

## Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism

Cornel West

Let me open with two epigraphs. The first, from Paul Valéry's essay "The Crisis of the Mind" (1919), begins with that famous sentence: "WE LATER civilizations . . . we too now know that we are mortal." It goes on to say:

*The idea of culture, of intelligence, of great works has for us a very ancient connection with the idea of Europe – so ancient that we rarely go back so far.*

*Other parts of the world have had admirable civilizations, poets of the first order, builders, and even scientists. But no part of the world has possessed this singular physical property: the most intense power of radiation combined with an equally intense power of assimilation.*

*Everything came to Europe and everything came from it. Or almost everything.*

*Now, the present day brings with it this important question: Can Europe hold its pre-eminence in all fields?*

*Will Europe become what it is in reality – that is, a little promontory on the continent of Asia? Or will it remain what it seems – that is, the elect portion of the terrestrial globe, the pearl of the sphere, the brain of a vast body?<sup>1</sup>*

The second epigraph comes from another towering cultural and social critic, Frantz Fanon. At thirty-six years old (he would die less than a year later in Washington D.C.), Fanon writes:

*European nations sprawl, ostentatiously opulent. This European opulence is literally scandalous for it has been founded on slavery, it has been nourished with the blood of slaves, it comes directly from the soil and from the subsoil of that underdeveloped world. The well-being and the progress of Europe has been built up with the sweat and dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians and the yellow races.*

*The wealth of the imperial countries is our wealth too. . . . For in a very concrete way Europe*

*has stuffed herself inordinately with the gold and raw materials of the colonial countries: Latin America, China and Africa. From all these continents under whose eyes Europe today raises up her tower of opulence, there has flowed out for centuries toward the same Europe diamonds and oil, silk and cotton, wood and exotic products. Europe is literally the creation of the third world. The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples.<sup>2</sup>*

Two fascinating starting points. Both are half-truths: Europe does and has made great contributions to humanity, just as crimes have been committed against humanity in the name of Europe. We need to think through a dialectical interplay between contributions and crimes, to reflect upon going beyond Eurocentrism and multiculturalism. The way to do this is threefold. First: nurture a nuanced historical sense. This means acknowledging the ambiguous legacy of all civilizations, the hybrid character of all cultures. It means calling into question any notions of a pure and pristine civilization or culture. Such an enterprise takes us back to the beginnings of the human adventure, the beginnings of so-called human civilizations and the cross-cultural fertilizations that have taken place from then on up to the present moment. Second: develop a subtle social analysis. This involves not only powerful and dazzling descriptions but also persuasive explanations. I highlight persuasive explanations because at present many are highly suspicious of explanations: the New historicists, the aesthetic historicists, deconstructivists. We need to give an account of power, wealth, resources, status, prestige – not just rhetorical power but smart bombs and canons, nation-states and modes of production. Third: let us be explicit about our politics – radical democratic politics.

At issue, then, is the relation among these three dimensions: nuanced historical sense, subtle social analysis, and radical democratic politics. This is important, for we live in a time that tends to be tribalistic – groups closing ranks, groups in conquestive identities, in quest for community. For some this serves as protection against escalating xenophobic violence, for others it is a way of coming to terms with hybridity. We had to cross national boundaries from Jamaica to Toronto, from Guyana to London, from Alabama to New York City. This raises the question of identity: Who am I? I need a new identity. But will, in fact, this new identity be fluid and protean enough so that it does not become ossified into some kind of orthodox or dogmatic ideology? Important question. Nuanced historical sense necessary here. The fundamental questions are: What is the moral content of your identity; what are the political consequences of your identity? If one is serious about radical democratic politics – the means by which unnecessary alterable socially induced forms of suffering can at least be minimized on the globe

– these questions must be raised. Otherwise, identity remains cathartic, which is to say, not just bourgeois but paralyzing.

Let us first come to terms with the fact that we live forty-seven years after the end of the Age of Europe. Those nations between the Ural Mountains and Atlantic Ocean which once sat at the centre of the historical stage find themselves decentred: the dwarfing of European populations, the demystifying of European cultural hegemony; the destruction, as Heidegger put it, of European metaphysical systems; the deconstruction, as Derrida puts it, of European philosophical edifices. What kind of response to that ambiguous legacy will we, in the new world, have? In order to answer this, we have to understand the great contributions of those who struggled during the Age of Europe. I want to highlight two.

The Age of Europe witnessed the emergence of distinctive forms of historical consciousness that stressed the capacity of human beings to make and remake themselves, society, history, and the world. Vico talked about this capacity in terms of *inventio*, the new science in the early part of the eighteenth century; Marx described it in terms of praxis; Dewey referred to it as agency; and Gramsci as counter-hegemonic agency. Societies can be shaken, hierarchies can be undercut and undermined. Historical consciousness remains at the centre of any serious reflections on the present-day culture precisely because it is so difficult to understand the present in terms of history. Market driven cultures efface the past, displaying it as if it were simply a repetition of the present. So how do we think about the present as history?

This brings me to the second contribution, namely, a notion of democracy: an application of the idea of human making and remaking among ordinary folk. An idea grounded in the quotidian, in the common place, so that the making and remaking can move from the bottom up, shaking not just illegitimate forms of authority as in the Reformation *vis-à-vis* the Catholic church or the Enlightenment *vis-à-vis* absolutist monarchies. But actually shaking social hierarchies that have to do with workplace, with domestic space, and so on. Historical consciousness together with this precious notion of democracy were instrumental in unleashing perspectives around the globe that would fundamentally reshape how we think of ourselves. Two crucial contributions.

Now, the crimes against humanity are more obvious during the Age of Europe: from 1492 to 1945. An age unable to come to terms with fundamental issues of difference and otherness. 1492: think of the indigenous peoples in the “New World,” think of the mass expulsion of Jews from Spain, think of the construction of new grammatical texts that were already putting forth certain supremacist claims in relation to other

languages. 1945: Auschwitz, concentration camps, enslavement of African peoples, the dispossession of land of indigenous peoples, marginalization of women, the devaluation of gays, lesbians, exploitation of workers – the list goes on. An age, then, that embodies an absolute discrepancy between democratic ideals and the actual practices dictated by the expansion of empires.

It is currently quite fashionable to speak about race, class and gender. I think we have to address empire first. You cannot situate race, you cannot situate class, you cannot situate gender, unless you begin with empire. Look down through the march of time at how various elites were able to impose their power on heterogeneous populations and then expand the constituting cultures over time and space. Within those empires one sees various power dynamics often on racial, often on gender, and often on the class axis, but it is the empires themselves that constitute a larger context.

So let us define this context with nuanced historical sense: forty-seven years after the end of the Age of Europe and, also, nineteen years after the end of the presence of American imperial hegemony in the world. Indeed, the American century lasted only twenty-eight years: from 1945 to 1973. I point this out because I want to situate the debate between Eurocentrists and multiculturalists in the United States within the reality of economic decline and cultural decay. The American empire: inability to mobilize resources (schools and libraries closing down), incapacity to educate labour forces, short-term profiteering, the tragic decline of real wages of working people and the creation of scapegoats (black folks, single mothers, gays and lesbians). It is not just economic decline but cultural decay as well; that is, the inability of citizens to find the cultural armour that would enable them to navigate from womb to tomb. To deal with the traumas and crises of human existence – death, dread, and despair. The violent character of the American social fabric is beyond description, especially in working-class and working-poor communities. It is producing deracinated and denuded children. This, of course, is the distinctive feature of a declining empire. An inability to nurture children, both their bodies and their souls, that leaves them rootless and culturally naked.

Given this context, how do we understand the debate between Eurocentrism and multiculturalism? The debate tends to be cast in terms of bureaucratic categories put forth by professional managers, by people fighting over particular problems within the professional managerial space of American capitalist society. As Weber taught us, rationalization and bureaucratic organizations are inescapable. Nevertheless, while we might accept that there are battles to be fought within bureaucratic structures, they do not have to be



fought in terms of the categories formulated by the bureaucrats. So let us look at each term in the debate.

“Eurocentrism.” An obscuring term, an obfuscating term. Europe itself is an ideological construct, a mythic, fictive construct. Other than an inscription of certain nations between the Ural Mountains and Atlantic Ocean, what is Europe? When does the term first appear? Christmas 800, Charlemagne, imperial coronation, Leo III, two groups out of eight (Lamberts, Franks) imposing unity, Pope in trouble, just left town, you remember the story? Nephew of former Pope ran him out of town, Empress Irene just blinded Constantine her son in Greek-speaking Christendom and, most importantly of course, the power of the Arab Caliphs. This story is all about otherness for it is the Arabs that call Europe into being. In the face of heterogeneity and territorial particularity, an elite attempts to impose unity on Europe, to make it synonymous with Christendom. The attempt fails. Forty-three years later partition of three kingdoms. “Europe” first used as an adjective in 1458, Pious II, five years after Turkish takeover of Constantinople, Turkish menace again calls the idea of Europe as unity into question. Fails. Quick reformation, division of Christendom and subsumption under national governments. Hence, the grand Renaissance and Burckhardt’s lovely characterization of a new individualism that would serve as a critique of all forms of collectivity: nationalities, political parties, races, and so on. And the stirrings of this notion of individuality which would become inseparable from democracy in subsequent decades. Napoleon, May 1804, puts a crown on his own head, to proclaim himself Emperor of France. Battles: Leipzig. Boom. Waterloo. Boom. Post-Napoleonic nationalism escalates. New tribalism hits Europe. Europe’s fundamental conflicts, contradictions, heterogeneous clashes are all hidden and concealed by the term “Eurocentrism.”

What does this term really mean? Certain nations whose elites constituted centralized powers and imposed white supremacist practices on different parts of the world. Say it. Male supremacy within a certain group. Say it. It is a typically bureaucratic move to bring an ahistorical characterization into a very complex debate. We know what George Orwell said about the decay of language working in tandem with cultural chaos and cultural chaos precluding the empowerment of subaltern people, subjugated people. Not only that, but it also precludes the coalitions and alliances requisite for any serious talk about social change. Intellectual clarity goes hand in hand with a certain moral sensibility and political efficacy. The left is feeble and obfuscatory categories do not help things out.

So what do we mean by “multiculturalism”? Europe is already multicultural, multinational, and so forth. Are we talking about certain other cultures that have been degraded by white supremacist practices? Say it. Europe does not have a monopoly on

male supremacist practices; many cultures subsumed under multiculturalism have deeply embedded forms of gender and sexual oppression shaped by their own experiences – forms of domination that must not be concealed or hidden by bureaucratic terms.

What else do we mean by multiculturalism? To be sure multiculturalism addresses the identity crisis experienced by those who do not see themselves represented in, for example, the educational systems in which they matriculate. But what does seeing yourself signify? I teach in prisons – mainly black men – and I ask them, “What does seeing yourself mean in terms of a Shakespeare versus an Ellison, or in terms of a Dante versus a Toni Morrison?” I ask that at the beginning of the course, and I ask it again at the end of the course. If they don’t see themselves in Shakespeare by the end of the course, then I’ve failed. And if they only see themselves in Ellison, then I’ve also failed. Why? Because human histories are interconnected and interdependent. Once you begin to differentiate and fragment identities, then ultimately I might not see myself in Toni Morrison because of gender barriers, or generation barriers, or because she is from Ohio and I am from California. And if I don’t see myself in Toni Morrison I might as well drop dead because of the collective memory of what it is to be a person of African descent in the United States, and what it is to be a human being who recognizes that a sense of history and struggle is inseparable from one’s identity.

Seeing yourself is a very delicate and difficult notion. If seeing yourself means that your identity has to be solely limited to a community which itself is constructed in the modern world – fluid, changing, and hybrid – then we are reinforcing a parochialism and provincialism that is dangerous. We are actually disarming and disempowering those who need intellectual weaponry in the war they are waging.

Persons who refuse to see themselves in products and instruments of other cultures criticize Charlie Parker for blowing a European instrument. And of course, Charlie Parker never gave a damn because he did what he wanted to do with the means available to him. He was after weaponry in order to fight off the absurdity of being black in the United States before World War II and thereafter. He is no less black or African American for using African polyrhythm and European instruments. He is able to define himself through a variety of different cultural products: not only through the particular cultural community that shaped and moulded him, but also through the musics of Asia, Germany, Brazil, and Mexico. This does not mean that he is a “universal man.” It means that he is grounded, entrenched in the best of his tradition. In that sense, he embodies a notion of universality that runs counter to the Enlightenment belief that the particular can be supplanted by the universal. Charlie says no, you have to go through it. This relation

between universalism and particularity is one with which we have to struggle in our reflections on Eurocentrism and multiculturalism.

I want to suggest that this debate is one that has to now be cast in much more intellectual and political terms. Radical democratic politics must be placed at the centre because presently this debate is reinforcing racial polarization, reinforcing gender polarization, making it impossible for progressive forces to come together and bring a critique to bear on well-to-do patriarchal, most often white, homophobic power. If the debate remains pre-packaged (i.e., Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: the Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*), polarization will increase and the very people on behalf of whom multiculturalism is said to speak will be completely disarmed. Those who are gaining presently are the middle-class bureaucrats who are pushing the issues of jobs, slots, exhibitions, and so on. The larger offshoot of this is the closing of ranks. You begin to see narrow political projects taking hold among the very people who are in need of resources and power. I'm thinking of a whole host of narrow black nationalist figures who speak with a boldness and defiance of the white power structure but who have very little to offer in terms of vision, analysis, organizational power, and pressure. These figures remain very important because they are able to speak to the issues of identity that are real and palpable among a disempowered and disorganized people. Yet a variety of different local figures are coming to speak to the closing-ranks mentality, reinforcing an escalating fragmentation that is not simply racial but also class based. That is why David Dinkins has very little public confidence among significant numbers of working-poor black people; the whole black political class itself is losing legitimacy owing to its inability to deliver on any significant programs that might impact on the life chances of black people. Similarly so for the trade union movement, similarly so for the feminist movement. It is a very frightening and terrifying moment. For freedom fighters, it means getting one's bearings right, negotiating fragmentation from within racial communities, within larger progressive communities, and within middle-class spaces. There is no panacea. There is no one solution. As someone who functions as a professor, which is to say who functions as a professional manager in a university, I must ensure that I do not become so encapsulated by my own context that it is conflated with other layers of context. It also means that I don't run away from my context. There is a battle to be fought but that battle must be linked to other battles, or I will become demoralized. I will become depressed which is the making of the narcissism and individualism concerned solely with my own upward mobility as one of the privileged middle-class folk. A position which is the result of the blood, sweat, and tears of persons who struggled in the 1960s and before.

In conclusion, I think ultimately we are going to have to stress the larger transnational, transracial, and transgender processes that fundamentally shape hierarchical operations of power within the market cultures and societies of our time. As a democratic socialist, I am not against the market. I have enough sense to know that markets existed before capitalism. The question is not whether markets should exist, but what they should look like. What will be the conditions under which they operate? Regulated or unregulated, what degree of regulation? What kinds of control? Commodification is not the only process that needs to be addressed but also what Foucault calls “normalization.” Especially the way in which repressive apparatuses of nation-states impose different disciplinary techniques and strategies of control that scar bodies and shape consciousnesses and identities. How do these constitute the “normal” culturally, politically, sexually, and so on? If we lose sight of these larger structural processes, then our identity politics sweeps under the rug what those basic processes have been unable to do for most people around the globe, which is to provide basic social goods – food, housing, health care, child care, education. If our identity politics sweeps those issues under the rug, then you know identity politics is a middle-class affair. That is a benchmark. That is the challenge. And that is where I am presently reflecting and struggling.

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## Notes

This text is a revised transcription of a talk given at the Power Plant in Toronto, May 1992.

1. Paul Valéry, “The Crisis of the Mind,” *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry* vol. 10, ed. Jackson Mathews (New York: Pantheon, 1962), 31.

2. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 96-102.