



Pluralism vs. Melting Pot

by Dr. Charles Taylor

This article is intended to help campuses appreciate the rich diversity that exists in the US and to understand why diversity should be both respected and celebrated.

"...But why can't we all be the same. I mean I don't look at skin color. I try to treat everyone the same—what's wrong with that?"

You have probably heard the above sentiment expressed on numerous occasions; perhaps not the exact words but the meaning was essentially the same. Usually the person who voices this sentiment is well intentioned and would not deliberately try to be insensitive to the cultural needs of others. Unfortunately treating everyone the same does not mean that everyone is being treated fairly. Too often treating everyone the same means believing that everyone has the same needs or will respond in predictable ways.

Perhaps a simple example will help clarify why this particular sentiment needs to be challenged. In planning a student retreat, if cultural preferences were not taken into consideration, what type of food would you serve? What type of music would you plan for the participants to listen to? What speakers would you invite to address the gathering? Although these examples are somewhat simplistic, they do speak to the real importance of pluralism in campus programming. Pluralism celebrates diversity. The melting pot thrives on conformity.

When one is expressing the sentiment of ignoring differences, one is generally supporting the melting pot theory. This theory of assimilation was popularized by Israel Zangwill (1908) in a play, *The Melting Pot*.

During the 1800s the U.S. was host to a wave of immigrants from Europe. As the number of immigrants from southern Eastern bloc European countries increased, white Anglo Saxon protestants began to feel that their values and life styles were threatened. As a result immigration laws were changed. These changes proved discriminatory to dark skinned Europeans as well as to people of color the world over.

Since thousands of immigrants had entered the country prior to the immigration laws being changed, ways had to be found to acculturate them into U.S. society as quickly as possible. The public schools served this role probably better than any other institution, although most of the institutions of the society contributed to immigrant assimilation. Immigrants were expected to downplay their own particular ethnic heritage and traditions and replace them with new American traditions and values. Zangwill (1908) attempted to describe this transformation when he wrote: 'America is God's crucible, the melting pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming!'



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The idea of a distinct entity—an 'American' was being widely pushed until it was firmly embedded in the American psyche by the beginning of the twentieth century. Now, when immigrants wanted to maintain their language or customs they were accused of being un-American.

Although Europeans were encouraged to melt, generally people of color were not permitted to. It is not surprising that the melting pot concept is rejected by many people of color today. Cultural pluralism is the concept being embraced by such groups. Gold (1977) offers a reason for this when he writes;

"...multiculturalism equates with the respect shown the varied cultures and ethnic groups which have built the United States and which continue today to contribute to its richness and diversity."

Multiculturalism recognizes that as Americans we share many things in common, but as hyphenated Americans our lifestyles and values need not be the same. The way we dance, speak, party, dress, etc., can reflect our cultural heritage and need not be considered anti-American. Multiculturalism attempts to make the point that differences are not deficiencies.

The melting pot theory essentially says, "from the many, one," while the pluralism theory says, "the one is really many."

It is important that these two concepts be discussed on campus. Helping students accept differences is more than just teaching tolerance. Practicing diversity is key to our survival as a nation and as a member of the world community.

It does not take much effort to understand the implications of expecting everyone to be 'like us'. We need to help students understand that treating everyone the same has resulted in the inadequate treatment and exclusion of the contributions made by people of color in text books, under-representation of minorities on school staffs and lack of authentic involvement of minorities in the decision making structures of the society.

There are those who still defend the melting pot idea vehemently. Let's take a closer look at the case they make.

Why Can't we all be the Same—The Case for the Melting Pot Theory

The case for the melting pot emerged in a world where ethnic and racial identities were still being viewed through an 'inferior' and 'superior' lens. On one hand, the idea of the melting pot seemed to suggest a place where people from different backgrounds came and lost their



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previous identities to create an entirely new American identity, yet the reality was not nearly as romantic as that sounds. This is also quite obvious as one picks up any early study of assimilation in the United States. Earlier social scientists studied assimilation or the 'melting' process as one whereby people of 'inferior cultural traits' unlearned their old practices to adjust to the host society, in order to become fully accepted (Alba and Nee, 1997).

Assimilation therefore was a process that occurred along a clearly defined hierarchy along ethnic and racial lines, and the extent to which one needed to 'melt' in the pot was a direct function of where they fell on that social hierarchy. Rumbaut (1997) presents a very powerful challenge to this idea of assimilation that is perhaps one of the most misunderstood ideas in the American society. Assimilation according to Rumbaut (1997) has a certain 'one-wayness' about it, whereby the foreign element has to conform to this ideal of 'American', which was considered to be a superior way of being, in contrast to the life styles of the ethnic foreigner seeking to become part of the American society.

The Melting Pot Worked Fine for European Americans but not People of Color

In order to understand contemporary views about immigration one needs to consider the issue of immigration in a historical perspective and sift myth from reality. Massey (1995), divides the waves of immigration primarily into several groups. The classical era of primarily European immigration lasting from 1901 to 1930, followed by a long period of very little or no immigration, and then a new regime of large scale non-European immigration beginning in the 1970s. Massey (1995) says, that the early wave of immigration was primarily European, and although the composition shifted from one part of Europe to another, at the end, the Europeans outnumbered the people of color in the United States, giving it a distinctly European outlook.

Massey argues however, that the European immigrants faced a distinct set of circumstances two of which were, a hiatus in immigration for a while, during which the identity of 'Pole, German, or Irish' became less obvious in future generations, and also, the economic boom that was accompanied with that immigration. Hence the first wave of immigration ought to be considered in its proper historical perspective.

Adding more to Massey's idea of historical context, one ought to put the assimilation of European Americans into the context of the World War, the Great Depression and the GI bill. Despite initial hostility towards immigrants even of European descent, the fact is that due to racism directed towards people of color, eventually the 'assimilation' process excluded those who were of a non-white stock. Today, it might be considered even 'American' to remember one's Scottish, Irish or German ancestry, but un-American to associate too strongly with say one's Native American, Chinese or Japanese ancestry.



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Why the Melting Pot Theory Should be Rejected

The melting pot theory is more myth than fact when it's used to create a romanticized version of American history where every immigrant was welcomed with open arms, and provided an equal opportunity to flourish and create a better future for himself. What it also does, is put the onus on an individual rather than on the structures within which he finds himself. Put differently, if someone is facing structural hardships in securing employment opportunities, or housing, it is because they have not made a sufficient effort to 'assimilate'.

Few people who emphasize assimilation take the time to consider the requirements of assimilation or what it means to assimilate. Furthermore, assimilation as a goal, is something that is almost unachievable by ethnic minorities, given the way race is perceived in the United States, for no matter what their economic or educational status, they can not escape their skin color.

While canonical theories of assimilation focused on assimilation as an idealized one-way street, later research has shown that not to be the case. Race relations have hardly been a one-way street in which the minority group eventually assimilates into the majority culture (Alba and Nee, 1997). The fact is that race relations in the U.S. have been hostile, and due to structural discrimination embedded in the very institutions of our society, economic and social assimilation has still not occurred for the majority of African Americans and others of color.

Treating Everyone the Same Doesn't Mean Everyone is Being Treated Fairly

We are all products of our history, and in these histories we carry our DNA, all the time, passed on to us through generations. To deny this history, is to deny part of ourselves, our beings, for indeed they are very much shaped by the history lived by our forebears. The notion of equality held by the public in the United States is often at odds with what people of color have experienced.

Due to this unproved, yet idealistic notion of America being the land that rewards individual efforts, where people can pull themselves up by their 'boot straps' and live the 'American dream', people refuse to fully acknowledge the structural racism that prevents equal opportunity for everyone and thereby perpetuates racial inequality on so many levels.



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It also disregards the very long history of systematic oppression of people of color, when they are expected to perform on par with their white peers, who have enjoyed the benefits of the color of their skin for many generations.

Some of the strongest proponents of 'equal treatment' are those who oppose initiatives such as Affirmative Action since they believe it gives minorities undue advantage over whites. These individuals fail to acknowledge the long history of oppression faced by people of color in this country, that has put them in a distinctively disadvantaged position which they can never overcome merely on their own.

One way of understanding this idea of 'equal not being the same as fair' can be if we considered the example of two people boarding a bus. One has perfectly fine limbs, while the other has been in a terrible accident causing him to wear a cast on one of his legs. If a seat becomes available, would it not be 'fair' to consider the predicament of the person in the cast or should they both be treated 'equally' and no consideration should be given to the physical limitation imposed by the cast? By the same token, to expect everyone to perform well without making any reparations for the historical and systematic discrimination faced by them, is neither fair nor equal.

Why We Must Embrace Multiculturalism

Perhaps one of the most convincing cases for multiculturalism comes from Rumbaut's (1997) study of assimilation and its discontents. Rumbaut analyzes and compares numerous outcomes for health, criminal outcomes, etc., for 'foreign-born' and U.S. born groups, and finds that in many areas, the foreign born groups have better outcomes than their U.S. counterparts, and therefore assimilating into the U.S. society actually implies a 'lower' or 'worse' outcome for the immigrant group rather than a better one.

Many proponents of the colorblind approach to race and ethnic relations fail to recognize the implicit racism in such an approach. In a study that compared the attitude of people when exposed to 'color-blind' vs. 'multicultural' perspective, Richeson and Nussbaum (2003), found that a color blind approach lead to greater explicit racial bias than did the multicultural approach.

Multiculturalism celebrates differences, rather than trying to ignore or eliminate them. People have historically been treated differently because of their group membership, and a truly just and fair approach requires that we acknowledge this fact and then try to push for policies that would ameliorate the effect of such differential treatment for certain groups.

There is no culture that is devoid of its faults, and there is no culture that is perfect either. As a human race, our strength is in our diversity, because it allows us to learn from each other. If there is any cultural amalgamation that we should be striving for, it is a human culture of brotherhood, of beauty in difference, and of mutual understanding, acceptance



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and respect. It is multiculturalism, not the melting pot theory that lends itself to the creation of such a human culture.

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