
SOCIETY

What 'Cultural Diversity' Means

"A World View of Cultural Diversity" by Thomas Sowell, in *Society* (Nov.-Dec. 1991), Rutgers—The State Univ., New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

"Cultural diversity" is frequently invoked today as a shining ideal. Some of its crusading advocates, notes Sowell, a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, "seem to want to preserve cultures in their purity, almost like butterflies . . . in amber." That, he points out, is not the way in which, over the centuries, cultures and civilizations and indeed the whole human race have advanced. The long history of "cultural diversity," Sowell observes, presents "not a static picture of differentness but a dynamic picture of competition in which what serves human purposes more effectively survives while what does not tends to decline or disappear."

Paper and printing—which originated in China and yet today are integral parts of Western civilization—are but two examples of how cultural advances have been transferred from one group to another and from one civilization to another. Such transfers have marked the entire history of the human race, and they signify much more than just cultural diversity, Sowell argues. They imply that some cultural features were *better* than others.

"The very fact that people—all people, whether Europeans, Africans, Asians, or others—have repeatedly chosen to abandon some feature of their own culture in order to replace it with something from another culture implies that the replacement served their purposes more effectively," he says. For example, Arabic numerals (which actually originated among the Hindus of India) are better than, not

just different from, Roman ones. "This is shown by their replacing Roman numerals in many countries whose own cultures derived from Rome, as well as in other countries whose respective numbering systems were likewise superseded by so-called Arabic numerals." Roman numerals today may be fine for numbering kings and Super Bowls, but they can hardly match the efficiency of Arabic numerals in most mathematical operations.

Some contemporary champions of diversity acknowledge the fact of cultural change but insist that such change should come about only through collective or political decisions. This, Sowell says, "is not how cultures have arrived where they are." Decisions about change are made rather by individuals in the course of their daily lives. "In this way, cultures have enriched each other in all the great civilizations of the world."

No culture has grown great in isolation, Sowell says. Intellectuals who, in the name of "cultural diversity," promote "a multiplicity of segregated ethnic enclaves" are not doing the people in those enclaves any favor, he maintains. "However they live socially, [those people] are going to have to compete economically for a livelihood. Even if they were not disadvantaged before, they will be" if they are confined to what exists in their immediate subculture. The advances made in behalf of the human race belong to all people, and "all people need to claim that legacy, not seal themselves off in a dead-end of tribalism or in an emotional orgy of cultural vanity."

The Incredible Expanding Workweek

"Work and Leisure: On the Reporting of Poll Results" by Richard F. Hamilton, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Fall 1991), Inst. for Social Research, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106.

In a 1989 cover story on "The Rat Race," *Time* magazine declared that "America Is Running Itself Ragged" and cited surveys

by pollster Louis Harris to prove the point. The median workweek increased from 40.6 hours in 1973 to 48.8 hours in 1985,

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