Benign Multiculturalism

Alan Wolfe

An American born as the twentieth century ends will grow up to live in a society completely different from that into which an American was born as the twentieth century began. In 1900, few would have described this country as seriously divided by race. To be sure, black and white Americans lived in distinct worlds. In the South, slavery had been abolished, but officially sanctioned segregation maintained uncrossable bridges between the races. And in the North, informal but no less powerful customs and habits created patterns of living in which substantial racial inequality and injustice persisted. Yet most white Americans, who did not want to think about these injustices, kept questions of race safely at a distance, and many black Americans, deeply offended by such patterns of inequality, lacked an effective voice for making their concerns heard.

Despite these racial divisions, Americans in 1900 were united in other ways. For one thing, the country at that time was predominantly Christian; whatever differences existed between blacks and whites, both usually believed in the same God. They also shared the same language, a pattern that was not disturbed all that much by the arrival of large numbers of immigrants who came to the United States at that time. For these immigrants either, like the Irish, spoke English already or, like Italians and Poles, were determined to leave the old country and its customs behind in the hopes that their children would succeed in the new land. Nor were Americans spread across the entire continent; the West Coast in 1900 was still relatively underpopulated, and most Americans grew up and eventually died not all that far from where they were born. In short, most Americans in 1900 took something called America for granted. They had a strong sense of what America meant to them, they outdid each other in expressing their patriotism, and they believed that their country was especially blessed by God to do great things.

This sense of an America whose meaning was relatively uncontested is a far cry from the situation that exists today in the United States. For one thing, as divided by race as the United States was at century’s beginning, its racial situation appears remarkably divisive at century’s end. This is not to say that there has been no racial progress. The past two or three decades have witnessed a substantial growth in the black middle class in America. Most white Americans no longer expressed deeply prejudicial views toward black Americans, and although vestiges of segregation remain, particularly in housing and school attendance, there can be little doubt that race relations have improved in the years since the
century began. Still, there does remain a gap between blacks and whites. In part, this is a gap of opportunity: The chances of an inner-city child succeeding in life are far lower than those of a suburban child. In part, it is a gap of attitude: Black Americans continue to believe that racism is omnipresent in American life, whereas white Americans do not.

If tensions remain between blacks and whites, they have been complicated by the fact that our racial landscape is no longer painted in just two colors. We were a land of immigrants in 1900, but the law gave a priority to people from countries in Europe whose populations were white. Those laws were revised in the 1960s and 1970s, however, with the consequence that immigrants these days often come from Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Our population is now officially divided into five races: whites, blacks, Asians, native Americans, and (in what is really an ethnic or linguistic category) Hispanics. And even those categories are anything but clear-cut. Is someone from Puerto Rico whose skin color is black properly classified as African American or as Hispanic? The answer is usually the latter, but what does such a person have in common racially or ethnically with a white person who emigrated as a political refugee from Cuba? Because race is not a hard-and-fast category, America's racial landscape is not only more complicated, it is also more fluid.

If we can no longer speak of an America divided by black and white, it makes even less sense to talk of America as a Christian country. There have been Jews in the United States since the earliest days, but the religious diversity brought about by America's immigration policies has been without precedent. It is true that in 1900 many immigrants to America, although white, were distinct from those Americans already here, for the latter tended to be Protestant and the former Catholic. The result was serious battles over public schools and suspicion on the part of each religious group of the intentions of the other. But despite these hostilities, both were Christian and in that sense worshiped the same God. Now, there are as many believers in Islam in the United States as there are Episcopalians. Religious diversity is as strong as racial diversity, and no one, least of all the U.S. Supreme Court, knows how to apply principles guiding the separation of church and state in such a context.

Religious diversity, like racial diversity, has important implications for what kind of society we are going to be. There are at least some Americans who believe that for a country to flourish, it has to have a common morality. And, they also believe, religion is the most important source of moral belief. If both of these propositions are true, it follows that a society that has no common religion—which is clearly the case in the United States now—can have no common morality. For those of this persuasion, a number of America's social problems—such as rising rates of divorce and crime—are due to this lack of a common morality. But that is untrue, others would reply. In fact, the most important moral virtue in America, what made it different from Europe from the start, is its appreciation for and tolerance of difference. For that reason, the fact that we are all no longer Christians is a sign of a more mature country, one in which people can live together despite believing in different conceptions of God.

What do Americans make of all this diversity in their midst? We know what those who write on the subject believe. Among academics and intellectuals, there has taken place a furious war about diversity. Some insist that principles of equality, toleration, and respect for difference lead to the conclusion that we should welcome the presence of many cultures in the United States and celebrate our racial, ethnic, and religious differences. Others believe just as strongly that all previous immigrants to this country assimilated to the United States by dropping their languages and cultures of origin and becoming American in the process. It is only fair that recent
immigrants do the same, they argue. Indeed, they must if we are to remain one society capable of defending itself and passing on its legacy to the next generation.

Issues of multiculturalism and diversity tend to be subject to passionate argument in this country. If the subject is affirmative action, for example, those who believe that colleges and universities should take special steps to diversify their student bodies generally believe that those who feel otherwise are, to one degree or another, racist. And, to return the favor, those who believe that quotas and preferences violate American principles of liberalism and merit tend to argue that their opponents are engaged in an effort to lower standards and to politicize learning. The passions, if anything, intensify when students who are African American or Asian American ask for recognition in the form of programs that focus on their ethnic or racial heritage. Few issues stir the pot as much as those involving the question of who we are—and who we ought to be—as a people.

Although the intellectuals have spoken, however, most ordinary Americans have not. Polls give us a snapshot of the way Americans think about diversity, but, based on quickly asked and answered questions, they do not tell us enough. And referenda, such as those restricting affirmative action or immigration in California, are often worded ambiguously enough to make interpretation of their results difficult. In an effort to find out more, my research assistant and I conducted long conversations with a sample of middle-class Americans in four parts of the country: Brookline and Medford near Boston, Massachusetts; Cobb and Dekalb counties outside of Atlanta, Georgia; Broken Arrow and Sand Springs, Oklahoma; and Rancho Bernardo and Eastlake, two suburbs on either side of San Diego. We talked with them about their views on God, country, family, race, poverty, work, and civic life. Our findings were published in a book entitled One Nation, After All. In what follows, I offer a summary of what they told us about the subject of diversity, plus some reflections on what it all means.

One conclusion emerges in sharp clarity from these interviews: If support for multiculturalism means support for bilingualism, middle-class Americans are against it. Americans place great store on English as the language of the country: When given a series of statements about the obligations of citizenship—voting, keeping informed, serving in war—being able to speak and understand English placed second in importance, behind only reporting a crime that one has witnessed. That helps explain why, according to the 1994 General Social Survey, 62.9 percent of the American people favor making English the official language of the United States compared with 27.6 percent who do not. Groups such as U.S. English, which promote the notion of one official language for the United States, have had some political success: Although their efforts to pass a constitutional amendment requiring English as the official language of the country failed, state measures, such as California’s Proposition 63 in 1986, generally have passed. Indeed, Proposition 63 passed by 73 percent of the vote and won a majority in every county in the state. English, it is clear, matters.

Middle-class Americans, it would seem, think about other languages the same way they think about homosexuality, a subject on which they are not especially tolerant, and not the way they think about minority religions, an area in which they are very tolerant. Our respondents were strongly opposed to bilingualism, no matter where in America they lived, and, overall, the percentage of those unsympathetic to the rationale behind bilingualism was four times greater than the proportion that was sympathetic. Survey researchers use the concept of a “bell curve” to describe responses in which the majority clusters in the middle with two extremes at each end. On the issue of bilingualism, as Table 34.1 shows, public opinion deviates substantially from that pattern.
Table 34.1
"People Who Do Not Speak English Well Should Be Taught in the Schools in Their Native Language"

<table>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>Sand Springs</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>11</td>
</tr>
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<td>DeKalb</td>
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</tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rancho Bernardo</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

What accounts for this opposition? Although many of those with whom we talked insisted that their opposition to bilingualism was meant to help immigrant children get along better in their new country, in fact, hostility to bilingualism is primarily symbolic in nature. Bilingualism is one of those issues that generates passionate research, each side claiming empirical support for how much such programs can work or how little they achieve. But even if they were persuaded that bilingual programs worked effectively, our respondents still would be likely to oppose them. For them, a willingness to learn English is one of the marks, if not the most important mark, of the good immigrant. It is a test: Pass it and you belong; refuse to take it and you do not. To a considerable degree, public policy has had to accommodate itself to such sentiments, as have the debates over bilingualism; increasingly, defenders of such programs emphasize not the political imperative of protecting minority languages, but how bilingualism, when done right, can help smooth the transition to English.

Because insistence on English is seen as a test, it is likely to be resented by those being tested. But middle-class America did not invent the symbolic dimension of bilingualism: It has been part of the arguments made for these programs. Some claim that bilingualism is a political challenge to a dominant culture, an argument likely to lead those who uphold the dominant culture to dig in their heels. Others suggest that all immigrants eventually will learn English anyway, so that we ought to allow bilingualism to show respect for those who came here under such trying conditions. Our respondents simply turn that symbolism around. We all know they are going to learn English anyway; therefore, the sooner they do, the better off they will be. Respect for immigrants is important, but respect for the country is more important. On this issue, for most of our respondents, the idea that we are one nation clearly takes precedence over the idea that difference should be celebrated.

Despite the large proportion of people who expressed hostility to bilingualism in our survey, it would not be correct to conclude that these attitudes represent an intolerance comparable to, or greater than, the way our respondents thought about homosexuality. For one thing, the intensity of the language they used when discussing bilingualism was not the same as the language they used when respect for homosexuality was the issue. People do not think of those who want to preserve Spanish as perverted or
immoral. For another, despite strong support for making English the official language of the United States, the General Social Survey also discovered that there are majorities in America behind both bilingualism in schools and multilingual ballots. As much as they like the idea of English as the official language of the country, it would seem Americans want those who speak other languages to preserve them: A 1987 poll taken just about the time that Proposition 63 in California passed discovered that a substantial majority of the state’s residents thought it was “a good thing” for immigrants to keep their languages and traditions. Opposition to bilingualism and support for the preservation of original languages sound as if they are in contradiction to each other, but the more one listens to how people express themselves, it becomes clear that they are not. As most Americans grapple with these issues, they support the principle that groups within the United States ought to be allowed to retain their distinctiveness, but only so long as they do so within an official culture that insists on the priority of the national community over subnational ethnic groups.

This is certainly the way our respondents thought about the conflict between the larger nation as a whole and the specific nations that make it up. On the one hand, they had little doubt that group loyalties had to take second place to national ones; Table 34.2 presents data from our survey question dealing with this issue. Although one can detect some racial polarization in their responses—primarily, black respondents in DeKalb County were more sympathetic to the claims of ethnic and racial groups than those elsewhere—the overwhelming majority sentiment across the country, not surprisingly, puts the nation first.

Yet, there is also another side to the story, one that revealed itself to me in an unexpected way. As a college professor and writer, I have been deeply involved in debates over “multiculturalism,” the idea that we have a strong obligation to emphasize the differences and special characteristics of the groups that compose the American mosaic; my position in those debates generally has been unsympathetic to multiculturalist claims, preferring instead an assimilationist position that I identify with my own familial and ethnic experiences. Because the middle-class Americans with whom I spoke were so hostile to bilingualism, I naturally assumed that they would share my personal distaste for multi-
culturalism. They did not. And therein lies a story that may have implications for the larger discussion of race and multiculturalism in our society.

Let us turn, then, to the question of multiculturalism specifically. When we asked people how they felt about taking special steps to recognize and celebrate specific cultures, most of those with whom we spoke put aside their opposition to bilingualism and indicated strong sympathy with multiculturalism. Often, there was some confusion in people's minds about the two. When we asked people whether they supported multiculturalism, a number of them responded by denouncing bilingualism. When we explained that we were not asking about language culture, many said that was different. Of course, we ought to respect other cultures. Teaching children respect for the many cultures brought to this country was variously described by our respondents as "very good," "real good," "important," "fine," "great," "really great," "neat," "superb," "helpful," and "necessary," only a few said it was "harmful" or an example of "political correctness run amok." Even when challenged—on this question, we tried to be very challenging—people rarely backed down from their enthusiastic support for the idea. "Spend a week on this and a week on that, that way the person is full-rounded," said J. W. Cotton of Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. "Well," my research assistant intervened, "some people say we need to stress the basics." "Like I said," he responded, "a week or two on each. I mean when you've got four or five months in school, I am sure you can sneak in a week or something. . . . There's room for fluffy stuff." Although survey researchers have demonstrated that support for multiculturalism is stronger in the Northeast than in the other regions of the country, we found strong support in each region, perhaps reflecting the fact that multiculturalism is also more popular among better-educated Americans.

The middle-class African Americans with whom we spoke were the most unabashedly enthusiastic about multiculturalism. "You should automatically respect someone when you first meet them," Gerald Stevens pointed out. "It's almost like unconditional, until maybe that person does something to make you lose respect." The same rule, he believes, applies to groups. Black people like him ought to have the benefit of the doubt for their culture unless or until that respect is lost. "As a young child," Vaughn Hyde added, "I knew far more about Europeans than they could ever possibly know about me. That's not fair." Over and over, African Americans brought up the example of Christopher Columbus, proving, in passing, how controversies over historical symbols have real cogency in the country at large. How could he have discovered America, they wanted to know, when people of color were already here? Latinos in California shared the same point of view. Their enthusiasm for multiculturalism ranged from the practical—"I would be out of a job" without it, as an educational training coordinator laughingly put it—to such idealistic reasons as the "need to expand ourselves."

White Americans, although sympathetic to multiculturalism, were not quite as enthusiastic. For one thing, even those who support multiculturalism have qualms about forcing it on people; they think about cultural diversity in the same laissez-faire way they think about religious diversity, as a good thing as long as no one tries to impose their views on others. Multiculturalism, William Fahy of Cobb County argued, should be "low key," which to him meant that "you don't take it to extremes." Searching for the right word to characterize his feelings, he finally found it: multicultural education is all right so long as it is not "political." Whether he knew it or not, and I think he probably did, Mr. Fahy was trying to support the idea of multiculturalism without supporting the agenda of the
activists behind it. He would object to multiculturalism as its most passionate defenders understand it. They believe we should teach respect for all groups as a means to achieve equality among them, whereas he would teach respect for all groups because they exist here in the same country with us.

Multiculturalism usually is identified with particularism. To its supporters, the majority culture tends to overlook the accomplishments of particular cultures, requiring an emphasis on the singular achievements of special groups, whereas to its opponents, multiculturalism represents a splintering of society into its ethnic and racial fragments. One reason that multiculturalism can be so popular in middle-class America is that many of those who support it do so for universalistic rather than particularistic reasons. Just as they believe there is only one God, despite myriad ways of worshipping him, they also believe, as Samina Hoque, a Medford physicist from Bangladesh, put it, that “People are not very different. Deep down, they are all the same.” They even look the same, according to Sand Spring’s Diana Hamilton: “When was the last time you saw a kid in Egypt dressed in a linen thing wrapped around their waist?” she asked.

They just look like the rest of us... So if you could really have a multicultural curriculum that... explained people’s differences and then showed how we’re all the same, that would be good. But a lot of the ones I’ve observed don’t do that at all. Like I said, it serves to point out all the differences, and say “Oh, isn’t that weird.”

Multiculturalism that is tailored to be compatible with the more universal values of America can be described as “benign.” To do it right, as Eastlake’s Jason Cooper put it,

You don’t institutionalize the celebration of those differences. You let people celebrate those differences by association and by civic groups and by public interest organizations. You don’t have to institutionalize that in society by saying that on this day we’re going to celebrate Cinco de Mayo in public schools to recognize that there is a group among you that happens to be affiliated with that heritage.

Benign multiculturalism is informal rather than official, soft in its particularism rather than hard, and assimilationist in its objectives; it is, in short, an example of a modest virtue. The national culture, like middle-class morality, requires occasional revitalization, which particular identities can provide. But those particular identities can only do so by subsuming themselves under the broad umbrella of Americanism.

There is, along these lines, a generally unrecognized conservative set of arguments in favor of multiculturalism; ones that the more conservative among our respondents were quick to make. Brian Fischer, a conservative resident of Cobb County, dislikes multiculturalism vehemently: “To predicate an educational environment on stressing dissimilarities so people can understand where they came from, I think is the greatest load of crap,” he said in no uncertain terms. But, he also noted, in the South, individuals “need to know who their people are.” He would have all students sit down with a tape recorder and talk to their parents and grandparents, getting a sense of their struggles and hopes. In that way, he believes, multicultural education “gives a person a sense of worth and a sense of tradition.” A number of our respondents thought that learning about your background gives you roots, anchoring you in the scheme of things in a way that strengthens your sense of place in the society. Taking pride in your group is a way of taking pride in yourself: “I mean, there’s nothing wrong with heritage-type education, you know, like a background,” said Alex Molinari. “For example, my heritage is Italian. Hey, there’s nothing wrong with a little Italian in school. That’s
great.” Everybody should learn something about their heritage, even if, as Jose Velasquez put it, “You should be American and then something else, not the other way around.” Even African Americans, who supported multiculturalism more strongly than our other respondents, did so in essentially conservative ways. Kenneth Easterbrook sees nothing wrong with black students at university having their own dorms and congregating with each other. “That’s not because I want to separate, that I don’t want to deal with you,” he added. “It just says that at times I just want to touch base with who I am.”

Benign multiculturalism has one additional advantage: It is practical. If you really want to make money in mutual funds, you have to invest globally, said Jeremy Toole of Cobb County; for that reason alone, he would have his children learn more about the rest of the world. Cathy Ryan tells us that her husband would require that the president of the United States spend a year abroad, like an exchange student; if he is going to make decisions that involve other places, he ought at least have an appreciation for them. Even selling products here in the United States now requires familiarity with all the cultures and languages that live here: “I think that with the mixture of people that we have in America now too, we have to learn the languages of other people,” as George Slade put it. In reality, both America and the world are changing, and multiculturalism can help with the transition.

The preponderance of conservative and practical arguments in favor of multiculturalism suggests an answer to how middle-class Americans would choose between the principle of pluralism and the principle of patriotism. By avoiding the extremes of parochialism on the one hand and particularism on the other, benign multiculturalism enables middle-class Americans to avoid making that choice. Herbert Gans once coined the term “symbolic ethnicity” to characterize the way earlier immigrant groups, among them Italians, Irish, Poles, and Jews, took pride in their group but always at somewhat of a distance from its tribalist claims on them. It is that experience with multiculturalism in the past that shapes how middle-class Americans view multiculturalism in the present. They want newer groups of immigrants, as well as African Americans, to be able to express their ethnic diversity, but they also want them to move quickly toward what the historian David Hollinger calls a “post-ethnic” perspective. “The national community’s fate can be common,” Hollinger wrote, “without its will being uniform, and the nation can constitute a common project without effacing all of the various projects that its citizens pursue through their voluntary affiliations.” If multiculturalism is organized in such a way that it serves American goals and values, it becomes possible to respect the diversity of the groups that belong to America and to respect America at the same time.

The story of Americans’ attitudes toward their country over the past three decades is the story of one shock after another. Vietnam and Watergate in the 1960s and 1970s, immigration and the emergence of global capitalism in the 1980s, multiculturalism and culture wars in the 1990s. And as if that was not enough, Americans have experienced a questioning of their country’s sense of purpose at the same time that their faith in God and family has undergone significant change. So much has happened so quickly, it is no wonder that serious students of American history have raised the question of whether the Union is falling apart. Yet, it is remarkable how few of their worries about the country’s future have filtered down to most of the people who live here. In the opinion of the middle-class Americans with whom we talked, as Table 34.3 indicates, the idea of living in any other country in the world is barely conceivable.

These middle-class Americans have a message to deliver to those who worry that America might fall apart: Calm down. Yes, the country has changed, perhaps for the
Table 34.3
"Even Though It Has Its Problems, the United States Is Still the Best Place in the World to Live"

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better, perhaps not. But everything changes all the time. The trick is not to lament what has passed but to come to terms with what is emerging. We are not facing the disuniting of America but its reuniting. This being America, it cannot be bad.

The confidence that America will reemerge as a strengthened society draws on a number of sources. Religious Americans who believe that God has always taken a special interest in this country believe that, as Mrs. McLaughlin of Broken Arrow put it, "If we get down on our knees and pray to Him, He will change, you know, change our land and help us to heal our land." Others, such as Judy Vogel of Cobb County, think that disagreement and discord offer more of a secular test, and that when faced with political conflicts and different versions of the meaning of the country, "I think we need to listen with our hearts a little better and try somehow to find answers," for "this country has a strong foundation," one that enables it to struggle through until we find the right thing to do. Over and over again, people stressed two things about the country that, in their view, will never change. One is that the people here are too good for bad things to persist too long. The other is that the history of America is a history of generosity and caring; Americans are the kind of people who help out when times are tough. If things get bad enough—they have not quite gotten to that point yet—the way in which Americans pull together when facing floods and earthquakes will help them move beyond their political disagreements and controversies.

The most significant source of national regeneration, however, stems from what many middle-class Americans see as an inevitable cycle: Our freedoms make us special; taken to extremes, they cause us problems; but when we experience those problems, our very freedoms will help us find a way out. This whole cycle of distinctiveness, decline, and possible rebirth was expressed in one sentence by Rancho Bernardo’s Megan Graff:

I think the obvious freedom of speech that we have, I think when we compare ourselves to the other countries, we are definitely the best, that when you try to run a country of this size with all the ethnic diversity, you’re going to have major, major blowups and problems, but we do try to sort them out and I don’t think a lot of other countries put as much effort into keeping everything on a smooth keel.

As that cycle works itself out, the country will move toward what Elizabeth Tyler of Brookline called

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some sense of shared purpose and commitment to continuation of our culture, some sense of survival of the next generation, some sense of things living in a proper way ... and some sense of living in a country that is free with free choice and some measure of leisure and some measure of economic freedom ... fairness, and correct moral and ethical values in the way we treat one another and the world.

Statements such as these suggest that, for all the passion and turbulence with which intellectuals and academics discuss issues involving multiculturalism, most ordinary Americans do so in a much quieter voice. To indicate how remarkable that voice is, we ought to return, once again, to the beginning of this century. Then, as I argued at the start of this essay, America was less divided racially and in terms of religious diversity than it is now. Yet there was, if anything, more of a sense that the country was fighting a serious culture war then than there is now. Protestants and Catholics disagreed far more strongly, for example, with each other in those days than Christians do with non-Christians these days. And even though our racial landscape was simpler in the sense that there were only two major races in the country then compared to five now, there was also far more violence and hostility on the part of whites toward blacks than there is between any of our racial groups at the present time.

It also may be helpful, to understand the importance of benign multiculturalism, to compare the situation at century’s end with the situation that existed right in the middle of the twentieth century. We now call that time the McCarthy period, and it was a time when questions about a changing national identity were also very much on the minds of the American people. In the 1950s, when charges of treason filled the air, American identity was not especially threatened; the economic and political power of the United States was unsurpassed; there was relatively little immigration; no significant domestic disputes upset a national consensus; women and children were not in rebellion; and rapid technological change was just around the corner. In the 1990s, by contrast, the power of America is weakening economically and politically, the country has become far more diverse, its ideals are challenged constantly, and new technologies seem to flower annually, yet Americans have not responded by accusing each other of lacking sufficient love for their country. Benign multiculturalism enables us to celebrate our differences and our similarities at the same time. That is not a bad accomplishment.

Notes


Wolfe:

1. What are the reasons that Wolfe says that people living in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century would have been surprised at how divided our society is now?
2. What does Wolfe mean by “benign multiculturalism”? 

464 Multiculturalism in the United States