In The Melting Pot  
Resolutional Overview by Mark Csoros



Apart from a few rare exceptions, like Japan during its 220 year isolatory *Sakoku* policy, remote jungle tribes, and totalitarian regimes like North Korea, human cultures have always mixed and intermingled. The Old Testament gives explicit instructions on how to treat sojourners and foreigners, the study of human anthropology is full of cultural contact, and hospitality towards the “other” is basic manners all over the world. This year’s topic revolves around some fascinating questions. How should cultures treat those from different backgrounds? Can people ever really assimilate into a new culture? In a world of immigration crises, refugees, and globalization, does our mindset need to shift? If America is a melting pot, and an increasing number of countries are too, have assimilation and multiculturalism become the same thing? This overview isn’t designed to answer those questions, but rather to give you a starting point to answer those questions yourself. Part 1 of this article defines the key terms of the resolution and (hopefully) provides a foundational understanding of the clash. Part II contains some best practices to adopt and mistakes to avoid, to help guide your research through a topic that can turn unexpectedly complicated exceptionally quickly. Let’s git goin’.

# Part I: Key Terms and Their Definitions

## Culture

Merriam-Webster defines culture thusly, with accompanying examples in parentheses:

*“a* ***:*** *the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group. also****:****the characteristic features of everyday existence - such as diversions or a way of life - shared by people in a place or time. (popular culture. Southern culture)*

*b* ***:****the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization. (a corporate culture focused on the bottom line)*

*c* ***:****the set of values,*[*conventions*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/convention)*, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic. (studying the effect of computers on print culture. Changing the culture of materialism will take time …— Peggy O'Mara)*

*d* ***:****the*[*integrated*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrate)*pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.”* [[1]](#footnote-1)

A culture, then, is the sum (note the “ands” in every definition except c) of the beliefs, values, goals, traits, and behaviors of a group. Depending on the context, inclusion in one of these groups could be determined by when or where you’re born, what you look like, what government you live under, what you believe, or what you do. This means that “culture” as a term, can refer to a lot of different things.

## Assimilation

Merriam-Webster says that:

“Assimilation*refers to the process through which individuals and groups of differing heritages acquire the basic habits, attitudes, and mode of life of an embracing culture.”* [[2]](#footnote-2)

**That’s pretty straightforward, but there are two key aspects here. First, the word “process” means that assimilation isn’t a fixed state of being, but rather an evolution. Second, the term “differing heritages” is key. Assimilation definitionally assumes conflict, or at least differences, between inherited customs and mindsets.**

**Complementing Webster, the Encyclopedia Britannica says that assimilation is:**

*“in anthropology and sociology, the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant*[*culture*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture)*of a society. The process of*[*assimilating*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assimilating)*involves taking on the traits of the dominant culture to such a degree that the assimilating group becomes socially indistinguishable from other members of the society.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

**This definition helps us by pointing out the result of finished assimilation**. Eventually, assimilated people would be socially indistinguishable from the rest of the culture. It’s not clear that full assimilation has ever occurred, at least in modern times, but we do have interesting picture of what that might look like.

Our last definition of assimilation, my personal favorite, is from the Migration Policy Institute:

*“Assimilation, sometimes known as integration or incorporation, is the process by which the characteristics of members of immigrant groups and host societies come to resemble one another. That process, which has both economic and sociocultural dimensions, begins with the immigrant generation and continues through the second generation and beyond.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

## Multiculturalism

Let’s hear once again from Merriam-Webster. It defines multiculturalism as:

*“cultural pluralism or diversity (as within a society, an organization, or an educational institution)*

***:*** *a*[*multicultural*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/multicultural)*social state or a doctrine or policy that promotes or advocates such a state.”[[5]](#footnote-5)*

So, we have to define cultural pluralism before we can really understand multiculturalism. The Oxford Companion to United States History writes that cultural pluralism:

*“Is both a social reality and a social theory that emphasizes the retention of ethnic culture and customs by the diverse ethnic groups making up American society.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Ordinarily, I wouldn’t use a society-specific definition in LD, but in this case we can reasonably expand the definition to cover any country with diverse culture groups, since it would have been illogical for a U.S. history source to define the concept outside the scope of its course material. When we put the definitions of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism together, we get the following: multiculturalism occurs when a society places emphasis on newcomers retaining the cultural habits they brought with them, instead of adopting the customs of the dominant culture. The Encyclopedia Britannica adds a bit more to the concept, defining multiculturalism as:

*“the view that*[*cultures*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultures)*, races, and*[*ethnicities*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethnicities)*, particularly those of*[*minority*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/minority)*groups, deserve special acknowledgement of their differences within a dominant political*[*culture*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture)*.*

*That acknowledgement can take the forms of recognition of contributions to the cultural life of the political*[*community*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community)*as a whole, a demand for special protection under the law for certain cultural groups, or*[*autonomous*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autonomous)*rights of*[*governance*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/governance)*for certain cultures. Multiculturalism is both a response to the fact of cultural*[*pluralism*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/pluralism-politics)*in modern*[*democracies*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracies)*and a way of compensating cultural groups for past exclusion,*[*discrimination*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discrimination)*, and oppression…Multiculturalism seeks the inclusion of the views and contributions of diverse members of society while maintaining respect for their differences and withholding the demand for their assimilation into the dominant culture.”[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Of the two definitions in this section, I prefer the Encyclopedia’s, though I would probably only use the first and last sentences for a case definition. The Encyclopedia definition emphasizes that multiculturalism means special acknowledgments, not just toleration of minority cultures. It also helps set multiculturalism in direct conflict with assimilation, which is useful for determining conflict in the resolution. With our terms defined, we’re on to Part II.

# Part II: What To Be Mindful Of

There are a couple things to look out for when working with this resolution which is why I’ve entitled the section with a precaution.

## Resolutional Limits

If you’ll think back to our definition of culture, we discussed how wide-ranging and inclusive the term is. Almost any group of people who share at least one trait could, hypothetically, be considered a culture. America, the Church, a church, an Indian tribe, the Russian Czars, homeschooled debaters, lawyers, and Hello Kitty enthusiasts could all definitionally be cultures.

But, not every culture can be applied to this resolution. Some cultures can’t value assimilation, multiculturalism, or either of them. Church culture consists entirely of belief in Christianity. Therefore, the Church can’t assimilate non-Christians (you’re either Christian and in the culture or non-Christian and not), nor can it be multicultural (we can’t have atheists having a separate service in the back pews, can we?). The Czars could assimilate families through intermarriage, but since inclusion in that culture stemmed from direct hereditary succession, multiculturalism wasn’t an option. There’s no assimilation process for homeschool debate culture, if you’re homeschooled and you compete in speech and debate, you automatically qualify, no assimilation needed. But the differences between, say, LD culture and TP culture prove that Stoa is a multicultural organization.

So, when writing cases and applications, make sure that you’re dealing with appropriate examples of culture. The resolution may not say “when in conflict”, but it’s still illogical to present scenarios where it’s impossible to value one side of the resolution. Applications that include nation-states, independent territories, culturally important institutions (HSBCs, for example), or even regions or areas with distinct cultural differences (Brooklyn, Texas, the Basque region) are likely fair game.

## Related, Controversial, and Potentially Misused Terms

Assimilation, in the context of this resolution, is a scholarly term with a few different interpretations and related terms. Acculturation and amalgamation are the two terms most commonly linked to assimilation, so let’s do some digging to find out what they mean. In the following passages, I’ve emphasized our key words, for ease of reading. Merriam-Webster says that:

**“Acculturation***is one of several forms of culture contact, and has a couple of closely related terms, including***assimilation***and***amalgamation***. Although all three of these words refer to changes due to contact between different cultures, there are notable differences between them.***Acculturation***is often tied to political conquest or expansion, and is applied to the process of change in beliefs or traditional practices that occurs when the cultural system of one group displaces that of another.* **Assimilation***refers to the process through which individuals and groups of differing heritages acquire the basic habits, attitudes, and mode of life of an embracing culture.***Amalgamation***refers to a blending of cultures, rather than one group eliminating another (***acculturation***) or one group mixing itself into another (***assimilation***).”[[8]](#footnote-8)*

Under this explanation, acculturation means replacing beliefs and traditions, a deeper and more radical process than assimilation. Amalgamation, here, refers to how cultures like the Creole derive from a mix of European and Caribbean culture.

However, not everyone defines these terms identically. Even though the Encyclopedia Britannica and Merriam-Webster have the same basic definition of assimilation, they relate it to other sociological terms differently. The Encyclopedia says that:

*“…***assimilation** *is the most extreme form of*[**acculturation**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/acculturation)*…* **assimilation** *may be compelled through force or undertaken voluntarily….”[[9]](#footnote-9)*

and also that:

*“The effects of*[*culture*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture)*contact are generally characterized under the rubric of*[**acculturation**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/acculturation)*, a term*[*encompassing*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encompassing)*the changes in*[*artifacts*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artifacts)*, customs, and beliefs that result from cross-cultural interaction. Voluntary*[**acculturation**](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acculturation)*, often referred to as incorporation or* **amalgamation***, involves the free borrowing of traits or ideas from another culture. Forced* **acculturation** *can also occur, as when one group is conquered by another and must*[*abide*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abide)*by the stronger group’s customs.”[[10]](#footnote-10)*

A sociological paper published in the Journal of Leisure Research mentions a foundational researcher into assimilation, Milton Gordon, who contradicts the Encyclopedia by classifying acculturation as a part of assimilation, not vice versa. The paper says:

*“Gordon (1964) broke the* **assimilation** *process into seven subprocesses:* **acculturation***, or behavioral assimilation; structural assimilation, or access to societal institutions;* **amalgamation***, or marital assimilation; identificational assimilation; attitude receptional assimilation, or the absence of prejudice; behavior receptional assimilation, or the absence of discrimination; and civic assimilation, or the absence of value and power conflicts. According to Gordon,* **acculturation** *(the first subprocess of* **assimilation***) occurs when an ethnic group's cultural patterns change to those of the host society.”[[11]](#footnote-11)*

If you’re confused, don’t worry. Sociologists can’t even agree on exactly which terms mean what in relation to everything else. The point of this is that you should be very careful when you’re using these terms, framing the resolution, and citing sociological evidence. Make sure that everything you say is resolutionally oriented, and don’t quote evidence from researchers who use conflicting definitions.

# Part III: In Conclusion

This is shaping up to be an enjoyably deep and complex resolution, and I’m excited to see y’all debate it. My hope for you this year, especially with the topic at hand, is that you remember why you compete. The purpose of this competition is to strengthen you against a world that’s trying its best to assimilate you back into a culture of sin. You are part of a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people that God has chosen out of the world to be set apart for Himself. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

1. “Culture.” *Merriam-Webster*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Ibid.](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assimilation#note-1) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/assimilation-society> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/assimilation-models-old-and-new-explaining-long-term-process> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/multiculturalism> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095652889> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/multiculturalism> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assimilation#note-1> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/assimilation-society> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/culture-contact> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/journals/jlr/1998/volume-30/jlr-volume-30-number-1-pp-47-63.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)