

Transracialism, multiculturalism, and community

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Some critics nowadays are calling for the development of a transracial or “color-blind” society. They claim that the current focus on multiculturalism is causing undue social conflict. In general, these critics want to promote an absolute culture that provides a universal standard for assimilation. The problem with this approach to maintaining social order is that diversity is undermined, along with key elements of democracy. What is needed, instead, is an image of society that does not require unquestioned assimilation in order to insure solidarity. In this way, the democratization of culture can be promoted.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities is the focus of this essay, in view of the controversies demanding that societies should become color, race, and culture blind. In recent years, a growing number of writers have begun to argue that transracialism should be emphasized in the United States and elsewhere. Their concern is that integration, rather than ethnic group solidarity, should be the focus of attention in every society (Loury 1996). In this way, the ethnic balkanization that they feel is currently threatening the U.S. can be curtailed. The overall aim of this movement is to create a “color-blind” America.

What these writers fear is that the traditional ethnic majority – white Europeans – has begun to disappear. Without a doubt, the U. S. has begun to change demographically. But supporters of transracialism believe that much more is at stake than the ethnic composition of American society. In short, they seem to believe that the moral fiber of America will not survive these changes. What Jim Sleeper refers to as “America’s civic culture”, therefore, must be reaffirmed and adopted by every ethnic group (Sleeper 1993). Otherwise, the future of this society is very bleak. Clearly, this idea carries racist overtones; specifically, only Europeans are capable of creating a unified society. In a slightly new way, transracialists are resurrecting an old theme. That is, the survival of America requires that everyone be assimilated

successfully to particular cultural ideals. Alternative traditions, declares Sleeper, must not be allowed to challenge traditional culture. Afrocentrism, for example, must never be permitted to derail real or universal civic education. Only through the generation of a transracial public will American society continue to thrive. For example, economic and other modes of success require that the U.S. remain unified and focused on a single goal.

In order to achieve this end, advocates of transracialism call for the formation of a broad human community. Consistent with the thrust of modern sociology, the social organization they have in mind constitutes a reality *sui generis* (Durkheim 1983). Based on America’s civic culture, this form of community is not mired in the particularized interests that lead to ethnic conflict. The community transracialists covet, instead, reflects universal principles and thus is devoid of ideology. As some critics are fond of saying, this new community is built on a “color-blind” foundation (Bennet 1992: 178–202).

But similarl to earlier approaches to assimilation, transracialists accept uncritically the notion of a universal culture. A reality *sui generis*, in other words, is not considered to be contradictory. America’s civic culture transcends the limitations imposed by ethnic traditions and should appeal to everyone. Moreover, adhering to these standards will result in the creation of a “new race” that embodies the highest ideals of humanity (Sleeper 1993: 6). Following assimilation to this seigniorial culture, parochial concerns are replaced by a genuine

American ethos. Park and Burgess during the 1920s, along with a host of more recent assimilationists, made similar claims.

By stressing community, the aim is to reinstate the former dominant consensus. The implication is that social harmony is antithetical to multiculturalism. Indeed, cultural differences must be obscured, or a sense of community will never prevail. Without the adoption of a transgroup identity, transracialists contend that moral authority is destined to collapse. There will be no mainstream or center around which American society can coalesce; ethnic chauvinism will undermine any possible basis of trust among different racial or ethnic groups.

IS SEEKING COLOR-BLINDNESS WISE?

Transracialists hope to promote racial harmony through the development of a cohesive community. They approach this task in a manner similar to all social realists, and argue that the community they have in mind is immune to quotidian concerns. In this particular case, the actual intricacies involved in maintaining social relationships in American society are dismissed as unimportant.

Like true realists, transracialists presume that ethnic issues are hopelessly embroiled in ideology. A real community is produced, accordingly, by overcoming this source of error and confusion (Stark 1963). Yet achieving this state of transcendence creates a paradox, i. e. the actual existence of persons is overlooked or negated. Because of the lure of this synoptic vision – a universal and autonomous culture – ignoring issues related to the actual formation of a community is not treated as a serious flaw. In other words, seeking color-blindness is presumed to be an essential ingredient in overcoming the restricted vision associated with ethnic interests.

But back to the initial question: Is pursuing a color-blind society wise? For several reasons, this proposal makes little sense. Communities, in short, are not this sterile. Communities are not abstractions based on myths about a primordial sense of solidarity that has been disrupted in modern societies. Prior to the onset of ethnic awareness, transracialists believe that communities arose spontaneously. Some basic and common bond was present, which multiculturalists have decided to disregard. Perhaps these halcyon days can be retrieved, if only ethnic groups would simply focus on the larger, human community.

Multiculturalists, on the other hand, contend that color blindness will not culminate in the homogeneous society envisioned by transracialists for several reasons. First, persons have identities that are variously constructed. These individuals are uniquely situated and have different pasts and futures. To dismiss these differences is tantamount to rejecting the existence of these persons (Marable 1995: 123–127). In this regard, addressing their uniqueness does not represent a lapse in rationality; on the contrary, recognizing these persons requires that the novel character of their identities be acknowledged. Fur-

thermore, because abandoning any reference to an identity is impossible, those who jettison their ethnicity must adopt other standards that they may believe are unsuitable. This transition will most likely be viewed as repressive and engender resentment.

Second, persons are treated differently in American society because of their race. As Cornel West describes, “race does matter” in practically every area of life (West 1994). Choosing to ignore this fact will not eliminate discrimination and institutional barriers to equality. The point is that persons are not atoms and categorically distinct from surrounding factors, but are involved in a host of relationships. And some of these associations may be predicated bias and exploitation. If these sources of discrimination are not directly confronted and dismantled, a community that demands all persons be treated similarly will not be forthcoming. Except in the ideology perpetrated by racists, fairness and justice are not associated with discrimination.

And third, the sort of homogeneity realists’ desire can easily begin to truncate democracy. In short, the required conformity can stifle expression throughout society. Traditionally conceived, democracy requires the recognition and toleration of differences, including those related to ethnicity. As Claude Lefort notes, democracy is antithetical to the contrived image of society promoted by transracialists (Lefort 1986: 279). As opposed to a vision free of ethnic histories, conflicts, and various emotions, a true democracy incorporates elements such as these to insure that everyone is heard in their own voice. When the ethnic history of a country is told in a variety of ways, the *vox populi* is expressed. What transracialists refuse to recognize is the embedded nature of social existence. Persons are influenced by racial and ethnic concerns, have different histories and experiences, and are enmeshed in many social relationships. These associations, moreover, have both positive and negative consequences. For example, identities are sometimes able to flourish because of these cultural supports. On the other hand, differences in power may inhibit personal or group advancement. In the end, developing a community requires that the embedded nature of social life be given serious attention. When this issue is overlooked, talk about community is filled with nothing but platitudes. Hence building a community rests on abstractions, such as the unquestioned need to assimilate.

INTEGRATION AND ORDER

At this time, proponents of transracialism are asking, “what has happened to integration?” “Why has this idea been devalued?” The implication is that in the absence of integration, society will disappear. But this conclusion is erroneous; order and integration are not synonymous. In point of fact, multiculturalists contend that order can be based on a very different principle that is related to emphasizing ethnic pride.

Consistent with the aim of color-blindness, integration is achieved through assimilation. And in the end, assimilation fosters conformity and not necessarily the ability of persons to participate fully in society. For example, many blacks have become assimilated – they have either forgotten or rejected their African ancestry – but remain marginalized in American society. Full participation and self-determination have not been accorded to many completely assimilated minorities. The reason for this failure is quite simple: assimilation places the burden of mobility solely on the individual. Questions are deflected, therefore, away from systemic or institutional factors that may undermine the independence and advancement of a group. Self-abasement will not necessarily result in upward mobility, as long as this movement is not in the interest of the majority.

For real integration based on full participation to occur, more is usually required than assimilation. Why should inter-group solidarity be linked to the elimination of ethnic or racial differences? For presumed by this type of purge are powerful social influences that can demand and enforce such conformity. And given the presence of these exalted persons or groups, minorities will not be able to join freely the community that, as transracialists argue, will resolve all ethnic conflicts.

But what is wrong with emphasizing pride? Consciousness raising and identity politics do not have to devolve into the anomie feared by transracialists (Murphy; Choi 1997: 113–127). In fact, the identity politics that have been at the core of the battle to eliminate apartheid, the civil rights struggle in the U.S., and the Women's Movement have emphasized the collective nature of human liberation. Additionally, very disciplined strategies were developed in each case to attack systemic barriers to inclusion, so that a thoroughly multi-dimensional community could be established.

The same is true of most advocates of Afrocentrism (Asante 1992). Asante and Karenga, for example, state openly that they simply no longer want Africans to have to live in the shadow of Europe. They want blacks to assume their rightful place as members of a human coalition that will fight racism and other forms of discrimination. Instead of erasing European influences and instigating hostility, they want to open U.S. society for the full participation of African-Americans.

Ethnic pride, therefore, is not inherently anathema to order. On the contrary, emphasizing this aspect of identity has been associated with a willingness to confront publicly groups and institutions that discriminate. As a result, an environment can be created that supports the formation of a community of independent groups, which are bound together by the principles of respect and toleration. Through this sort of confrontation, the factors that mediate the survival of a community can be addressed. In a manner similar to that conceived by Habermas in his discussion of the ideal speech situation, persons can recognize one another in their own terms and reach an understanding that is non-repressive (Ha-

bermas 1970: 115–148). At least the stage is set for differences to be examined without entrenched personal prejudice or institutionalized bias, thereby encouraging unimpaired discourse.

As a result of becoming self-reflective, persons and groups can begin to appreciate the epistemological limits inscribed by their respective identities. Following this awareness, others can be engaged directly in their own terms. Habermas refers to this process as undistorted communication. Africans and Europeans, therefore, can begin to enter properly each other's world-view and form a mutually satisfying relationship. As should be noticed, this association is not color-blind. Indeed, the opposite is the case. The recognition or examination of identity allows others to be revealed, for they are no longer concealed behind a façade cultural absolutes.

The key point at this juncture is that assimilation is not required for order to survive. Through the recognition of difference, communication and regular patterns of behavior can be maintained. In fact, according to Lefort, the success of democracy depends on this possibility. When he declares that real democracy is not a system, he means that a democratic government is not a reality *sui generis* but an ever expanding web of discourse instituted by freely associated citizens (Lefort 1986: 273–291). In this sense, all multiculturalists are asking for is a style of community where ethnic differences are not obscured by the need to associate. Why must the other be rejected – which is a mode of recognition – before a relationship can be formed? Multiculturalists challenge this kind of faulty thinking.

EVERYONE WANTS COMMUNITY!

Transracialists want to solve the race problems in America by recognizing that everyone is fundamentally human. Once again, all persons are invited to join the human community. Who could possibly disagree with this proposal? Nonetheless, multiculturalists are skeptical of this plan; they believe transracialists are only delaying the inevitable. That is, constructing a community based on fairness and equity may require the kind of social intervention that transracialists loathe. After all, even racists believe their duty is to socialize properly and improve minorities, although repression is the final result. In many respects, transracialists are similar to those who believe that the market is the best mechanism for regulating a society. If left alone, the market will produce the most reasonable order. In this regard, according to Adam Smith, the market is devoid of moral imperatives. Applied to race relations, this philosophy means that without the moral initiatives discussed by multiculturalists, a human community will be gradually and spontaneously formed. Continued interference in this process, moreover, will only culminate in disorder.

As a result, transracialists have chosen to avoid the tough issues. Even Glenn Loury, a somewhat liberal trans-racialist, equivocates about intervention. They seem to

believe that once race consciousness is discredited, social harmony will replace automatically ethnic strife and cultural balkanization. But the schism that has occurred between ethnic groups is not solely the result of their inability to communicate with one another. Clearly, a host of racist institutions have existed, which have driven a wedge between various groups. And with whites deriving most of the benefits from these policies and practices, why should minorities trust these persons? Why should most whites be expected to attack institutions that have given them so many advantages?

So, what advance is made by simply calling for the development of an all-inclusive community? Do institutional arrangements still exist that are going to subvert this effort? Do certain relationships persist – political or economic – that are anathema to communal solidarity? If these impediments are present, the prospects for creating an inclusive community remain remote. Most important is that a community consists of far more than the ability of diverse persons to mingle. In a true community, they must be given complete responsibility for planning their future; they must not be excluded *a priori* from important aspects of the planning process. Accordingly, all principles that support exclusion or marginalization must be examined and exorcised from society.

In order to foster a true democracy, the following issues, for example, must be addressed: (1) what sort of power differentials are present that encourage the marginalization of minorities; (2) what economic relationships have been instituted that make racism and other modes of discrimination profitable; (3) what systemic changes would have to be made to undermine the ideology of racial supremacy; and (4) what institutional barriers exist that prevent minorities from acquiring the “cultural capital” necessary for them to become fully functioning members of society?

This list could be expanded, but without further enumeration a particular point is obvious. Full participation in a community does not result simply from good intentions and hope for a better future. Creating a community predicated on solidarity may require a plethora of systematic interventions, if embedded sources of discrimination are present. Hoping that persons will gradually begin to associate and, possibly, express affection for one another is insufficient to build a community; safeguards may have to be installed to insure the full participation of everyone in society. Contrary to what transracialists believe, democracy is not harmed by these interventions. Indeed, creating the proper conditions for democracy to thrive is not anti-democratic!

CONCLUSION

Those who find the notion of transracialism attractive believe that focusing on race or ethnicity is socially disruptive. Sooner or later, they claim, interventions such as affirmative action are introduced to equalize treatment. The problem with this solution is that society is reduced

to warring groups (Schlesinger 1992: 101–118). As special interests are pitted against one another, the common weal is obscured.

To avoid this tragedy, transracialists argue that a sense of civility should be restored in American life. Instead of stressing ethnic differences, in the manner recommended by multiculturalists, society should become color-blind. But will ignoring the sources, methods, and beneficiaries of racism necessarily result in the generation of a community? Doubtless, leaving these elements intact will impede any attempt to foster social justice. In most cases, interaction will be expected to proceed within institutional strictures that perpetuate racism.

Creating a fair and open community may require a variety of interventions. A conscious effort may have to be made to level the playing field, if persons are going to relate to one another in an equitable way. Simply put, positive or affirmative steps may have to be taken to encourage the fairness that everyone desires. The resulting interventions may be disruptive, but not necessarily to society as a whole. At this juncture, a clear distinction should be made between those who benefit from racial supremacy and the rest of the citizenry, and the complaints of supremacists should not be equated with the demise of society. After all, their success has been based often on maintaining invidious social distinctions that are illegitimate. Therefore, why should their bleating be given any credence?

Overlooking ethnicity, therefore, may result in the exact opposite of the desired effect. In short, supremacists may escape unscathed. But without creating some disruption, how can racism be eliminated? Any proposal that does not include this possibility should be viewed as naive or, possibly, pernicious. For clearly racism does not exist in a vacuum and the resulting advantages accrue to someone. As W. E. B. Dubois reminded his readers throughout his work, racism is intentional. Therefore, equally focused remedies, which supremacists may call unnecessary and unfair, will likely be required to end this practice.

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TARPRASIŠKUMAS, MULTIKULTŪRALIZMAS IR BENDRUOMENĖ

S a n t r a u k a

Tapatybės problema straipsnyje nagrinėjama per aktualius tarprasiškumo, multikultūralizmo ir jų sąveikos šiuolaikinėje bendruomenėje klausimus. Pastaruoju metu kai kurie kritikai ragina plėtoti tarprasinę, arba nešališką rasių atžvilgiu, bendruomenę. Jie nuogąstauja, kad dabartinis susidomėjimas multikultūralizmu gimdo socialinį konfliktą. Tokie kritikai visų pirma siekia propaguoti absoliučią kultūrą, kuri formuoja bendrus standartus asimiliacijai. Tokio socialinės tvarkos traktavimo keblumas glūdi tame, kad pakertami skirtingumas bei įvairovė, o kartu su jais – esminiai demokratijos elementai. Tai, ko iš tiesų reikia, yra vizija bendruomenės, kuri nereikalautų neginėjamos asimiliacijos vardan solidarumo užtikrinimo. Būtent tokiu keliu gali būti vykdoma kultūros demokratizacija.

Raktažodžiai: tarprasiškumas, multikultūralizmas, demokratija, asimiliacija, bendruomenės įvairovė