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MULTICULTURALISM IN WORLD HISTORY: A CONFERENCE REPORT

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The FPRI's History Institutes are weekend conferences designed to inspire, stimulate debate, and assist high school and junior college teachers by presenting the perspectives and analyses of leading scholars. The latest Institute, "Multiculturalism in World History," aspired to give context and depth to a concept often invoked but rarely analyzed in arguments over social, cultural, and educational policy, and indeed over American identity. Deliberately, the question "Is the United States multicultural, or should it be?" was not addressed explicitly. Rather, with the exception of the introductory lecture, speakers examined how some of the most important cultures in world history have dealt with the challenge of multiculturalism.

In the opening lecture on the history of multiculturalism as a concept, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese of Emory University pointed out that "multiculturalism" is most often used as an ideology rather than a description of a particular society or culture. Multiculturalism can be an epithet of opprobrium or a seal of approval, depending on how one judges the intentions of those who propound it, and in turn on one's own preferences. To judge in this manner, however, is to succumb to standpoint relativism, proving that the concept is ideological rather than descriptive -- as is any "ism."

But what is ideology? Two different understandings are useful in approaching the question of multiculturalism as an ideology. The first sees ideology as the partisan manipulation of attitudes and beliefs. By this definition multiculturalism is either an ideology of others or, conversely, a device for unmasking the anti-multiculturalist ideology of others. In the second sense, ideology is a complex of alternate understandings of reality. It embodies the contributions of different groups, but is not a tool by which some exercise domination over others. An ideology thus is more like a comprehensive worldview to which groups may adhere for different reasons.

In the contemporary debate, both proponents and opponents of multiculturalism tend to ignore the tension between multiculturalism the ideology and the multicultural reality of different societies. This reality presents serious challenges to a society's political, economic and educational institutions, as distinct groups lay claim to collective resources. Differences in social and economic position among these groups, moreover, are a recipe for resentment and conflict.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, the main opponents of the West are Westerners themselves, who attack rationalism, science, and legitimate authority. But at its core, true multiculturalism relies on loyalty to a particular group and insistence on its unique value. By nature, such groups place the authority of the collective ahead of the claims of the individual. How does group loyalty fit with the Western opponents' hostility to authority?

It can't, of course. Multiculturalism is not really multicultural, and in fact owes more to Western individualism than to non-Western traditional cultures. Multiculturalists, ignoring facts about cultures in which they claim membership, cannot conceive of a culture that does not celebrate the rights of the imperial individual, yet they attack individualism.

The United States ranks as the primary example of a democratic multicultural society, and it has owed its success to distinctly Western values and institutions—including individualism. And yet the attempt to level all distinctions of talent, endowment, and culture raises the alarming prospect of tyranny; one need only consider the history of socialism in this century. A solution may lie in respecting other cultures while retaining loyalty to one's own. That, in turn, requires a better understanding of history.

The remaining presentations consisted of overviews of multicultural factors in four civilizations: Mediterranean antiquity, Islam, China, and India; a global interpretation of the phenomenon of cultural encounter; and a spirited assessment of the lessons of multiculturalism, especially for teaching.

David Gress of FPRI surveyed the multicultural aspects of Greek and Roman civilization. As a starting point he turned

to the epic hero Odysseus, who, in his ten-year struggle to return home after the Trojan War, was said to have "seen the cities of many people and known their mind."

As myth and symbol, Odysseus presents two contrasting attitudes to discovery and alien cultures. One is of Odysseus as anthropologist, a man open to strangeness. In this sense he prefigures Greek philosophy and democracy, with their basis on questioning inherited beliefs, norms, and customs and judging them in the light of natural reason. The other face of Odysseus is that of the man who seeks only that which points homeward, and is thus not genuinely multicultural.

Both of these attitudes are evident in the work of Herodotus, the "father of history." On the one hand, to write on the Persian Wars he scoured the world for stories and legends. On the other, he constructed a narrative of the triumph of free men over despotism, and in so doing established the opposition of Greek, free, and civilized versus barbarian, servile, and base.

In the Hellenistic era, which lasted from the late 4th century BC to at least the 7th century AD, the Greeks encountered four other civilizations: Roman, Celtic, Judaic, and Persian. What happened in that era was genuinely multicultural, but not by design. As the historian Arnaldo Momigliano pointed out, Hellenistic civilization had all the instruments for knowing other civilizations except command of languages, and all the marks of a conquering and ruling class except faith in its own wisdom.

Cultural imperialism and multiculturalism were therefore two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, a Stoic guru went to Egypt to instruct the Egyptians about wisdom and boldly declared that, "to a wise man, everything is Greece." On the other hand, the same period was characterized by an increasingly anxious search for personal salvation, to be found in putatively exotic lore or alien wisdom. But this wisdom was not really alien. Since the Greeks did not learn other languages, they found not the reality of other cultures but a projection of their own aspirations.

The search for salvation culminated in Christianity, which brought true multiculturalism to Greece. Although it spoke the language of Greek philosophy and Roman morality, it introduced elements that really were deeply alien to Greek civilization: the Judaic focus on the power and justice of God and a unique promise of individual salvation.

Bruce Lawrence of Duke University addressed the notion of classical Islam, problematic because "classical" is a concept derived from classical antiquity. It also tends to emphasize Arabian Islam and Quranic theology rather than the social and cultural reality of what the American Islamist Marshall Hodgson called Islamicate civilization, which is predominantly Asian, and owes more to the cultural creativity of the Mongols (Mughals) who dominated India and Central Asia for centuries than to the Maghreb Arab thinkers and rulers who were most familiar to Europeans.

A non-Eurocentric view of Islamicate civilization recognizes, as Hodgson did, that its heartland is the Nile-to-Oxus region, the fundamental social and geopolitical structures of which

were largely laid down in the pre-Islamic period from 3000 BC to AD 500. The term Islamicate was devised to show precisely that what characterized this civilization was not merely the scriptural religion of Muhammad and its interpretation, but also the deeper and longer-lasting traits, including a militarized society, autocratic rule by networks of notables, and massive monuments that served as foci of tomb cults of saints and heroes. These elements coalesced with the religion to produce norms that shaped societies well beyond the Nile-to-Oxus region. Unlike two of the great civilizations regarded as "Asian," the Indic and Chinese, Islamicate civilization proved flexible enough to encompass a much broader range of cultures from the Maghreb to Southeast Asia.

Professor Lawrence suggested that the eleventh-century Turk al-Biruni, who learned Arabic, Persian, Greek, and Sanskrit and wrote 125 books in Persian and Arabic, might be a good symbol of Islamicate multiculturalism. In one of his major works, for example, he provided a detailed analysis of Hindu philosophy and religion. One of his principal goals was to enable educated Muslims to incorporate Hinduism's "higher" truth in their own worldview.

The keynote address by the world historian William H. McNeill concerned multiculturalism as an actuality of world history, rather than as an ideology. Multiculturalism is an affair of cities, for it requires travel, diasporas, mutual adaptation, and long-distance exchange. The first cultural contacts began in the Sumerian seaside ports in the Persian Gulf in the 4th millennium BC. By the later third millennium, the Semitic Akkadians had taken over political rule in Mesopotamia, which led to bilingualism, since the Sumerian language remained in use for ritual and religion. Thus, within Mesopotamian civilization a form of multiculturalism evolved to complement the cultural exchange inherent in land and sea trade.

All cultures have displayed deep ambivalence toward strangers, who pose a challenge to the fixed system of ritual, folkways, and traditions. Whether these strangers are ultimately treated with hostility or admiration depends heavily on the vitality of the "receiving" culture. When a culture loses its inner security, strangers appear more threatening. Members of a culture may react by thinking, "That stranger knows something I don't, so I have to change," or, "He is corrupt and will seduce us. We need to emphasize differences." But change is inescapable, since even the act of resisting change causes change, and intercultural contact is its principal source. The perceived discrepancy between oneself and outsiders provokes innovation.

Civilization can be ultimately defined as a population among whom the rulers pay lip service to a corpus of rules and obey them, in ways that allow for efficient cooperation. This sort of cooperation produced the galaxy of cultures in Eurasia that have flourished from the time of the Chinese expeditions to Ferghana ca. 100 BC.

Multiculturalism, McNeill concluded, is here to stay. People will cherish their differences, especially in a global, urbanized society which is fragile and vulnerable to serious disruptions. In the midst of all these differences, however, accommodation is necessary, because the modern world cannot afford long-

term conflict. As history has shown, cultures whose rules are most attractive to others will prevail.

June Dreyer, a China scholar from the University of Miami, discussed multiculturalism -- or the lack thereof -- in Chinese history.

Traditionally, Chinese have regarded themselves as inhabitants of the "Middle Kingdom," a worldview according to which they were surrounded not by entities considered equal to themselves, but by barbarians who were thought to have little to offer. China never borrowed heavily from others, aside from a few important military innovations.

During the formative epoch known as the "Hundred Schools" era, 500-300 BC, various traditions competed to become the ruling doctrine of state and society, but this was a debate within Han Chinese civilization, rather than with outsiders. Confucianism eventually won out and became deeply linked to Han culture. Because of Confucianism's focus on worldly affairs, some religions existed easily alongside it. Buddhism, for one, was both tolerated and quickly sinicized. Islam, on the other hand, presented fundamental challenges to Chinese culture, especially to the supremacy of the emperor, since a Muslim's first loyalty is to Allah. Much later, Christianity encountered similar problems.

The Tang dynasty of the seventh and eighth centuries was the most cosmopolitan of the Han dynasties. During that time, a Sogdian, An Lu-shan, became commander of the armies, Jews arrived and built synagogues, and the ruling Li family was part Turkish. But tolerance was rejected after An Lu-shan rebelled and provoked the slow decline of Tang civilization. The next dynasty, the Song, was far more resistant to foreign cultural influences. The next dynasty, the Yuan, was Mongol, and perhaps because of the speed with which they conquered other peoples, its members neither tried to turn the Chinese into Mongols nor showed much desire to become Confucians themselves. The Ming, who succeeded them, at first promoted extensive overseas explorations, but the foreign finds seem to have been valued largely as exotica rather than as a means for systematic study of other cultures. These voyages of discovery were halted when the Confucian bureaucratic-scholarly elite convinced the emperor that it was better to cultivate an ethical society than to explore. In their view, China should not be assimilationist; barbarians would either recognize Chinese superiority on their own or not, and there was no point in trying to change them.

The last imperial dynasty, the Qing, was from another nomadic group, the Manchus. Unlike the Mongols, however, the Manchus consciously manipulated symbols from different cultures to govern the various peoples within the empire. Under the Qing, for example, the emperor became the patron of Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism, while also

observing some purely Confucian rituals, and in fact became far more Confucian over time.

During this period contacts with the West increased significantly, especially with respect to Christian missionaries and British traders. In both cases the Westerners' perspective clashed with the Chinese, who were affronted by

the Westerners' refusal to acknowledge the Chinese emperor above the Pope or the Queen of England. Significantly, Chinese pride and confidence in their own culture were not based on race or ethnicity, but rather on culture. Foreigners who spoke and dressed as Chinese and observed Confucian etiquette were even accepted as Chinese.

In the later nineteenth century, when they faced militarily superior Western forces, Chinese thinkers began asking why China was weak, and concluded that China had fallen away from true Confucianism. As it became increasingly clear that some degree of adaptation to Western ideas would be needed, the notion of a compromise was developed, focusing on the "ti/yong" distinction. Confucianism would be retained as the essence (ti) of Chinese civilization, while adopting Western practical learning (yong). But these thinkers soon discovered that accepting Western yong depended on adopting Western ti.

Sun Yat-sen, the first president of republican China, had been educated in the West and converted to Christianity, and his ideology of government bore explicit links to Abraham Lincoln's notion of government by the people, of the people, and for the people. However, far from lending credence to multiculturalism in any form, he introduced ethnically based nationalism, arguing that China was weak because it was ruled by foreigners. Confucianism lost credibility after the revolution in 1911, as many began to see it as the problem, not the necessary foundation, of an ethnically defined China. In the subsequent power struggle, many ideologies competed to succeed Confucianism, but few people seemed interested in toleration of diverging points of view.

The communist regime that took over mainland China in 1948 countenanced no cultural rivals to Chinese Marxism. The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, two critical and vastly destructive epochs of the communist era, were both anti-Western and centralist, opposed to regional and cultural differences. Standardization, most notably of the language, was a crucial part of the program.

Beginning in the 1970s, China began opening to the West as a counterweight to alignment with the Soviet Union. However, this strategic move unleashed broader forces in society. Young Chinese began to absorb Western tastes and ideas; the Quran was published in China for the first time since 1949; minorities demand autonomy and recognition. Although cultural diversity continues to gain ground, few voices are willing to consider genuine autonomy for minorities. The greatest search seems to be for a formula that will allow China to become strong and wealthy without discarding its unique characteristics -- be they Confucian or communist or something else.

The last of the historical surveys, on India, was provided by Stanley Wolpert of UCLA. India, unlike China, is a society with a 3,000-year history of multiculturalism. Around 1000 BC, Indo-Aryan invaders crossed the Hindu Kush and occupied or destroyed the proto-Dravidian culture of the Indus Valley -- a culture which itself may have originated in East Africa. The Indo-Aryans absorbed much of the Indus Valley religion, which in its main form became a blend of pre-Aryan and Aryan deities, customs, and styles. This melange developed into what we know as Hinduism and the caste system.

In 326 BC, Alexander's armies conquered the small kingdoms of Punjab. After his sudden withdrawal, the first Indian emperor, Chandragupta, sought to unify all of northern India for the first time. India subsequently faced numerous invasions, but all of the "conquerors" were ultimately assimilated into Indian culture.

The great exception was the Muslims, who first invaded in 711. The Islamic conquest of South Asia left a legacy visible today not only in Pakistan and Bangladesh, but in the more than 100 million Muslims in India. Islamic monotheism, resting on a social-democratic polity, contrasted sharply with Hindu polytheism with its caste-class system. Notable, however, is that during much of the past, in villages throughout South Asia, Hinduism and Islam have existed side by side in relative harmony.

The British presence in India from the eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries left a deep legacy in Indian culture, including its literature, politics, social structure, and -- according to one view -- the divisiveness among Indian Muslims and Hindus. Whether or not that is accurate, it is certainly true that during the last 25 years, Hindu fundamentalism has stirred a revival of communal unrest. In Kashmir and Tamil Nadu, conflicts simmer, and the Sikhs of the Punjab grow more militant. Among the dominant Hindu population itself, the lingering caste system divides people and has led to violence. In India as elsewhere, education—for all—is the best means to mitigate cultural conflicts.

Walter A. McDougall concluded the Institute with some remarks on the merits and perils of teaching multiculturalism in the classroom. He began by recalling that contrary to current myth Western Civilization has been uniquely interested in other cultures throughout history. Medieval Europeans were fascinated by their Islamic opponents. Renaissance Europe explored the globe. The Enlightenment invented world history and cultural anthropology. And nineteenth century scholars established the disciplines of comparative religion, Orientalism, and linguistics. And in the twentieth century, especially after 1945, William H. McNeill led a campaign to replace surveys in Western Civ with world history. But no sooner did he begin to make headway than the whole field was captured by radical multiculturalists with an agenda at least as ideological as the "Eurocentric" one they sought to dislodge. Thus, the

multicultural critics charge that Europeans (and Americans) have always measured other cultures by their own standards, imagined that all other civilizations would follow the Western path to modernity, and studied the world only to subdue, exploit, and make it over in their own image.

Rather than true multicultural teaching, therefore, our schools often promote curricula that disparage the history of the West as racist, sexist, imperialist, while depicting all other cultures as innocent and victimized. McDougall affirmed the need for students to learn about other cultures, but pleaded for honesty and an end to all double standards. For the only way to sustain a multicultural society such as the United States is to value the contributions of all heritages and the elements of common humanity they share.

What lessons of multiculturalism might be learned from history? Here, at least, are some that have been addressed or implied in the presentations and discussions:

– Contacts between cultures are always a source of both tension and reward.

– A rewarding outcome of interaction depends on the inner resources and confidence of the participant cultures or on the "social capital" of their members.

– When social and cultural capital and self-confidence decline, the capacity to benefit from cultural exchanges also declines.

– Political and religious leaders who want to promote multicultural exchanges and understanding ought to avoid creating incentives that set members of different groups against each other or emphasize collective over individual qualities.

– Teachers must boldly confront the "good, bad, and ugly" in all cultures and eras of history. Moralistic stories aimed for or against any idea, ethnicity, gender, or culture do nothing to further understanding--in both senses of the word.

The papers from the history weekend on multiculturalism appear in the Fall 1999 issue of Orbis. To order a copy, send a message to FPRI@aol.com or call 215-732-3774, ext. 201.

FPRI's History Academy is directed by Walter A. McDougall and David Gress, who are jointly writing a book on "The Use and Abuse of History."

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