

CHAPTER 4

Multiculturalism and
the Politics of Interest*Michael Walzer*

Thin Skins

Contemporary multiculturalism is not quite the same thing as the cultural pluralism championed by writers like Horace Kallen and John Dewey earlier in this century.¹ The notions certainly overlap; they probably point toward the same end state: the coexistence of different cultural groups. But multiculturalists are more edgy, nervous, militant than the old pluralists; they express a stronger sense of group oppression, a greater anxiety about cultural loss. Whereas Kallen was confident that the different groups would survive and prosper so long as they were let alone, so long as there was no state program of enforced "Americanization," multiculturalists want the state enlisted on the side of difference. They have a positive political agenda: they are committed to the "outing" of difference—this is their everyday political and intellectual work—and then they seek public recognition for all the previously suppressed and invisible differences.

Many of the groups that constitute multicultural America need governmental support in its most obvious form: tax money. Their most insistent demand, however, is for acknowledgment and respect. In contemporary multiculturalism the politics of interest is replaced or superseded by a politics of identity, where it is not the material condition of a group that is at issue but the value of a culture, history, or way of life. What the collective will is bent on avoiding is not exploitation or even impover-

ishment so much as insult and degradation, the social experience of "invisibility." Inevitably, rhetoric and gesture take on great importance. These are the double-edged swords of multicultural politics. *We* use them to tell ourselves (and the listening world) how good, strong, proud, and beautiful we are; *the others* use them to convict us of fear, laziness, greed, and violence. Hence the intensity of the debates about "hate speech" and "political correctness," an intensity that survives the ridicule of commentators and critics, since so many of the participants are convinced that words are really helpful or hurtful: the old rhyme about sticks and stones isn't convincing anymore. Hence also the new political emotions (I mean, newly surfaced, publicly expressed): not indignation, which implies a standard of justice, but resentment, offense, mortification, hurt feelings. It is hard to imagine a trade union official telling the representatives of management that their contract proposal has hurt his feelings and should therefore be withdrawn. But hurt feelings are political currency, money in the bank, in the world of multiculturalism.

There is not always enough money, of course, to get what one wants. A year or so ago a group of Jewish students from a nearby university came to me with a complaint: the local black students' organization had invited Louis Farrakhan to campus. The Jewish students were offended; their feelings were hurt. I tried to tell them that Farrakhan on campus would be a political event; they needed to work out an explicitly political response. But perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps Farrakhan had been invited precisely in order to hurt their feelings, in response to similar injuries, real or imagined, on the other side. I was looking for a political struggle, while what was really going on was much more personal. It wasn't a matter of power or interest; what mattered, in fact, were feelings. And so while the response of the Jewish students wasn't persuasive to their black fellows, didn't lead them to withdraw the Farrakhan invitation, it may nonetheless have been the proper response in this sense: that it registered with the blacks, the hurt was somehow acknowledged, it counted toward the next time. But I am still inclined to raise an older question: Was the actual well-being of either group served by this exchange?

In multicultural politics it is an advantage to be injured. Every injury, every act of discrimination or disrespect, every heedless, invidious, or malicious word is a kind of political entitlement, if not to reparation then at least to recognition. So one has to cultivate, as it were, a thin skin; it is important to be sensitive, irritable, touchy. But perhaps there is some deeper utility here. Thin skins are useful precisely because the cultural identities over which they are stretched don't have any very definite or sub-

stantive character. People are right to be worried about cultural loss. And because identity is so precarious in modern or postmodern America, because we are often so uncertain about who we are, we may well fail to register expressions of hostility, prejudice, or disfavor. Thin skin is the best protection: it provides the earliest possible signal of insults delivered and threats on the way. Like other early warning systems, of course, it also transmits false signals—and then a lot of time has to be spent in explanation and reassurance. But this too is part of the process of negotiating a difficult coexistence in a world where difference is nervously possessed and therefore often aggressively displayed.

Despite all the misunderstandings generated by the mix of nervous groups and thin-skinned individuals, there is something right about all this. Social peace should not be purchased at the price of fear, deference, passivity, and self-dislike—the feelings that standardly accompanied minority status in the past. The old left wanted to substitute anger at economic injustice for all these, but it is at least understandable that the actual substitute is the resentment of social insult. We want to be able and we ought to be able to live openly in the world, as we are, with dignity and confidence, without being demeaned or degraded in our everyday encounters. It may even be the case that dignity and confidence are preconditions for the fight against injustice.

So it is worth taking offense—I am not sure it is always worth feeling hurt—when demeaning and malicious things are said or done. But a permanent state of suspicion that demeaning and malicious things are about to be said or done is self-defeating. And it is probably also self-defeating to imagine that the long-term goal of recognition and respect is best reached directly, by aiming at and insisting on respect itself. (Indeed, the insistence is comic; Rodney Dangerfield has made a career out of it.) Consider the analogy of happiness, which we don't achieve, despite the Declaration of Independence, by "pursuing" it. We actually aim at goals like satisfying work and good relationships and particular pleasurable experiences, and if we find these, we are happy. Happiness is a by-product. Jon Elster has written extensively about ends of this sort, which can only be achieved indirectly and where focused effort may well be counterproductive, like *trying* to fall asleep.² People do not win respect by insisting that they are not respected enough.

What do groups need to do in order to be recognized and respected? (I shall write about individuals only as members of groups.) What should be the direct objects of their pursuit? They need a place in the world: legal standing, an institutional presence, resources. And then they need to coex-

ist with other groups similarly "placed," roughly equal to themselves. The others are necessary, obviously, since they must do the recognizing and respecting, and then they will want to be recognized and respected in turn. The only satisfactory basis for this regime of mutual respect is some kind of equality—not of numbers or even of wealth (though gross inequalities of wealth make multiculturalism very difficult) but of standing and presence. There will still be problems about the politics and also about the etiquette of coexistence, the sharing of public space, access to public funding, and so on. And there will still be group hostility and conflict. But when these are addressed from positions of strength, rhetoric and gesture are likely to be moderated, suspicion reduced. Fights over recognition seem to have an all-or-nothing quality, but the negotiation of difference among groups that already have standing and presence, political and economic resources, invites compromise.

I am obviously assuming that the groups we see around us in America today are capable of achieving standing and presence. My aim is to describe multiculturalism as a workable social system, not to suggest a world more attractive than this, some kind of postmodern, postethnic (postcultural?) utopia in which men and women freely fashion their own identities from the bits and pieces of a pluralist past.³ The groups such people formed would not be capable of the achievements I mean to describe. Perhaps for that reason, my own sympathies don't lie with postethnicity. In any case, the groups that actually exist, whatever difficulties they encounter, however nervous their members, are not about to be superseded. And so the immediate issue is ethnic (racial, religious) coexistence. If America's diverse communities can manage to live together on reasonable terms, in conditions of rough equality, that will be utopia enough. Now, how can we move toward the necessary forms of standing and presence?

"Meat and Potatoes Multiculturalism"

The experience of American Jews may be of some help here, though their extraordinary economic success requires me to be very cautious about setting them up as a useful example. Certainly, they have been sensitive to insult, as the early founding of the Anti-Defamation League (1913) suggests, and they are still quick to feel insulted and injured in cases like that of the Farrakhan invitation. But they are not today the main

protagonists of identity politics and their history suggests an alternative (indirect) political strategy. This strategy is partly revealed in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, where Jews were allies of blacks in the fight against discrimination and inequality.⁴ The breakup of this alliance and the drift toward more rhetorical and gestural responses to American racism mark the beginning of identity politics. Jewish participants in the civil rights struggle were applying lessons learned from an earlier experience. Perhaps the lessons were too literally applied—and in conditions where they were bound to lead to frustration (though not always to failure). Nonetheless, it is worth reflecting on them.

What is it that gave the Jews place and standing in American society? First, a strong internal organizational life, communal solidarity reflected in institutions: synagogues, schools, welfare and mutual aid associations, defense leagues, fraternal and sororal societies, a great variety of cultural and political organizations, Yiddishist, Zionist, laborist, and so on.⁵ But an intensively organized Jewry can go along, historically has gone along, with isolation and fear vis-à-vis the larger non-Jewish community. It has coexisted with the politics of deference, passivity, and accommodation which is suggested by the image of the “court Jew,” an ambassador from the weak to the powerful, who often found himself begging for favors. Something more is needed if Jews are to live with confidence among the “others.”

So, second, Jews sought and won legal protection in the form of antidiscrimination laws (the end of restrictive covenants and quota systems) and political protection in the form of friendly politicians and “balanced tickets” and equal access to public funds—which allows, in turn, for the strengthening of Jewish organizational life. Winning these protections required a politics of interest rather than a politics of identity, even though the interests at stake were those of men and women who were similarly identified (rather than similarly situated, say, vis-à-vis the means of production). The leaders of this politics of interest spoke from positions of strength—from a mobilized electoral base and a mobilized socioeconomic base—and their “demands” were highly specific and detailed. Dignity and confidence were achieved not by pursuing them directly but by acting in the world in pursuit of individual rights and collective advance.⁶

The result provides a model of what I will call “meat and potatoes multiculturalism.” This Jewish achievement is paralleled by that of other religious groups, Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, and Baptists among others (who mostly didn’t need to win the same kind of political battles). Thus far, only religious groups have been able to deliver the meat and potatoes,

although these groups often have ethnic subsets: Irish Catholics, German Lutherans, black Baptists. These are the chief protagonists of a concrete multiculturalism. Purely ethnic and racial groups, by contrast, though some of their representatives are leading defenders of the multicultural idea, have had greater difficulty putting it into practice—or at least into the specific kind of practice that I now want to describe. They don’t have organizational histories comparable to those of the mainstream religions.

Culture requires social space, institutional settings, for its enactment and reproduction. Among the Jews (and other religious groups too), this space is provided by the full organizational gamut that I have already described, greatly expanded now so that it forms a (partially) publicly funded sector of the American welfare state. The crucial institutions cover the life cycle: day-care centers, nursery schools, day schools and after-school schools, synagogues, museums and historical societies, family services, hospitals, old-age homes, and cemeteries. These are not only places where highly specific services are provided; they are also places where Jews meet, socialize, help one another, observe the dietary laws, perform religious rituals, teach and learn, lecture about Jewish history or literature, organize dramatic productions, sing the traditional songs, celebrate the holidays, comfort the sick, mourn the dead. All this is what I mean by cultural meat and potatoes. Cultures don’t survive in people’s heads; they need bounded spaces and organized activities of this kind. Multiculturalism without multiple institutional networks is a fake.

But even the Jews, who have 2,000 years of experience in taxing themselves—most of that time without the political power to tax—cannot provide these spaces and activities on their own, at least, not as they would have to be provided today for millions of people dispersed across a modern mass society. The semiautonomous communities of medieval Jewry, the *kehillot*, had something close to the taxing power, and even without it they could mobilize social pressure against recalcitrant individuals. The communities were very small and very precarious, and their members mostly had no place to go.⁷ But American multiculturalism is constituted on a largely voluntary basis. The different groups consist of a central core of believers and activists and a spreading periphery of partially committed or entirely uncommitted individuals. It is easy to fade away into the peripheral distances—easy too to reappear on some special occasion (the birth of a child, the illness or death of a parent) and expect that communal services will be available. The activists at the center want to be welcoming on such occasions. Still, the services won’t be available, not on the necessary scale, unless tax money can be spent to maintain them.

The extent to which tax money is being spent by organizations based in the various religious communities may surprise people committed to the "separation of church and state." Except with regard to schools, however, this expenditure has never been a controversial feature of American welfarism. And even with regard to religious schools, tax money has sometimes been allowed to filter across the divide—for "secular" uses like transportation, public health, care for disabled children, textbooks in nonreligious courses, and so on. These expenditures have been contested in the courts,⁸ but funding for other welfare services has been a purely political matter, with religious organizations lobbying for public funds like any other interest groups. In theory, the welfare state could be run entirely by government officials. But in fact it isn't, and the constituent communities of American multiculturalism are able to hold their members only insofar as they can run some piece of it themselves.

That is why communal organization must be seconded by political power if multiculturalism is to work and if it is to provide people with the social basis of respect and self-respect. To adapt a presidential metaphor: the "points of light" in American civil society depend on a publicly run electricity grid. How does this work? It is time to talk *tachlis*—to pay attention, in the more current phrase, to the bottom line. Political theories about civil society and voluntary association are too often distanced and abstract.

Consider a Jewish nursing home near a major metropolitan center. Its financial structure will have roughly this form: about one-fifth of the necessary money, perhaps a little less, will come from fees paid by those residents who are able to pay; another third, perhaps a little less, will come from philanthropic funds raised in the Jewish community (through the United Jewish Appeal or more directly by the nursing home and its local support group); more than two-fifths will come from federal and state tax money, mostly in entitlements carried by individuals but also in other forms, including, of course, tax deductions for philanthropic gifts.⁹ (The state of New Jersey pays for kitchen inspections in Jewish nursing homes not only to guarantee cleanliness but also to guarantee *kashrut* (observance of the dietary laws)—what friendly politician arranged this breach in the wall between synagogue and state?)

But money is only part of the story. A considerable investment of volunteered time and energy is necessary to raise philanthropic funds, and volunteers also work in the nursing home itself, providing auxiliary services, most important, perhaps, visiting with lonely or sick residents, but also organizing talks, games, concerts, birthday celebrations, and so on. These kinds of activities make the home a better place than a state-run or

for-profit institution is likely to be. And the Jews (or Catholics or Lutherans) earn respect in the larger community because they run and partly pay for institutions of this sort, which are open, at least in principle, and often in fact, to the wider public. These institutions also provide the community as a whole, and perhaps its individual members too, with a thicker skin, so that some of the nervousness and nastiness of multiculturalism-without-meat-and-potatoes can be avoided.

Politics

The strength of multiculturalism depends on the capacity of all its groups to deliver the cultural goods. It doesn't depend on anything else. But this capacity is by no means equally distributed in American society today. Institutional density, communal resources, and political power are in fact unevenly possessed by the different groups. And the weakest or most deprived groups in these three areas are also the ones most committed to identity politics and most insistent on the importance of its rhetoric and gestures. Some of their critics, including internal ones, call on the members of these groups to turn inward, mobilize their own people, build their base, take responsibility for expanding the social spaces and activities that already exist. That this call sometimes takes a hostile, xenophobic, separatist form, as in the case of the Nation of Islam, does not make it any less plausible. No doubt, communal inwardness is a good thing. Multiculturalism won't work unless people attend to their own culture and its necessary institutions. I have already argued that it isn't helpful to face outward and demand respect: there must be an inner world that *commands* respect.

But under conditions of great and growing economic inequality, these inner worlds can't be built and sustained without significant outside help. I mean *built up*, for obviously cultural life can be and commonly is sustained—it can even thrive—in the absence of governmental recognition and tax money: this absence of support may actually be a requirement for the growth of oppositional cultures. But institutions that engage and protect ordinary men and women and that provide opportunities for cultural expression at every stage of the life cycle will not grow or thrive, will not even exist for many people, unless there is some serious public investment in them.

And that investment, if it is to contribute to the achievement of recognition and respect, has to be fought for; it has to be defended in the dem-

ocratic arena; it has to be earned politically. An inward turning that is also a turn away from citizenship and democratic politics is therefore a very bad idea. But building a community from the inside and fighting on the outside for a larger role in American politics—these activities in fact go together and reinforce each other. That is the Jewish experience, and in this case it seems clearly transferable to other groups. Only a cohesive community capable not only of voting in a disciplined way but also of providing money and/or workers to selected campaigns and movements can have a visible political impact.

American Jews contribute large sums of money to political campaigns.¹⁰ These contributions reflect the affluence of the community as well as, I suspect, a very old exilic practice: the collection and distribution of protection money to gentile officials and political leaders. While this practice has now taken on a democratic form, it still expresses a characteristically Jewish sense of vulnerability. Other communities in multicultural America are in fact more vulnerable; they are also, however, less affluent and without a tradition that demands of their wealthy members that they buy protection for everyone else. But these groups do have votes and their ordinary members have talent, time, and energy, and these too can be traded in the democratic marketplace.

I have purposely described such transactions in the crassest way, in keeping with my commitment to meat and potatoes. But all such transactions have, in a democratic setting, another aspect. Democratic politics is not only a materially enabling but also a morally ennobling practice. When a democracy is working well, it gives its citizens a sense of efficacy, which is a source of pride, and it makes them actually effective, which is a source of respect. In a decent multicultural society, the members of the different cultural communities will also be citizens, equal to all the other citizens. They will have a double identity (some of them, the children, say, of intermarried couples, may have a more complicated identity), the two sides of which will strengthen one another.

This last point about complex identity brings the argument back to the old pluralists, who believed firmly in a common citizenship alongside and in support of a great diversity of ethnic and religious cultures. For pluralists, citizenship supported diversity by holding the different groups together: participation in democratic politics (and therefore in coalitions of different sorts) was the functional alternative to cultural Americanization. If America was to be a “nation of nationalities” rather than simply a nation, democratic commitment would have to be its unifying creed

and democracy itself its practical unity. This is, of course, an argument against public funding for any parochial or separatist schools that don't make a serious commitment to the education of citizens. Such schools might foster sectarian survival, but they wouldn't provide the cultural or intellectual support necessary to sustain a large, dispersed community of “hyphenated” Americans.

The pluralists did not envision significant state funding for the different cultures. But they lived in a smaller country, where politics, the economy, the communications media, and social life in general were far more decentralized than they are today and where the various ethnic and religious (and, though the pluralists had less to say about this, the various racial) groups were more segregated and so more capable of maintaining themselves by themselves. Even so, John Dewey argued that the state should not be “only an umpire to avert and remedy trespasses of one group upon another.” Political power has, he thought, a larger function: “It renders the desirable association solid and more coherent . . . it gives the individual members . . . greater liberty and security; it relieves them of hampering conditions.”¹¹

That is the argument I have tried to revive and elaborate in this essay, with an account of what it means, on the ground of everyday life, to make associations solid and coherent. The conclusion is easy to summarize: in modern society *no group can make it on its own*. It is a maxim of the socialist left that “the liberation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself.” In fact, however, political coalitions and state support have everywhere been necessary features of labor movement success. The success of cultural groups can only come in a similar way. And that means that all the multicultural citizens have to work politically to create a state committed to sustaining its own pluralism: to distribute resources in a roughly egalitarian way to all the constituent groups so as to help them help themselves.

The necessary combination of political integration and cultural diversity won't be advanced very much by controlling hate speech. That's not a bad thing to do, if it is done sensibly; it may well ease the tensions of everyday life. But it won't strengthen identity or communal loyalty, for it has no serious connection to the hard work of creating communities capable of accumulating resources and engaging their members. Nor will it make for a democratic campaign against Dewey's “hampering conditions,” the actually existing patterns of discrimination and inequality. The material success of multiculturalism therefore depends on an older, pre-multiculturalist politics of interest.

Notes

1. Horace Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924); John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927; Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 1985).
2. Jon Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
3. For a more sympathetic account of postethnicity, see the essay in this volume by David Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond," and also David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
4. For an account of this alliance of blacks and Jews which pays attention to its internal tensions, see Robert Weisbord and Arthur Stein, *Bittersweet Encounter: The Afro-American and the American Jew* (New York: Schocken, 1970), especially chapter 7.
5. For a brief account and a useful list of organizations, see Daniel J. Elazar, "The Jewish Community as a Polity," in Marshall Sklare, ed., *Understanding American Jewry* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1982), 186-216.
6. On Jewish politics in the United States, see Lawrence Fuchs, *The Political Behavior of American Jews* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1956).
7. See Salo Wittmayer Baron, *The Jewish Community* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1942); David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York: Schocken, 1986), especially chapter 3.
8. For an account of court challenges to expenditure of tax money for religious schools, see Frank J. Sorauf, *The Wall of Separation: The Constitutional Politics of Church and State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).
9. For a more general account of the uses of tax money, see Dean M. Kelley, *Public Funding of Social Services Related to Religious Bodies* (Institute of Human Relations, the American Jewish Committee Task Force on Sectarian Social Services and Public Funding, 1990); for recent numbers, see "Charities Aiding Poor Fear Loss of Government Subsidies," *New York Times*, February 5, 1996, p. B8.
10. For a sharp critique of American Jewish political engagement, see Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
11. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 71-72.

PART TWO

Canons and Counterhistories
