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# The Hubris of the Master Chefs of Diversity Stew

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# The Hubris of the Master Chefs of Diversity Stew

## **Abstract**

This article discusses the dangers of pursuing diversity, be it in the workplace, in a student body, or in a society, in a manner that puts a high level of control in the hands of a few experts using a specific "recipe". These masters of diversity may pose serious threats to some basic principles that most Americans hold to be essential components of what it means to be free, self-determining individuals.

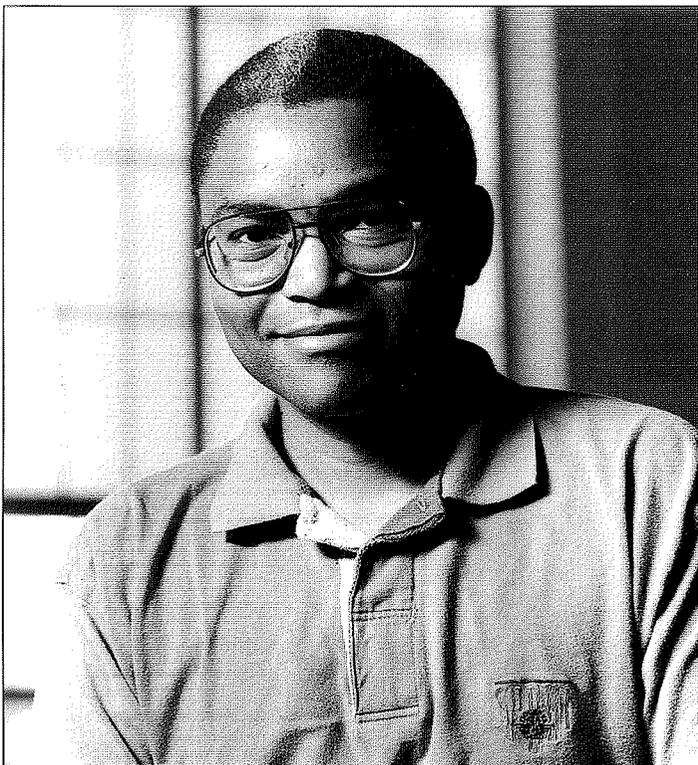
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# The hubris of the master chefs of diversity stew



ROB LEVINE

one source of my addiction: I'm enthralled by the chef's magical power to transform raw ingredients in wondrous ways to produce a host of flavors, textures, and colors. Every dish appears to be a spontaneous creation, resulting from adding a dash of this, a smidgen of that, followed by a half cup of something else.

How wonderful life would be if only people, their perceptions, thoughts, and emotions were as easily controlled and predictable as those wonderful dishes I see on public television. Just think: all of this in 30 minutes or less!

By Michael K. Jordan

**S**INCE A GREAT DEAL of public discourse on social issues is confessional and focuses on feelings rather than thought, I'll begin with an embarrassing disclosure about myself. Hi, my name is Michael, and I'm addicted to watching cooking shows on public television. I'm not hooked on any particular show. Any show will suffice, as long as it has detailed explanations of how to prepare meals and includes close-ups of the food during all stages of preparation.

The cause of my addiction? I'm not really sure. It may have something to do with the late morning or early afternoon broadcast time of these shows. I'm normally famished by one o'clock.

But months of personal struggle and introspection have enabled me to identify

What does this have to do with diversity? Plenty, I think. I don't claim any expertise concerning all the approaches used in creating diversity in any given social setting — whether admissions policies at law schools, hiring policies in the workplace, or one's choice of friends. There is, however, a common theme that runs through many of the arguments and methodologies offered to "promote diversity." I discovered this theme when I realized that the source of my addiction to cooking shows was my admiration for how much power the *chef* possesses.

Everything is so orderly and predictable. No surprises. Like the master chefs, advocates of diversity view their goal as the controlled combining of people (the ingredients) in various combinations to produce particular results (meals) that are pleasing to the eye and palate (socially acceptable and statistically appropriate results).

Neat. Orderly. No surprises. And in 30 minutes or less.

Regardless of how well intentioned our social chefs may be, the problem is that people are not objects, and the prescribed process inevitably obliterates individuality. A recipe requires a dash of cinnamon because cinnamon has a particular and distinctive flavor. But the spice itself is fungible. Whether it's acquired from one source or another isn't important, because it need only be the "highly aromatic bark of any of several trees (genus *Cinnamomum*) of the laurel family...."

**B**UT WHEN the master chefs of diversity apply this approach in the kitchen that we call society, individuals are reified. That is, categories like black and white are treated as if one were dealing with cinnamon. A person is either bark from a particular tree and will have the distinctive and desired characteristics needed in the recipe, or he is not. It's that simple. Of course, this assumes that like *cinnamomum* bark, every individual member of the group needed in the social prescription possesses the essential trait that identifies him or her as a member of the group.

One's identity thus is tied to characteristics viewed by the master chef as essential for the recipe. Victor Anderson in his book *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (Continuum Publishing Co., 1995)

refers to this as "ontological blackness" and "categorical racism."

But this epicurean social engineering isn't limited to race. Some recipes require a little thyme or other herbs and spices. Regardless of the ingredient, the approach is the same. Individual identities are obliterated in favor of assumptions about *group traits*. Moreover, the power to identify and select desirable traits is concentrated in the hands of a limited number of master chefs.

There's yet another unsettling aspect to "social cookin'" of this type. I've noticed that some chefs are in favor of "diversity stew" in certain settings but not in others.

I also have a sweet tooth — another addiction? I could eat sweet items during

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every course of every meal. But I've learned from the masters that that's inappropriate and suggests a plebeian palate. A well-planned meal requires an assortment of aromas, flavors, colors, and textures. There are, however, instances in which a sweet tooth may be indulged — and perhaps sated — during several if not all of the courses of a meal. The issue is which flavor, color, or texture is appropriate during which course. That decision rests within the sound discretion and experience of the master chef.

I've seen the same phenomenon when the diversity stew pot is put to the boil. Some chefs strongly favor diversity in the workplace. They have several recipes for a spicy workplace appetizer. But then we get to the next course of the same meal and find that the chef has decided that the same or a similar flavor, color, or texture now is inappropriate.

A deliciously spicy *workplace* concoction is wonderful, but the same principle doesn't apply when the chef is examining his or her *personal* circumstances, such as his neighborhood, friends, or church. The person who adds spice to the workplace is seen as an unwanted or perhaps even harmful ingredient in the chef's neighborhood.

Now I'm not suggesting that people should be forced to experience every flavor or every food group during every meal 365 days a year. I'm simply suggesting that the masters of social culinary diversity acknowledge their own limitations. A spicy and diverse workplace and a bland neighborhood may reflect nothing more than their narrow self-interested gastronomical preferences, rather than some transcendent epicurean truth.

Which brings me to my last and most important point. The culinary masters of diversity, no matter how well intentioned, pose serious threats to some basic principles that most Americans — even the masters — hold to be essential components of what it means to be free, self-determining individuals.

The masters assume they possess a high degree of knowledge and control of the social stew we call society. I attribute their hubris to several decades of living under the ethos of the social sciences, which has led us to believe that individuals are nothing more than the sum total of their environment. It has become an article of

faith that intelligent and reliable predictions can be made about people's behavior based upon visible traits or known social experiences. "Tell me what you've seen, and I can tell you who you are." Or is it "... who I think you *ought* to be"?

Chefs who are trained in the high art of social gastronomy and have devoted years to cultivating a refined social palate can comprehend, control, and predict people's behavior. Armed with this knowledge, they need only blend people in controlled amounts to produce the type of "stew" most pleasing to the palate. But that deterministic view of human behavior and soci-

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ety is at odds with the way people and societies operate. Moreover, it's at odds with some very basic assumptions undergirding our concept of liberalism — the classical kind.

Liberalism, as we have come to define and practice it in this country, is based upon the notion that society rations opportunities to achieve unequal levels of success. Inequality of results — including success — is not deemed to be unjust and is indeed accepted, even by the master chefs, if there has been fair competition between autonomous self-determining individuals. But here lies the inherent contradiction in the chefs' recipes for diversity stew.

Competition is fair as long as it complies with the *chefs'* conception of whether each individual's background has placed him or her in a position where he can compete on a fair basis. Otherwise, the chef compensates by adjusting the ingredients — by excluding some and/or increasing the proportions of others. Only the chefs themselves seem free from manipulation and constraint due to the dictates of others. Most of us are quick to notice how this approach concentrates a tremendous amount of power in the hands of the mas-

ters of good taste. If you're a chef or one willing to eat what they serve up based upon their representation that this is "good for you," it's a pretty good deal.

I guess that explains how it's possible for a chef to favor one combination of ingredients and flavors for one course of a meal and reject it for another. Diversity in a workplace or school is okay but isn't desirable — or isn't much thought about — if the chef lives in a segregated neighborhood. One tastes better than the other. Apparently, the competition that produced the result in one setting is acceptable, while the other isn't.

Or, this apparent inconsistency may reflect the simple proposition that success breeds mistrust and misunderstanding among those in need of enlightenment. Experts are charged with the responsibility of practicing, inculcating, and preserving the secrets of their arts. They must ignore protestations and the charge of hypocrisy from those bearing the burden of experiencing and learning the art under their tutelage. Every master is compelled to enforce an exacting regimen upon laypersons, no matter how painful it is for us or how painless it may be for the master. Those of us on the receiv-

ing end of this expertise must work toward understanding that for culinary aesthetes, imposing burdens on others is one of the rewards of success.

**THIS STATE OF AFFAIRS** wouldn't be so troubling if we were merely blending spices, not human beings. I often vigorously disagree with the dining suggestions offered by those chefs on public television. But as far as I can tell, neither they nor I have suffered any visible or psychic harm. But entering the social kitchen with a book of ideologically-based recipes that equate people with cinnamon and justify the arrogation of a high degree of control in the hands of a select group of culinary experts is a threat to *everyone's* individuality and freedom. It doesn't require too much reflection to compose a list of chefs from throughout the ages who knew they had the perfect recipe, if only they could find enough of "this" or totally eliminate "that" from society.

We'll never have a shortage of experts with sufficient good taste and knowledge to tell us what we ought to eat. I only hope we'll always have at least an equal number of people who recognize that as nothing more than hubris. ■