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## The Multicultural Wars, Part Two

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I would like to begin this essay on *Brown v. Board of Education*, originally presented to the conference "Brown at Forty," by returning, briefly, to a set of concerns and specific questions with which I concluded an essay entitled "The Multicultural Wars," published in the fall of 1992 in the journal *Radical History Review* [reproduced here as Chapter 19 – HVC].<sup>1</sup> There I argued that contemporary debates about cultural integration most commonly rage under the banner of "multiculturalism" in our schools and colleges but that the content of these debates seemed to me to be a totally inadequate political response to the conditions of social, political and economic devastation present in the daily lives of those who are poor and designated members of so-called "minority" populations in the United States.

An enormous amount of our individual and collective political energy in the academy, I am convinced, has been directed toward increasing the diversity of cultural representation through curricular reform. Agitation for increased cultural representation has, of course, a long history in black cultural politics, but the specific link to curricular reform in educational institutions is a legacy of the *Brown* paradigm – having fought to integrate our educational institutions, should we not now also struggle to integrate the curriculum? However, in many educational institutions across the country it appears that most advocates of multiculturalism are ignoring the fact that forty years after *Brown v. Board of Education* we still live with widespread educational and residential apartheid. Multiculturalists, it seems to me, limit their political imagination and vision to dreams of culturally integrated syllabi instead of agitating for the institutionalizing of a political vision of a just and equitable social formation; indeed, the former seems to be a comforting substitute for the latter. So, forty years after what is considered to be the victory of the *Brown* decision, it is important that we question the apparent reluctance of these proponents of multiculturalism to confront not only the continuing maintenance but increasing strength of an apartheid system in residence and education in this society. In addition, it is imperative that we develop a political critique of the discourse of multiculturalism and condemn its lack of a complex

political vision for aggressive political action: action which would not only desegregate this society but would seek to create a just and equitable alternative social order.

I reassert this question, in the context of a discussion of *Brown v. Board of Education*, because I feel that our contemporary discursive legacy from *Brown*, multiculturalism, has at its heart a complete disregard for cultural, political and economic justice.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the daily practices of multiculturalism have spawned an obsessive engagement on the part of its practitioners with issues of identity politics, a form of politics which has focused upon questions of the personal, the subjective and the emotive. The emphasis on increasing personal, or subjective, awareness of difference is thought to take place in conjunction with a selection of cultural texts, but this process, frequently imagined to be an engagement in cultural politics, takes place at the expense of an engagement with the politics of culture and cultural production. In other words, what is deeply disturbing is that, as multiculturalism is currently practiced, the attention paid to cultural forms does not necessarily extend to a systematic interrogation of the nature of cultural formations. I would argue that it is not only necessary but urgent that we shift from this intense concentration on cultural forms, on textual representation and the subjectivity of identity politics, to an analysis of the relation between the production of cultural forms and the state of cultural formations, the material conditions which shape our collective as well as our individual existence.<sup>3</sup>

What we need to ask ourselves is if the vision of cultural integration implicit in the paradigm of "Brown at Forty" is, in fact, an adequate conceptual and political framework within which to understand the complexity of our contemporary systems of apartheid. I would argue that it is a very inadequate frame of reference and would evoke Antonio Gramsci's warning about becoming complacent about the nature of the battle in which *Brown* was only an opening sortie: "It was right," Gramsci asserts,

to struggle against the old school, but reforming it was not so simple as it seemed. The problem was not one of model curricula but of men [and women], and not just of men [and women] who are actually teachers themselves but of the entire social complex which they express.<sup>4</sup>

Any analysis of identity politics, of the subjective and emotive expressions of the social order, must be part of an active and rigorous critique of, and engagement with, the "social complex" in order to embody a vision of social, political and economic transformation.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, issues of representation have consistently been present within the spectrum of black politics and political organizations. However, in the academic field of African American Studies, which has been in existence for more than twenty-five

years,<sup>5</sup> there seems to be an assumption that the cultural politics of textual representation, as first articulated by black modernists, has an integral if not a seamless relationship to issues of political representation and the achievement of equal rights of citizenship. Thus, much of our energy as black intellectuals, cultural producers or critics has been aggressively directed toward increasing the force of our cultural presence, with pen and paper, in front of or behind cameras, or with paint or clay, as part of a wider political struggle. However, now these cultural forms, particularly mass cultural forms, easily penetrate the boundaries that the black working class or the black poor are forbidden to cross: rap music, or Spike Lee's, Stephen Carter's and Cornel West's cultural texts become metaphorical substitutes for the presence of young black male bodies in the white middle-class suburb. I want to stress that it is not a problem of authorship or of artistic practices that I am trying to name. The fact that our cultural forms have a social mobility and accessibility that is denied to the majority of black people is a structural issue with which the field of African American Studies should be centrally concerned. What I want to contest, here, is an assumption of cultural integration that has dominated African American humanist thinking: an assumption that if cultural forms embody our undeniable humanity, they will help advance our demands for justice and equality in the society at large.

In African American Studies we can loudly applaud our own "difference" and assert our distinct cultural presence in ways that resemble the valorization of difference within the discourse of multiculturalism, but we do so at great risk, if not at our peril.<sup>6</sup> As Paul Gilroy has argued, theories of cultural difference are becoming as absolute in their demarcation of the racial boundaries of humanity as the biological theories that supported scientific racism.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the most notable feature of contemporary racist formations is that they no longer have to depend upon theories of biological heredity for their existence but, on the contrary, emphasize "the insurmountability of cultural differences" instead. Rather than "postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others," what is articulated is "'only' the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions." As Etienne Balibar has characterized this shift, this new racism is "a racism without races . . . a differentialist racism," in which culture functions like nature. What has changed, he continues, is that contemporary racist discourse "naturalizes not racial belonging but racist conduct."<sup>8</sup>

Our contemporary fascination and obsession with cultural difference and cultural belonging is, thus, entirely compatible with a hegemonic ideology of apartheid that structures our contemporary social formation. An emphasis on cultural difference and cultural belongingness supports, for example, one of the most pernicious practices of university administrations and departmental politics, a practice which is frequently justified by appealing to the discourse of cultural integration. On a daily basis

university administrators and departmental chairs conflate the need to increase the presence of minority faculty with particular fields of knowledge. For example, African American faculty are drafted to teach African American Studies, Latino and Latina, Chicano and Chicana, and Asian American professors are considered only in the context of a variety of ethnic studies programs. We, therefore, exist in the academy as professionalized ethnic or racialized presences. It was not the vision of *Brown* but maybe it is its legacy that our professionalized ethnicity, or professionalized blackness, has become a required academic commodity – a commodity that is in demand and can be utilized as a type of academic currency.

If *Brown* was about the practice of inserting bodies into integrated educational environments, are the current academic practices of reducing bodies to spheres of knowledge a crucial element of the insidious and pervasive practices of physical and mental ghettoization? And is the physical and mental ghettoization experienced by so many so-called “minority” faculty the more comfortable, though still unacceptable, academic equivalent of the brutal residential and educational apartheid of the wider society? If you exist as a racialized or ethnicized intellectual, it is difficult to speak or to be heard outside of the boundaries of the body/field of knowledge equation: of casting a critical eye upon the narrow reach of mainstream disciplines, for example, or of daring to confront the structures of masculinity and patriarchal practices that shape and penetrate the academic world. But, unfortunately, the reduction of bodies to spheres of knowledge also has the effect of constructing those fields of knowledge as political turfs, as fields of influence over which ethnicized and racialized intellectuals feel that they have an exclusive claim or within which they consider, usually quite correctly, that they have their only chance to gain an academic job.

The metaphor of war that I intentionally evoked through my title of the 1992 essay, “The Multicultural Wars,” was not used lightly. On the contrary, I would describe the state of “minority” intellectual presences in the academy, as students and as faculty, as embattled. *Brown* was only one of many charges that we are going to have to make against the forces of racist reaction and retrenchment, and maybe we should revise our strategies of war to take account of what we did not achieve through the *Brown* decision. Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of the difference between wars of position and wars of maneuver I have found to be very useful in thinking about the complexities of our struggle for justice and equality.

In wars among the more industrially and socially advanced States, the war of manoeuvre must be considered as reduced to more of a tactical than a strategic function. . . .

The same reduction must take place in the art and science of politics, at least in the case of the most advanced States, where “civil society” has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic “incursions” of

the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.). The superstructures of civil society are like the trench systems of modern warfare.<sup>9</sup>

The same thing happens in the art of politics as happens in military art: war of movement increasingly becomes war of position and it can be said that a state will win a war in so far as it prepares for it minutely and technically in peacetime. The massive structures of the modern democracies, both as state organizations, and as complexes of associations in civil society, constitute for the art of politics as it were the "trenches" and the permanent fortifications of the front in the war of position: they render merely "partial" the element of manoeuvre. . . .<sup>10</sup>

The cultural politics of multiculturalism, far from being a war of movement, a wing in a larger war for radical transformation of which *Brown* was a part, has, in fact, become merely a discursive strategy in a war of position. Whereas proponents of multiculturalism like to see themselves as part of an attack on the racist formation, they have actually become stuck in the first line of the trenches of textual representation and seem incapable of climbing the next hurdle and challenging the injustice and inequity of our contemporary racialized social order. Indeed, I would go even further and suggest that our legacy of cultural integrationism works in harmony with, not in opposition to, the anti-civil rights hegemony first secured during the Reagan and Bush years and now being elaborated through an anti-affirmative action backlash and the Republican "Contract With America." The liberal consensus on the attainment of justice and equality, as it was embodied in the demands of the expanded civil rights agenda of the sixties and seventies and which we believed was the legacy of *Brown*, has clearly been revoked and instead we are offered a vision of cultural integration, multiculturalism, as a pacifier, an antidote to the anger and outrage that we bitterly repress.

Forty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the interests of the white and a significant portion of the black bourgeoisie are aligned in a battle over one of our most important public resources – the public school system. In a maneuver that increasingly resembles the historical mobilization of states' rights to retain the disenfranchisement of masses of black southern residents, the white suburban middle class, rallying to the cry of "the right to local control," is virtually privatizing sectors of the public educational system in its own class interests. Now that corporations, rather than the middle class, control capital accumulation, the bourgeoisie seek to retain control over the production of what Immanuel Wallerstein has called "human capital."

Human capital is what these new-style bourgeois have in abundance, whereas our proletarian does not. And where do they acquire the human capital? . . . in the education systems, whose primary and self-proclaimed function is to train people to become members of the new middle-classes, that is to be the professionals, the technicians, the administrators of the private and public enterprises which are the functional economic building-pieces of our system.

In a situation in which the children of the bourgeoisie can no longer be assured of inheriting capital, the middle class is in a battle to retain its control over quality education as a legacy for its children.<sup>11</sup> Many members of the black middle class are aligned with the white bourgeoisie in this struggle and have adopted similar political strategies either by supporting the establishment of black private schools or through attempting to gain privileged access into magnet schools as a legacy for their children. The result is an apparent social consensus to the significant drain of economic, physical and material resources away from the poor.

The paradigm of *Brown* from a legal perspective is completely inadequate to counter this drain of resources. Indeed, the current role of the courts is to support the bourgeoisie as our educational system has entered the front line of this political struggle. We need, therefore, to drastically revise our perspective on the role of the law in the achievement of change. We need to interrogate the history of the role of the courts in the achievement of legal definitions of cultural integration while, at the same time, we develop a critique of the contemporary role of the law in the defeat of social justice and equality. As Jonathan Kozol has argued, the legal redress offered by *Brown* has been invalidated by the Supreme Court rulings in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* and *Milliken v. Bradley*, decisions which have effectively denied the legitimacy of claims for educational equality and justice.<sup>12</sup>

Surely, in the face of the despair and suffering of poor black, Native American, Latino(a) and Chicano(a) children we must try to develop an alternative to the *Brown* paradigm which asks us to place our hopes for radical social transformation in the courts of this land. The question is: who will take up the cause for social justice and equality that the courts refuse to defend? Our public school system must be defended as a public resource that no group has the right to use or abuse in its own narrow class interests. Through which channels do we articulate what we want to demand of a public education system in a democracy?

"Democracy, by definition," Gramsci stressed, "cannot mean merely that an unskilled worker can become skilled. It must mean that every 'citizen' can 'govern' and that society places him [or her], even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this."<sup>13</sup> Or, to make the point through the phrase that C.L.R. James used as the title of one of his essays, "every cook can govern."<sup>14</sup> Our present language of cultural integrationism, multiculturalism, must be replaced by an active politics of social, political and economic transformation, a politics that is not satisfied with understanding and bewailing the inequities of the social order but develops a commitment to ending present injustices and inequalities and redistributing wealth through a socialist vision of the future in the present. To conclude in the words of Etienne Balibar, the "destruction of the racist complex presupposes not only the revolt of its victims, but the transformation of the racists themselves and, consequently, the internal decomposition of the community created by

racism."<sup>15</sup> This is our actual legacy from *Brown*, a legacy that should force us to undertake the work that *Brown* left undone, to confront and dismantle the forces that not only protect but nurture the racist community.

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### Notes

1. Although this paper was written for the "Brown at Forty" conference, I am taking this opportunity to address some of the issues raised in response to this earlier essay. In particular, I am intending to implicate an audience working in the field of African American Studies. As Thelma Foote stated in response to "The Multicultural Wars":

... although Carby provides an incisive critique of multiculturalism's failings, she limits her analysis to the consequences those failures hold for the political awakening of white middle-class students, while ignoring the fact that curricular reforms have important consequences for the politicization of black students also.

See Thelma Wills Foote, "The Black Intellectual, Recent Curricular Reforms, and the Discourse of Collective Identity," *Radical History Review*, no. 56, Spring 1993, p. 52.

2. The term "cultural justice" has been coined by Andrew Ross in the following context. "I see cultural studies as the quest for cultural justice, which is my preferred term for political correctness." Andrew Ross, "Cultural Studies Times Interviews," *The Cultural Studies Times*, vol. 1, no. 2, Fall 1994, p. A11.
3. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 10–11, for a similar argument which is elaborated in his critique of strands of Cultural Studies in North America.
4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York: International Publishers, 1971, p. 36.
5. The African and Afro-American Studies Program at Yale University was established in 1969. It was preceded by a conference in the spring of 1968, one of the first in the nation, to examine the nature of Afro-American Studies. The program formally changed its name to African and African American Studies in 1994. Thank you to Lorrie Trotter in the Office of Public Information, Yale University.
6. See Etienne Balibar,

... it is not a question of setting a collective identity against individual identities. *All identity is individual*, but there is no individual identity that is not historical or, in other words, constructed within a field of social values, norms of behaviour and collective symbols. ... The real question is how the dominant reference points of individual identity change over time and with the changing institutional environment.

Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, London: Verso, 1991, p. 94.

7. I absolutely agree with Paul Gilroy when he states, "where black art and aesthetics are debated in conference after conference it is becoming harder to dislodge the belief that ethnic differences constitute an absolute break in history and humanity." See, Paul Gilroy, "Cruciality and the Frog's Perspective: An Agenda of Difficulties for the Black Arts Movement in Britain," *Third Text*, no. 5, Winter 1988/89, p. 37.
8. See Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, pp. 21–2.
9. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, pp. 234–5.
10. David Forgacs, ed., *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935*, New York: Schocken Books, 1988, pp. 226–7.
11. Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, p. 150.
12. Jonathan Kozol, "Romance of the Ghetto School," *The Nation*, May 23 1994, p. 703.
13. Forgacs, ed., *An Antonio Gramsci Reader*, p. 318.
14. C.L.R. James, "Every Cook Can Govern," in *The Future in the Present: Selected Writings*, London: Allison & Busby, 1977, pp. 160–75.
15. Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, p. 18.