Chapter 3

Philosophical Perspectives on Multiculturalism

Stefan Sullivan

The phenomena generally grouped today under the rubric of multiculturalism span a spectrum from historical revisionism to social reform to global brand marketing. As such, multiculturalism is less about diverse ethnic groups cohabiting a common state or nation than a specific ideological *Zeitgeist* that promotes the recognition of these individual groups in various political, economic, and cultural spheres. At its best it represents, "the sensibility of openness to the enormous cultural differences that has always existed in American life, but whose fullness has been suppressed by the might of the dominant European culture" (Bernstein 1994, 5). By overcoming this suppression, multiculturalism claims a progressivist historical validity as the fin-de-siecle trend that seeks to make amends for the past misdeeds of Eurocentrism, in particular, the abuses of colonialism, slavery, racial discrimination, and the power paradigms embedded in WASP culture. However, because its rhetoric is replete with seductive liberal truisms about tolerance, compassion, and empowerment -- concepts that would not be out of place in the lofty guidelines of the Founding Fathers -- and because its supporters have recently managed to occupy the higher moral ground, it has generally been difficult for open minded critics to pinpoint the dangers and damages caused by multiculturalism's excesses. One can criticize its pedantry and righteousness, its stubborn efforts to gloss over

the reality of natural differences, its endorsement of self-serving claims to entitlements, and the logical flaws in its extreme cultural relativism, but it has generally resisted a more fundamental indictment of its underlying premises.

Such a critique of multiculturalism would highlight conflicts between the existential needs of personhood and the false security of group belongings. It would expose misleading elements in the monolithic portrayals of the Other, as well as the secondary status of ethnic identity in much of human interaction. Finally, it would reflect on the banality of the multicultural aesthetic, on a global level, when employed in the service of profit-driven corporations, or as a surrogate rootedness for cosmopolitan elites. Importantly, however, it would not seek to undermine the ideal of racial cohabitation per se. The need for diverse ethnic groups to live and work together within social parameters founded on tolerance, mutual respect and equal opportunity, is of such an obvious moral value that it need not be reiterated here. Furthermore, that the United States is still marred by a legacy of structural racism, discrimination, and racial antagonism, perhaps even more so now than 20 years ago, is also common knowledge. The concern is only that multiculturalism as a particular, but increasingly mainstream, ideology espousing a particular set of values has lost touch with reality and certain fundamentals about human coexistence. Philosophy, in so far as it seeks to transcend policy prescriptions, and historical and cultural particularities to reflect on the human condition, is in many ways best equipped to attempt to draw attention to this dilemma without necessarily espousing a particular political viewpoint.

In this chapter, I shall investigate multiculturalism from a philosophical perspective, taking a number of these themes into account. For the sake of simplicity, we shall progress from the general to the specific, beginning with the nature of personhood through group belonging to national self-awareness. While much of the discussion concentrates on multiculturalism's American context, the final section digresses to examine two international features of the ideology, the spiritual identity crisis of postwar Germany, and the role of cosmopolitan elites in appropriating exotic cultures. This final discussion is intended to expose some questions about the by-products of multiculturalism understood as not just an American, but a global phenomenon.

Entry Points

Truth and Relativism

Philosophers have generally steered clear from the multicultural debate for the simple reason that questions of racial and cultural inheritance are secondary to its more fundamental concerns; the contemplation of universals such as Mind, Will, the Self, Consciousness, the validation of truth and falsehood. Debates over these subjects, for better or worse, take place on a rarefied level of abstraction largely unaffected by historical or cultural contingencies. Nonetheless, one clear entry point into the debate comes from an introspective view of the discipline of philosophy itself, namely the erosion of its privileged access to truth. This trend is seen as one of the principal components of the postmodern philosophical agenda whereby the once fixed certainty about an all-encompassing, absolute truth, or objective standard of measurement for judgments, has given way to a fragmentary set of conflicting truth claims based very much on individual preferences. My idea of what is true, the postmodern would argue, has more to do with what is true for me than with some objective criteria that logically determine a statement or action to be true.[1] While the full contours of this dynamic cannot be reviewed here, suffice it to say that it emerges as a subset of a number of schools of thought including nihilism, post-structuralism and deconstructionism which can be traced back to the end of the last century. These various -isms, many of which are rooted in the work of Nietzsche and further developed by Heidegger and contemporary French philosophers such as Derrida and Foucault, derive from the European tradition of the 19th century that called into question the enterprise of making judgments of value and so-called truth claims on the basis of some absolute standard. From this viewpoint, truths which were traditionally considered self-evident, or ordained and legitimated by Western logocentrism, are seen as "based on standards that are ultimately imposed by and further entrenched by structures of power" (Taylor 1992, 70).

Insofar as the challenge to Western rationality was executed in an eclectic array of fields, whether the history of mental illness (Foucault) or textual analysis and the written word (Derrida), it opened the doors of various historical, institutional and cultural (both low- and highbrow) contexts to philosophical analysis. More importantly, for our purposes, it questioned the hierarchizing of civilizations on the basis of Western

paradigms and paved the way for the current era of cultural relativism. It is under the assumption that all cultures have an equal worth, there being no Absolute standard by which to measure them, that "multi-cultural relativists" have questioned the legitimacy of so-called foundationalist, that is, Eurocentric, academic curricula in the United States. However, this relativism, as a subset of the trend known as political correctness, often goes a step further in arguing that there is no longer any standard by which to measure certain behavioral preferences either, even if they counteract established social norms. The diehard relativist ascribes everything to a question of taste, and refuses to pass judgments based on some hierarchy of values, to acknowledge that some ideas, mannerisms or achievements are better than others.

The Recognition of the Other

The fragmentation of truth toward subjective preferences and its concomitant cultural relativism leads us to another entry point in philosophy's critique of multiculturalism, namely the recognition of the Other. As Heller notes:

> Even if a kind of Truth is absolute and ultimate for you, you can still recognize that the same Truth is not Truth for others. The idea of Truth enjoins us mutually to recognize each other's Truth. It is the highest form of the recognition of the Other (Heller 1993, 133).

This again has a neo-Heidegerrian ring, popularized by such philosophers as Derrida and Levinas,[2] but beyond its position in the academic canon, it raises a fundamental point, as important on a personal as it is on a communal level. That is, how our relationship to the Other, whether the other gender, race, or nation, impacts on our sense of self, and our ethical responsibility vis a vis other human beings. The relationship to the Other has particular poignancy on the national level when guilt, such as Germany toward the Jews or European settlers toward native Americans or blacks, and its manipulation by aggrieved parties comes to frame the debate about the rights and claims of these minority descendants in the present day. Nonetheless, despite its enticing conceptual relevance to multiculturalists, Otherness as often developed by white academic philosophers has been rightly criticized by minority theorists as unrooted in a real biographical understanding of the Other.[3]

The Limits of Empiricism

A third entry point into the multicultural debate for philosophy lies in the vacuum left by disenchantment with more empirical forms of analysis. In particular, contributors to the discussion of race relations in America have expressed growing frustration in the viability of statistical demonstrations in making informed judgements about the comparative status of ethnic groups.[4] The problem is not only that surveys and questionnaires can be manipulated by conservative and liberal alike, but also that, increasingly their results cancel each other out. For every graph revealing an increasing marginalization of blacks, is another graph showing the rapid expansion of the black middle and upper income group. Instead, these critics of empiricism call for flexible, new thinking that can accommodate the myriad of institutional, cultural, systemic and historical processes outside of the biological fact of race that nonetheless impact on the condition of various minority groups. As such, even if philosophy has been often justly criticized for its vagueness, its ability to abstractly mediate the conflicting statistically-based claims of various interest groups makes it applicable to the current crisis in race relations. A case in point is the current debate over affirmative action, one of the hallmarks of the civil rights movement but now mired in controversy over federal classification of racial groups, the meaning of various economic and demographic data, and counterproductive employment and admissions quotas. A fresh perspective can arguably only emerge by questioning whether something as complex as race relations can be resolved and balanced, like a federal budget, through empirical means.[5]

Reason, Sensuality and the Good Life

The above discussion had the task of reviewing some possible areas where philosophy, commonly perceived as distant from contemporary race issues, can contribute toward our understanding of multiculturalism. In the sections which follow, a critical view will be advanced on the basis of theoretical constructs that question some of the underlying assumptions of the multicultural agenda.

A significant corollary to the postmodern relativization of truth is its skepticism about the paradigm of rationality. This attitude has equally been adopted by multiculturalists who equate the white dominated majority society with the Eurocentric's excessive focus on rationality to

the detriment of other aspects of the human persona. Simply put, the whole of Western philosophy, with its core pillars of Greek, Roman and Christian thinking, revolves around a number of basic dichotomies such as the distinction between head and heart, mind and body, reason and feeling. The faculty of reason, or logos, and its suppression of natural appetites and desires, has been seen, from the Greek period onwards, as the fundamental characteristic separating us from animals. It endows us with language and the means by which we assign rules to ourselves to create a stable and harmonious society. It is the means by which, beginning with Kant and continuing through the Enlightenment, philosophy has sought to liberate man from mysticism and religiously ordained dogma by showing that only that which can be rationally demonstrated can be recognized as true.

Traditionally, Western philosophy has posed the relationship between reason and feeling in terms of a paradigm of domination and subordination. The purpose of the mind, of reasoning judgment, is to restrain the arbitrary desires of the body, or sensual desires. From this very presupposition, the paradigm of domination sets in, as classically stated by Aristotle in his *Politics*: "The element which is able, by virtue of its intelligence, to exercise, forethought, is naturally a ruling and master element; the element which is able, by virtue of its bodily power, to do what the other element plans, is a ruled element, which is naturally in a state of slavery" (Aristotle 1958, 1252b).

For the sake of simplicity, let us suppose that the multicultural debate can be framed within the structure outlined by Aristotle above. From that perspective, actions based on rational decision making, while indisputably playing a role in all human behavior, are prioritized to a fault in white, and particularly male, Eurocentric thinking. Along these lines the dictatorship of reason has bred a culture of violence, of clinical, bureaucratic mechanisms, of dispassionate pursuit of material goals at the expense of the less technologically advanced peoples. Under this rubric would fall the European colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, the centuries long subjugation of women, the male suppression of feeling and intimacy within relationships and the family structure (one of authoritarian rather than democratic child rearing), the victory of capitalism over more egalitarian forms of distributing wealth (on the basis of social justice rather than rational competition), and the preoccupation with technological progress as opposed to promotion of the arts. It is not my purpose here to validate or question the legitimacy of these

viewpoints, only to show how they emanate from a critical opposition to the predominance of logocentrism in Western civilization.

Assuming such a view speaks certain truths, however one-sided and misleading, we are still left with a choice as to whether or not we want to be active participants in this type of rational society, an organization based on the constant correlation between intellectual achievement and material reward. Of course, it might be equally absurd to hypothesize a society in which reason were subordinated to our arbitrary desires without rules or regulations. Such a civilization, as evoked in the fantastical imagery of Bosch, DeSade and Dante and in the political theory of Hobbes, would consist of a licentious free-for-all guided only by the instinct of sensual gratification and violence in the name of self-preservation. Or, closer to the present day, one imagines the peaceful hippy commune guided by lethargy, leisure and LSD. In other words, neither a society in which rationally-guided progress is either the sole measure of success or entirely absent is satisfactory for realizing the unique potential of every human being.

There is, however, a middle ground. If, for the sake of argument, we are to assume that Aristotle is wrong, not that reason is subordinated to feeling, but that in fact both sides of the brain, so to speak, are equally conducive to our self-realization, then, to be logically consistent, we must take a step back and consider from a new light, the stereotypes which have cast minorities and women in a lesser light than male, European culture, dominated by the paradigm of reason. From this perspective the attributes of sensitivity, compassion, irrationality, athleticism, rhythm, creativity, sexuality, that is, all those attributes which when cast in the light of negative stereotypes compromise the identity and self-confidence of women and minorities, are on an equal pairing with those traits normally grouped under the rubric of reason. In other words, within the parameters of the mind/body conflict, we can cast off the hierarchy of reason, not so much by challenging its supremacy, or bad-mouthing its contribution to our civilization, but rather by embracing feeling and sensuality at face value, by transforming the negative stereotypes into a form of empowerment.

Under this assumption, we are not yet presenting a new model for race relations but rather simply affirming the equal contribution rational and irrational traits make to leading a good life. If I were a woman, I would take pride in my intuition, in my innate compassion for fellow human beings, in an uncalculating motherly instinct, in my interest in consensus rather than conflict, in sharing rather than competition. However,

importantly, I would not argue from a feminist standpoint, that these traits should necessarily be recognized by male dominated rational society as equal benchmarks for success within that society. I would accept that, should I decide to participate in that society, I would have to suppress certain traits that form an integral part of my gender identity. Likewise, if I were black, I would take pride in natural athleticism, in my sense of rhythm and dance, in my overt sexuality, in retaining a sense of humor and a notion of the carefree, good life. Not only would I take pride in these attributes, I would seek to use them to my advantage even if and when I choose to compete within the white, male dominated culture of power. However, I would not assume that these racial-genetic traits could replace the entrance requirements to that culture.

To call these traits natural to a particular race or gender may appear blasphemous to the multiculturalists. However, it is only so to those who wish to conform to the pattern of behavior and markers of success of the rationally guided European white male society, and feel that appropriating and endorsing their own racial stereotypes hampers their efforts to do so. If, however, one assumes, as I do, that sensuality, compassion, a lust for life, are equal in stature to material achievement and the dullness of a regimented daily routine, then one should not suffer an inferiority complex if one embraces this equality. In other words, stereotypes speak an undeniable truth about ethnic groups because they are based on socially and historically observed patterns of behavior. But it is a truth which speaks only to those who wish to hear it. It, furthermore, revolves around a different notion of happiness than the one endorsed by Eurocentric culture.

Furthermore, we must also address the fact that for all the status quo endorsed qualities of the white male, there are also a number of negative attributes which must be taken into account. These are the by-products of rationality as they impact on one's understanding of the self. They include an inability to relate to others, the loneliness of the selfish pursuit of material goals, the blandness and sexlessness of its popular culture, as exemplified by such negative epithets as mannered "Eurojazz," or derivative "white rap," both attempts at self-expression within an artistic medium alien to many white people. As a black journalist noted recently about white attempts to 'be cool,' "there is a subterranean but direct lineage from Norman Mailer in the late fifties hailing 'the Negro hipster' who lives on the edge of danger to today's white rappers contorting their faces and flailing their arms about in absurd attempts at street credibility" (Lamar 1992, 91). This attempt to appropriate the energy and spirit of

blacks reflects the extent to which blackness, particularly in America's postwar period, acts as an icon of unrestrained manhood for the repressed white male. Along these lines, the Beatniks challenged the claustrophobic domesticity of the Eisenhower era -- as seen in Kerouac's naive and whimsical desire to be black, suffering, dark and bluesy. By seeking to appropriate qualities they admired in the Negro, an admiration which continues to this day among young fashion-conscious Americans, they hoped to transcend their confining white bread image, of "hard work, good clean fun, and chastity and piety and success" (Baldwin 1961, 132).

Multiculturalism wants to deny that the traits so many members of the white majority admire among minority groups are innate, rather than a product of stereotyping. However, by doing so, it also ignores that so much of what counts as black culture based on these traits, is actually American culture. Or, in other words, the particular black contribution is so forcefully linked to American cultural identity per se -- whether it is blues, jazz, rock and roll, or basketball -- that the multicultural attempt to intellectualize away this contribution either as part of a social narrative of oppression, or as a footnote to a supposedly more worthy potential for contributions in science, law or other so-called 'white professions,' does a disservice to the black community. Such a view does not deny the potential for, and growing evidence of, black success in medicine or law. It merely relativizes membership in the professional class as one, among many, avenues for success and happiness. It places reason and sensuality on an equal footing and thereby reappropriates stereotypes away from the negative context in which they are now used. By focusing on the dual world views that make our life worth living, one arguably achieves a more flexible spectrum in which individuals of both majority and minority groups can make choices about the way they wish to live.

Personhood Without Ethnicity

Our Existential DNA

We have suggested that our senses of self are influenced by the way in which we balance our rational faculty and our sensual drives, and that this balance is often dictated by, but does not necessarily restrict us to, our cultural and racial affiliation. Furthermore, we have shown that if our main criterion is self-realization rather than material success then we need not jettison those sensual drives which are normally considered inferior

within the white male paradigm of rationality. By suppressing these we are only conforming to standards alien to the full enjoyment of life. However, even if we accept that certain patterns of our behavior are racially inherited, we must still ask ourselves how central race is, and should be, to personhood. If we ask ourselves the simple question, "Who am I?" we notice that we are a composite of a number of identities, including sexual, physico-aesthetic, national, familial, class and educational. These traits take on even more importance when we judge and measure ourselves against members of the same race, where the historical and cultural stigmas of our color, have little relevance. In this context, the question who am I becomes an issue of individual responsibility to the self. In other words, in addition to our biological DNA, which we inherit and can really do nothing about, we also have an existential DNA that we create and compose as we evolve as human beings.

To assume from the outset that such individuation is not possible due to social barriers associated with one's race ignores the myriad of possible existences within one's own racial category. To say I am a black man or black woman in a white man's world, as the cliche goes, says nothing about what sort of black man you are; artistic, scientific, rich, poor, ugly, beautiful, violent, or poetic. Multiculturalism distracts minority members from the quest for their authentic self by framing their destiny constantly in terms of its relationship to the majority race. It raises color to an autonomous *Existenzcategorie*, thereby creating the illusion that once this category is appropriated, one has resolved the problem of personal identity along the lines: Now that I know that I am black, I know who I am. On the contrary, the demands by minority groups to have their uniqueness recognized only obscures the development of their existential DNA, which, ultimately, is not a socially dictated process but rather begins with the individual's responsibility to himself. As Bernstein notes: "It (multiculturalism) erodes individualism in that it presents people primarily as products of their racial and sexual identity, rather than as free, self-fashioning members of a democratic society who assume responsibility for themselves." (Bernstein 1994, 37).

Praising individual responsibility over social causality may appear like an arch conservative political viewpoint. However, on a philosophical level, it merely implies that we must define who we are independent of socially-dictated stigma (whether race, gender or religion) in order to achieve a viable personal identity. It is as if, to adopt a device coined by the political theorist, John Rawls for somewhat different purposes,[6] we

ask ourselves, if I had no knowledge of my sex, color, or class, what sort of person would I like to be, what sort of things would I like to achieve in my life, how would I like to be recognized. These questions should always be in the forefront when shaping personal identity. The barriers or advantages that certain racial and cultural affiliations proffer are only a secondary consideration.

Presocial Personhood

By addressing the elements that form our personhood outside of ethnicity, we are not saying that the existential DNA is dependent solely on our individual responsibility. Neither do we claim that environmental factors can be held solely accountable for a misguided development. Between these two opposing sides, often grouped under the label of nature and nurture, there is a middle ground that combines both elements, namely the role of parenting. In the debates over the plight of blacks in America, much has been made recently of the influence of the parents in steering children toward or away from the daisy chain of bad schooling, violence and criminality, or simply low achievement. Even in the early 1970s, amidst the enthusiasm for integrating schools, there emerged a renewed focus on the family environment. As noted by James Coleman, whose seminal *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, published in 1966, convinced many of the virtues of the forced assimilation: "All the data assembled in the last few years tends to show that the family level of education and family background in general are the single most important factors related to academic achievement."[7]

As we all know, in children between the ages of 6 and 18, parents play a significant role in fostering moral values and judgments, and, often, plant the seeds for certain vocational interests. Parents influence our first contact with certain books, sports and social activities. In and through our familial environment, we also become aware of our uniqueness vis a vis our peers. We come to recognize inequalities of athletic and artistic talent, of intellect, of beauty and of eloquence and bravery. It is undeniably the parental responsibility to foster those nascent talents and traits which will allow the child to realize him or herself. This presocial personhood is less marked by racial or cultural affiliation, than by the inherited and nurtured traits of parental role models. If these are absent, children seek them out in surrogates, whether next door, on the street, or on television. While numerous policy prescriptions have been advanced

to improve parenting among minority groups, such as counseling to teen mothers and single-parent homes, fundamentally, a theoretical shift must occur, away from schools and social programs, in order to drive home the pedagogical responsibility of parenthood. One must activate the will among parents to channel and nourish the unique potential of each child. That potential need not necessarily be intellectual; the same ingredients for success apply in any number of spheres. The key element is the continuous and patient demonstration by the parent of the link between hard work and personal reward.

Back to Bootstraps: The Upside of Suffering

In short, the multiculturalist attempt to implicate discriminatory barriers for the lack of success of racial minorities has obscured the degree to which we are all accountable for our self-realization. This may seem reminiscent of conservative politicians opposed to any form of social spending to help the needy. Rather they appeal to "rags to riches" stories of American corporate mythology, the cornerstone of which is that you "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" as Reagan used to say. However, one need not wholeheartedly endorse the Republican icon of the self-made man to keep an open mind about the virtues in overcoming hardship.   In fact, while basic principles of human justice demand government-led social spending, the dialectic of self-development and suffering is still poorly understood. Fundamentally, one needs to question whether the sense of satisfaction achieved through overcoming hardship, the single minded pursuit of goals in the face of daunting challenges, do not outweigh the discomforts of not being born into privilege. In other words, can we grow in and through our suffering?

The current meritocracy rewards those who struggle to make it in life more than those who are born into wealth.   A mediocre, stable environment often perpetuates further mediocrity, whereas instability and poverty can foster greatness by turning the agent away from his immediate chaos and towards a personal inner sanctum. As Fukuyama notes with reference to the classic immigrant's struggle in America, being a poor and persecuted outsider can also be a source of strength because it forces the immigrant into a ruthless self-examination, reinforcing the values that are crucial for survival (Henry 1994, 207).   However, arguably, this heightened self-awareness, as a by-product of suffering, is neither elitist nor egalitarian. It explains the genius of a number of the

most talented writers, painters, and composers who came from troubled, broken homes in which, to combat the chaos around them, they sought solace in the development of their latent talents, and created a fantasy world to which only they had access. In the dialectic of suffering, the self is forced to seek a meaning and purpose within the chaos around him. One seeks byways, alternate routes and exits from the misery, through the development of special talents, through innovative thinking, and enterprising behavior.

Multiculturalists obscure the dialectic of suffering by assuming falsely that everyone should be given a fair and equal chance via an institutional leveling of natural differences. However, it is through overcoming, through our own resources and free will, naturally endowed shortcomings that we are only able to approximate an authentic sense of self.

Authentic Belonging: Defining the Value of the Group

All the above themes have centered on individual responsibility to self-development. The uniqueness that we create to distinguish ourselves from others is a function not of racial affiliation, but rather of our existential DNA, the multitudinous components of our personhood that make our life worth living. Turning now to the communal aspect of the multicultural debate, we ask ourselves what is the value of the group for individual self-realization. Most of the common responses to this question center on man's instinct for socialization, the greater meaning and purpose attached to life through the shared pursuit of common goals. Since the last century, and the advent of the industrial age, the themes of fragmentation and alienation have risen to the fore. With increased mobility, the decline in traditional institutions such as family, village, and class, people are confronted with anonymity in a society of competitive members struggling for scarce resources. Group affiliation, satisfying as it does the human need for recognition and belonging, is thus seen as a way of asserting individuality amidst a mass of fragmented others. However, while creating a fragile context of security for certain alienated individuals, the multicultural endorsement of racial group belonging has at the same time increased antagonisms among groups. The abstract idea of America that once bound together diverse immigrant groups has now been replaced by competing claims about which groups that idea has historically served.

This trend is unsettling on two fundamental counts. Firstly, it not only ignores the diversity of *cultures* within the category of *race*, but also, in doing so, it turns a blind eye toward the numerous communicative and experiential channels that link members of diverse ethnic groups above and beyond racial affiliation. Secondly, it is intellectually dishonest in that its self-serving pedagogical agenda distorts historical truths.

Multiple Cultures Within One Race

There is no better way of generating enthusiasm for a struggle than through the monolithic portrayal of the enemy, the Other. Both the whites and minority groups have been guilty of such portraits. Until recently, and to a certain extent, still present, whites have been guilty of the more outrageous stereotyping, from minstrel shows, to Aunt Jemima, Amos and Andy, and the Willie Horton advertisement campaign of the 1988 elections, playing on white fears, ignorance and insecurity. While these misrepresentations are fascinating reflections of race relations in their own right, we are more interested here in the multicultural portrait of white society, or Eurocentrism. This is not only because the white stereotyping is already well known, and to a certain extent atoned for, in the current era of political correctness, but also because by highlighting the diversity of white subcultures, one can more easily highlight the secondary nature of racial identity in much of human interaction. Furthermore, this diversity is so extensive to render the term Eurocentrism virtually meaningless.

Eurocentrism, as the philosophical foundation of the U.S. Constitution, social values, our system of high education, and the outlook of the status quo, is the key bogeyman of multicultural rhetoric. Eurocentrism is caricatured as based on the individual pursuit of material gain, as in the following statement:

> To this extent, the Eurocentric philosophical system is considered unhumanistic in that the material needs (power, objects, physical gratification) of the individual are valued over the collective well-being of people. The unhumanistic character of Eurocentricity also emanates from the heavy emphasis on material and physical attributes of people as opposed to non-material or intangible qualities (Schiele 1994, 152).

While this passage is not the most eloquent attack on Eurocentrism, its very over-simplification and inexactitude provides a good example of a monolithic portrayal of the Other. If we actually observe the majority

white culture as they observe themselves, that is, by standards including everything except their whiteness, this monolithic portrayal begins to dissipate very quickly. Questions of class, education, profession, interests, interpersonal skills, dress style, are the principal sign posts by which members of the white majority size each other up. There are repressed preppie snobs, poor white trash trailer park inhabitants, hypersensitive academics, unidimensional Wall Street types, mountain biking MTV slackers, policy wonk Washingtonians, gay militants, cosmopolitan Eurotrash, fraternity jocks, petty thugs, beer chugging steel workers, caffeine addicted computer geeks, and monosyllabic farm boys. It would be an understatement to say that the color of their skin plays much role in the degree of common ground these disparate groups find among themselves. They are more likely to cross racial barriers to embrace their soulmates, that is, those who share their lifestyle and *Weltanschauung*, than seek solace in a common racial purity, or lock arms against the minority menace. This is an obvious, but too often ignored, point which categorically undermines any attempt at a monolithic portrayal of Eurocentrism.

However, this diversity of subcultures obviously does not just apply to whites. It applies to all ethnic groups so much so that it undermines any attempt to classify according to race. As one commentator notes:

> Ethnic groups are internally, culturally, and socio-economically differentiated. They possess crisscrossing values, beliefs, and situational identities; they compete among themselves over status and material resources; and are at various levels of generational assimilation and acculturation (Webster 1992, 198).

Monolithic portrayals of the Other and simplistic classification according to race obscure the common ground and communication channels that link together people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. These are as important to human interaction than a vague and socially divisive solidarity based on racial-genetic origins.

The Scourge of Intellectual Protectionism

The multiculturalist accent on racial group identity is propped up by esteem building history and humanities lessons. However, much like in the case of trade protectionism, intellectual protectionism distorts the mechanism by which the free exchange of ideas takes place. Because

multicultural pedagogues assume that the identity of their minority students are intrinsically linked to the historical achievements, failures or misery of their forebears, the past is taught in the best possible light. Ancestral virtues are exaggerated and vices downplayed particularly by transposing the latter onto the collective action of the monolithic, Other, European civilization. The more comical excesses of this practice have been documented at length in the American press. Furthermore, the weaknesses of Afrocentrism as an alternative -- as opposed to a supplement -- to our European dominated educational cultures have already been exposed in detail by numerous scholars, some of the most eloquent from within the African American community itself.[8] What must be considered, however, is not the virtue of learning about other cultures, or the importance of historical self-awareness among ethnic groups. These are indisputable truths. Rather, of more importance in the current debate, is the need to retain objective standards for measuring quality in order to sustain the younger generation's faith in the educational system. In education, and particularly history education, where the greatest revisionist battles are being fought, truth is not a tangible substance that can be boiled down to simple memorable phrases, but rather an approximation based on an aggregate of conflicting viewpoints. The more broadly we read and stretch our imagination and question established tenets, the closer we get to what is really true, and not simply a pre-packaged set of doctrines. This is, however, something different than radical postmodernism in which no truth is possible, only stories, or interpretations.   Rather, more along the lines of postmetaphysicians, in which reason is decentralized but never explained away, truth is a different sort of object in each sphere of learning. Its validation is nevertheless accomplished along certain rational procedures that conform to fixed notions of what a true statement is within that given discipline.[9]

In history, truth is an aggregate of interpretations based on fact or, at least, some consensus about 'what happened.' However, history is not only based on facts, and these facts are not only based on scientific data. The facts can be anecdotal, piecemeal, fragmented, even conjectural, and they then must be interpreted and compounded to arrive at an explanatory value. Nonetheless, in the final analysis, the main criterion is that the story makes sense given the data available. If a historian deliberately avoids facts or distorts them in such a way as to mislead the reader, then frankly, the truth is not being told. Since the reader, and particularly the young reader, is not in a position to verify facts, they can only engage in

a kind of comparative reading, measuring interpretation against interpretation of the same facts, texts, or historical trends. As such, the quest for truth in historical studies has an important quantitative component -- that is, one needs to read a lot of books about the same events to get a full picture -- but it is only valid if and when we have the full access to numerous conflicting interpretations. Textbooks, for reasons of brevity and simplicity, necessarily limit that freedom. That is why their content has become so important and politically charged. However, while all minority cultures have something to contribute to our historical understanding, this does not imply that they are all of equal value, and should be given equal space and time in educating school children. Furthermore, if the rendering is too pious and idyllic to be true, such as the rosy portraits of native American village life, or the collective memory-lapse regarding African complicity in the slave trade, then the cause of liberal education is not properly served.

Intellectual protectionism, like economic protectionism, is over the long term damaging and unproductive. On a pedagogical level, particularly in history education to minorities, three steps could be taken to ward off this trend. First, foundationalism must be preserved so that minority students can challenge the monolithic portrayal of Eurocentric culture advanced by multicultural pedagogues. If that foundationalism is well constructed, students will become more skeptical of 'us and them' rhetoric when referring to cultural differences. This is particularly the case in philosophy where disturbing platitudinous constructs opposing Eurocentric reason to Afrocentric feeling, ignore the diversity of counter posing positions in European philosophy.[10] In Western thought, for every neo-Kantian, there is a Rosicrucian mystic; for every tidy British empiricist there is a messy German metaphysician. This may seem like an obvious point, but it is sad the degree to which students, when deprived of a foundationalist curriculum, can be so proud and pretentious in their ignorance. The blind and simplistic association of materialism with Western culture sends, not just minority members but many privileged, white fashion victims, shopping for an alternative ideology, whether Islam, the Dalai Llama, or Rastafarianism, soaking up the surface gloss of these worthy institutions, in the name of some self-conscious rebellion against the 'clinical rationalism' of Western culture.

Second, members of minority cultures should be dissuaded from intrinsically linking their identity to the victimization of their forbearers. Affirming one's generic sense of self before giving any consideration to

ethnic identity is the best way to break the cycle of guilt, blame and retribution characteristic of the multicultural agenda.

Third, the teaching of minority history and literature should supplement, not supplant, educating students on the Western foundations of U.S. culture. Not only from a pragmatic standpoint, in the sense that these foundations will allow one to function and succeed more effectively in Western society, should one choose to do so, but it is also important from the standpoint of universal knowledge, the time-tested standards regarding what educated people should know. These canonical classics of the Great Books variety; i.e., Shakespeare, Voltaire, Goethe, Tostoevsky, Ibsen, Joyce, to name a few, have as their main topics issues that, above all, concern the self in his world. The dead white men who, for the most part, make up these controversial reading lists were, while they were alive, not particularly aware of the fact that they were either white or men. They were neither concerned with their race nor their gender. These dead White men were concerned with man's relation to himself, to others, to God. They wrote about love, death, loyalty and betrayal, and they did so in an original way that struck a chord among generations of readers.

The contemporary need for belonging in a fragmented and mobile society should not be satisfied at the expense of self-integrity and intellectual honesty. Monolithic portrayals of the Other, and inaccurate self-serving historical interpretations, only widen the gap of understanding between races. However, as we turn now to multiculturalism in the national and international arena, we shall see that the attempts to bridge that gap through post war radical aura of liberal tolerance can have wide ranging effect on the self-awareness of nations. In addition, as we approach the millennium and multicultural interaction seems increasingly the norm, there appears to be a certain longing for internal coherence and purity of monocultural traditions.

Multiculturalism Among Nations and the Rootless

> People from diverse cultures may dress differently, observe different cultures, and have distinctive appearances, but beneath the surface we're all very much alike. Tribu celebrates that.[11]
> Ken Landis, President of Benetton Cosmetics Corporation

As the above statement suggests, postmodernism and its companion, multiculturalism, are in danger of lapsing into banal marketing slogans.

"We're all different and yet, we're all alike." Corporations have hopped onto the ethnochic gravy train and tapped into the solidarity contemporary youth feel for exotic cultures. These corporate-generated sentiments are so heartfelt that young people are willing again and again to dip into their pockets to support multicultural trappings: CDs with the latest Afrogroove, chequered intifada scarves, rice peasant pajama bottoms, and Benetton's new perfume call Tribu. But why should we be surprised? Multiculturalism underlies Benetton's whole marketing campaign, black meets white, white meets yellow, yellow meets black, all little children of color meet together on their advertising posters and television advertisements spanning the globe. CNN, the cable news network for tired traveling executives presents the sights and sounds of every corner of earth, informing us helpfully about a light rainshower tomorrow in Bogota, or a cold weather front moving over the Gobi desert. MTV brings us multicultural presenters with cute local accents and profiles of Sting, who tries to be everywhere where white people are not, or of Paul Simon bringing the rootsy rhythms of Zulu warriors into every New England college dormroom.

Such a perspective may appear cynical insofar as every effort to expand beyond our horizons should be lauded, and if it takes corporate institutions to filter and sanitize the exoticism of the Other to the Everyman, it is at least better than vegetating in our parochial world view. Nonetheless, our concern is more the superficiality and spiritual sterility of the multicultural aesthetic. The adoption of global exoticism by Western society not only devalues the authenticity of these rites and traditions within their indigenous context, but also it seduces Westerners away from investigating and embracing their own culture closer to home. In other words, the question that should be asked is; to what extent does multiculturalism undermine the purity of cultural identity, and is this good or bad?

I wish to investigate this issue from two perspectives. One is that of Western cultural alienation, the idea that the interest in exotic cultures is a symptom of a more deeply rooted spiritual crisis at home. This I would like to take up with reference to postwar Germany, for the simple reason that it represents the most extreme case of a Western nation denying its own history and culture to embrace broad principles of liberal tolerance and diversity. The resulting spiritual vacuum highlights a problem with ramifications for European culture as a whole. Secondly, increasing mobility and cross-cultural communications has engendered a new cosmopolitan elite of multicultural tourists. They no longer feel they have

responsibility or commitment to their native culture, and, in fact, feel alienated from it. The resulting dilution of cultural purity, the endemic internationalism spread everywhere, is symptomatic of the postmodern era where fragments of other cultures bombard us daily over television, in restaurants, bars, at the supermarket, and in magazines. However, more importantly, this rootlessness at the same time speaks to a modern need for belonging which many cosmopolitans find in the purity and consistency of exotic monocultures.

The Nation as Airport Lounge: The Case of Germany

Just like individuals, every nation is at some point or another compelled to ask itself who or what it is. What does it mean to be English, French, Italian? Can one speak of core values, traits and characteristics beyond language and cuisine that unite all citizens of that country together? Can one speak of a soul of a nation, that is partly, but not wholly made up of its racial identity, its belief in its evolution from a common genetic stock? Germany is a fascinating case in this respect not only because of its break with the past following World War II, but also because the very elements which led to the horror of that war and particularly the Holocaust, were centered on questions of race and cultural identity. In particular, the evil it perpetrated in the name of race relations rises to a philosophical level in that the Jew was not simply another race, but rather the very embodiment of the Other. From the warped Nazi perspective, the path to freedom, that is, the victory of the German nation, lay via the annihilation of the Jew. Thus, a monolithic portrayal of the Jew, as the very incarnation of everything antithetical to Nazi German values, was used to justify the horrors done to them. In the aftermath of the Second World War and Holocaust, the new German state, with considerable encouragement from the allied occupation, made an effort to supplant its own troubled identity with a generic multicultural liberalism. As such, its very embrace of multiculturalism is a collective existential response to its annihilation of the Other.

Because we are interested in the authenticity of the embrace of the Other and how it coincides or conflicts with national self-consciousness, Germany presents an ideal test case. Because the collective will of Germany during the Nazi period was so closely associated with a particularly negative standpoint vis a vis the Other, it is safe to ask whether the postwar response has not gone too far in the opposite

direction. That is, by deliberately discontinuing a spiritual link to the past which is rooted in a specific ethnic self-consciousness has Germany lost a critical orientation point by which to develop a new national identity? As Enzensberger notes, only half ironically:

> Other societies have even today not consumed their historical substance. They are weighed down by a stock of ideas and structures, habits and obsessions, which cannot be abolished at will. The Federal Republic on the other hand is blessed with a unique deficit. The Germans have blown up their history all by themselves; a brutal demolition enterprise that made their country a monstrosity of the new (Enzensberger 1992, 168).

The so-called 'monstrosity of the new' however was the emergence of a value system largely centered on middle class banalities, economic growth and consumer self-satisfaction. Because the only virtue of Germanness which the Germans themselves were willing to salvage from the ideological debris of the postwar was a certain pedantic thoroughness and technical excellence, this has been emphasized to the extent that a materialistic 'Made in Germany' patriotism has replaced more spiritually significant forms of national pride.[12]

Beyond the inarguably vacuous patriotism of the *Wirtschaftswunder* (the postwar economic miracle), some theorists have put forward an idea which grounds national feeling in a transnational, posttraditional loyalty to liberal political institutions. However, even this so-called *Verfassungspatriotismus* (constitutional patriotism) promoted by the well-known German philosopher, Habermas, cannot come to terms with the spiritual and cultural vacuum left by the rupture with the past.[13] It is a national identity of anti-nationalism, at once fervent, yet apathetic, transcending its borders to embrace the lofty dream of a united Europe. As Habermas notes:

> A national Identity, which is not in the first instance based on a republican, a constitutionally patriotic self-understanding, collides with the universalistic rules of the communal life of equal, co-existing life forms; it collides also with the fact that that political integration is now taking place on three levels -- statewide, national and European (Habermas 1990, 217).

According to Habermas (1990), in post-traditional society, of which postwar Germany is an exemplary model, the idea of national pride based on ethnic, cultural and linguistic links is a moral anachronism. It can no

longer accommodate the diversity and mobility of the modern European.
In its stead emerges an arena of open dialogue that seeks to build
consensus from the standpoint of a broad tenet of democratic liberalism.
However, the tolerant multiculturalism that would substitute for the
previous patriotism centered on the Prussian nation-state, or a
conservative Bavarian monarchy, is too arid and lifeless, too general in its
prescriptions and historically rootless in its foundations, to serve as a
guiding ideology for a nation, particularly the relatively monocultural
German one.   By injecting an ideological multiculturalism into its
monocultural social structure, the result has been a superficially broad
minded group of generic, liberal Europeans whose sense of nationhood is
woven together by common pursuit of economic growth and more
vacation days. As one self-critical German journalist once commented,
"the only territory West Germany is prepared to defend is Majorca."[14]

True, the legions of Italian, Yugoslav, Greek, and Turkish guest
workers who have emigrated to Germany since the late 1950s, did not
come for its dark and mysterious pine forests, or the bratwurst or the latest
staging of Wagner's *Lohengrin*. For them, Germany was a factory zone
in the process of reconstruction, suffering from critical manpower
shortage. The *Gastarbeiter*, the guest-workers, were neither encouraged
to assimilate nor were they particularly interested in doing so. In short,
the Germans and the foreign workers more or less tolerated each other;
they were coworkers building an economic miracle rather than citizens in
a common state. The question arises, however, as to whether tolerance is
the norm to strive for. Can a real community be founded on tolerance
alone, or does it merely create a society of self-centered atoms, like fellow
passengers at an international airport lounge biding their time until they
can depart, a plastic aura of international exoticism, a semblance of
comfort, a babel of foreign tongues, yet no sense of community? The
lounge, which is the postwar German national consciousness, has been
colonized by American mass consumerism and third world faddishness.
Its art and music culture is sadly derivative of foreign genres. And yet,
these borrowed lifestyles and ephemeral fashions are held aloft as a model
of diversity and multicultural tolerance, as an example of a country that
can prosper outside the traditional parameters of the nation-state.

Germany, in its eagerness to please the powers of the allied occupation,
first as collaborators in reconstruction, then as equals, and finally as
leaders in the creation of postwar Europe, has lost sight of its own
collective identity, its culture, history, and existential Dasein.   The
German soul was, of course, a problematic beast with all its attendant

metaphysical grandeur and petty bourgeois pedantry, its militaristic violence, and romantic worship of nature and the arts. As Nietzsche observed: "the Germans are more incomprehensible, more comprehensive, more unknown, more incalculable, more surprising, even more frightening to themselves than other peoples are -- they elude definition" (Nietzsche 1973, 155). Nonetheless, for all its complexity, the German had a soul that gave life and energy to the nation beyond material progress. Indeed, the over-reliance on economic growth as a source of pride creates difficulties now during a structural recession. Once its industrial might has been challenged by *fin de siecle* economic realities, in particular, the tax burden of reunification, an aging population and the lower wage costs next door in Eastern Europe, Germany has no spiritual energy to draw upon. Ultimately, there is no longer any idea of Germany that transcends the banality of everyday life.

Is it possible for the Germans to retrieve the romantic Geist and mystical grandeur of their prewar cultural aesthetic? Is it possible to recapture non-ecologically righteous ties to the land, as reaffirmed in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, or the poetry of Stifter, or the reassuring melodies of Alpine folk songs? Is it possible to reawaken the love of Heimat, of that elusive sense of home, without it immediately being implicated as neofascist demagoguery? Is it even possible for the German to restore pride in their nation, as a historically rooted central European ethnos linked to ancient Germanic tribes and imbibed with centuries of rich tradition and lore, without it appearing xenophobic? One might hope that it would be possible, with time, to retrieve the distinct Germanic iconography of the past on which any national sense of self can be based. However, the reality appears that Germany is going the way of the rest of the world, just slightly in advance. It is the harbinger of the multicultural mediocrity, the nation as airport lounge.

The Cosmopolitan Praetorian Guard

If the Germans feel lonely in their rootlessness, embracing every other culture except their own, they need not worry. For a new generation of cosmopolitan elites is emerging to take up leadership positions in the new global village. The problem is this new village has neither a main street, nor a local bar, nor a central park, nor community center. It is an imaginary device to explain the myriad of fragmented communities and communication channels that characterize the highly educated, highly

mobile new elite. The wealthy, jet setting meritocracy no longer has any ties to a particular community or hometown, nor a sense of civic duty and regional loyalties. Multiculturalism on the other hand, as Lasch has pointed out:

> suits them to perfection, conjuring up the agreeable image of a global bazaar in which exotic cuisines, exotic styles of dress, exotic music, exotic tribal customs can be savored indiscriminately, with no questions asked and no commitment required. The new elites are at home only in transit, en route to a high-level conference, to the grand opening of a new franchise, to an international film festival, or to an undiscovered resort (Lasch 1995, 6).

Multiculturalism provides the opiate against the alienation which contemporary elites feel toward their native culture. Insofar as mobility implies success, rootedness is the stigma of the complacent and slothful, in short, of those that have not made it.

However, it is not as if the cosmopolitan elite have unpatriotically abandoned the Rockwellian main street paradise in search of mambo dancing and Thai food, for the small town idyll of the heritage preservers has itself fallen victim to the increasing mobility, albeit less exotic, of the average citizen. As any pop sociologist will confirm, the stay at home VCR has replaced the drive-in theater, the drive-in fast food has replaced the neighborhood barbecue, and the suburban mall has replaced the mom and pop stores downtown. In short, average American society has fallen victim to its own craving for convenience and instant gratification, a trend which has steadily eroded the charm and communal spirit of small town life.

Therefore, although one can sympathize with Lasch's eloquent testimony to the lack of creative elite leadership at the small town level, it is partly the fragmentation of middle America itself that has driven these elites in search of cultural wealth outside their native context. For the aesthetic appeal of multiculturalism is namely that it is an aggregate of internally coherent and pure musical, artistic and culinary traditions which cosmopolitans may find lacking or not have bothered to investigate in their own Western culture. The relative insularity of salsa, mambo, Cuban jazz, Thai or Ethiopian cuisine from foreign influences, presents to the cosmopolitan elite a semblance, however ephemeral, of belonging. That sense of belonging comes from the fact that these traditions, however otherly and exotic, follow reassuring set rules that have endured for

centuries. Thus, the elite embrace the Otherness of multiculturalism because the constancy and purity of its traditions is missing in their own culture. What they are really valuing is the ethnocentricity, not diversity, of exotic cultures. Even if the local ethnicities are artificially preserved so that they can be consumed as aesthetic, exotic experiences,[15] the fact is, they satisfy a craving, now lost in the West, for simple communal life, time-worn traditions whose legitimacy is not called into question, and for ethnic and cultural purity. In short, the new multicultural elites value monoculturalism.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion of multiculturalism and its philosophical ramifications has sought to emphasize that our relationships to others should be built on a solid sense of self, whether on the personal, group, or collective level. For this reason, it is difficult to conjecture on the sort of political program of action, so much a part of the multicultural debate in America, which would alleviate racial antagonism. In fact, philosophy itself is ill-equipped to prescribe institutional solutions to problems deeply rooted in the human psyche. At best, it can only encourage shifts of consciousness among the agents involved by conceptualizing these problems in terms of their most general and common denominators. In the case of multiculturalism, this involves more than endorsing liberal truisms such as the virtues of tolerance, equal opportunity and racial harmony. That is only the starting point. For few still live under the illusion that either the rhetoric of good will, or the affirmative action dynamics of academic and political institutions can be the sole loci of progress in race relations in the United States. In fact, the resolution of racial antagonisms can only begin when issues of race and ethnicity are subordinated to other more fundamental categories of existence. This is not to say that we should deny our genetic origins. Quite the opposite. We should take pride in its strengths, and confront openly its shortcomings. And, by confronting the shortcomings, whether these are genetic or socially conditioned, we will be taking the first step toward transcending racial barriers. As an African critic has commented:

> Obviously, if the United States wants to correct the wrongs of history, race becomes a factor. But the dilemma is that the more you think racially to correct racial inequities, the more you reinforce the simplistic dichotomy

between black and white, which provides a fertile ground for antagonism and prejudice (Deng 1995, 17).

Rather than thinking racially, we should begin to think philosophically, inspire a return to individual responsibility, dismantle monolithic portrayals of the Other, and approach the study and experience of foreign cultures from a solid understanding of our own.

Endnotes

1. For useful discussions on the postmodern view of Truth, see A. Heller (1993, 114-35), Niekerk (1995), and Habermas (1990).

2. For a summary of Levinas reflection on ethical responsibility to the Other, see Serber (1995).

3. See for example, Hooks: "Without adequate concrete knowledge of and contact with the non-white 'Other,' white theorists may move in discursive theoretical directions that are threatening and potentially disruptive of that critical practice which would support radical liberation struggle" (Hooks 1990, 26). While this may be the case with American philosophers, it applies less to Levinas whose reflection on Otherness, while rooted within a rigorous Heidegerrian framework, is often problematized around his own Jewish origins.

4. See for example, Webster (1992, 194-196), and Horner (1995).

5. Such a conclusion seems to have already been reached by the general public. According to a Washington Post/ABC national poll from April, 1995, 75 percent of whites were against affirmative action, but more importantly, so were 52 percent of blacks (Cited in Horner 1995, 8).

6. Rawls introduces this device, which he calls the "veil of ignorance," to hypothesize a fair society by which members, deprived of knowledge of their class background, gender or race, define just guidelines for communal living. See Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford 1972).

7. Cited in D. Eisner, "A Problem at Evanston High," *Wall Street Journal*, April 16, 1974.

8. See Appiah (1993, 24).

9. See Van Niekerk on the difference between postmodern and postmetaphysical definitions of truth.

10. See Schiele (1994, 152).

11. Quoted in *Harpers Bazaar*, August 1993, p. 63.

12. Enzensberger remarks that "it would make more sense to talk about a Lufthansa or Mercedes patriotism than about a constitutional patriotism" (Enzensberger 1992, 180).

13. In particular, see the discussion in Habermas (1990, 147-156), Schwan (1989, 135-153), Eibl-Eibersfeldt (1991, 39-56), Hennigsen (1995, 379-389).

14. The Mediterranean Spanish island occupied by German vacationers every summer.

15. On the subject of the homogenization of the global tourist culture, and the artificial preservation of indigenous cultures for tourist consumption, see McCannell (1993).