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MULTICULTURALISM- YES, NO, MAYBE

Robert B. Tapp

Much current support for "multiculturalism" grounds in postmodern perspectives which so stress a relativistic stance that serious historical analysis becomes difficult. I will try here to untangle some of the historical ignorances and omissions that have served to polarize inquiry. Discussions are further complicated by terms-nation, civilization, ethnic group, race, culture, diversity, pluralism-which carry semantic ambiguity as well as discursive potency.

It will also become clear that what may be necessary or wise for a large society may be quite unwise within any group of significant others within that society. Certainly humanist groups continually face such questions as whether to define themselves narrowly and exclude others who may also claim to be humanists. In recent years, arguments among "secular" and "religious" humanists illustrate this. Persons in both camps probably feel that the "other" has a right to exist so long as it does not attempt to preempt the hu-

manist label. Some have proposed describing humanism as a worldview or a lifestance to bridge this particular gap.

In the abstract we are dealing with an "us versus them" issue. More concretely, we can be widely understood if we notice the possible existence of several cultures within a nation, and perhaps several nations within a civilization. Dropping down in levels, we can speak of groups within a culture as well, of course, of individuals within groups. In actual fact, there are almost infinite permutations. The differentiations can stem from "race," ethnicity, sex, gender, class, religion, caste, sexual orientation, color, habitation, education-in all of their possible overlaps. (It hardly matters that UNESCO long ago established the biological meaninglessness of "race"). Nor does it matter that some groups are labeled "ethnic," since that term either applies to any and everyone or it has no useful meaning for classifying purposes.

Problems for Contemporary "Multiculturalists"

Many multiculturalists treat cultures as discrete and unchanging entities. But all cultures have histories, which means that they are continually changing. This is especially true in open and mobile societies such as the United States. Think of Andrew Greeley's wry observation that his fellow Irish had just ceased being an ethnic group as this status was coming into fashion (or his perceptive provocation that intellectuals were an ethnic group). Yes, there are still St. Patrick's Day parades, but in recent years these have faced their own recognition/identity problems, with gay and lesbian participants. A great deal of cultural change follows the pattern of Hansen's Law (known to many via Will Herberg) where first-generation immigrants cling together and to the old ways; their children reject all this in embracing Americanism; and the grandchild-

dren return to some form of ethnicity as more supportive than simple American identity. I say "some form" because many cultural features that clung to the grandparents had been dropped by that third generation

Compounded by a few more generations plus ethnic intermarriage rates (using that term as the most neutral group descriptor), the situation becomes hopelessly muddled. Tiger Woods becomes a better prototype for the next century. Michael Lind writes of an America "beige" and "black."¹

In my own personal case (hardly atypical), my father climbed out of a lower-class Irish (and Catholic) home to cross a railroad track and marry the upper-class German woman and convert to her Lutheranism. On St. Pat's day, should I wear green or orange? What should my Jewish grandchildren wear? And how about my non-Jewish grandchildren? Where do my Catholic nieces and nephews fit in? Or since I remarried, how does all this affect my Latino nephews and nieces?

There are various ways to treat ethnicity. Morris Raphael's English version, widely seen in the BBC production "Those Glittering Prizes," was to have the young Jewish student who has won entrance to Cambridge in the years before World War II reject his Orthodox father's criticism for adopting the ways of a gentile world, jump up from the table, and say that the only way to deal with a tradition is "to turn your back on it!"

A softer version appeared recently by Rosario Ferre:

Puerto Ricans living on the mainland think of the island in much the same way as African Americans think of Africa-as an almost mythical place inhabited by ancestral gods. For those Puerto Ricans, the homeland is a place of origin, proof of a vi-

tal "difference" that sets them apart from what can seem the vast sameness of the United States.

Puerto Ricans have been Americans since 1898, and our culture and language remain as healthy as ever. We are no longer poor, undernourished or anemic. We are mulatto-mestizo, bilingual and proud of it. We no longer need fear that "el otro," the other, will swallow us up.

We have become the other. As a Puerto Rican and an American, I believe our future as a community is inseparable from our culture and language, but I'm also passionately committed to the modern world. That's why I'm going to support statehood in the next plebiscite.²

Yet another version of dealing with ethnicity (more congenial to me) comes from the pianist/author Alfred Brendel in a recent interview:

I don't remember what Kundera wrote precisely, but my thoughts are these. I enjoy being positioned in the middle of things. I like to imagine that my family absorbed different traits: Austrian, German, Italian and Slav. I like the idea of federations; they don't always work, but that is no argument against them. Much of the great music I value comes from Central Europe. And there was a literary culture in Austria, epitomized by Robert Musil, the taking-in of which was a great influence in my 1920s. I dislike any kind of nationalism or regionalism. I do not feel the need to "belong." I have lived in London and felt cosmopolitan for nearly thirty years. Wherever I am, I prefer to be a paying guest.³

Take the simple proposition: All cultures in a pluralistic society deserve respect. Easy to accede until we think of the hard cases. Should some of our neighbors, for cultural reasons, insist on their right to deny medical treatment to their sick children? Should other groups insist that the public schools avoid sex education (because of their beliefs rather than any evidence of its alleged harmfulness)? What about cultures that practice infant genital alterations? While the male circumcision issue is still medically somewhat ambiguous,

female infibulation has no known health merits and clear demerits. How much formal education should a state require of its youth? Should this standard be lowered to meet the practices of local cultures? The list of such conflicts grows as U.S. society becomes more diverse. The racist immigration laws have been changed and our military interventions outside our borders predictably generate refugee-immigrants.

Many U.S. cultures are impacted by law in terms of their customs and practices. Marriageable age, polygamy, sacrifice of animals, hallucinogen usages, hats and shawls and hair-stylings, uses as well as avoidances of violence, religious observances and practices, knowledge restrictions (health biology, evolution, history, linguistic patterns) quickly come to mind.

These intra-culture changes are not only a result of direct and restrictive outside influences. They can come as competitive countermeasures. Examples of this might be Kwanzaa, heightening the importance of Hanukkah, anti-Columbus Day celebrations.

The point here is simple and should be obvious--cultures in free society are very fluid structures. One generation's central focus may be marginalized by the next generation. Some practices may only remain as materials for satire, no doubt appropriate within the group but nevertheless an ambivalently-distancing device from the cultural past. One thinks of Yiddishisms, Sven and Olejokes, Black English among bilingual African-Americans, Irish old sod stories.

Given these examples, it becomes clear that any agenda positing relativistic equality of all cultures and therefore demanding equal respect for all raises some major problems. Just which historical moment of a culture it is that should be respected-now loses specificity. Moreover it fails to take account of intercultural im-

pacts. Each of us, and the cultures that we reference, are surrounded by forces of "otherness," many of them quite real and some more imagined ("virtual," in today's jargon). Some of these othernesses are more palatable than others. Dare I instance the enormous appetite Americans have shown in recent years to sample each other's cuisines? What once only existed in large cities now can be found in small-town groceries. Or think in terms of music. How field shouts and chants, rooted in African homelands, birthed the blues and jazz, and then, with a change in pigmentation, became rock and roll. TIME magazine has even argued that the present reality of American music is hip-hop.⁴

These discussions of multiculturalism would be more realistic and more useful if they were better rooted historically. While a standard criticism is that American culture tries to integrate everyone into a "Eurocentric" mold, it is clear that from the earliest days, American thinkers saw themselves as building a new society, quite separate from that Europe that they had left. To speak simply of "the Enlightenment project," without seeing the real transformations intended by Jefferson, Madison, Franklin and many others, simply won't do. There was indeed an "American Enlightenment," given to practice and not just theory. Many European roots of those ideas were acknowledged, but the changed political structures and class distinctions made for fuller and different exercise.

America as Exception?

Let's now look more carefully at what critics call "the myth of American exceptionalism." Flaws are easy to find in the various records of political organizations that humans have tried. What makes the American experiment worthy of a second look? One of our leading historians who has also played larger political roles than

most academics is Arthur Schlesinger Jr. He makes the following case for exceptionalism:

The contemporary sanctification of the group threatens the old idea of a coherent society. Multicultural zealots reject as hegemonic the notion of a shared commitment to common ideals. How far the discourse has come from Crèvecoeur's "new race," from Tocqueville's civic participation, from Emerson's "smelting pot," from Bryce's "amazing solvent," from Myrdal's "American Creed."

Yet what has held the American people together in the absence of a common ethnic origin has been precisely a common adherence to ideals of democracy and human rights that, too often transgressed in practice, forever goad us to narrow the gap between practice and principles.!

The references here are clearly to the Enlightenment background of U.S. nationalism, where the clear note was a rejection of past forms of governing, political and ecclesiastical. None could be trusted, and power was therefore to be vested in the citizenry (i.e. the male, non-slave, and economically secure parts of that citizenry). Of course such individuals had "interests," but separating and spreading power would mitigate the harms that clashes of interest would bring. For this initial elite there was an implicit assumption that "knowledge was power," and that the relatively new sciences~mbodying both reason and common sense~would expand human knowledge.

By the nineteenth century, political and economic problems abroad had brought waves of immigrants to U.S. shores. The young industrial society, having surmounted a devastating civil war, was eager for workers. And for the more restless, there was always that frontier, enlarged by wars and diplomacy. A new dialectic emerged between those who feared these new cultural and religious infusions and those who took their comfort in the expectation that the new public education system would integrate this new citizenry.

At the extreme were the Know Nothings who insisted on freezing their already-outdated image of a WASP society, and eliminating all deviations. The naivete of such a position renders it unstable and untenable-subject to periodic ridicule. Shortly after his 1933 inauguration, Franklin Roosevelt accepted a quite pro forma invitation to address the conservative and chauvinistic Daughters of the American Revolution. He began, "Fellow immigrants"

Occupying a more middle ground were those who kept the rhetoric of the "new race" but more privately saw it as the extension of their own selves. Since those selves were continually being reshaped by their cultural contexts, it too afforded no firm grounding. More realistic was Randolph Bourne's descriptor of "cultural pluralism," a recognition of the perpetual changing that characterized an immigrant society.

Horace Kallen and John Dewey quickly built on this concept. In Dewey's philosophy, the simplistic view of an America into which the new immigrant would be integrated was transformed into a recognition of the historicity of cultures and the processes by which U.S. culture might be continually transformed into a culture based on ongoing knowledge from the sciences. Dewey, of course, was not a positivist, and his "science" included experiential social sciences. The transactions between organisms and their environments constituted culture and, for Dewey, culture was in continual change. The serious differentiation was between those cultures mistakenly thinking that they could remain static and those that accepted change and tried to insert intelligence into the process.

Here we would do well to speak of a U.S. "civilization" interacting with, transforming, and being transformed by the various "cultures" of the citizenry. Disputes among these cultures would not be resolved on the basis of priority but in terms of which

alternative would have preferable outcomes for the civilization which all disputants inhabited. Such disputes necessitate an inquiry into the claims of all parties. In most cases, the outcomes will preserve some elements of all components. Each "resolution," in turn will at some future time be challenged by newcomers, and the rational evaluation will recommence.

Among migrants, in the early days of their Minnesota immigration, for instance, were hauled into court for netting songbirds for food. Minnesotans preferred eating larger birds, a preference which made no particular sense to their new neighbors. Existing laws should have been viewed as the occasion to resolve such a dispute rationally. Instead they were viewed as automatic arbiters. In other words, challenges always raise the issue of custom versus intelligent rule. If more Minnesotans had come from northern Italy, where until very recently small birds (uccelli) were netted and relished, the courts might have ruled differently.

It is where more serious issue clash that we need a more supple theoretical framework. Free expression is a good example. One community's literature might be seen by some other community as pornography. So far, the best solution has been to maximize freedom unless and until a "clear and present danger" from such expression can be demonstrated. The abortion issue, however, underscores both the obduracy of intergroup disputes as well as their shifting vectors. The emergence of a Religious Right in the United States suddenly brought a Protestant support to what had been a basically non-political issue for Roman Catholics. The emergence of homosexual rights movements created oppositions within traditional U.S. religions.

The Religious Factor

In our generalizations about conflicts among cultures and groups, we must recognize the paradigmatic role of religious absolutisms. Those who feel they possess the "truth" about a matter have no interest in hearing other positions. In the pre-Vatican II position of Roman Catholicism, "error does not have equal rights with truth." In my Los Angeles graduate student days in the 1940s, I led "reconciliation tours" (sponsored by the YM-YWCA) which gave Protestant highschoolers a chance to visit varieties of Buddhist, Hindu, and Catholic sites. At one of the latter, a student asked the friendly priest if it would not be a good idea for his youth to have similar tours. "What for?" was the abrupt answer--correct at that time, if not exactly polite.

Globalization may have the effect of relativizing that kind of absolutism for some, but it also can intensify it. To stay with the religious sphere, the intense world missionary activities of Euroamerican Protestants in the nineteenth century led to a World Missionary Conference in 1910 which aimed to reduce competitions among national groups. Uniting the "us" did nothing to include the "them." At a follow up meeting in 1928, the "them" was broadened to include those committed to "secularism." The next meeting in 1937 returned to Christian triumphalism.

Another lesson from history of religions, described by Peter Berger, is the tendency of variant Christian groups to band together when they are all weak (ecumenism) and then to compete when they are again strong.

This tension between ingroup solidarity and multigroup tolerance looms large at the end of the twentieth century. The forces

exist in texts and even occasionally in clerics, but the popular religion typically predominates. Should we attend to the scholars or the pollsters, and in what proportions? Humanists have traditionally stressed the importance of actual and operative ethics. To ignore the actual while insisting upon some theoretical makes for poor judgments.

In many part of Europe, social freedom and economic improvements have seen a decline in formal religions. This has not been so true in the former Soviet empire and is certainly not the case in the United States. What is important is the set of new values embraced, whether within some religion or apart from it. Salman Rushdie puts this well:

By agreeing on what we are against, we discover what we are for. Andre Malraux believed that the third millennium must be the age of religion. I would say rather that it must be the age in which we finally grow out of our need for religion. But to cease to believe in our gods is not the same thing as commencing to believe in nothing.⁷

A Humanist Perspective

Given the instance of intergroup tensions, what are the best strategies for democratic societies? Foremost, it seems to me, is the establishment of legal systems based on the recognition of universal human rights. Along with this must come a reduction of the economic underpinnings of tension. Once "green families" have the same income range as "purple families," much of the tension will disappear. None of this can realistically occur without the overarching oversight of an international community dedicated to pluralism.

These key aspects of a humanistic perspective assume and re-

quire the education of individuals based upon the free flow of information. How ironic that the Internet, developed initially for military purposes, now fosters free information flows. Humanists have always assumed that informed peoples will struggle for their freedoms. We need to emphasize that informed people will also have better understanding of their neighbors and therefore be less likely to stereotype them or to "buy into" distortions.

Humanists have historically been meliorists, not utopians. That is, they have always sought ways to improve their culture's status quo, without ever assuming that this task of improvement would end in some kind of perfect society. Dewey's eternal problem-solving comes to mind—the search for ways toward ends-in-view, the implementation of present values, the contrast between dream and reality (to revert to Gunnar Myrdal's useful distinction). This restlessness, this drive to make things better stems from the nontheism of the humanists. This is not the best of all possible worlds because it was created by some perfect divinity. Nor is it a world where some divinity will, in time, make things better. The evolution of human intelligence puts the potency for improvement, as well as the responsibility, solely in human hands.

Multiculturalism versus Pluralism

Let me now expand on the connotations of contemporary multiculturalism. As cultural theorists use the term, it connotes a relativism. Or rather, it extends the relativism assumed by postmodern discourse: since no construct is grounded or rests on any fundamentals, all constructs are equally arbitrary. On this basis, there is no arguable reason for preferring one culture to another. More importantly, it follows that there is no justifiable basis for criticizing any aspect of any culture since this would have to be done from

some other equally relative cultural standpoint. In the hands of some recent educationists, this has generated a self-esteem curriculum where student problems are traced to a lack of positive cultural identity. Somehow, the histories of all cultures must be shown as equally meritorious.

Critics have been many on this issue. Richard Bernstein suggests that such relativism is a fraud "perpetuated by mostly middle-class intellectuals, all of whom have jobs."⁸ The change in climate, he argues, stems not from any increase in U.S. diversity but from "our unwillingness to see the American identity as worthy enough to expect newcomers to adopt it as their own.,"⁹ In his two years preparing this book, Bernstein says "I have rarely met a multiculturalist ideologue who bothered to learn anything beyond a few heartwarming cliches about another culture, or even evinced much curiosity about a people other than his own."¹⁰

He accused them of purveying a watered-down and re-sloganed Marxism, and calls upon

liberals to recapture the high ground from the demagogues of diversity, to declare their diversity fake, fraudulent, superstitious, cranky, sanctimonious, monotonous. **It** is time to reaffirm the greatest engine of genuine diversity that the world has ever known, which is the liberal-democratic society sustained by a set of concepts now dismissed as the narratives of the people in charge."¹¹

The African-American Situation

Much of the discussion of multiculturalism is complicated by the situation of African Americans, descendants of slaves who were forced migrants and not eager immigrants to the "New World." Their purchasers broke up family structures, language groups, re-

ligious groups, and all else that threatened to preserve something of human dignity. The Civil War was but a momentary surcease in this systematic human degradation. Once the slaves were allowed to be converted to Christianity, a serious racism had emerged to support the continuance of this degradation and separatism.¹² In 1815, Emerson had included "Africans and Polynesians" in his "smelting pot," but this brief moment was largely ignored. African Americans were essentially ignored by promoters of Americanization and assimilation in the later nineteenth century. Various "back to Africa" stirrings found wide endorsements by other Americans. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, after all, was only founded in the early twentieth century.

Admittedly, "race" was a widely used construct in the past century. Even the Irish were viewed as a race (and a troublesome and inferior one). But the social control of African Americans proved lasting and obdurate. (The forced relocation of Nisei [Japanese Americans] in World War II was a tragic mixture of hysteria, ignorance, greed, and a modified racism—since other Asian citizens were not so stigmatized). Only Native Americans have been subjected to a similarly long-lived stigmatization by law and custom. Where the other Americans permitted themselves a limited romanticization of "Indians," this was seldom extended to African Americans. Demeaning stereotypes were standard. One would never learn from the Hollywood film output of World War II that the U.S. Armed Forces were rigidly segregated.

I was vice-chair of the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations in that postwar period, and our agenda focused heavily on the particular problems of the African-American population and the incredible resistance by most other Americans to see or meliorate this chain of injustices. One of our major thrusts was to get the City Council to pass a fair employment ordinance. The

existence of a second pressure group made it easier for the Council to stall. That second group was spearheaded by the Communist Party and the few remaining labor unions that it controlled. In view of the failure of those in that second group to support racial integration or oppose Japanese-American relocation during the war period, my group carefully but firmly rejected those who formed that second group. I mention this to remind younger readers of the ideological chasms during that period.

Nathan Glazer, Harvard University expert on ethnicity, has written a poignant book summing up his distinguished career entitled *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*.¹³ The title is ironic, and reflects a deep despair. He looks out at the "culture wars" surrounding the multicultural issue and mourns that these

reflect a hard reality that none of us wants, that all of us want to see disappear, but that none of us knows how to overcome. It is only change in that larger reality that will reduce multiculturalism to a passing phase in the complex history of the making of an American nation from many strands.¹⁴

He is probably correct in seeing present U.S. identity politics as monopolized by an African-American agenda, and that this may be regrettable even though understandable. In terms of most curricular materials, this leaves out various Hispanic groups as well as South Asians, Southeast Asians [here the labeling becomes absurd, but "pan-Asian" is equally unacceptable], Africans [an equally absurd umbrella], Native American [same problem], Pacific Islanders Serious awareness of all these groups is curricularly unachievable. They became parts of U.S. life for many disparate reasons. Certainly the Nicaraguans who fled the Sandinistas and those who fled Reagan's "Contras" have little in common beyond language. The Vietnamese of the United who were fortunate enough to be airlifted when their cause failed are certainly different from the Vietnamese of Chinese descent who were driven out by the victors.

Multiculturalism likewise rests upon the untenable assumption that culture is a stable entity. How to view the "old country" is a function of many new factors-why one left, inherited and imputed class status, educational/professional achievement and their transferability, regionalism, how readily assimilation is available, cultural intermarriage, religious conversions, upward mobility, American caste structures. For all these reasons, assigning any stable "culture" label on individuals is highly problematic.¹⁵

The pluralism construct serves us much better. It recognizes not only variety but change, not only difference but similarity. John Hume, the Nobel Peace laureate of northern Ireland put this well "Difference is an accident of birth; difference is the essence of humanity."¹⁶ Consider again that basic humanist principle that we are all better served in society when all of us can contribute most fully. Humans should be wanted (family planning), nurtured (emotional supports), intellectually fulfilled (education), permitted to contribute (employment), permitted to flourish (health, social stability, play, pleasure).

When these basic human rights are recognized and implemented, irrational discriminations (those based on sex, gender, "race," belief, sexual preference, class) will lose much of their force. Instead, individuals will freely explore possibilities of achievement throughout the whole life cycle, learning from each other and contributing to each other. Lest this sound utopian, we need to remind ourselves that the discovering of nature (including human natures) is an ever-expanding process-one where each solution opens new problems for us.

Marx was brilliant in showing the ways that trivial distinctions between groups obscure the more serious divisions. He was also brilliant in showing ways that incorrectly identifying one's group led to false consciousness. But any simplistic distinction between

bourgeois and proletarian has little use today in the mixed economies that dominate developed countries. What are the real issues in our time? Try justice. We are not yet able to relate equal rights to equal incomes or wealth. We have here a genuine and unresolved pluralism. Perhaps overarching this is an ideological/ethical division that ran through the Cold War and recently resurfaced in the flap over an Academy award to Elia Kazan. If he, under oath, named names—was he a "rat," a "patriot," or a newly-rehabilitated "liberal?" One group of absolutists among us saw/see the Communist Party as a political party among parties (Kazan was a "rat"). Another group of absolutists, claiming to own something they call "Americanism," view Kazan as an ex-traitor. A more nuanced view, found on the liberal-left, viewed Kazan as saying the right thing at the wrong time in the wrong arena. The American C.P. was never a clear and present danger to the U.S. government, but it had acquired at that time significant power in some labor unions and some segments of the film industry. And it had done so by using fronts (e.g. the Progressive Citizens of America and Henry Wallace), deception (talking racial integration in the United States while rationalizing ethnic preserves in the USSR), and subversion (no free speech for Trotskyites, no wartime strikes). Sidney Hook, in the spirit of Dewey, described the issues in this period of history well with his slogan "Heresy, yes; conspiracy, no.,)7

Most of the things that present groups view as dividers are essentially involuntary-artifacts of birth and thus of chance—skin color, sex, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference. What should we be discussing when the divisions based on these have been lessened by one level of pluralism? I have already mentioned justice. Others might want ethics and the good to be central. Yet others will want to underscore beauty, and others will focus on the development of full personalities. Most of us, however, will agree that the shift to pluralistic societies engaging in such

important pursuits will require continual inquiry into the nature of nature and our natures. Thus the development of the sciences will be the necessary foundation of future societies, and the core of education for the young.

Not only do immigrant Americans face the problem of relationships to some "old country." Whenever that former country changes radically, these have to be reassessed. Think of u.s. "White Russians" after the fall of Russian communism. Or Iranian Americans after Khomeini's revolution. Or of Japanese Americans-interned during WW II, apologized to long after many had died.

Even greater problems arise, however, in the process of making more accurate assessment of key elements in the "shared" versions of U.s. history. Consider Christopher Columbus. Alleged memories of his places in Genoese, Portuguese, and Spanish history abound. Strong claims of his Jewish ancestry add to the puzzles. In recent years, however, he is being re-assessed as a cruel slaver, consumed by a kind of biblical fanaticism. As to his "discovery" of a New World-that claim only makes any sense from a European standpoint. Native Americans ("Indians") clearly have seen him as a cruel conqueror and bearer of disease and slavery. As our writing of history becomes less biased and more global, so does the way U.S. history is taught in the schools. And this, after all, is where memories are refashioned. And this process will accelerate as more groups become effectively enfranchised. University departments of women's studies, black studies, Chicano studies, gay studies, and their many counterparts will both insist upon and play major roles in unearthing those facts that will correct the historical memories.

Ours is a rather unique moment in human history. Globalization stretches around the planet with its message that some form of market economy is the best way to maximize the human potentials

of a maximal number of persons. Even China's "marxists" seem moving in this direction. But unlimited free markets, especially where there are no democratic checks on the bottom-line mentalities of industrial managers and their financiers, produce ecological and human disasters. Salman Rushdie makes a telling argument against relativizing this situation:

[A]re there other universals besides international conglomerates and the interests of superpowers? And if by chance there were a universal value that might, for the sake of argument, be called "freedom," whose enemies—tyranny, bigotry, intolerance, fanaticism—were the enemies of us all; and if this "freedom" were discovered to exist in greater quantity in the countries of the West than anywhere else on earth; and if, in the world as it actually exists, rather than in some unattainable Utopia, the authority of the United States were the best current guarantor of that "freedom," then might it not follow that to oppose the spread of American culture would be to take up arms against the wrong foe.¹⁸

The risk is that all the older polarizations will be replaced by a horrendous and bloody split between have and have-not. In the past, divisions over what we have been calling the involuntary distinctions of color, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and the like have obscured this other source of misery and human wastage. Our unique challenge is to use the power of globalization to overcome every kind of polarization. To obstruct one gender or ethnic group from achieving full human potential is to slow the development of any society. That particular case can be made rather readily in our epoch of serious social and economic data. We now need to devise an equally effective strategy to make it self-evident that dooming any bloc of humans to live in poverty, whatever the rationale, similarly destroys human development.

When humanists use words such as "full potential" and "human development" within the world group of cultures that we all in-

herit, we are clearly talking about radical changes that must be brought about in all of them. Whether we call this social progress or social evolution is a rhetorical choice. Humanists have committed to such radical change precisely because there are no inevitable cosmic directions (except perhaps entropy) and no plausible evidences of any cosmic helpers. Our best resource is critical intelligence-but not in the sense of some abstruse rationality. Rather we must critically consider all the values that humans have cherished thus far in our trajectory on this planet. The criteria? Whether they bring more humans into their own potentials and thus move us toward a true world community. Any multiculturalism that sees all cultures as equally valid would freeze an untenable status quo. A critical multiculturalism will call upon every culture to promote those values that enhance human development and to outgrow those that impede.

Pluralism within Humanist Groups

If humanist groups are to play their proper role in leading toward world societies with these goals, they will need to think carefully about the clues to their own effectiveness. Clearly the involuntary forms of social division have no place in humanist groups, and inclusiveness must be the basis. This will make realistic a healthy pluralism in which varied points of view are known both at first and second hand. In other words, humanists need to be, in principle, color-blind but in practice keenly sensitive to the human damage that focus on color has meant. So too with gender, class, sexual preference, religion, and the other divisions based upon accidents of birth.

But our philosophies and ideologies are not lifelong accidents of birth. We need consciously to adopt these, even those of us who

were fortunate to be born into humanistic climates. Put another way, these are too important to have been left to the choices of our parents (whom we did not choose). Humanists need to be very clear about the roles religions and ideologies have played in human history. They need to devise therapies for themselves and others who come out of repressive and anti-human systems. But their focus needs to be on humanist authenticity so that the commitments and stances of their groups are there for all to see.

In this sense, a multicultural humanist group is an anomaly. An early Christian church father said that "Lips that praise Jahweh cannot praise Jupiter." Humanists must remain clear that praise of the supernaturals denigrates the human. Goddesses are no better than gods, and religious tradition X probably has the same poor track record as religious tradition Y. Arthur Clarke in *Childhood's End* suggests a future scene in which superior beings dominate belligerent humans and give them a television-like device that can be tuned to any past time and place. Overnight, the religions, with all their historical falsifications, disappear. Only a form of Buddhism survived.

A more humanist version of this narrative would begin with threads in India, China, and Greece that saw humans as a part of the natural world (and not dominators or victims). This narrative would recognize us as embodied, as experiencing both pleasures and pains, and as gifted with visions and dreams to improve the situations in which we found ourselves. We are not lost citizens of some unearthly realm, waiting to return. Instead we are that part of nature which has not only become conscious but has visioned the possibilities and responsibilities for changing and improving both ourselves and the surrounding world. Pain and disease are not punishments from the gods but aspects of nature needing improvement. Birth is the chance to flourish rather than the curse of enter-

ing an evil world. Death is not release and transport to some other realm but the natural end of all living things—a cosmic recycling. And life therein is a truly sacred realm, where the human can flourish, can dream, create, know, experience.

Against some of the postmodern critics, ours is a universal, even foundational, view. A view building upon evolution, changes that are adaptive and that also change the environments in which adaptation occurs. Humans are too insignificant a part of the universe for us to claim that there is any overall purpose running through energy/matter. Yet we are that part of existence where purposing can occur. The philosophies of the world's humanists, ancient as well as modern, concur that this purposing is the very essence of life, and that purposes guided by wisdom are the meaning of life.

In a profound sense, humanists have become "cosmopolitans"⁹ by their very commitment to reason and the possibility of knowledge. This leads them to take the sciences seriously and to take ethics seriously. That same commitment shows them that human liberation demands the transcending of historical ethnicities and religiosities.

Humanist groups must therefore be inclusive since no group has a monopoly of skill or knowledge. They must be pluralistic since a number of lifestyles have succeeded in promoting life. But they must embody a critical intelligence which knows that not all cultures are equal or the same; a critical intelligence which refines the capacities to make careful selections from all cultures and wise choices among them.

Notes

1. Michael Lind, "The Beige and the Black," *New York Times Magazine* (Aug. 16, 1998).

2. Op-Ed., *New York Times* (March 19, 1999).

3. Interview with Johanna Keller, *New York Times* (April 4, 1999).

4. *TIME*, passim.

5. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 123.

6. *New York Times* (April 4, 1999).

7. *New York Times* (March 5, 1999).

8. Richard Bernstein, *Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future* (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. 10.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 346.

12. Cf. Buell Gallagher, *Color and Conscience, the Irrepressible Conflict* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1946).

13. Nathan Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

14. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

15. These barriers, to be sure, vary from one ethnicity to another, especially in the case of African-Americans.

16. C-Span, Jan. 18, 1999. Speech during Atlanta celebration for Martin Luther King, Jr.

17. Sidney Hook, *Heresy. Yes-Conspiracy. No* (New York: John Day, 1953).

18. *Loc. cit.*

19. Stalin, quite correctly, saw those who had such a cosmopolitan commitment as the enemies of his totalitarian pseudo-science. He was only wrong in thinking that most cosmopolitans were Jews

and that therefore most Jews were cosmopolitans. This faulty logic only exacerbated his anti-Semitism.