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Multiculturalism

By Thomas K. Lindsay



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(Post)Modern Romance: Liberals and Multiculturalism

By Thomas K. Lindsay

These days, it's getting more and more difficult to talk to each other. Even less do we listen, preferring a scorched-earth policy over discussion and compromise. Some of the reasons for this are not new: the religious Right has for some time now responded with bitter anger to what it perceives as our moral dissolution. And the Left continues to denounce our bourgeois notions of economic and political liberty as little more than sham rationalizations in the service of class inequality. But there is also a new entrant into the fray, multiculturalism, which asserts that mere toleration of diversity, the classical liberal solution, will no longer do: not toleration but nothing less than "celebration" must be our new moral imperative. The result? From our universities, to the National Endowment for the Arts, to even the Boy Scouts, the clash between "traditional values" and "cultural diversity" is stretching our democratic sensibilities to the breaking point.

As a college professor who teaches political philosophy, I am paid to worry about such things. And worry I do. What troubles me most is this: the majority of my colleagues, who believe in and practice a very respectable mainstream liberalism, somehow find themselves intellectually and morally bound to support the multicultural agenda that is at this moment establishing more beachheads on American campuses. Or, if they do not support the new orthodoxy, they believe that their liberalism compels at least their acquiescence. Meaning, they keep their mouths shut.

At first glance, this is altogether understandable. As liberals, who among us can be unsympathetic to the quest to abolish bigotry in all its forms? Given this end, how can we object to the extension of this project to our universities? Did not our classical liberal Founders envision a society that practices and cherishes toleration? As these rhetorical questions demonstrate, multiculturalism's quest to produce a people which "celebrates diversity" appears to be only a logical, if more committed, extension of the classical liberal project. But the harmony between liberalism and multiculturalism is only apparent. Beneath their shared animus toward bigotry lie differences so fundamental that the success of multiculturalism cannot but spell the death of liberalism. To see this, we need first to rediscover the older, that is, the liberal, view of toleration.

Classical Liberal Toleration. Classical liberal toleration recognizes and aims to ameliorate the natural tension between extraordinary—and often peculiar—individuals (a Socrates, a Van Gogh, a Howard Hughes, etc.) and the moral-political community. To effect this reconciliation, that is, to do justice to both individual liberty and social cohesion, liberalism "tolerates" such individuals, while asking, in the name of social harmony, that they keep to themselves. In so doing, liberalism seeks to ensure the freedom required for these "fringe" lives, while at the same time recognizing that a certain closedness is an inescapable requirement of moral-political health. While citizens in a liberal regime would not be the subjects of Socrates (and most would decline even to be his students), neither would they be his executioners. To this extent, the natural tensions between democratic equality (with its tendency to view the extraordinary as undemocratic

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or “elitist”), republican virtue (with its proclivity to label the peculiar “immoral”), and individual liberty (with its openness to corruption) can be ameliorated.

Toleration and Multiculturalism. While liberal toleration has been successful over the last two centuries in making liberty acceptable to partisans of equality and virtue, it has yet to—indeed, it cannot—make its peace with that species of postmodernism called multiculturalism. And with good reason. Positing that all values are equal (because all equally lack rational support), “self-creation,” rather than rational discovery (liberalism’s focus), has become the postmodern standard of human dignity. Having jettisoned the conviction that there are authoritative standards of virtue and vice, equality in our rights (the liberal project) is no longer sufficient, and must be replaced by equality in our lifestyles. Hence, indiscriminate toleration, even “celebration,” supplants the older republican, at times intolerant, concern with civic virtue. But whereas older versions of intolerance sought to subordinate “each to the all,” multiculturalism looks to subordinate “all to the each”—that is, to each and every, necessarily idiosyncratic, version of self-creation. In short, morality grounded in nature’s amorality; equality grounded in reason’s impotence at “prioritizing” values; and liberty grounded in our inability to distinguish liberty from license—these are the leading characters in the multiculturalist drama. On these terms, classical liberalism’s mere toleration rather than celebration of the diversity of self-creation is niggardly and “illiberal” indeed.

Against my concerns, my colleagues offer a very common-sensical, indeed, a very liberal, response: The multicultural agenda, while it aims radically to change society, will in time come itself to be changed, that is, moderated, by society’s moral demands. Multiculturalism’s ideological excesses will inevitably produce a backlash from which all but its most ardent proponents will flee to the safer havens of moderation. The celebrationists will come to recognize that their demands for more than mere tolerance endanger social harmony and, with it, the grounds of their own liberty. Faced with the self-undoing recklessness of their more excessive demands, they will act soberly to retract them. Because we live in a mass democracy, meaning, because here public opinion finally reigns supreme, multiculturalism will be changed as much as or more than the society it seeks to change. The net result: a society that is more tolerant and an intellectual class that is more restrained. As a Marxist colleague likes to remind me, “Multiculturalism, like everything else that pretends to significance in America, will come in time to be co-opted.”

The Abandonment of Rational Liberalism. I am less soothed by this forecast than are my colleagues. Because I can’t believe it. Certainly there’s no denying that such appeals to prudence, moderation, and self-preservation have been successful for the last 200 years, that is, during liberalism’s reign. But will they prove persuasive with liberalism’s latest critics? Let’s look at what accounted for liberalism’s principled victories over its past opponents. The prudential arguments of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and our Founders succeeded because they persuaded us that humanity finds, through reason, that the most fundamental thing about us is our desire for and subsequent right to self-preservation and the liberty it requires. Our social contract relies both on the capacity of all to reason (if only in this low, calculating sense) and on the supremacy of reason in moral-political matters; that is, human reason both unites and guides.

But for multiculturalism, reason has fallen from its throne. In our epoch, both Marx on the left and Nietzsche on the right agree on reason’s merely derivative status. With the dismissal of the notion that our rationally discerned and grounded rights are the fundamental facts of humanity, that which is now argued to be fundamental—be it class, power, creativity, race, gender, sexual orientation—no longer unites us, as did classical liberalism’s world view, but, instead, forever separates us. Be the distinctions proletarian/bourgeois, superman/last man, Aryan/non-Aryan, or “sun people”/“ice people,” all find our fundamental differences to outweigh the sameness to which liberalism has looked in positing a human **nature** (essence or soul) and on which its rights

doctrine has relied. Stated simply, humanity-as-unprincipled-creativity leaves us with no truly **common** appeal to make. From this it follows that the rationally discovered and grounded, “self-evident truths” of human nature, as espoused in the Declaration of Independence, are nothing but ideology. When reason, which served as the core of the liberal definition of human nature, was emasculated, so was any possibility that humanity could discover an objective natural standard on the basis of which we might compromise in the name of respecting equal rights: mere equality in rights is not only insufficient, it is insulting and oppressive in the eyes of those for whom only equal dignity can be justice.

The Abandonment of Limitations. This is why I am less than sanguine that multiculturalism will come to moderate itself in the face of the demands of social and political harmony. After all, the downfall of reason and resulting balkanization of what is now only nominally (and derivatively) referred to as “human nature” can justify—for Nietzsche, does justify—the merciless extinction of multitudes in the name of some self-creative act. Absent any objective moral standards, the new individualist cannot be censured for pursuing violence if he should deem his self-creation requires it. Indeed, given the postmodernist contempt for liberal toleration (to give just one example, philosopher Richard Rorty comes close to praising the “private poem” he finds in the “sadist[’s]” “extreme cruelty”), should we expect anything less than violence? Principles, Justice Jackson informed us, have a way of working themselves out to the “limits of their logic.” In the face of such a world view, our liberal, prudential arguments for political moderation come much too late.

What is more, the liberal conviction of the goodness of political moderation itself depends on our prior conviction that political life is limited in its ability to provide all goods to all people. For the liberal, the limitations of politics follow logically from the limitations of human nature (“if men were angels,” James Madison tells us, “they would need no government”). That is to say, our recognition of the limits of politics requires first our looking to a standard that transcends politics. But relativism-grounded multiculturalism denies trans-cultural and hence trans-political standards. At the same time, it argues that the “self”—in the name of which it would transform society—is radically derivative of the community. “Socialization,” Rorty reports, “goes all the way down, and who gets to do the socializing is often a matter of who manages to kill whom first.” With this postmodern marriage of cultural relativism and cultural determinism, the “self” finds itself radically and simultaneously above and below politics and culture: culture stands as both groundless and absolute. While this may appear as a philosophically untenable position, it is so only from the standpoint of (what has of late come to be called “logocentric”) reason, which multiculturalism views as only one more of the—groundless—orthodoxies of (to use Rorty’s description) the “rich North Atlantic” democracies.

So, again, I can’t help being less confident than my colleagues in the ultimate effectiveness of their very prudent and temperate appeals in the face of the intemperance of the new “anti-Science” Science. Arguments for social and political harmony will be discarded on the grounds that such appeals are rooted in a notion of the limits of “human nature,” itself a product of bourgeois prejudice (on this, and again, both Marx and Nietzsche agree, although for clearly different reasons). Indeed, any arguments for moderation in recognition of the limits of political justice must be denounced: “creativity” knows no limits. For these reasons, postmodernism/multiculturalism (allow the rough parallel for present purposes) threatens to marry in one regime the worst aspects of republicanism (zealotry), democracy (envy-driven levelling), and liberalism (corruption).

Self-Destructive Tendencies of Classical Liberalism. How did we get to this point? After bemoaning the menace of multiculturalism, we who insist on continuing to defend liberalism are duty-bound to ask what responsibility liberalism itself bears for our decline. Would it be remarkable if the principles of classical liberalism’s “naked public square” have managed, in our 200

years as a nation, to “trickle down” to the private sphere? We may have to concede, if grudgingly and with qualifications, that the moral cohesion of, and community support offered by, the private sphere during earlier times was the product of our collective hangover from institutions and practices (religion, tradition, and the extended family) that classical liberalism’s own principles helped to “demystify.” Having been already weakened by classical liberalism, should we be surprised that these private havens of morality should be easy prey for those multiculturalists who now view them only as enemies of “diversity”?

If we grant that classical liberalism began our balkanization, we liberals need also to ask ourselves whether multiculturalism represents, in key respects, the attempt to reestablish community on the ashes left by liberalism and contemporary relativism. That is, classical liberalism did away with the trans-political authority of religion, tradition, and patriarchy. Relativism, in turn, by denying reason its former power, closed us off from access to trans-political natural standards. Hence, all that is left as a support for community is the solitary, unsupported “self.” The political question then becomes how to construct community out of a diversity of unconnected “selves.” Only by celebrating diversity; i.e., only the community that is not a community can satisfy the self without a soul (fixed nature). Perhaps, then, we should not be surprised that the “anti-community” community requires for its implementation the uniform imposition of diversity-celebration on those who would claim any standard above standard-less self-creation. Stated differently, multiculturalism aims to remedy classical liberalism’s perceived failure at supporting community, but it does so on the basis of the success of relativism; hence, diversity-as-monolith (=political correctness) imposes the communal value of value non-imposition (=diversity-celebration) in the name of the lawless liberty of the soulless self.

The Counterbalance of Private Morality. Mindful of and concerned over liberalism’s atomizing emphasis on rights, Mary Ann Glendon (*Rights Talk*) and others recently have suggested as a counterbalance the return to vigorous moral discourse in our private lives. A noble and serious project, indeed, one at which we must look hard. But, given current political and cultural tendencies, we need also to ask ourselves where there will remain an autonomous sphere of the private in which to foster and nourish private morality. Some age-old answers are “private associations” and the family. But consider the present and likely status of both under the postmodern political agenda. Beginning last year, and continuing to the present, one such private association, the Boy Scouts, has come under legal attack for discriminating against prospective Scout leaders on the basis of sexual orientation—an unrepresentative fluke? I would judge so were it not for the fact that the leader of the initial attack on the Scouts, Roberta Atchenberg, has since been named assistant secretary for fair housing at HUD. Consider also that a likely project of our new President, if wife Hillary has her say in the matter, will be granting to children the right to sue their parents—for which a Florida judge recently lent the precedent. In the name of the postmodern vision of liberty, the realm of the private is likely to suffer a shrinking. Hence, pointing to families and private associations as safe havens for nourishing private morality, while a very laudable goal, was a more viable option in Tocqueville’s day (it was he who first proposed this as a remedy to democratic conformism). Because ours is not Tocqueville’s day, I wonder whether mainstream liberals grasp fully the hostility with which any autonomy-promoting agenda will be viewed by the totalitarian-tending project of postmodernist emancipation. In this light, the diversity-enforcing speech restrictions so in vogue at a number of our universities appear now to be but the first step in a project that requires for fulfillment its extension to society as a whole. In the realm of ideas, at least, trickle-down appears to be working.

What, then, is to be done? Because the coming political crisis is the result of an intellectual crisis, a way out, if there is a way out (I have my doubts), must consist in retracing our steps back to the source, back to the understanding of liberal toleration grounded in human nature, and back to the university by the fate of which liberalism stands or falls. In the face of the

postmodern assault, those who are in the universities must rediscover and then defend (I am speaking here only to the tenured) the deepest reasons for liberalism's having been founded in the first place. The best and only weapon liberal teachers possess consists in holding up for emulation once again the model of the time-honored liberal—the individual whose rational freedom enables him, like Socrates, to stand against the force of orthodoxy. Such an individual deserves a **liberal** regime because he has the capacity or at least the potential, through his reason, to **liberate** himself from the sometimes less than rational authority of religion, tradition, “community,” etc. Of course, the possibility of a truly liberal way of life requires that we discover again that there is something worth looking up to, that is, requires that we refute the postmodern claim (as expressed by Rorty) that “there is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them.” What is required is our relearning and advancing the liberal conviction that natural standards can be discovered through reason, rather than merely idiosyncratically created through “private poems.” What is required is a return to liberal rationalism, and with it, to a truly liberal education—an education aimed at freeing the mind from the less-than-examined assumptions that necessarily animate every culture. Because, without the possibility of intellectual freedom or self-understanding (rather than mere self-creation), those who today would purge both the curriculum and our politics of their largely “Eurocentric” focus have a strong case indeed. Only our rediscovery of the possibility of true freedom can justify the toleration for which mainstream liberalism stands.

But don't hold your breath. My fear is that the bulk of liberals, both in the academy and out, will continue to court multiculturalism in the belief that it is only liberalism taken seriously. Remember the American Left's line back in the '20s and '30s? “Communism is only twentieth-century Americanism,” we were told, and many believed it. The parallel between the older Communism-Americanism and present multiculturalism-liberalism analogies is frighteningly perfect and perfectly frightening. True, history gave the lie to the Communism=Americanism myth. But all the years and lives sacrificed in the process happened largely “over there.” Now, liberalism's latest enemy is over here—and with tenure or growing political power (in Donna Shalala's case, both).

So fasten your seat belts. It's going to be a bumpy ride.

