

PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

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Multiculturalism and Cultural Authenticity

Recent years have seen the emergence of two inter-related trends in our cultural politics. First, there has been a call for multiculturalism: for greater diversity in artistic and educational offerings, for a broadening of the spectrum of society's interest beyond the activities and experiences of dead or living white males. Thus, students demand courses in black, Hispanic, and women's studies; children's librarians clamor for more books about Native American and Asian youth; viewers of all races protest if their stories are not told on television's nightly news and prime-time sitcoms. Second, there has been an insistence that those offering representations of previously unrepresented groups be themselves members of the group in question — that courses in black studies be taught by black faculty, books about Native American youth be written by Native American writers, and reporters covering the Hispanic community be of Hispanic descent. It is this second and more controversial requirement that I wish to submit to examination here.

The thesis that interests me is what I will call the authenticity thesis. The authenticity thesis maintains that the individuals representing the experiences of group A should (generally or even always) be members of group A. The thesis can be put forward in both a broad and a narrow form. In the narrow form, it applies when group A is what we may call a victim group, a group that has previously suffered and currently continues to suffer from oppression and discrimination — e.g., blacks, Native Americans, women.

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