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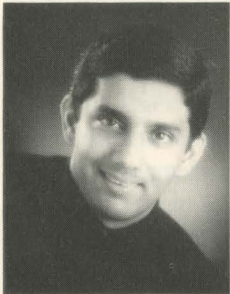
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## Multiculturalism: Fact or Threat?

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**DINESH D'SOUZA**, the Robert and Karen Rishwain Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, served as a senior domestic policy analyst to the White House from 1987-88. He has written extensively for newspapers and magazines, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *Forbes*, and *Harper's*, and is the author of four books: *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*; *The End of Racism*; *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader*; and, most recently, *The Virtue of Prosperity: Finding Values in an Age of Techno-Affluence*. Mr. D'Souza graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Dartmouth College in 1983.

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*The following is an abridged version of Mr. D'Souza's speech at a Hillsdale College seminar on May 22, 2001, in Boise, Idaho.*

There has been a remarkable demographic shift that has changed the complexion of American society over the last 40 years. One reason for this change is the fact that most immigrants today come from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, rather than from Europe. A second contributing factor is birthrates: those of non-white minorities are substantially higher than that of whites. Taken together, these have led to what some have called the "browning of America." In this sense, we can speak of multiculturalism as a fact. But it is important to distinguish this fact from the ideology that goes by the same name. The ideology of multiculturalism demands the transformation of America's educational and political institutions in response to the new demographic reality. This ideology of multiculturalism, unlike the fact of multiculturalism, poses a threat to what is best and highest in America.

Multiculturalists insist that we change how we teach our children, in order to reshape how they think. Specifically, they must stop thinking

of Western and American civilization as superior to other civilizations. The doctrine underlying this position is cultural relativism – the denial that any culture can be said to be better or worse than any other. Cultural relativists take the principle of equality, which in the American political tradition is applied to individuals in terms of rights, and apply it instead to cultures in terms of their value.

One approach taken by multiculturalists to extinguish feelings of cultural superiority is to revise reading lists in our schools to minimize the influence of those they deride as "dead white males." A few years ago the novelist Saul Bellow set off a controversy when he said, "Find me the Tolstoy of the Zulus, or the Proust of the Papuans, and I would be happy to read him." In the storm of outrage that followed, Bellow was accused of racism. But the charge was unjustified. Bellow was not saying, after all, that the Zulus and Papuans are incapable of producing great novelists. He was saying that as far as he knew, they hadn't. But just by raising the possibility that some cultures have contributed more, if you will, to the dining table of civilization, he had violated one of the chief tenets of multiculturalism.



A few years ago I attended a panel at the American Historical Association where the participants were almost coming to blows over the question of whether Columbus “discovered” America or “encountered” America. For a while I was puzzled, but then I realized that there was an important issue at stake. The idea of discovery involves a subject and an object, as in “Fleming discovered penicillin.” It suggests that one person takes the initiative and finds someone or something else out. An encounter, on the other hand, is a chance event: “The hiker encountered a bear in the woods.” To say that Columbus *discovered* America suggests that Columbus’s civilization was engaged in a remarkable project of exploration and evangelization; by contrast, the term *encounter* implies that it was accidental that European ships came to America, rather than American Indian ships landing on the shores of Europe.

## Whence Western Civilization?

**IN CARRYING** forth their case, cultural relativists must account for the obvious fact that for the last half millennium, it has been one culture — the culture of the West and now of America — that has dominated the world. Prior to 1500, China was the preeminent civilization and Western civilization — then called Christendom — was a relative backwater. How did this backwater conquer the world? Multiculturalists explain it in terms of oppression. Western civilization, they say, became so powerful because it is so evil. The study of Western civilization, they insist, should focus on colonialism and slavery, the distinctive mechanisms of Western oppression. But colonialism and slavery are not distinctively Western at all. They are universal.

The British conquered India and ruled it for 300 years. But before the British there were the Persians, the Mongols, the Afghans, and Alexander the Great. Indeed, the British were the sixth or seventh colonial invader to occupy a large part of Indian territory. As for slavery, it has existed in all cultures. It was prevalent in ancient India, in China, in Greece and Rome, and in Africa. American Indians practiced slavery long before Columbus set foot here. In point of fact, what is uniquely Western is not slavery, but abolition. The movement to end slavery developed only in Western civilization. While people everywhere oppose slavery for themselves, never outside the West have slave-owners and potential slave-owners proclaimed principles condemning it, and expended blood and treasure ending it.

Western civilization is not distinguished by colonialism and slavery, but by its institutions of democracy, capitalism, and science. These institutions were developed because of a peculiar dynamism in Western civilization — a dynamism driven by the combination of Western philosophy and theology. And it is these institutions, I believe, that comprise the source of Western strength and explain the West’s long-standing dominance in the world. In keeping with this, and contrary to multiculturalist doctrine, America’s unparalleled power in the present is sustained far less by military force than by the force of its ideas and institutions.

I should point out in passing that there is room in American education for an *authentic* multiculturalism. Reading lists can be anchored in Western thought and culture, but include the great books produced by non-Western cultures as well. This, however, is not what the multiculturalists want. For one thing, the great books of non-Western cultures reflect beliefs and prejudices that are anathema to multiculturalist ideology. To cite just two examples, the Koran embodies a strong doctrine of male superiority and *The Tale of Genji*, a Japanese classic, celebrates social hierarchy. So it is misleading for multiculturalists to say they support the expansion of curricula to include the great works of non-Western cultures. What they really support is tailoring education to promote the ideas and objectives of the political left.

## Is America Racist?

**A COUPLE** of years ago I debated Jesse Jackson at Stanford University on the topic, “Is America a Racist Society?” I conceded, of course, that racism exists, but I challenged Jackson to show me racism today that is strong enough to prevent him or me or his children or my daughter from achieving our basic aspirations — from going to college, starting a business, exercising the basic rights of citizens, etc. Jackson insisted that racism in America is as strong as ever, and that any appearances to the contrary are due to the fact that racism has gone underground. From one perspective, I believe, this disagreement reflects the divergence of an immigrant’s view of America and the view of a leader of an indigenous minority. Immigrants compare America to their home countries, and by that standard America is a place of extraordinary freedom and opportunity. Jesse Jackson, on the other hand, is not comparing America to any other actual country. His standard is utopian, and not surprisingly, by this standard, America falls short.



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The division represented by these divergent viewpoints among non-whites is camouflaged by the doctrine of multiculturalism. This doctrine assumes the existence of a grand alliance – a “rainbow coalition,” if you will – of non-white Americans who see themselves as oppressed and disadvantaged by the white majority. But this is a false model, because as I say, non-white immigrants form a huge and growing subset of non-white Americans, and they have a much different and more positive view of what America means and what it has to offer.

Recently David Horowitz created a stir by attempting to place ads in college newspapers denouncing the idea of reparations for slavery – that is, the disbursement of cash payments to blacks today as a way of repairing the injustice of historical slavery. This bizarre idea of reparations reminds me of a story related to the heavyweight fight in the mid-1970s between Muhammad Ali and George

Foreman. Held in the African nation of Zaire, this famous fight was billed – quite insensitively by contemporary standards – as the “Rumble in the Jungle.” In any case, after the fight was over and the victorious Ali returned to America, he was asked by a reporter what he thought of Africa. He replied, “Thank God my granddaddy got on that boat.”

There is a profound notion, I think, concealed in this clever quip. It is something that I learned growing up in India, talking to my grandfather. My grandfather was a sophisticated man, but in some ways a very embittered man. He never wanted me to go to America, because he recalled the injuries and humiliations that had piled up during British rule, and he held these against the white man. From this I realized something quite startling. I realized that although colonialism had been bad for the people





who had lived under it, such as my grandfather, it had been good for me. As a consequence of colonialism, I was exposed to the ideas and traditions that inform the Western understanding of freedom. I learned about separation of powers, democracy, human dignity, and equal rights. I learned the English language. Much of what I am and believe today has evolved out of the benefits I received from the colonialism that injured my grandfather.

Muhammad Ali, whether he intended it or not, was making a similar point about slavery. Slavery, even more than colonialism, was wrong and harmful to the people who lived under it. But paradoxically, and against the wishes of the slave owners, it also was the transmission belt that brought Africans into the orbit of Western freedom. Obviously the slaves were worse off as a result of slavery. But are the descendants of slaves worse off? Is Jesse Jackson worse off? Would Jackson be better off, by any measure, living in Uganda? We today are not able to repair the harm done to those who suffered under slavery, but it would be absurd to make a show of doing so by paying money to those who have, in a sense, benefited the most from their ancestors' suffering.

## Historical Perspective: DuBois and Washington

**TO UNDERSTAND** what is at stake in the multiculturalism debate, it helps to get a sense of historical perspective. There was a famous debate in the early part of the 20th century between sociologist W.E.B. DuBois, the first African-American to get a Ph.D. from Harvard, and Booker T. Washington, who had been born a slave and went on to found the Tuskegee Institute. According to DuBois, blacks

in America faced one problem: racism. In response to this problem he prescribed protest and agitation. Washington countered that there were *two* problems. Racism was one. But just as important was a cultural disadvantage that resulted from high

crime rates, low rates of business formation, and fragile family structures. DuBois argued that these problems were traceable to slavery. Washington responded that although that might be true, blacks themselves were responsible for working such problems out. It was up to them to develop the habits and skills to take advantage of freedom, even while they were agitating for equal rights.

For the better part of the last century, the civil rights movement – led by the NAACP, which DuBois co-founded – implemented the DuBoisian strategy.

This strategy ultimately succeeded in the mid-1960s, when American law was brought into accordance with America's principles and with the 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution. At that point, having achieved legal equality for minorities, one would have expected a shift in the civil rights movement from the strategy of protest and agitation toward Booker T. Washington's strategy of encouraging and nurturing self-improvement. Unfortunately, that shift never occurred. The fact that multiculturalism continues to this day to inform the agenda of the civil rights movement is quite tragic. It is especially tragic for African-Americans and other minorities who fall prey to the enervating bitterness that feeds ideas like reparations, even while recent non-white immigrants like Haitians and West Indians are taking advantage of educational and entrepreneurial opportunities to climb the American ladder of success. Nor does this require surrendering one's

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