

Toward a Definition of Multiculturalism

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By Caleb Rosado*

It is an axiom of our times that our world is rapidly changing. With change comes not only a different view of the world, but also changes in language to name that “new” world. Old words take on new meanings and new words enter the vocabulary, resulting in another way of “seeing.”

It was not too long ago that as a nation we moved from an Agrarian Society concerned with conformity, through an Industrial Society concerned with nationalism and uniformity, to our present Information Society concerned with diversity within a global context, on our way to the Global Society of the 21st century with a planetary worldview (Rosado 1996). Such cultural and political upheavals have given rise to knowledgeable players in the game of social change, while leaving most people as confused bystanders, desperately hanging on to a past which in part is dysfunctional to the present and in many ways irrelevant to the future.

The needs of the 21st century demand a citizenry that is culturally sensitive and internationally focused, with an orientation toward the future rather than the past. Diversity is “in,” much to the dismay of defenders of the past, the likes of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1992), Dinesh D’Souza (1991, 1995), E. B. Hirsch (1987), Allan D. Bloom (1987) and Rush Limbaugh (1992). The American demographic landscape is such that by the year 2050 nearly half of the population of the United States will be comprised of People of Color. This is that non-dominant, non-white status segment of the population, which, by virtue of the negative meaning placed on them, has been granted limited access as a group

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to the societal rewards of wealth, power and prestige, and whose value and contribution to society is continually minimized.

Multiculturalism, as the new paradigm for education for the 21st century, is a political ping-pong term greatly misused and highly misunderstood. Since for many it is also a value-laden concept, it has come under fire from diverse segments of the population, who due to their social position view the world differently. The fact that where you stand determines what you see is a reality in most situations, and it is especially true for the concept of multiculturalism.

The purpose of this article is to provide an operational definition of multiculturalism and its value for all groups as a basis for understanding the changes coming to our society.

What Is Multiculturalism?

The concept of multiculturalism embodies a new orientation toward the future. Unfortunately, in all the heated discussion around the term no clear definition of the concept has yet emerged. People are thus left to read into the term whatever their biases and self interests dictate. Let me put forth an operational definition of multiculturalism as a starting point to better clarify our human interactions.

Multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society.

Let's take it apart. There are the four pairs of action phrases that give substance to the definition: “beliefs and behaviors,” “recognizes and respects,”

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“acknowledges and values,” “encourages and enables,” and a fifth one, “empowers.” Multiculturalism is a “system,” a set of interrelated parts—in this case, beliefs and behaviors—which make up the whole of how humans experience today's world. It includes what people believe about others, their basic paradigms, and how these impact, and are impacted by, behavior. The outcome of this framework of beliefs/behaviors are seven important actions.

The first is *recognition* of the rich diversity in a given society or organization. For the longest time racial/ethnic minorities, the physically disabled, and women have not been given the same recognition as others. The one-sided approach to history and education has been a testimony to that fact.

With recognition should also come *respect*. Respect is the process whereby the Other is treated with deference, courtesy and compassion in an endeavor to safeguard the integrity, dignity, value and social worth of the individual. *It means treating people the way they want to be treated.* Respect and recognition are not the same, since recognizing the existence of a group does not necessarily elicit respect for the group. Our nation has a long history of not respecting the rights of the powerless.

Multiculturalism also entails *acknowledging* the validity of the cultural expressions and contributions of the various groups. This is not to imply that all cultural contributions are of equal value and social worth, or that all should be tolerated. Some cultural practices are better than others for the overall betterment of society. These cultural expressions and contributions that differ from those of the dominant group in society are usually only acknowledged when there is an economic market for them, such as music for African American, native Indian dances for tourism or Mexican cuisine. When the business sector wants our money, the advertising industry pictures people of color in a positive

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light. But in most other cases the entertainment media simply caricatures minority stereotypes, such as women usually in supportive roles.

Multiculturalism thus means *valuing* what people have to offer, and not rejecting or belittling it simply because it differs from what the majority, or those in power, regard as important and of value.

Multiculturalism will also *encourage* and *enable* the contribution of the various groups to society or an organization. Women and persons of color, for example, often experience discouragement because what they bring to the “table” for discussion is often regarded as of little value or worth. Yet what people bring needs to be valued, for who knows from where the next great idea may come—from a youth, from an elderly person, from an African American, from a single parent, from a lesbian, from a high school drop out, from a business executive, etc.? The word *enable* here is important, because what lies behind it is the concept of *empowerment*—the process of enabling people to be self-critical of their own biases so as to strengthen themselves and others to achieve and deploy their maximum potential. People's sense of self-worth, value and dignity is most often determined not only by the kind of support and encouragement they receive from others, but also from how willing they are to be self-examine negative behaviors in their own life and in their cultural group. If I or my group is practicing self-destructive action, all the external help will go for naught.

The essence of multiculturalism, the undergirding concept of multicultural education, is the ability to *celebrate* with the other in a manner that transcends all barriers and brings about a unity in diversity. Multiculturalism enables us to look upon the Other, especially the Other that society has taught us

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to regard with distrust and suspicion, and to be taken advantage of, not as a “potential predator, but as a profitable partner.”¹

The last part of this definition of multiculturalism—“within an inclusive cultural context”—is most important, because it is here where many people get off and refuse to go along with an inclusive approach to society or to education. Many people fear multiculturalism will bring in “foreign” concepts and ideas which will deviate the nation from its historic course and transform the United States into something different from what it has been. We need to realize that America has always been a multicultural society, whether or not many have been willing to admit it. America has never been a “melting pot,” which conjures up images of a homogeneous, purée-like product.

A *Stew-Pot* is a better metaphor to describe the reality of America as a multicultural society. We are a heterogeneous society, a rich cultural stew, where the various ingredients—white potatoes, brown meat, yellow squash, red tomatoes, and all the other substances—while maintaining their distinctiveness, have contributed their unique cultural juices and ethnic flavors, all richly blended by the heat of group tension. This is what makes a stew, not just the ingredients tossed in together as in a cold salad, but the application of heat to the pot. In American society “heat” has come from racial and ethnic conflict. Fire, however, is dangerous, because if one turns up the heat too high or leaves the pot on the fire too long, or simply neglects it, the stew will be burned. The stew-pot has been burned on many occasions—recall Detroit, Watts, Newark, Miami, New York, Chicago, Yonkers, Bensonhurst, and most recently South Central Los Angeles, as well as our high school, college and university campuses; all have

¹There are certain phrases throughout this article, enclosed in quotation marks, that are classic phrases of Samuel Betances, my good friend, colleague and former roommate in college, to whom I am in debt for his influence on my thinking and understanding of diversity.

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experienced the fires of racial riots, revolts and rebellions. Watched carefully the heat of this group tension will bring out the creative juices of the various cultural groups seeking to resolve their conflicts. The result is a special process of cultural blend which gives the people of the United States of America their unique character in the world, a character which differentiates them from former compatriots in the very countries from which they came.

What is an “American”?

Such a process cannot be described as assimilation, perhaps the most inappropriate concept by which to describe the American ethnic experience. Assimilation—from the Latin, *assimilare*, “to make similar”—is the process whereby newcomers to society are encouraged to give up their cultural way of life and accommodate as quickly as possible the values and culture of the host society. It is an ethnocentric, one-way process of cultural exchange, in that only the newcomer is expected to adapt, with the implied promise that group acceptance will be the social reward. Every group that came to America has had to do this, *except the English*. The English never assimilated; they just *transplanted* their culture and imposed it on everyone else.

Yet few groups in American society have been completely absorbed to the point where they have lost sight of their ethnic heritage and cultural contribution to the nation. A more appropriate concept reflective of the real American experience of group interaction is *Transculturation*, a term coined by the renowned Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz. Transculturation must not be confused with the more common term, “acculturation,” the anthropological equivalent of assimilation, meaning that one group adapts its culture to the cultural ways of the dominant group, usually through the one-way process of socialization.

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Transculturation is radically different. *Transculturation is the reciprocal process by which two cultures, upon contact, engage in a system of give and take and adaptation to each other's ways, though often not in an equal manner, resulting in the emergence of a new cultural reality* (Ortiz 1970). It is a two-way process of cultural exchange, where the various groups learn from each other, each impacting the other, without totally losing their unique distinctiveness. This rich blend of ethnic groups, coming together on the basis of coalitions of interests and not of color, with a common set of values, is what makes the United States of America distinct and gives us the competitive edge in the world today.

At question here is what constitutes an American? For many persons living in the United States, what comes to mind whenever they try to visualize what an American looks like, is a Northern European phenotype, blond and blue-eyed. Those that differ from this visual image of what is perceived to be an American, have experienced rejection. Some may never be included because they cannot change their skin color. It is this latter point that led Eduardo Seda Bonilla to conclude that:

There have always been “two ways” of adaptation for minority groups in the United States. One way was designed for the ethnic or “cultural” minorities, the immigrants of different nationalities. The other way was for the “racial” minorities. For the former—the Irish, the Germans, the Italians, the Jews, etc.—all they simply had to do to assimilate and be accepted was to change their ethnic identification, discard their culture. Once their cultural identity subsided under the American cultural identity, which essentially was English, the door to the “silent” or socially invisible world of the majority was open; because they were “white.”

For the second type of minority group, identified on the basis of “racial” stigma, the issue was more complex, it was biological, and as a result the shedding of culture made no difference in their acceptance. They were never seen, nor have been seen as “genuine” Americans, only as hyphenated Americans: Native-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc. The implication is that they are not quite yet Americans, nor can they ever be because of phenotypical differences (Seda Bonilla 1971, p. 56).

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They have simply not been accepted as genuine Americans.

Similar to Seda Bonilla's assessment is the one by Robert Blauner who declares that there have been two major processes for the incorporation of population groups in the United States—immigration and colonization (Blauner 1972). History textbooks tend to tout the former as the dominant and only model, with assimilation as the natural outcome. For those that cannot assimilate, the problem lies at their doors, for refusing to do so by pushing for multiculturalism, which only divides and expresses a sense of thanklessness and biting the hand that opened America's doors to let them in. It sounds so nice and patriotic for Americans to do so, and those that do not assimilate but push for multiculturalism and multicultural education are perceived as unpatriotic and as denouncers of American values.

The problem, of course, is that the second process or model, colonization, is rarely discussed. This oppressive mode, rising out of the ideology of manifest destiny, leads to an entirely different outcome, segregation. The immigrant model, as the most prevalent model of incorporation into America, has been the process for whites from Europe and other regions. For people of color, primarily American Indians, African Americans and Latinos, the prevalent model has been colonization. And forced segregation has been the outcome. This model is rarely discussed in textbooks, except as a footnote or an aside. Yet, both models or processes have been very American.

So what is an "American"? Multiculturalism is redefining who is an American by challenging the taken-for-granted definition of American as "white." It is telling the people of the United States of America that an "American" is any person that is a citizen of this country either by birth or

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naturalization, no matter their skin color, physical features, cultural expression or national origin. The result is a delicious stew, a beautiful mosaic, that reflects the beauty of the human family.

Multiculturalism is thus an *inclusive* process where no one is left out. Diversity, in its essence, then is a “safeguard against idolatry”—the making of one group as the *norm* for all groups.

Therefore, one of the dangers that must be avoided in grasping a proper understanding of multiculturalism is *bashism*. Bashism is the tendency to verbally and/or physically attack another person or group based solely on the negative meaning given to group membership—due to biological, cultural, political or socioeconomic differences (such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, political party, class, education, values, religious affiliation or sexual orientation)—without regard for the individual. The motivating factor for bashism is fear, arising out of ignorance of the other.

One of the backwashes of a narrow view of multiculturalism, especially as espoused by some women and persons of color, is what I call “white maleism.” White Maleism is the tendency of minority groups to blame white males for most of the social evil in the world today, especially as it relates to sexism and racism, and view them as selfish, ruthless, unrepentant and unredeemable, and, as a consequence, refuse to recognize and accept the contribution that many white males have made, continue to make, and desire to make, to remove oppression.

While much of oppression today has been the historical by-product of the abuse of power by white males, not much is gained in terms of creating an inclusive, caring, compassionate educational system and society, by reversing the process and excluding many white males who have been instrumental in creating structures of opportunity, access and inclusion. Some of us persons of

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color would not be where we are today if it were not for culturally, politically and morally concerned white males who opened institutional doors, made decisions, implemented policies, and stood in the breach to bridge the gulf of intolerance. Thus multiculturalism includes, empowers and benefits all persons concerned, and is therefore for everyone, whites included. It prepares all persons to operate effectively in the multicultural society of the 21st century.

In an age of cultural pluralism and diversity, multiculturalism is needed to provide a corrective to the reality of our American heritage. It is the only option open to educators, leaders and administrators in an ever-increasing culturally pluralistic environment. This is because today's diverse student populations are simply not going to go away, but increase. This is the direction of the future—multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual. And schools and communities will reflect these dynamic changes. Effective educators and administrators, concerned with the bottom line—quality education—are recognizing this new direction and are planning accordingly.

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