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396

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Multiculturalism**

By Russell Kirk



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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
202/546-4400
<http://www.heritage.org>

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By Russell Kirk

The Need for Continuity

What is called *order*, a word signifying harmonious arrangement, has two aspects when we discuss the diverse cultures of humankind. The first of these is order in the soul: what is called moral order. The second of these is order in the commonwealth: what is called constitutional order. In both its aspects, order stands endangered today, requiring vigorous defense.

Six decades ago in *The Revolt of the Masses*, José Ortega y Gasset wrote that American civilization could not long survive any catastrophe to European society. This remains true, and particularly true with respect to Britain. America's higher culture, and the American civil social order, are derived from institutions and concepts that arose to the east of the Atlantic Ocean. Americans are part of a great continuity and essence.

America and Britain and their cultural dependencies share a common religious heritage, a common history in large part, a common pattern of law and politics, and a common body of great literature. Yet American citizens and British subjects cannot be wholly confident that their order will endure forever. It is possible to exhaust moral and social capital; a society relying altogether upon its patrimony soon may find itself bankrupt. With civilization, as with the human body, conservation and renewal are possible only if healthful change and reinvigoration occur from age to age. It is by no means certain that our present moral and constitutional order is providing sufficiently for its own future. Modern men pay a great deal of attention to material and technological means, but little attention to the instruments by which any generation must fulfill its part in the contract of eternal society.

Grim Symptoms. Twentieth century mankind, in Britain and in America, have tended to be contemptuous of the past; yet they contribute little enough of their own, except in technology and applied sciences, toward the preservation of a tolerable order, let alone its improvement. The facile optimism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is much diminished nowadays, but this does not signify that naive notions of inevitable Progress have been supplanted by serious reflection on the problem of how to conserve and to renew our cultural patrimony. The present threat to the inner order and the outer order comes as much from indifference, empathy, and selfishness as it comes from totalist political powers. Pessimism for pessimism's sake is as fatuous as is optimism for optimism's sake. Grim symptoms may be discerned of an absolute decline of the higher culture in both America and Britain, and also symptoms of a decline of the ties that have joined the English-speaking cultures on either side of the Atlantic. How may decay be arrested?

In any age, some people revolt against their own inheritance of order—and soon find themselves plunged into what Edmund Burke called “the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow.” Near the end of the twentieth century, the number of such enemies to order has become alarming. A spirit of defiance or biting criticism that may be healthful, when confined to a creative minority, can become perilous if it is taken up unimaginatively by a popular majority. To the folk who rebel against their patrimony of moral and constitutional order, that leg-

Russell Kirk is a Distinguished Scholar at The Heritage Foundation.

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acy seems a burden—when in truth it is a footing. Cultural restoration, like charity, begins at home; and so I touch here upon symptoms of neglect of the common inheritance of America.

Religious faith, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Judaic, seems enfeebled in the United States. Many of the clergy tend markedly toward a sentimental and humanitarian application of religious teachings; they incline toward the radical alteration of society at the expense of the transcendent ends of religion and of any personal obedience to moral teachings.

As for the legacy of ordered liberty, there, too, one finds cause for misgiving. Even among judges and lawyers, one encounters a growing disregard of the old principles of justice and jurisprudence; and one encounters, too, an overwhelming tendency toward concentration of power in centralized governments.

Theoretical Illiteracy. The causes of such drifts may be found, in part, in the gradual substitution of “pragmatic” standards for old principles of jurisprudence and inherited political institutions. With few exceptions, schools of law have encouraged this progress. There may come to pass the triumph of what Eric Voegelin called “theoretical illiteracy” in law and politics. A university student of considerable native intelligence inquires of me why checks and balances are at all desirable in politics. Why should we not simply train up an elite of governmental administrators, he inquires, trust to their good will and abilities, and let them manage the concerns of the nation?

This growing naïveté, born of an ignorance of the political and legal institutions of the British-American culture, too often passes unchallenged by disciples of the pragmatic and technical methodologies dominant in schools of public administration and in governmental research. This simplicity also reflects a wondrous unawareness of human nature and of statecraft. It is the attitude that Lord Percy of Newcastle denominated “totalist democracy”—a trust in an abstraction called The People, combined with an unquestioning faith in The Expert.

Theoretical illiteracy in politics and jurisprudence is paralleled by a decline of true apprehension of humane letters. In the Anglo-American culture, the study of great literature has pursued an ethical end through an intellectual means. The improvement of reason and conscience for the person’s own sake, and the incidental improvement of society thereby, was the object of the traditional literary disciplines. The present generation of schoolchildren is expected, instead, to “learn to live with all the world, in one global village”—a consummation to be achieved, perhaps, by scissors-and-paste projects.

When poetry is replaced by “communication skills” and narrative history by vague sociological generalizations, the intricate patrimony of general culture is threatened. There exist professors of education who argue that no young person ought to read any book more than half a century old. The imaginative and rational disciplines, so painfully cultivated over centuries, can be permanently injured by a generation or two of neglect and contempt.

Lack of Continuity. Modern men and women live in an age in which the expectation of change often seems greater than the expectation of continuity. In any order worthy of the name, men and women must be something better than the flies of a summer; generation must link with generation. Some people, in this closing decade of the twentieth century, are doing what is in their power to preserve a common heritage. This is not a work that can be accomplished through fresh positive laws or through the creation of new international commissions. Yet if a people forget the ashes of their fathers and the temples of their gods, the consequences soon will be felt in the laws and in international affairs. Cultural continuity lacking, there remains small point in political tinkering with a body social that has become exhausted spiritually and intellectually.

A French aphorism instructs us that the more things change, the more they are the same. We fight over again, generation after generation, the battle to maintain the inner order and the outer. As T. S. Eliot wrote, there are no lost causes because there are no gained causes. Say not the struggle naught

availeth. In defense of the order into which we have been born, one may reaffirm the counsel of Edgar, in *King Lear*:

Take heed o' th' foul fiend; obey thy parents; keep thy word justly; swear not; commit not with man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud array.... Keep thy foot out of brothel, thy hand out of placket, thy pen from lender's book, and defy the foul fiend.

From Shakespeare, as from other most memorable dead, comes the energy that sustains people in a time of tribulation. The order, inner and outer, of our common culture is defended not by the living merely, but by the valiant dead as well.

Challenge and Response

From time to time, during this twentieth century, some American voices have been raised in dispraise of America's inheritance of British culture. One such assault occurred about the middle forties; it was renewed a decade later. Even some American scholars of good repute suggest that it would be well to drop from formal instruction most of our baggage of British literature, and to concentrate instead upon native American verse and prose; certain language associations embrace this line; buy the homegrown product! In effect these literary nationalists advocate a cultural Tariff of Abominations.

Dr. Louis B. Wright, then director of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, took up his cudgel about 1952 in defense of a civilized heritage, against academic allies of barbarism. In his lively book *Culture on the Moving Frontier*, Dr. Wright repeatedly and persuasively digressed from his narrative to point out the essentially British character of American institutions and the American realm of reason and of art. He wrote in his first chapter:

Modern America is so polyglot, and social historians have devoted so much attention in recent years to analyzing and describing the multifarious European, Asiatic, and African influences in the development of American life that we are now in danger of underestimating and even forgetting the oldest, the most persistent, and the most vigorous strain in our cultural inheritance. Great Britain's influence is still so strong that it subtly determines qualities of mind and character in Americans who cannot claim a drop of Anglo-Saxon blood.... If there were no other legacy from the past except the English language and its literature, that alone would be sufficient to explain the durability and strength of the tradition.

Four decades after Professor Wright reproved thus the Goths and Vandals within the Ivory Tower, a new horde of adversaries is bent upon deconstructing the edifice of Anglo-American culture. The principal accrediting associations of the United States, indeed, have menaced colleges and universities with disaccreditation unless they promptly proceed to enter upon programs of multiculturalism, permeating the whole curriculum. And various academic presidents and deans have supinely submitted to this intellectual bullying; but the federal Secretary of Education has rebuffed these barbarous educationists somewhat, threatening *them* in turn with governmental disaccreditation of unjust accreditors.

One encounters in today's American education, truly, a great deal of dullness, at every level; and much intellectual provinciality, too. Ever since the Second World War, indeed, oddly enough, American schooling, from kindergarten through graduate school, has sunk farther and farther into the provinciality of place and time, so that the rising generation grows up unicultural, notably igno-

rant of other countries and other cultures, despite the tremendous ascendancy of the United States in world affairs.

A Multicultural Curriculum. Six decades ago, when I was enrolled in a public grade school not far from great railway yards outside Detroit, nobody thought of demanding multiculturalism: we already possessed that in our school. In geography class, we learned a great deal about the cultures of five continents; we were very interested. Many of us, a few years later, enrolled (during high school) in three years of history: ancient, modern, and American. At least half of us took two years of language, either Latin or French, with corresponding instruction about Roman civilization or French culture; some pupils finished four years of foreign language. Our intelligent courses in English and American literature helped to redeem us from what T. S. Eliot called "the provincialism of time." We were much aware of diversity in the world and in our own country.

Today the radical multiculturalists complain, or rather shout, that African, Asian, and Latin American cultures have been shamefully neglected in North America's schools. In that they are correct enough. In many primary, intermediate, and high schools nowadays—aye, in colleges, too—the offering in the discipline of history amounts only to a whirlwind "Survey of World History" (with Good Guys and Bad Guys occasionally pointed out by the teacher, amidst the violent dust storm), and perhaps a year of American history, often ideologically distorted. As for geography, that virtually has gone by the board; at least one famous state university, a few years ago, swept away altogether its department of geography. Even at boarding schools of good repute and high fees, the teaching of humane letters is very nearly confined to reading and discussing some recent ephemeral novels.

Sixty years ago, most school pupils were taught a good deal about the people and the past of Bolivia, Morocco, China, India, Egypt, Guatemala, and other lands. They even learnt about Eskimo and Aleut cultures. Nowadays pupils are instructed in the disciplines of sexology, driver education, sex education, and the sterile abstractions of Social Studies. Formerly all pupils studied for several years the principal British and American poets, essayists, and novelists and dramatists—this with the purpose of developing their moral imagination. Nowadays they are assigned the prose of "relevance" and "current awareness" at most schools. Indeed a great deal of alleged "education," either side of the Ocean Sea, requires medication or surgery.

Radical Poison. But what the curious sect of multiculturalists prescribe, in Britain as in America, is poison. There is reason to suspect that such multiculturalists as Leonard Jeffries, a black radical professor at the City College of New York, hope to bring down the whole edifice of pedagogy—so as to hold among the ruins perpetual "rap sessions" about indignities once suffered by blacks.¹

Yet suppose that the multiculturalists were sincere in their professions of desire to redress the balance by reducing emphases upon Eurocentric and British culture, and introducing new programs to describe other cultures that have affected the United States—why, how might the thing be accomplished? The number of hours in an academic day is limited. How would a multicultural curriculum deal with the worthy contributions of Armenians, Syrians, Lebanese, Iraqi Chaldeans, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Serbs, Maltese, Croats, Puerto Ricans, Czechs, Chinese, Vietnamese, Mexicans, Hungarians, and a score of other "minorities" that inhabit the city of Detroit, say? Early in 1991,

1 Jeffries it was who drafted the report "A Curriculum of Inclusion" to submit to the New York Board of Regents. During the summer of 1991, Mr. Jeffries indulged himself in denunciation of the Jews, some of them having been obstacles in his deconstructive path; his epithets opened the eyes of persons who had fancied that multiculturalism was merely an endeavor to inform the rising generation about the contributions made to American civilization by folk from many lands.

the Detroit School Board instructed publishers of textbooks that the Board would give short shrift to any school manuals that did not fully emphasize the contributions of Afro-Americans to American culture. Are textbooks for instruction, or are they to become merely devices for “increasing the self-esteem” of ethnic groups?

Whims of Minorities. Even before multiculturalism was taken seriously by anybody, it was sufficiently difficult to publish a textbook that objectively dealt with its subject. A decade ago, I was editing a series of social science manuals. In a history textbook, it had been found prudent to insert a chapter on the Mongols—giving those devastators equal space and classroom time with Hellenes and Romans. In that chapter appeared the phrase “the charge of the barbarian horsemen.” Our textbooks were printed and distributed by a commercial textbook publisher, acting for our council. A woman editor of that firm instructed me, “There may have been women among them. Change your phrase to ‘the charge of the barbarian horsepersons.’” I replied to her that in historical fact, the ferocious cavalry of Genghis Khan included no females; and that I knew of no American woman who would be gratified by being labelled a “barbarian horseperson.” Such are the difficulties that arise when objective scholarship is subject to the whims of all “minorities”—and, moreover, those “minorities” are engaged in endless warfare, one against another.

It is well to learn much about distant cultures. When a sophomore in college, this present writer spent a whole year reading rare works about travels in Africa, borrowed from the shelves of the Library of the State of Michigan—considerably to the neglect of the conventional disciplines for which he was being graded at his college. But to neglect or to repudiate the central and pervasive British culture in America would be to let the whole academic and social enterprise fall apart, “The center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...”

May the Anglo-American culture, so battered by the pace of change during the twentieth century, so damaged by ideological assaults these past several decades, be restored to health? (It is one culture, really, that complex of literature and law and government and mores which still makes civilization possible in both the United States and Britain. Of the three major poets in the English language during the twentieth century—T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, William Butler Yeats—two were American born, a fact suggesting that British and American cultures have coalesced.) No culture endures forever: Of those that have vanished, some have fallen to alien conquerors, as did Roman Britain; but most have expired in consequence of internal decay. When the cult failed, the culture presently crumbled to powder. Will the American culture and the British expire jointly “not with a bang, but a whimper”? One thinks of the Chorus in Sir Osbert Sitwell’s long poem “Demos the Emperor”:

We are the modern masters of the world,
The arbiters, the heirs
Of Egypt, Greece and Italy
 (We have no time for art
 But we know what we like!)

We are the fulfillment of Man’s Promise
The Cup-tie Final and the paper cap;
We are the Soul of the Cash Register,
The Secret of the Hire-Purchase System,
The Vacuum, and the Vacuum-Cleaner.²

2 Published in 1949.

Perhaps. And yet, as I once remarked to President Nixon, great cultures commonly pass through alternating periods of decay and renewal, flickering out finally after many centuries. Byzantine civilization is our clearest instance of this process. The culture from which Anglo-American culture developed extends back more than three thousand years, to Moses and Aaron. Cultures cannot be deliberately created; they arise, rather, from the theophanic events that bring cults into existence. It remains conceivable, nevertheless, that cultures may be *reinvigorated*.

Watering the Roots. If America's British culture is to be reinvigorated, its roots must be watered. The twentieth century guardians of that culture must reject such silliness as the multiculturalist ideology, which does nothing more than gratify little ethnic vanities. Those guardians—who are the whole class of tolerably educated Americans—must resist those ideologues of multiculturalism who would pull down the whole elaborate existing culture of this country in order to make everybody culturally equal—that is equal in ignorance. On this point, Louis B. Wright deserves to be quoted a final time:

For better or for worse, we have inherited the fundamental qualities in our culture from the British. For that reason we need to take a long perspective of our history, a perspective which views America from at least the period of the first Tudor monarchs and lets us see the gradual development of our common civilization, its transmission across the Atlantic, and its expansion and modification as it was adapted to conditions in the Western Hemisphere. We should not overlook other influences which have affected American life, influences from France, Holland, Spain, Germany, Scandinavia, and the rest of Europe, and also influences from Asia and Africa. But we must always remember that such was the vigor of British culture that it assimilated all others. That is not to say that we have been transmogrified into Englishmen, or that we are even Anglophile in sentiment. But we cannot escape an inheritance which has given us some of our sturdiest and most lasting qualities.

Arnold Toynbee instructs us that cultures develop, and civilizations arise, by the process of challenge and response. Some threat to a culture's survival may occur; if that culture vigorously surmounts that challenge, the culture will grow in strength. But if the challenge is so formidable as to damage or distort the culture—why, the threatened culture becomes stunted and possibly succumbs altogether.

The ideology called multiculturalism might benefit American society, after all—in the sense that it is a challenge (if a foolish challenge) to the friends of America's inherited culture. If the response to the multiculturalist threat is healthy, it should rouse again among Americans an apprehension of the high merits of the literature, the language, the laws, the political institutions, and the mores that Americans have received, in the course of four centuries, from the British people. For if a civilization never is challenged, that civilization tends to sink into apathy—and slowly to dissolution.

Intellectually Puny. Multiculturalism is animated by envy and hatred. Some innocent persons have assumed that a multicultural program in schools would consist of discussing the latest number of *The National Geographic Magazine* in a classroom. That is not at all what the multiculturalists intend. Detesting the achievements of Anglo-American culture, they propose to substitute for real history and real literature—and even for real natural science—an invented myth that all things good came out of Africa and Asia (chiefly Africa).

Intellectually, multiculturalism is puny—and anti-cultural. Such power as the multiculturalist ideologues possess is derived from political manipulation: that is, claiming to speak for America's militant "minorities" (chiefly those of African descent). These ideologues take advantage of the sen-

timentality of American liberals, eager to placate such "minorities" by granting them whatever they demand. But what fanatic ideologues demand commonly is bad for the class of persons they claim to represent, as it is bad, too, for everybody else. To deny "minorities" the benefits of America's established culture would work their ruin.

"Culture, with us, ends in headache," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of Americans in 1841. Should the multiculturalists have their way, culture, with us Americans a century and a half later, would end in heartache—and in anarchy. But to this challenge of multiculturalism, presumably the established American culture, with its British roots, still can respond with vigor—a life-renewing response. Love of an inherited culture has the power to cast out the envy and hatred of that culture's adversaries.

