Multiculturalism is a movement advocating the representation of multiple cultures in education, government, and other institutional settings. Multiculturalists are motivated by ethical and practical considerations. Ethically, multiculturalists believe that it is unjust that social institutions only recognize a single cultural group. States, for example, have an obligation to recognize all citizens and their traditions, not merely those that have traditionally controlled the state. Multiculturalists also believe that individuals and groups benefit when they are exposed to multiple cultures. Individuals may become more tolerant if they know about ethnic groups aside from their own. Groups that have been historically repressed may benefit from have their voices heard in schools or government, and thus decrease the stigma associated with being from a particular group. It is also argued that recognition of multiple cultures reduces conflict because non-dominant groups are not forced to completely assimilate the dominant culture.

The Behavior of Multicultural Movements

Multicultural movements operate at multiple levels. Some political movements institutionalized multiculturalism in the national government. A number of Southeast Asian nations have created policies that emphasize the representation of multiple groups. Following a period when Chinese ethnics dominated, the Malaysian government created a 1963 policy that formally recognized non-Chinese groups and gave them power. A very well known example is Canada, which has formally recognized multiple cultures for decades. Not only are the French speaking Quebecois recognized, but so are indigenous groups and various immigrant communities (Driedger 1996).

Multicultural movements also target civil institutions. In the 1980s, for example, multiculturalists targeted American schools (Binder 2002). The principle argument was that American schools had systematically ignored or minimized the history and culture of various ethnic groups, such as African Americans, Native Americans, and Chicanos. The solution was to thoroughly revise school curricula, especially in history and languages. At the primary and secondary level, multiculturalists demanded that schools employ textbooks showing the accomplishments of non-European individuals (Binder 2002). At the post-secondary level, activists demanded that universities require students take courses exploring the experiences of different ethnic groups and that administrators create ethnic studies programs to conduct research on American ethnic groups (Bryson 2005; Rojas 2007).

The Impact of Multicultural Movements

The success of multicultural movements depends on a number of factors, such as the tactics employed and the openness of the targeted institutions. In studies of educational politics, it has been found that moderate levels of protest are the most likely to lead to implementation multicultural college curricula. Protest that is violent, or that does not occur at all, has a negative
impact on creating multicultural college curricula (Rojas 2006). The culture of the institution appears to matter a great deal as well. If activists can make their proposals consistent with the school’s stated goals, then they are more likely to have the proposals accepted. Radical demands that schools or colleges completely change are ignored. Similarly, multicultural movements who find allies within institutions are also likely to experience success (Binder 2002).

The long term impact of multicultural movements on individuals is unclear. For example, even though a number of universities have multicultural course requirements, there is almost no research on whether such courses significantly change students’ attitudes or academic experiences. One exception is Yamane’s (2004) discussion of multicultural university curricula. Yamane suggests that multicultural course requirements might be a policy that mitigates vocationalism in the university. Ethnic studies majors, unlike other liberal arts majors, have not decreased relative to business. Similarly, there is little research in political science asking if state sanctioned multiculturalism decreases ethnic tensions within a country. However, it is clear that there are lasting organizational impacts. Multicultural policies regarding languages and ethnic rights remain in many countries and they are enforced. Despite criticisms, ethnic studies ideas are now found in many school curricula, whether it be in history books or in the novels assigned in reading classes. Governments often have ethnic caucuses, such as the Black Congressional caucus, that continue to have influence.

**Opposition to Multiculturalism**

Like most movements, multiculturalism has spawned its own counter-movements. In the United States, there are associations of university professors who oppose campus multiculturalism and espouse a return to classical teaching. Political parties have arisen to combat multiculturalism and associated group rights. These parties are often populist and traditionalist in orientation and target immigrant groups. The Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid) is one such example. Founded in 2005, it opposes dual citizenship, a key feature of multiculturalism in the Netherlands, and continued immigration from Islamic nations.

Many intellectuals have opposed multiculturalism on practical and ethical grounds. Practically, critics claim that multiculturalism exacerbates ethnic tensions by celebrating group differences. Instead, people should be encouraged to adopt the dominant culture. On moral grounds, critics claim that multiculturalism is bad because it “ghettoizes” people and sorts them into low status groups, rather than treat them as autonomous individuals. Other critics note that multiculturalism relies on the assumption that all cultures equally deserve respect. Thus, multiculturalism is criticized from traditionalists and populists, who value the dominant culture, and individualists, who are highly suspicious of group differences.

SEE ALSO: Culture and Social Movements; Ethnic Movements; Racist Social Movements

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


