# Reflections on Multiculturalism

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# Chapter 8

## No Sentimental Education: An Essay on Transatlantic Cultural Identity

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You've got to be carefully taught.
—Rodgers and Hammerstein, *South Pacific*

Bibliography may advance politics through semantics. The Library of Congress Subject Guide does not list the adjective "multicultural" as a classification term. Instead, the officially sanctioned term is "intercultural," a coinage that suggests the realm of ideas rather than the arenas of daily life. Cultures, then, interact on both levels: As the "raw" meeting in the marketplace is transformed into a conceptual encounter, a multicultural experience turns into an intercultural reflection. The fortuitous etymological situation in library classification signals a larger truth: cultural competence is played out both in practice and in theory. A culturally cognizant person is always already a participant who is situated at the intersections of cultural exchange. At the same time, this person cares about the theoretical dimensions of culture. Cultural identity thus results from the personal involvement of each human being in his or her context followed by reflection. Such reflection can help to clarify motives, provide historical lines of thought, and give direction to future multicultural encounters.

Drawing on personal experience, I will argue in this essay that a well-defined and reflected self-identity is essential for rea-

sonable and productive discourse to occur in society. With reference to a few high-profile current events, I will attempt to outline the path on which, in my view, the present cultural debate proceeds in the United States. Building on that ground, I will reflect on a seminal incident in my own life that has caused me to rethink the effectiveness of my intercultural education. Finally, I will suggest some educational imperatives.

Participation in a democratic society is a delicate matter and requires a reflected self-identity. Yet in this time of rapid transformations, when a formerly rigid world is in post-Cold War flux and communication is instantaneous, self-identity also needs to be open to change and adaptation. It is apparent that global problems—hunger, pollution, natural resources, sustainability of the planet—which until recently each generation seemed to pass down to the next at minimal risk to itself, now face us directly. Where political power and military prowess used to combine comfortably to maintain the status quo, the imminent overpopulation of our planet forces rich and poor nations alike to reconsider their roles in the world. Consequences for the individual human being result from this reassessment. However circumscribed and parochial one's original identity may be, anybody may be plunged into the midst of a controversy in which ethnic, religious, gender, and other social determinants come together to form a space for debate and exchange of ideas. In the process of adapting from life in Westphalia, the German province of my birth, to life in the United States, I have seen parochial constriction on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet frequently, more than just debate and ideas are at stake. Academics and journalists have the luxury of debating ideas, but even a casual glance at the evening news would suggest that ethnic and religious identity can be a matter of life and death for peoples around the globe.

Intellectual debate in the United States tends to be controversial mostly because relatively little is at stake: academic debates are frequently "academic" in the pejorative sense of the word. Moreover, while scientific discoveries receive immediate public attention—promising outlooks in the research on AIDS come to mind—debates in the humanities tend to have far less of a popular echo, unless a wholesale revolution of hitherto accepted norms



and values seems to threaten the peace. A notable exception to the customary wallflower existence of humanities debates has been the heat generated by the controversy over Political Correctness in the past few years. It extended into the popular media and to the Sunday political talk shows until it gradually lost its sting by its codification in legal controversy.

In the United States, cultural debate shares with other public phenomena its eventual relegation to the legal realm. The American impulse to reduce debates to a battle of conflicting rights—to purify them, as it were, in the crucible of law—is difficult for a foreigner to understand. It is premised on the Constitution and its amendments as the founding documents of the country's identity. These written documents take the place in American culture of the national identity in European countries that is based on cultural practice and is shared with preceding generations over hundreds of years. Legal thinking in the United States creates clear fronts. In the abortion debate, for example, the right of the fetus is weighed against the right of the mother. In the PC debate the right to free speech is pitted against the protection from hateful pronouncements. But the intended clarity of opposing viewpoints can have unintended effects.

Much has changed since the relatively amicable discussion over E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom and the possibility of a commonly shared American cultural identity. By contrast, at the time of this writing, the great public debate over the incendiary and anti-Semitic remarks made by Khallid Abdul Mohammad at Keane College in November of 1993 has been carried out, not under the terms of Political Correctness, but under the terms mostly of First Amendment rights. While free speech is essential to the American understanding of freedom, historical experience elsewhere may dictate different solutions. Germany, for example, has relatively strict laws against hate speech and the proliferation of anti-Semitic writings. As a result, German neo-Nazis print their pamphlets abroad. Legal codification of the right to controversy raises the tempting popular assumption that whatever I may legally do, I may presume to be ethical. Few fallacies could be more misleading. Legal sanction does not remove personal responsibility.

As a German living in the United States, I have experienced the personal properties of cultural identity more strongly than my education ever led me to expect. Outside of the fatherland's borders, Germans are expected to show their colors especially with respect to Germany's Nazi past. The public voice of Americans, in academia and in the media, is sometimes the voice of Jewish Americans who justifiably expect that one adopt a reflected attitude toward one's interlocutors. In addition, foreign residents in the United States must find a place in the complex web of "race" relations. This is particularly ironic for Germans, since in the German language "Rasse" is a completely discredited word, rendered unusable by its employment in Nazi terminology and now limited to distinctions between breeds of dogs. Any American application form, however, blithely asks me to identify myself as a member of the "white," or "Caucasian," race. Visa applications reserve a space for travelers to identify themselves if they participated in the activities of Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945. American categories of identity, then, which highlight historical "correctness" (that is, ideological opposition to Germany's Nazi past), markers of race as well as possibly religion and class—these do not form part of visa applications, but they can be apparent from neighborhood stratifications—show me myself in a subject position—to borrow a term from literary theory—distinct from that of my youth, when everybody I knew was white, Catholic, middle-class, and mildly conservative.

My "attitude" toward Germany's Nazi past has become a test case for my political integrity in the country of which I am now a permanent resident. My explanations have elicited various responses from varying audiences. Specifically, a presentation on coming to terms with one's country's history will yield different results when given to an audience of white, Midwestern college students or, alternately, to an audience of African Americans—composed of students from Chicago's South Side and from the Deep South—at a historically black college in a Southern state. A person's cultural and political identity gains relevance only in context. What emerges from my comparison of the two presentations is a personal lesson about the public nature of one's beliefs and one's identity. Awareness of intercultural dynamics is,



then, not a luxury made requisite only by the contemporary fascination with "culture" in American public discourse. Such awareness, rather, is a necessity, perhaps especially for a person who was socialized in highly homogeneous circumstances.

Like Voltaire's Candide—the optimistic student of Pangloss, who thought that intercultural competence could safely be navigated in the realm of ideas—I grew up in Westphalia. *Candide* is an object lesson for our time. Without detracting from Voltaire's genius, I might well call *Candide* the multicultural manifesto of the Enlightenment. The eponymous protagonist experiences senseless war, gains and loses a fortune, travels to all corners of the known world, meets Jesuits and papal inquisitors, and retires to a private enclave with a motley crew of companions from different walks of life to cultivate a common garden. Many ideals of the Enlightenment, such as tolerance, reason, and belief in happiness, have again gained currency in our day, possibly because of the fatal consequences of a rampant Romanticism that moves without stopping from Wagner and Nietzsche to Hitler. But even if reason can make a garden of our planet, we can no longer envision private enclaves for the like-minded. People of the twenty-first century need to move between gardens.

My education in the Westphalian public grammar school in the 1970s was progressive. Much to the dismay of our parents, my schoolmates and I read living East German authors instead of Goethe and Schiller. We learned three foreign tongues, thus imitating Pangloss more than Candide. We were perhaps the first generation of schoolchildren to be informed in full about the origins, events, and consequences of Germany's thirteen years under Nazi rule. Prosperity, security within the Western alliance, and the regaining of international respect for Germany were the catchwords of the day. In many ways, however, this education was theoretical: for all the good things I learned about Judaism, I never met a Jew.

The first test of my multicultural competence occurred when I became a graduate student at a large, well-known American university on the east coast. Many of my fellow graduate students, professors, and advisors were Jews. Many of the authors we studied were Jewish. Suddenly, the theory of Germany's col-

lective guilt—which I had discarded—seemed somehow to apply to me. As the token German in many classes, I would frequently be called upon to explain my country's history and its subsequent developments. Over time, I was able to develop a defensible argument: born in 1960, I could clearly not take personal responsibility for any event that happened between 1933 and 1945, yet as a historically conscious German, I would forever be called, by the burden of my country's history, into responsibility for those suffering from persecution. "Never Again" was to be the uncomfortable motto for a moral imperative over my life.

I had developed my argument without taking into account the multiplicity of ethnic and racial experiences in the United States. As I turned from student to teacher, I soon found occasion to reexamine my stance. The small, Midwestern college at which I now teach requires all freshmen to enroll in a year-long class in the "Western Intellectual and Literary Tradition." My colleagues and I decided that I would give a lecture to the entire freshman class on my coming to terms with my country's history. As I explained German history of the twentieth century—the Weimar Republic, the rise of the Nazis, their political machinery, German compliance and isolated resistance—and as I finally recalled how a visit to Auschwitz I made as a student left me speechless for days, the reaction in the culturally homogeneous audience was predictable: shock, horror, and empathy. There are relatively few Jews in southwest Missouri. My white audience, not predisposed to any particular sentiment toward Jews, evinced the standard shock that any of us would feel in the presence of human suffering. My students perceived the lecture essentially as an academic learning experience, perhaps somewhat intensified by the unusual nature of the lecturer. Still, by comparison with, say, a concentration camp survivor, I am extremely far removed from the subject I discuss.

A few months later, I was invited to give the same presentation to the freshman class at a historically black college in the Deep South. A small but articulate minority of both Palestinian and African American students challenged me on my portrayal of the Jews as victims. To these students' thinking, my arguments



were hopelessly mired in the past. As Blacks and Muslims living in the United States at the present time, they felt strong sympathies with the Palestinians against the Jewish state, and they quickly equated Israel's treatment of the occupied territories with the Nazis' persecution of the Jews. American inner cities and their Black population, they argued, suffer to this day from Jewish financial and commercial interests. How could I as a German defend the Jews when my forebears had reacted to perceived injustices similar to those many Blacks suffer today in the United States? Clearly, these students had a cultural learning experience that turned my presentation from an academic lesson into an invitation to react. To my German sentiment, the Holocaust means guilt and grave moral discomfort. To my audience, the Holocaust was one event in an ongoing series of clashes between culture groups, one of which defines itself largely by ideological opposition to the state of Israel.

All of a sudden, my comfortable theory had exploded. My naive belief that victimized groups—Jews in Nazi Germany, Blacks in the United States—feel solidarity with each other was no longer justified. As our discussion continued, I momentarily found myself taking a perverse kind of comfort in the position of victim—a completely new experience. Had I not felt before the unfairness in world opinion? Were not Germans, at home and abroad, held to a higher standard than anyone else? When a punk in Frankfurt roughs up a Turkish guest worker, does not the world press erupt in indignation, whereas a British skinhead attacking a Pakistani hardly achieves even local notoriety?

On further reflection, these thoughts turned out not to be productive. Their inaccuracy lies in the comparison of two unequal situations. The nature of evil is such that each occurrence must be measured by its own standard. One evil cannot necessarily be "put into perspective" by comparison to another one. The Holocaust does not become justifiable by the fact that other atrocities have been committed by other people at other times. Evil can also be transpersonal (e.g., in the spreading of an epidemic disease), but guilt and responsibility are personal. Thus, while there is no collective guilt, there is also no collective innocence.

The realm of intercultural negotiations needs to be approached differently. It is a matter of personal engagement. The proposals I shall now put forward are based on my experience as a teacher. The examples which sparked the proposals are personal in nature, yet I do not claim to have addressed their subject matter in full. While the immediate occasion for the different reactions I received in response to my lecture was a discussion of German history and the Holocaust, this essay is not the place to do justice to the gravity of that topic. Rather, I claim so grave a topic in order to remove from this essay any suspicion of frivolousness, straightforward though my proposals may appear to be.

First, an intercultural society needs to be educated in the culture of debate. I envision a truly civilized form of debate, in which listening skills become part of the rhetorical toolbox. The McLaughlin Group is hardly a model here. Instead, a cultured debate would take place among equals whose intention is not necessarily to convince one another, but whose commonality lies in their willingness to learn about different perspectives on the same question. The American tradition of rallying around the Constitution may be helpful here. To exemplify: if I brought the two student groups with whom I discussed German history into communication with each other, they would probably learn more about each other than about the topic at hand. As the "teacher" fades into the background, the process of intercultural debate has begun. At least for a time, participants in the debate would see the world from a different angle of vision and would consider respecting that alternative. Interestingly, a culture of debate is literally limitless. All participants, the "presenter" included, continually reexamine their stances. Far from being rampantly relativistic, the practice of continual reexamination is made necessary by the nature of multicultural debate. Since every participant is different, every participant deserves recognition. Understood in this manner, a multicultural existence is a philosophical existence: we ascribe to Socrates the adage that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

Second, an intercultural society needs to be polyglot. Primarily, this means competency in a foreign language. Arguments about language learning are legion, and many linguists can state



them with more authority than this author. But in many ways, competency in a foreign language may only be the first step toward intercultural competence. That would also entail the ability to move between social classes or religious and ethnic groups and to act as "translator." Germans of my generation, for example, are generally quite comfortable communicating with their British and French and Spanish friends. But, as we learned recently, speaking with those of our compatriots who used to be East Germans is a different matter altogether. After forty years of separation, we share so few beliefs and concepts that we often doubt whether we speak the same language. Not only has the speech of West Germans become imbued with American idioms and that of East Germans with Russian idioms, but, more profoundly, the very understanding of national—or cultural—identity differs substantially. Allow me to simplify for the sake of clarity: West Germans, especially the thirty-something generation, have seen the only possible future for Germany in a European bond with strong transatlantic ties. We stressed European identity to the extent of neglecting German particularity. Through the sixties and seventies, our sense of national pride or patriotism—healthy or not—lay dormant. Only with the advent of the eighties and an increasing temporal distance from 1945 did we begin to sense a German identity. East Germans, on the other hand, stressed the fact that their country was "the first socialist state on German soil." In spite of their prominent place in the socialist brotherhood of nations, East Germans have some justification to the claim that they preserved a sense of German national identity. By chance, Weimar and Wittenberg came to be situated on the eastern side of the border. Yet the East Germans preserved their sense of national identity at the expense of virtually denying responsibility for Germany's Nazi past. The strength of the denial, and the burden of this particular past, were made apparent when the first freely elected East German parliament—before unification—opened its inaugural session with an apology to the state of Israel. So when we debate the role of Germany in the post-Cold War world or the possibility of a seat on the United Nations Security Council, we start from different points of view. In this debate, multicultural sensitivity supersedes the accidentals of lan-

guage. Since the integration of the former East Germany into the West has in many ways turned out not to be a meeting between equals, but rather a process of absorption and refashioning in the Western image, a polyglot culture of debate will be required there for a long time to come. Third, education in such old-fashioned virtues as tolerance, politeness, and tact will contribute, I believe, to a better world culture. Optimism, Candide's specialty, will become a cherished commodity. A person's cultural identity, as I said above, is both a private and a public matter. If we want the public discourse to be productive, tolerance will be a more helpful approach than proselytism. "Tolerance" and "tact" may sound like easy subterfuges, but they take us back to the troubled eighteenth-century world of Candide, which Voltaire tried to meet with the tools of reason. In the practical, everyday world of multicultural encounters, tolerance and tact take on meaning at a surprising rate of speed. I would invite readers to test my proposals in their own lives.

The culture of debate, polyglot education, and the fostering of tolerance and tact are the ingredients of a well-defined and self-reflected identity. The three are interdependent as well: only persons sufficiently sure of themselves will face the world tolerantly. Any intercultural identity then, transatlantic or otherwise, will need to be, not sentimental, but rational.