

Social Science as a Multicultural Canon

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The current debate over educational canons largely involves the humanities disciplines of history and literature. What the present controversy ignores, however, is that the social sciences long ago recognized and dealt with the exact issues—such as ethnocentrism and multiculturalism—at the core of the canonical debate.

Social scientists early on developed several ways to deal with biases inherent in one's cultural and status-based perspectives (though such biases have not, of course, been abolished). The social sciences were also among the first academic disciplines to include minority, women's, and third world studies in their disciplinary bodies of knowledge, inter-scholarly exchanges (at annual meetings, research programs, and so on), and main "required" teachings (for example, on American society). The social science core early on contained works reflecting cultures and viewpoints different than those of the main groups, such as W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Soul of Black Folk* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics*.

All of this indicates that the social sciences have long been relatively attentive to important elements of the issues at hand. Such a statement, though, would certainly have to be more qualified before it could be applied to the study and teaching of philosophy, English literature or mainstream, required history in the 1950s. This is not to deny that there have always been some mavericks in these fields who knew better.

Moreover, because the social sciences tend to be very concerned with methodology—especially when compared to the humanities—they seem to have progressed further in dealing with the problems of context, relativism, or "deconstruction." The social sciences are better equipped and better able to deal with the issues that threaten the future of a unified American society.

In turn, a greater reliance on social sciences in teaching future generations would help to evolve socially appropriate responses to the challenges posed by multiculturalism. Before I elaborate these points, I turn to a discussion of the main issues that must be dealt with in the canonical debate.

Polarization

One of the marks of an intellectual is the ability to recognize gradations, to see merits in arguments of both sides of an issue (although not necessarily of equal weight), and generally to take into account the complexities of the world without being overwhelmed by them. True, all knowledge simplifies; we cannot deal with the world if we try to duplicate the full measure of its rich variety in our conceptual paradigms. However, this does not mean we need to strip the world down to one or two categories.

Our popular (or mass) culture tends to dichotomize—typically one is asked whether one is a liberal or a conservative, hawk or dove, religious or secular—and to search for single-cause explanations of most social phenomena, ranging from drug abuse to trade imbalances. When a sense of social injustice is added to positions advanced by those who speak for popular culture, polarization soon tends to follow, in which two categories (hardly ever three, not to mention a higher number of positions or gradations) are bestowed with highly charged affect and with strong normative valuations. One is expected to be pro-life or pro-choice, for or against the death penalty, and so on.

The non-dialogue on multiculturalism is a prime example of this troubling tendency that hinders analysis and treatment. As Nancy S. Dye, Dean of Faculty at Vassar College, notes in her review in *The New York Times* of Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education*: "Like

so much of the current debate on higher education, Mr. D'Souza's discourse is framed entirely in polarities." And Paula Rothenberg notes in the April 10, 1991 *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

. . . a steady stream of articles on 'politically correct' thought has appeared in countless national, regional and local publications. None of them, whether news stories or opinion pieces, makes even a pretense of presenting a fair and balanced account of the issues.

The recent fiery exchanges on the subject were opened with a barrage by Allan Bloom, who argued in his *The Closing of the American Mind* that Western civilization is endangered because "universities" have ceased to teach a set of shared Western values, those said to be found in "Great Books," and replaced them with a relativistic hodge-podge of dubious "low quality" or sectarian writings failing to distinguish between good and bad or right and wrong—instead presenting all as alternatives, neither better nor worse, simply different. Opposing the substitution of personal opinion for sound ideas, Bloom writes: "Cultural relativism succeeds in destroying the West's universal or intellectually imperialistic claims, leaving it to be just another culture."

More recently, Dinesh D'Souza, author of *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, has argued that beyond attacking the substance of Western civilization, various activists also successfully challenged the canons of Western thinking by "deconstructing" revered texts, showing them up to be either full of white male biases, or merely relativistic presentations that have no more standing than any other ideological track. Critics such as D'Souza and Bloom call for restoring the central canons of the West in university teaching.

On the other side of the polarized confrontation, a number of writers, such as Asa Hilliard III, Molefi Asante, and Bell Hooks, have argued that diverse viewpoints enhance the university in ways the traditional Western curriculum cannot. But they, too, put their position starkly. Asante was quoted in a recent *Newsweek* article as saying: "There are only two positions, either you support multiculturalism in American education, or you support the maintenance of white supremacy."

These writers recommend teaching students in a particular, culturally preferred way (for example, Afrocentric studies) without any core curriculum, or by replacing the core curriculum with sequences of particularistic studies in place of a core curriculum. A

recent example is Stanford University which canceled its Western Culture requirement in favor of a new "Culture, Ideas and Values" program emphasizing race and gender issues. Stanford's action—though classified by some as moderate—clearly exhibits the particularistic direction in which higher education is said to be turning. These writers also favor teaching white males the inherent biases of their culture by exposing them liberally to other cultures, while teaching minorities and women about their histories of suffering at the hand of ruling classes and a discriminatory, prejudiced establishment, to instill in them pride in the achievements of their race, gender, and class.

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Both viewpoints, once stripped of their excesses, have some merit, and treatments might be evolved that would address the legitimate concerns of both sides. Few would deny that our culture was, and to some extent still is, insufficiently aware of the injustices wreaked on minorities, women and the third world, and that our list of "great books," music, art, and other cultural mainstays does not give sufficient recognition to the achievements of other cultures and societies, such as those from East Asia. And there are elements of ethnocentrism and even xenophobia in most societies, ours included; hence, people ought to learn to be aware of such biases and their effects. Finally, people need to be aware of the contextualizing effects of social structures and categories on their thinking.

However, civilization is not a post-modern cafeteria with offerings for a great variety of tastes and no harm is done if the main course or a particular line of cuisine is lacking. Civilization, and even more so, specific cultures of particular societies, require a core of shared perspectives and values and a shared language. Without such sharing, the babble of tongues—the result of people unable to converse with one another, either because they literally do not speak each other's languages or they command conflicting bodies of knowledge, assumptions and perspectives—retards the vital foundations for civic order and democratic polities of dialogue, civility and consensus-building.

Even from a narrow political viewpoint, the thesis that all Western products are simply a reflection of power, and hence other groups should use their power

to advance a new cause, is too narrowly construed. It makes the established groups dig in, and turns polity, society and culture into a brute confrontation in which established groups tend to prevail. An approach that appeals to values shared by all, without giving up on the political mobilization of previously disadvantaged groups, is much more likely to serve the quest for social justice. Nobody put this observation better than Cornel West, a leading Afro-American scholar, in an article in *The New York Times* of April 3, 1991:

Now, instead of the civil rights movement being viewed as a moral crusade for freedom, it's become an expression of a particular interest group. Once you lose that moral high ground, all you have is a power struggle, and that has never been a persuasive means for the weaker to deal with the stronger.

Finally, extreme moral and intellectual relativism leaves all ethics and thinking in shambles, not just Western versions. If all values and categories are fair game for deconstruction, surely no Afrocentrist or feminist or third world perspectives remain immune from such nihilistic, destructive approaches.

As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. puts it in *The Disuniting of America*: "‘Multiculturalism’ arises as a reaction against Anglo- or Eurocentrism; but at what point does it pass over into an ethnocentrism of its own? . . . When does obsession with differences begin to threaten the idea of an overarching American nationality?"

The key to forwarding the canonical debate surely is not attack and counterattack, but rather the search for mutual understanding, respect, recognition of differences and the quest for unifying forces.

Pluralism within Unity

How can a society, culture or community accommodate a variety of perspectives and values without losing its viability, unity, and common ground? First, we must realize that many sub-areas are not part of the bonds that sustain the shared orientations, and hence that these are legitimate areas in which to foster variety, subgroup identification and expression. Folk dances are a case in point. We do not all have to appreciate square dances to be members of the North American community, and we can cherish jigs, horas, polkas, and many others.

Also we should realize that in many other sub-areas there is room for many legitimate sets of values and expressions, as long as they are treated as elements of a pluralistic mosaic and not the overarching frame-

work. One such example is religion. We teach about Christianity and Judaism, and we should teach about Islam and Zen Buddhism, as long as none claims to be *the* religion while denigrating all others and atheism, or seeks to impose its values on others.

Then we must recognize that there are some elements that are ties that bind us as a community and culture—Schlesinger calls them "unifying ideals." Not only need we transmit knowledge about these ideals (that can be pluralistic) but we also need to transmit commitment to one overarching framework. This holds, for example, for our opposition to totalitarian and authoritarian forms of government, and our insistence that our form of democracy will recognize minority and individual rights and guard them in clear, delineated areas. The Bill of Rights provides a fine list, albeit far from complete, of these areas. No cafeteria here. Hence, our teaching should not accord equal attention, and certainly not equal standing or value, to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, and *The Federalist Papers*. Students should be familiar with all of these, but they are not to be treated as equal pieces of a multicultural display.

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Thus, we may teach about various forms of government, but we seek to transmit and affirm the superior value of the constitutional-democratic form of government, compared to all others. We are not and cannot be value-neutral on this matter. The same holds for our commitment to be tolerant of one another. Students should know about the Ku Klux Klan, apartheid and the Marquis de Sade, but they should not be given the same centrality or recognition as John Locke, Edmund Burke, and Martin Buber.

We must also realize that even once we agree on a set of sensibilities that all ought to acquire and nourish, we may find that we can use a large variety of texts from different backgrounds interchangeably to get the same basic points across, as long as the same sensibilities are nourished. Thus, surely we can use a text written by a feminist, a gay, a Jew, a black and many others to teach the suffering of those at the receiving end of prejudice; it does not have to be *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

I agree with Erich Martel, who said in *The New York Times* on March 31, 1991, that African, and any other history, is replete with examples of the triumphs and achievements of humanity as well as its follies and setbacks. It matters less where the text comes from than how it is taught: as a venomous attack on all others, a bitter stream of free associations, or as a source to learn about human suffering and about how individuals and groups have inflicted cruelty upon others, as a call to mobilize to reduce injustice in the world.

Finally, there are some tools of communication (language, concepts) and of orderly discourse (logic, reasoning, scientific methodologies) that we need to share for culture and community, to allow for an accumulation of knowledge.

To draw in detail what belongs in which category—multicultural pluralism or bonding elements of various kinds—requires years of work by curriculum committees and cannot be undertaken here. All I suggest is a perspective that recognizes categories of pluralism as well as of common elements that bind us together, as an alternative to the view of unbounded pluralism.

Which Social Science?

Usually the question "Which social science?" brings to mind the differences among sociology, psychology, anthropology, and so on. These old classifications are less and less productive, as there are ever more works conducted with perspectives and methodologies shared by some segments of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and so on, that make these segments closer to one another than to other segments of the same discipline.

Thus, cultural anthropology has more in common with institutional sociology than with physical anthropology, and neoclassical economics has more in common with public-choice political science and exchange sociology than with institutional economics. I shall refer to these cross-disciplinary bodies of knowledge and perspectives as social science paradigms and methodologies rather than particular social sciences.

We find in the more interpretive, qualitative parts of social sciences numerous early works that afford students insights into the perspectives of different cultures, races, and genders. To cite but a well-known few, Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's *The Amdaman Islanders* (1922), and Claude Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind* (1966).

These are not some maverick works but works widely respected and taught in the social sciences for more than a generation. We find in the same segments

that the major work of the social sciences have alerted us to the need to overcome ethnocentric perspectives long before the current wide interest in the subject. This is a central thesis of much of cultural anthropology, long taught to generations of students, for example in Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934), and Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935). And regarding race, class and gender, there is Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), Allison Davis' *Social-Class Influence Upon Learning* (1948), Kenneth B. Clark's *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (1965), John Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937), Jane Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), Allison Davis, Burleigh Gardner, Mary Gardner and W. Lloyd Warner's *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*, Margaret Mead's *Male and Female* (1949), and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1957).

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In the quantitative parts of social sciences an attempt has been made to find measurements and variables that people from different perspectives can agree upon and draw on. Thus, both a capitalist and a socialist, a black and a white social scientist, and many others may agree that the GNP growth rate was lower in the 1980s than in the 1960s, that inflation was higher, and so on—given the prevailing definition and agreed upon measurements of these terms.

At the same time, social science methodologists regularly struggle with the problems of the values inherent in the selection of particular measurements versus others, and the particular ways in which the variables are construed. Thus, they call attention to and are aware that estimations of the extent of poverty changes a great deal if one measures only income or income and assets (for example, many among the poor who have income are homeless because they have no assets, and cannot build any from their low incomes); that changes in the size of the GNP measure economic growth or decay, but do not reflect depletion of the environment and social conditions; and statistics about what is called "illegitimate birth" among minorities do not take into account that many black Americans live in common-law marriages. Similarly, United States

unemployment figures usually cited refer to people actively seeking work, but not to those referred to as "discouraged workers." Hence, these measurements systematically underestimate the measure of people out of work. As a result, they also mislead by overestimating unemployment early in a recession and underestimating it late in a recession. The same variety of viewpoints exists for IQ tests and mental health classifications.

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Recognizing these built-in values and definitional problems does not remove them, but it does allow social scientists of different perspectives to dialogue with one another, to watch for biasing implications and to seek to cope with them. And, it allows them to seek to institute measures that capture the aspects they hold need to be covered—without turning the exchange of perspectives into a deafening shouting match or mindless relativism that extreme deconstructionism tends to generate.

Each year social science classes make millions of young Americans aware of their cultural biases, psychological blinders, and lack of attention to matters of class and power—even those classes and reading materials that do not cover or include minority, feminist or third world material explicitly. For example, it is hard to conceive of a course of study in social psychology that would not result in some enhanced understanding of the role of groups and culture and values and prejudice in one's thinking—no matter what the details of discussion. Similarly, it is hard to conceive of a course of study in institutional sociology or cultural anthropology without seeing a significantly enhanced awareness of the role of culture and social structure in one's life. The same holds true for the awareness of power—in political sociology and some forms of political sciences.

Finally, the concepts of unbounded pluralism versus pluralism-within-unity are themselves the product of the parts of social sciences in which political theory, macro-sociology, and others serve to introduce societal

perspectives that are more accurate and constructive than concepts used elsewhere, for example, the opposition of assimilation to disunity, as if there were no middle ground. The list of writings on this subject is long indeed, including such early works as those of Arthur F. Bentley and David Truman, Theodore Lowi, and most recently and directly to the issue at hand, that of Diane Ravitch, who argued in *The Responsive Community*: "We are a multicultural people, but also a single nation knotted together by a common set of political and moral values. In the education we provide to our students, how do we reconcile our pluribus and our unum? How do we ensure that education promotes pluralism, not particularism?"

And that indeed should be the crux of the debate over educational canons. "The question America confronts as a pluralistic society," Arthur Schlesinger writes, "is how to vindicate the cherished cultures and traditions without breaking the bonds of cohesion. . . that hold the republic together."

The answer, at least in part, is that to overcome the obstacles to achieving a multicultural society bound together by a common supraculture, we must look toward the social sciences. Starting early on and continuing to the present, they have shown themselves both willing and highly able—much more so than the humanities—to confront and analyze those issues central to creating pluralism-within-unity.

Readings Suggested by the Author:

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