

An Analysis of American Multiculturalism

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Abstract: Multiculturalism has received fierce controversy and discussion upon its proposal for its complexity in definition and in practice. This research discusses the definition of multiculturalism focusing on the comparison between the term “cultural pluralism” and “multiculturalism”, its influence on American society and its distinct characteristics, which is the claims of equality and identification between different cultures. It is argued that multiculturalism is not only a cultural ideology and a cultural war between the WASP-based mainstream culture and the cultures of the disadvantaged groups, but also a political and economic movement. The research also analyzes the practice of multiculturalism in the fields of political participation, education, race, media and the practice of multiculturalism that targets the disabled people and women. Moreover, the problems arise during the proposal and practice of multiculturalism are presented in the research. It is argued that the relationship between multiculturalism and homogeneous culture is not contradictory but united. A mature, sustainable and energetic national culture needs to seek common ground while recognizing and reserving the differences.

Keywords: American multiculturalism; National identification; Equality; Ethnic minorities

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1 Introduction

Contemporary America is a huge immigrant nation with immigrants from almost every region and culture around the world. During the founding stage of the country, more than 60% of the population were

Anglo-Saxons from England. This situation only lasted by the end of the 18th century. Since 1790, the constitution of the United States has provided for a census every ten years. According to the U.S. Census, the proportion of white people in the total population of the United States decreased from 69.1% in 2000 to 63.7% in 2010, while proportion of the ethnic minorities increased from 30.9% in 2000 to 36.3% in 2010. (U. S. Census Bureau 2) Among the ethnic minorities, Hispanics make up 16% of the country's population. Among the top 50 cities in the United States, in 32 cities, ethnic minorities are the majority of the population. The increasing number of immigrants and the diversity of their ethnics ultimately promote the development of the diversity of American culture. The crisis arises in the meantime revolving around how immigrants, established ethnic groups and aboriginal peoples accommodate to, and are accommodated by the majority groups in society. Confronted with the diversity of American culture, American newspapers expressed concerns that white people would become new "minorities" in 40 years after the 2010 census results were released. In the past three decades, multiculturalism has aroused fierce repercussions and debates in the fields of education, culture and ideology. (Wang Enming 113)

Researchers home and abroad have made lots of researches on multiculturalism. The analyses of multiculturalism in domestic researches are mainly concerned about the definition, the origin and formation, the representation and influence of multiculturalism, the understanding of the multiculturalism theory, the limitation of multiculturalism, etc. Among the researches about multiculturalism from all kinds of perspectives, the articles from Wang Xi and Wang Enming are the most impressive and enlightened ones. In The Origin,

Practice and Limitation of Multiculturalism, Wang Xi outlines the evolution of the ideology and practice of multiculturalism since the 1960s, analyzes the usage and connotation of multiculturalism in different fields and discusses the limitations of multiculturalism. (Wang Xi 44) In *On American Multiculturalism*, Wang Enming analyses multiculturalism in American education through the investigation of multiculturalism theory and its main arguments to reveal its fundamental purpose of grasping the discourse power of cultural values and reestablishing American national character. Compared with the domestic researches which analyze multiculturalism in qualitative method, more overseas researches use quantitative analysis. For example, In *The Meaning of Multiculturalism in a Culturally Diverse Urban America Area*, ANOVA and t-test are calculated to investigate to what extent ethnic groups should keep up their own ways of life and to what extent they should take on the American way of life. (Taylor ed. 727)

2 The connotation of multiculturalism

Upon its proposal in the late 1980s and early 1990s in American society, multiculturalism has received fierce controversy and discussion as it is closely connected with the fundamental issues such as education, race, gender, class, etc.. The understanding of multiculturalism differs as it is not a mere cultural phenomenon, but also political movement and it is applied in many fields. The definition of multiculturalism is therefore quite complex. Moreover, as the phenomenon develops and strengthens, more disadvantaged groups such as homosexuals and feminists join the multiculturalists to jointly challenge the patriarchal discourse system, which makes the cultural term harder to define. This research tries to explore the connotation of multiculturalism through its core characteristics and its influence on the American society.

As America is a nation of immigrants, multiculturalism is presented in the 1980s in American society to respond to the challenges associated with cultural diversity. Compared with the “melting pot” view that immigrants should assimilate to the mainstream American culture—the WASP(White Anglo-Saxon Protestant)-based mainstream culture—by abandoning their own cultures,

languages, and other traditions and different from the “cultural pluralism” which only states the harmonious coexistence between different culture, multiculturalism stresses more than the coexistence, but also the equality among different culture and ethnic groups. (Wang Enming 113) Equality is one striking feature of multiculturalism.

According to Henry Louis Gates Jr., chairman of the Department of African American Studies at Harvard University, the core of multiculturalism is to recognize the diversity of culture, the equality and mutual influence between cultures, and break the monopoly position of Western civilization in thoughts and languages. (Henry 720) The equality that the advocates seek is the thorough change in values and policies, but not just superficial oral promises. They seek identification and acknowledgement from the mainstream culture and they seek equal rights in social and political activities and equal discourse power. The advocates of multiculturalism believe that multiculturalism is a pursuit of democratic ideals. They think the issues that multiculturalism raises is the problems of the democracy in America. Since democracy is enthroned in America, the culture in America should also be democratic instead of homogeneous and authoritative. Besides, as multiculturalism resorts to the change of values and thoughts, it can be considered as a kind of ideology.

As the seek of the equality and the changes in values would change the way in which social activities in many fields are conducted, multiculturalism is not just a cultural phenomenon, but also a kind of political movement. In the view of the advocates of multiculturalism, “culture” is a representation of power relations in political society and cultural inequality is mainly due to political inequality. To establish cultural equality, the existing unreasonable political and economic power structure need to be changed. Therefore, the ultimate goal of multiculturalism is not to pursue “cultural equality”, but to pursue “social equity”, which means to strive for the equality of different groups (especially those who have been discriminated against and oppressed for a long time in history) in sharing the political, economic and cultural resources in the American society. (Wang Xi 51) The battle between cultural pluralism and multiculturalism is actually a battle between the two forces to vie for more political power in the society.

3 The practice of multiculturalism in America

The claims of multiculturalism are not just resorts in words, but resorts in practice. It is not only a claim of identification, but also a matter of economic interests and political power: it includes demands for remedying economic and political disadvantages that people suffer as a result of their marginalized group identities. The advocates of multiculturalism seek down to earth changes involving changes in religion, language, ethnicity, gender, race, class, education, sexual orientation and disabled people in order to get rid of the predicament of being oppressed and discriminated and fully enjoy the equal rights and resources in the democratic society.

For the practice of multiculturalism in the rights of political participation, the two major political parties (especially the Democratic Party) implement the "affirmative action" in order to win the votes of ethnic minorities and women. The "affirmative action" ensures a certain proportion of ethnic minorities and women's representatives in the allocation of delegates of the National Congress. The supporters of the "affirmative action" believe that in the past, the privileged class has always been partial to white Protestants and urban middle class, and the implementation of affirmative action plan is to correct the prejudice in the past and make up for the crimes of racial discrimination and gender discrimination in the past.

For the practice of multiculturalism in education, although the United States has not issued a special policy on multicultural education, support has been directly or indirectly demonstrated in the legislation of government departments. The Civil Rights Act presented in 1964, for example, prohibits racial discrimination in public schools. The Economic Opportunity Law passed in the same year provides \$300 million a year to support the poor students. According to the records, there are 39 policies related to multicultural education, most of which are state-level decisions. 34 states have formulated relevant legislation, rules, guidelines or policies to promote multicultural education. (Grant 245) More women and black people are granted opportunities to go to the college. Research and courses in school are reformed and involves a more wider range including African American Studies, Native American Studies, Latino American Studies, gender studies, Asian

American Studies, etc..

For the practice of multiculturalism that targets the disabled people, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 obliges all public and educational institutions to provide more convenience for the disabled to use social service facilities, access to public places and employment, which marks that the career of helping disabled people in the United States has truly entered the "barrier free era". The Education for All Handicapped children Act issued in 1975 prohibits the exclusion of disabled children from general education, provides free education and individualized education program for the designated disabled children. Multiculturalism strives for the equal rights of disabled people in both social and educational field.

For the practice of multiculturalism in race, the U.S. federal government also influences state governments through legislation such as stop praying before class, and deal with racial segregation in schools.

For the practice of multiculturalism that targets women, after the civil rights movement and the women's rights movement, women gradually have more opportunities to serve in the government departments, corporate enterprises and other social institutions, and a considerable part of them began to work in the jobs that they could not get involved in before, including some important positions.

4 The significance of multiculturalism and the coexistence between multiculturalism and homogeneous culture

The recognition of cultural diversity and the equality in different cultures enriches and promote the development of culture in America. The essence of various cultures inject more vitality into the culture of America and in turn the culture of America would gain more acknowledgement by not only the mainstream cultural group but also the disadvantaged groups. The proposal of multiculturalism is not only significant to American culture, but also to the society. Multiculturalism promotes mutual understanding and respect among races and genders. As various groups joins in the political decision-making process, the implement of economic and political policies becomes more effective and democratic. The improvement of the education level of ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups is conducive

to the development of the overall education level of the country. As the ethnic minorities learn more knowledge and skills in university, the ethnic minorities with different cultural backgrounds would bring their distinct talents into play, and establish a more complete social mechanism.

The relationship between multiculturalism and homogeneous culture arouses heated discussion among scholars. Multiculturalism puts forward a new method to explain the American culture, but while emphasizing the cultural diversity of different groups, multiculturalism does not provide a satisfactory answer to how to unify the traditions of different groups with different culture. It seems that multiculturalists try to achieve cultural variety at the expense of the unity and by getting rid of the influence of the thoughts about homogeneous culture. It is hard for the multiculturalists to deal with the relationship between multiculturalism and homogeneous culture. The problem is that the overstatement of and excessive attention paid to multiculturalism would lead to the loss of national identification of its own culture. Multiculturalists have to face the problems. Otherwise, multiculturalism will not only be continuously opposed by the cultural conservatives, but also make the supporters of multiculturalism feel at a loss in their political and cultural identity in the end.

Therefore, the research argues that multiculturalism and homogeneous culture are not contradictory, but unified. Instead, the thoughts of multiculturalism and homogeneous culture needs to form a unity and coexist and complement each other. Multi-ethnic immigrants have created the hybrid American culture, which is manifested in two forms: homogenization and mixture. (Li Qirong 152) The formation of homogenization is a qualitative change, which forms the mainstream and the core of American culture; the latter is a quantitative change, which forms a variety of subcultures. They are mutually infiltrated and interdependent. The cultural diversity that multiculturalism demands and the identification that homogeneous culture requires are actually a complementary unity.

5 Conclusion

Multiculturalism is a complex cultural term. Its complexity lies in the complex groups of supporters

including not only minority ethnic groups but also other disadvantaged people such as women, the disabled, and LGBT people and also lies in its close association with the society. Granted the social attributes, it is not only a cultural ideology that the minority cultures seek the changes of values in people's mind in order to gain identification, or a cultural war between the WASP-based mainstream culture and the minority ethnic groups and other disadvantaged groups, but also a political and economic movement that the disadvantaged group seeks real policies taken place in order to gain equal social resources and political rights. The research probes into the definition of multiculturalism through the comparison between the term "cultural pluralism" and "multiculturalism", its influence on American society and its distinct characteristics. The advocates of multiculturalism seek down to earth changes involving changes in religion, language, ethnicity, gender, race, class, education, sexual orientation and disabled people. Because of the length of the article, the research mainly analyzes the practice of multiculturalism in the fields of political participation, education, race, media and the practice of multiculturalism that targets the disabled people and women. At last, this research also elicit the problems that arise in the process of the practice of multiculturalism, which is multiculturalists try to achieve the diversity neglecting or at the expense of the unity. It is argued that the relationship between multiculturalism and homogeneous culture should be united but not contradictory. The unity and coherence of national culture are the basis of the cultural diversity, while the diversity brings vitality and mature for the national culture. A mature, sustainable and energetic culture should always seek common ground while accepting and reserving the differences.

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