MULTICULTURALISM: CULTURAL BELONGING AT THE EXPENSE OF CULTURAL MIXING?

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Multiculturalism reflects, most basically, a positive endorsement of communal diversity, usually arising from racial, ethnic and language differences. As a political stance, and sometimes as a series of policies ('official' multiculturalism), multiculturalism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, most clearly in Canada but also in Australia, New Zealand and many European states, including the UK. Its key attraction was that, by strengthening minority groups' sense of cultural belonging, it promised to counter marginalisation, disadvantage and oppression, and so to promote non-assimilative integration. This was expressed in what became the distinctive theme of multiculturalism: diversity within unity.

However, in a trend that has been most apparent in Europe since the 1990s, multiculturalism has been subject to mounting criticism. Indeed, in mainstream political circles in particular, the term multiculturalism has acquired unmistakably negative or pejorative associations. Although various criticisms have been levelled at multiculturalism, perhaps the most serious is that it fosters mutual incomprehension and communal segregation (sometimes portrayed as 'ghettoisation'). Rather than balancing diversity against unity, multiculturalism may thus endorse diversity at the *expense* of unity. A particular concern has been that, in becoming essentially a vehicle for promoting cultural belonging, multiculturalism has ignored, and maybe actively discouraged, cultural mixing and intercultural dialogue. One of the consequences of this has been increased interest in what has been called 'interculturalism' (see Box 2), seen as either an alternative to multiculturalism, or an updated version of multiculturalism.

This article considers the following questions:

- On what grounds have multiculturalists endorsed cultural belonging?
- What may be the benefits cultural mixing?
- Why have some had reservations about cultural mixing?
- To what extent are multiculturalism and interculturalism compatible?

Importance of cultural belonging

One of the core ideas of multiculturalism is that identity and culture are intrinsically linked. Such a view is based on a theory of human nature significantly shaped by communitarianism (see Box 1). By contrast with the liberal belief that, as individuals, people in all societies and all cultures have essentially the same 'inner' identity, communitarians stress the importance of group membership. Individuals, in this sense, are 'embedded' in a particular cultural, social, institutional or ideological context. In *Multiculturalism and the 'Politics of Recognition'* (1993), the Canadian communitarian philosopher, Charles Taylor, thus argued that human beings make sense of the world through 'frameworks', or broad networks, of values that are constructed between people with the same cultural heritage.

Box 1 Communitarianism

Communitarianism is, broadly, the belief the self or person is constituted through the community, in the sense that individuals are shaped by the communities to which they belong and owe them a debt of respect and consideration. As a school of thought, communitarianism emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a critique of liberalism, highlighting the damage done to the public culture by an overemphasis on individual rights and freedoms. In the study of world politics, communitarianism is usually linked to nationalism, and especially the idea that morality is fashioned by the distinctive history, culture and traditions of a particular nation. However, it also constitutes one of the foundational features of multiculturalism.

The notion of an intrinsic link between identity and culture provides the basis for an analysis of both how minority group oppression takes place and how it can be challenged and overthrown. From the multiculturalist perspective, group marginalisation is not merely a political or social phenomena but, rather, it is a cultural phenomenon. It operates through stereotypes and values that are developed by the dominant, and usually majority, group in a society. These stereotypes and values structure how marginalised groups see themselves and are seen by others, in a process that effectively amounts to cultural imperialism. The problems with this are twofold. Not only are minority groups recruited into a culture that is 'inauthentic' (in that the sense that it is at odds with their established way of life and traditional beliefs), but the dominant culture also tends to inculcate in minority groups a sense of inferiority, even shame, helping to entrench their subordination.

For multiculturalists, the solution to oppression and marginalisation is for minority groups to embrace an authentic sense of cultural belonging. Following Taylor, many multiculturalism thinkers have embraced what has been called the politics of recognition. Recognition, in this sense, amounts to a process of politico-cultural self-assertion, as subordination is challenged by reshaping identity to give the group concerned a sense of usually publicly proclaimed

pride and self-respect. In what amounts to an act of defiance or liberation, stereotypical identities that are disempowering or demeaning are displaced by positive social identities, encouraging people to identify with those who share the same identity as themselves. In many ways, the strategy of politico-cultural self-assertion that multiculturalism was later to embrace was was first practised in the 1960s by the Black Power movement in the USA, through its emphasis on black pride ('black is beautiful') and its portrayal of Africa as the black 'homeland'.

Benefits of cultural mixing

Thanks to the pressures generated by globalisation, not least in the form of increased migration flows and wider access to communications technology, interactions and exchanges between often very different cultures have become a prominent feature of modern society. However, the implications of cultural mixing have been a matter of controversy. For some, cultural mixing and, in particular, intercultural dialogue are clearly beneficial, with a number of arguments being advanced in their support. For example, encounters with other cultures have been seen as vital means of refreshing and reinvigorating a culture, allowing it to remain meaningful and relevant in changing times. This also benefits the people concerned, whose ability to develop a full understanding of their own culture requires that they have something to compare it with. Cultural mixing thus helps to prevent the emergence of fossilised cultural 'prisons'.

Box 2 Interculturalism

Interculturalism is an approach to diversity which strongly emphasises the benefits of dialogue and interaction between cultures. As such, it has been seen as a response the question how to live *in*, rather than *with*, diversity. The intercultural approach is based on three key assumption. First, it rejects the idea that cultures are temporally and spatially fixed, instead emphasising that they are fluid and internally differentiated. Dialogue thus takes place within cultures as well as between them. Second, contest, debate and argument are seen to be intrinsically worthwhile, reflecting an underlying faith in reason. Third, cultures are taken to be distinguished more by what they have in common than by what divides them.

Furthermore, cultural mixing has been seen to promote civil peace and social harmony. This is because cultures that are based on different moral systems and contrasting ways of life can co-exist in the same space and at the same time only through the establishment of at least a basic level of mutual understanding. At the very least, people must be encouraged to accept beliefs and practices that differ from their own and with which they may be in disagreement. In the absence of mutual understanding, relations between cultural groups are

likely to be characterised by antagonism, fuelled by ignorance, suspicion and even hatred. This is why an effort is made in many multicultural societies to systematically widen the opportunities for cultural interaction and exchange, often through the school curriculum.

Finally, it has been claimed that cultural interaction and exchange widen the sphere of individual freedom. One of the key reservations about the politics of cultural belonging is that it can result in the domination of the individual by the group or community. People do not (in most cases, at least) 'join' a culture, in the sense of making an independent and informed decision; instead, they are absorbed into a culture through a process of socialisation that usually starts in early childhood and over which they have little or no control. From this perspective, the benefit of cultural mixing is that, by exposing people to alternative beliefs and practices, it introduces an element of individual choice to cultural membership. This applies whether cultural exchange serves to confirm people's established sense of cultural belonging, or encourages them to question or even reject it.

Drawbacks of cultural mixing

Nevertheless, cultural mixing is by no means universally accepted. At least three arguments have been advanced against it. In the first place, rather than stimulating deeper reflection about their own culture, perhaps generating an enriched sense of cultural belonging, cultural interaction and exchange may merely encourage people to embrace a 'pick-and-mix' cultural orientation. This has been called hybridisation. A white American may, for example, be interested in Buddhism, practice yoga, eat Japanese food, listen to African music and so forth. The problem with this is that it blurs cultural distinctiveness, creating a 'melting pot' in which traditional or established cultures struggle to preserve their authentic character. survive. Moreover, by transforming culture into a lifestyle choice - or, more accurately, a series of lifestyle choices - culture loses its capacity to generate a deep and meaningful sense of identity.

Second, the image that cultural mixing is a neutral process that takes place on a level playing field is flawed. In any society, a particular set of cultural beliefs and values enjoys advantages and privileges that are denied to other groups. These are derived from its association with the structures of political and economic power, bolstered by the fact that it usually reflects the views of the majority of citizens. To survive and especially to flourish, minority cultures need to be protected from the dominant culture, and this implies that constraints are imposed on cultural mixing. This particularly applies in the case of forms of expression that may cause deep offence by, seemingly, exposing principles and beliefs that lie at the core of a minority group's sense of identity to criticism, ridicule or insult. Such thinking can be illustrated by the Rushdie affair (see Box 3).

Box 3 The Rushdie affair

Shortly after its publication in 1988, a wave of protests broke out, mainly in India and the UK, demanding the banning of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses.* The affair became a major international incident in February 1989 when Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's Supreme Leader, issued a *fatwa* (religious order) calling for the death of Rushdie and his publishers. Whereas liberals have defended the book's publication on the grounds of freedom of speech, and specifically freedom of artistic expression, those Muslims who have demanded its withdrawal have done so in the belief that, in view of what they consider to be its blasphemous references to the Prophet Muhammed, it shows a harmful disregard for their religious identity. The book has been banned in countries ranging from India and Thailand to Kenya and Venezuela.

Third, cultural mixing has been criticised on the grounds that it often over-over-states the scope for meaningful intercultural dialogue. In, for instance, the case of Canadian bilingualism, debate between English-speaking and French-speaking communities is generally constructive and worthwhile because it takes place with a wider framework of liberalism, to which both communities subscribe. This has been seen as 'weak' diversity. However, in the case of 'strong' diversity, when rival cultural groups are divided by deeper or even foundational issues, dialogue between them is likely to involve little more than 'talking past' one another. The Rushdie affair was thus so difficult to resolve because, at heart, it reflected a divide that was perhaps impossible to breach. This was between the Western liberal view that religion is essentially a private matter and the belief that Islam is a total and complete way of life, providing guidance in every sphere of human existence.

Multiculturalism and interculturalism

The relationship between multiculturalism and interculturalism has been a matter of controversy. What is clear is that interculturalism did not emerge out of multiculturalism, but rather in response to criticisms of multiculturalism. Advocates of interculturalism have therefore set out to address what they see as the limitations and defects of multiculturalism. Their principle focus has been on the problem of self-segregation, the creation of a collection of cultural groups that live almost entirely separately from one another (sometimes called 'plural monoculturalism'). Interculturalism thus constitutes either the basis for a radical re-thinking of multiculturalism, or an alternative to a multiculturalist project that is deemed to have failed. Interculturalism thus differs from multiculturalism in important ways. Notably, it rejects the communitarianism on which much of multiculturalism is based, and it places a

much greater emphasis on the parallels and similarities that bind apparently different cultures together.

On the other hand, multiculturalist theorists such as Tariq Modood, the British-Pakistaini sociologist and political scientist, portray interculturalism as variant of multiculturalism. In this view, the notion that multiculturalism is, by its nature, hostile to cultural interaction and exchange is simply a mistake. Such a stance may be particularly easy to defend in the case of liberal multiculturalism, which, in seeking to reconcile communitarianism with a commitment to liberal values such as freedom of speech, openly supports *both* cultural belonging and cultural mixing. Liberal multiculturalists would thus find little to object to in the account of the benefits of cultural mixing examined earlier. Cosmopolitan multiculturalism resembles interculturalism even more clearly, in that it celebrates diversity on the grounds of what each culture can learn from other cultures, positively embracing, in the process, the idea of multiple identity or hybridity.

The same cannot be said about pluralist multiculturalism, however. Being particularly concerned to establish the legitimacy of non-liberal cultures, and to deny that liberalism enjoys some kind of special status in the world of cultures, pluralist multiculturalists have been noticeably more sensitive than either liberal multiculturalists and cosmopolitan multiculturalists to the drawbacks of cultural mixing. In this light, interculturalism should perhaps be seen as neither an alternative to, nor an updated version of, multiculturalism. Instead, it could be viewed as a separate but overlapping approach to cultural diversity, but one whose key significance may be that it exposes an important fault-line in multiculturalism

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