

Multiculturalism

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Multiculturalism, as distinct from the adjective **multicultural** ("of or pertaining to a society consisting of varied cultural groups"), first came into wide circulation in the 1970s in Canada and Australia as the name for a key plank of government policy to assist in the management of ethnic pluralism within the national polity. In this context, the emergence of the term is strongly associated with a growing realization of the unintended social and cultural consequences of large-scale immigration. Coined by a Canadian Royal Commission in 1965, this governmental use of "multiculturalism" is widely supported and endorsed by its proponents as both a progressive political imperative and an official article of faith – a term associated in principle with the values of equality, tolerance, and inclusiveness toward migrants of ethnically different backgrounds. "Canadian multiculturalism is fundamental to our belief that all citizens are equal. Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging" (Government of Canada, 2001). Typically, multiculturalism here is a social doctrine that distinguishes itself as a positive alternative for policies of assimilation, connoting a politics of recognition of the citizenship rights and cultural identities of ethnic minority groups (Kymlycka, 1995; C. Taylor, 1992) and, more generally, an affirmation of the value of cultural diversity.

By the IC20, it had become commonplace for Western liberal democracies to describe themselves as multicultural societies, even though only a few had embraced official policies of multiculturalism. Even nation states which had traditionally been known as fiercely homogeneous, such as Germany and Japan, could no longer avoid acknowledging the ethnic and racial diversification of their populations. As a result of intensifying global migrations, "the world becomes increasingly a place of multi-ethnic states, with up to 30% of the population coming from other societies" (Davidson, 1997: 6). "Multicultural" is thus often equated with **multiethnic** in public discourse, which in turn is conflated with **multiracial**, indicating the extent to which debates on multiculturalism are concerned predominantly with the presence of non-white migrant communities in white, Western societies. In this context, multiculturalism is variously evoked as a response to the need to address real or potential ethnic tension and racial conflict.

For example, in Britain a Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, set up in 1998 by the Runnymede Trust, was "devoted to the cause of promoting racial justice" and to proposing ways of "making Britain a confident and vibrant multicultural society at ease with its rich diversity." The Commission's report, *The future of multi-ethnic Britain* (Runnymede Trust Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000), also known as the Parekh Report after the Commission's chairperson, Bhikhu Parekh, stated famously that "Britain is both a community of citizens and a community of communities, both a liberal and a multicultural society, and needs to reconcile their sometimes conflicting requirements" (p. 1). This statement illustrates the unresolved, complex, and ambiguo-

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ous relationship between multiculturalism and the political philosophy of liberalism, although the phrase **liberal multiculturalism** is also used descriptively by academic analysts to refer precisely to the diversity management policies of governments.

In a more activist context, "multiculturalism" stands for a left-radicalist attempt to overturn dominant, monocultural conceptions of history and society, which were considered ethnocentric or even racist. In the USA, multiculturalism in this sense came into wide public use during the early 1980s in the context of public (state) school curriculum reform. School curricula were criticized for their so-called Eurocentric bias and their failure to acknowledge the achievements of women, people of color, or people from outside the tradition of Western civilization. Most controversial in this regard is the movement known as Afrocentrism, which in various versions has sought to document the centrality of African cultural traditions to the foundation of American and Western history, and to celebrate that African tradition so as to increase the self-esteem and educational success of African-American students.

Overall, the burgeoning language of multiculturalism signals a heightened awareness of and concern with the increasingly problematic and disjunctive relationship between race, ethnicity, and national identity in the IC20 and eC21. This also accounts for why "multiculturalism" has remained a controversial concept despite its now common circulation. While the precise meaning of the word is never clear, it refers generally to the dilemmas and difficulties of the politics of difference.

Critics come from both conservative and radical angles. Left-radical critics have found fault in (liberal) multiculturalism because it allegedly depoliticizes or aestheticizes difference by emphasizing the cosmetic celebration of cultural diversity, rather than the socially transformative struggle against racism or white supremacy. For them, multiculturalism stands for a strategy of containment of resistance and revolt rather than for a true desire for the elimination of racial/ethnic oppression. In a more postcolonial vein, the celebrationist notion of diversity – the practical expression of which can be witnessed in the proliferation of **multicultural festivals** organized by local governments in areas with a high presence of migrant populations – is often dismissed by cultural critics because of its exoticizing, folkloristic, and consumerist nature: "Multiculturalism in Australia is acceptable as a celebration of costumes, customs, and cooking" (Stratton, 1998: 97). From the perspective of postcolonial and postmodern theory, multiculturalism is criticized for its implicit assumption that "ethnic groups" are the inherent proprietors of "culture" and that "cultures" are fixed and static realities. These diverse critical strands have in common that they consider multiculturalism, as a state-managed policy and discourse, as not going far enough in transforming the white-dominated dominant culture. Hence, the term **critical multiculturalism** is sometimes coined as a radical alternative to liberal multiculturalism. Unlike the latter, the former sees "diversity itself as a goal, but rather argues that diversity must be affirmed within a politics of cultural criticism and a commitment to social justice" (McLaren, 1994: 53; see also Chicago Cultural Studies Group, 1994).

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Conservative critics, on the other hand, accuse proponents of multiculturalism of political correctness and a particularist pursuit of identity politics. These critics generally argue against multiculturalism because they see it as encouraging separatism and as a threat to national unity and social cohesion. Thus, Australian prime minister John Howard said in 1988: "My argument with multiculturalism is not that it respects and tolerates diversity but rather in many ways it emphasizes division" (*cit.* Stratton, 1998: 67). So controversial was the very word "multiculturalism" for a short period after 1996, when Australia was swept by a right-wing populist backlash, that it was routinely referred to as "the M-word." By 2002, however, according to the *Australian* newspaper, reporting on Howard's apparent concession that multiculturalism had "acquired a certain meaning and place in our society," "the M-word is kosher again" (Steketee, 2002: 12). The addition of a national specification to the general term, as in "Australian multiculturalism," is commonly deployed by Howard as a way of imposing the unifying umbrella of national identity on the tapestry of diversity, which he, and others like him, consider as having a dangerous potential for unleashing centrifugal forces within society.

Very similar controversies have raged in other countries as well. In the UK, the Parekh Report, particularly its multiculturalist notion of Britain as a "community of communities," was widely criticized by conservatives as a recipe for the balkanization of society. In the USA, multiculturalism was similarly attacked for promoting national division, as reflected in the title of Arthur J. Schlesinger's best-selling book, *The disuniting of America*. Invoking the US's motto *E pluribus unum*, Schlesinger argues that multiculturalism, especially in its radical version, is based on a "cult of ethnicity" and an "obsession with difference," unsettling "the balance between *unum* and *pluribus*" (Schlesinger, 1992: 133). All these critics stress the need for a "common culture" if a nation is to function peacefully.

One effect of the fallout of the terrorist attacks on the USA on September 11, 2001, has been a heightened concern with the possibility of a global "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1993), specifically between Islam and "the West," with grave implications for the place of the millions of Muslims now living in liberal-democratic societies. As they are now in danger of being positioned as "the enemy within," and their culture and religion dismissed as backward or inferior by some extremist right-wing politicians, especially in Western Europe (including the Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi), the multiculturalist credo of valuing and protecting cultural diversity is increasingly countered by a renewed call for assimilation or for a halt on immigration altogether – unrealistic desires in the complex realities of the globalized, postmodern world.

In the eC21, then, as globalization has become generally, if sometimes reluctantly accepted as a fact of life, the issues which were first addressed by multiculturalism – that is, how to deal with the proliferation of ethnic and cultural differences within the nation as national borders become increasingly porous – have become increasingly urgent and complex, even as the term itself is becoming more and more problematic. As the name

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for a consensual idea it seems to have become unworkable, but it is still necessary as an heuristic concept that points to the uneasy and contested space between exclusionary and homogenizing modes of nationalism, on the one hand, and on the other, the unrealistic utopia of a rootless cosmopolitanism where everyone is supposedly a "world citizen" in a borderless world.

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See: ***CIVILIZATION, DIASPORA, DIFFERENCE, ETHNICITY, LIBERALISM, NATION, POSTCOLONIALISM, RACE, WEST.***