

## Multiculturalism is incompatible with equality

### What is multiculturalism?

The term multiculturalism clearly implies something more than the fact that a society is made up of different cultures – so what does it imply? Does it refer the idea that the separate identity of ethnic minority communities should be nurtured and affirmed? Is it an argument for preserving the differences between cultures that exist within one nation? Or does it simply mean treating people of all cultures with equal respect? To an extent it means all of these things. However, multiculturalism is also much more than a set of ideas – it is a political framework that has influenced policy throughout the Western world.

The origins of multiculturalism date back to the late 1950s when the word was used to describe the cultural mix found within Switzerland. It became applied more widely throughout the 1960s, and began to find its way into official policy of a number of countries in the 1970s. Multiculturalism emerged in this period as a reaction against three prevailing approaches to minority groups within a country: (1) the social integration or assimilation approach, which was premised on a strong sense of what the national culture was and was closely linked to nationalism; (2) the ‘leading culture’ model, which recognised the distinct identity of communities within a country, but which expected that those communities would support core elements of the leading culture such as democracy, separation of church and state, and other Enlightenment values; and (3) the ‘melting pot’ view (prominent in the USA) which imagined all the immigrant cultures mixing and amalgamating without state intervention<sup>[1]</sup>.

Policies that have been explicitly linked to multiculturalism include support for minority festivals, holidays, and celebrations; programmes to encourage minority representation in politics, education and the work force; government support for media in minority languages; acceptance of traditional dress in schools, the army and society in general; and support for arts from a variety of cultures. What most multiculturalist policies share is a rejection of the idea that minority cultures should be subsumed into the overall culture of a country – cultures should remain distinct. Before we had the ‘melting pot’, now we have the ‘salad bowl’<sup>[2]</sup>.

<sup>[1]</sup> [http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/multi\\_culture2.html](http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/multi_culture2.html)

<sup>[2]</sup> <http://www.cafebabel.co.uk/article/16216/melting-pot-or-salad-bowl.html>

### Equality and Egalitarians

Equality is one of the great social ideals that emerged from 18<sup>th</sup> Century Enlightenment thinking (although its roots can also be found in Christian doctrine). As Thomas Jefferson put it in *The Declaration of Independence* of 1776; “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Egalitarians, the advocates of this ideal, think all people should be considered to be of the same worth and thus should be treated accordingly<sup>[3]</sup>. However, this is problematic in that what constitutes the same or even similar treatment is not always clear cut. There is also disagreement as to which aspects of our treatment are most important: For some, an equal society is one that guarantees all its members the same fundamental legal and political rights; for others, this is not enough, and a much more extensive equality of living conditions is called for, thus it requires a strong economic element. In fact, the threefold approach to equality which defines it in legal, economic and political terms has informed a myriad of political philosophies over the last two hundred years including socialism, communism, anarchism and libertarianism<sup>[4]</sup>. What is common to all these philosophies is the notion that we all deserve to be treated with the same respect and in the same way, and it is this that lies at the heart of the debate about

multiculturalism. Does the idea of equal respect for different cultures square with treating everyone in the same way?

[3] <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/egalitarianism/>

[4] <http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/5946>

### **Arguments for multiculturalism**

The proponents of multiculturalism see it as a positive approach to dealing with different cultures within a nation – the celebration of difference and diversity. One aspect of this is that people from different cultures learn about each other’s art, literature and philosophy, and are thereby enriched. They claim that multiculturalism facilitates trust between people from different ethnic groups, creates a more inclusive sense of national identity and pride, and helps to facilitate the political participation of minority groups<sup>[5]</sup>. Historically, the advocates of multiculturalism argue, it was necessary to move away from assimilationist approaches of the past because they were associated with nationalist and racist ideas. Contrasting it with what they call the ‘cultural imperialism’ that preceded it, supporters of multiculturalism present it as a form of civil rights with its foundation in having equal respect for different cultures. Similarly, the leading culture approach is characterised as too prescriptive in that it expects everyone to buy into certain core values, indicating a lack of respect for different cultural values. With reference to this motion, many advocates of multiculturalism think that the concept of equality as it developed in the eighteenth century is faulted in its focus on the individual. They argue that it needs to be extended to groups as well as individuals and that their emphasis on equal respect redresses this imbalance<sup>[6]</sup>.

[5] <http://www.maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/WillKymlickaStateofMulticulturalism.pdf>

[6] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-terrorism/multiculturalism\\_2879.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-terrorism/multiculturalism_2879.jsp)

### **Arguments against multiculturalism**

One key argument against multiculturalism is that it is inherently divisive, creating friction within society and leading to ghettoization of minority communities. It has been blamed for a myriad of social ills from riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham to the 7/7 bombings in London<sup>[7]</sup>,<sup>[8]</sup>. Some opponents of multiculturalism see it as something which has been imposed on them without their consent. Some go as far as to describe multiculturalism as an assault upon the foundations of Western civilization. Many, especially those on the political right, view multiculturalism as a direct assault on the national identity, and some even characterize it as a part of a conspiracy to Islamise Europe.

On a more philosophical note, multiculturalism is criticised by some for its relativist perspective, suggesting that no culture is better or worse than any other, it is merely different. Such perspectives undermine our ability to articulate and apply general norms that help us to distinguish between truth and falsity, good and evil, or even what is and is not permissible<sup>[9]</sup>. This is particularly problematic in the case of the norms that came out of the Enlightenment, such as belief in equality, free speech, universal suffrage and democracy.

[7] <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/brasian/bradford2.htm>

[8] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1498695/Race-chief-criticised-for-ghetto-warning.html>

[9] <http://www.thefreemanonline.org/featured/what-is-multiculturalism/>

### **Multiculturalism and equality**

As we have seen above, the advocates of multiculturalism see equality as being at the heart of their ideas, in particular equal respect for different cultures. However, many egalitarians think it sets the idea that all *cultures* are equal against the idea that all *people* are equal. So, does celebrating difference mean a failure to recognise what we all have in common? Is it an argument for treating people from different backgrounds differently? Or is it fairer than what went before, offering a way towards a society in which people are treated more equally?

### Other Links

Multiculturalism (Schools Wikipedia)

<http://schools-wikipedia.org/wp/m/Multiculturalism.htm>

Multiculturalism (Wikipedia)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiculturalism>

Egalitarianism – Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/egalitarianism/>

Egalitarian - Definition

<http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Egalitarian>

Toward a Definition of Multiculturalism by Caleb Rosado

[http://www.rosado.net/pdf/Def\\_of\\_Multiculturalism.pdf](http://www.rosado.net/pdf/Def_of_Multiculturalism.pdf)

Multiculturalism is not dead in the UK by Tariq Madood

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic/2010/oct/06/multiculturalism-thriving-uk-muslim-groups>

Against multiculturalism by Kenan Malik

[http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/against\\_mc.html](http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/against_mc.html)

America: Melting Pot or Salad Bowl?

[http://cc.kzoo.edu/~k03hk01/melting\\_pot\\_or\\_salad\\_bowl.html](http://cc.kzoo.edu/~k03hk01/melting_pot_or_salad_bowl.html)

The end of multiculturalism: The US must be a melting pot – not a salad bowl

<http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2008/0226/p09s01-coop.html>

Britishness, multiculturalism and globalisation by Bob Cannon

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/risingeast/archive04/academic/cannon.htm>

Don't Respect Difference: Ignore Difference by Patrick West

<http://www.civitas.org.uk/pdf/cs46-1.pdf>

The New Statesman Essay - Do we really want equality? By Alan Ryan, 2000

<http://www.newstatesman.com/200009250027>