

Identity  
Against  
Culture:  
Understandings  
of  
Multiculturalism



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Editor: Christina M. Gillis

Assistant Editor: Jeffrey S. Akeley

Designer: Lynn Kawaratani

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# Identity Against Culture

K. Anthony Appiah

It is a truism that in the United States of America “we live in a multicultural society.” But the obviousness and apparent clarity of this truism, like the apparent clarity and obviousness of most such truisms, dissolves upon inspection. To begin with what is, perhaps, the least patent difficulty, what people normally have in mind when they pronounce this slogan, is that the United States is a multicultural state. This is by no means obviously the same thought, since that we in America constitute a state is, so to speak, a juridical and constitutional fact; and that juridical fact is neither necessary nor sufficient for our being a society.

*Introduction*

The word “society,” used in this context, means something like *a group of people with a shared social geography*,<sup>1</sup> and certainly *shared institutions and a common culture*: and, granted the geographical unity of the (continental) United States and the existence, under the constitution, of American institutions, the question whether we are a society in this sense is the same as the question whether there is

such a thing, at some level, as a shared American culture.<sup>2</sup> To speak of American society as multicultural in this sense, as composed of groups of people with distinct cultures, might seem to be, at best, confusing, at worst, actually contradictory: the American state can be multicultural; but unless Americans also share a culture, there is no American society.

Such problems as flow from the coexistence of the many cultures within the boundaries of the American state are the consequence of the yoking together of societies, groups of people with a common culture and common institutions, within a single set of political institutions and in a shared social space.

The diversity of America's societies should not blind us to their interdependence. We think of ourselves as a nation of immigrants—thus erasing, of course, the Native American peoples and cultures who pre-dated the immigrations we have in mind. This nation of immigrants talk has advantages as well as disadvantages however; one of which is that it records an understanding that the dominant cultural groups in this nation have no special claim upon the American soil; an understanding that is a powerful tool in resisting the regular upsurges of American nativism. The nation of immigrants story has another important consequence: it has accustomed us to the idea that the diversity of cultures within the United States is the natural consequence of the importation of different cultures from different societies elsewhere. But while *some* of the cultural variety of the current United States arises from the presence of people who grew up and were acculturated in other places,<sup>3</sup> most of America's cultures have been largely shaped by experience in the United States: if there is an over-arching set of beliefs, ideas and practices that make up an American culture, most of America's cultures were shaped by that common culture. And even if that common culture is pretty thin gruel, America's cultures have mostly been shaped by interaction with each other. America's many cultures, its various societies, have grown up together, belong in a single system of cultures: they are not the mere logical sum of a series of unrelated historically-independent elements.

If, as I have suggested, a society is a group of people with a shared geography, and certainly shared institutions and a common culture, then understanding whether we are a society will depend on both

a) whether there are American institutions and

b) whether there is *an* American common culture.

I have already relied upon the obvious answer to first of these questions: the political institutions of the American state are shared by all who live in the United States.<sup>4</sup> If we had only these institutions in common, we would have common institutions.

The difficult question, then, would seem to be the second question: the question of an American culture. Suppose it is correct to speak, as many do, of American culture as centrally constituted, in part, by, for example, democratic and republican values. Then, so it seems, something central to American culture may not be held in common by all who live within the American state. Or suppose that the English language is the American language, defining the American system of communication: then there are juridical Americans who do not participate in American culture for that reason. And so, in the relevant sense, there may be no American society, nothing bound together both by the American institutions, whose existence I have granted, and by an American culture, about whose existence I am suggesting we may need to inquire further.

**B**ut we will not get much further with that inquiry until we explore the idea of culture, which immediately reveals itself to be extremely elastic. In my dictionary I find as a definition for “culture”: “The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.”<sup>5</sup> This is not, I think, quite right. There is, to begin with, no obvious incoherence in the idea of a non-human culture: we can reasonably speak of the culture of some primates or imagine, in science fiction, the culture of non-terrestrial creatures.

*Approaching  
Culture*

But the definition surely picks out a familiar constellation of ideas. “Culture,” in one sense, does indeed name all the “products of human work and thought.” That is, in fact, the sense in which anthropologists largely use the term nowadays. The culture of the Ashanti or the Zuni, for the anthropologist, includes every object they make (clothing, pottery, houses—which, taken together, we call their “mate-

rial culture”) and everything they think and everything they do; or, more precisely, everything that they do that is the product of thought (which is to say, invoking a distinction familiar to philosophers, not every bodily movement, but every action.)

You will notice, however, that the dictionary definition could have stopped there, leaving out the talk of “socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions” because these are all products of human work and thought. They are mentioned, of course, because they are the residue of an older idea of culture than the anthropological one. Here what the dictionary draws attention to is something more like the idea of a civilization: the “socially transmitted behavior patterns” of ritual, etiquette, religion, games, arts; the values that they engender and reflect; and the institutions—family, school, church, state—that shape and are shaped by them.

There are two tensions between the anthropologists’ idea of a culture and the idea of a civilization. First, there is nothing in the anthropologists’ idea that requires that the culture of a group should be a totality in any stronger sense than being what I called the mere logical sum of all the things they make and the actions they undertake.

American civilization, on the other hand—if there were such a thing—would not be just a simple logical sum of the doings and thoughts of Americans. It would have to have a certain coherence. Some of what is done in America and by Americans would not belong to American civilization because it was too individual (the particular bed-time rituals of a particular American family); some would not belong because it was not properly American, because (like a Hindi sentence, made in America) it does not properly cohere with the rest.

The second, connected, difference between what I am calling the anthropological idea of culture and the idea of a civilization, is that the latter takes values to be more central to the enterprise, in two ways. First, the civilization of a group is centrally defined by its moral and aesthetic values: and the coherence of a civilization is, primarily, the coherence of those values with each other and, then, of the group’s behavior and institutions with its values. Second, civilizations are essentially to be evaluated: they can be better and worse, richer and poorer, more and less interesting. Anthropologists, on the whole, tend now to avoid the relative evalua-

tion of cultures, adopting a sort of cultural relativism, whose coherence philosophers have tended to doubt. And they do not take values as more central to culture than, for example, beliefs, ideas and practices.

Because there are these differences I want to reserve the word “culture” for the anthropologists’ notion: henceforward I shall use the word “civilization” for the older notion I have been sketching. The habit of shaking hands at meetings belongs to culture in the anthropologist’s sense; the works of Sandro Botticelli and Martin Buber and Count Basie belong to culture also, but they belong to civilization as well.

I am using the words “civilization” and “culture” to distinguish two ways of thinking about the products of human work and thought; I don’t claim that these words now mark that distinction in ordinary speech. And I want to point out now that the move from the cluster of ideas I have labelled the concept of “civilization” to the cluster I have called “culture” was the result of arguments, not a simple drift of usage. The move away from evaluation came first, once people recognized that much evaluation of other cultures by the Europeans and Americans who invented anthropology had been both ignorant and biased. Earlier criticisms of “lower” peoples turned out to involve crucial misunderstandings of their ideas (Levy-Bruhl’s talk of a “pre-logical” mentality, for example); and it eventually seemed clear enough, too, that nothing more than differences of upbringing underlay the distaste of some Westerners for unfamiliar habits. It is a poor move from recognizing certain evaluations as mistaken to giving up evaluation altogether, and anthropologists who adopt cultural relativism often preach more than practice it. Still, this cultural relativism was a response to real errors. That it is the wrong response doesn’t make the errors any less erroneous.

The arguments against the ethnocentrism implicit in the “civilization” concept were in place well before the mid-century. More recently, anthropologists began to see that the idea of the coherence of a civilization got in the way of understanding important facts about other societies (and, in the end, about our own). For even in some of the “simplest” societies, there are different values and practices and beliefs

*The Move to  
Culture      Multiculturalism  
                         defined*

and interests associated with different social groups (women as opposed to men; elders as opposed to young men; chiefs as opposed to commoners; one clan as opposed to another). To think of a civilization as coherent was to miss the fact that these different values and beliefs were not merely different but actually opposed.<sup>6</sup> Worse, what had been presented as the coherent unified world-view of a tribal people often turned out, on later inspection, to be merely the ideology of a dominant group or interest.

I believe there is much of value in these anthropological criticisms of the idea of a civilization.<sup>7</sup> I shall refer back to the idea of civilization from time to time, however, where it helps to understand some of our contemporary debates.

I am going to call the *shared* beliefs, values and practices of a socially recognized sub-group a subculture.<sup>8</sup> And I shall say that a state that contains sub-cultures wider than the family is *multicultural*. This is a *stipulation*: I am aware of other uses of the word “subculture” and other understandings of the multicultural. These understandings I propose, I propose for the purposes of making an argument today; and I don’t want us to be distracted by questions about whether I am accurately reflecting someone’s current usage of these terms, not least because I doubt that most current uses of the term are particularly stable.

Since this definition is going to do some work later, let me point out at once some things that it does not entail. On this way of thinking of subcultures, there doesn’t have to be one common culture shared by the members of all the national sub-cultures taken together. A subculture is “sub” because it belongs to a recognized sub-group of the nation, not because its members share the national culture *plus* some other more specific culture. My definition doesn’t assume there is some culture in common to all the national sub-cultures: but it isn’t meant to rule that out either.<sup>9</sup>

It is also important that the over-arching group is the nation not the society. For, in the way I have been using the word “society” it is an open question whether fellow citizens share a society: because it is an open question whether there is a national common culture.



No one is likely to make much fuss about the fact that a nation is multicultural in this sense. For, in this sense, many simple and all large scale societies have been multicultural. Once you have division of labor and social stratification, there will be people who do and people who don't know about music and literature and pottery and painting; if we call all these specialized spheres together the arts, then everyone will participate in the arts to varying degrees, and there are likely to be sub-groups (opera-lovers, say, or dedicated movie-goers, or lovers of poetry) who share significant practices and ideas with each other that are not shared with everyone else.

I associate cultures with social groups not with nations because I want to insist again that a group of persons living together in a common state, under common authorities, need not have a common culture. There is no single shared body of ideas and practices in India, or, to take another example, in most contemporary African states.

Thus, many, but by no means all, Ghanaians know (some) English. There is no language known to all (or even most) of us. There are Moslems and Christians and practitioners of the traditional religions of many ethnic groups. There are matrilineal and patrilineal conceptions of family; there are traditions of divine kingship and less hierarchical notions of politics. The modern constitutional order—the Presidency, the parliament, the courts—are not well understood by many and unknown to quite a few.<sup>10</sup>

Now I think it is fair to say that there is not now and there has never been a common culture in the United States, either. The reason is simple: the United States has always been multilingual, and has always had minorities who did not speak or understand English. It has always had a plurality of religious traditions; beginning with Native American religions and Puritans and Catholics and Jews and including now many varieties of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, Bahai ... and so on. And many of these religious traditions have been quite unknown to each other. More than this, Americans have also always differed significantly even among those who do speak English, from North to South and East to West, and from country to city, in customs of greeting, notions of civility and a whole host of other ways.

To say this is not to deny that for significant parts of American history there has been a good deal of mutual knowledge across regional, religious, ethnic and even linguistic barriers. My point is that the notion that what has held the United States together historically over its great geographical range, is a common culture, like the common culture of a traditional society, is not sociologically plausible.

The notion that there is no American national culture will come as a surprise to many: observations about American culture, taken as a whole, are common. It is, for example, held to be individualist, litigious, racially-obsessed. I think each of these claims is actually true, because what I mean when I say there is no common culture of the United States is not what is denied by someone who says that there is an American culture.

Such a person is describing large scale tendencies within American life that are not necessarily participated in by all Americans. I do not mean to deny that these exist. But for such a tendency to be part of what I am calling the *common culture* they would have to derive from beliefs and values and practices (almost) universally shared and known to be so. And *that* they are not.

At the same time, it has also always been true that there was a dominant culture in these United States. It was Christian, it spoke English, and it identified with the high cultural traditions of Europe and, more particularly, of England. And, until recently, when most people here spoke of American culture, this is what they meant: this was the age of Eurocentrism.

This dominant culture included the common culture of the dominant classes—the government and business and cultural elites: but it was familiar to many others who were subordinate to them. And it was not merely an effect but also an instrument of their domination. Because the dominant norms of language and behavior belonged were those of a dominant class, their children, for example, were likely to have preferred access to the best educations; educations which themselves led to dominant positions in business, in government and in the arts.

As public education has expanded in the United States, America's citizens, and especially those citizens educated in public elementary schools in this country, have come to share a body of historical knowledge, and an understanding—however tenuous—of the American political system. And it is increasingly true that whatever

other languages children in this country speak, they speak and understand English, and they watch many of the same television programs and listen to much of the same music. Not only do they share these experiences, they know that they do: and so they can imagine themselves as a collectivity, the audience for mass culture. In that sense, most young Americans have a common culture based in a whole variety of kinds of English: but it is no longer that older Christian, Anglo-Saxon, tradition that used to be called American culture.

The outlines of this almost universal common culture, to which only very few Americans are external, are somewhat blurry. But it includes, for example, in its practices, baseball; in its ideas, democracy; in its religion, Christianity;<sup>11</sup> in its arts rap music and music videos and many movies. This culture is to a large extent, as I have implied, the product of schools and of the media. But even those who share this common culture, live in sub-cultures of language, religion, family organization, and political assumptions.

Now I take it that multiculturalism is meant to be the name of a response to these familiar facts: that it is meant to be an approach to education and to public culture that acknowledges the diversity of cultures and sub-cultures in the United States and that proposes to deal with that diversity in some other way than by imposing the values and ideas of the hitherto dominant Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition. That, I think, is the common core of all the things that have been called multiculturalism.

I think this common idea is a good one. It is a good idea for a number of reasons. *Multiculturalism, in this sense, defended* It is a good idea, first, because the old practice of imposing Christian, Anglo-Saxon tradition was rooted in racism and anti-Semitism (and sexism and heterosexism . . . but that is another story). But it is a good idea, second, because making the culture of *one* sub-culture the official culture of a state privileges the members of that sub-culture—gives them advantages in public life—in ways that are profoundly anti-egalitarian and, thus, anti-democratic.

Yet agreeing to this idea does not tell you much about what you should do in schools and in public culture. It tells you that you mustn't impose certain practices

*Identity versus  
Culture*

and ideas, but it doesn't tell you what you should do affirmatively. I want to suggest that one affirmative strategy in this area is a *bad* idea for public education and that there are other strategies that are better. And then, in closing, I want to say something about why living together in a multicultural society is bound to turn out to be difficult.

There is one final piece of apparatus I need, however. I have been talking of "subcultures" and defining what I mean by this. And it would be natural to assume that the primary subgroups to which these subcultures are attached will be ethnic and racial groups (with religious denominations conceived of as a species of ethnic group). It would be natural, too, to think that the characteristic difficulties of a multicultural society arise largely from the cultural differences between ethnic groups. I think this easy assimilation of ethnic and racial subgroups to subcultures is to be resisted.

First of all, it needs to be argued, and not simply assumed, that black Americans taken as a group, have a common culture: values and beliefs and practices that they share and that they do not share with others. This is equally true for, say, Chinese or Mexican Americans; and it is a *fortiori* true of white Americans. What seems clear enough is that being an African-American or an Asian-American or White is an important social identity in the United States. Whether these are important social identities because these groups have shared common cultures is, on the other hand, quite doubtful; not least because it is doubtful whether they *have* common cultures at all.

These issues matter in part because thinking in terms of cultural difference suggests different problems for political life than does an analysis in terms of identities. With differing cultures, we might expect misunderstandings arising out of ignorance of each others' values, practices and beliefs; we might even expect conflicts because of differing values or beliefs. The paradigms of difficulty in a society of many cultures are misunderstandings of a word or a gesture; conflicts over who should take custody of the children after a divorce; whether to go to the doctor or the priest for healing.

Once we move from talking of cultures to identities whole new kinds of problem come into view. Racial and ethnic conflicts, for example, have to do with the ways in which some people think members of other races and ethnic groups should be treated, irrespective of their cultural accomplishments. It isn't because a black man won't understand his daughter; or because he will value her differently from a white man; or because he does not know some important facts; that Archie Bunker wouldn't want his daughter to marry one. Mr. Bunker's bigotry does not require him to differ culturally in any significant respect from black people. He would be as opposed to the marriage if the potential son-in-law had exactly the same beliefs and values (on non-race-related matters) as he had himself. Similarly, in Bosnia it is not so much that what Croats *do* makes them hateful to Serb bigots; or vice versa. It is rather that those things are hateful because Croats (or Serbs) do them.

These cases bring out the ways in which ethnic and racial identities are contrastive: it is central to being African-American that you are *not* Euro-American or Asian-American; mutatis mutandis, the same goes for being Euro-American or Asian-American. And these distinctions matter because (some) people think it appropriate to treat people differently depending on which of these categories they fall into; and these ways of treating people differently lead to patterns of domination and exploitation. Racial and ethnic identities are, in this way, like genders and sexualities. To be female is not to be male; to be gay is not to be straight: and these oppositions lead some to treat people differently according to their gender or sexuality, in asymmetrical ways that usually privilege men or straight people.

Now it is crucial to understanding gender and sexuality that women and men and gay and straight people grow up together in families, communities, denominations. Insofar as a common culture means common beliefs, values and practices, gay people and straight people in most places have a common culture: and while there are societies in which the socialization of children is so structured by gender that women and men have seriously distinct cultures, this is not a feature of most "modern" societies.<sup>12</sup>

I take the fact that questions about feminism (gender) and gay and lesbian identity (sexuality) come up often in thinking about multiculturalism (especially in

the university) as a sign that what many people are thinking about is not the multiple subcultures of the nation but its multiple identities. All I want to insist on for now is that these are not the same thing.

**I**mplicit in much multi-cultural talk is the thought that the way to deal with our many cultures in public education is to teach each child the culture of “its” group: in order, say, to define and strengthen her or his self-esteem. This is the strategy of some (but by no means all) Afrocentrists and of some (but by no means all) of those who have favored bi-lingual education for Hispanics.

This is the strategy I oppose.

To explain my first basis for objection, I need to elicit a paradox in this approach, which we can do by considering the answer this approach—I shall call it, tententiously, Separatism—proposes to the question: Why should we teach African-American children something different from what we teach other children? The answer will come in two parts: the first part says that we should do so because they already come from a different culture; the second part, says we should do so because we should teach *all* people about the traditions from which they come.

It’s the first answer that is paradoxical, at least if you think that the plurality of cultures is a problem. It is paradoxical because it proposes to solve the problems created by the fact that children have different cultures by emphasizing and entrenching those differences, not by trying to reduce them.

I should make it plain that I have no problem with the argument that children’s home cultures need to be taken into account in deciding how to teach them: there’s no point in giving kids information in languages or dialects they don’t understand, or simply punishing them—rather than dealing with their parents or guardians—for behavior that they are being taught at home. But to admit *that* is to admit only that culture may sometimes make a difference to *how* you should teach not that it should make a difference to *what* you should teach. And defending teaching children different histories (Afro-centric history) or different forms of speech or writing (Black English) on the grounds that this is *already* their culture simply begs

the question: if we teach African-American children different histories from other children, then, indeed, it will become true that knowing that history and not knowing any other history will be part of the culture of African-Americans.

But the fact is that if we don't enforce cultural differences of this kind in the schools, surely they will largely disappear.

And what that means is that the *only* serious argument for Separatism that survives is the second answer I considered earlier: the claim that we must teach each child the culture of "its" group, because that is the right thing to do, because we should.

That idea is much more powerful. It is presumably at the basis of the thought that many non-observant Jews share with observant Jews (who have other reasons for believing this), namely, that it is good to teach their children Jewish history and customs, because they are Jewish children. It is the argument—"we have Plato to our father"—that led to the sense of exclusion that many African-Americans felt when the history and culture of the United States was taught to them as the continuation of a white Western tradition; the argument against which so much Afrocentrism is a reaction.<sup>13</sup>

I myself am skeptical of all arguments of this form: my instinct is to believe that traditions are worth teaching in our public schools and colleges because they are beautiful and good and true—or, at least, interesting and important and useful—never because they are ours or yours, mine or thine. I was brought up a Protestant; but after my first seder, it struck me that this was a tradition worth knowing about for *everybody*, Jew or Gentile; and I have always valued the experience of family community among my Moslem cousins at Ramadan.<sup>14</sup>

But I repeat that I do not think that it will help us in public education to add to our baggage of reasons for offering an element of a school curriculum to a child the thought that: I teach you, this particular child, this thing because it is *your* tradition.

This is because I think this an inadmissible ground for the curriculum of a *public* school, not because I think that we should *never* hear such arguments. Indeed, they

are among the most compelling arguments that a family or a church or temple or mosque can offer to a child. “In our family,” I might tell my nephew, “we have done this for many generations. Your great-grand uncle did it, in Asante, in the late nineteenth century; your grandfather did it when he was a boy in Kumasi.” There are things and practices I value because we—my ancestors and I—have done them for generations, because I take pleasure in the sense of continuity with them as *my* ancestors.

If I had been to a Catholic or a Jewish or a Muslim school, I would have learned such traditions, too, not as *my* traditions but as somebody else’s. I would have learned them not because the teachers and the school believed in them as traditions, but because they believed in them *tout court*. And because one can value them not just as traditions but as truths, I could decide to make them mine.

In the modern world many have sought to hold on to the profound pleasures of tradition even after they have left their faith behind. But, to repeat, in most Catholic or Jewish or Muslim schools, before the modern period, what was taught was taught as the truth about life, the universe and conduct: and though people might have taken pleasure in thinking of it as a matter of the tradition of a family and a community, if it had not thought it *true*, they would have thought it worthless. For these schools one notion of the good and the true, a contested notion, attached to one identity was a presupposition of the curriculum.

The public schools of a multicultural, multi-ethnic, religiously diverse society should not operate like these older religious schools: the public schools should not propagate one faith, support the traditions of one group, celebrate the heritage of one ethnicity. They should not teach particular traditions and religions; though, of course, they should teach about them.

The view I am articulating here is a view about the division between public and private spheres in the education of children: on such a view, ethnicity and religion are not to be transmitted by the organs of the state. Both, rather, are created and preserved outside the state by families, and by wider communities, including religious ones. Because there are many such cultures—and identities—created outside the state, in civil society, and because for many of us they are central to our



conceptions of ourselves and of our lives, the school must acknowledge them. Because they have a great deal of impact on our relations, in communities and in the political life of the state, we are all better prepared for life in this nation if we know something of the cultures and identities of others and if we learn to engage in respectful discourse with them. Outside the school, children can be preached a specific religion; within it, they can hear about their own traditions, along with others, but they should not be proselytized, even on behalf of their families.

I realize that I have been articulating rather than defending this view: I have not been making arguments from premises widely conceded. And I shall try to remedy that defect in a moment. But let me begin by noticing that my view does not have some of the obvious problems of Separatism. For consider what might happen if we adopted a policy in which the public schools set out to teach children according to their identities and subcultures; that not only taught *about* collective identities but set out to reinforce and transmit them. If carried to its ultimate, this policy would require segregation into cultural and religious groups either within or between public schools, in ways that would be plainly unconstitutional in the United States since the *Brown* decision. For if we did have unsegregated classes teaching Jewish history, and African-American history, and Anglo history and Hispanic history and Chinese history in our schools, by what right would we forbid children from going to the “wrong” classes? Finally, too many of us have multiple identities—we would have to be in too many classrooms at once.<sup>15</sup>

Of course there are things that we surely all believe that we should teach all American children: in particular, we should teach them something of the history of the American political system. And here is a reason why we cannot hope to teach each child only “its” cultural tradition: for understanding the American constitutional system and its history requires us to know about slavery and immigration, about the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Underground Railroad and Ellis Island, the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Battle of Wounded Knee: if there is a sense in which each of these belongs more to the history of some social groups than others, there is also a clear sense in which they belong to us all.

And it is *that* idea that motivates the approach to dealing with our multicultural society that I favor, that undergirds *my* multiculturalism. For it seems to me that

what is ideal in a multicultural society, whose multicultural character is created outside the state in the sphere of civil society, is that the state should seek in its educational systems to make these multiple sub-cultures known to each other. A multicultural education, in my view, should be one that leaves you not only knowing and loving what is good in the traditions of your sub-culture but also understanding and appreciating the traditions of others; (and, yes, critically rejecting the worst of *all* traditions.<sup>16</sup>)

*Taylor attacked  
(gently)*

I suspect that many will feel that a more substantial argument against the maintenance of identities by the state is in order. To make my case, I must spend a little time now somewhat out of the way of my main argument. What I want to do is to take on the most direct philosophical defence of ethnicity as a focus of state maintenance of which I am aware, namely that of Charles Taylor in his “Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition.”

Charles Taylor argues there that much of modern social and political life turns on questions of “recognition.” In the Western liberal tradition we see recognition largely as a matter of acknowledging individuals and what we call their “identities”: and we have the notion, which comes (as Taylor also rightly says) from the ethics of authenticity, that, other things being equal, people have the right to be acknowledged publicly as what they already really are. It is because someone is already authentically Jewish or gay that we deny them something in requiring them to hide this fact, to “pass,” as we say, for something that they are not.

As has often been pointed out, however, the way much discussion of recognition proceeds is strangely at odds with the individualist thrust of talk of authenticity and identity. If what matters about me is my individual and authentic self, why is so much contemporary talk of identity about large categories—gender, ethnicity, nationality, “race,”<sup>17</sup> sexuality—that seem so far from individual? What is the relation between this collective language and the individualist thrust of the modern notion of the self? How has social life come to be so bound up with an idea of identity that has deep roots in romanticism with its celebration of the individual over against society?<sup>18</sup>

One strand of Charles Taylor's rich essay is a cogent defense of a set of answers to these questions.

The identities whose recognition Taylor discusses are largely what we can call collective social identities: religion, gender, ethnicity, "race," sexuality. This list is somewhat heterogeneous: such collective identities matter to their bearers and to others in very different ways. Religion, for example, unlike all the others, entails attachments to creeds or commitment to practices. Gender and sexuality, unlike the rest, are both grounded in the sexual body; both are differently experienced at different places and times: still, everywhere that I know of, gender identity proposes norms of behavior, of dress, of character. And, of course, gender and sexuality are, despite these abstract similarities, in many ways profoundly different. In our society, for example, passing as a woman or a man is hard, passing as straight (or gay) is relatively easy. There are other collective identities—disabled people, for example—that have sought recognition, modelling themselves sometimes on racial minorities (with whom they share the experience of discrimination and insult), or (as with deaf people) on ethnic groups. And there are castes, in South Asia; and clans in every continent; and classes, with enormously varying degrees of class-consciousness, all over the industrialized world.

*Authenticity*

But the major collective identities that demand recognition in North America currently are religion, gender, ethnicity,<sup>19</sup> "race," and sexuality; and that they matter to us for reasons so heterogeneous should, I think, make us want to be careful not to assume that what goes for one goes for the others.

The connection between individual identity, on the one hand, which is the focus of Taylor's framing of the issues, and these collective identities, on the other, seems to be something like this: Each person's individual identity is seen as having two major dimensions. There is a collective dimension, the intersection of their collective identities; and there is what I will call a personal dimension, consisting of other socially or morally important features of the person—intelligence, charm, wit, cupidity—that are not themselves the basis of forms of collective identity.

The distinction between these two dimensions of identity is, so to speak, a sociological rather than a logical distinction. In each dimension we are talking about

properties that are important for social life. But only the collective identities count as social categories, kinds of person. There is a logical category but no social category of the witty, or the clever, or the charming or the greedy: people who share these properties do not constitute a social group, in the relevant sense.

I shall return, later, to the question why these particular properties constitute the bases for social categories of the sort that demand recognition; for the moment, I shall rely on an intuitive grasp of the distinction between the personal and the collective dimensions of individual identity.

Let me turn now to “authenticity” in order to bring out something important about the connection between these two dimensions.

Taylor is right to remind us of Lionel Trilling’s brilliant discussion of the modern self, and, more particularly, of the ideal of authenticity, whose roots are in romanticism. Taylor captures that idea in a few elegant sentences: “There is a certain way of being that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way. . . . If I am not [true to myself], I miss the point of my life.” [p. 30]

Trilling’s theme is the expression of this idea in literature and in our understanding of the role of the artist, as the archetype of the authentic person: and if there is one part of Trilling’s picture that Taylor leaves out, it is the fact that, for romanticism, the search for authenticity is demonstrated at least as much in opposition to the demands of social life as it is in the recognition of one’s own real self. In the precisely titled collection, *The Opposing Self*, Trilling writes of *The Scholar Gypsy* (as the model of the artist) that “[h]is existence is intended to disturb us and make us dissatisfied with our habitual life in culture.”<sup>20</sup>

Taylor’s topic is the politics of recognition: attending to the oppositional aspects of authenticity would complicate the picture, because it would bring sharply into focus the difference between two levels of authenticity that the contemporary politics of recognition seems to conflate.

To elicit the problem, let me start with a point Taylor makes in passing about Herder, who is rightly regarded as one of the founders of modern philosophical reflection on the nation:

I should note here that Herder applied his concept of originality at two levels, not only to the individual person among other persons, but also to the culture-bearing people among other peoples. Just like individuals, a Volk should be true to itself, that is, its own culture. [p. 31]

It seems to me that in this way of framing the issue less attention than necessary is paid to the connection between the originality of persons and of nations. After all, in many places nowadays, as I suggested earlier, the individual identity, whose authenticity screams out for recognition, is likely to have what Herder would have seen as a national identity as a component of its collective dimension. It is, among other things, my being, say, an African-American that shapes the authentic self that I seek to express.<sup>21</sup> And it is, in part, because I seek to express my self that I seek recognition of an African-American identity. This is the fact that makes problems for Trilling's opposing self: for recognition as an African-American means social acknowledgment of that collective identity, which requires not just recognizing its existence but actually demonstrating respect for it. If, in understanding myself as African-American, I see myself as resisting white norms, mainstream American conventions, the racism (and, perhaps, the materialism or the individualism) of "white culture," why should I at the same time seek recognition from these white others?

There is, in other words, at least an irony in the way in which an ideal—you will recognize it if I call it the Bohemian ideal—in which authenticity requires us to reject much that is conventional in our society is turned around and made the basis of a "politics of recognition."

Irony is not the Bohemian's only problem. It seems to me that this notion of authenticity has built into it a series of errors of philosophical anthropology. It is, first of all, wrong in failing to see, what Taylor so clearly recognizes, namely the way in which the self is, as he says, dialogically constituted. The rhetoric of authenticity proposes not only that I have a way of being that is all my own, but that in developing it I must fight against the family, organized religion, society, the school, the state—all the forces of convention. This is wrong, however, not only because it is in dialogue with other people's understandings of who I am that I develop a

conception of my own identity (Taylor's point) but also because my identity is crucially constituted through concepts (and practices) made available to me by religion, society, school and state, and mediated to varying degrees by the family. Dialogue shapes the identity I develop as I grow up: but the very material out of which I form it is provided, in part, by my society, by what Taylor calls its language in "a broad sense."<sup>22</sup> I shall borrow and extend Taylor's term "monological" here to describe views of authenticity that make these connected errors.

I used the example of Afro-Americans just now, and it might seem that this complaint cannot be lodged against an American black nationalism: African-American identity, it might be said, is shaped by African-American society, culture, and religion. "It is dialogue with these black others that shapes the black self; it is from these black contexts that the concepts through which African-Americans shape themselves are derived. The white society, the white culture, over against which an African-American nationalism of the counter-conventional kind poses itself, is therefore not part of what shapes the collective dimension of the individual identities of black people in the United States."

This claim seems to me to be simply false. And what shows that it is false is the fact that it is in part a recognition of a black identity by "white society" that is demanded by nationalism of this form. And "recognition" here means what Taylor means by it, not mere acknowledgement of one's existence. African-American identity is centrally shaped by American society and institutions: it cannot be seen as constructed solely within African-American communities.

There is, I think, another error in the standard framing of authenticity as an ideal, and that is the philosophical realism (which is nowadays usually called "essentialism") that seems inherent in the way questions of authenticity are normally posed. Authenticity speaks of the real self buried in there, the self one has to dig out and express. It is only later, after romanticism, that the idea develops that one's self is something that one creates, makes up, so that every life should be an art-work whose creator is, in some sense, his or her own greatest creation. (This is, I suppose, an idea one of whose sources is Oscar Wilde.)

Of course, neither the picture in which there is just an authentic nugget of selfhood, the core that is distinctively me, waiting to be dug out, nor the notion that

I can simply make up any self I choose, should tempt us. We make up selves from a tool kit of options made available by our culture and society: in ways that I pointed out earlier. We do make choices, but we don't determine the options among which we choose.<sup>23</sup>

If you agree with this, you will wonder how much of authenticity we should acknowledge in our political morality: and that will depend, I suppose, on whether an account of it can be developed that is neither essentialist nor monological.

It would be too large a claim that the identities that claim recognition in the multicultural chorus *must* be essentialist and monological. But it seems to me that one reasonable ground for suspicion of much contemporary multicultural talk is that the conceptions of collective identity they presuppose are indeed remarkably unsubtle in their understandings of the processes by which identities, both individual and collective, develop. And I am not sure whether Taylor would agree with me that collective identities disciplined by historical knowledge and philosophical reflection would be radically unlike the identities that now parade before us for recognition, and would raise, as a result, questions different from the ones he addresses.

In a rather un-philosophical nutshell: my suspicion is that Taylor is happier with the collective identities that actually inhabit our globe than I am: and that may be one of the reasons why I am less disposed to make the concessions to them that he does.

These differences in sympathy show up in the area of what Taylor calls group survival: and this is where we return, finally, to the questions I was raising about the role of the state in maintaining ethnic identity.

Here is Taylor defining what he means by group survival (and it is clear that he has the political life of his own native Quebec very much in mind).

Policies aimed at survival actively seek to create members of the community, for instance, in their assuring that future generations continue to identify as French-speakers. [Charles Taylor, 58-9]

Taylor argues that the reality of plural societies may require us to modify procedural liberalism. I think he is right in thinking that there is not much to be said

for the view that liberalism should be purely procedural: I agree that we should not accept both (a) the insistence on the uniform application of rules without exception and (b) the suspicion of collective goals [p. 60]; I agree that the reason we cannot accept (a) is that we should reject (b) [p. 61]. There can be legitimate collective goals whose pursuit will require giving up pure proceduralism.

But Taylor's argument for collective goals in the vast majority of modern states, which are multicultural, is that one very strong demand, to which the state may need to accede, may be for the survival of certain "societies": by which he means groups whose continuity through time consists in the transmission through the generations of a certain culture, of distinctive institutions and values and practices. And he claims [footnote, p. 41] that the desire for survival is not simply the desire that the culture which gives meaning to the lives of currently existing individuals should continue for them, but requires the continued existence of the culture through "indefinite future generations."

I would like to suggest a focus different from Taylor's in his discussion of this issue. To explain why, let me stress first that the "indefinite future generations" in question should be the descendants of the current population. The desire for the survival of French Canadian identity is not the desire that there should for the long future be people somewhere or other who speak that Quebec language and practice those Quebec practices. It is the desire that this language and practice should be carried on from one generation to the next. A proposal to solve the problems of Canada by paying a group of unrelated people to carry on French Canadian culture on some island in the South Pacific simply would not meet the need.

Why does this matter? Because it seems to me not at all clear that this aim is one that we can acknowledge while respecting the autonomy of future individuals. In particular families, it is often the case that parents want the children to persist in some practice that those children resist. This is true for arranged marriage for some women of Indian origin in Britain, for example. In this case, the ethical principles of equal dignity that underlie liberal thinking seem to militate against allowing the parents their way because we care about the autonomy of these young women. If this is true in the individual case, it seems to me equally true where a whole generation of one group wishes to impose a form of life on the next generation—



and *a fortiori* true if they seek to impose it somehow on still later generations.

Of course, speaking abstractly, survival, in this sense, is perfectly consistent with respect for autonomy; otherwise every genuinely liberal society would have to die in a generation. If we create a culture that our descendants will want to hold on to, our culture will survive in them. But here there is a deep problem, that has to do with the question of how a respect for autonomy should constrain our ethics of education. After all, we have it to some extent in our power to make our children into the kind of people who will want to maintain our culture. Precisely because the monological view of identity is incorrect, there is no individual nugget waiting in each child to express itself, if only family and society permit its free development. We have to help children make themselves: and we have to do so according to our values because children do not begin with values of their own. To value autonomy is to respect the conceptions of others, to weight their plans for themselves very heavily in deciding what is good for them: but children do not start out with plans or conceptions. It follows, therefore, in education in the broad sense—the sense that is covered by the technical notion of social reproduction—we simply must both appeal to and transmit values more substantial than a respect for liberal procedures. Liberal proceduralism is meant to allow a state to be indifferent between a variety of conceptions of the good: but what conceptions of the good there will be will depend on what goes on in education. Teach all children only that they must accept a politics in which other people's conceptions of the good are not ridden over, and there will soon be no substantive conceptions of the good at all.

*Proper Behavior*

In most modern societies, the education of most people is conducted by institutions run by the government. Education is, therefore, in the domain of the political. This is not just an accident: social reproduction involves collective goals. Furthermore, as children develop and come to have identities whose autonomy we should respect, the liberal state has a role in protecting the autonomy of children against their parents, churches and communities. I would be prepared to defend the view that the state in modern society must be involved in education on this sort of basis: but even if someone disagrees with this they must admit that it currently does play such a role and that, for the reasons I have been discussing, this means that the state is involved in propagating elements, at least, of a substantive conception of the good.

That is one of the major reasons why I agree so wholeheartedly with Taylor's objections to pure proceduralism. I do not think that it is Taylor's reason, however, even though he does raise his objections to pure proceduralism in the context of a discussion of survival, that is, of social reproduction.

The large collective identities that call for recognition come with notions of how a proper person of that kind behaves: it is not that there is *one* way that gay people or blacks should behave, but that there are gay and black modes of behavior. These notions provide loose norms or models, which play a role in shaping the life-plans of those who make these collective identities central to their individual identities.<sup>24</sup> Collective identities, in short, provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories. In our society (though not, perhaps, in the England of Addison and Steele) being witty does not in this way suggest the life-script of "the wit." And that is why what I called the personal dimensions of identity work differently from the collective ones.

This is not just a point about modern Westerners: cross-culturally it matters to people that their lives have a certain narrative unity; they want to be able to tell a story of their lives that makes sense. The story—my story—should cohere in the way appropriate by the standards made available in my culture to a person of my identity. In telling that story, how I fit into the wider story of various collectivities is, for most of us, important. It is not just gender identities that give shape (through, for example, rites of passage into woman- or manhood) to one's life: ethnic and national identities too fit each individual story into a larger narrative. And some of the most "individualist" of individuals value such things. Hobbes spoke of the desire for glory as one of the dominating impulses of human beings, one that was bound to make trouble for social life. But glory can consist in fitting and being seen to fit into a collective history: and so, in the name of glory, one can end up doing the most social things of all.

How does this general idea apply to our current situation in the multicultural West? We live in societies in which certain individuals have not been treated with equal dignity because they were, for example, women, homosexuals, blacks,

Catholics. Because, as Taylor so persuasively argues, our identities are dialogically shaped, people who have these characteristics find them central—often, negatively central—to their identities. Nowadays there is a widespread agreement that the insults to their dignity and the limitations of their autonomy imposed in the name of these collective identities are seriously wrong. One form of healing of the self that those who have these identities participate in is learning to see these collective identities not as sources of limitation and insult but as a valuable part of what they centrally are. Because the ethics of authenticity requires us to express what we centrally are in our lives, they move next to the demand that they be recognized in social life as women, homosexuals, blacks, Catholics. Because there was no good reason to treat people of these sorts badly, and because the culture continues to provide degrading images of them nevertheless, they demand that we do cultural work to resist the stereotypes, to challenge the insults, to lift the restrictions.

These old restrictions suggested life-scripts for the bearers of these identities, but they were negative ones. In order to construct a life with dignity, it seems natural to take the collective identity and construct positive life-scripts instead.

An African-American after the Black Power movement takes the old script of self-hatred, the script in which he or she is a nigger, and works, in community with others, to construct a series of positive black life-scripts. In these life-scripts, being a Negro is recoded as being black: and this requires, among other things, refusing to assimilate to white norms of speech and behavior. And if one is to be black in a society that is racist then one has constantly to deal with assaults on one's dignity. In this context, insisting on the right to live a dignified life will not be enough. It will not even be enough to require that one be treated with equal dignity despite being black: for that will require a concession that being black counts naturally or to some degree against one's dignity. And so one will end up asking to be respected *as a black*.

Let me rewrite this paragraph as a paragraph about gay identity: An American homosexual after Stonewall and gay liberation takes the old script of self-hatred, the script of the closet, the script in which he is a faggot, and works, in community with others, to construct a series of positive gay life-scripts. In these life-scripts, being homosexual is recoded as being gay: and this requires, among other things, refusing

to stay in the closet. And if one is to be out of the closet in a society that deprives homosexuals of equal dignity and respect then one has constantly to deal with assaults on one's dignity. In this context, the right to live as an "open homosexual" will not be enough. It will not even be enough to be treated with equal dignity "despite being homosexual": for that will require a concession that being homosexual counts naturally or to some degree against one's dignity. And so one will end up asking to be respected *as a homosexual*.

This is the sort of story Taylor tells, with sympathy, about Quebec. I hope I seem sympathetic to the stories of gay and black identity I have just told. I *am* sympathetic. I see how the story goes. It may even be historically, strategically necessary for the story to go this way.<sup>25</sup> But I think we need to go on to the next necessary step, which is to ask whether the identities constructed in this way are ones we—I speak here, for what it is worth, as someone who counts in America as a gay black man—can be happy with in the longer run. What demanding respect for people *as blacks* and *as gays* requires is that there be some scripts that go with being an African-American or having same-sex desires. There will be proper ways of being black and gay: there will be expectations to be met; demands will be made. It is at this point that someone who takes autonomy seriously will want to ask whether we have not replaced one kind of tyranny with another. If I had to choose between the world of the closet and the world of gay liberation, or between Uncle Tom and Black Power, I would, of course, choose in each case the latter. But I would like not to have to choose. I would like other options. The politics of recognition requires that one's skin color, one's sexual body, should be politically acknowledged in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and their sexual body as personal dimensions of the self. And personal means: not secret, but not too tightly scripted. I think (and Taylor, I gather, does not) that the desire of some Quebeckers to require people who are "ethnically" francophone to teach their children in French steps over a boundary: and let me add (to pronounce on a topic Taylor does *not* address) that I believe it is, in some sense, the *same* boundary that is crossed by someone who demands that I organize my life around my "race" or my sexuality.

The relationship between these arguments and the issue of the role of the state in the maintenance of ethnic identities is complex. I have been arguing, in the name of liberal individualism, against a certain kind of enforcement of identity. John

Stuart Mill wrote: “Society can and does execute its own mandates; and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself.” [John Stuart Mill (cited on p.139 of *Law and Sexuality*)] This passage should remind us that non-governmental social enforcement of identities can be objectionable, even if my focus has been on limiting governmental enforcement.

But, as I have conceded, these arguments are hard to apply to young children since they are addressed to people possessed of an autonomy children do not (yet) possess. This might mean—since the state may have to protect both the autonomy of adults and the rights of non-autonomous persons, including children—that there can be a role for the state in relation to ethnicity, even if the state (like society) should not enforce ethnicities as it conceives of them. Indeed, if having the option of an ethnic identity is a good for an autonomous adult, might not the state owe to non-autonomous children an upbringing that permits them just such choices?

This is a complex issue: but let me say at least this much in answer to this obvious question. The sort of multi-cultural education I have been proposing will produce children knowledgeable about the meanings of many of the identities socially available around them: in that sense, so far as I can see, a state that offers multicultural education of this kind is meeting such obligations as the state has to make a range of identities available to children whose schooling it has in its charge.

I have a final argument against Separatism. It is that it is dangerous, for reasons that have to do with the final point I want to make, which is about the difficulty of managing multicultural—plural—societies. *A final argument*

I said earlier that no one is likely to be troubled by the variety of sub-cultures in high culture. Why is this? Because however important our participation in high culture is, it is unlikely to be at the heart of our ethnicity. High culture crosses ethnic boundaries to an extraordinary degree. (The boundaries that it crosses with less ease

are those of class.) The result is that subdivisions of high culture are not so likely to become central to the organization of political life. The United States is not threatened by the cultural autonomy of the American Philosophical Association or (even) the American Medical Association. In this respect the associations of high culture are like many elements of popular culture: the next New York mayoral election is not going to be between followers of the Mets and of the Yankees.

But differences in what I have called subcultures are rather different. We pass on our language to the next generation because we care to communicate with them; we pass on religion because we share its vision and endorse its values; we pass on our folkways because we value people with those folkways.

I have insisted that we should distinguish between cultures and identities: but ethnic identities are distinctive in having cultural distinctions as one of their primary marks. Ethnic identities are created in family and community life. These—along with mass-mediated culture, the school and the college—are, for most of us, the central sites of the social transmission of culture. Distinct practices, beliefs, norms go with each ethnicity in part because people *want* to be ethnically distinct: because many people want the sense of solidarity that comes from being unlike others. With ethnicity in modern society, it is often the distinct identity that comes first and the cultural distinction that is created and maintained because of it, not the other way around. The distinctive common cultures of ethnic and religious identities matter not simply because of their contents but also as markers of those identities.

Culture in this sense is the home of what we care about most. If other people organize their solidarity around cultures different from ours, this makes them, to that extent, different from us in ways that matter to us deeply. The result, of course, is not just that we have difficulty understanding across cultures—this is an inevitable result of cultural difference, for much of culture consists of language and other shared modes of understanding—but that we end up preferring our own kind: and if we prefer our own kind, it is easy enough to slip into preferring to vote for our own kind, to employ our own kind, and so on.

In sum: Cultural difference undergirds loyalties. As we have seen repeatedly in recent years, from South Africa to the Balkans, from Sri Lanka to Nigeria, from South Central Los Angeles to Crown Heights, once these loyalties matter they will

be mobilized in politics and the public square, *except to the extent that a civic culture can be created that explicitly seeks to exclude them*. And that is why my multiculturalism is so necessary: it is the only way to reduce the misunderstandings across subcultures, the only way to build bridges of loyalty across the ethnicities that have so often divided us. Multiculturalism of this sort—pluralism, to use an older word—is a way of making sure we care enough about people across ethnic divides to keep those ethnic divides from destroying us. And it must, I believe, be a central part of the function of our educational system to equip all of us to share the public space with people of multiple identities and distinct subcultures.

I insisted early on the distinction between cultures and identities. It is especially important here. Teaching young people to respect those with other identities is not the same thing as teaching them some of the central practices and beliefs of a different subculture. When we teach Toni Morrison to children with serious attention we are demonstrating respect for the cultural work of a black person in a culture where there is still pressure not to respect black people. We are showing that respect to black children; we are modelling that respect for other children. Each of these is something that a decent education can seek to do; neither is simply a matter of introducing people to a culture.

It seems to me that it will be important, too, to teach children to reflect critically on their identities, including their ethnic identities, if they care about them; and I accept that once we do this, we will inevitably change their identities, or, at least, shape them, in various ways. Once ethnic identities cease to be unreflective, as such reflection is bound to make them, I will come to see my identity as something that can be molded, if not individually then at least as part of a common political project, or indeed as something that can be put away all together.

If I accept that the school in our society cannot simply leave everything ethnically where it is—accept that my earlier separation of ethnicity out of the public sphere in education was too simple—the question of a single common culture is likely to resurface. Why not argue out democratically a common culture, making sure to learn the lesson of multiculturalism that this must not simply be the cover for a sectional interest?

My answer is: because we do not have to do so. The question presupposes that what we *really* need is shared values, a common culture. I think this is a mistake: not least because, as I argued against Taylor, I am skeptical of the role of the state in enforcing identities.

But let me grant that we *do* need something in common if we are to live together: and try to say quickly what that something is.

What I think we really need is provided in a conjunct of our original definition of a society, that was so obvious that we soon left it behind. “Common institutions and a common culture,” I said, dropping talk of the common institutions almost immediately.

But to live together in a nation what is required is that we all share a commitment to the organization of the state—the institutions that provide the over-arching order of our common life. This does not require that we have the *same* commitment to those institutions, in the sense that the institutions must carry the same meaning for all of us.

The first amendment separates church and state. Some of us are committed to this because we are religious: we see it as the institutionalization of a Protestant insistence of freedom of conscience. Some of us are committed to it because we are Catholics or Jews or Moslems, who do not want to be pressed into conformity by a Protestant majority. Some of us are atheists who want to be left alone. We can live together with this arrangement provided we all are committed to it, for our different reasons.

A shared political life in a great modern nation is not like the life of a traditional society. It can encompass a great diversity of meanings. When we teach children democratic habits, through practice in public schools, what we are creating is a shared commitment to certain forms of social behavior. We can call this a political culture, if we like. But the meanings citizens give to their lives, and to the political within their lives, in particular, will be shaped not only by the school, but by the family and church, by reading and by television, in their professional and recreational associations.



Maybe, in the end, there will be a richer American common culture; maybe it will lead to a consensus on the value of American institutions. Certainly cultural homogenization is proceeding apace. But it has not happened yet. And, so far as I can see, it doesn't have to happen for us to live together. Competing identities may be having a hard time living together in new democracies. But in this, the oldest democracy, so long as our institutions treat every significant identity with enough respect to gain its allegiance, we can muddle along in the meanwhile without a common culture. Is that not, after all, what we have been doing, lo, these many years?

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## Notes

- 1 The shared space is probably what distinguishes this sense of the term from the sense of society in the expression “international high society.” We wouldn't normally speak of this as “a society,” despite the shared institutions (Ascot, the Kentucky Derby, the fall fashions in Paris, the London season) and common culture (conventions of address).
- 2 My dictionary gives as the relevant sense of the word society: “A group of human beings broadly distinguished from other groups by mutual interests, participation in characteristic relationships, shared institutions, and a common culture.” *American Heritage Dictionary III for DOS* (Third Edition) (Novato, CA: Wordstar International Incorporated 1993).
- 3 It is increasingly true, of course, that the cultures of other places are shaped by American culture—notably through the movies—so that the distinction between a culture shaped *in* the United States and one shaped *by* the United States is less sharp than it used to be.
- 4 Some of us live here without being citizens, and thus without being entitled to participate in those institutions as voters, jurors and so on: but we all have the right to participate in other politically-created institutions—heterosexual mar-

riage, for example, or property-ownership—and the obligation to live under American laws.

- 5 *American Heritage Dictionary III for DOS* (Third Edition) (Novato, CA: Wordstar International Incorporated 1993).
- 6 There is nothing absurd in holding that the different practices and beliefs of, say, women and men in a society cohere—not in the sense of forming a single logically consistent system, but in the sense that the reason why women engage in one practice is connected with the reason why men engage in another different practice and that a society in which women and men engage in these different practices is, in part, held together by that fact. But even that notion came under attack when the functionalist notion that every element of practice in a society was adaptive was subjected to criticism.
- 7 Though, as I say, I do not think you need to react by becoming a cultural relativist.
- 8 This is not the only way the term could be used. Some want to reserve the term for the culture of sub-ordinate groups. I want to avoid that implication in my usage.
- 9 What I have been calling a subculture, then, consists of people who share specific practices, beliefs and values that constitute the common culture of a subgroup of the nation.
- 10 Given that the constitution is about a year old as I write (it was promulgated in 1992 and came into full effect in 1993) this is not too surprising, I suppose. But much of the structure has been in place since independence with few changes.
- 11 This is not, remember, to claim that most Americans are Christians by belief. It is to say only that some of the central ideas and practices of Christianity are known to and understood by most Americans.
- 12 Men and women may have characteristically distinct experiences; but that doesn't, by itself, guarantee distinct cultures.

- 13 There is another problem with this way of thinking: it suggests that Western culture belongs to some American children more than others *in virtue of their descent*. This is doubly troubling: first, because the culture we teach in school belongs only to those who do the work to earn it; second, because it proposes to exclude certain children from certain educational experiences on what look like racial grounds.
- 14 Of course, I do not think—absurdly—that everyone should become both a Jew and a Moslem while holding on to Protestantism. The sort of participation in Jewish or Moslem celebrations that I am talking about is the participation of a guest, a visitor, a friend.
- 15 A point made to me by Prof. Elgin of the philosophy department at Wellesley College.
- 16 Postmodernism urges people to respond: “worst by *whose* criteria.” My answer is: in the real world of inter-cultural moral conversation, nobody—except a postmodernist—defends their position by claiming that it follows simply from their criteria and leaves it at that. If we argue with those who practice clitoral excision that and say it ought to be stopped, we need to tell those who practice it why. If we argue that it causes pain to girls, years of low grade infections to women, raises the risks of pregnancy; if we say that women who have not been circumcised are *not, ipso facto*, sexually insatiable; if we say that the practice deprives women of a source of pleasure; if we observe that the practice is *not*, in fact, recommended by the Koran: nobody, except in a rhetorical moment of weakness, is going to defend the practice by saying that these facts—if such they are—are relevant only by *our* criteria. And when they suggest to us that “we”: mutilate women—through cosmetic surgery; or that “we” practice male circumcision, which also reduces men’s capacity for pleasure; or that an uncircumcised girl cannot get a husband: these facts—if such they are—do not strike us as relevant only by our criteria. (And, in any case, there are people here who are not so sure about the badness of the practice and people there not so convinced of its goodness.)

And this is in a hard case of inter-cultural disagreement. Most American

subgroups share so many substantial ethical assumptions that the “Says who?” response is usually offered only by those who are losing an argument.

- 17 I’ve spent enough time arguing against the reality of “races” to feel that unhappy about using the term without scare quotes. See *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992) passim.
- 18 Taylor reminds us rightly of Trilling’s profound contributions to our understanding of this history. I discuss Trilling’s work in chapter 4 of *In My Father’s House*.
- 19 In the United States we deal with what Herder would have recognized as national differences (differences, in Taylor’s formulation, between one society and another within the American nation) through concepts of ethnicity.
- 20 Lionel Trilling *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (New York: Viking Press, 1955 ) p. xiv.
- 21 And, for Herder, this would be a paradigmatic national identity.
- 22 The broad sense “cover[s] not only the words we speak, but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the ‘languages’ of art, of gesture, of love, and the like.” [p. 32.]
- 23 This is too simple, too: for reasons captured in Anthony Giddens’s many discussions of “duality of structure.”
- 24 I say “make,” here, not because I think there is always conscious attention to the shaping of life plans or a substantial experience of choice, but because I want to stress the anti-essentialist point that there are choices that can be made.
- 25 Compare what Sartre wrote in his “Orphée Noir” in *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Nègre et Malagache de Langue Française*, (ed. L.S. Senghor) p. xiv. Sartre argued, in effect, that this move is a necessary step in a dialectical progression. In this passage he explicitly argues that what he calls an “antiracist racism” is a path to the “final unity ... the abolition of differences of race.”

# Commentary

David Hollinger

Angela Harris

Jorge Klor de Alva



# Commentaries

**David A. Hollinger**

University of California at Berkeley

Department of History

Several years ago our Berkeley colleague Ishmael Reed pointed out that if Alex Haley had chosen to trace his genealogy on his father's side, Haley would have ended up in Ireland. Haley's choice of roots was of course not a real choice at all. The one-drop rule made Haley black. Haley's Choice is a suitable reminder of a distinction that Anthony Appiah's lecture often touched upon, and of which I want to make more: the distinction between identities that are chosen and those that are ascribed.

This distinction is vital to an understanding of the problems to which multiculturalism is addressed, and to some of the dead-ends multiculturalism has encountered. Charles Taylor's work, which Anthony has dealt with very effectively, is inspired largely by the difficulties of two groups of white people, francophone and anglophone Canadians. The lines that restrict the choices made by these people are significant, but they are not remotely as constraining as the lines that make Haley's Choice the Hobson's choice of genealogy in America. In my comments, I will try to bring closer to contemporary American political earth some of the issues over which Anthony quarrels with Taylor.

Choices having to do with identity in the United States today are most often made within a remarkable five-part structure, an “ethno-racial pentagon.” As Americans, we are routinely invited to declare ourselves to be one, and only one, of the following: Euro-American (or sometimes “white”), Asian-American, African-American, Hispanic (or sometimes “Latino”), and Indigenous Peoples (or sometimes Native American). It is assumed, moreover, that we will select the group in which others perceive us to belong. These are ascribed categories, not truly chosen ones. The five specified blocs of this “ethno-racial pentagon” are not equally populated or empowered, but the structure itself is supposed to embrace us all.

Although the multiculturalism of the last few years has gotten us into the habit of referring to the five ethno-racial blocs as “cultures,” or “subcultures,” not enough recognition has been given to the fact that this pentagon merely replicates the crudest, most invidious, and least voluntary of popular distinctions between human beings: black, brown, red, white, and yellow. These are not categories of culture. Their significance is culturally constructed, and they constitute social spaces in which culture is produced, but the categories themselves are not cultural in the same sense that Mexican-American, Navajo, Jewish-American, or Korean-American, etc., can be so construed.

But if this ethno-racial pentagon is built on the old color foundations, it owes its current prominence to a wholesome effort of the government to protect non-whites from discrimination. It was to facilitate the voting rights and equal employment enactments of the federal government that the Bureau of the Census was told to group people in these five categories, as defined in “Statistical Directive 15” of the Office of Management and Budget. According to this memo, we have four races in the United States, whites, blacks, American Indians, and Asians/Pacific Islanders, with “Hispanic Whites” being singled out as one ethnic group whose members needed to be counted, too.

Now, it is essential to note that the harms against which individuals were to be protected through the legal application of these statistics are harms that follow primarily from ascribed ethno-racial status, not from chosen cultural affiliations. A black person is at risk of being discriminated against as black no matter what his or her cultural orientation, a point Anthony made that I think deserves to be



underscored. Richard Rodriguez's enthusiasm for Shakespeare and Spencer does not make him any less subject to abuse as a Latino in some situations than a member of the National Council of La Raza.

Culture, however, became highly relevant to the ethno-racial pentagon not long after it was institutionalized by the 1977 Directive. The pentagon proved to be a convenient way to organize multiculturalist programs. Berkeley's own American cultures requirement instituted by the Senate in 1989 works within the pentagon, requiring that the three cultures studied in the course be selected from within three of its five blocs. The empowerment of people through culture has indeed been a widespread motive for multiculturalism, many of whose intellectual leaders have been sensitive, in "cultural studies" style, to the ways in which power and culture partake of one another anyway. The replacement of "white" with "Euro-American" is part of the transformation of the pentagon into a space for assigned cultural orientations. As a result, by the end of the 1980s, the word "culture" became in many cases a euphemism for race and ethnicity. Nothing illustrates this more dramatically than the widespread failure of multiculturalism to deal directly with religiously-defined cultures. Religious communities are more chosen, of course, than ascribed, more subject to the right of exit, and more open to new recruits who do not share a common descent.

Anthony is a refreshing exception to this rule of avoidance of any mention of religion. His lecture often referred to religious communities. I appreciate his insistence that religious solidarities should maintain themselves outside of the apparatus of the state. I want to take a bit farther Anthony's heuristic exercise of thinking about religiously defined cultures and ethno-racially defined cultures within the same frame of reference. One result of this exercise might be the conclusion that religious groups merit some of the status and protection now afforded to ethno-racial groups. Some evangelical Christians have already proposed this, and have offered themselves as the newest "minority" in need of protection to guarantee their equality and to facilitate their survival in the face of a secular intellectual establishment. The separation between church and state should not be construed as a barrier, it is said, to public support for educational institutions that require adherence to certain religious doctrines. The Christians who argue this

sometimes appreciate both Charles Taylor and Rush Limbaugh. The blurring of the line between religious and ethno-racial affiliations can thus serve to make over religious groups in the contemporary image of ethno-racial minorities. The increasingly cultural valence of the ethno-racial pentagon increases the credibility of this initiative.

An element of this way of thinking is already embodied in *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, which enables Amish communities to perpetuate themselves by restricting their children to the elementary schooling provided by the Amish themselves. But the *Yoder* protections apply to a group willing to rigidly separate itself from the larger society; the Amish are true separatists. What if a group asks for *Yoder*-type protection of their distinctive way of life even in the setting of public schools, demanding that schools diminish attention to ideas that threaten their survival as a group? Suits asking this—*Mozert v. Hawkins*, for example—have been unsuccessful, so far. But a softer version of the same logic would simply give greater curricular attention to the ideas and values of religious communities represented in a given district or region, just as schools are often encouraged to develop course materials reflecting the ethno-racial composition of a given section of the country. The widespread enthusiasm for creationism and for school prayer indicates how strong is the constituency ready to take advantage of whatever openings might follow from the application to religious affiliations of an ethno-racial paradigm understood to carry entitlements.

But one can instead reason in the opposite direction and I take this to be more in keeping with the drift of Anthony's lecture. By the opposite direction, I mean the application to ethno-racial affiliations of a "religious" model. The implications of this approach are quite different, on account of the traditional separation of church and state. Insofar as ethno-racial affiliations have come to play a role similar to that played by religious affiliations at the time of the founding of the Republic and in much of American history, it follows that some of the guarded-but-respectful attitude toward religious cultures expressed in our constitutional order might now be judiciously directed toward ethno-racial groups in their capacity as vehicles for culture.

In this view, ethno-racial cultures ought to look after themselves much the way

religious cultures have been expected to do. Both are sustained by voluntary affiliations. The cultural products of both kinds of communities may to be welcomed as contributions to the richness of the nation's cultural life, but both ethno-racial and religious cultures partake more of the private than the public sphere. Neither is to be the beneficiary of outright public subsidies. In the meantime, programs for affirmative action can continue to occupy the political space that was theirs alone before culture began to take over the ethno-racial pentagon.

Movement in this direction—the religious model for ethno-racial cultures, rather than the ethno-racial model for religious cultures—might reduce some of the pressure on public schools and on higher education to satisfy the need for cultural self-validation on the part of ethno-racial groups, and to turn educational policy toward explorations and displays of cultural diversity that are less politically pretentious. To the extent that educators can be relieved of some of their implicit responsibility for ensuring the prospering of the nation's several communities of descent, educators may be less tempted to divide up the entirety of culture into politically functional ethno-racial segments.

It is the integrity of these ethno-racial segments, their claim to a monolithic character, and their unique standing in America's effort to affirm cultural diversity, that is now being challenged by mixed-race individuals. This is another feature of the American scene that renders the abstractions of Charles Taylor less helpful than they otherwise might be. A society long hostile to racial mixture, and exceptionally skilled at denying its reality, now confronts a rapidly increasing population of avowedly mixed-race families and individuals, many of whom are double-minorities—Japanese-African-Americans, for example—and thus in a stronger position ideologically to challenge the one-drop rule.

And it is the open avowal of mixed-race status that matters, even more than the numbers of mixed-race people. The mulatto, as Albert Murray and Werner Sollors have insisted, is in the mainstream of American genetic history, empirically considered. But only recently have organizations advancing the distinctive interests of “mixed-race” peoples proliferated. The demand to add “mixed race” to the federal census can be construed as merely an effort to turn the pentagon into a

hexagon, but the logic of the very category, “mixed race,” threatens to destroy the whole structure, as a helpful article in the July 25 *New Yorker* pointed out. The various blocs of the pentagon are literally filled with “mixed race” people. A concern for the political cohesion of the African-American bloc, in particular, has led a number of scholars and activists to resist the mixed-race category. The one drop-rule and the exact terms of Haley’s Choice are defended by “conservative” custodians of the minority blocs of the pentagon, who thus play Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., to mixed-race “radical” disuniter.

The people who lobby with the Census Bureau for recognition as “mixed race” have followed the multiculturalist movement’s use of the ethno-racial pentagon as a basic guide to cultural identity in the United States. San Francisco residents asked on a street corner two weeks ago how many “racial” categories should be listed in the census answered as often as not in strictly cultural terms, taking for granted that the reporter’s question was about the public recognition of cultures, not about the facilitating of entitlements for victims of racism.

The routine, public attribution of cultural content to categories originally given official sanction for the purposes of protecting individuals against the deleterious effects of ascribed identities, has brought to a point of tragic contradiction two valuable impulses in contemporary America: 1) the impulse to protect historically disadvantaged populations from the effects of past and continuing discrimination on the basis of ascribed identities, and 2) the impulse to voluntarily affirm the variety of cultures that now flourish within the United States and that flourish even within individual Americans. Whatever we as a society decide to do with the ethno-racial pentagon, we will do well to remember the tragic character and the depth of this contradiction.

[Note: Some of these remarks are adapted from David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, forthcoming 1995).]

**Angela P. Harris**

University of California - Berkeley

School of Law (Boalt Hall)

I

When we speak of “multicultural education” in the United States today, what we primarily have come to mean is education about the histories and traditions of those social groups historically and currently subordinated on the basis of race and ethnicity: African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. A secondary connotation of “multicultural education” might be education about the histories and traditions of other subordinated groups: women, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities, for example. Anthony Appiah disrupts this shorthand. By taking seriously the concept of a “culture,” and by distinguishing “culture” from “identity,” Appiah hopes to alert us to some of the dangers lurking in the easy equation of multiculturalism with “multiracialism,” or “identity politics.”

First, Appiah wants to warn us of the dangers of separatism. Multicultural education that assigns every child to one and only one “culture” and seeks to immerse her in that culture encourages insularity, ignorance, and intolerance between people from different cultures—traits this multicultural society can hardly afford. Separatist education also falsely assumes that there are no multicultural people. Even when “culture” is narrowly defined solely in racial and ethnic terms, in contemporary America many (if not most) people engage in the beliefs and practices of more than one cultural group. Finally, separatist education falsely assumes that cultures themselves are insular rather than constantly interacting with one another. It encourages children to believe that there is one and only one proper way of being Latino, or female.

Second, Appiah wants to warn us of the dangers of involving the state in identity formation. Taking a lesson from the religion clauses of the first amendment, Appiah argues for a separation of identity and state. In their private lives, and presumably in private schools, families should feel free to immerse children in the values of “their

own” culture. Appiah rejects past and future attempts by the state to create a common national culture by destroying or suppressing competing subcultures. But public education should not go the other way and attempt to instill the values of any particular subculture. Such an attempt would not only court the dangers of separatism once again; it would also bring state coercion to bear on individuals and groups. Appiah wants to allow individuals to make choices about their identities—about how to be gay, or Puerto Rican. When the “loose norms” of subgroups—the different and competing narratives of identity subcultures foster—become state sanctioned alternatives, valuable personal freedoms are lost.

Thus, in Appiah’s view the goal of public multicultural education is twofold: (1) to acquaint all children with a wide range of traditions, instead of only “their own,” and (2) to encourage, or at least allow for the possibility of, critical thinking. Appiah wants to encourage children to think about what is good and what is bad both in their own traditions and in the traditions of other people. Like a good liberal, Appiah wants to observe a strict public/private split as a way of protecting individual freedoms; and the common national culture he espouses (to the extent that he wants to create one at all) is a “thin” one, based on the liberal (or, perhaps, secular humanist?) virtues of tolerance, critical thinking, and individual freedom to choose from the largest possible menu of ways to be in the world.

He asserts that it would be “undemocratic” for the state to privilege certain cultures over others (although if the favored culture were the majority culture, perhaps the question of democracy would be more difficult).

In general, I am sympathetic to Appiah’s endeavor. I agree that separatism is bad and that pluralism is good; that races are not the same thing as cultures; that it is wrong to think of cultures as static and as unaffected by constant interaction with one another; and that it is absurd to suppose that culture can be mapped onto individuals in a kind of one-to-one correspondence. But if Appiah’s focus on the idea of “culture” saves us from some of these mistakes, it creates the opportunity for others. More precisely: pitting “culture” against “identity” does not resolve the issues of power around which the debate over multicultural education constantly circles.

## II

Rather than begin with the assumption that “multicultural education” means education about the traditional “racial pentagon,” Appiah proposes to examine the idea of a culture to understand what multicultural education is and should be about. Appiah rejects the anthropological definition of culture as “all products of human behavior,” and instead borrows from a definition of culture as “civilization,” under which a culture is a coherent set of ideas and practices, shared by a group of people. Crucial to this second definition is the word “value”: Appiah thinks that cultures are held together by common values, and he wants us to be able to evaluate cultures, rather than falling into anthropological relativism.

The focus on “culture” allows Appiah to play with the notion of a common United States culture. If a “society” is a group of people who share a culture, is the United States a society or only a nation? Here Appiah is ambiguous. He begins by suggesting that there is no shared American culture, because there are no beliefs or practices that every individual in the nation shares. Appiah rejects individualism, litigiousness, and racial obsession as elements of a common culture for this reason. At other points, however, Appiah seems to suggest that a common culture is emerging among American children that includes baseball, democracy, Christianity, rap, movies, and music videos.

Appiah’s focus on “culture” as the basis for multicultural education rather than “identity” is salutary in many ways. His approach helps us see, for example, that the gulfs between various “subcultures” in the United States are not as wide as we sometimes imagine. Appiah’s refusal to begin with the racial pentagon as the basis of “multiculturalism” also makes space for the fact that the pentagon as we know it suppresses cultural differences among groups. The notion of an homogenous “black” culture, for example, suppresses the cultural differences between first-generation Jamaican Americans and seventh generation African Americans. Appiah’s focus on shared practices also brings religious groups into a discussion from which they have been largely excluded. Finally, Appiah’s approach makes space for a dynamic rather than static conception of “culture.”

But in so sharply distinguishing “culture” from “identity,” Appiah elides the issue of structural subordination for which the racial pentagon and other designations of identity serve as (often unfortunate) shorthand. First, it is not clear where the line between identities and cultures ought to be drawn. For example, if subgroups in American society like gay and lesbian people, women, and African American people have practices, values, and beliefs that are considered distinctive by those in the group and those outside the group as well, such that they have some kind of coherence and can be evaluated, why are these not cultures but only “identities”? Is the objection that to call these practices a “culture” is to suggest they are monolithic? But Appiah says that there is a “dominant” culture in America which is Protestant, English-speaking, and Eurocentric. Surely there is not just one way to be part of this dominant culture, just as there is not just one way to be a lesbian or an African-American.

Is the objection that “race” is too general a marker for culture, so that we should reject the idea of a “black” culture but accept the idea of an “African-American” or “Korean-American” culture? Or is the objection more general: that neither ethnic groups nor races can be said to have distinctive cultures? Appiah does not tell us.

Or, is the objection that racial and ethnic cultures in America are defined and define themselves with reference to practices of subordination? Is the problem here then not that African-Americans don’t have a culture, but that it is inevitably parasitic on certain practices and beliefs of white supremacy? There may be good reasons for believing this, but Appiah does not tell us what they are.

It seems, then, that Appiah is trying to avoid calling “cultures” those practices and beliefs associated with groups formed primarily by state-sanctioned subordination. But how this sharp distinction between culture and identity can be maintained is not clear to me. And if this distinction is not a clear one, Appiah’s approach wrongly avoids the question of how multicultural public education should respond to these cultures-cum-identities formed in part by historical subordination.

Appiah’s reason for sealing “identities” off from “cultures” may be a sense that “identities” are inextricably intertwined with the history of subordination in this country, whereas “cultures” are not. If multicultural education does not purport to



deal with identities, then it need not enter debates about racism, sexism, and other -isms; and it need not be stuck in a Catch-22 in which identities originally formed for the purpose of maintaining inequality are perpetuated, now under the sign of culture instead of biology. But is it possible for children to develop mutual respect for one another's cultures and to learn to evaluate their own and other cultures critically without addressing the ways in which these cultures were formed? Can we have multicultural education without identities?

### III

The problem as stated here is a familiar one: lawyers know it as the dilemma of equal opportunity. Wishing to avoid perpetuating harmful practices of racial categorization, legal liberals announce that from this day forward our nation will no longer recognize distinctions of "race." But the genie will not be put back in the bottle. Racial differences persist, even as we officially pronounce "race" to be an illusion; and the practices we are used to thinking of as race-neutral turn out to be deeply race-sensitive. As Justice Blackmun wrote in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way." Similarly, "teaching about" other cultures, as Appiah wants multicultural education to do, is not enough in a world where cultures emerge in part from practices of subordination. At least, it is not enough if the common culture we want to foster is one that values both tolerance and critical thought.

The philosopher Lawrence Blum has distinguished three values for a multicultural society: antiracism, multiculturalism, and interracial community. The distinction between the first two is particularly relevant here. Blum defines "antiracism" as "striving to be without racist attitudes oneself as well as being prepared to work against both racist attitudes in others and racial injustice in society more generally." Blum defines "multiculturalism" as:

an understanding, appreciation and valuing of one's own culture,  
and an informed respect and curiosity about the ethnic culture of

others. It involves a valuing of other cultures, not in the sense of approving of all aspects of those cultures, but of attempting to see how a given culture can express value to its own members.

These values are not the same. Yet if multicultural education is to foster tolerance and critical thinking, I would argue that some measure of antiracist education is necessary to complete a multicultural education in Blum's sense of the term.

As Blum points out:

Multiculturalism's thrust is to highlight (especially hitherto neglected or undervalued) contributions. Yet merely highlighting contributions of different cultural groups does not, by itself, address the deficiencies in traditional education that the multicultural education movement (broadly construed) hopes to address. For one effect of racism has been to prevent subordinated groups from fully developing their capacities for such accomplishments and contributions.

"Teaching about" various cultures and simply letting children "choose" among them ignores the fact that cultures do not take shape in a historical vacuum. The project of fostering mutual respect and tolerance among children from different cultures requires some teaching about past and present violations of these very values.

Second, Blum argues that "while antiracism directly challenges racial domination and racial injustice, multiculturalism, by contrast. . .tends to promote the attitude of respect for other cultures, primarily within the existing structure and inequality between groups." Multiculturalism without identities tends to foster the status quo—a world in which, many groups who support multicultural education would argue, inequality flourishes.

Finally, multiculturalism without identities marks as private what should be public: the condemnation of racism and other practices of subordination. If past attempts to create a common American culture by force are truly to be rejected, children need to learn to recognize and condemn present and future attempts. Part

of the project of fostering toleration must be the condemnation of intolerance.

This is to suggest not that Appiah's approach is wrong, but that it leads us back in the end to the distinction between private and public and the question of state interference in identity formation. Can or should there be some common American culture? What should it consist of? Can we have mutual respect for cultural differences without a strong understanding of history and power, and can public schools foster such an understanding without disrupting the fragile peace established by liberalism? Multiculturalism without identities cannot stand; can multiculturalism with identities?

**Jorge Klor de Alva**

University of California at Berkeley  
Department of Ethnic Studies

**T**here is much with which I agree in Anthony Appiah's lecture, and I want to underline what that is. But in the need to economize on time, I will note some of my proposed alternative positions at the same time.

**A** state—a juridical entity—need not be composed of shared value, world-views or a common language and religion, but only as long as the political consequences of the differences among these can be resolved in the context of political institutions. That is to say, no national common culture is needed to have a socially cohesive state, but neither can a non-authoritarian state exist without a consensus around its central political procedures and institutions. However, as recent debates at the U.N. and elsewhere have made perfectly clear, liberal democrats delude themselves if they think their cherished values and beliefs or even their support of

human rights are so free of specific cultural markings as to be either universally applicable or even globally defensible.

The privileging of one group's practices and beliefs, and the subordination of other groups is anti-democratic and undermines the American commitment to freedom to pursue one's version of life, liberty, or happiness.

The conflation of ethnoracial subgroups and racialized ethnicities, subcultures (i.e., communal groupings as national groups) is a practice fraught with dangerous possibilities. And identifying multiple subcultures as the same as multiple identities is indeed problematic at best; after all, just as philosophers tell us, much against common sense, that you cannot derive an "Ought" from an "Is," physical characteristics alone ought not to be considered the same as cultural identity, although in the United States the former has greatly delimited the formation of the latter.

Modern public schools cannot (for legal reasons) and ought not (for liberal ones) operate like old religious schools: teaching particular traditions and religions instead of reaching about them. And, therefore, the public and private spheres, in so far as it is possible within a conception of balanced democratic ideals of individual freedom and social justice, must be maintained separate.

Multicultural education—whatever this floating signifier may refer to—should have, as a matter of public policy, the ultimate goal of leading students to appreciate, or at least recognize and tolerate, what is good in all subcultural traditions and practices, and to reject what is bad. I appreciate, of course, that deciding what is good and what is bad, while usually a simple matter when it comes to practices, is extremely difficult to undertake where competing values, ideals, and—especially—interests are concerned.

We should not be tempted, in the course of applauding or even rejecting multiculturalism, by either an essentialist vision of the personal or collective self, nor by a constructionist assumption that either self can be created from any of the imagined, hoped for, or even socially possible options ostensibly available. We must surely make some choices, but obviously we are not free to determine all the options from which we can choose. In short, it is not a matter of self/society dialogue that

leads to a particular sense of identity—as Appiah noted—but rather identity, or at least the identities that matter in our conversation today, are highly contested affairs that not everyone can hold or reject at will, at least not in ways that can easily convince others to respect the choices. I refer here to the now commonly-made distinction between symbolic or voluntary identity, one that matters little to one’s life-script and affects almost not at all one’s opportunities—as is the case with German-, Irish-, or French-American identity—and non-voluntary identities such as those of African or Asian Americans or of women. Here the constraints placed by others on the romantic exercise of self-formation or even on the freedom to identify within a framework of national origin or familial descent are so formidable as to make a choice impossible. Thus, Afro-mestizos are not free to be merely Cubans in the U.S. any more than Asian-Americans can simply claim to be from South Dakota. In effect, the subcultural identities that matter politically for our purposes today are more effects of asymmetrical power relations, results of exclusions, and consequences of others’ well- or ill-conceived interests than they are, or are likely to be, results of only social “dialogue” or a will to be X, à la Oscar Wilde.

Thus, while I fully agree that we ought not to enforce, that is, impose, an identity on an individual or group that is unwanted, ill-suited, rejected or detrimental (or, for that matter, undeserved), the solution to the threat of Separatism, which Professor Appiah thoughtfully and correctly warns about, does not lie in domesticating multiculturalism or turn enlightened somersaults at the will of liberal democrats concerned for their lives or property, but rather the solution lies in recognizing that neo-ethnicities and neo-races that have appeared are primarily the result of unenlightened and undemocratic social, political, and economic policies that have driven poor blacks, Latinos, and others to a sense of despair that few if any of us in this room could ever imagine.

And I will close by noting that the post-Civil Rights legacy of permitting access to certain resources only to those willing to take on these neo-identities has only served to heighten the Separatism that so rightly concerns Professor Appiah. If the government will recognize a subgroup only if that group can claim to be victimized, then victimized identities not only will, but if they understand their best interests—

at least in the short run—*must* play the role of victims. In short, the problems of identity we are discussing today are not so much philosophical in origin or solution, as they are ultimately effects of evil or at best misguided economic and political rationalizations.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH was born in Ghana, educated at Cambridge, and is currently Professor of African-American Studies at Harvard. He holds an eminent position among scholars whose interests connect philosophy and questions of culture and identity. The author of a number of scholarly works in philosophy including *Necessary Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*, *For Truth in Semantics*, and *Assertion and Conditionals*, Professor Appiah is perhaps best known for *My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, which received the Herskovitz Award of the African Studies Association for the best work published in English on Africa. Anthony Appiah has written numerous articles across a broad spectrum of subjects, he has co-edited (with H.L. Gate, Jr.) critical anthologies on eight African-American and African writers, and he is the author of two works of fiction: *Avenging Angels* (1991) and *Nobody Likes Letitia* (forthcoming). Before joining the faculty at Harvard, he taught philosophy, literature and African and African-American Studies at Yale, Cornell and Duke Universities.