contrast, the Indians still lived in the world of the spirits-the enchanted universe. They could not adapt to changing circumstances. They confused the Europeans with gods. They sought to reverse casualties by sacrificing their own soldiers to the totems. When Montezuma's military advisers and soothsayers warned him of ill-omens he ordered them imprisoned and their wives and children killed. The Indians were held in paralyzing obedience to the emperor. They were accustomed to exterminating their inferiors but were unfamiliar with the challenges of combat against well-armed peers.

In short, the Indians were defeated and massacred because, by a cruel juxtaposition of history, they encountered, even in the persons of "semi-literate, implacable, and greedy swordsmen," a Spanish civilization that was superior both in the sophistication of its arms and its ideas. Even today, Vargas Llosa argues, the principles of the West continue to shape the modern world, and "the nations that reject those values are anachronisms condemned to various versions of despotism."

Because of his defense of the West, Vargas Llosa has been criticized for advancing a reactionary position. Yet in a similar vein the left-wing Mexican novelist and diplomat Carlos Fuentes argues that the Europeans prevailed over the Indians because their empirical approach to knowledge gave them enormous civilizational confidence. By contrast, the Indians relied on a combination of direct perception, dreams, hallucination, and appeals to the spirits. Fuentes writes in *The Buried Mirror*, "The so-called discovery of America, whatever one might ideologically think about it, was a great triumph of scientific hypothesis over physical perception."

The West even supplied the Americas with a doctrine of human rights that would provide the basis for a sustained critique of Western colonialism. We may join Kirkpatrick Sale, Stephen Greenblatt, and others in expressing outrage at wanton Western seizure of Indian lands and abuses of basic rights. But upon reflection we would have to admit that these criticisms depend upon concepts of property rights and human rights that are entirely Western. Long before Columbus, Indian tribes raided each other's land and preyed on the possessions and persons of more vulnerable groups. What distinguished Western colonialism was neither occupation nor brutality but a countervailing philosophy of rights that is unique in human history.

Shortly after the Spanish established their settlements in the Americas, the King of Spain in the mid-sixteenth century called a halt to expansion pending the resolution of a famous debate over the question of whether Spanish conquest violated the natural and moral law. Never before or since, writes historian Lewis Hanke, has a powerful emperor "ordered his conquests to cease until it was decided if they were just." The main reason for the King's action was the relentless work of exposing colonial abuses that was performed by a Spanish bishop, Bartolome de las Casas. A former slave owner, Las Casas underwent a crisis of conscience which convinced him that the new world should be peacefully Christianized, that Indians should not be exploited, and that those who were had every right to rebel. Las Casas wrote his *Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, he said, "so that if God determines to destroy Spain, it may be seen that it is because of the destruction that we have wrought in the Indies."

Although Las Casas is sometimes portrayed as a heroic eccentric, in fact his basic position in favor of Indian rights was directly adopted by Pope Paul III, who proclaimed in his bull *Sublimis Deus* in 1537:

Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by the Christians are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; nor should they be in any way enslaved; should the contrary happen it shall be null and of no effect. Indians and other peoples should be converted to the faith of Jesus Christ by preaching the word of God and by the example of good and holy living.

Leading Jesuit theologians such as Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suarez interpreted the Bible and the Catholic tradition to require that the natural rights of Indians be respected, that their conversions be obtained through persuasion and not force, that their land and property be secure from arbitrary confiscation, and that their right to resist Spanish incursions in a "just war" be upheld.

More than a century before Locke, and two centuries before the French and American revolutions, theologians at the University of Salamanca developed the first outlines of the modern doctrine of inviolable human rights. Although these rights were often abused in practice, largely because there was no effective mechanism for enforcement, they provided a moral foundation for the eventual enfranchisement of the native Indians. Multicultural textbooks are typically sparse in their acknowledgment of the liberal tradition of the West associated with Las Casas. The reason for this reticence is that liberalism is uniquely a Western achievement, and hence could provide a possible foundation for a claim to Western cultural superiority.

In order to undermine this claim, advocates of multiculturalism insist on the contribution of the American Indians to the West. There is little doubt that American Indians taught the white man a great deal: about canoes, snowshoes, moccasins, and kayaks. The hammock is an Indian invention. Indians also introduced Europeans to new crops: corn, potatoes, peanuts, squash, avocados, and other vegetables and fruits. Ronald Takaki informs us that "the term *okay* was derived from the Choctaw word *oke*, meaning: it is so." Yet even when one adds the heroic exploits of Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Chief

Joseph, and Geronimo, it is not clear that American Indian society has established cultural parity with the West.

Consequently, advocates of multiculturalism frequently proceed to make an audacious claim: that the fundamental institutions for the recognition of liberal rights, such as the U.S. Constitution, were not the exclusive product of Western civilization but were decisively influenced by such groups as the Iroquois Indians. Anthropologist Thomas Riley asserts that the League of the Iroquois served "as a model for the confederation that would make up the United States." Alvin Josephy credits the Iroquois with being "particularly influential" on the thinking of the framers in Philadelphia. Jack Weatherford in *Indian Givers* observes that the Iroquois provided a blueprint "by which the settlers might be able to fashion a new government."

If these claims are true, then surely the past refusal of teachers to credit the Iroquois for the Bill of Rights and other vital instruments of liberal freedom provides a classic example of the kind of bias that multicultural advocates have insisted pervades the traditional curriculum. Historian Elisabeth Tooker investigated the issue and discovered that the main evidence linking the Iroquois to the American founding is a letter written by Benjamin Franklin in 1754.

It would be a strange thing if six nations of ignorant savages should be capable of forming a scheme for such a union, and be able to execute it in such a manner as that it has subsisted for ages and appears indissoluble, and yet that a like union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies, to whom it is more necessary and must be more advantageous, and who cannot be supposed to want an equal understanding of their interests.

Franklin is saying, in other words, if the barbarians can work out their problems and form a union, surely we civilized people can do as well.

In her inquiry, Tooker explores the similarities between the Iroquois League and the American Constitution and finds that they are virtually nonexistent. The League consisted of tribal chiefs whose title was partly hereditary. Only one tribe, the Onondagas, were permitted as "firekeepers" to present topics for consideration. All rulings by the League required unanimous consent. The claim that the Iroquois were the secret force behind the American Constitution is a myth, sustained only by ideology.

While advocates of multiculturalism are right to criticize many of the old texts, in which Columbus is presented as a valiant adventurer and American Indians are scarcely to be seen, contemporary activists merely replace the old biases with new ones. Columbus has metamorphosed from a grand crusader into a genocidal maniac and a precursor to Hitler. American Indians are now beyond reproach, canonized as moral and ecological saints.

In order to establish cultural parity, multiculturalists are routinely compelled to emphasize Western oppression and non-Western virtue. They are driven to downplay the illiberal traditions of other cultures even as they suppress the distinctively liberal tradition of the West. The consequence is that multiculturalism becomes an obstacle to true cultural understanding, and implants in students an unjustified animus toward the liberal societies of the West. Both truth and justice suffer as a consequence.

Ultimately cultural relativism itself, the intellectual scaffolding of multiculturalism, becomes the issue. One of the starting premises of relativism is that most Americans cannot objectively study minority and non-Western cultures because they will necessarily view them through a prism of Eurocentric

assumptions. The multiculturalists are certainly right that none of us approach other societies in a culturally nude state: our perspective is necessarily shaped and perhaps clouded by our prior beliefs. But if this means that we have no way to transcend our beliefs and approach the ideal of objectivity, then multiculturalism becomes an illusion—for other cultures would constitute inaccessible and incommensurable worlds, and Westerners could only project their own values onto the cultures they appear to be studying. The assumption that other cultures are self-contained and untranslatable systems leads, ironically, to the conclusion that it is a waste of time for outsiders to attempt the inherently impossible project of understanding other cultures. Richard Rorty has reached precisely this conclusion, arguing in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* that Westerners should be unabashedly ethnocentric because they cannot be anything else.

The vast majority of multicultural advocates reject Rorty's position, because it exposes multiculturalism as Eurocentric, whereas activists like to think of themselves as fighting Eurocentrism. Multicultural advocates such as Renato Rosaldo, Richard Delgado, and Ian Haney-Lopez typically argue that schools should recruit minority and Third World representatives who can provide much-needed black, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian perspectives. In some cases, activists insist that it is inadequate for minority recruits to have the right skin color: they must also espouse progressive and left-wing views.

Of course, the question remains how we know that these progressive, left-wing, minority recruits truly represent their cultures. They may well represent marginal factions, or even be Eurocentric imposters.

Multicultural advocates typically avoid this problem by asserting that education does provide a bridge between cultures, and with proper training students can be taught to appreciate the equal worth of all cultures. "If we develop cultural consciousness and intercultural competence," Christine Bennett writes, "we may be able to understand that we might very well accept and even participate in such behaviors had we been born and raised in that society." But this conclusion does not follow from its premises. If standards of judgment derive from within cultures, we cannot arrive at external standards of evaluation that permit us to judge all cultures as valid for the people who live under them. Multicultural activists rely on the sleight-of-hand in which "I cannot know" becomes "I cannot judge" which becomes "I know that we are all equal." A skeptical confession of ignorance mysteriously becomes a dogmatic assertion of cultural egalitarianism.

This is not to condone approaching other cultures with a presumption of their inferiority. As Charles Taylor argues, "It makes sense to demand as a matter of right that we approach the study of other cultures with a presumption of their value." Thus cultural relativism may provide a valuable methodological starting point of humility and intellectual openness. Yet as Taylor points out, in evaluating other cultures "it can't make sense to demand as a matter of right that we come up with a final concluding judgment that their value is great or equal to others." Perhaps a careful examination of other cultures will reveal good reasons to be critical of other cultures, just as we are often critical of our own culture.

Indeed the first thing we notice when we study other cultures is that without exception they reject the cultural relativism that is a uniquely Western ideology. It should come as no surprise that relativism provokes a sharp resistance from people in other cultures. Imagine the legitimate anger of a Muslim who is cheerfully informed by a Western academic that Allah's teachings are true for him, when he deeply believes that they are universal principles. Moreover, as Leszek Kolakowski points out, it seems paternalistic to say that Islamic practices such as punishing thieves by cutting off their limbs represent legitimate judicial options—for those people. Such arguments, implying that our kind of people deserve democracy and human rights but their kind of people do not, seem self-serving and destructive to the

contemporary aspirations of millions of Third World peoples. In a stunning admission, Claude Levi-Strauss writes:

The dogma of cultural relativism is challenged by the very people for whose moral benefit the anthropologists established it in the first place. The complaint the underdeveloped countries advance is not that they are being Westernized, but that there is too much delay in giving the means to Westernize themselves. It is of no use to defend the individuality of human cultures against those cultures themselves.

A sincere effort to study other cultures "from within" requires a rejection of the Western lens of cultural relativism. Multiculturalists who wish to take non-Western cultures seriously must take seriously their repudiation of relativism. Otherwise a humble openness to other cultures becomes an arrogant dismissal of their highest claims to truth.

Students do need to be exposed to the great accomplishments of other cultures, as well as their influence on the West. But when multiculturalism goes beyond this to insist that we should understand cultural differences without applying (inherently biased) standards of critical evaluation, it forbids at the outset the possibility that one culture may be in crucial respects superior to another. An initial openness to the truths of other cultures degenerates into a closed-minded denial of all transcultural standards. Seeking to avoid an acknowledgment of Western cultural superiority, relativism ends up denying the possibility of truth.

The purpose of a liberal education, as Cardinal Newman defined it, is to "educate the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it." Schools and colleges should provide young people with an authentic multicultural curriculum that begins at home but is nevertheless open to the world beyond. Such a canon would be modestly Eurocentric, in recognition of the facts that we live in a Eurocentric world, that Europe has dominated the rest of the globe in the modern age, and that while the popular culture in America is culturally hybrid, the philosophical, political, legal, and economic institutions of this country are the product of European culture and no other.

Yet this new curriculum would also be cosmopolitan, seeking to criticize and enrich Western civilization with ideas imported from abroad. An authentic multiculturalism would expose students to "the best that has been thought and said" not simply in the West but in other cultures as well. The object is not diversity but knowledge: students should learn ways to seek to distinguish truth from falsehood, beauty from vulgarity, right from wrong. Knowledge is both a matter of ascertaining fact and a developing of the tools to formulate "right opinion." To use Plato's famous image, we live our lives in a cave, mistaking shadows for reality, but it is the aspiration of an authentic multicultural education to help us move from opinion to knowledge, to climb out of the darkness into the illuminating light of the sun.

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