Dismissing Unum and Exalting Pluribus: Analysis of the Afrocentrism-Multiculturalism Debate

Tunde Adeleke, Iowa State University

Abstract:

Afrocentric scholars and their critics have each accused the other of trying to disunite America. Afrocentric scholars are skeptical and deeply suspicious of multiculturalism which they portray as a disguised strategy for perpetuating white domination. Advocates of multiculturalism, on the other hand, describe Afrocentrism as a cultural jingoistic and essentialist ideology designed to superimpose African/black worldview on the rest of Americans. Both sides disagree sharply on the Crevecoeurian question: What then is this American, this new man? A major complication derives from the constant tug between national and trans-national identities, especially in the wake of increased immigration, and the upsurge of nativistic, counter-immigration consciousness and movements. Can there truly be a composite and multicultural American identity as envisioned by the old Melting Pot theory? Is multiculturalism the answer to America’s growing complexity? What about the Afrocentric contention that multiculturalism itself is culturally skewed? Another critical problem, from the Afrocentric perspective, is the growing tension between consciousness of, and loyalty to, an original identity and homeland, and a hyphenated and hybridized American identity. Would multiple hyphenated American identities become the norm?

This paper is an attempt to answer these questions by critically analyzing the views and contentions of some of the leading participants in contemporary discourses on the problematic and changing nature of identity in the United States. It also discusses the implications of a racialized and essentialist construction of the black struggle in the context of discourses on multiculturalism and post-ethnic America. The analysis centers around the following critical questions: Is multiculturalism truly detrimental to the cultural survival of blacks? Should blacks welcome and embrace multiculturalism and deemphasize racialized identity and jettison identity politics? What about the intercultural perspective? Or, is intra-culturalism more desirable? Would a multicultural and cosmopolitan America truly accommodate and represent multiple cultures? Would it facilitate a healthy context for multiple cultural interactions and coexistence? Is such context possible and desirable?
In a contribution to an anthology on Booker T. Washington, Cornel Thomas laments the many challenges that racial classification and other narrowly-defined categorizations posed to human societies. Referring to the United States, he observed:

*E pluribus Unum* ... helped to proclaim the birth of a new nation to the world. Our nation embraced this concept at inception for foundational strength and fortitude. In a sense, the objective was one of developing a set of common goals—a collective mid-set which helped to define self within a collage of difference, while at the same time making primary import the needs of the whole—the nation, society. Yet, the emphasis placed on difference, in particular color, has created an atmosphere of mistrust, disrespect, and inequality among the people (Thomas, 1998: 143).

*E Pluribus Unum* envisions America as a nation of immigrants who have been molded into a melting pot of cultures. The pot symbolizes unification of the disparate groups into something uniquely American. The pot is a transcendental element that is supposed to fairly and adequately reflect and represent all the constituent parts. In other words, this pot is the embodiment of diversity. However, given the nature of black American history and experience in America, the pot has not represented blacks to the degree that it had represented other groups, especially those of European descent—Poles, Italian, Germans, and the French. Blacks had felt neither represented by, and embodied in, nor fully embraced by, the melting pot. Race and racism are critical to the alienation of blacks. The “American” remains culturally Eurocentric and hegemonic. Other immigrants also find the construction of the “American” still culturally alienating and hegemonic; essentially an embodiment of WASP and consequently not representative and reflective of all. In fact, as Peter Kivisto contends, the universal American ideal of the melting pot is inherently problematic. There was always tension between the ideal of inclusion and the actual demand for exclusion (Kivisto, 2006: 45). Race and racism played a major role in subverting the universal ideal. The construction of the “American” as the fusion of diverse people who have somehow transcended their original heritages is, therefore, an idealistic
vision that was never fully realized. There was always tension between this ideal of conformity, freedom and equality and the legacy and reality of racial oppression and exclusion.

For blacks, the critical issue was not poor or inadequate representation. How blacks are represented, or misrepresented, has always been problematic. Race and racism have made black representation significantly negative. The Unum remains alien, alienating and hegemonic. Blacks had never felt a part of whatever the melting pot contained. Thus, for blacks, the challenge of representation is intimately existential. With the end of de jure discrimination, and passage of the civil rights laws and reforms, twentieth century America was certainly not a place for the type of overt and blatant racism and bigotry that shaped its past. Yet, America is not an entirely open and welcoming society, all the civil rights reforms notwithstanding. Blacks remain distant and alienated. Although the black conception of America today is fundamentally different from that of the past, yet America remains very much hostile, dominant and domineering. For blacks, diversity is not just about \textit{representation}. It is also about \textit{recognition}. Before you can be adequately represented, you had to be accepted and recognized as a valid and authentic constituent of the nation, and this, in relation to other minorities and immigrants of Caucasian background, means full equality. It means a deracialized relational context. This construction of diversity, therefore, underscores the problematic of the melting pot theory. It defines diversity as fair and adequate representation, and not necessarily, the obliteration of essential differences. This “multicultural” construction shifts diversity away from the monolithic and uniform representation \textit{Unum}, to a kind of group reifying context which while emphasizing shared and unifying ideals, also acknowledges and protects inherited group differences and uniqueness. In this context, diversity is defined by real differences, and the privileging of group distinctiveness (\textit{Plura}).

It is this conception of diversity that Afrocentrism articulates. Although, it roots are embedded in the nineteenth century, Afrocentrism as an ideological movement gained prominence in the post-civil rights era. It developed out of, and reflected, black frustrations with, and alienation from, mainstream America. It underscored the failure of integration. This failure and alienation led Afrocentric scholars to seek a new identity for alienated blacks in ancient African ancestry and heritage (Asante, 1989; Walker, 2001; Howe, 1998; Shavit, 2001). For blacks, America remains a troublesome and troubling entity. For blacks, whose consciousness of America is defined by negative historical experiences and relationships of racism, violence and impoverishment, race and ethnicity became core elements of a countervailing identity grounded and rooted in Africa, instead of America. Afrocentric scholars, therefore, reject \textit{E Pluribus Unum}. In their judgment, blacks had never been a part of the \textit{Pluribus} that went into the making of the \textit{Unum}. They had always existed outside of,
and alienated from, the *Unum.* The Afrocentric response is to reject the *Unum* and, in its place, substitute *Plura.*

True diversity means celebrating difference without contextually accenting or privileging any. This remains the major challenge of multiculturalism in the United States, at least from the Afrocentric perspective. While in principle, Afrocentricity seems to favor multiculturalism, Afrocentrists remain deeply suspicious of the context of cultural engagement and participation. They are deeply suspicious of culturally skewed multicultural context. Advocates of multiculturalism assume, *a priori,* that it exemplifies diversity, incorporating Americans of different backgrounds. Afrocentrists disagree. They view the “multicultural” context as still very much anti-black, hegemonic and white dominated. Hence, what is presented as multicultural, universal or diverse is still heavily a reflection of the dominant white society. In response, Afrocentric scholars emphasize the need for the construction of black representation in racial and ethnic terms linked to the African heritage, as a prerequisite for a meaningful and constructive multicultural relationship. Blacks have to reconstruct and rebuild a historical and cultural heritage that had been maligned through American history and experience. Affirming and exalting this anti-American, African cultural identity would give blacks the essential cultural foundation for fair and adequate representation within a reconstructed multicultural America in which true diversity is determined and measured by the degree to which cultural specificity and distinctiveness are allowed to thrive.

A leading advocate of Afrocentricity, Molefi Asante contends that diverse people can coexist without relinquishing their fundamental traditions and differences. A society that is truly democratic and respects diversity must accommodate and respect diverse cultures (Asante, 1999). America, in the Afrocentric perspective, cannot uphold a unified construction of culture. There cannot be a representative, all-encompassing “American” identity or culture. The history of the nation itself underscores the imperative for pluralism that does not accentuate ethnic or cultural chauvinism. Asante accuses advocates of the melting pot perspective such as the late Arthur Schlesinger Jr., of confusing American nationality with American culture (Ibid: 17-18). It is possible, Asante contends, to conceive of a unified political construction of America as a nationality, and to accommodate blacks and other ethnic minorities within that political construct. But it has to be as people who retain their distinct heritages and cultures (Ibid). In other words, there could never be a unified “American” culture. True diversity, therefore, is not in harmonizing differences into a single and uniform American concept, but in privileging differences and group rights. Thus, Asante rejects black assimilation into America’s Anglo-Saxon heritage which Schlesinger advocated. In Asante’s view, “Americanism,” as conceptualized by Schlesinger, could not nurture true diversity (Ibid: 19). Though, he agrees with the need to
construct unity around shared attributes and ideals such as language, liberty and democracy, Asante insists, however, that each group should retain its essential cultural identity (Ibid).

Arthur Schlesinger was, however, insistent that America’s Anglo-Saxon heritage should remain the defining character of a unified American identity that encapsulates all others (Schlesinger, 1998: 34). In his judgment, multiculturalism is not a permanent stage, but a transition phase in the “Americanization” of minority groups (Ibid: 140-141). He believed strongly in the inviolability of the old melting pot theory of unifying multiple groups into one American identity. Schlesinger had no consideration for those who object to the Eurocentric and hegemonic implications of his paradigm. He dismissed advocates of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism as divisive. He constructed the “American” as an assimilative, composite identity, beyond multiculturalism and cultural pluralism. In Schlesinger’s view, this melting pot construct (Unum) has worked so well in the past, and should be developed (Ibid: 147). For Afrocentrists, however, the melting pot had only worked for peoples of European background. Others, such as blacks and Native Americans, have never been truly assimilated, and do not believe in the ideal of a common culture and single society. They demand a paradigm that recognizes their group rights; one that allows them to organize and exist as distinct groups within America. They demand the right to be American, with all the rights and privileges, while maintaining their essential and original historical and cultural identities. Schlesinger described this as a divisive strategy that could create imbalance between Pluribus and Unum. In his judgment, the melting pot concept was a balanced representation of America’s essential diversity. The call for multiculturalism threatens this essential balance (Ibid: 147-151). He wanted the old melting pot and balance restored and protected. Critics insist there was never a balance. A critical consideration, at this juncture, is whether a true balance based on shared faith in America can develop, given these contradictory positions. Schlesinger suggested the use of democratic principles and ideals (language, political ideas and institutions) to forge a strong bond and restore the balance (Unum). These shared ideals would serve as unifying elements within which, according to him, “people would be free to live as they choose, ethnically and otherwise” (Ibid: 145) But Schlesinger insisted that the ideals be derived from, and reflective of, America’s Anglo-Saxon and European heritage. In Schlesinger’s judgment, the European origin of America should neither be sacrificed nor compromised (Ibid: 145-150). Other ethnics would have to be assimilated into this heritage in order to become fully American. In this respect, becoming American means obliterating other heritages. Schlesinger saw nothing wrong fundamentally with this prescription.

Well, Afrocentrists are not reassured. They remain deeply suspicious of America’s Anglo-Saxon and European heritage, which they deem fundamentally destructive to blacks. They portray Schlesinger’s
ideas as parts of a sinister ploy to disguise Eurocentric ideas as universal and impose them on non-Europeans. These Anglo-Saxon and Eurocentric ideas are neither universal nor objective (Asante, 1999). Both Schlesinger and his Afrocentric critics seem to agree on the need for some essential unifying principles. The major disagreements, in my opinion, are two-fold. First, there is no consensus on the cosmological underpinnings of these principles, and second on whether these unifying principles are compatible with the privileging of cultural and other essential differences. Can there be national cohesion within diverse cultural specificities? Is it possible to develop one American ideal that supersede inherited cultural differences? Should the goal be “unity in diversity” or “unity and diversity”? These are fundamentally different options. Schlesinger’s faith in the old melting pot reflects “unity in diversity”; the American ideal embodying diversity, transcending multiculturalism and cultural pluralism. Asante and others who advocate what is deemed “critical multiculturalism” reject the melting pot and the idea of a common ideal and common culture signifying all others. This is not possible, in their judgment, given fundamentally different historical and cultural backgrounds. They advocate “unity and diversity”. Yes, there are, and should be, common unifying ideals (language, religion, political ideas and institutions), but these do not, and should not, assimilate or obliterate essential differences and uniqueness. The melting pot (Unum) presupposes resolution of difference and the evolution of a unifying ideal that reflects shared interests and values. Though Afrocentrists believe in the possibility of shared and unifying values, they insist, however, that these ideals should not obliterate the essential cultural differences or specificities that are unique to individuals and groups within the nation. This is the essence of Afrocentric assenting of Plura.

But Afrocentric scholars have also ventured beyond the pluralistic to a kind of universalistic paradigm. While rejecting western universalistic claims as pretentious and hegemonic, they propose a theory of Afrocentric universalism which, not surprisingly, is not deemed hegemonic but humanistic and universalistic and, therefore, could indeed serve as the basis for a truly multicultural, non-hegemonic and organic representation of diversity. Black psychologist Na’im Akbar developed this paradigm and defended it in an article in which he contrasted western and African cosmologies and worldviews. One, the former, could never be the basis of equal representation of diverse groups because of its inherent negative, divisive, exploitative character (individualistic, xenophobia, violence, rationalistic and materialistic). The latter, the African, possessed the inherent qualities of collectivism, spirituality, morality, emotionalism, peace, justice and goodness. One worldview seeks and imposes conformity, the other encourages creativity; one is mechanical, the other humanistic; one is thing-focused, the other people-focused (Akbar, 1984). Given these fundamental differences, Afrocentrists insist that blacks in
America cannot, and should not, be assimilated into a culture that is fundamentally in conflict with their heritage. Any attempts to impose uniformity (Unum) within this context would create social conflict and disequilibrium, disharmony and mutual resentment. In the estimation of Afrocentrists, America is a nation of conflicting cultures. These fundamental differences notwithstanding, Akbar insists that the African worldview could in fact serve as the foundation for a universal paradigm for all humanity given its essential goodness. Consequently, because African cosmology and worldview is humanistic, it could therefore serve as the basis for instilling in humanity those qualities that would generate a truly diverse, multicultural and non-hegemonic context of relationship (Ibid). Critics such as Schlesinger and Schmidt, however, disagree and accuse advocates of universalizing the African worldview of harboring hegemonic agenda and mirroring the Eurocentric hegemonic aspirations they so passionately oppose and deconstruct. For example, in a provocative study, Alvin Schmidt denounced multiculturalism as a “Trojan horse” that would eventually destroy America, since it would enable, “some totalitarian group or ideology to seize power and define ‘truth’ consistent with its values,” just like Nazism (Schmidt, 1997: 5-6). In other words, Schmidt perceives multiculturalism as a means of imposing the values and interests of blacks on whites, and thus a threat to democracy.

Schlesinger, and other critics of Afrocentric “multicultural” paradigm, described it as hegemonic and inherently disuniting. Schlesinger insisted that those shared ideals (language, political ideas and institutions) are based on America’s Anglo-Saxon heritage, and should form the basis of the Unum. He was vehemently opposed to privileging ideals and values that tend to reify other heritages and groups. In his view, the “American ideal” is both Anglo-Saxon and transcendental and should obliteriate, and take precedence over, inherited and original cultural traits and identities. In other words, everyone should partake and share of the representative “American ideals”. For Afrocentrists, those cultural attributes and differences are immutable, and some even contend that the ideals derived from America’s Anglo-Saxon heritage were never, and could never be, shared. The melting pot had always been Eurocentric and hegemonic. Essentially, we have a conflict over heritages. Schlesinger invoked America’s Anglo-Saxon and European heritage as the foundation for constructing a unifying American ideal that incorporates multiple groups. Afrocentric scholars describe this as a scheme to perpetuate European domination. In response, they offer African ideals as the most adequate and solid foundation for developing a unifying context that is not skewed in favor of any particular group. In their judgment, African cosmology has the kind of values that could unify all humans in a common cause. Could the Afrocentric paradigm truly create a context of unity and shared ideals among different groups, or is the paradigm a
means of subverting America’s democratic tradition, as Schlesinger and Schmidt suggested?

Is Afrocentric emphasis on plura a ploy to impose African values on, and subvert America’s democratic culture? Could this be evidence of the abuse of diversity? There is a possibility. As Algernon Austin argues, essentialist cultural discourses, in the proper political and economic context are perfectly amenable to developing a racial hierarchy Austin, 2006). Afrocentrists also construct heritable and immutable essential differences among humans. Their suggestion of the essential goodness of the African worldview exalts it above the European worldview. If their claim of essential and immutable differences is valid, would the choice of the African worldview for all humanity not constitute hegemony? Would this not be a vindication of critics who describe Afrocentric call for multiculturalism as hegemonic?

Critics like Schlesinger and Schmidt have then accused Afrocentric scholars of undermining the drive toward a multicultural America, of threatening to disunite America (Schlesinger, 1998; Schmidt, 1997). What they advance is a kind of E Pluribus Plura (Out of many, many); one in which the groups maintain their distinct identities within a context that celebrates this distinctiveness. Critics see this as disuniting. Afrocentrists seem to favor what Ziegler describes as a centric culture specific multicultural context where all cultures are recognized, acknowledged and privileged. Assimilation into any form of Americanization has been detrimental and destructive to blacks. The quest for Unum would not help blacks, as long as they remain backward and marginalized. Before true Unum can take place, there has to be total structural assimilation (Garland, 1995: 225). The old melting pot has privileged cultural assimilation within a problematic structurally dysfunctional context. They advocate structural assimilation before cultural assimilation. For structural assimilation to take place there has to be a national public policy that eliminates discrimination and structurally integrates blacks into America as equals. This is the only viable context for the eventual development of a truly representative and homogeneous Unum (Jalata, 1995: 170-171). In the meantime, the Afrocentric response is E Pluribus Plura.

References


