

MULTICULTURALISM

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As interpreted by right wing pundits like Pat Buchanan, multiculturalism is a cancer eating away at the fabric of American society. Lkening today's immigrants to the barbarians who were allowed to overrun and destroy the Roman empire, immigrants from "third world nations" are corrupting American society, undermining our values, weakening our institutions, sapping our strength, and destroying our unity.¹ In Europe, multiculturalism seems to be on the defensive, as European political leaders fret over the growth of "parallel societies" and put greater emphasis on promoting shared values and teaching national languages. What exactly is multiculturalism? And will it lead, as Buchanan suggests, to the decline and fall of western civilization? This research brief tries to probe this question.

- Multiculturalism was not an invention of the sixties or seventies. Rather, it traces its origins back to the early days of the 20th century, when it was generally known as intercultural education. The intercultural education movement represented a creative response to the influx of millions of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe during the period from 1890 to 1914.²
- Rather than being a recipe for group separation, multiculturalism was mainly intended as a formula for promoting the integration of immigrants into American society and for the enrichment and revitalization of American culture.
- Recent research suggests that multicultural approaches in immigrant-receiving societies have succeeded in facilitating the political and civic integration of immigrants.³
- Research also suggests – perhaps counter-intuitively -- that those who are most rooted in their ethnic cultures have an easier time adapting to American society.⁴
- Multiculturalism is often erroneously depicted as a philosophy that puts loyalty to group, whether ethnic or religious, ahead of loyalty to country. Most people, no matter where they fall on the political spectrum, would disassociate themselves from such a view. But multiculturalism, understood as respect for other cultures and pride in heritage, may go to the core of American identity and be entirely compatible with a strong common culture; indeed, it may be reflective of that culture, if one of the country's distinguishing characteristics is its openness to new ways and capacity to learn from others.
- One of the most sophisticated attacks on multiculturalism comes from Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington who divides the world into nine "civilizations." Asking Americans to resist the "divisive siren calls of multiculturalism," Huntington believes that the United States must remain rooted

in “Western civilization” and not fall victim to the spurious notion that we can create a universal, or “multicivilizational” society.⁵

- Multiculturalism has also been attacked from the left. University of Illinois Professor Walter Benn Michaels argues that the American preoccupation with group rights has been a kind of smokescreen blinding the country to class-based inequalities.⁶ University of Wisconsin Professor Michael Olneck, on the other hand, thinks multiculturalists “fail(ed)” to articulate an authentic ideology of pluralism” and offered instead a “sanitized cultural sphere divorced from sociopolitical interests.”⁷
- Some have called for the creation of a “multiculturalism 2.0,” because the old multiculturalism, or the idea of a mosaic of cultures, seems to be an “obsolete paradigm.” In place of the mosaic, new multiculturalists describe a “schema model” for cultural identity, by which they mean a complex web of influences, inclusive of ethnicity, but not bound by it.⁸
- When all is said and done, multiculturalism may best be understood as a set of values and practices designed to achieve a more cohesive and harmonious society.
- One of the alleged excesses of multiculturalism, as noted by some observers today, is its tolerance for the use of foreign language in the delivery of public services to members of immigrant communities. Such use is considered incompatible with an effort to promote the adjustment of newcomers to our society, through the rapid acquisition of English and knowledge of American institutions and values. In reality, the need to reach out to immigrants in their own languages, in order to help newcomers acclimate to American society, has been a continuing thread in America’s response to immigrants.
- During the early days of the 20th century, government and private institutions used foreign languages to communicate with recently arrived immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. During the first two decades of the 20th century, for example, there was a “foreign language movement in American Libraries,” a concerted effort to assemble books and periodicals in the foreign languages represented by the immigrants in the local community. As the Librarian of the Newark Public Library put it, “It is easy to believe that they (the immigrants) find their new home still more homelike, and become sooner attached to it, when they find one of its public institutions giving them a welcome in their native tongues.”⁹ Showing hospitality through the use of foreign language was also practiced by the federal government, which made extensive use of the foreign language press to communicate with immigrant communities. At the same time, hundreds of settlement houses and international institutes around the country recruited bilingual, bicultural workers to meet the everyday needs of immigrants.

¹ Patrick J. Buchanan, State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America (New York: 2006). According to Buchanan, “It is not true that all creeds and cultures are equally assimilable in a First World nation born of England, Christianity, and Western civilization...Race matters. Ethnicity

matters. History matters. Faith matters. Nationality matters. While they are not everything, they are not nothing. Multiculturalist ideology be damned, this is what history teaches.” (248)

² For a history of the intercultural education movement, see Nicholas V. Montalto, [A History of the Intercultural Educational Movement: 1924-1041](#) (New York: 1982).

³ For a good summary of research supporting this point, see: Irene Bloemraad, “Unity in Diversity? Bridging Models of Multiculturalism and Immigrant Integration,” [Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race](#) (4:2, 2007), 1-20.

⁴ Portes and Fernandez-Kelly use the term “selective acculturation” to explain the ability of some second generation immigrant youth from less privileged backgrounds to defy the odds and succeed in college and work. Alejandro Portes and Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, “No Margin for Error: Educational and Occupational Achievement among Disadvantaged Children of Immigrants,” Center for Migration and Development, Princeton University, November 2006 (CMD Working Paper #07-03), 15.

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, [The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order](#) (New York: 1996). Huntington’s critique of multiculturalism is found on pp. 301-321.

⁶ Walter Benn Michaels, [The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality](#) (New York: 2006).

⁷ Michael R. Olneck, “The Recurring Dream: Symbolism and Ideology in Intercultural and Multicultural Education,” [American Journal of Education](#) (Vol. 98, No. 2, Feb., 1990), 165-166.

⁸ For a good exposition of this point of view, see: Alden E. Habacon, “Beyond the Mosaic: Multiculturalism 2.0,” [Canadian Diversity](#) (Vol 6:4, Fall, 2008), 150-154.

⁹ Winthrop Talbot, ed., [Americanization](#) (New York: 1920), 235.