

**Richard Bernstein. Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, 367 pages, \$25.00.

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*Déravage*: A French word meaning, roughly, good intentions turned destructive. And thus does Bernstein, a liberal, summarize multiculturalism in America today. Arising in the noble impulses of the civil rights movement, multiculturalism has become dictatorial in the name of virtue. It is a new American Puritanism that swiftly and severely punishes any departure, real or suspected, from its strict codes of thought and behavior concerning race and gender.

Bernstein is a skilled narrator with an acerbic wit and an ability to turn a phrase. He weaves together his story of *déravage* from two years of observing multicultural training, following particular controversies over political correctness, interviewing the protagonists, examining documents, and delving into the pertinent academic literature. Bernstein also brings to his account an unusually clear-eyed knowledge of cultural differences. The book is suffused with information and insights from his having served, among other stints, as *Time's* bureau chief in Beijing, *The New York Times'* bureau chief in France, and the latter's cultural correspondent.

The book's prologue describes how French historians have used the word *déravage* (literally, a "skid" or a "slide") to describe the moment when the French Revolution "skidded from the enlightened universalism of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen into the rule of the Committee of Public Safety and the Terror." The next four chapters document Bernstein's argument that multiculturalism has similarly become "nobility perverted."

Chapter 1, "Elementary Diversity," describes how programs for "valuing diversity" have become compulsory chapel where people are "told what... is proper to think, to feel, and to believe." We meet trainers with good hearts but little understanding of the cultural differences that they would have us "celebrate," and who imagine a world of diversity "where everybody will have more or less the same ideas, the same philosophy, the same vaguely liberal political convictions."

Chapter 2, "Places of Memory," describes the multiculturalists' transformation of American history into a saga of cultural oppression, American icons (like Christopher Columbus) into symbols of shame, and White European males into the embodiment of iniquity. As even the American Library Association has announced, the events of 1492 "begin a legacy

of European piracy, brutality, slave trading, murder, disease, conquest, and ethnocide."

Chapter 3, "Advanced Sensitivity," makes the case that many universities now instill "sensitivity...with a sledgehammer" via "relentless identity politics" (coerced expressions of support for "oppressed" groups, and humiliation and abuse of "non-oppressed" individuals). Academic freedom, far from protecting speech, is ever more frequently viewed as a threat to cultural diversity, for, apparently according to one administrator, it "keep[s] racism and sexism alive and well."

The next chapter, "Notebook," provides many examples of multicultural *déravage* ranging from "good-goody ridiculousness" to "a grab for power," to support Bernstein's claim that universities are indeed being captured by the forces of intolerance. It lays bare in biting detail the double standards and censorship in both academe and media reporting—the "soggy credulity" for everything ideological multiculturalists claim, but the hair-trigger vilification of individuals merely accused of offending multicultural sensibilities and of anyone who might come to their defense.

The next three chapters delve into the reasons for the *déravage* and its timing. Chapter 5, "Otherness in Queens," takes us on a tour of highly multi-ethnic Queens, New York, and profiles two of its immigrant families, one from today and the other from early in the century. Bernstein's lesson is that multiculturalism has gathered force in the United States, not from any great change in immigrants' expectations of America, but rather from Americans' loss, in recent decades, of confidence in the worthiness of their own culture.

This chapter also brings home a theme throughout the book, namely, that multiculturalism is not about culture at all. Indeed, most multiculturalists know and care little about other cultures, greatly exaggerating supposed "cultural" differences among American subgroups, including men versus women, and trivializing profound contrasts among societies across other continents. Rather, the multiculturalists' real goal is to empower like-minded people and to impose on others their own "modish, leftish, moralistic"—and uniquely (if perversely) Western—view of reality. By this view, "cultural diversity" means group parity in pride, power, and perks—a regimented equality of results, psychological as well as economic, that marches across the national landscape.

Chapter 6, "The Search for Sin," uses the multiculturalists' own evidence to expose perhaps their most essential myth, namely, that there has been a "massive increase in bigotry." For example, Bernstein's close analysis of the "ethnovoilent victimization" reported by the National

Institute Against Prejudice and Violence reveals that significant incidents are rare and that Americans now routinely and vigorously condemn them. Lacking real evidence for their claim, multiculturalists show "great inventiveness in the production of...crimes of the mind," literally demonizing suspected heretics in order to whip up emotion, justify their righteous fury, and "cow the intellectual opposition into compliance or silence." What the multiculturalists' evidence for worsening bigotry shows is nothing so much as their own "hyperbolic race thinking."

Chapter 7, "The Secret Victory," asks why the nation seems to have plunged headlong into self-condemnation and angry fault-finding on race just as bigotry has receded, as cultures worldwide have begun imitating our liberal democracy, and as American institutions (textbooks being his exemplar) have largely met the multiculturalist goal that "non-traditional" people be given due respect and recognition for their contributions. Bernstein's answer emphasizes the formation of a critical mass of adherents to a "New Consciousness"—at heart only "a stale, simple-minded... reformulation of... Marxism, its creases of great age masked by the lipstick and rouge of a new [deconstructionist] terminology"—that has now penetrated the nation's elite institutions.

However, he also shows how the New Consciousness feeds on the very goodness and social progress that it refuses to acknowledge: A tradition of self-questioning, commitment to civil rights, collective guilt over past injustice, rising expectations, and the "empowerment of what were once small voices of protest." Although multiculturalism poses as "the protest of the weak against the Power... it is the Power consolidating itself." This is the secret victory which multiculturalists must deny.

The last two chapters, "The Battle of Brookline and Other Struggles" and "The Battle of Texas," describe in depth two long battles over school curricula, both eventually successful, to rebuff imposition of the new multiculturalist virtue. The epilogue reiterates the implications of such battles for America's future. Multiculturalism today is not devoted to legitimating the non-traditional. Rather, it aims to delegitimize traditional principles and practices because they have not produced the equal outcomes that multiculturalists demand. Indeed, ideological multiculturalism regards the principles for which civil rights workers once fought—color-blindness, in particular—chiefly as unwelcome impediments to be overcome.

Capturing the language of civil rights and equal opportunity, this new orthodoxy transforms White males into an oppressor class and "tradition" and "merit" into codewords for White male privilege. Even seemingly objective standards are dismissed as covert, self-serving "White male" tools of oppression. Thus, ideological multiculturalism requires no overt acts of discrimination, only unequal results across groups, to

allege mean-spirited and ubiquitous bigotry. By this orthodoxy, fairness requires that we reject traditional common standards (because they are relics of "White male culture") and instead tailor standards to group membership (because all "cultures" are equally but differentially meritorious). In a twist on race-norming, race, gender, and ethnicity themselves become elements of merit while treatment without regard to group membership becomes bias. In the pursuit of equal results, then, ideological multiculturalists would root our opportunities, political rights, and personal identities in group membership, not liberate them from it.

Bernstein ends on a hortatory note by recounting a wonderful story from Chinese military history to argue that we would find multiculturalism intellectually defenseless were we to engage it in battle. Urging us on, he concludes "the battle is ours."

I read this book as one who teaches a class on multiculturalism, does research on the multicultural movement (Gottfredson, 1992, 1994), has lived and worked in another culture (multi-ethnic Malaysia), and experienced demonization first-hand (Holden, 1992). The book is entirely consistent with my observations. It is far more insightful than most critiques, and captures well the social processes surrounding ideological multiculturalism and the personal and institutional damage it can wreak. Bernstein describes not isolated aberrations, but processes I have seen replicated in diverse organizations with predictable regularity (but not always publicly). Very important, Bernstein is correct in suggesting that ideological multiculturalism's strength lies largely in the weakness of its potential critics, in particular, their fear, confusion, and silence.

But Bernstein misses a crucial point. Even the strongest critics continue to let multiculturalists play a dishonest trump card, namely, that racial imbalance (in legal terms, disparate impact) reflects racial discrimination—in particular, a pervasive "hidden," "unconscious," and thus especially insidious, "institutional racism" which justifies social coercion and admits no disproof. Psychologists have shown, however, that disparate impact is usually the rule rather than the exception in bias-free educational and employment settings and that it stems from long-standing group disparities in skills, abilities, and interests. Thus, multiculturalists can almost always count on having a trump card to play.

And play it they do. It has become the new rationale for imposing quotas across every nook and cranny in the workplace—"managing workforce diversity"—all in the name of enhancing economic competitiveness and all the while coercing workers to celebrate what they often oppose. Until critics find their tongues on "institutional racism," ideological multiculturalism will continue to consolidate its control over American life.

## REFERENCES

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