Unity in Diversity in America

By contemporary biological definition, a community consisting of separate organisms of varying ages, sexes, and skills that are capable of cooperative behavior is deemed by scientists to exhibit something called, “unity in diversity” (Nehru, 2), a phrase coined by the former Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. Upon hearing or reading it, this concept might bring about images of cheerful associations fluently working together in pursuit of some common “good”, despite some rather abundantly clear differences. While this optimistic picture certainly could not be used to describe fully the history of the United States, our notions on the complicated relationship between unity and diversity have been a prevalent part of our identity from the humble origins of our country.

In one of the most vehement and oft repeated phrases in our nations Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson affirms, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” While I am sure most people have surely examined this sentence at one point or another in their lives, its underlying tone and implications are far more revealing than the words themselves. By granting “inalienable rights” to all citizens of America, with no preemptive mention of constraints based on age, personality, status, etc., one cannot deny the concept of unity in diversity professed by our forefathers. Our Declaration of Independence unites what would be considered historically a diverse group of people by granting them identical, inalienable rights, and henceforth labels all men as having
been created equal. While “men” does indeed refer to about half the population on Earth, they are nonetheless declared to be seen as equal in the eyes of the United States government regardless of income, social status, influence, etc. This exposes the ardent paradox of American society: the ebb and flow between unity and diversity that is eminent throughout our democracy. Our nation has been founded upon the immense value that lies in a union of peoples who are inherently different from each other, and this in and of itself is the point of an extant republic.

However, to go so far as to say that the United States was and is a country that celebrates diversity is far too idealistic. Perhaps the most obvious and effective counterexamples would be America’s long standing relationships and attitudes regarding both gender and race in America. A woman’s worth and rights were tied shamelessly to her husband throughout American history, as she was barred from owning property, serving on juries, and exercising her ability to vote, among a variety of other gross injustices. The Declaration of Independence specifies that all “men” are created equal, rather than “citizens” or even “people”, deftly excluding women, people of color, and all other demographics other than white men. The struggles of American women were overshadowed by the harsher injustices faced by African Americans. In addition to the atrocious tragedies that accompanied slavery, segregation, and continued discrimination, the ongoing damage of these abuses has permanently shaped American society. African Americans are still dealing with the repercussions of such treatment even today because they have been at a disadvantage from the start and still are in today’s society. African Americans are less likely to be successful as a cumulative result of centuries of systematic oppression. Movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Rights Movement largely revolutionized these issues and we have a variety of activists to thank for these advances. The fact that a country that
can profess equality in diversity in its founding documents can allow such blatant oppression to occur based upon the idea that some demographics are not indeed created equal is indicative of the complexity of this issue. However, in a sense America did not promise that said diversity would not be controversial. On the contrary it allowed such diversity for the sole purpose of furthering our idea of an effective, purposeful Republic.

The dynamic equilibrium that exists between our notions of equality and our diversified ideals is a uniquely American paradox that continues to greatly impact our modern society and the world today. America’s Declaration of Independence declares all men created equal with certain inalienable rights not because it is a country without racism, sexism and other prejudices, but because a variety of viewpoints and the power to express them to others is the driving force behind a constitutional Republic. This is reflected in the monotonous houses of suburbia, the grit of the urban jungle and her ghettos, rural towns, and perhaps most prevalently in Washington. The fact that people representing so many differences in opinion have the power to express them is the future our forefathers envisioned. In the words of playwright Eugene Ionesco, “Ideologies separate us. Dreams and anguish bring us together” (Demakis, 85).
Bibliography

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