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Americanization versus Open Society: 
Answering the Challenge of Multicultural Education

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Abstract

American education theory in the twentieth century is characterized by a split between proponents of assimilation, Americanization, and conformity, on the one hand, and proponents of diversity, cultural pluralism, and open society, on the other. The Progressive movement of the turn of the twentieth century espoused an American cosmopolitanism built on the basis of Anglo-American culture, yet ironically its simultaneous support for the equality of the cultures of immigrants made possible the further development of pluralist ideas. Horace M. Kallen in the 1920s introduced the idea of preservation of differences, a pluralism of cultures as opposed to cosmopolitanism, that presumed equality and assimilation. Kallen's cultural pluralism recognized the inherent value of differences, and the need to preserve them. This division between the “Americanizing” Progressive educators and the adherents of cultural pluralism has shaped the ensuing debates between right-wing and left wing educational and political theorists. Conservative intellectuals, seeking to safeguard Anglo-American cultural traditions, have adhered to the views of the Progressives, suggesting that assimilation to the dominant culture is the most significant factor of success for American ethnic minorities. Intellectuals on the left have rejected the need for imposing a common assimilationist culture, and have embraced ideas of cultural pluralism. This paper considers the positions of Nathan Glazer and Richard Pratte (among others) as they relate to cultural pluralism, individualism, theories of the “melting-pot,” and multicultural and multi-ethnic education.
Like most social sciences of the twentieth century, American education theory split between the opposing views of Anglo-conformity and national unity, individual and community, and unity and diversity. The Liberal Progressive movement of the turn of the twentieth century initiated this controversy by disseminating ideas of American cosmopolitanism: a theory of equal participation in and contribution of both native and immigrant inhabitants to American culture. Though Jane Addams, John Dewey, and other Liberal Progressive leaders deemed this cosmopolitan civilization to be built on the basis of Anglo-American culture, it was the principle of equal right of cultural contribution that made further development of pluralist ideas possible. Horace M. Kallen clarified the difference between cosmopolitanism, pluralism and universalism in the 1920s, introducing the idea of preservation of differences, a pluralism of peoples’ cultures, as opposed to cosmopolitanism, that presumed equality and assimilation. Kallen’s cultural pluralism recognized the inherent value of differences, and the need to preserve them. With Kallen’s clarification it was no longer necessary to equate equality with sameness (as Liberal Progressives did), or pursue compulsory acculturation and eventual assimilation for immigrants, in favor of a universalism with its union of “equal and different.”

The division between the Liberal Progressive educators and the adherents of cultural pluralism became the analogue of the right and left wing division the political philosophy. Conservative intellectuals guarding American political and cultural tradition adhered to the views of Liberal Progressives, suggesting that assimilation towards the dominant Anglo-American culture and values was the most significant factor of success for American ethnic minorities. Liberal politicians on the left denied the importance of forcefully asserting a common culture, and propagated the ideas of cultural pluralism, or denied the importance and value of any cultural, ethnic, or racial affiliation.

Kallen’s view of cultural pluralism that developed throughout the 1920s and 1930s enabled white ethnic communities in the early 1940s and 1950s to reintroduce the questions of ethnic and bilingual education into the national agenda. Intercultural education paved its
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way into the academic study of education and teacher-training programs against the backdrop of increasing anxiety over fascism and support for the liberal religious groups, especially Catholic and Jewish. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act cleared the remaining legal hurdles that had stood in the path of ethnic minorities’ pursuit of equal education, and subsequently demands for introduction of intercultural programs into secondary schools and universities increased.

There were several theoretical and philosophical problems, however, behind the introduction of ethnic studies to public school and college curricula. The philosophy of cultural pluralism that encouraged positive self-images of ethnic communities and celebrated the cultural diversity among American ethnic minorities found few supporters among education theorists. Both left and right leaning scholars suggested alternatives to cultural pluralism in an effort to show an ethnically homogenous base of the American society in the context of post-WWII consensus. Assimilation towards a “true”—White Anglo-Saxon Protestant—American identity, and a liberal “open society”—a community devoid of ethnic and racial differentiation, were, accordingly, conservative and liberal variants of the homogenizing ethos within the American nation. The debate, however, strengthened multicultural education theory, as an acceptable transitional middle ground at the moment of radical change in the national public education.

One of the critics on the right was Nathan Glazer, who suggested a careful reconsideration of ethnic minority history and advocated supporting a “weaker” variant of cultural pluralism in an effort to thwart radical changes. Meanwhile, he maintained that one should be tolerant of differences in culture and levels of achievement, wherever they might stem from. In his 1969 article “Ethnic Groups and Education: Toward the Tolerance of Difference,” Glazer speaks about the desirability of supporting ethnic youth in their quest for education, however successful or unsuccessful these attempts might be. It is in “broader cultural characteristics,” where the educational differences between ethnic groups were rooted, Glazer claimed, and “these differences cannot be simply associated with the immediate
conditions under which these groups live, whether we define those conditions as being those of levels poverty and exploitation, or prejudice and discrimination.” Glazer insists that we have to tolerate both types of differences in order to achieve social peace. “We must learn to live with some measure of group difference in educational achievement, to tolerate it, and to accept to some degree the disproportion in the distribution of rewards that may flow from differences in educational achievement.” The acceptance of the status quo in the distribution of income, as well as readiness attribute it to the traditional, accepted, and therefore, unquestionable cultural dogmas, was what made Glazer’s position conservative.

In the 1977 article “The Problem of Ethnic Studies,” Glazer provided his definition of cultural pluralism and its goals. Looking at the history of cultural pluralism, Glazer showed how its proponents (Horace M. Kallen and Randolph Bourne) went against the grain of the dominant trends of acculturation and assimilation. Glazer also defined a “weak” and a “strong” form of cultural pluralism, and the latter as the philosophy behind introduction of multicultural education—a contemporary version of intercultural education of the 1940s.

Glazer argued that assimilation and acculturation, together with more radical Americanization, were not signs of conservatism in ethnic studies. Rather, both the first American sociologists and Glazer’s contemporary ethnic group leaders advanced these doctrines. Thus, assimilation and acculturation had been favorable for ethnic minorities social and cultural well being in the 1960s and 1970s. Glazer provides an example of Robert E. Park (an associate of Booker T. Washington) who founded a sociology school at the University of Chicago. “This was a severely empirical school and was ethnographic in its emphasis. However insofar as it had a direction, that is, a proposal for the American multiethnic society, that direction was also assimilationist.” Park’s disciple and successor Louis Wirth expressed the same “preference” for assimilation: “assimilation, which to be sure required lowering the barriers to assimilation, was the desirable end result of the interaction of Jews and non-Jews in the contemporary society.” According to Glazer, he same view was held by E. Franklin
Frazier and the leaders of NAACP, who observed in their writing that “[a]lthough it was clear that blacks could never because of race be indistinguishable from whites, it was desirable that they become culturally, socially, economically, and politically assimilated, that they be simply Americans with dark skins.” The ethnic group leaders who pursued Americanization and assimilation in order to lower prejudice and discrimination and thereby advance in the economy and society shared this position.10

According to Glazer, fatal ambiguity of purpose marred this agreeable picture of assimilation and acculturation: the rise of the propaganda of tolerance in the 1930s and originated in the 1940s theory of ethnic groups. These changes produced two different types of justification for greater tolerance in ethnic relations. One reason why the antagonism between ethnic groups was not justified, was because ethnic groups had more similarities than differences with the majority. Another reason was because ethnic groups had a right to be different and to protect that difference, a reasoning, that, if pursued to its logical result, could divide the society into the warring ethnic enclaves.11

Intercultural education was central to the activism calling for ethnic tolerance, a “curricular innovation,” as Glazer called it. Sociologists praised the doctrine of intercultural education for being in the middle, ascending neither into forced assimilation, nor into the separatism of cultural pluralism. This middle path was labeled “intercultural democracy” and consisted of pursuing two main trends—acceptance of ethnic heritage and tolerance of ethnic differences. Defying the undemocratic and possibly separatist ideas and practices of ethnic minorities, the doctrine of intercultural education was designed to propagate national unity and eventual assimilation of American ethnicities into one nation.12 Such national unity was important in a war with the Nazi Germany—a state, that legalized racial discrimination and extermination of peoples. Intercultural education was also important in the context of the Cold War as a policy that promoted for a stable and free union of the different, in contrast with the Soviet Union, where such union held together in fear of state repression.
Glazer contrasts this example of ethnic differences recognition in education with the 1970s alternative—multicultural education. According to Glazer, “the new development has emerged directly out of the demands of minority groups for recognition;” especially from the “explosive impact of the “black power” slogan.” While intercultural education was devised by academic elites, liberal church organizations, and intergroup relations organizations in tandem, multicultural education doctrine appeared, according to Glazer, as a claim for resurgent ethnicity devised by group leaders, who had effectively mobilized the support of key religious and community organizations. The second difference between intercultural and multicultural education was also the main reason for introduction of multicultural education: the gap between educational achievements among ethnic groups. Glazer reminded readers that these differences should be tolerated, but not evened by artificial means of affirmative action. The third difference was in the absence of the issue of tolerance from the multicultural education doctrine, and the fourth difference was state involvement into the implementation of multicultural education.

Glazer adds to this unfavorable description of multicultural education by maintaining that ideological concerns, not objective and justified public need, were the main reason for its introduction. It was ideology that dictated that people of the corresponding ethnic origins should teach ethnic studies programs. Another ideological demand consisted in the study of the contributions of ethnic groups to the mainstream culture, as opposed to the study of what Glazer defined as “great cultural areas.” The third condition perceived by Glazer was that ethnic studies programs were intended only for the members of ethnic minorities, while other people were discouraged from taking those classes, “by signs or directly.” Glazer left its leader to guess who were the agents of this intimidation and what it consisted in. The final stone Glazer cast was in maintaining that ethnic studies were unscientific. “These programs, it was assumed and intended, were to advocate instead of analyzing, exploring, considering.” Yet Glazer himself did not simply study the ideology behind introduction of multicultural education. His criticism was necessary
to defend the shaken status and advance an ideology of assimilation in a new reality of dominant cultural pluralism.

According to Glazer, two types of ethnic studies: intergroup education and multicultural education were a direct, and unfortunate result of two variations of cultural pluralism: weak and strong. Weak cultural pluralism “was basically a kind of tolerance on the way to expected acculturation and assimilation.” Strong cultural pluralism was primarily ideological, postulating the view of “racial and ethnic groups in American life … that emphasizes their colonial status and the repression of their cultures by Anglo-Americans.”¹⁷ The stronger variant was unacceptable to Glazer, as it diverted the minority ethnic groups from the manifest destiny of assimilation into the false struggle against the oppressive majority, under the banner of society segregated into the ethnic enclaves.

Glazer suggested the integration of the weak and strong cultural pluralisms so as to escape the danger of multicultural education while maintaining “tolerance” for gaps in ethnic group achievement in academics. The introduction of cultural pluralism raised “troubling questions,” that ultimately pointed out the issue of group pride and specificity versus the cultural variety of American society.¹⁸ In this controversy Glazer took the middle side of integration—the side of moderate cultural pluralism. “Cultural pluralism describes a supplement to the emerging common interests and common ideals that bind all groups in the society; it does not and should not describe the whole.”¹⁹

Thus, both in his sociological studies and in theorizing ethnic studies in the United States, Glazer reflected ingrained attitudes of the dominant ethnic group towards minority ethnic groups. Gradual assimilation of ethnic minorities was the focus of Glazer’s position. He argued that the need of assimilation should govern all minority interaction with public and state institutions. Cultural pluralism evolved, as Glazer recognized, as a result of white educators’ policies towards minorities, but it had been “hijacked” by ethnic leaders in order to foster ethnic pride and separatism. Providing Japanese-American, Jewish, and other ethnic minorities as an example of minority success in education and, therefore, assimilation, Glazer maintained
that this success could have been possible for other ethnic groups, had they had sufficient cultural standards and desire. This reasoning underlay his advocacy of a strategy of assimilation for those groups who had low levels of educational achievement and exhibited excessive tolerance of their low success. According to him, no help should be administered to these minorities, only demands for them “to better themselves.” Such assistance would only lead to dependency, slowing the all-essential progress of assimilation. Therefore, Glazer viewed all attempts at advocating educational policies of cultural pluralism from low-achieving ethnic minorities position as fundamentally flawed. Such attempts with their ideology and policies of propagating ethnic pride and separatism disrupted American social unity. This ideology, according to Glazer, prevented society and social scientists from establishing a “truthful account of our past and present,” as ethnic studies programs are “designed to advocate … commitment to the group as well as a distinctive view of its history and its problems.”20 His desire for a “truthful account” of American ethnic (including racial) history and view of ethnic studies programs as an obstacle to national unity, situated Glazer within the camp of traditionalist and conservative supporters of ethnic assimilation. These views not only reflected a larger social obliviousness to the powers of Anglo-conformity and racial intolerance in American society, they also contributed to them.

Richard Pratte, a philosopher of education, offered an alternative view of the history and perspectives of cultural diversity in the United States. In his books *Ideology and Education* (1977), *Pluralism in Education* (1979), and *Multicultural Education* (1980), Pratte argued that the understanding of cultural diversity in the United States had been distorted by the ideology of the melting pot (Pratte’s name for Gordon’s Anglo-conformity theory).21 In its three dimensions: social (and sociological), educational, and political, the ideology of the melting pot dictated, according to Pratte, norms, meanings and limitations of ethnic groups access to social goods. Interested mostly in education, Pratte summarized five possible ideologies that offered a vision of cultural diversity in America. In doing so, he revealed the final limitations of the melting pot doctrine, along with the possibilities of what
he called, using Karl Popper’s term, an “open society.” Pratte’s ultimate goal was to show that multicultural education programs, though in many cases a remedy for the former sins of the melting pot ideology, could not be successful in the United States unless some standard program of multicultural education was explicitly implemented on a state level. Thus, unlike Glazer, Pratte believed, that the United States should work out a clear position that would define multicultural education and the official doctrine of cultural diversity.

Pratte recognized cultural diversity both as a fact of life (the existence of multiple cultures within one national society), and as a social ideal “immensely significant for public education.” A tolerant attitude towards cultural diversity “could influence the positions we take on the issue of informal or casual education vs. formal education or schooling as well as determining the flexibility we allow to public education in accommodating religious and language differences.” However, there was a substantial inconsistency between cultural diversity as a social ideal and cultural diversity as realized in social establishments. The reason for this lay, in Pratte’s opinion, in the process of Americanization that had been shaping both American identity and its immigrant and host perception. “Both the explanation and the fact of Americanization have affected the nature and function of cultural diversity and both have done so in a cumulative and accelerating fashion.”

According to Pratte, the ideology of the melting pot was the most important factor in shaping the American view on cultural diversity. Amalgamation—biological fusion of nations and races, and assimilation—the process of cultural adaptation, were deemed to be primary vehicles of melting pot action. “The basic direction given was that immigrants were to intermarry on a large scale, repudiate their Old World heritage by changing cultural patterns to those of the dominant or majority group, and impart positive meaning to an otherwise chaotic and highly fluid social situation.” Moreover, the ideology of the melting pot shaped the perception of history and the direction of the American experiment for both new and established American citizens. “Ideology of the melting pot gave support to the belief that the American experience was a new historical epoch for humanity—
human history was given an entirely new direction by the melting pot of America.”

Pratte was highly critical of such situations, as it easily gave rise to “extremist” views and actions. The norms of thinking about one’s experience as a member of an ethnic group were one such result.

Rather than being used to clarify the situation, the metaphor was employed to change the situation. By claiming that society was “as if” a great bubbling cauldron in which particular elements were melted down into a new amalgam, it was assumed that certain consequences of a moral or normative character necessarily followed. … If the ingredient fails to melt at a particular temperature, we simply turn up the heat to the necessary melting point of that element. Similarly, if any particular group defies amalgamation or assimilation …, it is only necessary that we “turn up” the social heat—using injunctions, punishments, coercion and so forth… In short, this particular use of metaphor helped organize and support a coercive American view towards cultural diversity…

Melting pot ideology strengthened the control and the privileges of majority ethnic groups (Anglo-Saxon and North European Protestant) over minorities, as well as the right of the majority to educate and coerce minorities to accept dominant values, norms, and ultimately—social institutions and cultural traditions.

Yet even substantial education did not give the minorities a right for a fare share of social goods. Melting pot ideology presupposed discrimination between those assimilated, those who were yet to undergo this process, and the dominant majority. This discrimination was both racial and ethnic. “Within very narrow limits, race, above all else, would identify the groups to be assimilated. Indeed, much of the appeal of the ideology of the melting pot stemmed from dislike and fear of the racial other.” The truth was that people of a “different race”—Latin Americans, Native Americans and African-American, were not included into the melting pot by definition. “The ideologues of a melting pot never doubted the correctness of interpreting the slogan in terms of a view of racial superiority.”
Another, and, perhaps, major role of the melting pot ideology, besides channeling the racial discrimination sentiment and the need to assimilate Americans towards a common WASP standard, was its power to stabilize the society. Cultural norms propagated by settlement workers, teachers, and employers, as well as within the ethnic communities’ organizations and societies, served to impose order onto the chaotic mix of older immigrants and new. Order was achieved not only through the careful study and education of ethnic minorities, but also through the public policy of accommodation, that “advocated … controlled cultural diversity within the boundaries of ethnicity and politics.”

Favoring assimilation, accommodation policy allowed certain groups of white immigrants the opportunity to negotiate an amount of social goods necessary to uphold an elevated status within American society. The price ethnic groups had to pay was their cultural heritage and identity. Another complication was that “this model has not been considered to apply in any great numbers to the black American, the Native American, and the Latin American minorities, … [who] as groups have been refused complete acceptance in American society.”

Pratte suggested developing an educational standard based on more than one culture as an alternative the melting pot ideology. Contending that “for some Americans today, acceptance of the notion of a “resurgent ethnicity” requires no more than politicization of passion along the black-white lines to fan the flames of latent racism,” Pratte insisted, that it is public education that should develop a “workable expression of cultural diversity.” This, Pratte argued, would help the society to avoid the dangers of polarization under the surface of assimilationist stability.

In order to find the best alternative to the ideology of the melting pot, Pratte analyzed five models of ethnic groups’ interaction in his book *Pluralism in Education: Conflict, Clarity and Commitment*. Taking Milton Gordon’s classification as a basis, Pratte compared the long-standing methods of assimilation to the newly introduced approaches of cultural pluralism. Pratte also suggested his own model that would have worked toward elimination of all ethnic, religious, or cultural differences, and celebrate impersonal human relationships.
Pratte compares the opposite concepts of the melting pot and cultural pluralism to explain the final stage of development of diverse ethnic groups in a society, in an effort to prove that both ideas cover up latent racism and other prejudices. Each concept included two similar ideologies, as modifications of a basic concept. The assimilation concept was based on the ideology of Anglo-conformism, and amalgamation – on the ideology of the melting pot, corresponding to the visions of cultural diversity that should eventually give way to cultural unity. WASP values in the case of Anglo-conformity, and the projected amalgam of values in the case of the melting pot were to be the basic values of this cultural unity. Insular and modified pluralism represented cultural pluralism—an antithesis to assimilation and amalgamation. According to the ideology of insular pluralism, ethnic groups were supposed to fully retain the differences they had in their original societies. The ideology of modified pluralism postulated that diverse ethnic groups in a common society were different from what they were in the original societies.33

Thus, the best way to battle prejudice within a society was to strip ethnicity, race, and religious affiliation of their significance. As a result, the society would reach the stage that Pratte called structural assimilation – an ideology of the open society. By an open society Pratte meant a society where ethnic or other group affiliation did not have a political or any other significant influence upon national life. Pratte projected, that “in a secular open society—in which traditional ethnic, racial, and religious differences no longer count—is that individuals will enter and engage in the political, economic and social structures of society without respect to any group tie or affiliation.”34

To each form of ideology of cultural diversity Pratte provided a “curricular purport”—a view of cultural diversity advanced within the public education system, as well as “hoped-for results” of this advancement. It is here that Pratte gives the main distinction between ethnic and “multi-ethnic” studies under the corresponding ideologies of insular cultural pluralism and modified cultural pluralism. Ethnic studies, according to Pratte are the “secular and humanistic study of ethnic groups as people sharing a common ancestry, culture, history, sense of peoplehood, and common experience in the American so-
ciety.” As a result, students learn their groups’ heritage and role in the society, as well as the ways to remain “uncontaminated” by other cultures. “Multi-ethnic studies” presupposed learning about a variety of American ethnic groups, their culture and heritage, but with the emphasis on overcoming prejudice, racism and intolerance. The ethnic identity to be studied within this “rather specific form of multicultural education” would have been modified and shaped by the American experience making it fundamentally different from the ethnic identity of the home country.

An open society, according to Pratte, would foster a curriculum with “secular and individualistic studies” focus. It would also defy traditional interpersonal and familial affiliation and loyalty in favor of the “individual and nation-state commitment and relationship, especially in the context of impersonal structures.” Curriculum would therefore focus on symbols of the “large-scale, impersonal, secular, corporate structures of modern society,” such as the “public interest” and the “common good.” Unfortunately, Pratte seems to be unaware of how Huxleyian this picture of the open society looks. He maintains that cultural diversity is a curse, rather than even a mixed blessing, and therefore should be left in the past, for the sake of a “new universal ideal.”

Thus Pratte and Glazer were critical of cultural pluralism for the same reason: that it celebrates ethnic diversity. Like Glazer, Pratte thinks that cultural pluralism must have full attention of research, as it gains weight with the resurgent ethnicities. Pratte denied that that cultural diversity and positive ethnic identification represented “a portal to the realization of a truly democratic society.” Pratte noted correctly, “Although cultural pluralism ensures freedom for groups, it does not necessarily ensure freedom for the individual.” The alternative to cultural pluralism, however, is not a truthful and unprejudiced account of the ethnic history in the United States, as Glazer suggests. Pratte’s solution to that is “a new ideal”—an impersonal large-scale power structure that would obliterate all ethnic, religious, or any other community ties in favor of an individualistic, alienated, and self-sufficient (as well as beautiful, free, and humane) personality. This ultra-left solution—denying traditional personal identifica-
tion groupings—is what finally separates Pratte from Glazer within the political spectrum.

The criticism of cultural pluralism and multicultural education programs, or ethnic studies, had additional significance, as education theorists both on the right and on the left saw it as a poor alternative to the assimilationist coercion of the state. Yet, if Pratte suggested doing away with cultural pluralism altogether, Glazer displayed a more careful approach, taking the positive features of cultural pluralism philosophy (notably tolerance), and incorporating them into the old doctrine of cultural assimilation. Moreover, Glazer’s method became standard practice for the conservative thinkers. Using new sociological developments to renew an old theory and appease “radicals” demanding inclusion in the meta-narrative of the American experience became the hallmark of conservative intellectuals and politicians.
Notes


5 Glazer, “Ethnic Groups and Education,” 57.


8 Ibid., 100.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 101.


12 Ibid., 103-106.

13 Ibid., 107.


16 Ibid., 112-113.


18 Ibid., 122.

19 Ibid., 124-125.


23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 243.
25 Ibid., 244-245.
26 Ibid., 244.
28 Ibid., 246-247.
29 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 271.
32 Ibid., 274.
34 Ibid., 61-71.
36 Ibid., 78-79.
37 Ibid., 81
38 Ibid., 81.
39 Ibid., 83.
41 Ibid.