If You Say Multiculturalism Is the Wrong Answer,

Then What Was the Question You Asked?

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author poses some crucial questions about multiculturalism as the solution to a persistent 'problem'. He writes of those countries that have entrenched minority rights in their constitutions, and those that have not. He examines the elements of sustainable multicultural policy, contrasting the European with the North American approach. He argues in favour of cultural diversity and shared citizenship.

The idea of multiculturalism was probably born in New York in the 1960s amidst proclamations that the fire had been extinguished under the melting pot in which the American nation had been amalgamated from heterogeneous origins. And many say it has been buried in the same city under the rubble of the collapsed WTC twin towers. In the 1970s Canada and Australia officially declared themselves multicultural nations whose diverse ethnic groups were encouraged to maintain their heritage. By the end of the 1980s multiculturalism had reached Western Europe, where Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden developed their own models of recognizing cultural diversity as a permanent feature of societies shaped by immigration. In the academic sphere, literary studies, sociology and cultural anthropology quickly grasped the importance of this theme. Postcolonial and cultural studies emerged as new academic fields whose central focus is the interplay between diversity and dominance. As usual, political theory was a latecomer and joined the debate only in the 1990s, but the works of Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, Iris Young and Bhikhu Parekh have exercised considerable influence beyond their discipline. By the end of the decade, the American sociologist Nathan Glazer could declare that "we are all multiculturalists now" without raising many eyebrows.

All this has changed quite dramatically in the new millennium. Now cultural diversity is once again associated with risks of societal disintegration and violent conflict. The new mainstream's Cassandra is Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, whose prediction of a 'clash of civilizations' has conjured up the danger of persistent war along the frontiers of global cultural blocs. Huntington recently added similarly dire forecasts about the impact of Hispanic immigration in the US, which "threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages."

Before we join the funeral chorus for multiculturalism we should pause and consider some simple questions: If multiculturalism was the wrong answer, then what was the problem that it was meant to respond to? Was this problem merely imaginary or real? If real, will it somehow fade away under the new circumstances? If it persists, are there solutions available that are fundamentally different from multicultural ones?

So let's start with defining the problem. At its heart is an irresolvable tension between a liberal commitment to individual autonomy and equality and the fact that all modern state-building involves nation-building. Nation-building is an attempt to impose particular historical traditions, languages and symbols of collective identity on a large and heterogeneous population. This attempt generates different kinds of linguistic, ethnic, or racial minorities who are seen as not belonging to the nation. In order to realize national unity these minorities must either be kept apart or be assimilated. Prior to World War Two most liberals and socialists agreed with nationalists in endorsing one of these two solutions. Some believed in a Darwinian struggle between national cultures for survival of the fittest. Others thought that states with a well-established national culture had a mission to civilize backward minorities by assimilating them.

The human rights revolution of the post-war period and the civil rights struggles of the 1960s thoroughly discredited these ideas. Cultural minorities acquired legal claims to protection against discrimination and, "in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language" (Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights). In liberal states, rights to free speech and association enabled minorities to mobilize and put their demands on the political agenda. The democratic process strengthened these claims through incentives for political parties to catch minority votes and incentives for political institutions to co-opt minority elites in order to diminish their potential for disruptive mobilization.

All such moves, however, only served to further discredit the myth of colour-blind and culture-blind public policies. The presumption that a liberal state could treat all its citizens as equals by ignoring their cultural differences was questioned by pointing out the many ways in which official languages, educational curricula, public religious holidays, dress

codes and many other laws and policies were not neutral. The greatest challenge was raised by indigenous peoples and national minorities who did not merely claim that their ways of life and languages were disadvantaged, but that the dominant nation-building project itself had been realized at the expense of their own historical traditions and persistent aspirations of self-government. From their perspective, the very constitution and boundaries of the polity reflected a history of oppression that undermined their status as equal citizens.

Achieving strict cultural neutrality would be possible only if liberal states abstained from any activity that has a differential impact on the reproduction of cultural identities and practices. This is a libertarian fantasy that would require scrapping not only public education but all kinds of public services. The alternative solution is what Charles Taylor has called the "politics of recognition" with its proliferation of minority claims for exemptions, support, special representation and public symbols. The multicultural response to the claims of indigenous and national minorities was to involve them in a constitutional dialogue about regional autonomy and power-sharing in central government institutions.

The politics of recognition can create all sorts of perverse and undesirable effects and must therefore be firmly constrained by principles of human rights and equal individual citizenship. It also needs to be counterbalanced by fostering a shared public culture and civic identities that fully embrace cultural differences. However, this does not undermine the basic insight that liberal democracy must respond to cultural heterogeneity in society with multicultural policies. As Joseph Carens has suggested, a hands-off approach to cultural difference must be replaced with evenhandedness in judging the legitimacy of claims.

If all this is accepted, the answers to two of the questions I have raised seem to be pretty straightforward. First, the problems that multiculturalism responds to may be described as imagined, but not as imaginary. They become real because imagined collective identities are real in their consequences once people mobilize to defend them. Second, these challenges might temporarily "disappear" under certain circumstances. If western states decided to use all available means for stopping new immigration and returning to a policy of coercive assimilation similar to the one that prevailed in the U.S. in the last century's interwar period, then many current multicultural claims would vanish. If authoritarian regimes, similar to those that ruled over Eastern Europe until the 1980s or in Portugal, Spain and Greece until the 1970s, replaced liberal democracy, then national and indigenous minorities could be effectively silenced, too. Pessimists may think that the new security concerns in western democracies may eventually trigger such developments. But I hope they agree with me that multicultural policies should not be scrapped in anticipation of such disasters.

Finally, if the problems persist, are there better answers than the ones given by multiculturalism? Certainly yes, if we describe multiculturalism as a quasi-apartheid policy of segregating citizens into cultural groups with different sets of rights for each of them. Those who claim that this is what multiculturalism is all about must then provide empirical support for this charge. The answer is less easy if we accept the above description of how liberal democracies have actually reacted to cultural minority claims. It can't be a resounding "no" because in dramatically changing circumstances multiculturalism can only be defended if it is revised and reformulated.

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There is no way of denying that multiculturalism has come under attack. These attacks have been triggered by events such as 9/11 or the murders of the populist politician Pym Fortuyn and filmmaker Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands. They have also been fuelled by long-term trends of rising poverty, unemployment and urban segregation among certain ethnic minorities. It is disingenuous to blame multiculturalism for causing terrorist acts of religious fanatics or for the dismantling of public welfare policies, but the celebration of cultural diversity is certainly no answer to these issues, which must be addressed when defending religious toleration or differentiated citizenship. Still, the complaint that multicultural policies have distracted attention from weightier concerns about security or social equality is not entirely sincere since the same could be said about gender mainstreaming, gay rights, environmental issues and many other pieces of liberal policy.

Yet there is a deeper concern that multiculturalism might be self-subverting or, to put it more cautiously, that multicultural integration might require preconditions that the policies of the last four decades have often failed to create. What I have in mind is that successful multiculturalism consists of three different elements that should be seen as complementary and mutually supporting: constitutionally entrenched rights, accommodationist policies, and a shared public identity.

The first element contains the basic cultural liberties listed in human rights conventions, protection against discrimination on ethnic, racial and religious grounds, as well positive minority rights to exemptions, recognition, support, representation and autonomy. In Ronald Dworkin's words, all such rights are conceived as trumps over majority preferences. They protect autonomous individuals and vulnerable minorities against the tyranny of the majority that is always a potential danger in democratic regimes.

Since the force of moral argument is rather weak in daily politics, such rights must be entrenched in constitutions that cannot be easily amended and must be interpreted by constitutional courts that are shielded against political pressure from the legislative and executive.

Yet multicultural politics is not merely about fleshing out the rights of minorities, it is also about designing institutions and implementing policies that allow cultural diversity to flourish and conflicting claims to coexist peacefully. These are areas of policy-making in which minorities have a claim to be involved but that will generally be decided by representatives of parliamentary majorities. Often, multicultural policies involve decisions about the allocation of public funds that must always be weighed against alternative policy goals. Rights to the protection of minority languages cannot determine how much money should be spent on bilingual education in public schools. And bilingual education for immigrant minorities may be better defended as part of a general policy of social and cultural integration rather than as a minority right. Yet this means that sustainable multiculturalism will need majority support within legislative institutions, in the public administration, and ultimately also among voters.

The third element is policies that shape and promote common civic identities within a diverse society. Some liberals have suggested that a shared commitment to constitutional principles and their underlying values is all we need. Others have pointed out that this is not nearly enough. Why should majorities not merely accept minority rights as constraints but also support policies that promote diversity? Why should national minorities respect the territorial integrity of a state that grants them autonomy, but denies them the sovereignty enjoyed by independent nations? Why should immigrant minorities be satisfied if they can freely practice their languages and religions but cannot establish them as official ones?

A plausible answer to these questions is that mutual acceptance of multicultural rights, arrangements and constraints requires a shared sense of belonging, of common stakes and equal membership in a polity. This cannot, however, justify a return to assimilation into a single national identity, however generously defined. Discourses about national identities are never fully compatible with recognizing claims of internal minorities that regard themselves as nations in their own right, or with transnational affiliations of migrants to external homelands. And even if a liberal conception of national identity may tolerate linguistic and religious diversity, demands for national loyalty override all other affiliations in case of conflict.

A politics of integration in a multicultural society must pose the question what it is that all citizens and communities are supposed to integrate into. On the one hand, an open civil society is essential for mutual tolerance and respect but it is not enough for sustained support for multicultural policies. On the other hand, national identities are too thick and exclusive to accommodate deep diversity. A shared political identity should instead emphasize the composite nature of the polity and highlight diversity as a basic feature of its history and as an asset for its future. The success of such policies can be measured by the extent to which a native majority population accepts minority narratives as part of their own collective identity and the extent to which minorities combine group affiliations with a sense of belonging to the larger polity. Such a transformation of identities can only be brought about if the inevitable conflicts over cultural claims are debated openly so that all citizens feel they have a stake and a voice in this dialogue.

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The record of how well liberal democracies have managed to balance the three elements of sustainable multiculturalism is mixed and uneven. On the rights dimension there is some progress, e.g. the recent expansion of anti-discrimination legislation in Europe that was brought about from above through EU directives, but a stalemate in other areas, e.g. in addressing the claims of Roma minorities in Eastern Europe or of Australian Aborigines. But I think it is fair to say that we have not yet witnessed a significant rollback.

Multicultural arrangements and public policies that have not been constitutionally entrenched have suffered a more severe setback in some countries. For example, several European governments are now accusing whole immigrant communities of being unwilling to integrate into mainstream society. Two policy instruments that have been adopted in order to break up what in Germany is now called "parallel societies" are age thresholds of 21 and higher for spouses brought in from abroad and mandatory language courses backed up by sanctions ranging from fines to a withdrawal of welfare benefits and a loss of residence permits.

Still, what has happened so far is more often the adoption of new policies that send a signal to majority voters than an actual scrapping of established multicultural accommodation. The reason for this is easy to understand. Public administrations, especially at the local level, are often reluctant to execute policies adopted by legislators that cater to majority prejudices. The task of municipal civil servants, police officers, public health workers and teachers is to provide public services to culturally diverse populations. They would fail to meet their own professional goals if they did not do this in culturally sensitive ways. This is why we find a lot of multicultural accommodation at the local level even in a country like France where the official

republican discourse denies the existence of cultural minorities.

The most significant backlash against multiculturalism occurs at the level of political rhetoric. It is here that we witness a full swing of the pendulum in some European countries, including the Netherlands, which in the 1990s were admired as the continent's multicultural showcase. Changing the political rhetoric is much easier than dismantling entrenched rights and overturning accommodationist policies. Yet this diagnosis is cold comfort. Downplaying the impact of the current crisis of European multiculturalism would be rather short-sighted. If the rhetoric falls on fertile ground it will eventually generate a popular mandate for policy-makers to take more radical steps.

This fertile ground on which the seeds of diversophobia can grow has been mostly left uncultivated by multicultural policies. The problem is a serious deficiency of European multiculturalism on the public identity dimension. "Old stock" Dutch, Swedish and English populations have learned to think that multiculturalism is about the others and their rights rather than about their own history and identity. This helps to explain a sense of loss and deep grudge among sections of native majorities who had not been offered an alternative identity they could feel to share with minorities.

In this respect, Europe is still quite different from North America where the imagined community of nationhood had always included at least a sense of diversity of origin, albeit not always the recognition of cultural difference. Western European governments have only reluctantly admitted that they, too, have become countries of immigration. But they have failed to construct new multicultural identities for their countries. No other western country has gone as far as Canada in adopting multiculturalism not only as a policy towards minorities but also as a basic feature of a shared identity. This does not prevent incidents such as honour killings, ethnic riots or murders motivated by religious fanaticism. But it may prevent them from triggering a wholesale reversal of public commitments towards pluralism and respect for diversity.

So is there a better response than multiculturalism? Conservative critics have always argued that the promotion of minority rights and identities results in "disuniting the nation." They fail to understand that under conditions of liberal democracy and cultural diversity there is nothing more divisive than projects of forging national unity. Multiculturalism has emerged as a reaction and a response to these divisions. It has balanced the scales that had been heavily tipped against cultural minorities and has created new opportunities for self-determined communal identities. Yet if it is to succeed, it must also try to bridge the cleavages by transforming public identities of both minorities and majorities in such a way that they support a shared citizenship.