MULTICULTURALISM: AN UNCERTAINTY TO OPENNESS — A RESPONSE TO LEVINSON’S ESSAY

Thomas Eske Rasmussen’s*

For decades the Little Bighorn National Monument in Montana was linked to General George A. Custer’s doom in 1876. Normally the defeated have no claim to history: who would be left to write it and who would be left to read it? The battle at Little Bighorn was surely a tragedy for the relatives of the soldiers of The Seventh Cavalry. Nevertheless, Custers’s side won in the end, and perhaps in a twist of irony, the Custer Battlefield National Monument, the cemetery for the triumphantly defeated, was created.

Two decades ago (and more than a hundred years later) the memorial got a new name, shifting the focus from one partisan of the conflict to the geographical site of the battle. The modern museum at the renamed site attempts an objective overview of the conflict, taking pains to assess both the historical background and perspectives of both sides. A similar phenomenon regarding representation of history is found at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming. In his stimulating article, Multiculturalism and Great American West: Some Ruminations, Professor Sanford Levinson takes this evolution as a result of multiculturalism, where the explicit distinction between hero and villain is neutralized:

“Integration,” in this context, certainly does not mean a single story; rather, it is the recognition that history is simply too complex to be reducible to a single narrative, that part of being an adult is to recognize the reality of these competing stories and then to embark on the difficult—some might say impossible—task of creating a society that can accept the inherent contradictions presented by these stories and not, instead, simply pick one as “the winner” and then in effect to suppress, or ignore, the competition.¹

This well-considered observation of complexities Levinson later defines as “the ability to hold two opposed ideas,” with a quotation from F. Scott Fitzgerald.² Regarding Western American history, indeed any country’s history, this particular notion of multiculturalism fills one with hope for a civilization’s future. But Levinson goes further, noting that “[i]t is

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2. Id.
obviously true that ‘multiculturalism’ is a national phenomenon.” 3 If we consider globalization being a sort of multiculturalism, we might specify and call it a national challenge. And we only need to look back to recent history of the 1990s when the world witnessed ethnic conflicts in the Balkans to understand how deeply rooted a challenge multiculturalism can be. In a violent bloodshed in former Yugoslavia, Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims rejuvenated a mutual hatred that traces back to the fascist Ustaša movement during World War II — and even to the battle between Serbs and Ottomans at Kosovo Polje in 1389. 4 In this part of the world terms such as “hero,” “villain,” and “just cause” are a serious matter. Marshal Josip Tito (1892-1980) sought to suppress these ethnic conflicts in the communist republic of Yugoslavia, but clearly his project was not strong enough to endure beyond his death.

Indeed, sometimes multiculturalism is an unwelcome stranger, especially in any society with a strong national identity and cultural history. The United States of America should, however, in theory, be ripe ground for multiculturalism, as its history of immigration in the nineteenth century is unique. One might argue that these then-future Americans shared their history, religion, and political tradition as they had left European civilization and represented the same culture. But even further back, the fact that European settlers and American Indians together celebrated the successful harvest at the very first Thanksgiving Day in 1621 illustrates that different cultures can co-exist — one wishes to have witnessed that day. That this peaceful cultural encounter shortly after developed into alienation and violence is a tragedy, but history tells us that this sort of outcome is not exceptional.

Living in a multicultural society requires, on some level, repressing of all kinds of natural human feelings of self-awareness, prejudice, and predilections to see ourselves in a cultural context equal to others. It is essential to accept human limits and be able to forgive — very civilized and yet very uncomfortable conditions for man. Yet, it is possible to overcome these boundaries, and the results can be surprisingly fruitful as the national memorials in Montana and Wyoming today illuminate. Levinson, in an apt use of literary labeling, calls this “negative capability,” quoting a letter written by the English Romantic poet John Keats. 5 As Keats states it as “Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” 6 What Keats referred to is what “forms a man of achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously.” 7

In this context, “negative capability” is a questionable term. It is not impossible in literature, but, in reality, it is doubtful whether any human being can go through life without any “irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Fact and reason are fundamental premises in our

3. Id. at 1.
5. Levinson, supra note 1, at 4.
7. Id. at 57.
pursuit of scientific, philosophical, and political development as well as historical and cultural understanding of both the present and past. Moreover, “mystery” is an arguably misleading term. Mystery is secrets, privileged access and knowledge limited to the few initiated. To these, mystery offers straightforward answers and safety. Several established communities formed in such mystery, and examples include the early Christian Church, freemasonry, and the Hells Angels (to suggest an odd triad). None of these seem yet to have made historical contributions to multiculturalism, whatever their underlying ideals are.

I think we must dig deeper to detect the mechanisms of multiculturalism, namely to renaissance humanism. Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466-1538) recognized uncertainty itself as a potential touchstone in the quest for truth. And though Erasmus did not live to see the accomplishment of the Reformation, he was nevertheless engaged in doctrinal controversy with Martin Luther. In Erasmus’ polemic treatise On the Free Will—he offers an interpretation of the will being fundamental for achieving salvation in the Lord; of course, it was a matter of vital concern for Erasmus to keep the discussion constructive. In De Libero Arbitrio, Erasmus denies that he and Luther are fighting like gladiators and explains: “What sort of sincere judgment can there be when people behave this way? Who will learn anything fruitful from this sort of discussion—beyond the fact that each leaves the discussion bespattered with the other’s filth?”

Erasmus himself deliberately called his treatise a diatribe—an ancient term for a polemic discourse on moral questions. Moreover, his tolerant way of holding up “two opposed ideas” was based in ancient academic philosophy, orienting themselves around the works of Aristotle and Marcus Tullius Cicero. The latter, of course, was of particular interest because Cicero was a lawyer, and a centrist politician who tried to apply these ideas in practice. Indeed, in Cicero’s works we learn about a virtue of classical rhetoric called loqui in utramque partem—“to talk on both sides,” i.e. to argue pro et contra on whatever topic as convincingly as possible, no matter what point of view regarding the topic you or your audience may have. A brilliant example of this is Cicero’s defense of Aulus Cluentius Habitus. In this speech Cicero explains why, in an earlier trial, where his client Cluentius was involved, he had implied that Cluentius had bribed the jury and why his efforts in the present trial in favor of Cluentius make perfect sense (despite this past serious transgression). Though it may sound cynical, as Ann Vasaly puts it:

This was also to be expected when we keep in mind that the orator was attempting to respond to his audience’s prejudices about the world, and when we remember that the Roman audience of the late Republic had no single vision of reality. Like

all of us, they were capable of entertaining various, often mutually inconsistent ideas about places and the people in them.\textsuperscript{11}

I am not suggesting that Erasmus and Cicero were would-be fans of multiculturalism, or that Keats was not (though it would surprise me if any of them were), but simply that our opportunities—and obstacles—in supporting multiculturalism lie deeply rooted in Western humanism.\textsuperscript{12} Additionally, this prior example comes closest to Levinson’s own field of jurisprudence rather than to literature (despite his substantial contributions to both fields). Ideals are far from reality, and following the mourning of the lost Seventh Cavalry, it is doubtful that any American could think of clearing the path for future multiculturalism by representing Little Bighorn in a “two opposed ideas” perspective. As for multiculturalism in the future, Levinson is aware of the difficulties and paradoxes: “Magnanimity may be easier after unequivocal triumph than in the case of a standoff, where the result remains uncertain and subject to ‘renegotiation’ following the renewal of battle.”\textsuperscript{13}

The humanity that visitors face in places such as the Buffalo Bill National Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming is the result of sheer openness. Every possible clue or historical-cultural marker in seeing the big picture is submitted to the visitor with the underlying message: make your own opinion from this evidence, in defiance of your previous knowledge and personal preferences. Given that the word multiculturalism denotes a peaceful and respectful interaction between cultures, Levinson might have detected a step in that direction. Multiculturalism is at once a civilizing and almost supernatural challenge. We have to put aside every conception of ourselves as having the better cause on the historical timeline, no matter how unjust and shameful we may regard the treatment of our ancestors. Does this ultimately call for a suppression of national, historical, and cultural identity? In pursuit of true and genuine knowledge we can only be certain that nothing is certain. This is what Socrates said, and his summation seems as accurate in Ancient Athens as today. And, as is well known, he was sentenced to death for these views, for—as the authorities deemed it—undermining the democracy of Athens.

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\textsuperscript{12} See, e.g., Cicero, De Oratore III 206 (David Mankin ed., 2011) (discussing in utramque partem in the context of poverty as something to be neither avoided nor sought).
\textsuperscript{13} Levinson, supra note 1, at 4.
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