



Per Wirtén

Doing the world differently

In defence of multiculturalism

Multiculturalism, long the *bête noire* of the Right, has come under increasing attack from the Left. But whether multiculturalism is a threat to Enlightenment values or not, the real debate must be over how we understand the term itself, writes Per Wirtén. A cosmopolitical interpretation of multiculturalism, in which social cohesion arises from the common solving of common problems, must replace the pluralist paradigm.

For some years now, the realisation has dawned that Sweden, like most countries in what was once called "Western Europe", has become a country of immigration, and consequently a multicultural society. And not only that. A fragile consensus has emerged that this means Sweden has to change — that not only immigrants are affected, but that our very Swedishness is being thrown off course. For want of anything better, this new way of thinking has been termed a "multicultural social policy". There is even a dawning realisation that Sweden is characterised by structural race discrimination, that even this country is caught up in the world images that emerge from race philosophy, colonialism, and slavery. I have been forced to realise that I too, as a white ethnic Swede, have a skin colour and what is termed ethnicity. As a white European male, I am not the norm. I am as different as everyone else. And just like everyone else, I am a minority. In Sweden, I have even been confronted with terms like "white privilege", and perhaps I have come to understand the meaning of that phrase.

It has been — and still is — a difficult journey, a journey full of conflicts that constantly explode along the roadside. But it has also given me a strong sense of political freedom. The horizons have moved. The scope of what is politically possible has been expanded. Sweden has been opened up to the world, to history, and to the future, in a way that itself is already overwhelming. This is not an isolated Swedish phenomenon. We can say the same thing, albeit using different words and contexts, for the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Belgium, and other European countries.

But now, there is good reason to be concerned.

A backlash is growing against these advances, one that is gaining momentum from three specific series of incidents.

First, I refer to the murder of Theo van Gogh, the death threats against Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and the spiral of violence and threats these gave rise to in the Netherlands. It raises urgent questions about tolerance of the intolerant — and who the fundamentalists actually are.

Second, I refer to the train bombers in Madrid and the suicide bombers on the London underground. Above all the latter, since the bombers did not come from the slums and a life of poverty. No, they were well-integrated British Muslims, and the attacks raised some completely new question marks about British society, Islam, and Europe in general.

Third, I refer to the November riots in the Paris suburbs in 2005. In contrast to the first two incidents, they were unrelated to Islam, instead driven by quite different forces. In a recently published book, Swedish journalist Torun Börtz has spoken to people who live in these deprived city districts. And listen to what they have to say: "I don't want to be integrated. I want a job." And "What am I supposed to integrate into? Should I start wearing blue contact lenses?" And: "It's the French who should integrate into the country that they themselves created." This raises the question why we stubbornly carry on talking about integration when the people we are referring to respond with words such as justice, respect, and equality.

It is clear how these three series of incidents have stimulated a social-political debate, a debate where important questions are asked and where criticism is formulated. And also, where a strong suspicion, not to say categorical rejection, of what we term "multicultural social policy" is disseminated.

In the past, it has been conservatives who have persistently rejected the idea of multiculturalism. But far more worrying is that these calls are beginning to come from the Left and from Centre Liberals. They claim that multiculturalism rips the very concept of society to shreds, and that a foundation of common values is necessary for society to function.

French philosopher Pascal Bruckner's [recent polemic](#) has rekindled attention and debate. He writes: "Multiculturalism is a racism of the anti-racists: it chains people to their roots." David Goodhart, editor of British magazine *Prospect* — which is close to New Labour — has written that we may be forced to conclude that solidarity and diversity cannot co-exist, and that we must therefore abandon diversity. Ayaan Hirsi Ali has rejected multiculturalism on several occasions as a type of apartheid, where honour-related violence and barbaric enclaves are accepted. These people claim to be defending the values of the Enlightenment, which they being threatened by "multiculturalism" — a word that sometimes seems to be a euphemism for Islam.

These are just three examples. Look at cultural journals around Europe and you will see that the debate is ongoing in country after country. The critics are united in a desire for simplicity and simple answers. It is this desire that unites them with many intellectuals, journalists, academics, politicians, and citizens. It is what guarantees their arguments a sympathetic hearing. It is a desire that is easy to share.

But this simplicity is an illusion and a self-deception. If we have begun to understand anything, it is that multicultural society is distinguished by the very absence of general and abstract solutions to the confusion of social, religious, cultural, moral and, not least, historical conflicts. The conflicts that lead to daily negotiations to find compromises and solutions. Exactly the type of negotiation we have learned to live with, and even value, in class and gender conflicts. Yet this still seems difficult to digest when it comes to conflicts in a post-colonial landscape characterised by racist structures and — yes — white privilege.

Another factor uniting the critics is that they are not primarily interested in day-to-day politics. They focus on concepts, on ideas, words, and symbols. Their criticism is what we call discursive.

Words and concepts are an iron cage. Or to put it more mildly: they create spaces for our imagination — openings as well as boundaries. It is my firm conviction that the term multiculturalism is leading us down the wrong path. I would like to explain why using a historical detour.

The first two decades of the twentieth century were the high point of immigration to the US; in 1924, immigration was brutally curtailed with the introduction of restrictive laws. New groups of immigrants were arriving — known in fact as "the new immigrants" — who engendered fear in the Anglo-Saxon Protestant America. The newcomers were considered different; they were poor southern and eastern Europeans, Jews, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians. They were called dagoes, hunkies, and other derogatory names. Historian David Roediger has shown that they were not accepted as white Americans until the 1930s. They were viewed as threats to the culture, to the language, and to Protestantism. The situation was the same as it is in Europe today. Questions were asked: how do we want America to change with immigration? How do we want America to be? These were questions that emerged from encounter with "the other" and are identical to the questions we are asking in Europe today.

The answers and ideas that were chiselled out — the conceptual spaces that were created — are things we are still wrestling with: demands for closed borders, desire for cultural homogeneity. The often ruthless and completely unsentimental assimilation policy took its name — the melting pot — from a work by Israel Zangwill that premiered on stage in Washington in 1908.

But I would particularly like to focus on two answers to the question from that time: "How do we want America to be?" The two approaches, which are all too often mixed up in the European debate, have created confusion as to what is meant by a multicultural view of society.

The first answer was formulated by sociologist Horace Kallen in a series of articles in the second decade of the twentieth century: the US as cultural pluralism in practice, a nation of many nations. The resulting metaphor was a mosaic, with the various migrant cultures representing small pieces that combined to form a larger whole. Kallen thought it was the State's task to protect each individual culture and he detested the melting pot standardisation. He began using the word "hyphenates" to describe Americans who were Italian-American, Jewish-American, or Anglo-American, for example.

Pluralism had a strong influence in Swedish politics for a period. *Hemspråks-undervisning* ("home language instruction" — tuition in a language other than Swedish, spoken by at least one of the pupil's parents) was a wonderful reform taken directly from pluralism's toolbox. But today pluralism is not appropriate. It is open wide to criticism of enclaves and tolerance of a culture of introversion and violence (towards women, children, homosexuals, bisexuals, and transsexuals). Pluralism recognises that a multicultural society is an inevitable fact, but offers no policy that can combine diversity with justice and equality. It offers peace of mind for each piece of the mosaic, but no provision for change, dynamics, or adaptability. Pluralism gets bogged down in culture. In the word "culture".

It's high time to reject pluralism. To draw a firm line beneath the idea of mosaics, mixed salads, and all those other terms. Time to make it clear that this is not what we are after when we defend multiculturalism. The criticism now — in the wake of the three incidents I mentioned by way of introduction — forces this kind of position.

At the same time that Kallen was writing his articles, another sociologist was strolling around Manhattan: Randolph Bourne. He too saw the hyphenates, the people living with one foot in Europe and one in America. He met them, spoke to them, and worked with them in political contexts. They were there and their presence could not be denied. But he also saw how the mosaic approach closed people in, locked them into their history, into their historical roots. He saw people who wanted to change their piece of the mosaic and live in another, people who preferred to walk along the joins. Bourne felt a desire to stroll freely over the whole mosaic, and he noticed that people had more than one identity, ones that may not at all be linked to ethnicity, race, or national culture — which after all are just synonyms for history. But Bourne also saw that some people had to be left alone on their secure mosaic fragments. The State's task cannot be to protect minority communities. Nor can it be to force them into a melting pot. Its task is to keep the passageways between the pieces of the mosaic open to *everybody*.

In actual fact, the mosaic structure of pluralism is founded on the same race philosophy as the melting pot model and hostility towards immigrants: the notion that homogeneous national groups and separate individuals are happiest in the safe community of the group.

"Cosmopolitan" was the answer Bourne gave to the question "How do we want America to be?" His initial, preliminary, uncertain notes should form the basis of what we mean when we talk about a "multicultural" view of society.

But while the relatively new term "multiculturalism" stresses the word "culture", the emphasis of the old word cosmopolitan is on politics. And while culture in its anthropological sense locks people in, the term "politics" opens up opportunities. In politics, the world is "doable" in a completely different way, the opportunities for scope are expanded.

Allow me to try and explain the point of the very old thought Bourne picked up in the 1910s, and which has since developed and enjoyed a strong renaissance in politics, social research, and art over the past ten years.

A cosmopolitan nation is not held together by a common culture, ethnicity, or even a shared history. Sweden is not a country for Swedishness, but for the people who live here. French philosopher Catherine Audard writes: "The nation is not determined by virtue of the past, through culture or tradition, it is continuously created afresh through citizens' tacit connection to its political institutions and [political] basic values: the nation, as Ernest Renan said in his celebrated description, is 'a daily plebiscite'."

The glue that holds the cosmopolitan society together is politics. In other words, having shared problems that need to be resolved democratically. And by this I mean politics as Hannah Arendt described it: the discussion created where people meet to resolve common issues. We call this the public sphere or the public arenas. It is in these discussions, founded on the idea of democracy and equal rights, that the cosmopolitan order takes shape. It is not a simple answer to all the conflicts raging in the city, but it is a framework for resolving

them. This is what Jürgen Habermas ingeniously termed "constitutional patriotism" — people feel a sense of solidarity with a nation's laws, freedoms and rights, rather than its ties of kinship or cultural history.

Access to this discussion, to the publicity, requires an end to discrimination and exclusion. Having publicity and politics as the sole requisites of the community means that cosmopolitan society cannot accept the exclusion of anyone; it presupposes inclusion and, thereby, equal rights for everybody. Otherwise it ceases to function.

But cosmopolitanism is not just political theory. It is primarily lived experience. Take a walk through London: through the East End, Southall, Brixton. Be shocked by the inequality — but see the life. How people every day open up the mosaic and move the boundaries. How they prove that an individual is not governed by an unequivocal cultural affiliation. How the barriers of racial discrimination are overcome. Discover music as a wordless discussion about how the cosmopolitan city should be formed. Rishi Rich, Nitin Sawhney, DJ Cheb i Sabbah, and don't miss Erika Frisell's amazing collaboration with Solo Cissokho. It is no coincidence that London-based cultural sociologist [Les Back](#) has used improvised music and jazz as a metaphor for the cosmopolitan. You have to be able to improvise, but it is not possible without knowledge of both your own and others' traditions.

The idea of a cosmopolitan society — or a multicultural one, if you still prefer that term — is radically open, without answers known in advance. It is an experience of uncertainty. In this respect, it is reminiscent of the democratic ideal. Both are in some way beyond control. And, as a result, also unsettling. Anything that is fixed risks evaporating; fixed communities may dissolve or even vanish altogether. Zygmunt Bauman expresses the situation as follows: "The truth may only emerge at the far end of conversation — and in a genuine conversation (that is, a conversation that is not a soliloquy in disguise), no partner is certain to know, nor is able to know, what that end may be (if there is an end, that is)."

I began this article with a deep feeling of concern. But I finish it with the strong conviction that the advances we have made can be defended. And not only defended. It is absolutely possible to expand the space we live in. But one prerequisite is that we do not descend into a fear of freedom and into the trap of simple, seemingly certain answers. Democracy is no longer a social community, as American philosopher John Dewey wrote in the 1920s. Instead, it must be a community of strangers.

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