From multiculturalism to interculturalism

Ali Rattansi
20 March 2012

In keeping with its "big society" scheme, the British Conservative Party's recently revealed alternative to New Labour's "state-sponsored multiculturalism" replaces top-down cohesion projects with community activities promoting "mainstream British values". The centrepiece of the new policy? "The Big Lunch", where neighbours get together for a meal on the weekend of the Queen's diamond jubilee. Ali Rattansi sees the initiative as the latest in a line of equally ill-founded attempts across Europe to blame multiculturalist policies for social fracture.

While analysing multiculturalism in the UK, the Netherlands and France in my recent Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2011), I had to confess that I had little idea what David Cameron’s “big society” project was going to mean for what remained of multiculturalism in the UK. I had my suspicions, of course. It was already clear that the “big society” seemed like a ruse. Dressed up as a Big New Idea it seems like a very old one, beloved of neoliberals – the “small state”, meaning the potential withdrawal of the state from supporting social and community projects from potentially every area where there has been governmental support. And the axe was bound to fall on New Labour’s particular version of multiculturalism, which had morphed into “community cohesion” (something I examine carefully in the book).

The Big Lunch

The waiting is over. Communities Secretary Eric Pickles has replaced multiculturalism and community cohesion with a vaguely defined notion of community building and integration. [1] And one central component of the new strategy is the “Big Lunch”. Coming from Pickles, one should surely not be surprised, but the thinness of the new proposals and the smallness of vision is extraordinary. “Diet lunch” is a more apt metaphor for the whole document. Apart from encouraging neighbours to sit down and share a meal on Sunday 3 June, the weekend of the Queen’s diamond jubilee, his proposals include a community music day on 9 September, vague references to “outflanking” extremism and the severe retrenchment of state funding for other community integration initiatives. Hollow- big- society and mean -small- state are all that
is on the menu.

Coming so soon after David Cameron’s Munich speech denouncing multiculturalism, delivered in the presence of Chancellor Angela Merkel who not so long ago had declared the “failure” of multiculturalism in Germany, one might be forgiven for thinking that there is now just about enough dirt in the grave to finally bury multiculturalism in the UK and the rest of Europe. The Netherlands and Denmark introduced draconian “integration” measures quite some time ago, the French and now the Dutch have banned the burqa and the Italians have squarely set themselves against the idea that their country was “multi-ethnic”. And the Far Right has been growing in influence in the newer Eastern European members of the EU.

Questioning the narrative of failure

The background to this flurry of anti-multicultural measures is disturbing. On closer inspection, public debates about multiculturalism in Europe have been played out at an abysmally low level, with rhetoric and unsubstantiated accusations trumping reference to serious empirical research and reasoned argument. Nothing has been more indicative of this tendency than the 2005 description of “multiculturalism as the real suicide bomb” in the Daily Telegraph and David Cameron’s similar specious reasoning which begins with the threat posed by Islamic terrorism, complains about all Muslims’ refusal to integrate and ends up by denouncing multiculturalism (flaws in argument which have been brilliantly exposed by Brian Klug’s forensic dissection of the Munich speech). [2]

As I show in some detail, there were similar glaring weaknesses in New Labour’s argument, in the wake of the 2001 disturbances in the Northern “mill towns” and then the 2005 London bombings, that it was multiculturalism that had led to “fractured communities” and “parallel lives” and also in Trevor Phillips’s infamous “we are sleepwalking into segregation because of multiculturalism” soundbite.

My re-reading of the reports commissioned by New Labour into the 2001 urban disorders shows not only that they did not blame multiculturalism, but that they called for more multiculturalist policies. The investigating panels were appalled by the amount of racism against the Asian minorities, their severely deprived conditions in the de-industrialised northern cities such Bradford and Oldham, and the failure of national and local governments to address both racism and the consequences of de-industrialisation on employment and poverty levels.

The reports into the 2001 disorders also argued something that has been confirmed by later research, that “segregation” and “fracturing” between the Asian communities and the white population has not only been exaggerated, but had at least as much to do with “white flight”, white hostility to mixed council estates and racist allocation processes within local authorities – all of which led to the concentration of Asians in particular locales and estates – as to the Asians’ refusal to integrate. The reports and other research have also confirmed a continuing desire on the part of Asians, and especially younger generations, to live in “mixed” rather than mono-ethnic Asian areas. Indeed, younger Asians have been deliberately moving into mixed areas, especially as they want their children to grow up in them.
“Community cohesion”, poorly defined notions of “integration” and measures such as citizenship tests for migrants were cobbled together by former home secretary David Blunkett and others out of a lop-sided reading of the 2001 reports, a mishmash of poorly thought out communitarianism, Robert Putnam’s highly contentious research on “social capital” in his (undeservedly over-influential Bowling Alone), and by treating the “white working class” as another “ethnic group” and indeed one disadvantaged by an over-emphasis on improving opportunities for immigrants. This argument was often supported by a misleading comparison between the poorest whites and all ethnic minorities.

David Goodhart’s equally flawed argument that Britain was becoming “too diverse” to sustain the common values and lifestyles that underpinned the welfare state, and the Young Foundation’s poorly researched lament for the English working class of the New East End of London – all of which are critically examined in my book – only fed into the widespread feeling that somehow it was all the fault of multiculturalism, which had supposedly focussed on celebrating ethnic and cultural difference to the exclusion of underlining and promoting common values and identities.

Hence, too, the desire to bring “Britishness” to the fore in the school curriculum and other public projects. By focussing on national identity and the supposed over-generosity to ethnic minorities, what went missing were the commonalities that defined the shared disadvantages, poverty and unemployment that unite the white and ethnic minority working classes. Moreover, what was also neglected was the threat to “community cohesion” posed by the gated communities of the rich and super-rich who were the more likely to be living “parallel lives” in relation to their fellow citizens, having been the main beneficiaries of New Labour’s neoliberal de-regulation of the economy and especially the financial sector.

Defining “Britishness” has also proved elusive, descending into the same banalities about democracy, liberalism, tolerance and fairness that the Netherlands defined as Dutch national identity and the French defined as “Frenchness” before Sarkozy unceremoniously abolished his short-lived Ministry of Immigration and Integration. By emphasising the obvious nice bits, each European nation also managed to avoid having to confront the undemocratic, the illiberal and the obvious class, colonial and ethnic cruelties that are also an intrinsic part of Europe’s history. Cameron appears to have alighted on “muscular liberalism” (an intolerant liberalism?) as his preferred new civilising mission, although his response to the 2011 urban disorders displayed much muscularity and little liberalism.

In any case, the evidence I have gathered suggests that democracy is highly valued across the large sections of the Muslim world and amongst European Muslims – the chief target of the new civilising mission – and if there was any doubt about this then the Arab spring has certainly showed that demands for liberty, fairness, equal rights and democracy are widespread in the Middle East. As is now clear, such aspirations were partly held back by hypocritical western backing for Arab dictators, secular and religious. Evidence of the highly misleading nature of proclamations like “they hate our way of life”, whether applied to the Arab world or to European Muslims, has been available for quite some time.

**Is multiculturalism bad for women?**
Multiculturalism has also been much reviled for its supposed cultural relativism. And ethnic minority women, especially Muslim women, have been identified as the main losers of this relativist tolerance towards the practices of minority cultures. This is a complex and tangled debate and here I can only provide a brief set of comments; there is a whole chapter on this issue in the book.

Let us leave aside the obvious hypocrisy of all types of conservatives suddenly morphing into militant crusaders for women’s rights, even using women’s subordination as a justification for the invasion of Afghanistan (but of course conveniently ignoring western support for the equally misogynistic Saudis and other Middle Eastern allies).

In relation to women, the case against multiculturalism has always revolved around the claim that in accommodating the cultures of minorities in a supposedly completely relativistic manner, European states have failed to protect ethnic minority women against female genital mutilation, “honour” killings and forced marriages, and have allowed men to impose headscarves, sometimes the burqa, and generally a degrading form of subordination that prevents “their” women from enjoying the freedoms taken for granted by their fellow women citizens.

The existence of patriarchal and sometimes extreme patriarchal views among some sections of the Muslim and other ethnic minorities cannot be doubted. But has a relativistic “state multiculturalism” aided and abetted this? In the past, Asian elders have often held sway over local authorities and the Home Office. But this is less and less true, and the activism of ethnic minority women’s groups, most notably Southall Black Sisters, Newham Women’s Project and Muslim Women’s Helpline in the UK has been increasingly influential. Female genital mutilation of all degrees is now banned in all western countries. So-called “honour killings” are now unequivocally seen for what they always have been, murder, without any mitigating “cultural” circumstances. And there is increasing state action against forced marriages. These are not widespread, but they continue to pose a serious problem for many young women amongst Kurdish-origin, Pakistani-origin and other ethnic minority young women all over Europe.

The important general point here is that there is little evidence of a “cultural relativism”, tied to official multiculturalism, among advocates of multiculturalism or within national and local governments that somehow colludes in the oppression of ethnic minority women. The 2000 Parekh/Runnymede Report on Multi-Ethnic Britain has set out a framework that is generally accepted by multiculturalists, that is, some accommodation with minority cultures but not at the expense of fundamental human rights, including the equality of women in all spheres. [3]

Of course, there is the vexed question of headscarves, especially in France. There is acute hostility to them in France and a belief that they are an unambiguous sign of a lack of civilisation among Muslims and an indication of either patriarchal power or radical Islamist sympathies. However, French sociological research offers a quite different interpretation of the meaning of the reviled headscarf. The same is true of research on young Muslim women’s turn to the headscarf in other European countries. By and large they choose to wear the headscarf rather than being forced, and often do so against parental wishes.
Moreover, it is still a minority of Muslim women who wear the headscarf, and a tiny minority who wear the full burqa covering the whole body and leaving only a small slit for the eyes. Sociological and anthropological research points to an important generational divide, with younger women using the headscarf as a badge of identity out of a feeling of marginality, and increasingly as a more confident and positive assertion of identity, but without radical Islamist sympathies or an exaggerated subservience to patriarchal culture. Often, the young women point out that their headscarf is a protest against the excessive sexualisation of women in western culture, as well as an expression of generalised resentment at the western image and treatment of populations in the Muslim world.

**Is multiculturalism dead?**

While citizenship tests, more controls on non-white immigration and the language of “integration” increasingly hold sway over proclamations of multiculturalism, many of the old policies that recognise ethnic minority cultures in dietary requirements, forms of dress, and equal opportunities and oppose discrimination in education, employment, housing allocation and so forth, continue, albeit under the more bland commitment to “diversity”.

Pickles’s new paper does not suggest that Whitehall diversity targets should be abandoned. But in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, funding for multicultural-diversity projects is being cut back and continuing austerity does not augur well for them. New Labour’s policies for encouraging greater inter-cultural dialogue, although based on flawed social capital and other notions, were heading in some of the right directions. It is my argument, fleshed out in my book, that we do need to move on from old-style multiculturalism to a more constructive phase of what in common with others I call “interculturalism”. But there is a long uphill struggle to hold on to the gains of previous periods and also to find funding for intercultural projects. Austerity is already resulting in higher levels of unemployment for ethnic minorities and increasing levels of general inequality and the rapid pace of change in local communities means that the backlash against multiculturalism and immigration has quite some way to run in increasingly anxious and insecure times. There is a very rocky ride ahead.

**Footnotes**


**Published 20 March 2012**