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What are the assumptions of the multicultural education movement?

"Multicultural Education," a need for conceptual clarification

by Robert P. Craig

Before one can make pronouncements concerning multicultural education, certain ground must be cleared. What are the assumptions of such a movement and are its concepts consistent? What theory of society does this movement encompass?

Multicultural education is in part a response to the familiar melting pot theory of ethnic development. The purpose of the "melting pot" approach "was to rid children of ethnic characteristics and to make them culturally Anglo-Saxon."[1] But this was done at quite a price, for children were taught contempt for their culture and thus they experienced self-alienation and self-rejection. Many children of the immigrants were able to fit into the mainstream of American life and accept the dominant Anglo-Saxon values. Yet the cost included great psychological harm at the personal level and the destruction of ethnic values at the cultural level.

The advocates of multicultural education, then, accept a much different view of ethnic development. This view is often referred to as cultural pluralism. On the surface this ideology seems to offer much. Who would be opposed to legitimate diversity in the culture? Who would want to claim that one's cultural values are not essential? Yet there is a difference between recognizing the importance of diversity and cultural values and to fully accept cultural pluralism.

Cultural pluralism was the theory developed by Horace Kallen who attempted to "allow for some degree of cultural diversity within the confines of a unified national experience."[2] Kallen's definition of cultural pluralism is not merely stipulative; it is quite descriptive. He in-

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cludes both the notion of the diversity of values and lifestyles and the need for recognition of the dominant culture. He wants to have it both ways: pluralism within the framework of a unified culture. The old philosophical problem of the relationship between the one and the many is considered by Kallen. The many (ethnic groups) must be allowed freedom of expression and understanding but only if the one (the dominant culture) is also recognized.

What happens, though, if certain ethnic values contradict the values of the dominant culture? Which values should the individual subscribe to? What if the ethnic value includes a recognition of the importance of the extended family and ethnic community, and the dominant culture emphasizes the nuclear family and mobility? How is the individual going to harmonize these quite diverse values? At times this harmony may be impossible. What this means in part is that Kallen's definition of cultural pluralism is deficient.

One problem with using cultural pluralism as the basis of understanding multicultural education is that this theory could become another ideology of ethnicity, as the melting pot theory became. Banks suggests that cultural pluralism could encourage as many racist concepts as the melting pot.[3] By this he seems to mean that an ethnic group could easily accommodate its own values as paramount to the neglect of the values of the dominant culture.

What, then, does cultural pluralism mean? Richard Pratte points out that cultural pluralism actually encompasses three meanings.[4] The first he terms the political/economic concept of cultural pluralism. There was a tension during our early history between the dominant culture and political/economic factions. This tension was in part relieved by the writing of the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution*. Examining these documents is revealing, because they emphasize liberty and equality not the "identities of non-English subcultures."[5] Thus cultural pluralism is not a traditional American value.

Many of the writers of the *Declaration of Independence* were very suspicious of a strong central government. They had experienced a troubled relationship with England. Initially the political/economic notion of cultural pluralism included a belief that power and control are to be avoided. But Hamilton and Madison both were concerned with a society which was plagued with factions. They thought that the problems of government could be understood if the people realized the evil of these various factions, both religious and ethnic ones.

During the course of American historical development the opinions of Hamilton and Madison were not shared by the majority of leaders. It became quite the reverse: government is progressing because many factions are involved in its development. Thus, there is a difference between the political/economic stand toward cultural pluralism as envisioned by many members of the early republic and the contemporary notion. The political/economic concept of cultural pluralism today emphasizes the interaction of various groups in the political/economic spheres. It is suggested that state power should be limited by the activity of public opinion, special interest groups and ethnic values. By involvement in society the person from *any* ethnic group, through the promoting of a diversity of experience and interests, carries much political/economic power. Thus the current

political/economic sense of cultural pluralism emphasizes individual capacities and rights. It bases political and economic activity on the consent of the people. At least this is the theory.

The second sense is termed the anthropological/ sociological. For those who adopt this position, diversity is a positive value. They desire to maximize the distinctiveness of cultural groups. Competition and conflict are prized as the means to social progress. A basic problem with this view is with the definition of culture. Different anthropologists and sociologists define culture differently. Anthropologists seem to define it in at least two ways, in reference to the development of norms or in regard to the encouragement of specific forms of behavior in certain circumstances. Sociologists, on the other hand, because their interests are different, define culture *abstractly,* often in reference to a shared normative system. If these two views of culture are compatible is another question. The point, though, is that this sense of cultural pluralism attempts to answer the question, "What is culture?" And equivocating on a definition of culture is not of much help in developing a consistent theory of cultural pluralism.

The final sense of cultural pluralism is the philosophical concept, sometimes referred to as the ordinary language concept. Empirical questions about cultural pluralism cannot be answered until certain conceptual/philosphical questions are addressed, such as, what counts as a culturally pluralistic society? In the ordinary language view, "cultural pluralism" is used in two ways—In a descriptive sense to characterize the harmony of various cultural groups living together in a manner which allows the dominant culture to function. "Cultural pluralism" is also used in an evaluative manner. Thus it is claimed that cultural pluralism is a positive concept because it leads to participatory democracy; and an open form of government is thought to be desirable.

In ordinary language "cultural pluralism" suggests a number of traits. They include cultural diversity, equality of educational and economic opportunity, respect for the sub-groups that comprise the social order, and the development of a positive relationship between the ethnic culture and the dominant one. All of this is still not definitive. It simply illustrates that the concept of cultural pluralism is a polymorphous one. It is deeper and broader and more complex than its advocates imply. Until cultural pluralism is understood, the basis for multicultural education is questionable.

Yet it is true that many minority youths find the present school system and its dominant culture hostile and self-defeating. Institutional racism, poverty and so on form part of the real world of the school for many minority students; and this is merely a reflection of the larger society. (I am using the terms "ethnic" and "minority" synonymously). It is recognized that ethnic values quite often differ from the values of the dominant culture. Why not just accept cultural pluralism in its various senses, then, as a theory inherent in any intelligible notion of multicultural education? What else may be problematic about it?

Harry Broudy suggests that there is a more recent concept of cultural pluralism than Pratte traces to the founding fathers. Broudy goes back to the Civil Rights and Great Society movements of the mid-60s. He insists that the "new cultural pluralism" involves only Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Indians.[6] Thus, Irish, Polish, Jews, Italians, French, Chinese and Japanese were not included.

Secondly, the "new cultural pluralism" denies a basic tenet of Kallen's position, namely, that the dominant culture matters much. As Broudy remarks, "In its more extreme and militant forms, it is a demand that minority cultures be regarded as separate and equal."[7] Again, how much diversity is compatible with the development of the dominant culture? If Broudy is right, it follows that diversity will lead to little dependence of cultural groups upon each other.

No one today would question the need for respecting the values and life-styles of other cultures, but what if this multiculturalism leads to a refusal to participate in the dominant culture? Is it possible that some of the multiculturalists have such a dislike for formal schooling, the work ethic and the standards of morality envisioned by the dominant culture that any working relationship between them and the dominant culture is impossible? Different individuals have differing ability in appraising and in dealing with environmental contingencies. Does this not indicate that a helping/sharing relationship among sub-groups is essential? Does it not suggest that the dominant culture and its methods of interacting with the environment can be a source of inspiration for minority individuals, not offering the "right" way to solve anything, but suggesting a way to consider?

Cultural pluralism is also problematic because of the propensity of its advocates to *label* the members of ethnic groups. This is not only a problem of those from the dominant culture. Certainly there were labels used in the past, and many of these labels bear the charge of racism. But the same can be said of current labeling in multicultural education. For instance, there is no such person as a *typical* Asian-American, Puerto Rican or Black. As Baty puts it:

> When we speak of Blacks, for example, are we thinking of Southern Blacks who have moved to the North? Or Blacks in our Northern ghettos who are trying to move into the mainstream of American life? Of Blacks recently arrived from Africa? Or of Blacks from the Caribbean islands?[8]

To avoid this mislabeling, which is a prominent feature of the language of the proponents of multicultural education, one must realize that social-class differences are apparent in every ethnic group. Upper-class, lower-class and middle-class exist within almost every minority group. The life of the middle-class Black family resembles closely the life of a middle-class White, Puerto Rican or Polish family. Differences in socio-economic level tell teachers more about learning differences than ethnicity. If this is recognized, an added element to multicultural education appears, for individual students cannot be abstracted from their socio-economic conditions. To label a person Puerto Rican is hardly an exhaustive description, even though this is the extent of the identification in many multicultural circles.

Lastly, there are three other components of multicultural education to consider. One is the cultural aspect mentioned earlier. Not much progress can be made in multicultural education if the United States is viewed primarily as a homogeneous nation. We are not only an Anglo-Saxon country; England is no longer our "mother country," as if one needs to be told this. It is obvious that minority students need to appreciate their ethnicity, but with the rhetoric of many multiculturalists themselves, this may be difficult.

But this is not enough. As was suggested previously,

2

they also need to understand the values and behaviors of the dominant culture. As Milton Gold says:

> While we are eager to preserve the values of diversity, we also share a common life, participate in a common economy, are involved with the same political, social, educational, and cultural institutions, and make use of the same public and health services.[9]

There needs to be a balance, then, between sharing and maintaining one's culture.

The second problem with multicultural education is political. Multiculturalism within the school can have little effect if its positive aspects are not realized in the political arena, in the nation, the state and the neighborhood. Poverty, for instance, is not identifiable with any one ethnic group. People are not poor because of their ethnicity. They are poor because they have limited opportunity to develop careers which are satisfactory. Some political measures have been tried; busing in the schools and affirmative action in hiring. Whatever one may think of these kinds of activities, they have increased the minority person's access to the mainstream of American life —toward a "better" education and toward a more acceptable job.

The third area of concern in multicultural education is social. What is the attitude of society toward ethnic individuals? Are some ethnic groups prized more than others? Italians more than Blacks, for example? Social values may go through praxis, yet still remain stagnant; merely a reflection of existing social policy. If multicultural education is to be enhanced, social values need to be changed; a more open policy toward ethnic contributions must be envisioned.

It is hoped that the arguments of this paper bring out some of the issues involved in multicultural education. There are many conceptual muddles with cultural pluralism, for "cultural pluralism" is not the name of anything clear, even though much has been written about it. Likewise, the concept of "multicultural education"

needs more attention. It cannot infer separatism, nor suggest the superiority of one culture over another. There may be many conceptual problems with the movement, but it *can be* a step in the right direction.[10]

Notes

1. For a recent examination of the "ideology of cultural pluralism," multicultural education and the schools, refer to, James A. Banks, "Cultural Pluralism and the Schools." *Educational Leadership*, 32, No. 3, (December 1974), pp. 163-166. The quote is from p. 164.

2. One of the more important and traditional discussions of cultural pluralism is found in Horace Kallen, "Democracy vs. the Melting Pot." The Nation, February 18 and 25, 1915.

3. James A. Banks, "Cultural Pluralism and the Schools," p. 165.

4. I would like to thank Richard Pratte of Ohio State University for his helpful insights into cultural pluralism. See, for instance, his "The Concept of Cultural Pluralism," in *Philosophy of Education, 1972*, edited by Mary Anne Raywid. (Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University, 1972), pp. 61-77.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

6. Harry S. Broudy, "Cultural Pluralism: New Wine in Old Bottles." *Educational Leadership*, 33, No. 2, (December 1975), p. 173.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

8. P.M. Baty, *Re-educating Teachers for Cultural Awareness*. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), p. 206.

9. Milton J. Gold, "Pressure Points in Multicultural Education," in *In Praise of Diversity: A Resource Book for Multicultural Education*, edited by Milton J. Gold, et. al. (Washington, D.C.: Association of Teacher Educators, 1977), p. 19.

10. For an analysis of other issues related to multicultural education, see, *Multicultural Education: Commitments, Issues, and Applications*, edited by Carl A. Grant. (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1977).