

Multiculturalism and curriculum

Michael O. Billington reports on an unpublished paper, "Multiculturalism and the Core Curriculum," by China scholar William Theodore de Bary.

Prof. William Theodore de Bary, America's foremost China scholar and a leading defender of classical education, has produced a devastating attack on the current craze of "multiculturalism" in a paper presented at the East-West Center in Hawaii. "Multiculturalism" has become a code word for the various methods being used to eliminate classical education, replacing the learning of fundamental cognitive skills in science, history, art, and language with a mishmash of associative notions of value-free, "New Age" degeneracy. De Bary has spent his long and productive career in the study and teaching of a true "multiculturalism," based on the investigation of the historical and epistemological roots of the great cultures of history, his own specialty being the Confucian culture of China. From this perspective, he recognizes the current misuse of the term "multiculturalism" as a cover for a retreat into overt racism and the destruction of the cognitive potentials of our youth.

Professor de Bary, the John Mitchell Mason Professor of the University Emeritus and Provost Emeritus (also Special Service Professor) of Columbia University, takes as his point of reference the New York State report "One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence." This report, adopted as policy by the New York State Commissioner of Education, is the basis of the various "Rainbow curriculum" policies implemented in New York, which have provoked bitter opposition by parents watching their children being brainwashed by anti-science, racist, and overtly perverse programs under the guise of ethnic studies, sex education, and the like. Professor de Bary decries the "general clamor for the recognition of whatever is touted as 'diversity' or claimed as discrimination. . . . 'Diversity' has become stretched to cover anything from discrimination in the workplace to divergent lifestyles and prophylactic sex. Almost any social grievance seems to warrant consideration under the heading of 'diversity' and in most cases this has nothing to do with the preservation of cultural values."

This is the crucial point. The various outcome-based education curricula lay great emphasis on the student "being himself or herself," allowing his or her feelings to dominate over any restraint, be it the guiding hand of one's parents, the moral teachings of one's religion, or acculturated internal restrictions of conscience against homosexuality or other currently fashionable perversions—all such restraint is declared to be authoritarian, old-fashioned, and repressive. This is not

actually "multicultural," but "counter-cultural."

Professor de Bary insists that for students to know themselves requires intense investigation of the great creative minds of at least their own cultural heritage, since these works "exist within them, in the sense that the kind of language they speak, the terms they use, and the ideas they have about themselves and the world around them are derived from such writings" (de Bary is quoting another scholar John Van Doren, in this passage). In other words, what is most important about the individual is not his feelings or what he thinks, but the underlying axioms of his cultural worldview which determine how he thinks. Without examining those axioms, both as an inspiration for replicating the creative process of one's predecessor, and as a basis for discovering unconscious prejudices distorting one's cognitive processes, one cannot "be yourself." Education, says de Bary, must be "an ongoing, open-ended dialogue between past and present." He points to the fact that throughout human history, "great minds spoke to each other, commented on their forebears, argued with them over the centuries."

But one's own culture did not develop in a vacuum, isolated from the other cultures of the world. De Bary references the doctrine of Chu Hsi, the foremost figure of the great Confucian Renaissance of the 11th and 12th centuries, who asserted "the unity of principle and the diversity of its particularizations." This is parallel to the Christian notion of the unity of God and the multiplicity of His creations, but it can also be applied to the notion of a common humanity, uniting all mankind in a single process of development, but with diverse cultural manifestations. "It is not a bad principle on which to approach problems of multiculturalism on a global scale," says de Bary.

What is required, he says, is a "triangulation" of one's own culture—an investigation of not one, but at least two cultures other than one's own, so that "a multicultural perspective predominates over simplistic we/they, self/other, East/West comparisons." He insists, however, that while every culture is entitled to recognition, this does not mean that they are all worthy of equal respect. Those cultures that have sustained great civilizations, with high relative population concentrations and high rates of scientific development, must be assigned a priority, more crucial to study due to the success of their culture.

De Bary relentlessly exposes the opposite approach—

“the current American variety” of multiculturalism, which, “as popularly understood, has almost nothing to do with culture, or the serious study either of ‘one’s own’ or ‘other’ cultures in any depth. Rather, the ‘multiculturalism’ advocated on most American campuses tends to be cultural revolutionary and a throwback to the counterculture of the 1960s, which even in America readily lent itself to Mao’s cultural revolutionary slogans.” Professor de Bary is eminently qualified to make such a judgment, having watched both the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution in China and, as the head of the leading association of Asian Scholars during the period, the anti-intellectual “Maoist” rage that swept U.S. campuses in the 1960s and ’70s, inflamed, in part, by the justified anger over the U.S. role in Vietnam.

Further, de Bary identifies these pseudo-“multicultural” curricula as racist in fact. He quotes anthropologist Virginia Dominquez, who has criticized a required “American cultures” course at the University of California at Berkeley for encouraging both faculty and students to “use the language of race just as much as the language of culture.” De Bary adds that so-called ethnic studies in the United States tend to “replicate the divisions implied by straight racial talk in the U.S.—‘whites’ and their racist Others (‘black,’ ‘red,’ ‘yellow,’ ‘brown,’ . . .) . . . [these] are indeed courses about race in United States society, conceptualized racially though marketed as culture talk.” The rainbow approach, he adds, “seems oblivious to the idea that the identities of these diverse minorities might have anything to do with ancestral traditions, there being no reference to any in-depth study of the original cultures of immigrant groups, but only their experience in America. . . . [Such] superficial exposure will only confirm ethnic stereotypes, exacerbate unexamined racist prejudices, and reinforce the presumption that certain so-called ‘racial’ types are, after all, inassimilable to each other.”

Schlesinger’s opposition inadequate

De Bary also goes to some length to criticize one of the most well-known opponents of the new New York State education program, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., whose book *The Disuniting of America* is an attack on the New York report. While approving of Schlesinger’s rejection of the rainbow approach as “bad history under an ethnic banner,” he takes issue with Schlesinger’s defense of European culture. He quotes Schlesinger: “Whatever the particular crimes [of its past history], that continent [Europe] is also the source—the unique source—of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human rights and cultural freedom that constitute our most precious legacy and to which most of the world aspires today.”

Such broad and vague references to “liberty” and “freedom” as both unique to the West and as the essence of Europe’s contribution to human history are all too typical of those in the West whose actual intent is to impose libertarian and free trade dogmas upon nations in the underdeveloped world.

While de Bary does not accuse Schlesinger of such devious intent, he does expose Schlesinger’s misplaced pride and his degrading approach to the other great cultures of history.

For instance, Schlesinger, in claiming individualism as an exclusive European discovery, relegates virtually all of the rest of humanity to fanaticism: “Individualism is looked on with abhorrence and dread by collectivist cultures in which loyalty to the group overrides personal goals—cultures that, social scientists say, comprise about 70% of the world’s population. There is surely no reason for western civilization to have guilt trips laid on it by champions of cultures based on despotism, superstition, tribalism and fanaticism.”

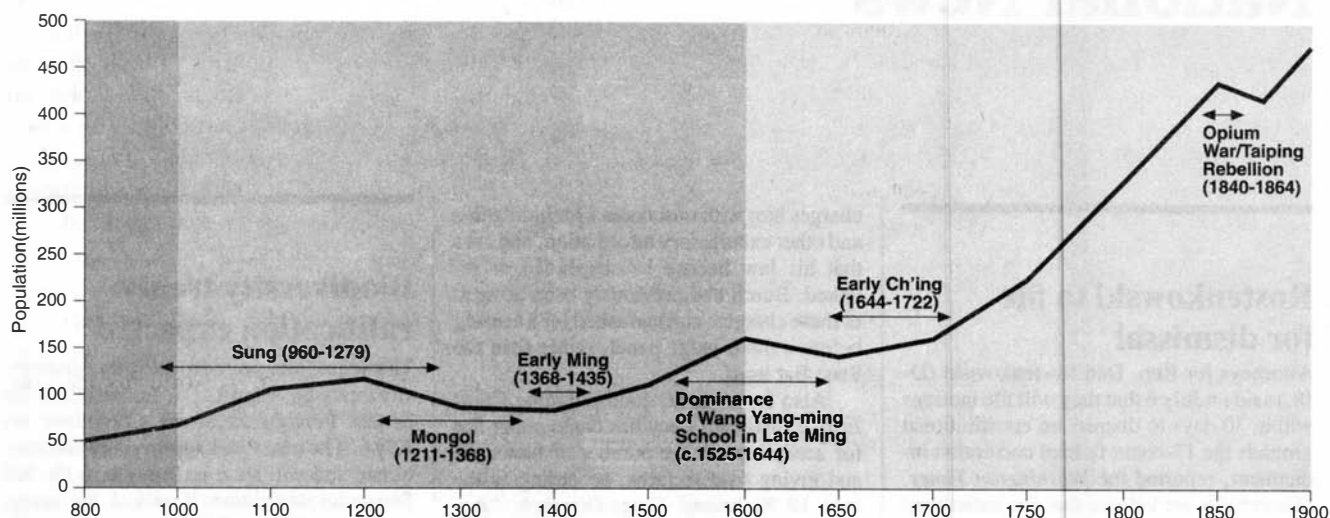
De Bary adamantly objects to this, for he has dedicated too much of his life to the study of the role of the individual in the largest (numerically) culture in world history—the Confucian culture of East Asia—to accept the sweeping denunciation of “despotism, superstition, tribalism and fanaticism” applied to East Asia. He reviews his own work, published in such books as *Learning for One’s Self: Essays on the Individual in Neo-Confucian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) and *The Trouble with Confucianism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), which identify the Confucian effort to locate the creative potential of the individual (with the sage as the model for the citizen) as the necessary means through which the common good of the nation can be achieved (see also *Fidelio*, Summer 1993, p. 4). Confucians rejected the egalitarianism of China’s own Rousseaus, as they also rejected the hedonism and super-individualism of their own Jeremy Bentham’s. De Bary adds that Schlesinger’s blanket defense of liberty and freedom, lacking even an effort at definition of those terms, lends credence to the mounting disgust around the world to American libertarianism as a “virus spreading spiritual pollution, moral decay and cultural degeneracy”—a disgust increasingly shared by many Americans themselves.

Why Europe’s contributions are unique

What de Bary leaves out of his analysis is the identification of those discoveries made in Europe, beginning during the Golden Renaissance, which are demonstrably unique and crucial for all subsequent world history. In the perhaps 2 million-year history of man’s existence on this planet, the rate of growth of population and the standard of living of that population has never before experienced the exponential growth rate of the 550 years since the Florentine Renaissance.

The scientific discoveries of Nicolaus of Cusa in that era, and the scientific works of (especially) Johannes Kepler and Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz in subsequent centuries, grew directly from the rediscovery of Plato’s scientific method, enhanced by the Christian notion of *imago viva Dei*, man created in the living image of God. The recognition that the laws governing the physical universe are good, in the sense of being self-perfecting and self-developing, reflecting the perfection of the Creator, became the basis for the method of hypothesis which gave birth to modern science. Cusa’s

FIGURE 1



Source: Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, *Atlas of World Population History*.

Rapid population growth accompanied the three major periods of influence of Neo-Confucian (Sung) Renaissance worldview, while population collapse followed each recurrence of Taoist/Legalist rule. (Note changes in time scale at A.D. 1000 and 1600.)

discovery of the transcendental nature of circular action as bounding and subsuming any linear deductive method; Kepler's demonstration that the structure of the planetary system is also transcendental, in harmony with the structure of the well-tempered musical scale; and Leibniz's similar discovery of further least-action laws in physics, are the characteristic mental (spiritual) processes which caused the explosion in human development and potential population density, in every part of the world, as contributions from Europe, which belong to all mankind.

It is this Platonic tradition in Europe, which values the creative power of the individual mind as that which must be nurtured by society, rather than the mere license of the individual to act according to his own undifferentiated will, which is worthy of admiration and careful study by all of humanity. Professor de Bary's essay would have benefitted from making this distinction in response to Schlesinger's emphasis on individual liberty.

De Bary is rightfully honored for his defense of the giant of the Confucian Renaissance, Chu Hsi (1130-1200). Had he made the distinction concerning the Platonic current in European history, I believe he would have recognized that the argument could be extended to the case of Chu Hsi in China. Chu Hsi, in harmony with the Platonic-Christian worldview of Nicolaus of Cusa 250 years later, not only defended the individual, but located the true value of the individual in his power of reason bestowed by Heaven, which is the only means through which new discoveries can be achieved and society as a whole advanced.

The fundamental worldview of Confucius and Mencius was that man is good by nature, endowed by Heaven with a

higher form of love, and is thus able to order nature and society according to Heaven's mandate. Chu Hsi extended this notion by identifying man's unique capacity to master increasingly the universal principles underlying all things and affairs, which he insists should be the focus of education. This closely parallels the Christian notion of man in the image of God, as opposed to the Taoist (and Aristotelian) notion of man as a mere beast in an unintelligible world—a worldview which Chu Hsi polemicized against continuously.

The Confucian Renaissance, driven by the school associated with Chu Hsi, not only generated tremendous scientific and economic progress in China, but provided the basis for an enormous leap in population every time such a philosophical outlook dominated (see **Figure 1**).

It is true, of course, that this tradition is essentially lost in China today, just as the Renaissance tradition in the West is in mortal danger due to the moral decay typified by the New York educational policy, a fitting partner to the current insanity emanating from the New York center of the "casino mondiale" known as the world financial system.

Professor de Bary's essay is a valuable contribution in the fight against this evil, and provides direction toward a necessary and superior educational policy. Were he to have drawn the distinction within European history between the Platonic tradition, which views man in the image of God, and the empiricist, Aristotelian tradition that views man as a beast, concerned with nothing more than his own sensual satisfactions, then de Bary's China scholarship would provide rich confirmation that just such a distinction exists in every great culture which has proven itself historically capable of sustaining an increasing population density.