Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity*

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If there were any doubt that the production of knowledge is a political enterprise that involves a contest among conflicting interests, the raging debates of the last few years should have dispelled them. What counts as knowledge? Who gets to define what counts as knowledge? These are difficult problems, never easy to resolve, but it is the function of teachers and scholars to grapple with them.

Those who deny the existence of these problems and who would suppress discussion of them are not without their politics; they simply promote their orthodoxy in the name of an unquestioned and unquestionable tradition, universality, or history. They attack challenges to their ideas as dangerous and subversive, antithetical to the academic enterprise. They offer themselves as apostles of timeless truths, when in fact they are enemies of change. The cry that politics has recently invaded the university, imported by sixties radicals, is an example of the defense of orthodoxy; it is itself a political attempt to distract attention from the fact that there are serious issues at stake and more than one valid side to the story in the current debates about knowledge.

What we are witnessing these days is not simply a set of internal debates about what schools and universities should teach and what students should learn. Journalists and politicians have joined the fray and added a new dimension to it. There is much more at stake in their campaign against “political correctness” than a concern with excessive moralism, affirmative action, and freedom of speech in the academy. Rather, the entire enterprise of the university has come under attack, and with it the aspect that intellectuals most value and that the humanities most typically represent: a critical, skeptical approach to all that a society takes most for granted.

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The far-ranging investigations of university practices—curricular change, admissions standards, financial aid, fellowship awards, disciplinary codes, hiring and tenure procedures, teaching loads, time spent on research, accreditation standards, even, I would argue, the investigation of the misuse of overhead funds—are all attempts to delegitimize the philosophical and institutional bases from which social and cultural criticism have traditionally come. We are experiencing another phase of the ongoing Reagan-Bush revolution which, having packed the courts and privatized the economy, now seeks to neutralize the space of ideological and cultural nonconformity by discrediting it. This is the context within which debates about political correctness and multiculturalism have taken shape.

“Political correctness” is the label that has been attached to any program or position that attacks or calls into question the status quo. Coined by the left as an internal criticism of moralizing dogmatisms, the term has been seized by the right and used to disqualify all critical efforts. It seems to be working so well as a form of intimidation that it has become a theme in the Bush presidential campaign for 1992. Demands for change in the name of tolerance, fairness, and justice are, under the “p.c.” label, described as dangerous orthodoxies, attempts to impose thought control on otherwise benign individuals. In the name of defending the individual’s right to think and act as he pleases, the conservative ideologists protect existing structures and practices from all critical scrutiny and even moderate attempts at reform.

If “political correctness” is the label attached to critical attitudes and behavior, “multiculturalism” is the program it is said to be attempting to enact. This project of somehow recognizing the demographic diversity that has become characteristic of many colleges, universities, and urban schools has been reviled by conservatives as a dangerous orthodoxy. One writer refers to the “cult of multiculturalism,” distinguishing a few reasonable proponents among a preponderance of fanatics. Another suggests that multiculturalism’s “Europhobia” will undermine the unity and the common culture of the American nation. Proponents insist, on the other hand, that multiculturalism will increase both fairness (by representing the range and richness of America’s different ethnicities) and tolerance (by exposing students to multiple perspectives on the meaning of history). In this view, multiculturalism pluralizes the notion of an American identity by insisting on attention to African-Americans, Native Americans, and the like, but it leaves in place a unified concept of identity.

It is this unified concept of identity that informs the debate on multiculturalism. And it is the extreme polarization of sides—for and against multiculturalism, liberal pluralism, or conservative individualism—that makes critical reflection on the terms of the debate so difficult. Despite its difficulty, and fully cognizant of the political risks involved, it is such a critical reflection that I want to undertake.
Within the pluralist framework that seeks to contain and resolve the debate, identity is taken as the referential sign of a fixed set of customs, practices, and meanings, an enduring heritage, a readily identifiable sociological category, a set of shared traits and/or experiences. "Diversity" refers to a plurality of identities, and it is seen as a condition of human existence rather than as the effect of an enunciation of difference that constitutes hierarchies and asymmetries of power. When diversity is seen as a condition of existence, the questions become whether and how much of it is useful to recognize; but the stakes people have in the answers to those questions are obscured, as are the history and politics of difference and identity itself. Without a way to theorize the history and politics of identity outside the pluralist framework, it is difficult to respond to the conservative onslaught.

Something of this can be seen in the report of the New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee, issued last June and called “One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence.” The report is an impressive document from many perspectives, and it makes a persuasive case for a multicultural curriculum, arguing, among other things, that democratic participation is enhanced when students understand that change occurs because groups pursue their interests through collective action. Pride in one’s heritage is, the report suggests, an important ingredient in citizenship, particularly for those whose identities and viewpoints have been excluded or marginalized in accounts of American history. What the report does not do is conceive of difference as in any way constitutive, and so it leaves itself open to a charge delivered by Nathan Glazer (one of the dissenting members of the committee) that ethnicities should not be treated as monolithic and unchanging because that ignores the very real history of their assimilation to “American culture.” Glazer’s argument, that the report’s “hypostatization” of identities creates a dangerously divided reality, is eminently political; by asserting the essential unity of the identity of “American,” it underplays the extent to which processes of difference and discrimination have structured (and continue to structure) American life.

By looking only at the effects of the enunciation of difference and not at the contested process itself, both Glazer and the authors of the report naturalize identity, making it a matter of biology or history or culture, an inescapable trait that can matter more or less, but is inherently a part of one’s being. The report assumes that people are discriminated against because they are already different when, in fact, I would argue, it is the other way around: difference and the salience of different identities are produced by discrimination, a process that

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estimates the superiority or the typicality or the universality of some in terms of the inferiority or atypicality or particularity of others.

Two citations seem to me to illustrate this point. One is from Stuart Hall, whose theoretical explorations prepare us for his insight:

The fact is “black” has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally, and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found. People now speak of the society I come from in totally unrecognizable ways. Of course Jamaica is a black society, they say. In reality it is a society of black and brown people who lived for three or four hundred years without ever being able to speak of themselves as “black.” Black is an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment. In Jamaica that moment is the 1970s.2

The second quote is from someone whose insight we might attribute to “experience” (as long as we understood experience to be discursively mediated). A white middle-class student living in a Latino dormitory at Stanford told a New York Times reporter what she had come to understand about her identity:

“Sometimes I’d get confused,” she said because she never knew when a simple comment she made would offend someone else. She finally appreciated the difference between herself and the Hispanic students when one of them asked her what it felt like to be an Anglo. “I’d never heard anyone use the word Anglo for me before. . . . Where I came from no one was Anglo; everyone was just Irish Catholic. But after being [here] a while I realized that an Anglo can be an Anglo only if there’s someone who’s not.”3

Most discussions of multiculturalism avoid this kind of insight about the production of knowledge of identity and therefore undercut their most radical potential. It may be precisely because they wanted to avoid appearing too radical that the authors of the New York State report assumed that identity groups preexisted rather than followed from discrimination; it may also be that to have historicized the question of identity would have antagonized a significant and vociferous minority constituency, one invested in establishing its autonomous and unified historical existence. (Support for this argument might come from the curious absence of attention to gender in the report and from the committee’s contorted apology about it at the end: “We were repeatedly cautioned to

avoid letting issues related to sex-role differences come to dominate the work of this Committee. We were reminded that, too often, when matters of cultural, ethnic, and language biases are addressed and attention is called to the importance of sex-role differences and sexism, the sexism question dominates discussion and action. Thus we treated sex-role groupings as contexts for the development of culture-like consistencies” (draft version, p. 68). The paragraph goes on to acknowledge the “double and even triple” burden carried by women in “low status” cultural groups (as if such an acknowledgment in the report could compensate for the exclusion of attention to gender and sexuality in the proposed curriculum). Whatever the explanation—and I suspect many factors were at work—the result leaves the discussion safely within a liberal pluralist framework and makes eminently plausible the objection of another of the dissenters on the committee, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., that in the proposed curriculum there was too much emphasis on the “pluribus” and not enough on the “unum.”

The alternative strategy—to historicize the question of identity—is to introduce an analysis of its production and thus an analysis of constructions of and conflicts about power; it is also, of course, to call into question the autonomy and stability of any particular identity as it claims to define and interpret a subject’s existence. Oddly enough, given the charges of incoherence and anarchy made against multicultural approaches, historicizing the question of identity also offers the possibility of a more unified view than that of the liberal pluralists. Here is S. P. Mohanty taking up an argument made by Cornel West against a notion of separate canons, of new canons entirely replacing old:

How do we negotiate between my history and yours? How would it be possible for us to recover our commonality, not the ambiguous imperial-humanist myth of our shared human attributes, which are supposed to distinguish us from animals, but, more significantly, the imbrication of our various pasts and presents, the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values, and material resources? It is necessary to assert our dense particularities, our lived and imagined differences; but could we afford to leave untheorized the question of how our differences are intertwined and, indeed, hierarchically organized? Could we, in other words, afford to have entirely different histories, to see ourselves as living—and having lived—in entirely heterogeneous and discrete spaces?4

His answer is obviously no. Instead he calls for an alternative to pluralism that would make difference and conflict the center of a history “we” all share.

If Mohanty’s solution seems obvious to many of us, we are in a clear minority, as the struggle over multiculturalism unfolds in the context of a prevailing ideology of individualism. Individualism is the language of the conservatives’ critique of multiculturalism, of the liberal universities’ accommodation to its newly diverse populations, and of the identity politics of minority groups. In the 1960s and ’70s proponents of affirmative action and identity politics took economic, political, and social structures for granted in their analyses (one could invoke “experience,” for example, and mean something historically, culturally, and discursively produced, as feminists did in consciousness-raising sessions to great political effect); but in the 1980s and ’90s the ideological pendulum has swung back to individualism (and “experience” now signifies a prediscursive, direct, and unmediated apprehension of social truth). The courts are reversing affirmative action decisions; the president vetoes civil rights legislation; and the history of discrimination as evident in statistics is being denied. All this is being done in the name of justice for individuals, who are conceived to be entirely equal units, living in a cultural and historical vacuum.

The logic of individualism has structured the approach to multiculturalism in many ways. The call for tolerance of difference is framed in terms of respect for individual characteristics and attitudes; group differences are conceived categorically and not relationally, as distinct entities rather than interconnected structures or systems created through repeated processes of the enunciation of difference. Administrators have hired psychological consulting firms to hold diversity workshops which teach that conflict resolution is a negotiation between dissatisfied individuals. Disciplinary codes that punish “hate-speech” justify prohibitions in terms of the protection of individuals from abuse by other individuals, not in terms of the protection of members of historically mistreated groups from discrimination, nor in terms of the ways language is used to construct and reproduce asymmetries of power. The language of protection, moreover, is conceptualized in terms of victimization; the way to make a claim or to justify one’s protest against perceived mistreatment these days is to take on the mantle of the victim. (The so-called Men’s Movement is the latest comer to this scene.) Everyone—whether an insulted minority or the perpetrator of the insult who feels he is being unjustly accused—now claims to be an equal victim before the law. Here we have not only an extreme form of individualizing, but a conception of individuals without agency.

There is nothing wrong, on the face of it, with teaching individuals about how to behave decently in relation to others and about how to empathize with each other’s pain. The problem is that difficult analyses of how history and social standing, privilege, and subordination are involved in personal behavior entirely drop out. Chandra Mohanty puts it this way:

There has been an erosion of the politics of collectivity through the reformulation of race and difference in individualistic terms. The
1960s and '70s slogan "the personal is political" has been recrafted in the 1980s as "the political is personal." In other words, all politics is collapsed into the personal, and questions of individual behaviors, attitudes, and life-styles stand in for political analysis of the social. Individual political struggles are seen as the only relevant and legitimate form of political struggle.5

Paradoxically, individuals then generalize their perceptions and claim to speak for a whole group, but the groups are also conceived as unitary and autonomous. This individualizing, personalizing conception has also been behind some of the recent identity politics of minorities; indeed it gave rise to the intolerant, doctrinaire behavior that was dubbed, initially by its internal critics, "political correctness."

It is particularly in the notion of "experience" that one sees this operating. In much current usage of "experience," references to structure and history are implied but not made explicit; instead, personal testimony of oppression replaces analysis, and this testimony comes to stand for the experience of the whole group. The fact of belonging to an identity group is taken as authority enough for one's speech; the direct experience of a group or culture—that is, membership in it—becomes the only test of true knowledge.

The exclusionary implications of this are twofold: all those not of the group are denied even intellectual access to it, and those within the group whose experiences or interpretations do not conform to the established terms of identity must either suppress their views or drop out. An appeal to "experience" of this kind forecloses discussion and criticism and turns politics into a policing operation: the borders of identity are patrolled for signs of nonconformity; the test of membership in a group becomes less one's willingness to endorse certain principles and engage in specific political actions, less one's positioning in specific relationships of power, than one's ability to use the prescribed languages that are taken as signs that one is inherently "of" the group. That all of this isn't recognized as a highly political process that produces identities is troubling indeed, especially because it so closely mimics the politics of the powerful, naturalizing and deeming as discernably objective facts the prerequisites for inclusion in any group.

Indeed, I would argue more generally that separatism, with its strong insistence on an exclusive relationship between group identity and access to specialized knowledge (the argument that only women can teach women's literature or only African-Americans can teach African-American history, for example), is a simultaneous refusal and imitation of the powerful in the present

ideological context. At least in universities, the relationship between identity-
group membership and access to specialized knowledge has been framed as an
objection to the control by the disciplines of the terms that establish what counts
as (important, mainstream, useful, collective) knowledge and what does not.
This has had an enormously important critical impact, exposing the exclusions
that have structured claims to universal or comprehensive knowledge. When
one asks not only where the women or African-Americans are in the history
curriculum (for example), but why they have been left out and what are the
effects of their exclusion, one exposes the process by which difference is enunci-
cated. But one of the complicated and contradictory effects of the implemen-
tation of programs in women’s studies, African-American studies, Chicano
studies, and now gay and lesbian studies is to totalize the identity that is the
object of study, reiterating its binary opposition as minority (or subaltern) in
relation to whatever is taken as majority or dominant.

The alternative, to treat identity as the unstable, never-secured effect of a
process of enunciation of cultural difference, is often dismissed as impractical
for pedagogy and political mobilization. But, as Denise Riley has persuasively
argued, except for the “catastrophic loss of grace in the wording,” it makes far
more sense for a feminist politics to have Sojourner Truth ask “Ain’t I a
fluctuating identity?” and thereby recognize both the dangers and benefits of
the collective consolidation implied in the category “women.”6 In a similar way,
it makes more sense to teach our students and tell ourselves that identities are
historically conferred, that this conferral is ambiguous (though it works precisely
and necessarily by imposing a false clarity), that subjects are produced through
multiple identifications, some of which become politically salient for a time in
certain contexts, and that the project of history is not to reify identity but to
understand its production as an ongoing process of differentiation, relentless
in its repetition, but also—and this seems to me the important political point
—subject to redefinition, resistance, and change. Such an outlook might also
call for a more complicated strategy than organizing political campaigns around
identity groups (conceived in pluralist terms), and that, in the current context
in this country at least, might be all to the good.

6. Denise Riley, “Am I That Name?” Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 1. An example of the literalness of the worst kind of
political correctness can be found in Tania Modleski, Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism
to Sojourner Truth as ahistorical, antiwoman, and certainly racist, thereby completely missing Riley’s
accomplishment for feminism, which is to historicize, not repudiate, the category “women.”