

Political Theory and the Multicultural Society

Bhikhu Parekh

Cultural diversity in modern societies takes many forms, of which three are most common. First, although members of society share a broadly common culture, they also entertain different beliefs and practices concerning certain significant areas of human life. This is the case with gays and lesbians, youth culture, those following unconventional lifestyles or family structures, and so on. The individuals and groups involved share and are happy with the wider culture, and are only concerned to open up appropriate spaces within it to express and live by their choices in the relevant areas of life. We shall call this subcultural diversity.

Second, some members of society are highly critical of the central principles and values of the dominant culture and seek to reconstitute it along appropriate lines. Feminists attack its deeply ingrained patriarchal bias, the religious its secular orientation, the environmentalists its anthropocentric and technocratic bias, and the blacks and others its racism. These and other groups represent neither subcultures - for they challenge the very basis of the existing culture - nor distinct cultural communities living by their values and views of the world, but distinct perspectives on how the shared culture should be reconstituted. We shall call this perspectival diversity.

Third, most modern societies also include several self-conscious and more or less well-organized communities entertaining and living by different systems of beliefs and practices. They include the newly arrived immigrants, such long-established communities as the Jews, the Amish and the Gypsies, various religious communities, and such territorially concentrated cultural groups as indigenous peoples, the Basques and the Québécois. We shall call this communal diversity.

The term 'multicultural society' is generally used in three corresponding senses, to refer to a society that exhibits all three and other kinds of diversity, one that displays the last two kinds of diversity, and one characterized by only the third kind of diversity. Although all three usages have their advantages and disadvantages, the third has on balance most to be said in favour of it. The term 'multicultural' emerged in the 1960s to refer to this kind of society, and the usage thus has a historical basis. Most contemporary societies are culturally diverse, but only some of them are multicultural or culturally plural.

A multicultural society, then, is one which includes two or more cultural communities. It might respond to its cultural plurality in one of two ways, each of which is in turn capable of taking several forms. It might welcome and cherish the plurality, make it central to its self-understanding, and respect the claims of its cultural communities in its laws and policies; or it might seek to assimilate the diverse cultures into its mainstream culture either wholly or substantially. In the first case it is multiculturalist,

and in the second monoculturalist, in its orientation and ethos. Multiculturalism refers to the fact of cultural plurality; multiculturalism to a normative response to that fact. The failure to distinguish between a multicultural and a multiculturalist society has often led to an agonized debate about how to describe a society. In Britain the ethnic minorities, made up of several distinct cultural communities, comprise just over 6 per cent of the population. Although the country is evidently multicultural, conservative opinion has systematically resisted the description, believing that Britain has over the centuries evolved a distinct culture which is integrally tied up with its national identity and should continue to enjoy a privileged status. The ethnic minorities should assimilate into it and become an indissoluble part of British society. If they so wish, they might preserve some of their beliefs and practices provided that these do not impede their assimilation and intrude into the public realm. In the conservative view, to call Britain multicultural is to imply that its traditional culture is only one among many and should not be given a pride of place, that the minority cultures are equally central to its identity, that they should be respected and even cherished and not encouraged to disappear over time, and that the ethnic minorities consist not of individuals but of organized communities entitled to make collective claims. Since conservatives vehemently reject all this, they refuse to call Britain multicultural; by contrast many British liberals, who endorse most of these claims, have no hesitation in calling it multicultural.

Contemporary multiculturalism: the need for a theory

Multicultural societies are not new to our age, for many premodern societies also included several cultural and religious communities and coped with the problems this threw up as best they could. Three basic facts distinguish contemporary multicultural societies from their predecessors. First, contemporary multiculturalism is more defiant. In premodern societies minority communities generally accepted their subordinate status and remained confined to the social and even the geographical spaces assigned them by the dominant groups. Although Turkey under the Ottoman empire had fairly large Christian and Jewish communities and granted them far greater autonomy than do most contemporary societies, it was not and never saw itself as a multicultural society. It was basically a Muslim society which happened to include non-Muslim minorities, called *dhimmis* or protected communities. It followed Islamic ideals and was run by Muslims who alone enjoyed full rights of citizenship, the rest enjoying extensive cultural autonomy but few political rights. Contemporary multicultural societies are different. Thanks to the dynamics of the modern economy, their constituent communities cannot lead isolated lives and are caught up in a complex pattern of interaction with each other and the wider society. And, thanks to the spread of democratic ideas, they refuse to accept an inferior civic status and demand not only equal rights but also an equal opportunity to participate in and shape the collective life of the wider society. For its part, society concedes the legitimacy of some of these demands and goes at least some way towards meeting them.

Second, contemporary multicultural societies are integrally bound up with immensely complex processes of economic and cultural globalization. Technology and goods travel freely, and they are not culturally neutral. Multinationals introduce new industries and systems of management and require the societies concerned to create their cultural preconditions. World opinion demands adherence to a minimum body of universal values embodied in the current discourse on human rights. No amount of cultural policing can protect a society against the international media. People travel for employment and as tourists, and both export and import new ideas and influences. Thanks to all this, no society can remain culturally self-contained and isolated. Indeed

the external influences are often so subtle and deep that the receiving societies are not even aware of their presence and impact. The project of cultural unification on which many past societies and all modern states have relied for their stability and cohesion is no longer viable today. Contemporary multiculturalism has an air of inexorability and irresistibility about it and poses challenges rarely faced by earlier societies.

Third, contemporary multicultural societies have emerged against the background of nearly three centuries of the culturally homogenizing nation-state. In almost all premodern societies the individual's culture was deemed to be an integral part of his identity in just the same way as his body was. Cultural communities were therefore widely regarded as the bearers of rights and left free to follow their customs and practices in their autonomous cultural spaces. This was as true of the Roman as of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires.

The modern state represents a very different view of social unity. Twined with and suffused by the spirit of individualism, it is a distinctly liberal institution. Accordingly it set about dismantling long-established communities and reuniting the 'emancipated' individuals on the basis of a collectively accepted and centralized structure of authority. It recognized only the individuals as the bearers of rights, and represented a homogenous legal space made up of uniform political units subject to the same body of laws and institutions. As a territorially constituted entity, the modern state accommodated territorial but not cultural decentralization. If any of its constituent units had different needs and required different kinds of rights, the demand was deemed to violate the principle of equality, and was either rejected or conceded with the greatest reluctance. Since the state required cultural and social homogenization as its necessary basis, it has for nearly three centuries sought to mould the wider society in that direction. Thanks to this, we have become so accustomed to equating unity with homogeneity, and equality with uniformity, that unlike our premodern counterparts we feel morally and emotionally disorientated by a deep and defiant diversity.

Although contemporary multicultural societies are not unique, their historical context, cultural background, and many other features are. Not surprisingly, they raise questions that were never faced by earlier societies or at least not in their current forms, and call for either new concepts or radical redefinitions of old ones. If we are to make sense of them and deal with the problems they throw up, we need a well-considered political theory of the multicultural society. While such a theory would rightly draw on the insights of the traditional political theory, it is also bound to mark a radical departure from it in its basic assumptions, conceptual framework, and philosophical concerns.

Such a theory needs to take full account of the fact that multicultural societies vary in the kind, degree and depth of their multiculturalism, and are not all alike. Some have large cultural communities (for example, India); others have a single cultural community and only a tiny cultural minority living on its geographical and social periphery, and are multicultural in a weak sense (for example, Norway with Lapps). In the former, multiculturalism lies at the very heart of society; in the latter it is largely marginal. In some multicultural societies, differences between their cultural communities run much deeper than in others; for example, those between whites and aborigines in Australia compared to those between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. In some societies, minority communities largely wish to be left alone; in others they interact with and seek suitably to reconstitute the wider society. In some societies minority communities are territorially concentrated and consider themselves nations; in others they are either dispersed or lack nationalist consciousness or aspirations. In some societies minority communities are recent arrivals; in others they have lived for centuries; in yet others they were brought by colonial powers and retain an insider-outsider status. In some societies cultural communities are primarily religious; in

others they are ethnic or linguistic in nature. Since all multicultural societies share several important features, we can legitimately aim to develop a general theory of them. Since they also differ in other important respects, the theory cannot be applied to them without appropriate modifications.

Extraído de:

http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2188&editorial_id=10166