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Where's the Class in Multiculturalism?

CLIFF WELCH

Multiculturalism has become a controversial buzz word on many college campuses. For supporters, multiculturalism is both a way of looking at North American society and of organizing it. The United States is composed of many cultures, supporters explain, and multiculturalism provides a means of legitimizing the existence of these different cultural groups and of building empathy between them despite their differences and often conflicting interests. Thus, multiculturalism is simply a new way of defining social tolerance and political pluralism in the American context. For many detractors, however, multiculturalism is dangerous in that it assigns premium value to cultural diversity rather than to cultural norms that are said to unify Americans, such as religious faith and the work ethic. By emphasizing cultural differences as inherently valuable, detractors argue, multiculturalism abandons a traditional mission of education, which is to minimize differences and maximize common characteristics and ambitions—to train students to blend into the mainstream. Detractors have felt so threatened by multiculturalism that some have turned to the press and politics, attracting an unusual level of attention to an academic controversy.

Both supporters and detractors of multiculturalism seem to share several common assumptions about the role of the university in society and about the basic structure of American society. Both see the university as a place for training citizens. For detractors, this is an obvious point. For supporters, multiculturalism is a way of teaching students to learn to live with “what it is,” which is another type of civics lesson in exemplary social behavior. In addition, both seem to fundamentally agree that the United States is not a class society but a classless society, in which one’s relationship to property is of relatively little significance. For detractors, North America is a consensual society and the idea of conflict implied by class analysis has no meaning. For supporters of multiculturalism, building consensus is problematic, but class bears no apparent relationship to it. Thus, both camps see the social role of the university as one of shaping and defining good citizens and neither camp deals with the question of class.

These generalizations about the controversy over multiculturalism were certainly true for Grand Valley State University, where the debate was reaching a climax in 1992 after nearly two years of examination and discussion. No one questioned the

assumption about training students to fit-in rather than to critically challenge American society. Similarly, class analysis had no part in the public discussion, despite its potential relevance to the cultural diversity theme of supporters on the one hand and the melting pot ideal of detractors on the other.

Class is a familiar term to one and all. Encountering it in the news, one rarely hesitates to reflect upon its definition. As many know, however, defining class in the context of the United States has consumed a forest of paper and the many questions raised are hardly resolved. The mostly widely held definition, one the government and statisticians use, is based on income: most Americans willingly assume they are middle class if they are in a family of four which earns more than \$25,000 a year. These kinds of calculations make a fair amount of sense to Americans.

A more comprehensive alternative definition of class has little to do with income. It asks where one stands in relation to property. If you own a business or share in profits generated by other sorts of property, from houses to junk bonds, you are part of the upper, ruling classes of this country. If you earn wages and do not own productive property, you are working class. According to some, even managers and professionals who earn salaries fall into the latter category. But as managers and professionals often identify more with their bosses and/or professional interests than their fellow employees, they are more often defined as middle class. In this definition of class, the term tells more about one's social status than one's income level and it thus begs questions about the structure of power in American society.

As the controversy over multiculturalism deals essentially with social problems, the question of class is one which needs to be confronted rigorously. Unfortunately, supporters have chosen to politicize multiculturalism to such an extent that the "ism" at the end of the word has come to reflect a doctrine defending cultural diversity against all other ideas. Rather than strengthening a multicultural approach to the study of society, this position has placed supporters on the defensive against conservative opponents as well as sympathetic critics, all of whom note various contradictions in the doctrine. Opponents belittle multiculturalism by proposing that it include such unlikely cultures as those represented by cowboys and Christian sects; in the meantime, sympathizers demand that it be more inclusive by putting such culture-shaping forces as sexual orientation on a par with race. This is the kind of trouble an intellectually unsound conceptualization is liable to attract. The supporters of multiculturalism would stand a better chance if they dropped the "ism" and put class at the heart of their project.

In a community that considers class a way of statistically distinguishing income groups, arguing that it reflects positions of political and social power is liable to be controversial. But it is a controversy that has a long and significant history that is itself educational. Defining class socially also offers an opportunity to dilute the arguments of detractors who bemoan the emphasis on diversity inherent in multiculturalism. One essential feature of class analysis is an emphasis on unity, on showing how people who earn wages share certain common interests. Teaching about this

idea will have great resonance in public institutions such as Grand Valley State where many students are children of wage earners and wage earners themselves. Teaching about class as a reflection of one's social relation to property and the means of production can help build solidarity between disparate student groups and reveal key insights about individuals in society that are far more profound than the framework of citizenship lessons currently being discussed.

An emphasis on class does not require abandoning the multicultural idea. To the contrary, a multicultural approach (as opposed to multiculturalism as a doctrine or value) facilitates a deeper examination of the way class relations work in the United States. The multicultural approach enriches class analysis by asking questions about the way people of different races, ethnic groups, genders, religions, and sexual orientations experience class. This idea has the advantage of appeasing sympathetic critics without losing sight of fundamentals. As the above list of "cultures" suggests, every group has a place if the principal concern is the relationship between class and culture. In the end, a class-based multicultural approach would not only facilitate cross-cultural empathy but a deeper sense of unity and commonality of interests between students. In this way, the university could help fulfill a much greater social function than that implied by mainstreaming.

In a certain way, the multicultural vision adopted by supporters is reminiscent of the outlook of hippies and counter-culture enthusiasts of the late 1960s and 1970s. For them it was politically correct to "let it be" and to "do your own thing." Where I come from in San Francisco, Afro-Americans, Asians, Native Americans, Chicanos, Gays, and Lesbians all had their own groups and lines of demarcation. To cross those lines was a no-no. Yet by jealously protecting their turf, they lost the potential for meaningful political unity. While the proponents of multiculturalism seem to think solidarity will be the result of their teaching about differences between people, it is good to recall that terrorism and the "me-decade" were part of the legacy of this earlier experiment with cultural diversity.

In contrast to multiculturalism, class draws attention to such key concepts as power and this seems highly relevant to teaching about how different cultures fit into American society. At Grand Valley, for example, the multicultural debate arose in response to a sit-in demonstration of black students in the Spring of 1990. It was a confrontation, a showdown, if you will, between groups with very different proportions of power that pushed the problem of racism on campus into the limelight. President Lubbers and Provost Niemeyer handled the confrontation with sensitivity and, in the tradition of western liberalism, they promised to set up a task force to study the matter. As is the custom of such task forces, the results have been so watered-down as to make them as non-threatening to institutional power as possible.

In the sit-in, black students expressed their need to see themselves represented in the curriculum; Asian and Latino students may feel the same way. And yet, the most numerous student groups at Grand Valley are white ethnics. From a racial point of

view, theirs is the dominant culture on campus. But from a class point of view, the interests of neither the whites, blacks nor Latinos is addressed in the curriculum. Since many are from working class families, they all experience class, although in different ways, depending on their cultural background. Furthermore, their common position in the social hierarchy means many of them are equally hurt by the elimination of various entitlements, such as affirmative action quotas, farm subsidies, student loans, and other government measures aimed at correcting historic inequality.

The 1980s saw a massive shift in the resources of power to the upper classes and a corresponding decline in the power and status of the working class. Across racial, ethnic, and gender lines, the poor and struggling have even less power to change their condition in this country. Improving their chances for meaningful social mobility should be a goal of public educational institutions such as Grand Valley State. In this sense, education should help explain the sources of inequality and poverty, sensitizing students to the problems of social stratification in the U.S., and helping to empower the poor to change their situation. As presently conceived, multiculturalism offers little to this project. Worse, multiculturalism hides real issues behind a veil of civics lessons such as the celebration of pluralism. Only a multicultural approach which seeks to relate class to culture is capable of offering students at a way of crossing cultural barriers to see themselves side by side with their peers in society.