

# MULTICULTURALISM: A RECIPE FOR TENSION AND CONFLICT?

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Multiculturalism is an incendiary political topic. Emerging in the 1960s as part of the wider rise of identity politics, multiculturalism came, by the 1980s, to be seen as perhaps the only reliable means of containing the pressures generated by immigration and cultural diversity, its influence extending into North America, Australasia and across much of Europe. However, since the turn of the millennium, and especially since 9/11, the tide has turned against multiculturalism. Mired in deepening controversy, it has been accused of crimes ranging from entrenching social disadvantage to promoting terrorism. At the heart of these debates is the question of its relationship to conflict: is multiculturalism the antidote to tension and conflict, or is it their cause? Has multiculturalism worsened the problem of difference that it set out to solve?

## **Understanding multiculturalism**

Before analysing multiculturalism's relationship to conflict, it is necessary to clarify its nature. What is multiculturalism? What are its defining features? Such questions are difficult to answer because the term 'multiculturalism' has been used in at least three different ways. It has been:

- a *descriptive term* referring to the existence within a society of two or more groups whose beliefs and practices generate a distinctive sense of collective identity;
- a *policy* or *programme* designed to manage the tensions generated by cultural diversity
- an *ideological stance* emphasising the benefits of cultural diversity, based on assumptions about the importance of culture and group affiliation.

However, the use of multiculturalism as a descriptive term is problematic. Not only do perfectly satisfactory alternatives exist (a society could be described as 'multicultural' or as exhibiting a particular level of 'cultural diversity'), but – in common with most other '-isms' – multiculturalism is better used as a normative term; that is, as a term that denotes not what 'is' but what 'should' or 'ought to' be. In other words, rather than describing the *fact* of cultural diversity, multiculturalism should be understood as a collection of ideas about how we should address, and respond to, cultural diversity.

On the other hand, multiculturalism can certainly be used to refer to a policy or programme. The clearest example of this is the Canadian *Multiculturalism Act* (1988), which built on the 1971 declaration that Canada would adopt a multicultural policy by recognising a range of aboriginal, language and minority rights. Similar forms of 'official' multiculturalism can also be found in Australia and New Zealand. It is nevertheless a mistake to treat multiculturalism as *only* a policy or programme. However they are framed, multicultural policies and programmes are never merely legislative constructs; instead, they are a means of giving legislative expression to deeper ideological beliefs, namely beliefs about the link between culture and identity and the need to celebrate cultural diversity.

In this light, multiculturalism is best understood as an ideological stance (even though many dismiss the idea that multiculturalism is a 'fully-fledged' ideology – an allegation sometimes also levelled at nationalism). But what are the core features of the multiculturalist ideological stance? Its central theme is that individual identity is culturally embedded, in that people largely derive their understanding of the world and their framework of moral beliefs from the culture in which they live and develop. Distinctive cultures therefore deserve to be protected or strengthened, particularly when they belong to minority or vulnerable groups.

This, in turn, leads to support for minority or multicultural rights, which in the case of national minorities (also called 'aboriginal', 'native' or 'tribal' peoples, or 'First Nations') may extend to the right to self-government. A distinction is thus sometimes drawn between 'multinational multiculturalism', which operates particularly in Canada, Australia and New Zealand and focuses particularly on the rights of aboriginal or indigenous peoples, and the 'polyethnic multiculturalism' that tends to be found in Europe and addresses the rights of groups that have formed through immigration. Polyethnic rights are essentially confined to a group's right to express and maintain its cultural distinctiveness.

### **Multiculturalism as the antidote to tension and conflict**

Supporters of multiculturalism argue that its chief attraction is that it offers a solution to the challenges of cultural diversity which cannot be addressed in any other way. Only enforced assimilation or the expulsion of ethnic and cultural minorities (repatriation) will re-establish the mono-cultural nation-state of old. Indeed, the case in favour of multiculturalism may have been made irresistible by the advent of globalization and the increase in international migration, and thus cultural diversity, it brings in its wake. But how does multiculturalism solve the challenges of cultural diversity?

Multiculturalists argue that conventional approaches to cultural diversity have led to resentment and profound inequality, creating a political powder keg. This is because minority groups have traditionally been marginalised and subordinated, a process that has occurred either because they have been forced to accept the norms and values of the dominant group (usually the majority community) or because a demeaning, stereotypical or 'inauthentic' identity has been imposed on them. Multiculturalists have, moreover, claimed that the injurious effects of cultural repression - or 'misrecognition' - are more damaging and profound than political and social forms

of repression, as they block minority groups' full participation in society despite the existence of formal guarantees of legal and political equality or attempts to redistribute wealth.

### **Key terms**

**Assimilation** – The process through which immigrant groups lose their cultural distinctiveness and adjust to the values, allegiances and lifestyles of the 'host' society. Assimilation may be either forced or voluntary.

**Authenticity** – The quality of being real or genuine, as opposed to fake or copied. In the case of cultural identity, the claim to authenticity may be difficult or impossible to prove beyond dispute.

**Cultural balkanisation** – The emergence within a common territorial area of a collection of distinct and contending cultural traditions, based on the supposedly quarrelsome history of the Balkans.

**Culture** – Beliefs, values and practices that are passed on from one generation to the next through learning, making culture distinct from nature. 'Culturalism' is the belief that culture is the universal basis for personal and social identity.

**Identity politics** – A style of politics that seeks to counter group marginalisation by embracing a positive and assertive sense of collective identity. Identity politics may orientated around race, gender, sexuality, religion or culture.

**Interculturalism** – Cultural mixing, particularly cross-cultural dialogue designed to counter the tendency within cultures towards self-segregation. Interculturalism is sometimes seen as a threat to multiculturalism.

**Minority rights** – Rights that are 'special', in the sense that they are specific to the groups to which they belong, each minority group having different needs for recognition based on its particular culture, traditions and way of life.

**Multicultural citizenship** – A model of citizenship that takes account of cultural difference, typically through the device minority rights, although there are rival liberal and pluralist conceptions of multicultural citizenship.

**Recognition** – A process of politico-cultural self-assertion, in which subordination is challenged by the reshaping of identity to give the group concerned a sense of (usually publicly proclaimed) pride and self-respect.

**Value pluralism** – The theory that there is no single, overriding conception of the 'good life' but, rather, a number of competing but equally legitimate conceptions. Value pluralism has been associated with ethical relativism.

The solution to cultural repression is what the Canadian political philosopher, Charles Taylor, has called the 'politics of recognition'. This involves a positive endorsement, even celebration, of cultural difference, allowing marginalised groups to assert themselves by claiming an authentic sense of cultural identity. Embracing and proclaiming a positive social identity thus serves as an act of defiance and emancipation, freeing people from others' power to determine their identity. Crucially, recognition in this sense must have a public dimension, involving the establishment of formal rights and immunities for minority groups, in line with the principle of 'differentiated' or multicultural citizenship. By reconciling citizenship with cultural diversity, multiculturalism provides the basis for group integration and thus both civic and social harmony.

## **Multiculturalism as the cause of tension and conflict**

Critics of multiculturalism nevertheless portray it not as the antidote to social and political tension, but rather as its cause. This view has been advanced in a number of different ways. Conservative nationalists, for example, associate cultural diversity with inevitable conflict and instability. This is because, in their view, all stable and successful societies are based on shared values and a common culture, ultimately reflecting the desire of human beings to live with others who share the same values, habits and lifestyles as themselves. Amongst other things, this implies that the advance of multiculturalism is likely to provoke resentment among the majority community, based on the perception that minority groups that fail, or refuse, to assimilate pose a threat to social and national cohesion, and that multicultural policies benefit minority groups at the expense of the majority community.

Feminists, for their part, have linked multiculturalism to conflict on the grounds that minority rights and the politics of recognition serve to preserve and legitimise patriarchal and traditionalist beliefs that systematically disadvantage women (as well gays and lesbians). The sensitivity towards cultural authenticity that multiculturalism breeds therefore upholds structural gender biases and, at best, tempers criticism of practices such as the imposition of female dress codes, female circumcision and even 'honour' killings. From the feminist perspective, multiculturalism may be little more than a concealed attempt to bolster male power and perpetuate female subordination.

A wider criticism levelled at multiculturalism is that, far from fostering integration and harmony, it promotes cultural balkanisation. It does this because the quest for cultural authenticity encourages groups to emphasise what distinguishes them from other groups, rather than what they have in common. In a process sometimes called 'ghettoisation', minority groups thus come to embrace narrow, inward-looking and fossilised cultural identities, inclining them to view other

groups, but especially the majority community, with suspicion and possibly hostility. Such tendencies are perhaps most pronounced when minority cultures are fashioned largely out of religious belief, as their values and practices then seen as sacred and therefore beyond criticism or challenge.

Finally, multiculturalism is associated with tension and conflict on the grounds that it weakens, and may even block, cross-cultural understanding. This is because there may be a basic contradiction between cultural mixing and cultural belonging. The likely consequence of people being encouraged to appreciate other cultures and engage in cross-cultural dialogue is the creation of 'pick-and-mix' cultural identities, which, to whatever degree, detach people from their 'own' culture and cultural group. Hybridity thus wins out over authenticity, particularly as only a *single* cultural tradition can be considered 'authentic'. People's sense of cultural belonging can therefore only be strengthened when checks are placed on 'interculturalism', especially cultural mixing that takes place between groups with quite different power and resources.

### **Divisions within multiculturalism**

However, a simple for and against account of its relationship to conflict may fail to acknowledge multiculturalism's breadth and complexity. In particular, although all sub-traditions within multiculturalism claim to blend diversity with togetherness, liberal multiculturalism has often been seen to place a special emphasis on togetherness, so containing the tendency towards conflict. It does this by qualifying its endorsement of cultural diversity. Liberal multiculturalists are only prepared to tolerate values and social practices that are themselves tolerant; that is, ones that are compatible with freedom and autonomy. This implies that minority rights should be limited to groups which permit members to question, revise and even reject the group itself, and that groups should only be entitled to public recognition if they are open and tolerant and resist authoritarian impulses.

Pluralist multiculturalism, by contrast, appears to place a heavier emphasis on diversity than togetherness. The clearest evidence of this is its willingness to accord non-liberal and even anti-liberal values and practices the same moral status liberal ones. This stance is based on what is called value pluralism, which implies that there are no such things as universal values, liberal or otherwise. Critics of pluralist multiculturalism nevertheless argue that, by treating groups with diametrically opposing views as equally legitimate, it effectively makes civic harmony and social cohesion impossible. Such a claim is based on the assumption that for groups to live together in peace and harmony, they must, at some level, share a common moral viewpoint.

On the other hand, supporters of pluralist multiculturalism insist that it offers a more reliable basis for civic harmony than does its liberal rival. This is because, by refusing to give priority to the (invariably liberal) values of the majority community, pluralist multiculturalism is a more effective vehicle for countering group marginalisation, especially when the groups concerned subscribe to non-liberal or anti-liberal beliefs.