What is Multiculturalism?
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1. Who did we learn about in school today?

Like most words, "multiculturalism" needs to be understood from both an historical and a conceptual perspective. Historically, "multiculturalism" came into wide public use during the early 1980s in the context of public school curriculum reform. Specifically, the argument was made that the content of classes in history, literature, social studies, and other areas reflected what came to be called a "Eurocentric" bias. Few if any women or people of color, or people from outside the Western European tradition, appeared prominently in the curriculums of schools in the United States. This material absence was also interpreted as a value judgment that reinforced unhealthy ethnocentric and even racist attitudes.

Observers noted that teaching and administrative staffs in schools were also overwhelmingly white and/or male (whiteness being pervasive at the teaching level, maleness at the administrative level, reflecting the politics of gender and class as well as race in the educational system). Eventually parallel questions were raised (once more) about the ethno-racial or cultural biases of other institutions, such as legislatures, government agencies, corporations, religious groups, private clubs, etc. Each of these has in turn developed its own response and policies regarding multiculturalism.
Finally, "multiculturalism" may also have become a popular term as "race" lost much of its former credibility as a concept. Scientists agree that, in terms of DNA genetics, "race" has no significant meaning as a way of categorizing human differences. Intermarried families offer the puzzle of a parent and child considered as belonging to two different races--clearly an absurd idea given that race was thought of as biologically passed from parent to offspring. Thus "culture" began to replace "race" as a term for distinguishing among distinct human groups.

2. Is there any justice in this world?

The concern to create a more "culturally diverse" curriculum had roots in the intellectual and social movements associated with the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s. These included Black Power,La Raza, the American Indian Movement, and the Women's Liberation movement, each of which challenged the norms and effects of educational policy. Multiculturalism also is directly related to global shifts of power, population, and culture in the era of "postcolonialism," as nations around the world take independence in the wake of the decline of Western empires (whether European, Soviet, or American). Perhaps more importantly, the Supreme Court ruling in Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) --- which outlawed explicit school segregation --- led to the admission of large numbers of non-white students to public and some private schools (also occasioning the "white flight" that has largely succeeded in re-segregating schools in most major cities). Teachers and school administrators then faced a student body with very different faces. This demographic cultural diversity was accelerated by postcolonial immigration from

non-Western European nations during the last two decades -- especially from Mexico, Latin America, and Asia, which was hastened by the liberalization of immigration laws in the mid-1960s.

3. Melt or get out of the pot!

The historical event of multiculturalism brings with it many complicated conceptual problems, causing a rich debate over what multiculturalism is or should mean. America's traditional conception of itself as a "melting pot" of diverse peoples joined in a common New World culture has been challenged by some multiculturalists who consider the "melting pot" metaphor a cover for oppressive assimilation. To them, the only way you can melt in the pot is by assimilating -- becoming similar to ---the dominant or "hegemonic" white culture. In this argument, assimilation is rejected. Then multiculturalism becomes a movement that insists that American society has never been white, but always in fact multiracial and diverse. This movement seeks to preserve distinctly different ethnic, racial, or cultural communities without melting them into a common culture. Here the common culture is seen as white supremeacy, a culture of bigotry and discrimination, and the remedy as an emphasis on the separate characteristics and virtues of particular cultural groups.

4. Out of Africa?

Most controversial in this regard is the movement known as "Afrocentrism," which in various versions seeks to document the centrality of African cultural traditions to the foundation of American and Western history, and to celebrate that African tradition so as to increase the self-esteem and educational success of African-American students. Critics of Afrocentrism dispute both its intellectual claims --- the scholarship and historical conclusions it advances --- and its educational claims --- especially regarding the effect of an ethnically-centered curriculum on the academic achievement of students. Defenders of multiculturalism have published a number of respected books to substantiate their scholarly claims. They point out that critics of Afrocentrism rarely investigate whether or not the traditional Eurocentric curriculum has artificially improved the performance of white students. See, for example, debates about the cultural biases of "standardized" tests like the SAT or the GRE, on which many of the questions assume a body of cultural knowledge more likely to be found among white suburbanites than students in the ghetto or barrio. Or consider arguments that white males in the past created an artificially easy time for themselves in college admissions and job competition by excluding women and minorities. Critics of Afrocentrism have had more success challenging some of the details of its historical claims than in refuting the general charge of Eurocentrism. Many middle-of-the-road writers claim to reject both "-isms" as making the same mistake of asserting a dominant "center." They instead advocate models of cultural hybridity and impurity that see each culture as a changing node in a network without a single center.

5. Is identity political?

One problem with certain strands of multiculturalism is their reliance on "identity politics." "Identity politics" refers to the tendency to define one's political and social identity and interests purely in terms of some group category: race, ethnicity, class,

gender, nationality, religion, etc. Identity politics became more popular after the 1960s for many of the same reasons that multiculturalism did. The critique of America's "common culture" led many people to identify with a particular group, rather than with the nation --- a nation, after all, whose policies they believed had excluded or oppressed them. People increasingly became Native-Americans, African-Americans, Latino-Americans, Asian-Americans, Gay-Americans, etc., in an explosion of hyphenation. This movement for group solidarity did in many cases provide individuals with the resources to defend their interests and express their values, resources that as disparate individuals they could not possibly attain. As the American economy began to decline in the late 1980s, the scramble for a piece of the shrinking pie increased the tendency of people to band together in groups that together might have enough power to defend or extend their interests. American society is now often seen as a battleground of special-interest groups, many of them defined by the racial, ethnic, or cultural identity of their members. Hostility between these groups as they compete for scarce resources is inevitable. In defense of identity politics, others point out that these divisions between cultural groups are less the voluntary decisions of individuals than the product of discrimination and bigotry in the operation of the economy and the social institutions. It is these that divide people up by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, etc., privileging the dominant group and subordinating the rest, they claim.

6. Breaking up is hard to do.

Still, most analysts admit that in practice individuals belong to numerous different groups and have complex cultural identities. The theoretical term for analyzing people in terms of their group affiliations is "subject position." Each person occupies a variety of subject positions -- is positioned socially, economically, and politically -- by virtue of how his or her subjectivity is shaped by group identifications. When we analyze our identities, we can break them up into numerous facets of ourselves, until it seems that Humpty Dumpty can never be put back together again.

A person may think of herself or be treated at one moment as a woman, at another moment as Asian, at another moment as upper-class, at another moment as elderly, at another moment as a lesbian--each time being either helped or hindered by the identification, depending on the circumstances. The various parts of our cultural identities may not add up to a neat and predictable whole. Multiculturalism, then, insofar as it groups individuals into categories, may overlook the practical reality that no one lives in just one box. Recent proponents of multiculturalism, indeed, have emphasized the multiculturalism within each individual.

I. Is multiculturalism the same as multiracialism or multiethnicity?

A) yes, if race or ethnicity = culture
B) no, if culture is independent of race and ethnicity

II. Is multiculturalism a political concept?

A) yes, if it means the equal rights and respects accorded to distinct cultural groups or traditions by laws and governmental practices
B) no, if it simply refers to the existence of distinct cultural groups within the same nation-state, regardless of their relative legal status

III. Does multiculturalism mean some kind of egalitarianism — equality of opportunity or equality of outcome?

A) If multiculturalism means equal rights and respect for distinct cultural groups, then do individuals deserve equality of opportunity regardless of race or ethnicity (or other defining category)? How does one define equality of opportunity?

B) Does the egalitarianism of multiculturalism require equality of outcome or result? That is, if 50% of the population in your city is Hispanic, should 50% of the police force or teachers or corporate executives be Hispanic? If only 5% are Hispanic, how do you explain the difference in outcome, especially if you maintain that there has been an equal opportunity to try?

1. Does the inequality of outcomes prove racial or ethnic discrimination? Is it the result of the social and sometimes legal/governmental discrimination practiced by some cultural groups against others? Does this mean that social and economic inequalities produce cultural differences?

2. Does the inequality of outcomes prove cultural differences in values and behaviors between groups? Are there groups that have better outcomes because of the relative superiority of their values, ideas, institutions, social practices, etc.? Does this mean that cultural differences produce economic inequalities?

3. Are inequalities of outcome statistically significant for whole cultural groups, or are these principally a matter of differences between individuals, who have distinct talents, skills, temperaments, etc.?

IV. How does multiculturalism change the way we write history, given that history is usually about the struggles of groups for land, power, wealth, social recognition, and cultural expression?