Chapter 4
Democratic Patriotism and Multicultural Education

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Abstract Debate about multicultural education in the USA has been marked by anxieties about the stability of a nation that is both increasingly culturally diverse and increasingly resistant to coercive assimilative practices. A politically and morally persuasive multiculturalism must seek to dispel rather than evade these anxieties. One educational venue in which they must be addressed is history teaching. The possibility of cultivating democratic patriotism in the teaching of a genuinely multicultural American history is discussed.

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often creates a danger for nationality. Indeed, historical insight brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations. . . . Unity is always effected by means of brutality.

Ernst Renan ([1882] 1992)

Our memories may now be undermining our ability to progress as a people

Joseph Tilden Rhea (1997)

4.1 Introduction

One of the most troubling questions in contemporary politics is this. How are stable democratic institutions to be sustained in nation-states whose citizens are increasingly culturally diverse and increasingly resistant to the coercive assimilation and subordination that once helped to secure political stability? Americans face this question, along with many other people.

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To ask the question and to acknowledge its importance is not to suggest that political stability by itself is any virtue. Political institutions can be stable for long stretches of time despite (and sometimes because of) unrelenting oppression. We need not look to colonial Africa or Asia to imagine that possibility. The American Republic did pretty well, so far as stability goes, before its descent into Civil War, and better still in the many years between the defeat of Reconstruction and the partial victories of the Civil Rights Movement. For all but a few decades of the nation’s history, Americans have practiced or at least acquiesced in the practice of either slavery or Jim Crow.

The possibility of a regime that is both stable and oppressive might tempt us to say that justice and democracy are the things that truly matter, and if achieving them is politically destabilizing, then so much the worse for stability. The truth in the temptation is that political order must sometimes be disrupted, even shattered, for the sake of higher values. But another truth is as important. Justice and democracy can be no more that moments in a bleak history without them unless they become embedded as at least common aspirations and partial achievements in durable political structures that permit the peaceful conduct of collective self-rule.

The question of political stability (or unity) in the midst of diversity is frequently raised in scholarly as well as popular debate about multicultural education in America. Unfortunately, the question is rarely soberly confronted in what has too often been one of the bloodier battlefronts in the so-called Culture Wars. And inflamed ideological passions are not the only impediment to democratic dialogue. Another is the almost infinite variety of things that can be deplored or praised under the label of “multiculturalism.” Any word that can apply equally to corporate advertising strategies, cuisine, and outlandish academic views about the nature of knowledge has to be used with some wariness. (Part of the problem here is the almost amorphous meaning of “culture” in current, including academic usage.)

For the purposes of this argument I can characterize multiculturalism in a rough and inclusive way. As I understand it, to endorse multicultural America is to be well disposed to the nation’s growing ethnic diversity and its free mingling of traditions drawn from many parts of the world through commerce, intermarriage, and the respectful sharing of public spaces among different groups. Some markers of group difference within this diversity are ethno-racial: they have differentiated groups whose ancestry has long made them targets of discrimination and contempt in America. For multiculturalists, racial oppression is intolerable. And it is intolerable whether it is exercised to exclude people from equal status as citizens or to accord equal status on the condition that all must ape the conduct of socially dominant groups in their public and private lives. Ethnic traditions will change. They might take on new meanings according to some (allegedly) purer, more ancient version or they might alter radically to accommodate new social circumstances. Some long-standing collective identities that once had sharply etched boundaries may fade imperceptibly over the course of time or become more internally differentiated than before. There is no wrong in that, and hence nothing a multiculturalists in my sense could have moral reason to condemn, so long as change is not the effect of discrimination and contempt.