While the United States and Britain are commonly understood as multicultural capitalist democracies, they differ in the role that diversity has played in the popular imagination as well as on university campuses. In what follows I discuss the history of diversity as it is commonly understood in the United States and Britain, with particular attention to how the national contexts have shaped cultures of diversity in higher education, comparing the cases throughout. I show that while both countries have dealt with critiques of diversity and multiculturalism in the civic sphere, in the United States these debates have often spilled onto high-status university campuses, while similar British campuses have not seen the same level of public critique related to diversity and multiculturalism. At low-prestige universities, in both contexts minority students are overrepresented. On the one hand, the expansion of this sphere may be a source of increased opportunities for ethnic minority students in higher education; on the other hand, the lower completion rates and levels of prestige suggest that minority students are not benefitting from the just rewards of university education when shunted to lower-level institutions. I conclude with some areas for further research and refinement in the literature on diversity in higher education in comparative perspective.

The United States

Prior to the 1950s, racial segregation and legally enforced inequality were the norm in the United States, rooted in the former slave economy that legally ended in the nineteenth century. While southern African Americans moved to northern industrial cities for work in large numbers during the early twentieth century’s Great Migration in search of a less oppressive racial system as well as economic opportunities, they continued to face many hardships, experiencing racial discrimination far beyond that experienced by European immigrant groups (Lieberson 1980). Further, federal social support policies systematically excluded them while providing mechanisms for poor whites to experience social mobility, such as the policies of red-lining that prevented African Americans from obtaining loans for housing; the GI Bill that enabled working class whites to enter college during the era of higher education expansion; and more.

Although African Americans experienced systematic oppression and exclusion, the United States has been a nation of immigrants, both demographically with waves of immigrants since...
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Its inception, and in its identity as a nation. Foner (2005) has documented the historical and contemporary construction of the ideal immigrant forefathers of the United States, in contrast to European erasure of immigration history in the popular imagination. More than 40 years ago, Milton Gordon (1964) wrote *Assimilation in American Life*, in which he suggested that the country had shifted from an ideology of assimilation – the American “melting pot” – to one of “cultural pluralism.” This shift was from a model in which immigrants and their children would blend into a uniquely American culture, to one in which ethnic communities would maintain their ethnic cultures. Immigrants and their descendants in the United States have benefited from the hard-earned victories of the African American-led Civil Rights Movement. Even more so today than when Gordon wrote his famous book, the United States is understood to have largely accepted diversity and multiculturalism under the model of cultural pluralism, at least in a soft sense. This history has led contemporary Americans broadly to support ethnic identities: when asked if it is better for America for different racial and ethnic groups to maintain their cultures or for them to change so that they blend into the larger society, 32 per cent of Americans support the maintenance of cultures (GSS 2000); when Britons were asked the same question, just 20 per cent supported the maintenance of cultures (Park 2003). Furthermore, 54 per cent of Britons preferred that minorities adapt and blend, in contrast to just 37 per cent of Americans. Recent research demonstrates that in fact many Americans define what it means to be American as diverse or multicultural (Schildkraut 2011), and that in fact part of identity as a modern, moral self in the United States is to be multicultural (Voyer 2011). To be sure, immigrants and their children have experienced systematic discrimination and racism in the United States, whether at the turn of the last century (Alba and Nee 2003) or today (Telles and Ortiz 2008). Scholars should thus pay attention to the deep complexity of race, ethnicity, immigration, and social exclusion in the United States.

When the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* US Supreme Court decision forbidding segregated schools was made, US higher education was undergoing massive expansion, and the 1944 GI Bill allowed many working class whites to take advantage of the increased availability of higher education. Eventually, in the post-segregation era, minority students would be overrepresented in community colleges. Today, African Americans and Latinos comprise 33 per cent of the US college-age population, but 15 per cent of students at selective colleges and 37 per cent of students at non-selective two- and four-year colleges (Carnevale and Strohl 2013). Some see this development as evidence that community colleges are an important means for social mobility among racial minorities, while others lament the “diverted dream” of lower-level education and resources available to students at non-selective institutions, many of whom eventually drop out altogether (Brint and Karabel 1989).

The 1960s witnessed federal legislation to end legally racial discrimination and segregation, while also providing for social mobility for middle class blacks through affirmative action policies and federal financial aid for college. The 1960s Civil Rights Movement had a profound influence on college campuses. Open admissions to the City University of New York resulted in 1970 from protests led by black and Puerto Rican students over the underrepresentation of minority students on the CUNY campuses. This led to significant increases in diversity on those campuses. On four-year campuses with selective admissions, affirmative action policies initiated in the 1960s increased the percentage of black and Latino students on campus. Unlike solutions to the problem of underrepresentation in other national contexts in which quotas are used (e.g. Brazil and India), the holistic admissions process already in place at elite US universities allowed for race to become part of a larger evaluation of individuals’ merit using a holistic view (Chen and Stulberg 2008).
The landmark *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* Supreme Court case in 1978 established the legality of diversity as a “compelling interest” for universities, allowing for some (limited) types of affirmative action. This decision established the goal of expanded world views through racial diversity as a compelling state interest in the United States. In addition, the post-Civil Rights Era led to student demands for African American studies and ethnic studies departments; institutional support for black and Latino student groups; and minority student centers (Chen 2000). Most of these institutions endured – today, 9 per cent of four-year colleges have a department of African American studies, as do all Ivy League universities. These courses are attended by minority and white students alike: 41 per cent of college seniors report having taken an ethnic studies course in college, and it is just as common for undergraduates to participate in an ethnic or racial student organization as it is to join a sorority/fraternity (Saenz and Barrera 2007). Campus cultures subsequently changed. For example, by 2005 a majority of undergraduates in the United States favored prohibitions on racist or sexist speech on campus (ibid.). Overall, college professors tend to be more liberal than other Americans (Gross and Fosse 2012), leading some conservatives to claim that faculty views contribute unwarranted support for identity politics and diversity-related programming among their students.

A new and growing body of research studies the impact of campus diversity and other diversity-related campus programming on students’ racial attitudes, academic outcomes, and more (e.g. Sidanius et al. 2008). These studies generally find positive impacts, supporting Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis that, under the right conditions, intergroup contact will reduce prejudice.

Overall, the discourse on diversity on US university campuses has expanded beyond race, to include ethnicity, gender (including transgender identities), class, sexuality, learning (dis)ability, political identity, and more. On the one hand, the expansion can lead to a more inclusive university. On the other hand, it may equate the resource and power differences between, for example, white and black Americans as similar to those between liberal- and conservative-identified students. That is, the “diversity” rationale for affirmative action bases race-based considerations in admissions on the need for a diverse learning environment, while downplaying the resource and power differences between race groups (Berrey 2011), preventing students from easily understanding structural racism or other forms of racial injustice that continue to plague American society. Students at elite universities espouse the “diverse learning environment” justification for a value for diversity as important to the university experience. This is because it leads to a better learning environment for the majority-group individual, rather than for its attention to the rights of and disadvantages faced by minority groups. It signals a shift from diversity as highlighting inequality between groups in society to diversity as a cosmopolitan celebration of individual differences.

University campuses have also been a major site for the so-called “culture wars,” in which debates about racial justice, affirmative action, multiculturalism, free speech, and more have played themselves out, often on the national stage (Arthur and Shapiro 1995). These debates have manifested themselves in discussions over university curricula (Rojas 2007), affirmative action in admissions (Moore and Bell 2011), conceptions of merit, and more (for the most prominent critiques, see D’Souza 1991). This has been especially true on elite campuses, and the most high-profile controversies over multiculturalism often take place on elite campuses (Bryson 2005). Today, national conservative organizations contribute significant financial resources to conservative student groups, in an effort to foreground conservative perspectives on, among other things, multiculturalism and diversity (Binder and Wood 2013).
Anti-diversity backlash has not been confined to college campuses. In the United States Hispanic immigrants have been targeted as a major social problem, often perceived to be collectively undocumented. Samuel Huntington (2004) has suggested that the large number of Hispanics in the United States, their cultural impact, and significant undocumented migration from Latin America are leading to a fracturing of American national identity, in part due to the growing use of Spanish in some areas. In 1996, voters in California passed Proposition 209, which banned affirmative action, leading to a precipitous decline in the percentage of black and Latino students on University of California campuses; other states followed with similar state referenda. Some studies are starting to evaluate the impact of the end of affirmative action on campuses in those states, beyond the dramatic decline in numbers of black and Latino students (e.g. see Beasley 2011); still, the long-term impact of the increasing number of affirmative action bans on college campuses remains to be seen.

Great Britain

Similar to the United States, Britain identifies as a multicultural society. Britain’s ethnic and racial diversity is rooted in migration from the Commonwealth, especially South Asia and the Caribbean. Low-skilled workers came in large numbers during the 1950s to fulfill jobs in industry, while many professionals came to take up roles in the newly formed National Health Service; this wave of immigration from the former Empire became increasingly restricted, starting in the 1960s. Because of this early history, a significant third generation exists in Britain, while the third generation in the United States from the post-1965 wave of immigration is still quite young.

British multiculturalism stemmed from a 1950s government decision to allow immigrant communities — especially those relating to Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis — to continue their cultural practices that sometimes conflicted with dominant British society. This agreement began to unravel during the “Rushdie affair,” when Muslim protesters burned copies of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, while British writers fiercely defended Rushdie’s right to satirize Islam without threats to his life. Over time, the implicit link between Islam and terrorism has grown in the public eye in Britain, fueled by the World Trade Center attacks in 2001 and especially the London Underground bombings of 2005. Due to anti-Muslim sentiments rooted in perceptions of cultural difference, Modood (1996) argues that the American model of race discourse, focusing on skin color, does not suit the British context, where, for example, discrimination can be stronger towards white Muslims than towards black West Indians.

In the past few years Britain has undergone a backlash against multiculturalism, in favor of policies of “community cohesion” (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). According to some politicians, journalists, and public opinion, policies of multiculturalism — allowing ethnic minorities to maintain their distinct cultures — have led to a fractured society, and one in which cultural practices antithetical to democracy, such as gender inequality and radical preaching in mosques, have been allowed to continue. Some suggest that the 7/7 London Underground bombings (and subsequent attempts) are in fact results of the lack of Muslim integration and consequent radicalization. The perceived British “multiculturalism” mode of incorporation has led to concern about the need to define a uniquely British identity and to calls for parameters for assimilation expected of immigrant communities to be defined. These calls have come not only from the right end of the political spectrum, but also from the left, including from former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and the former Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Trevor Phillips. In 2005–6, the Labour Government changed Britain’s citizenship laws, instituting requirements that naturalizing residents demonstrate a command of English and pass an exam on “Life in the UK.”
British public opinion has also moved toward assimilation and away from multiculturalism, even among politically liberal groups. Since the mid-1990s, this is evident in successive years of the British Social Attitudes Survey (see www.natcen.ac.uk). The number of British citizens in favour of the maintenance of immigrants’ customs has declined, while the proportion supporting immigrant adaptation has increased; at the same time, general British attitudes have become more skeptical of immigrants’ positive contributions to the economy, and survey respondents have been more prone to thinking that immigrants increase crime. Since 2002, Britons increasingly feel that ethnic minorities need to “demonstrate a real commitment to [Britain] before they can be considered British” (Ipsos MORI 2006).

In 1992 the landscape of British higher education changed, with the transformation of Britain’s former polytechnics into universities; this increased the number of universities in Britain by over 50 per cent. Although this was an attempt to democratize higher education, the most recent research on diversity and higher education in Britain finds that, while racial minorities are overrepresented in the “new” universities (former polytechnics), which have lower status, they are underrepresented in the high-prestige “Russell Group” universities. The former polytechnics share with US community colleges their relatively low prestige, relatively high numbers of minority students, and relatively high dropout rates (Modood 2006). While their transformation into fully fledged universities allowed for greater numbers of minority students to obtain university degrees, like associated degree-granting community colleges in the United States, some argue that this is the mechanism by which the same students are systematically excluded from more prestigious British universities.

In terms of elite “Russell Group” universities in Britain, black Britons and some Asian groups are underrepresented, and recent research suggests a bias in favor of white students in admissions among students with similar qualifications who apply (Boliver 2013). Although they employ very different criteria in admissions, in both Britain and the United States elite universities have often been criticized for the underrepresentation of both working class students (Vasagar 2010; Vasagar et al. 2010) and US- and UK-born racial minorities (Lammy 2010). While Teles (1998) explains the lack of affirmative action overall in Britain, the collegiate structure of Oxford and Cambridge (Oxbridge) in particular may prevent these universities from adopting policies such as affirmative action. Nevertheless, new British government legislation requires universities to enter into “widening participation” agreements with the government if they want to maintain federal funding (UK Office for Fair Access 2012). These agreements are explicit plans for diversifying the student body, and they most often consider geographic representation as well as social class, as measured by type of high school (state versus private). Universities are also starting to utilize “contextual” information on applicants, such as the average GCSE scores in the applicant’s secondary school, or the percentage of families living in poverty in an applicant’s neighborhood. Hence, British universities may be moving toward greater emphasis on ensuring that students of all backgrounds are represented on campus, regardless of their prior educational opportunities. The new widening participation agreements may quicken the pace of change toward more access and inclusion that began 50 years ago at Oxford.

Overall, perhaps because British universities, whether old or new, have not experienced the race-related protests that US universities did, little infrastructure related to diversity exists on British university campuses. In contrast to the United States, where high-profile attacks on multiculturalism often target higher education, high-profile public attacks on diversity and multiculturalism in Britain have not targeted British university campuses during times of criticism of multiculturalism. In comparison, attacks on multiculturalism in the United States seem inevitably to turn to the liberal leanings of university professors, affirmative action in selective
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universities’ admissions, and other practices in higher education. Amidst numerous politicians calling for the scaling back of British multiculturalism in recent years, the one parliamentary attack on higher education came from David Lammy (Member of Parliament for Tottenham since 2000), who cited the very low numbers of British Afro-Caribbean students on Oxford’s campus (in 2010), sparking a public debate about the roots of the underrepresentation, and whose responsibility it was to change it.

What explains this difference? Elite British universities, despite their public funding, continue to be “socially buffered” to a large extent, whereas elite US universities, mostly private, tend to be “socially embedded” (Ramirez 2006). That is, while, for example, Oxford transformed during the mid-twentieth century from an institution serving the aristocratic elite to one that is “democratic elitist” with an emphasis on meritocracy in a narrow sense, it has retained its raison d’être as an intellectual center. In contrast, even the most elite US universities have always thought of themselves as playing a more civic role, perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the early history of professional schools at many of them. Thus, for example, students at elite US universities frequently expect their universities to address inequality of educational opportunities when making admissions decisions, while their counterparts at elite UK universities most often express concern that this type of consideration would compromise the status and role of their universities.

Conclusion

I have synthesized the literature on diversity in higher education in the United States and Britain, with particular attention to the development of diversity in a national context. Overall, comparing diversity-related practices, understandings, and policies reveals important contextual forces that shape diversity work in education and beyond. Unexpected findings arise when comparing educational institutions and the role that diversity has played and continues to play within them. Future research should examine the impact of social contexts around diversity in higher education institutions across other national boundaries, with an eye toward promoting equity in education. That is, by looking outside of national contexts, researchers may be able to identify promising practices and mechanisms for promoting access to higher education for non-traditional students. Further, the interplay between national discourses around diversity and university practices, protests, and structures is understudied, yet revealing, as I have shown. The junction between national cultures of diversity and institutional practices around diversity also allows researchers to see how national ideologies and rhetoric are engaged by individual actors.

Notes

1 Glazer (1997) has suggested that in fact a desire to distance the majority from African Americans has led to the valorization of immigrants in the United States.

2 There is some revival of the notion of assimilation among American academics, with the key question of “assimilation to what?” driving debates (Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Zhou 1993). Still, these debates take into account the influence of ethnic groups on the majority and on American society more broadly.

3 During the 1920s, in an effort to limit the numbers of admitted Jewish students, Ivy League universities added “character” to their admissions criteria. This exclusionary practice, ironically, paved the way for holistic admissions, which takes race into consideration.

4 Given the recent decision in Fisher v. Texas, the future of race-based affirmative action in higher education admissions remains to be seen.

5 Some have critiqued this “diversity rationale” for its inattention to resource differences between groups (Berrey 2011; Yosso et al. 2004).
6 Note that the US Supreme Court has recently agreed to hear a challenge to the Michigan state ban on affirmative action; the decision in this case may affect bans in other states.

7 Many also describe Britain as a class-based society, in contrast to the United States being race based (for example, see Foner 2005; Katzenelson 1973; Modood 1996). Still, there is a significant literature in Britain on racial exclusion (Gilroy 1987; Majors et al. 2001) and cultural/ethnic exclusion (Modood 2005).

8 These concerns are not limited to Britain, and indeed can be found in France (Bowen 2007), the Netherlands (Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007), and elsewhere in Europe.

References


