

IN DEFENCE OF MULTICULTURALISM

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Multiculturalism, a term generally accepted across the political spectrum for some three decades, has suddenly become a term to be scoffed at, rather like 'Political Correctness'. Spokespeople, from faith leaders and race relations commissars to politicians, are pointing to the dangers of multicultural policies in the UK. For the Chief Rabbi, 'Multiculturalism encourages people not to integrate, it creates social exclusion.' For Trevor Phillips, head of the Commission for Racial Equality, we are in danger of 'sleep-walking into segregation' and for David Blunkett our over-tolerance has allowed groups, especially of Asians, to 'self-segregate'. And now under Ruth Kelly, appointed to the new post of Communities Minister, we have a Commission on Integration and Cohesion to help usher in an 'honest', national debate about multiculturalism.

What is multiculturalism?

Part of the problem within the British discussion about multiculturalism is that a number of different things are being addressed under its banner. First it is important to distinguish between the description of our society as multicultural and multiculturalism as policy. To describe society as multicultural is just a statement of fact, of what is. Compared with fifty years ago when every shop, restaurant, piece of clothing or music, sportsman, religious institution, festival etc, almost without exception, was English (Welsh or Scots), our society is indeed infinitely diverse and multicultural. It reflects on a cultural level the many different ethnic groups that have settled in the UK. And it reflects this, not just in the sense that each ethnic group can have access to its own customs and traditions, but that all members of society can partake in the cultural diversity that has been jointly created.

Multiculturalism *as policy* emanated from both central and local government as a

conscious attempt to answer racial inequality (and especially the resistances to it after the 'riots' of 1981 and 1985) with cultural solutions.

'To use "integration and "assimilation" as synonyms is not just to misuse language and confuse concepts, but to dissimulate practice. Integration provides for the coexistence of minority cultures with the majority culture, assimilation requires the absorption of minority cultures into the majority culture. Integration is what "they" say, assimilation is what "they" do.'

A. Sivanandan

It is very important today not just to distinguish between the two meanings of the term multiculturalism but also between the terms integration and assimilation. Critics of multiculturalism often say that it has gone so far – been pushed to such lengths – that it is hindering integration of minority ethnic groups. But what they actually mean is that they are not happy with the weight being given to other cultures and customs. They essentially want British culture to be more traditional and/or Christianity to prevail over other faiths.

Assimilation

This view of Britain, in which there is one dominant culture and/or religion into which new ethnic groups have to fit and be absorbed, is called assimilation. Assimilation was the expectation when 'New Commonwealth' immigrants came to help to rebuild the war-torn country. The idea essentially was that people were wanted for their labour and were expected to leave their customs and culture behind them and adhere to British customs and culture instead. The idea during the 1950s and 1960s

was that this kind of cultural assimilation would somehow even out any differences between people.

Integration

It was, of course, a nonsense. Inequalities abounded, not because of cultural differences but because of racial discrimination in every sphere of life. By the mid-1960s the policy of enforced assimilation was rejected in favour of a more egalitarian policy of integration. This was defined by the then Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, as 'not a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'. Integration held out the promise that people had a right to their particular cultural expression. It was the basis for a multicultural society.

Black

The term black is used here in the all-encompassing sense that it was used by many immigrants from the West Indies, Asia and Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, to denote their shared experience of colonialism 'at home' and racial discrimination in the 'mother country'. Black was the colour of their politics not of their skins.

The historical context

This move towards multiculturalism did not come out of the air or from government beneficence. It happened as a response to the struggles that black communities waged against decades of racial discrimination in employment, housing, social services etc. Struggles to wear the turban at work, struggles against non-nationals having to report to the police, struggles for equal pay on the shop floor, to make the police protect

communities from racial attack, struggles for children not to be streamed or bussed out of schools, struggles to include other histories in educational curricula, to get the media to report on black people positively and so on. Multiculturalism, therefore, was a concomitant of community-based fights for equality and justice.

But this organic development of multiculturalism was to change when, in the early 1980s, the Thatcher government decided (after it had already been introduced into educational policies by Labour) to actively promote cultural policies as a means of combating disaffection within minority ethnic communities. The thinking went that the 1981 'riots' on the streets of many poor, deprived inner-areas of British cities (in which buildings were burnt down and street battles were fought with the police) came out of some sort of cultural deficit on the part of minority ethnic groups. And this could be addressed by the funding of local projects which spoke to the needs of the different ethnic, cultural and religious groups.

In the process, multiculturalism lost its anti-racist roots and remit and became institutionalised. It ceased to be an outcome of the struggle for equality emanating from below, and became, instead, policy imposed from above. And as the anti-racist component ebbed, multiculturalism degenerated into a competitive culturalism or ethnicism which set different groups against one another as they competed for hand-outs and office.

And now, suddenly, some twenty-odd years into the project, spokespeople are waking up to some of the problems that their policies have created – but usually placing the blame on the recipient communities rather than on their own misguided policies.

A positive or a negative?

To write off multiculturalism now, as some people do, is to misunderstand what is and has been happening.

Multiculturalism means cultures influencing one another, interacting. Cultures grow through bastardisation, as A. Sivanandan has said. If cultures exclude each other through a hierarchy of racial discrimination, multiculturalism becomes regressive. Conversely, it is only in combating racism that multiculturalism becomes progressive. The fight for multiculturalism and the fight against racism go hand-in-hand: anti-racism is the element that makes multiculturalism dynamic and progressive. It was when anti-racism was taken out of the equation, as it was from the 1980s, that all that was left was culturalism and ethnicism and its outcrop: cultural and ethnic enclaves with their own cultural and ethnic politics.

To now throw out the 'idea' of multiculturalism is not to redress the problem but to side with those who essentially want to return us to assimilation and a monocultural, mono-faith society.

'Multiculturalism simply means cultural diversity and that diversity can either be a good thing, leading to integration, or a bad thing, leading to separatism. It is the social and political context that determines in which direction multiculturalism develops.'

A. Sivanandan

Why is multiculturalism under attack now?

It is important to realise that Britain was once, especially because of the struggles waged by black communities in the 1960s and 1970s, the

most progressive country in Europe in terms of its multiculturalism. It was the country to which other countries looked for inspiration to formulate their own policies. The UK had rejected assimilation and adopted integration, it had passed acts against racial discrimination, it did not have a strong extreme-right, anti-immigrant political party. But Britain, once an example to mainland Europe, is now apparently hell-bent on following its European partners into the most conservative and reactionary of policies.

All the suggested new policies and programmes – the emphasis on a set of core values, the insistence on English language proficiency, an oath of allegiance, introduction of ID cards, a reservation on certain religious clothing, surveillance of foreign students, control over mosques and imams, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion – have their roots in other European countries' programmes and politics. We are importing the worst of European race relations instead of exporting the best.

The reason why it is happening now is to be found in the events of September 11 (2001) and the subsequent 'war on terror' and, most crucially, in the London bombings of 7/7 (2005). It was after the London bombings and subsequent failed attempts that questions began to be asked as to how and why young people born and brought up here should be so alienated from society (or so influenced by another) that they could carry out such destruction of others and themselves.

And the specious answer was that multiculturalism had helped to build up segregated communities, especially of Asian Muslims, who lived in separate, ethnic enclaves. There, in those enclaves, the young were becoming indoctrinated into alien ways which

challenged the very fundamentals of British society.

The obvious answers, such as the hatred of British foreign policy towards Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine and the fact that the dilapidated towns and cities that the young Asian suicide bombers came from had been socially marginalised and mired in poverty, were largely ignored or by-passed.

Also ignored was the fact that if there indeed was a degree of ethnic separatism in Britain's Muslim communities, it was the previous generation that stood to gain from government policies of ethnically-based and therefore ethnically divisive local authority funding and preferment.

'The government's response to the social uprisings in the northern towns was to introduce the concept of "community cohesion" aimed at bringing people from different backgrounds together. This is where the debate starts to develop about segregation being created by Muslims choosing not to mix.'

Lord Ouseley

Community cohesion – the prelude

Already, as a response to disturbances in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in the summer of 2001, when mainly young, mainly Asian youth took to the streets, the government had decided on a new policy thrust – community cohesion. And it was in the idea that the nation somehow had a deficit of glue, which would have to be artificially manufactured and injected into British institutions, that the seeds of the attack on multiculturalism took root.

The importance of a policy move to community cohesion cannot be overstated. First, it moved the debate away from racism and back to culture. The landmark Macpherson report (into policing after the death of Stephen Lawrence) had put institutional racism on the national agenda for the first time. Now the fight against racism could be put on a back burner. Second, it made respectable the chauvinism that had hitherto, and certainly since the second world war, been off limits to mainstream politicians. Third, it exonerated government policies and institutions of the racial discrimination that prevented integration and implicitly blamed minority ethnic communities for the lack of cohesion.

The rise of anti-Muslim racism

The debates on community cohesion and national security (in the wake of September 11) found common cause in the spectre of 'the enemy within' – the Muslim community. Over the last five years a virulent and all pervasive form of racism, directed against Arabs and Muslims, has come to permeate British life. The demonisation of Muslims in the media is being reinforced by the application of anti-terror and policing measures which specifically target that community. And a popular racism, with increased attacks on Muslim institutions and people perceived to be Muslim, has ensued.

Blaming the victims

In many areas of Britain, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities and newly arrived refugees who happen to be Muslim, are amongst the poorest in the country. In such areas educational provision from pre-school to further studies is lacking, employment opportunities for the young are absent. Note the areas in which the 2001 'riots' took place were those with industries, usually textiles, for which Asian

‘Segregation in housing led to segregation in schools. And the mechanism of parental choice, introduced at the end of the 1980s, meant that, in schools with catchment areas that ought to have produced mixed intakes, white parents chose to send their children to majority-white schools a little further away ... After the riots of 2001, when Britain woke up to the fact that a generation had grown up living “parallel lives”, this whole history was forgotten and, instead, it was Muslims who were blamed for refusing to mix.’

Arun Kundnani

immigrant labour was recruited in the 1950s. Now those industries have died (and/or been exported to the Third World) and with no new investment in the area, the job opportunities for the children and grandchildren of those original immigrants have gone. But instead of recognising how the economic decline in such areas, coupled with a long and unbridled racial discrimination over things like housing allocation, has led to exclusion from mainstream society, the excluded communities themselves are being blamed for their isolation. Instead of examining the impact of white flight out of mixed neighbourhoods, Muslims are blamed for self-segregating.

Buying the clash of civilisations

What is unusual and worrying about the new anti-Muslim racism is that erstwhile liberal-thinking people who would normally eschew any form of personal racism, now find it possible to join in the clamour against Islam and Muslims. And they do so because the idea of a fundamental clash of civilisations – between enlightened, western Christendom on the one hand and benighted, barbaric Islam on the other – has become commonplace and accepted. Muslim people as a whole are now being stereotyped not just as terrorists but also as backward, sexist, homophobic bigots whose intolerance and values threaten all our freedoms

– of artistic expression, freedom of speech etc and values of equality and fair-play.

Such values are now being passed off as something intrinsically British, when they are, in fact, universal. And the challenge to such values, which is carried out all the time, by all different sectors of society, is now being racialised in order to stereotype one set of people – Muslims.

What is to be done?

Oddly enough, there is no fight *for* multiculturalism. Or, rather, any fight for multiculturalism *per se* is likely to turn into a fight for ethnicism and hence into a form of separatism. Multiculturalism, unity in diversity, is a by-product of other struggles and not the thing to be fought for (except at the level of defending a concept). And there are plenty of other struggles to get involved in today which will, in the event, strengthen our multicultural society.

Fights that unite

The most organic way for multiculturalism to emerge is through a joint fight, across communities, over issues that affect everyone. Such fights against poverty, unemployment, lack of resources – the closure of a hospital or for better childcare services, for example – unite

‘When diverse communities all stay together, are all engaged in making the decisions and, however poor they are relatively, are contributing to making decisions that benefit everyone, resentment, hostility and intolerance will be reduced and eliminated. That is contributing to building cohesion.’

Lord Ouseley

people in a purpose that speaks to the needs and futures of all families.

Fighting racism

Then there is the fight against racism, and anti-Muslim racism in particular. Taking on this fight is not only to take on a fight for justice but also to undermine the grounds on which multiculturalism has come under attack.

Fighting for civil rights

It can take much of the bite out of the anti-multiculturalism attack if issues are removed from the terrain of race and represented instead as matters of human rights. Britain may now be a generally secular society with basic liberal values and an established set of freedoms, but if minorities are asking to observe particular religious practices or wear particular clothing, and these do not interfere with other people's freedoms and their own capacities as British citizens to learn, to work, to parent etc, then they should be regarded as civil rights and defended as such. For example, the ban on the wearing of the hijab in France became a fight against religious expression in a secular society. But it could equally be argued that all women in France should have the right to decide on what clothing they choose to put on their head. The decision to ban religious clothing in public spaces was therefore an interference with basic civil rights.

'France boasts of the Enlightenment values it spread throughout Europe. But its ill-conceived ban on the hijab – apparently also spreading across Europe – represents a direct threat to the European tradition of human rights'

Liz Fekete

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