

## **Multiculturalism and the Open Society**

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### *1. Multiculturalism*

Multiculturalism is a label for a variety of things. It applies to facts, problems, theories, and policies.

The fact of multiculturalism lies in the recognition that in our societies there are many different cultures, groups, traditions, each with its own values, customs, languages. This fact raises the issue of how these cultures, etc. can coexist peacefully, which amounts to the problem of constructing a free multicultural society. Answers to this problem are, broadly speaking, theories, that is to say, views about what the main tenets of multicultural societies are supposed to be based on. Such views justify or support the different policies states have to adopt in order to run multicultural societies.

I take multiculturalism for granted both as a fact and as a problem. As a citizen as well as a politician of a European country, I would be blind if I did not recognize the fact, and I would be stubborn if I did not acknowledge the problem. But I happen to also be a philosopher, at least in the peculiar sense of one who earns, or used to earn, his living by teaching philosophy at university. Therefore, I am interested in theories and policies.

In this presentation I will be focusing directly on the theory of multiculturalism and indirectly on the policies stemming from it. More precisely, firstly I will examine

three main philosophical approaches to multiculturalism, Derrida's view of hospitality, Taylor's view of communitarianism, and the classical liberalism view of the neutrality of the state. The thesis I shall try to defend is that a Popperian approach to the problems of multiculturalism is sounder and more promising than the other views. It is a pity that nowadays Popper is no longer discussed as he deserves to be. Whether or not this depends on the fact that sometimes professors of philosophy are at odds with philosophers is a question I leave open.

## *2. Deconstructing deconstructivism*

Let me then take my first step by discussing Derrida's view of multiculturalism as it stems from his deconstruction of the concept of hospitality.

Deconstruction is a polite, post-modern, as they say, expression. As I understand it, it is the "philosophically correct" equivalent of internal critique. To deconstruct a concept or an idea is to show its incompleteness or inconsistencies. This, in my view, implies that deconstructivists are like half-philosophers. They criticize, but they do not and cannot go beyond the positions that are internally criticised. If you want to advance and defend an alternative, positive view, you have to look elsewhere and for somebody else, most probably you have to look for full-fledged philosophers. Speaking of "deconstructive politics" and its consequences, for example a deconstructive policy of immigration, is tantamount to

speaking of an oxymoron. Derrida's analysis of hospitality is a typical case.

When we grant hospitality to strangers — Derrida maintains — we agree to protect them, even though they are foreign to us. It seems that the best way to accomplish this task is to open our public space to foreigners by sharing with them our rights and our responsibilities. To make this process easier we should teach them our language as well. In a word, we integrate them in our culture. But this very concept of integration reveals its cultural and psychological violence. Giving hospitality no longer means giving protection to someone who is foreign to us, since it now implies that he or she must become *like us*. Such hospitality is paradoxical in character: we give hospitality to a foreigner to the extent in which we succeed in making him or her no longer be a foreigner.

Should we then accept the Other unconditionally? This, too, is paradoxical. The law of unconditional hospitality is in conflict with the very same laws of hospitality, since accepting the Other's culture without asking him or her to accept our set of responsibilities and rights might destroy the foundation on which our own culture is based. Unconditional hospitality, therefore, is as inconsistent as conditional hospitality.

What are, if any, the political consequences of this deconstruction of the concept of hospitality? Multiculturalists like Derrida believe that we should abandon our current policies of integration and adopt instead a program whose task is the realization of "rainbow societies", where different and incompatible traditions may coexist on mutually good terms. Unfortunately, there is no

guarantee that such societies are stable and peaceful, at least there is no positive argument to this effect. Therefore, the consequence of the deconstruction of the idea of hospitality is a confused political theory with no suggestion of specific, operative policies.

I am fairly sure that Derrida would agree. However, he tries to transform what I consider a serious flaw of deconstructivism into one of its merits. Proposing a political theory, he claims, means to accept what we understand as politics in *our* culture, while his aim is precisely to question the whole tradition in which the demand for theories is embedded.

Yet, even if we were to accept his views, Derrida himself would have to accept the following question as reasonable: Once we have deconstructed the idea of hospitality, or the idea of a political theory, or the idea of a Western tradition, how should we behave with a foreigner? His answer is an outstanding example of irritating vagueness. He argues that hospitality can neither be turned into mere integration nor can it be unconditional. In an interview, he claims that it must be negotiated and invented every step of the way and placed somewhere in between unconditional and conditional hospitality. Precisely where, Derrida does not say. In the same interview, he admits that this policy is «very risky». I believe he is right and I take concessions like these as an implicit admission of the conceptual sterility of his view.

Deconstructivism, it seems to me, is a very poor philosophy with no positive or negative consequences. The only policy it can recommend amounts to no more than the famous “anything goes”, probably the best advice for

fashionable academics, certainly the worst for responsible politicians.

Furthermore, Derrida does not save himself from the danger of self-referential arguments. As a deconstructivist, he is committed to the idea that the alleged objective assessments of political theories conceal a struggle for power of some group or other. But who are these groups? Are deconstructivists themselves one such group? If they are not, should we take deconstructivists as the only enlightened souls who do not struggle for power? If they are, should we conclude that Derrida himself is cunningly aiming at power? I do not know the answer nor am I interested in the questions.

### *3. Communitarianism and zoological pluralism*

Let me now take my second step and ascertain whether communitarianism, especially as presented in Charles Taylor's influential work, provides us with a better theory of multiculturalism.

There are two main tenets of communitarianism. The first is that individuals are embedded in communities which shape their identity, that is to say, there can be no individual identity without cultural identity. The second is that not only individuals but communities as well have rights, that is to say, there can be no individual rights without community rights.

The communitarian view generates both theoretical and political consequences. One is fundamental. We may call it the *survival principle*. It maintains that the survival of a

culture is a good in itself and societies must be active in defending the rights of minority communities. If a minority community is in danger of extinction, some individual rights may be restricted or even forfeited in order to enable the community to survive.

Unlike the deconstructivists, Taylor is careful in rejecting the charge of relativism. He claims that all cultures are *presumptively* equal in value, but he also agrees that cultures can be compared and evaluated, and this implies that at the end of our investigation not all cultures will be considered of equal importance or value. Let us call this view the *objective assessment thesis*.

It seems to me that the objective assessment thesis is at odds with the survival principle. Cultures and communities are not static entities. They continuously undergo change. Some of them will eventually die and others will be transformed to such an extent as to be hardly recognisable. Let us assume that all or most people in community A want to leave it and reach community B. Deconstructivists would arguably see in this a struggle for power, and might consequently invoke a survival principle in order to defend the defeated culture. But the same move is not allowed to communitarians. Suppose these people wanted to move after an objective assessment, according to which the culture of community B is better than that of A (given, for instance, new social, technological, or environmental developments)? Should we force people to worsen their lives in the name of the survival principle, or should we let them choose freely in the name of the objective assessment thesis? If we opt for the latter, then we must admit that the survival principle is not a good in itself, but a good

*instrumental* to the well-being of individuals, who therefore have rights above and beyond to the rights of the communities to which they belong.

My view is that the survival principle is independent of the communitarians' analysis of the self. Though we allow that personal identity depends on a sense of belonging to a culture, this does not imply that the culture in question must necessarily be the one in which individuals were born. The right for *a* culture does not mean the right for *the* single, specific, original culture. The defence of minority communities, that Taylor and other multiculturalists like Will Kymlicka strongly advocate, seems reasonable to me in certain cases and not in others, for example when such communities no longer prove to be vital and thus able to evolve autonomously. I do agree that even dying communities deserve respect, but I am not certain that we show them respect if we confine them to a sort of protected social zoo like endangered species.

#### 4. *Liberalism and value conflicts*

My third step is to assess whether liberalism does better than deconstructivism and communitarianism?

Classical liberal thought is committed to what might be called the *principle of multiple divisions*: division between the individual and the state, between the state and religion, between civil society and the state, between the private sphere and the public sphere. According to liberalism, individuals, and individuals alone, have natural rights, which can be justified by some a priori theory, like Kant's,

anthropological theory such as Mill's, or other rational theory, like Rawls'.

The principle of multiple divisions, which became widespread in Europe after the religious wars, has, as a fundamental consequence, the *principle of the neutrality of the state*. According to this principle, individuals are free to pursue their own ideas of a good life including religious choice within their private spheres, whereas the state is not the bearer of any substantive values and limits itself to adopting those procedures that grant natural rights. In this framework there is no room for any rational value conflicts, whether they be they conflicts among individuals, since they are free to follow their own ideas of good, or conflicts between the state and the individual, because the state is neutral to the individual's own choices. Multiculturalism, therefore, is a fact which poses no special problem.

The two above-mentioned principles do not exhaust the classical liberal theory which also contains a third principle, namely the *principle of the compossibility of all values*, that supports them both. It is because all values are compossible, that is, not in conflict in the public sphere, that the state must be neutral, and it is because the state is neutral that there can be no real value conflicts.

This idea is very attractive, and, indeed, it has attracted the best European minds for centuries. Unfortunately, I do not believe it works. On this point, I do agree with Professor John Gray of the London School of Economics when he writes that «liberties are not elements in a structure of compossible rights». Instead of discussing this idea in general terms, I shall give a concrete example: *l'affaire du foulard*, the controversial decision of the



Bernard Stasi commission to forbid French Muslim girls from wearing the *hijab* at school.

At first glance, this decision seems to be wrong because the members of the commission have not applied the principle of compossibility. After all, teenagers are used to wearing eccentric clothes, and if we accept eccentric fashion (think of piercing) why should we not tolerate Muslim teenagers wearing the *hijab* at school?

However, this way of interpreting and applying the principle of compossibility misconstrues the deep reasons underlying the controversy. Had the *hijab* been a matter of fashion, the controversy would never have been born.

The Stasi commission validated a strong idea of the neutrality of the state. This idea is related to the value of *laïcité* (a term difficult to translate into English), which emphasises that education is *not* a private affair because it concerns all citizens as a community. Within the private sphere – this is what the Stasi commission argued –, religious symbols can be freely displayed, however in public places such as schools, religious symbols are not to be accepted. This is where the public and the private come into conflict and the principle of compossibility is out of place.

Consider the situation. On the one hand, the state relegates religion and its symbols to the private sphere, on the other, individuals (Muslims) take the *hijab* as a symbol of belonging to their culture and want it to be protected in the public sphere. There is clearly a genuine conflict between two values here: one accepted by a state, and the other professed by certain individuals or groups. But if a state accepts (and imposes as well) a value in contrast with

other values professed by certain individuals or groups, then the principle of multiple divisions is false, the principle of the compossibility of values is false, too, and the principle of the neutrality of the state does not function, because the public sphere turns out not to be an empty space. I do agree that these principles are all helpful and valuable, at least they have set the ground on which Western societies have flourished, but under philosophical scrutiny they prove to be too idealistic and too optimistic.

Looking for something more realistic, I take my last step and I turn my eyes to Popper's approach to multiculturalism. I will not invoke the view of the neutrality of the state. Rather I will defend a specific value, which is rooted in the tradition of the West: the value of pluralism.

### *5. Multiculturalism and the Open Society*

If I am not mistaken, neither multiculturalism nor value-pluralism ever appear as expressions in Popper's writings, but he could not help but acknowledge them as facts. After all, his Great Vienna was a highly cosmopolitan city where different communities lived together in a culturally fruitful way. As he wrote in one of his late essays: «The population of Europe [...] is the result of mass migrations. [which gave rise to] a linguistic, ethnic and cultural mosaic: a chaotic jumble, which cannot possibly be disentangled». But not only did Popper recognize the fact of value-pluralism, he also appreciated and advocated it. As he also

wrote: «Had there been no Tower of Babel, we should invent it».

For value-pluralists such as Popper, value-conflict is a basic and undeniable feature of our moral world. Given this fact, the question they ask is: how can we construct a society which respects individual freedom as much as possible without, at the same time, leading to its own destruction?

Popper's answer to this is: through the method of dialogue, a specification of which is the method of falsification, or of conjectures and refutations, or of trial and error, as practiced in scientific research. This method has an organon, or a logic, or an instrument, that is – to use my own terminology, not Popper's – dialectics.

Dialectics rests on a normative principle, which we may call the *principle of commitment to dialogue*. It states that one has a moral obligation to engage oneself in an exchange with others. Dialectics also rests on a factual claim. It says that if one is honestly committed to engage in a dialogue, then – no matter how far another's view might be from one's own – one can find a point of departure, a hook, something to hang on to, no matter how weak, from which a fruitful, though sometimes difficult and painful, discussion can stem.

The typical, dialectical way of discussing is to start from some shared premises or, in their absence, from provisional concessions, in order to draw conclusions from them, and to try to falsify them. What is important with this endeavour is more its sense than its method. Dialectics does not primarily aim at unanimity, or consensus, or conversion, or conviction. It aims at mutual understanding.

After a dialogue, interlocutors may or may not change their mind, but in any case they become enriched, more thoughtful, more open, more inclined to appreciate views different from their own. Dialogue is critical, not dogmatic. And the Open Society is not a light and easy “rainbow society” where “anything goes”, like that envisioned and advocated by many multiculturalists. It is a hard and difficult society indeed, where commitment to dialogue is fundamental and only those who really want to engage in it may become citizens.

Popper’s principle of commitment to dialogue, together with its dialectical method, is enough to overcome the philosophical sterility of Derrida’s deconstructivism. For example, it allows for conditional hospitality, but this does not imply forcing the Other to become like us, because the principle requires pluralism and the acceptance of irreducible differences. Moreover, the principle suggests better policies than those advocated by the deconstructivists. For example, it meets the concern of minority groups and their desire for recognition; it raises immigrants to the status of full citizens; it allows for positive actions such as offering school curricula based on specific features of different cultural traditions; it may even provide funds for minority religious institutions. There are constraints, of course. Those fanatic, fundamentalist and aggressive individuals or groups who oppose a pluralism of traditions and values are to be controlled. But these should not be seen as violent moves adopted by the majority or host group to its advantage. They are vindicated by the anti-dogmatism of the Open Society to the advantage of one and all.

One might think that policies inspired by value-pluralism boil down to teaching the value of tolerance. This is wrong. If we are committed to dialogue, if we want to learn from others, then we have to consider their views as being endowed with positive values. This requires more than tolerance, it requires *respect*. Tolerance is a passive attitude: we are capable of tolerating even ideas and actions that we find blameworthy and unacceptable. Respect is an active virtue: it asks for mutual understanding and, when appropriate, for corrections of our respective habits.

This has wide political implications. Host countries should ask foreigners to be not only tolerant, but also respectful. Immigration problems cannot be solved in terms of tolerance and the protection of public order alone. This was the illusion of classical liberalism. To be citizens of the Open Society, immigrants should learn the values and traditions of the host country. Therefore, they should learn the language and history of the country where they live. Without a common language we fall back to the wild rainbow society of the deconstructivists.

Of course, multiculturalists might object that this position is highly hypocritical, since I am not taking into considerations the asymmetries existing in the balance of power. For instance, why should immigrants learn one or more European languages when native Europeans may be content with just their own languages? The answer is obvious. First, lazy Europeans are asked to do the same when they immigrate to other countries, precisely as they do when they emigrate from non-English speaking European countries to the United States. Second, if

pluralism is to be taken seriously, policies based on it should encourage the knowledge of alien cultures.

A Popperian approach to multiculturalism seems to me to be preferable to not only deconstructivism and classical liberalism, but communitarianism as well. The principle of commitment to dialogue encourages traditions to demonstrate their merits. As Popper claimed, each idea should prove its worth and no idea should be silenced too soon. However, the same principle implies that, during the dialogue, certain traditions may prove to be weaker than others, or become less vital, or look less attractive, or meet difficult problems, or end up with insurmountable difficulties. The principle of commitment to dialogue, therefore, admits and implies the cultural selection of groups and traditions. No group or tradition has a right then for survival independent of its merits and the freedom of individuals to exhibit them.

In conclusion, if Popper is right, we have a promising philosophical framework within which we can organize our policies in a multicultural society. These policies may not always be clear-cut, or precise enough to instruct leaders and governments. At times, they may be disputed. Popper was neither a politician nor a chef. He was a philosopher. He provided us with ideas to develop, not political programmes to adopt or recipes to prepare. Real politicians cannot dispense with some theoretical ideas, as well as good chefs cannot disregard the art in cooking. Popper provided a good idea, in my view. As far as the recipe is concerned, well, it's about time for dinner. In spite of my Italian taste, let's be optimistic and hope Popper left a good heritage at the London School's kitchen, too!