The Uncertain Futures of Multiculturalism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the varying success of multiculturalism across Western democracies. Whereas in Canada multiculturalism policies are generally perceived as low-risk, other countries remain unconvinced of the potential benefits. Kymlicka focuses on three factors which may affect the adoption of this type of policy: Legal vs. Illegal Migration, Liberal vs. Illiberal Practices, and Economic Contributors vs. Burdens. He emphasizes the need to study more closely the risks involved and the ways in which these risks can be managed amid public fears about diversity.

I hesitate to speculate about the future of multiculturalism, in part because I have a rather mixed record in my past predictions on this subject. Several years ago, I rashly predicted that we were witnessing a growing convergence within the Western democracies on the ideal of "liberal multiculturalism." According to this ideal, public institutions have a duty to accommodate ethnocultural diversity, guided and constrained by the larger framework of a liberal-democratic constitution, with its firm protection of individual rights and non-discrimination. I acknowledged that some countries were moving more quickly in this direction than others, and that there were bound to be temporary setbacks along the way, but I confidently predicted that the overall trend across the West was clearly towards liberal multiculturalism.[1]

Today, however, it is clear that this prediction was false. Critics have rightly accused me of premature triumphalism regarding liberal multiculturalism, and perhaps also of wishful thinking. Indeed, some commentators argue that we are witnessing the very opposite trend: namely, an across-the-board retreat from multiculturalism. According to this view, multiculturalism will come to be seen as simply a passing fad of the 1980s and 90s, replaced by a return to more traditional ideas of homogenous and unitary republican citizenship, in which ethnocultural diversity is banished from the public realm.[2]

However, on closer inspection, what we actually see is an incredible variability of these trends across the different Western democracies. Consider the very different fate of multiculturalism in France and Canada. Indeed, there is considerable variation even within specific countries. For example, while Netherlands is generally seen as the paradigm case of a country that has retreated from multiculturalism since the 1990s, it has actually strengthened its multiculturalism commitments within certain domains, such as the military, which had previously resisted ideas of accommodating diversity.[3]

What explains these variations? I will focus on three conditions that I believe facilitate the successful adoption and implementation of multiculturalism.

Legal vs illegal migration: It is very difficult to gain public support for multiculturalism if the main beneficiaries are people who entered the country illegally. The presence of large numbers of illegal immigrants has several implications. First, it implies that the country is unable to control its borders, and this quickly generates fear about being "swamped" by unwanted migrants. By contrast, where illegal migration is minimal, the temperature of debates is lowered, and people feel secure that they are in control of their own destiny.

Second, in most Western countries there is a strong moralistic objection to rewarding migrants who enter the country illegally or under false pretenses (ie., economic migrants making false claims about escaping persecution). Such migrants are seen as flouting the rule of law, both in the way they entered the country, and often in their subsequent activities (eg., working illegally). Most citizens have a strong moral objection to rewarding such illegal or dishonest behaviour. Moreover, they are often seen as "jumping the queue," taking the place of equally-needy or equally-deserving would-be migrants who seek entry through legal channels. There is also a prudential objection to providing multiculturalism policies for illegal immigrants, since this may encourage yet more illegal migration.

If we put Western countries on a continuum in terms of the proportion of migration that is illegal, I suspect that this provides a fairly good predictor of the level of public antagonism to multiculturalism. At one end of this continuum would be a country like Canada, which has probably the lowest level of illegal immigration amongst the Western democracies (primarily because of its geographical position) and the highest level of public support for multiculturalism (close to 80% according to recent surveys).[4] This is not a coincidence: I have no doubt that support for multiculturalism would

rapidly and dramatically decline in Canada if we started confronting large numbers of illegal migrants. Consider the hysteria that accompanied the appearance off the Canadian shore of four boats containing just under 600 Chinese migrants in the summer of 1999. There was overwhelming support in the Canadian public for forcibly repatriating them to China, without allowing them to land and make asylum claims (which most Canadians assumed would be bogus).[5] I believe that Canadians are as opposed to illegal immigration as the citizens of any other Western country. If such boats appeared on Canadian shores every week, as happens in Italy or Spain or Florida, I have no doubt that there would quickly be a powerful anti-immigrant and anti-multiculturalism backlash.[6]

Liberal vs Illiberal Practices: A second important factor concerns the sort of "culture" that is being recognized and accommodated by multiculturalism policies. It is very difficult to get public support for multiculturalism policies if the groups that are the main beneficiaries of these policies are perceived as carriers of illiberal cultural practices that violate norms of human rights, and if they are seen as likely to invoke the idea of multiculturalism in order to maintain these practices (eg., practices such as coerced arranged marriages of underage girls, female circumcision, or honour killings). The general public in most Western democracies is unwilling to accept the risk that multiculturalism policies can be used to perpetuate these practices.

The extent to which immigrants are perceived as raising this risk varies considerably. White European immigrants to North America, such as the Italians or Poles, are not typically seen as carriers of illiberal practices. They are seen sharing a common "Western" and "Judeo-Christian" civilization. The same applies to immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America, who are overwhelmingly Christian. Although they are seen as non-white, and are often subject to racial discrimination and stereotypes (eg., about criminality, laziness, irresponsibility, lack of intelligence, and so on), they are not seen as bringing "barbaric" practices with them. And while Japanese and Chinese immigrants from East Asia are neither white nor Christian, they are not widely seen as having a religious or cultural commitment to offensive practices. In the West today, therefore, it is primarily Muslims who are seen as raising this risk. Muslims are not only seen as potentially bringing with them illiberal practices, but also as having a strong religious commitment to them, and hence as more likely to try to use the ideology of multiculturalism as a vehicle for maintaining these practices.

Whether immigrants are perceived as net contributors or net burdens depends on a number of factors. In the Canadian case, the perception that they are contributors is largely the result of the pro-active system of recruiting immigrants based on their education, skills and experience. Since immigrants are chosen precisely for their employability, it is not surprising that they tend to have relatively high rates of employment.

As a result, the fear that multiculturalism is a vehicle for perpetuating illiberal practices is linked to the size or proportion of the Muslim population. If we put Western democracies on a continuum in terms of the proportion of immigrants who are Muslim, I think this would provide a good predictor of public opposition to multiculturalism. Here again, Canada is at one end of the continuum. In Canada, Muslims are a small portion of the overall population (less than 2%) and form only a small fraction of the recent non-white immigrant intake (90% of our recent immigrants are not Muslim). Moreover, the Canadian multiculturalism policy was in fact adopted before the arrival of significant numbers of Muslims, and was initially designed in response to the demands of older white ethnic groups, such as the Ukrainians and Italians. In most of Western Europe, by contrast, the largest group of immigrants is Muslim – up to 80 or 90% in countries like France, Spain, Italy, and Germany etc. – and multiculturalism is understood first and foremost as an issue of how to accommodate Muslims. Moreover, many of these Muslim immigrants are from parts of Africa or South Asia where traditions of FGM or arranged marriages persist, or where Islamic fundamentalism is strong.[7] The numerical predominance of Muslims, combined with racism and Islamaphobia, generates a general perception of immigrants as illiberal, and hence of multiculturalism as morally risky.

Economic Contributors vs Burdens: A third factor concerns perceptions of the economic impact of immigrants. It is difficult to sustain popular support for multiculturalism where the immigrants who would benefit from multiculturalism policies are seen as a burden on the welfare state – ie., as taking more out of the welfare state than they put in. This is partly a matter of economic self-interest, but there is also a moral component. The welfare state is seen as something that has been built up by the sacrifices that each generation has made to protect the next. If newcomers who have not contributed to the pool take away resources, that will leave less for our children.

By contrast, in some countries, like Canada, immigrants have been perceived as net contributors to the welfare state. Historically, this is due to the fact that immigrants to Canada have in fact put more in than they have taken out, and that historical pattern is today further strengthened by the perception that immigrants are needed to offset our ageing population structure.[8] Without new working-age immigrants, we would have trouble sustaining health care spending or pensions as the population ages.

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I believe that these three factors explain much (though not all) of the variation in public support for multiculturalism. To oversimplify, in countries where immigrants are seen as legally admitted, as complying with liberal norms, and as net economic contributors, adopting multiculturalism will face the fewest obstacles. In countries where immigrants are primarily illegal, Muslim, and low-skilled, multiculturalism will face the greatest obstacles.

We can make the same point in terms of perceptions of risk. In countries like Canada, where immigrants are predominantly legal, non-Muslim and skilled, adopting multiculturalism is perceived as posing few risks either to people's economic well-being or moral principles. Of course, even here multiculturalism is not seen as entirely risk-free: some people will worry that by recognizing and institutionalizing ethnic identities, multiculturalism will erode feelings of national solidarity, and make it more difficult for everyone in the country to work together for the common good. In every society, there is always some free-floating anxiety about "the other," and nostalgia for a time when everyone was assumed to share thick bonds of common history and identity. But these free-floating anxieties about diversity, when not tied to more specific fears about border control, illiberal practices and economic burdens, are often too diffuse to generate effective public opposition to multiculturalism. In modern Western democracies, there is a powerful presumption in favour of tolerance, equality and individual freedom, and these public values and constitutional norms all push in the direction of multiculturalism, even in the face of diffuse anxiety about diversity. Moreover, these diffuse anxieties can often be reduced by linking ideas of multiculturalism with broader policies for promoting citizenship and national identity.[9]

In many countries, however, multiculturalism is seen as raising much more specific risks. This is particularly true where immigrants are seen as predominantly illegal, as potential carriers of illiberal practices, and as net burdens on the welfare state. In these cases, multiculturalism poses perceived risks to both prudential self-interest and moral principles.

The link between the free-floating dislike of diversity and the more specific fears about border control, illiberal practices and economic burdens is complex. To some extent, the latter can be seen as simply attempts to rationalize the former. People may have an intrinsic and irrational fear of diversity, but they do not want to appear as racists or xenophobes, so they look around for some more "acceptable" reason to oppose immigration, such as fears about the illegal entry, illiberal practices or economic burden of certain migrants. If necessary, people invent or exaggerate these risks, even when there is little or no evidence for them, in order to hide the true nature of their opposition to immigrants. Insofar as this is true, my argument that opposition to multiculturalism can be explained in terms of varying levels of public fear about border control, illiberal practices and economic burdens is potentially misleading. Some commentators would argue that these fears are just the surface manifestations or rationalizations of deeper forms of public racism and xenophobia that are quite independent of contingent facts about the legality, liberality or economic impact of particular migrant groups. If racists and xenophobes could not invoke these specific fears, they would simply find some other rationalization for opposing immigration and multiculturalism.

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This is undoubtedly part of the story, and it is surely true that wholehearted public acceptance of multiculturalism will never be achieved simply by dealing with issues of border control, illiberal practices and economic burdens. We must also reduce the public's free-floating anxiety about diversity, by tackling the racism and xenophobia that feed it. However, I do not believe that public fears about border control, illiberal practices and economic burdens can be dismissed as simply rationalizations of a deeper xenophobia. Free-floating anxieties about newcomers are undoubtedly strong throughout the Western democracies, but they cannot explain the variation in support for immigration and multiculturalism

between countries, or over time within countries. They cannot explain why some countries adopt multiculturalism policies while others do not, or why some countries start down the road of multiculturalism and then retreat. These variations suggest that in the enduring struggle between the public values of tolerance/non-discrimination and public fears about diversity, the outcome often depends on specific and contingent assessments of the risks involved. The varying fate of multiculturalism across the Western democracies suggests that many citizens are willing to accept multiculturalism policies when they are perceived as low-risk, but oppose them when they are perceived as high-risk.

What does this imply for the future of multiculturalism? On the one hand, these basic risk factors are unlikely to change for most countries in the foreseeable future. In countries where the risk factors are low today, they are likely to remain so in the years to come, and vice versa. There is no chance in the next 10 or 20 years that Canada will suddenly be confronted with large numbers of illegal, unskilled Muslim immigrants. Conversely, it is virtually inevitable that Italy will continue to be confronted with large numbers of unskilled, illegal Muslim immigrants for the next few decades (North Africa is not likely to become a region of democracy and prosperity in the near future).

So the future of multiculturalism depends on whether states can persuade their citizens that the benefits of multiculturalism are worth the risks, and that the state has the capacity and determination to manage these risks. The experience to date suggests that this is a hard sell. In many countries, citizens are unconvinced that multiculturalism has significant benefits, and are also unconvinced that states have the capacity and commitment to tackle the prudential and moral hazards involved (eg., to tackle issues of border control, to clamp down on illiberal practices, and to prevent abuse of the welfare state). Viewed this way, the future of multiculturalism in many countries looks rather bleak.

On the other hand, one could also argue that these very same factors also make the *rejection* of multiculturalism a high-risk move. It is precisely when immigrants are perceived as illegitimate, illiberal and burdensome that multiculturalism may be most needed. Without some proactive policies to promote mutual understanding and respect, and to make immigrants feel comfortable within mainstream institutions, these factors could quickly lead to a situation of a racialized underclass, standing in permanent opposition to the larger society.

Indeed, I would argue that, in the long-term, the only viable response to the presence of large numbers of immigrants is some form of liberal multiculturalism, regardless of how these immigrants arrived, or from where. But we need to accept that the path to liberal multiculturalism in many countries will not be smooth or linear. Moreover, we need to focus more on how to manage the risks involved. In the past, defenders of multiculturalism have typically focused on the perceived benefits of cultural diversity and inter-cultural understanding, and on condemning racism and xenophobia. Those arguments are sound, I believe, but they need to be supplemented with a fuller acknowledgement of the prudential and moral risks involved, and with some account of how those risks will be managed.

Notes

1 "Liberal Culturalism: An Emerging Consensus", originally published in 1998, and reprinted in my *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2001), chap. 2.

2 For representative discussions, see Han Entzinger, "The Rise and Fall of Multiculturalism in the Netherlands" in Christian Joppke and Ewa Morawska (eds) *Toward Assimilation and Citizenship: Immigrants in Liberal Nation-States* (Palgrave, London, 2003); Rogers Brubaker, "The Return of Assimilation?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies.* Vol. 24/4 (2001): 531-48; Christian Joppke, "The Retreat from Multiculturalism in Liberal Nation-States" (Russell Sage Foundation, 2003).

3 See Rudy Richardson, "Multiculturalism in the Dutch Armed Forces" (presented at the International Seminar on "Leadership, Education and the Armed Forces: Challenges and Opportunities", La Paz, Bolivia, 13-15 September 2004).

4 Andrew Parkin and Matthew Mendelsohn, *A New Canada: An Identity Shaped by Diversity* (Centre for Research and Information on Canada, Montreal, CRIC paper No. 11, October 2003).

5 Sean Hier and Joshua Greenberg, "Constructing a Discursive Crisis: Risk, Problematization and Illegal Chinese in Canada", *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* Vol. 25/3 (2002): 490-513.

6 The same hysteria accompanied the arrival of 174 Sikhs on the shore of Nova Scotia in 1987. In response to this "crisis", the federal government recalled Parliament in an "emergency session".

7 The popular view in the West that FGM is a "Muslim" practice is doubly incorrect: FGM is practiced by Christians, Jews and animists as well as Muslims in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and is strongly disavowed by many Muslim leaders. Yet this popular perception is very strong.

8 Whether immigration in fact substantially changes the age structure is debated by experts: most working-age immigrants quickly sponsor their parents, thereby reproducing the same age structure as the native-born population.

9 For the way that multiculturalism policies work hand-in-hand with citizenship policies in Canada, see my "Immigration, Citizenship, Multiculturalism: Exploring the Links", in Sarah Spencer (ed) *The Politics of Migration: Managing Opportunity, Conflict and Change* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2003), p. 195-208.