

Brown vs. Board of Education Was Wrong

George Kent
University of Hawaii
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Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, handed down by the United States Supreme Court on May 17, 1954, was the landmark decision outlawing segregation in public schools. It established the guiding principle of the civil rights movement, holding that it was fundamentally impossible to have public schools that were "separate but equal." Integration was required. Most blacks and most white liberals applauded the decision, and adopted integration as the cornerstone of the civil rights movement.

The movement has made progress, but it has been slow and deeply flawed. After four decades we now know that discrimination is deeply ingrained in the American social system, and will not be abolished by judicial decisions. And we have learned that not all blacks—or now, African-Americans—want to be integrated. Integration can be obtained only in exchange for sacrifices in terms of cultural identity, and for many individuals that cost is too great.

We have also learned that if there is to be integration into a single cultural form, that will inevitably be the form of the dominant culture, the white culture. The costs of integration are not spread evenly among the different cultures; it is the dominated, minority cultures that must do all the adjusting. Individuals from dominated cultures must adapt, or live alienated lives. That alienation is plainly evident in the records of their experience in the economic system, the school system, the justice system. There is no ambiguity about the alienation of dominated cultures in our society. This alienation represents more than passive failure to meet standards; it also shows decisive resistance to those standards.

The Supreme Court considered it necessary to choose among two options. First, there was the pre-1954 model, segregation, apartheid, in which hierarchy among culture groups is accepted and even sanctified in the law. Culture groups function separately and unequally in a stable social hierarchy. Second, there was the model selected in 1954 in which there is one cultural style deemed to be the correct one. Schools and other social institutions work to abolish cultural differences. The society is supposed to be a melting pot, boiling many different ingredients into one standard, dominant formula. Advocates call this process integration. Critics might call it homogenization.

The Supreme Court did not accept the third option, neither segregation nor integration but diversity, based on the ideal that there are many different cultures, all legitimate in their own ways, and all deserving honor, respect, and support. In this model the strength of society arises not out of uniformity but out of variety. It is accepted that different forms of schooling and ways of living are appropriate for different culture groups. In this model, the answer to Rodney King's plaintive question is that yes, we all can get along, and we can do it without giving up our own distinct cultural identities. At least that is the ideal toward which we should strive. The premise of this model is that the Supreme Court was wrong: we *can* be separate but equal.

There is a vast difference between saying that culture groups *may* be integrated and saying they *must* be integrated. There is a vast difference between saying they *may* be separate and saying they *must* be separate. Separation of culture groups should not be required; that is segregation. In much the same way, integration of culture groups should not be required; that is homogenization, forced assimilation. The requirement of integration, like the requirement of segregation, reduces freedom, and thus it is inherently oppressive. We should see that there is a third way that should be nurtured.

The first and second models, segregation and integration, hierarchy and homogenization, are both inherently oppressive. The third model, based on diversity, has the important virtue of not being inherently oppressive. A diverse society based on real respect for differences may not be easy to implement, but at least it is not inherently oppressive. We already accept the premise of diversity with regard to the practice of religion. Why can't we build on that, and work at accommodating diversity with respect to other cultural practices?

The principle of accommodating diversity should be applied not only within countries but also globally. The great conflicts of this century, both hot and cold, arose mainly out of the imperial ambitions of powerful countries. The costs have been enormous. If there had been less desire to dominate, to control, to homogenize, we would have had a more peaceful century.

Since the end of the cold war we have seen an upsurge of ethnic conflict throughout the world. People everywhere are trying to break out of the bondage of dominance to gain their freedom and, all too often, to gain revenge. The process is accelerated by the widespread efforts to promote democracy. However, it is not clear whether we are seeing real progress. Does the democracy that is being advocated look more like the hierarchy model, the homogenized model, or the diversity model?

Tragically, indications are that it is the homogenizing model that is being promoted. With the end of the cold war, Frances Fukuyama crowed about the "end of history," suggesting that we are now evolving to our true destiny, a destiny whose cultural form is singular, the mold established by the liberal democratic industrialized white west. Economically, the homogenizing pressure is evident in the World Bank's insistence on structural adjustment, under which struggling third world countries must conform to what they are told is the only acceptable economic form. Commerce is promoted with little regard for its negative effects, and ideas regarding subsistence and simple living are dismissed. The idea of community is all but lost.

In July/August 1994 the distinguished journal, *Foreign Affairs*, carried an article that concluded "true democratic elections in Gaza will only bring the Islamic fundamentalists to power." This sort of democracy was deemed unacceptable, for Palestinian politics "is tribal, traditional and Islamic in its political behavior," and "there are no center-moderate, middle-class political parties and organizations to mobilize them." The posture illustrates the stand for selective democracy, "our kind" of democracy.

In the Summer 1993 *Foreign Affairs*, Samuel Huntington offered a major article on "The Clash of Civilizations?" He anticipates that the major global clashes in coming decades will not be

among nations, in the forms familiar in the twentieth century; rather, they will be clashes of civilizations, the major culture groups of the world: Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African civilization. Both within nations and globally, hierarchy and homogenization are bad solutions to the clash of cultures. They stimulate conflict. Instead, ways should be found to allow cultures to evolve in their own ways. They should not be required to be separate, but they should have that option. These options should be protected and even nurtured. Freedom means expanding options, not contracting them.

How can the diversity model be implemented? A good place to start is in the schools. Begin with the premise that any schooling arrangement that systematically produces failure and resistance is itself a failure. Within broad guidelines, there should be possibilities for establishing African-American schools, Hispanic schools, Polish schools, Sioux schools, Hawaiian schools. There should be all-girls schools and all-boys schools, to accommodate families that might prefer gender separated schools. The argument for offering such specialized schools (or sections within schools) is not much different from the argument for offering schools specializing in science, music, and art. There should be diversity and choice, not uniformity, within schools, among schools, and outside schools. The more choices that are offered, the more the society honors the differences among its people. Efforts to standardize are inherently and necessarily oppressive.

For some purposes, such as assuring basic literacy and numeracy, the society may judge that some standardization is necessary. The task is to determine, through democratic processes, how that standardization can be accomplished in the least oppressive ways. Perhaps the best way is to assess achievements in literacy and numeracy in terms of outcomes, through standard tests, but allow that different schools may take different paths toward achieving specified outcomes in literacy and numeracy.

The challenge is to find ways to assure that separate schools are equal. Real diversity in content comes from real diversity in the control of schools. What funding and administration procedures would assure equality while respecting differences? One approach, suitable where economic bases are at a similar level, is to establish independent, localized funding, perhaps on a county basis. Another approach is School/Community Based Management (SCBM) under which schools operate under a central administration, but are given a great deal of autonomy to operate through contractual relations with the center.

It is not easy to assure equality while maintaining diversity. One way to achieve equality of a sort is to treat all as if they were identical. But where people are not identical, identical treatment can be very unfair. It is absurd to homogenize all schools, and thus suppress the cultural richness of society, for no other reason than to create the appearance of equality. After forty years we know that the attempt to homogenize results in the suppression and alienation of cultural minorities. We need to respect and honor differences, and not try to melt them away. If we take an ideological stance in favor of true democracy, broad participation in decision-making, and localization of control in society, we should follow those principles in the organization of schooling as well.