Multiculturalism: Still a Viable Concept for Integration?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, Duncan examines whether multiculturalism remains a viable model for thinking about integration, or whether contemporary forms of diversity and its accompanying conditions threaten the theory and require us to re-think how we manage social relations characterized by cultural, ethnic, and religious difference. Various criticisms are addressed and solutions put forward by the author.

After a few years during which countries of immigration were showing convergence in their thinking on the integration of immigrants, many countries in the west, now experiencing some of the most serious integration challenges they have witnessed in decades, are taking harder and diverging lines. To a significant degree, the contemporary issue is over the integration of those with sharply different cultural backgrounds, perhaps especially those with strong religious views that are not shared by majority populations. Tensions between, for example, Muslim minorities and non-Muslim majorities have been rising in some parts of the world, and this has in some cases produced calls for measures to ensure that minority religious and cultural views do not threaten majority interests. Some of these propositions come from the far political right; however, the mainstream is far from exempt in calling for strong action.

It can seem that the debate today is taking place without the help of a shared view of how to best manage integration. What had been used as a guide in many countries, the theory of multiculturalism, has lost favour in many societies, but no widely supported alternative has yet come forth. Societies that face integration problems are now in a position where there is no longer a dominant conceptual standpoint from which to take their cues. This is because the conditions that are now giving rise to integration problems are simultaneously the conditions that have undermined our dominant integration conceptual framework, the theory of multiculturalism. Integration failures are commonly seen as failures of multiculturalism policy.

Some recent criticisms of multiculturalism

Multiculturalism has been the dominant model for the way in which we manage integration for roughly 30 years. In my country, Canada, not only do we have this as a basic conceptual framework, but we have a Multiculturalism Act and a Multiculturalism Program in place at the federal government level as well as related policy instruments at lower levels of government. These policy instruments try to implement the general ideas of multiculturalism in specific ways. However, we in Canada and decision-makers elsewhere in the world are going to need to think deeply about how we go about the business of integration should contemporary criticisms of multiculturalism be sound. I would like to sketch these criticisms and outline a possible answer to them. It is important that we clarify our thinking on what 'integration' means, what we expect integration policies and programs to accomplish, and what an integrated society looks like. Again, in many countries, we are seeing former integration paradigms shattered, leaving behind only confusion as to how their people and political leaders understand social integration.

I will look briefly at two kinds of criticism of multiculturalism here, conceptual criticisms and practical criticisms. In brief, the conceptual criticisms say that due to the nature of the concept of 'multiculturalism' and the nature of what we mean by 'integration', the two simply do not cohere. It doesn't matter how a society tries to put it into practice, multiculturalism is bound to fail because of a fundamental inconsistency between that concept and the concept of integration. The practical criticisms recognize that the concepts might in principal cohere with one another, but argue that in reality multiculturalism yields seriously undesirable results.

Before I go further, I think it is important to recognize explicitly that multiculturalism in this context is an instrument for integration. One is used as a means to the other; the two concepts are not, as some seem to think, synonymous. Multiculturalism programs in Canadian and Australian societies are often regarded as *automatically or necessarily* integration policies; such is the history of social integration in these countries. In fact, the two concepts are entirely different.

One can see their difference – their conceptual independence – by noting that one can consistently imagine a society, perhaps an odd society, which regards multiculturalism as a device, not for bringing about integration but for maintaining *segregation.* If you were to imagine a society that had as a primary goal to maximize diversity and to avoid all forms of homogeneity, then you could imagine its policy-makers using the theory of multiculturalism as a way to maintain segregation and as a way to maximise and preserve diversity. You could even imagine such a society having a very strong immigration program as a way to increase diversity.

Hence, multiculturalism need not be only a device for integration; it could just as well be used as a device for segregation. This implies that a society must be thoughtful in *how* it applies multiculturalism in order to bring about integration and not some other, less desirable, result. The question then is, if we are going to use multiculturalism specifically as a policy for integrating newcomers, how should it be thought through? How should a society actually bring the policies or the ideas of multiculturalism to bear on the issue of integration?

The conceptual criticisms assert that it cannot be done. To shorten enormously one line of reasoning, integration, no matter which society one considers, is always integration *with respect to something,* say a central set of cultural values. Philosophers have referred to value universals around which a society conceives itself and in terms of which a society is integrated. The presupposition of this set of values, some of multiculturalism's critics say, immediately clashes with the fundamentals of multiculturalism which put a premium on respect for and celebration of difference. Diversity brings with it different points of view and values, some of which will not be consistent with the value universals of western liberal democracies or other types of society that might embrace multiculturalism. Therefore, in principal if you are going to encourage diversity at a fundamental and cultural level and at the same time try to integrate your society, which of necessity requires a common integrating principal, you find yourself face to face with a contradiction.

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The practical criticism entails something quite different, although it also rests on the assertion of conflict. From the political right, loosely-speaking, people will often say that the end result of years of multiculturalism as a model for social integration has been divided societies. Instead of working towards integration or cohesion, multiculturalism has produced social division. Rotterdam City Council recently argued that what has happened as a result of multiculturalism is simply an integration failure and a city so divided that the inner core has become home to a disproportionate number of immigrants, with the native-born Dutch moving to the suburbs, something similar to what has been called 'white flight' in the United States. Social tensions have risen and different ethnic groups live in fear of one another. Thus, it is argued, a divided city is the direct result of implementing multiculturalism, which, as it encouraged diversity, discouraged the promotion of a common way of life, a common set of core values, a common good for all residents of the city. Emphasis was placed on maintaining difference instead of finding common ground.

And, from the political left, again loosely speaking, people will say that what multiculturalism has resulted in is another form of division where you have a mere toleration of difference within the context of a social hierarchy based on the core values of the original members of the society. Such an argument is eloquently urged by commentators such as Bhikhu Parekh, who has argued that multiculturalism has not been embraced deeply enough with the result that members of cultural or ethnic minorities find themselves less than equal members of the society. Instead of a celebration of difference, the actual implementation of multiculturalism has often produced a near-perfunctory tolerance of difference within a deeply-rooted inequality amongst minority groups. So at a practical level, what you have, both the right and the left argue, is a divided society from the actual application of multiculturalism.

Solutions to problems

I will now try to sketch possible answers to these arguments. Let me begin with the conceptual arguments, which from a logical point of view are the most powerful, as their soundness would imply that it is impossible for multiculturalism to succeed as a device for social integration. From this point of view, we are talking about a fundamental clash between the idea of multiculturalism and the idea of integration. All too briefly, I would like to propose that the core ideas with which our societies think about integration, the ideas around which members of our societies are to be integrated, specifically the ideas of liberal democracy in general, are in fact a *foundation for* multiculturalism itself and function as a prerequisite to the application and very formulation of multiculturalism theory. My view is that these two concepts work at different logical levels, one being a precondition for the other. *Simply put, if you don't have liberalism you are not going to have multiculturalism.*

Try to imagine societies that are not liberal, but that are multicultural; try to imagine how they would even work. What I would argue is that we can resolve the conceptual

conflict by seeing that, in order to even have the possibility of a multiculturalism policy or a multicultural ethos in our societies, we need to be liberal already. The two do go together, are consistent, in that one is required for the other to be even possible. This line of argument, if found to be sound, is very powerful from a logical point of view and would, I believe, defeat the conceptual criticisms of multiculturalism. The argument that integration as conceived by liberal societies must conflict with multiculturalism, then, has an answer in outline.

The practical arguments concern how a society actually implements multiculturalism. The short answer to this sort of criticism is that one tries, as does Canada, to build social capital as one implements multicultural policies and programs. Multiculturalism programs must, I would argue, be designed explicitly to bring about social integration, the point I made at the outset, and, here I want to add, ought to be designed such that they yield increased social capital. Trust is at the heart of social capital and, if we are going to develop integrated and cohesive societies, we need it in large measures. Implementing multiculturalism in ways that develop trust between the newcomers and the rest of society is a practical way to get around the problems that people from both the right and the left speak about, whereby multiculturalism appears to result in social division and inequality.

One specific way that this can work is to implement these policies and programs so as to empower immigrant groups themselves in their process of becoming members of their new society, an empowerment that allows them to play a serious role in their own integration through which they, one might say, negotiate a partnership with the institutions of their new society. In Canada, integration and multiculturalism programs fund the many NGOs that represent and serve these groups to integrate themselves into Canadian society in a way that builds public trust with the rest of society. This is evidenced by the government providing funding for the NGOs to contribute to the integration process within a multicultural framework that is approved by Parliament and, in that sense, represents the will of the people of Canada. It is also evidenced through the NGOs accepting these funds, thereby indicating their trust of the institutions of their new society. The point of having NGOs deliver integration programs as opposed to having the government do so directly, as is often the case in full welfare states, is to empower the immigrants and their organizations. This approach gives a signal to the population at large that there is this trust between the government and the newcomer organizations and the newcomers themselves, all of which contributes to social capital creation. There is a much fuller story here to tell, but the point is that it is in actual fact possible to design and deliver multiculturalism programs in such a way that a society can avoid the division and inequality that the critics refer to if they are implemented with the goal of social capital creation in their basic designs.

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Conclusion

I began by noting that the paradigm of multiculturalism that has guided our thinking about integration for the past 30 or so years has been seriously challenged. This short piece may well be seen as a conservative and ad hoc attempt to bolster a faltering and outmoded view of how to manage societies that accept immigrants from diverse ethnic, racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. There will be those that call out for strong and innovative measures to manage what they will consider to be a new situation brought about by the forces of globalization and, for some, a 'clash of civilizations' that has resulted from globalization. However, I reject such talk in rejecting the diagnosis of the problem that locates its source in the concept of multiculturalism. There is nothing that is fundamentally different in international migration today that would suggest a full re-thinking of what it means to have an integrated society and how one achieves it. Rather, what is required is a thoughtful examination of what multiculturalism actually requires a society to do, recognizing that it is not automatically a device for integration and facing the fact that it must be carefully implemented with integration as its clear objective. Remember, it could consistently be used as a policy device for fostering segregation.

Integration requires a continual investment in people. A society that is diverse must be prepared to remain actively engaged in building bridges over the long term. A society cannot simply declare itself to be multicultural and expect everything to take care of itself afterwards. Rather, each day we need to decide again that we will maintain the bridges we have already built, we need to decide again that we will build bridges for the newcomers who come today, and we need to decide again that we are going to plan and design the bridges for the newcomers who will come tomorrow.