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Multiculturalism, Individualism, and Diversity

Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade

August 1999

In multi-colored, multi-ethnic societies, and especially in the united states, much is being made of the concepts of multiculturalism and diversity. Individuals are called on to respect others' cultural values and practices, organizations are urged to become more diverse, and some people are making careers for themselves as diversity counselors. The impetus for much of this comes out of the desire on many people's part to change racist attitudes and combat discriminatory practices. However, emphasizing cultural differences and promoting ethnic identification rather than acknowledging individual differences that occur in all social groups does not promote diversity of human thought and experience. It only reinforces inaccurate preconceptions people have about those who they perceive as different in some way.

Multiculturalists tell us that we must be sensitive to the culture of other people. But, identifying a person's culture does not really tell us very much about that person. While there are some beliefs or practices that one generally encounters only and/or commonly among those from a certain country or eth-

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nic group, not everyone in any of these countries or groups will share these. In the past it was considered insensitive to assume that people behaved or thought a certain way simply because they were white, or black, or an immigrant from haiti. Now, it appears that such cultural pre-judging is encouraged.

Cultural “competency” programs are used in many organizations, supposedly to encourage cooperation between various ethnic groups and promote diversity. But what is taught in such workshops and seminars is that black americans think and act this way, filipinos eat and worship that way, and ruscians bring up their children thus. Misinformation like this encourages other people to assume that all members of these groups act and think similarly, an attitude just as likely to promote misunderstanding as older, bigoted ideas about people of different ethnic backgrounds which arose out of ignorance of how others lived. Diversity is inhibited when people view “cultural” groups in this manner and fail to appreciate the truly diverse ways of the individuals who make up these groups.

At a time when racism and nationalism on the part of white american people are roundly, and rightly, criticized, multiculturalism, instead of promoting understanding between groups, often simply strengthens group ethnic identity among people who are not white, reinforcing barriers between different groups and individuals. Multicultural can, at times, even be used simply as a code word for non-white, with some organizations or events which describe themselves this way including certain people and excluding others based on their skin color or “culture.” And once one identifies oneself as a member of a certain culture, defining how members of this culture are supposed to think and behave, it becomes possible to exclude even members of one’s own culture as well, if they don’t exhibit “appropriate” cultural values. Such people can be dismissed as race traitors or castigated for not “thinking black,” for instance, just as some feminists have attacked pro-porn women as “male-identified.” Prescribing

racially or ethnically correct behavior discourages diversity and hinders understanding of and interaction with people who are different in some way.

In response to such generalizing, some people promote self-identification as a “sub-culture.” While countering the stereotyping involved in defining broad groups of people as culturally the same, such refining of identity breeds exactly the same sort of stereotyping, on an even narrower basis. Creating a sub-cultural identity promotes the same inaccurate idea that people who share some superficial characteristics are all alike, embracing some people the definers wish to associate with, and rejecting others whom they would rather not be around. Examples of such self-created sub-cultural groups are jewish lesbian daughters of holocaust survivors (this is for real) or gay and bisexual black men. Not exactly multicultural or diverse.

The problem with all of this is that those who identify themselves or other as members of a culture attach more importance to groups of people than to the individuals that comprise them. All individuals have a set of ideas, ethics, values that are uniquely their own, even though many of these may be shared in various combinations with others. Everyone acts in unique ways, some of which, again, may be similar to those of other individuals, but never the same. All groups are made up of some number of such unique beings, and therefore, little can be said about any group that will accurately describe all of its members. Trying to inform someone about the thoughts, feelings, or activities of another by describing their “culture” is foolhardy.

Misunderstanding and intolerance are going to happen at times between people for all sorts of reasons. The best way to minimize the likelihood of such conflicts is to look at others as individuals, fellow human beings, not as specimens of a foreign culture to be studied. Believing that all non-coercive individuals are worthy of respect, tolerance, and decent behavior will lead to just treatment of others. Promoting individuality will promote a true diversity of ideas, experiences, and lifestyles.

All values and actions are ultimately those of individuals, and people should be free to live their lives unbound by the cultural assumptions of others. Multiculturalism, while holding out the promise of greater understanding and tolerance, in fact only leads to more stereotyping and misconceptions, and more intolerance of individual differences.