

"MULTICULTURAL" EDUCATION

by Thomas Sowell

Most of the arguments for so-called "multicultural" education are so flimsy, inconsistent, and downright silly that it is hard to imagine that they would have been taken seriously if they were not backed up by shrill rhetoric, character assassination, and the implied or open threat of organized disruption and violence on campus.

Let us examine the multiculturalists' questions, one by one:

Why do we study Western civilization, to the neglect of other civilizations?

Why is that question asked in English, rather than in some non-Western language? Because English is what we speak. Why do we concern ourselves with the Earth, which is an infinitesimal part of the known universe? Because that is where we live. If we want to understand the cultural and institutional world in which we carry on our daily lives, we need to understand the underlying rationale and the historical evolution of the way of life we have been born into.

None of this has anything to do with whether English is a better language than some other languages. English is in fact more inconsistent and less melodic than French, for example. But we speak English for the same practical reasons that cause people in China to speak Chinese. Attempts to turn this into an invidious comparisons issue miss the fundamental point that (1) languages exist to serve practical purposes and (2) they serve those purposes better, the more people in the same society speak the same language.

Why don't we study other civilizations equally? The most obvious answer is the 24-hour day and the limited number of days we spend in college. It is stretching things very thin to try to cover Western civilization in two semesters. Throw in a couple of other civilizations and you are just kidding yourself that you are educating anybody, when all that you are really doing is teaching them to accept superficiality. Those whose real agenda is propaganda are of course untroubled by such considerations.

Any suggestion that any aspect of Western civilization has been admirable, or better in any way than the corresponding aspect of any other civilization, will of course be loudly denounced as showing bias instead of being "non-judgmental." However, the one thing that no civilization has ever been is non-judgmental. Much of the advancement of the human race has occurred because people made the judgment that some things were not simply different from others, but

better. Often this judgment was followed by abandoning one cultural feature and using the other instead.

We use Arabic numerals today, instead of Roman numerals, even though our civilization derived from Rome, and the Arabs themselves got these numerals from India. Arabic numerals (or Indian numerals) have displaced other numbering systems around the world because they are better-- not just different. Paper, printing, and books are today essential aspects of Western civilization, but all three came out of China-- and they have displaced parchment, scrolls, and other forms of preserving writings all around the world. Books are not just different, they are better-- not just in my opinion, or in the opinion of Western civilization, but in the practice of people around the world who have had an opportunity to make the comparison. Firearms have likewise displaced bows and arrows wherever the two have come into competition.

Many of those who talk "non-judgmental" rhetoric out of one side of their mouths are quick to condemn the evils of "our society" out of the other side. Worse, they condemn American society or Western civilization for sins that are the curse of the human race all across the planet. Indeed, they condemn the West for sins that are worse in many non-Western societies.

Perhaps the classic case is slavery. The widespread revulsion which this hideous institution inspires today was largely confined to Western civilization a century ago, and a century before that was largely confined to a portion of British society. No one seems interested in the epic story of how this curse that covered the globe and endured for thousands of years was finally gotten rid of. It was gotten rid of by the West-- not only in Western societies but in other societies conquered, controlled, or pressured by the West.

The resistance put up by Africans, Asians, and Arabs was monumental in defense of slavery, and lasted for more than a century. Only the overwhelming military power of the West enabled it to prevail on this issue, and only the moral outrage of Western peoples kept their governments' feet to the fire politically to maintain the pressure against slavery around the world. Of course, this is not the kind of story that appeals to the multiculturalists. If it had been the other way around-- if Asian or African imperialists had stamped out slavery in Europe-- it would still be celebrated, in story and song, on campuses across America.

Why are the traditional classics of Western civilization written by dead white males?

Take it a step at a time. They are written by dead people for two reasons: First, there are more dead people than living people. Second, a classic is not something that is hot at the moment but something that survives the test of time. There may be things written today that will survive to become classics, but we won't be here when that happens. The things we know are classics were almost by definition written by dead people.

Why were they white? Do we ask why the great classics of China were written by people who

were Chinese? If we found that the great classics of China were written by Swedes, wouldn't we wonder what the hell was going on?

Should there be any mystery as to why they were written by males? Is anyone so utterly ignorant of history that they do not know that females had more than enough work to keep them busy for most of the history of the human race? Maybe men should have shared some of that work. But history is what happened, not what we wish had happened. If most of the people who were educated were male-- as they have been throughout history, and even are today in some societies-- then most of the people who leave the kind of written material left by educated people will be men. You don't get great mathematical discoveries from people who were never taught algebra.

Much the same reasoning applies to other groups considered to be (1) oppressed and (2) "under-represented" among those whose historic achievements and contributions are recognized. But how can a people's achievements be unaffected by their oppression? One of the many reasons to be against oppression is that it keeps people from achieving all that they could have achieved if they had been treated more decently. To proclaim oppression and still expect to find the oppressed equally represented among those with historic achievements and contributions is almost a contradiction in terms.

The past is many things, but one thing it is, is irrevocable. A past to your liking is not an entitlement.

Don't we need multiculturalism to get people to understand each other and get along with each other?

Since this is an empirical question, you would expect people to seek an empirical answer, yet most of those who talk this way seem content to treat the matter as axiomatic. But is there any evidence that colleges that have gone whole hog into multiculturalism have better relations among the various groups on campus? Or is it precisely on such campuses that separatism and hostility are worse than on campuses that have not gone in for the multicultural craze?

You want to see multiculturalism in action? Look at Yugoslavia, at Lebanon, at Sri Lanka, at Northern Ireland, at Azerbaijan, or wherever else group "identity" has been hyped. There is no point in the multiculturalists' saying that this is not what they have in mind. You might as well open the floodgates and then say that you don't mean for people to drown. Once you have opened the floodgates, you can't tell the water where to do.

How are we to be part of the global economy, or engage in all sorts of other international activities, without being multicultural?

Ask the Japanese. They are one of the most insular and self-complacent peoples on Earth today. Yet they dominate international markets, international finance, international scientific and technological advances, and send armies of tourists around the world. This is not a defense of insularity or of the Japanese. It is simply a plain statement of fact that contradicts one of the many lofty and arbitrary dogmas of multiculturalism.