Multiculturalism in History

An Imperative of Civilization

by William H. McNeill

Multiculturalism and world history! When I was asked to talk about this, I was intrigued, but also unsure just what was expected. Multiculturalism as an ideology, after all, is the province of a small fringe group of people who seem to say that every culture is just as good as every other and deserves just as much space as anyone else's. To me, that does not seem to be a very serious position and is something not worth really worrying about. Multiculturalism as a human actuality, by contrast, has existed across the millennia in human affairs, ever since cities first arose. And that does seem to me worth thinking about, discussing, and putting into a general framework of world history. So it was that I succumbed to the invitation.

The first thing to say is that multiculturalism is an obvious reality, because different groups of people created discrete cultures. It is a reality that presumably dates back to the initial dispersal of humankind around the world, as groups became more isolated from one another across longer distances, developed unique technologies, and adapted to differing environments. The human race, in short, comprises a myriad of cultures.

But multiculturalism in the more exact (and contemporary) sense of people with different cultures living permanently cheek by jowl is an affair of cities. It arose whenever long-distance trade and diasporas living from trade became significant, and it required mutual adaptation so that all parties might gain the advantages of exchanging raw materials and manufactures—and ideas—from different parts of the world. So far as current scholarship can determine, this trade really began with ancient Sumer in the fourth millennium B.C., when the first cities arose at the intersection of a maritime network stretching across the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean and a land caravan network made possible by the domestication of donkeys. Precisely when the latter was achieved and long-range caravans began to travel cross-country is uncertain, but evidently human beings began sailing the seas very early—as early as 40,000 B.C., when Australia was first settled. Navigation in the Indian Ocean is thus extremely ancient, but what made the land of Sumer so critical was that

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it was where long-range trade routes over land and sea first came together. They linked the mountainous hinterland up the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers with the Persian Gulf, and in turn with the manifold coastlands of the southern seas and oceans, where monsoon winds made sailing easy.

Sumerian cities were settlements typically divided between landholders—the core settlement, of which the temple households were the largest and the most significant part—and what might be called a *faubourg*, the French medieval term for people living outside the city walls, including boatmen, caravan personnel, and long-distance sailors. Such sojourners formed a permanent if ever-changing population of peripatetic strangers, outsiders, and foreigners—people of different cultures, yet close at hand. Archaeologists have established the bifurcation of the earliest settlements, whose layout attests to this first multicultural reality.

There was probably another fissure, about which scholars are less sure, that is suggested by Sumerian texts referring to agricultural laborers as "black-headed people" and thus perhaps of different ethnicity from their Sumerian managers and the masters of the written language. After some thousand years, however, that single, dominant Sumerian group was overtaken by speakers of a Semitic language, Akkadian. They migrated from the fringes of the Mesopotamian world, and Sargon of Akkad, who dated from about 2250 B.C., was the first Semitic-speaking conqueror. But Akkadians were very eager apprentices to Sumerian skills and knowledge, especially in matters of religion, where they inherited the responsibility for managing relations with the gods. So the Akkadians readily practiced bilingualism if only because the gods were used to being addressed in Sumerian. The result was a civilization based on two sacred languages, with dictionaries translating from one to the other. Without these dictionaries, scholars might never have succeeded in deciphering Sumerian, which has no known linguistic relatives.

Now, the dominance of these ruling Sumerian and Semitic peoples was due to their monopolization not only of property, wealth, and power, but also of knowledge, especially of how to appease the gods. And it is possible that their modes of communicating with the gods were the motor of their entire social development. The drive to make temples more magnificent and liturgies more elaborate in order to earn divine good will (and thus, good harvests and safety) may have inspired a constant search for precious goods and curiosities brought from afar by caravans and ships. Indeed, it is probable that other Eurasian and Mesoamerican civilizations arose at similar exchange nodes, and it is possibly also true that the struggle to win favor with supernatural forces was central to the creation of cosmopolitan markets in each of these civilizations as well.

At any rate, the earliest civilizations all seem to have had priestly leadership at first, superseded or supplemented over time by a warrior class. Now, each civilization exhibits an endless variation of detail, and no single pattern, no fixed dynamic, characterizes them all. But always and everywhere, civilizations involved polyethnic mingling and attracted people who came from a distance to live, temporarily or permanently, in relatively close proximity.

Today this phenomenon is only intensified by the enormous capacity of modern transport and communication.

To be sure, like almost everything else in human affairs, this sort of "cheek-by-jowl" multiculturalism, causing people to live next to, or very close to, people whose beliefs, behavior, customs, and outward appearance are quite different, has positive and negative effects. One clear advantage is the access to new goods, skills, knowledge, and arts of which one would otherwise be ignorant. That is why exchange systems exist and persist in the first place and were present even *before* cities, amongst the earliest human hunters and gatherers. Clear proof of that derives from the chemical analysis of obsidian blades. Obsidian holds a very sharp edge, was the best cutting instrument available prior to metal, and thus was very precious to Stone Age communities. By chemical analysis, you can discover just where a given obsidian blade originated because it will contain trace elements from a volcano somewhere in the neighborhood. We know, therefore, that obsidian was carried by prehistoric traders many hundreds of miles from one group of hunters and gatherers to others. But the establishment of genuine multicultural communities required a much higher and more regular volume of exchange than the odd sliver of obsidian traded at occasional festivals as neighbors met their neighbors and so on, which is why urbanization, official cults, and the creation of market demands beyond the needs of sheer survival are intrinsic to what we call civilization.

The obvious downside of living with strangers with a different culture from one's own is that they can be, or can be perceived as, a danger or even as enemies. Trading has always been one way of exchanging, but raiding is another, and each can easily give way to the other depending on the relative strength of the parties. Still, booty amounts to a sort of accidental assemblage of goods. It may or may not contain what the raiders desired or be truly useful in the form it is taken. Even pirates and raiders usually required the services of intermediaries who would accept what they had in exchange for what they really wanted. Thus, raid and trade are first cousins, and one cannot exist without the other.

The Dangers and Boons of Cultural Mix

While strangers are always a potential threat to life and property, a multicultural setting can give rise to a still more profound threat to the host society. And that is because strangers who are to some degree ignorant of local customs and mores, and more or less indifferent to one's sacred beliefs and rituals, constitute by the very fact of their nonparticipation a tacit or active challenge to the *validity* of local authority and tradition. What can the dominant group in a multicultural setting do about that?

So long as one group remains clearly dominant and so long as the gap between the hosts and the minority is not too wide, newcomers can normally be compelled to conform, at least outwardly, to the expectation of their hosts. They may even learn from their hosts and seek to be assimilated, assuming

the dominant group will allow them to do so. Such tolerant "melting pot" behavior was a strong pattern that helped to maintain urban societies throughout the past, and not just the distant past, but the medieval and early modern eras as well. Indeed, given the demographic decay that usually characterized urbanized societies, due to infectious diseases above all, cities normally *had* to be sustained demographically by a constant in-migration from the countryside. Cities had to attract "strangers" or they would wither and die over time. Now, when the rural migrants come from relatively near at hand, the cultural and linguistic differences between them and the city folk are likely to be relatively minor. Assimilation to urban life under such circumstances is normal and unquestioned across a generation or two. Modern frictions of over-multiculturalism, by contrast, result from the fact that our urban cultures have come to embrace whole nations as their "rural hinterlands" thanks to the effect of modern transport and communications. Moreover, the recent collapse of birth rates all across the most highly developed parts of the world requires—or invites—migration from ever longer distances and across cultural barriers. That creates far larger gaps between the newcomers and the host population, making assimilation more difficult and inviting or tempting the newcomers to cling to the culture of their homeland. And the fact that communication with one's original homeland is much easier than ever before means that the possibility of maintaining ethnic particularism is much enhanced.

How does a dominant group negotiate a modus vivendi with large, autonomous minorities in its midst?

How then does a dominant group negotiate a modus vivendi with large, autonomous, well-connected, and self-confident minorities in its midst? This is the problem facing the United States, Western Europe, and Russia today, where birth rates have fallen below replacement levels. It is a very new phenomenon—post-1945 for the most part—and one of fundamental importance for the cultural, political, and social landscape of our time. But I hasten to say it is not unique. Other urban groups have, in times past, found it impossible to maintain themselves. Very possibly the decay of Sumerian civilization and the rise of the Akkadians was due to similar demographic processes. It is certain that the nineteenth-century decay of German townsmen across Eastern Europe, retreating before enhanced migration from the Slavic countryside and failing to assimilate the newcomers to the German way of life, formed the background to the breakup of the Hapsburg monarchy, with immense consequences for the history of Europe.

When people live close together, there is bound to be interaction between cultures. No one can live in complete isolation. The normal pattern, as was apparently true in ancient Sumer and seems to have been the case in every other urbanized setting, is ghettoization. The strangers are kept at arm's length, perhaps not with a wall around them like the Jews of medieval Venice (whence we derive the word *ghetto*), but in separate neighborhoods nonetheless. One need only think of medieval England, where the Lombards and the Baltic merchants of the Hanseatic League lived in separate enclaves. They enjoyed

the king's protection and a good deal of local autonomy, running their own affairs according to their own laws, independent of the people around them. They had only to pay the crown a fee, or ransom if you like, for protection. Similar arrangements existed in ancient and medieval China. There was a Muslim quarter in Canton, subsumed within the Chinese city. The Muslims were foreigners, to be sure, but thanks to the tribute they paid in return for the protection of the Chinese government, they were free to run their own affairs.

This was the standard pattern, and the ethnic neighborhoods in most American cities are a sort of residue of that ancient practice. Nor is such separatism a function only of the dominant group's prejudice or fear. Strangers want to live together, too. For example, the fourteenth-century Muslim traveler Ibn Batuta makes it very clear that after his arrival in China he was appalled by the Chinese: so indifferent to the revelation of Mohammed, which meant so much to him, yet nevertheless so numerous, skilled, and civilized as to be overwhelming. So he was relieved to meet fellow Muslims, including someone who had come from his own native Morocco—a neighbor encountered halfway around the world.

Whether or not a ghetto had a formal legal structure and "charter," it was always a vehicle for mutual accommodation. By and large, it seems to me that vigorous and successful cultures can afford to be interested in novelties from afar, welcome strangers, and assimilate them more or less into an evolving common culture. But cultures change in the process, as the "stranger" gradually comes to be accepted as one of "us," not one of "them." That is certainly the way I would describe the history of the United States, given its conspicuous success in this respect.

In contrast, when local culture loses a sense of its inner security, self-confidence, and cohesion, strangers start to appear more threatening and efforts to defend sacred truths and traditions become far more compelling. A telling example of that is what has occurred in French Canada. When I was a youngster in Canada, the Québecois were, of course, different from English Canadians. Everybody knew that. A sort of old-regime France survived on Canadian soil until the Second World War. What is more, the French had a much higher birth rate than other Canadians, as if in defense of their besieged way of life. But the pattern was disrupted during World War II, thanks to the boom in employment in Montreal and other cities, swiftly followed by a catastrophic drop in the birth rate. Young French Canadian women simply decided that they would never be enslaved to the cradle as their mothers, with eight or ten children, had been, with the result that the birth rate of French Canadians today is lower than that of English Canadians. Preservation of French culture and language was suddenly not as secure as before and so had to be buttressed by political action to compel signs in French and other sorts of linguistic policing, not only in Québec, but throughout Canada. And while a few liberal French Canadians think that is not the way to go, the Parti Québecois and most French Canadian intellectuals and politicians endorse the new ethnic politics.

Now, in general, whenever alien cultures collide, a deep ambivalence prevails. The age-old feature central to the historical process is that when people meet strangers, their obvious differences challenge local inherited ways. How to react? One may say, "He knows some things that I do not, he can do things that I cannot. Let me imitate him, improve and transform what he does and so acquire the skill, knowledge, and ability which he has and which I want." And that, of course, means changing established ways of behaving. Alternatively, one can say, "The stranger is corrupt and likely to seduce us from our ancestral ways. We must therefore strengthen ourselves against this intruder, underscore the differences between us and him and, if possible, impose *our* ways on him." But that also involves changing older behaviors.

Both responses, the positive and the negative, the acceptance and the rejection, involve an adjustment. And such adjustment, I am convinced, is the principal force behind historical change and cultural innovation across the centuries, because, other things being equal, the dominant, everyday tendency of human action is to do things the way one's parents did, the way one's ancestors did, the way they have always been done and obviously ought to be done. What provokes innovation is some perceived discrepancy between expectation and experience. Now, it is possible and certainly true that invention can arise from contradictions within existing traditions of learning and science. For the last three or four hundred years, in the West at least, the systematic search for new ideas and new technologies has become more and more prevalent.[1] But in ancient times, when sacred learning was the norm, what effectually challenged prevailing ideas and practices was seldom internal contradictions, but an encounter with outsiders who had different skills and ideas, some of which seemed better than anything known before and some of which threatened what the insiders held most dear. And because civilizations, by definition, are those places where strangers live side by side, even if ghetto walls separate them at night, civilizations are ipso facto volatile loci of change and exchange of new skills, tools, and knowledge, thereby augmenting their power over both nature and neighboring peoples.

There are also interesting biological dimensions to the phenomenon of urban multiculturalism.[2] Since cities attracting people from far away are veritable rookeries of infectious diseases, they create a civilized population that in time develops a high level of resistance and immunity. Such acquired immunities, in turn, become a mighty, if unconsciously wielded, weapon for the destruction of isolated peoples who have never been exposed to infections originating abroad. And this is a second reason why civilizations expand. They break down the demographic structures of previously isolated peoples with whom they

[1] However, it is easy to exaggerate how old that is. The idea of throwing away a perfectly good machine because you had a better one is really only about 150 years old now and was very radical when it was first introduced in the chemical, steel, and ferrous metallurgical industries.

[2] See William H. McNeill, *Plagues and People* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

come into contact. Both kinds of power, biological toughness and infectiousness, and the power of ever-altering technologies and ideas, tend to move outwards from the center and travel swiftly across very long distances.

Nevertheless, what held civilizations together despite the multiculturalism built into their body politic was widespread acceptance of a common code of thought and behavior amongst a privileged ruling elite or elites. The exact agreed-upon code or codes varied in each case, but no civilization lacked a dominant code and none survived the loss of that code. In sum, a civilization is a population whose rulers pay lip service to a corpus of agreed-upon truths and rules, and conform in their actual behavior to such truths and rules at least to a certain degree. That is what allows for efficient cooperation across large areas and among literally millions of people. And that is what makes civilization so powerful: maintenance of a predictable minimum level of agreement as to what ought to occur, what ought to be done, and how people ought to behave, even when they are strangers to one another.

Now, underneath the ruling elite, lower classes and local ethnic groups subordinated to them always had, I think, multiple and divergent cultures. But they shared some things with the ruling elite; they had to, if only to survive as subordinates in the presence of a representative of the elites. And lest that seem an exaggeration, recall that until the "day before yesterday"—certainly until the early part of the nineteenth century—in every civilization in history, *urban* populations were a very tiny minority. The peasant majority lived in villages and were *in*, but not *of*, urban high culture. They knew something about it but they certainly did not share it. They had little in the way of formal education, and perhaps none at all. They had a tradition that was local and was passed on from parent to child across generations, time out of mind, and thus they accommodated social superiors as best they could and constituted the bedrock of all society. To repeat, cities rested on that bedrock because they had to be maintained by migration from the countryside. Thus, from the time of neolithic development of agriculture, the real living cell of society was the village. Villages are what kept human society going, biologically and culturally.

As for the urban, "civilized" elites, they soon became aware that there were others like them at far distances. Within Eurasia, the landmark that I emphasized in *The Rise of the West* was the expedition that the Chinese emperor Wu Ti sent to Ferghana in 101 B.C. in search of horses that could carry armored men on their backs and so drive away the steppe nomads from the borders of China. Rumors of such horses had reached China from the west and from that time onward contact was never broken off for long. Caravans traversed the full breadth of Asia and as time went on their numbers and scale increased. Not long afterward, regular contacts by sea were also established—surely by the second century A.D., when self-styled ambassadors from the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (died 180 A.D.) arrived at the Chinese court.

These contacts brought awareness of distant accomplishments to the attention of the respective elites, calling into existence what may be called a world system of exchange. It was, if you will pardon the phrase, a multicivili-

zational interactive galaxy of cultures, in which the urban nodes were critical, but which was characterized by cultural slopes from the urban nodes downward toward the provinces in each case. The world system was a sort of moving landscape, because in every particular part of the Eurasian world new developments, inventions, skills, sources of wealth, and population spikes and declines were occurring more or less rapidly, and so defining cultural heights, depths, and slopes in a fluid topography. Similar things happened in the Americas. The Aztec and Inca civilizations did have contacts with one another, though we know relatively little about them, and the cultural slopes from those two principal centers of high skill extended north into what is now the United States and deep into South America. Likewise in Australia amongst the hunters and gatherers of that continent, I suspect cultural flows existed, but differences there were far less than in the Eurasian or American worlds, and patterns of diffusion and change are impossible to reconstruct.

After 1500, of course, the Eurasian and African system engulfed all the others, and our own one world is the heir and frame for multicultural interaction today. Accordingly, ours is multiculturalism with a vengeance, because literally thousands of distinct human cultures, each precious to some group and alien to others, and a multiplicity of metropolitan centers and cultural slopes, now interact in an ever-shifting landscape of cultures and subcultures that are either gaining or losing attractiveness among our species as a whole.

The Essential Fragility of Civilization

Now, in coping with this elemental fact of human life, it seems obvious that one must teach coming generations, heirs as they will be to quite different cultural traditions, that multiculturalism is a fact, a reality very ancient among humankind and sure to persist indefinitely into the future, for the simple reason that existing groups are attached to their differences and treasure the distinctive cultural markers that separate "us" from "them."

Consider my own experience as one who was born in Canada and spent the first ten years of life there. I was brought up very conscious of Canadians' image of themselves as the "true north, strong and free," poor but virtuous, and by virtue of our poverty and hardihood superior to the soft, corrupt republic to the south. Canadians still feel that way, though they may not say so quite so bluntly as I have done. Now, Canada—English Canada, anyway—is as like the United States as any two countries are ever likely to be. But each people treasures its differences. Imagine the divergences, then, among peoples with far greater cultural gaps.

So multiculturalism is here to stay, contrary to the commonplace American assumption that the "American way" is normative for all other peoples on earth, either by dint of preference or inevitable historical forces. The American tradition of assimilating immigrants is an expression of that assumption in microcosm and dates back to the eighteenth-century universalist notion that our values and institutions are an example that the world as a whole will eventually follow.

That is just not so. One need only to visit Canada and talk to a few Canadians privately to be disabused of such universalism. And that lesson is the first thing we ought to try to teach our youth.

The second is that, in spite of human determination to cling to differences, people and nations somehow must get along with each other peaceably, whether in the neighborhoods of our cities or on the planet we share. A failure to escape crippling social conflict and disruption, and the almost unimaginable costs of organized conflict in a closely interdependent world, scarcely bears thinking about.

The fragility of contemporary civilized society is something seldom talked or thought about, but the truth is that the essentials of everyday life today almost always arrive from afar. We depend on the delivery of fruits and vegetables from California, Florida, or overseas. But if gasoline should cease to flow faithfully through the pipelines and pumps, most inhabitants of the United States would be without food or fuel in six months or less. How utterly dependent we are on this flow-through economy, which is so vulnerable to serious disruption! The sort of thing that happened to the Russians in 1917, when 80 percent of the people were still self-sufficient peasants, would be infinitely more catastrophic today. The world is enormously vulnerable, like a spinning top poised on a single point.

The "American way" is *not* normative for all other peoples on earth.

So we have to get along peacefully. We cannot afford any massive resort to violence for any length of time, either domestically or internationally. And that requires mutual accommodation and respect. Some sort of social space for cultural differences becomes essential for practical citizenship, for the survival and maintenance of everyday life.

But remember the bedrock of all civilization: a predictability of behavior derived from a consensus about overriding rules. In one sense, we already possess that essential cultural capital, enshrined in sacred codes of conduct such as the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would be done by." Close parallels to it exist in other great religions of the world. Almost the identical words can be found in Confucius's *Analects*, for instance, and I do not think this is entirely an accident, for the survival advantage of such a rule is obvious. Wherever strangers abound and contacts with them are inescapable, giving them the benefit of the doubt, doing to them as you would be done by, has very sound, practical results. You are less likely to have your throat cut or be stabbed in the back. A little bit of trust, a little bit of generosity, goes a long way and so the survival value of such moral injunctions is very real.

Yet, at the same time, any realistic vision of the human condition must admit that there is a need for a certain readiness to defend local cultural heritages. Only so can a cultural tradition persist, can cooperation within the group that shares a culture be sustained and passed from generation to generation.

As I conceive of these things, the transmission of culture is a kind of loose survival of the fittest. Which rules of life work optimally, which rules attract adherents most powerfully? Those are the ones most likely to prevail

and assimilate outsiders. And this, unless I quite misunderstand the facts, is how all the principal religions of the world, and indeed secular cultures, arose and flourished: by converting individuals and groups, first at a locus of origin and then along paths we can at least partially reconstruct. One can follow the loci of principal creativity across the centuries and generations and see how one part of the world after another assumed the role of metropolitan center.[3]

Mine may be a narrow-minded and obtuse vision of reality. But it seems to me that the ultimate arbiters of the rise and fall of cultures, their propagation, spread, and transformation, are individual and group choices. Every human being faces the questions, Who am I? With whom do I belong? How do I define myself? How ought I to behave amongst those like myself and others who are not "us," but outsiders? These are the perpetual and universal moral questions that have always haunted human groups and associations at every scale, from the family on up to nations and civilizations, and arise in every kind of human encounter.

The answers chosen, and the behavior consequent to them, define the rise and disintegration of all social groups, local, national, and transnational, as well as the fate of humankind as a whole, because contemporary weapons can destroy us all. So we clearly need a more peaceable world, we need a more peaceable way of behaving toward culturally different individuals and groups, and we need effective ways of familiarizing the young with the ongoing cultural traditions of the world.

And here, of course, schooling certainly can help. Schooling is very powerful. Teachers have always helped to shape the minds of the persons put in their charge, and teachers today, it seems to me, must first of all accept for themselves and their pupils a global perspective on that human past. This is the only way they can introduce the young to the multicultural world that they actually inhabit, whether they want to or not, and also introduce them to the United States' own local version of high culture, which derives, of course, mainly from Latin Christendom and, in some specific and important political respects, from England and France of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Now, it is a tall order for any teacher to teach about the entire world in addition to the national cultural tradition of one's own country. But it is our duty; that is what a teacher's role in society is and necessarily must be. We are responsible for helping to define for the young who we are as a people and as members of a locality as well, and how we ought to behave as a nation and as members of the human race at large. This is what teaching, and specifically historical teaching, has always tried to do, has always done, and inescapably continues to do. I wish you well, teachers in my audience, in the effort to adapt our national traditions successfully to ever-changing circumstances, in a world where so many voices and noises compete for the attention of young people.

[3] See William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, new ed. 1991).

Nothing is more critical to the future well-being of those who are bearers of the cultural tradition of our own country, the various groups within it, and all of humanity.