Multiculturalism at its limits?

Managing diversity in the new Europe

Kenan Malik, Fero Sebej
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Multiculturalism, the default strategy in western Europe for managing cultural diversity in recent decades, is increasingly under attack. In a mainstream discourse closer to that of the far-Right, minorities are turned into problems as migration allegedly threatens cultural identity. Liberal critics, on the other hand, see a threat to Enlightenment values when the appeasement of religious and cultural sensibilities is regarded as more important than the right to freedom of expression or gender equality. In central and eastern Europe, the experience is different: because minority rights are largely seen in national-territorial terms, collective rights are viewed with suspicion, while other minorities, notably the Roma, are sidelined entirely. British writer Kenan Malik met Slovak politician and journalist Fero Sebej in Bratislava to discuss multiculturalism in the East and in the West. Moderated by Samual Abrahám, editor of the journal Kritika & Kontext.

Samuel Abrahám: Multiculturalism was originally an affirmative term indicating the diversity of the “melting pot”. Today, however, it has come to be associated with ethnic ghettos. Rather than celebrating difference and creating respect for pluralism, multiculturalism has brought new conflicts. Kenan Malik, what went wrong?

Kenan Malik: It seems to me that part of the problem is confusion over what we mean by multiculturalism. It can mean one of two things. First: diversity as lived experience. Second: multiculturalism as a political process. To talk of diversity as lived experience is to talk of the experience of living in a society that, through mass immigration, has become more open, more vibrant and more cosmopolitan. In that sense, the mass immigration of the past 50 years has been of great benefit, it seems to me. But multiculturalism as a political process has come to mean something very different, namely the process of managing that diversity by putting people into ethnic boxes. It’s a process through which cultural differences are institutionalized, publicly affirmed, recognized and institutionalized; through which political policy is predicated on the ethnic box to which one belongs. That seems to me deeply problematic.
The conflation of diversity as lived experience and multiculturalism as a political process has been highly invidious. On the one hand it has allowed many on the Right, and not just on the Right, to blame immigrants and immigration for the social problems of western nations. On the other hand, it has led many on the Left to abandon their attachment to classical notions of liberty and freedom, such as free speech and secularism. The irony about multiculturalism as a political process is that it undermines much of what is good about diversity as a lived experience.

The question that multiculturalists very rarely ask themselves is why is diversity good? Diversity isn’t good in and of itself; it’s good because it allows us to expand our horizons, to break out of the boxes – be they cultural, ethnic, or religious – in which we find ourselves. To think about other values, other beliefs, other lifestyles, to make judgements upon those values and beliefs and lifestyles. To enter, in other words, into a dialogue, a debate, through which a more universal language of citizenship can arise. It is precisely such dialogue and debate that multiculturalism as a political process undermines and erodes in the name of “respect” and “tolerance”. So the very thing that diversity is good for, the very thing we should cherish it for, is the very thing that multiculturalism as a political process undermines.

SA: Fero Sebej, what went wrong in our society, and by that I also mean Slovakian society, for multiculturalism to end up in this position?

Fero Sebej: Here in Slovakia, we are only observers, because our society is basically multi-ethnic rather than multicultural. Here, Hungarians, Slovaks, Germans and others share almost exactly the same culture, the same relationship between individual and authority, the same religious heritage. The ethnic tensions we experience are more the heritage of past confrontations between ethnical groups. We also have the demons of racism in our society, different kinds of racism, one of which is the vilification of the Roma minority. But also anti-Semitism, which still survives in a form of a conspiracy theory that the Jews secretly control the world. But comparing the Slovak situation with that in western European countries, major differences arise: we have no large Muslim minorities like in France, Germany, Scandinavia, the UK and elsewhere.

SA: But multiculturalism as policy was created not solely for Muslim minorities, and arguably has failed with respect to all minorities in society. Kenan, perhaps you want to add something?

KM: I think the very notion of multiculturalism is an irrational one. It assumes from the start that societies are composed of cultures that somehow relate to each other externally, as it were. Here is one culture, here’s another, and there’s another, and these cultures then interact with each other. In fact cultures aren’t like that: cultures are living, organic entities that constantly change. There is no such thing as a multicultural society. There are societies with a variety of cultural forms, beliefs, lifestyles, values – in fact, virtually every society embodies such diversity – but to say that is to say something very different thing to the claim that a society is “multicultural”.

There’s a myth that European societies used to be homogenous and somehow they’ve become plural because of mass immigration, particularly the arrival of Muslim immigrants. But if you go back to the nineteenth century, Europe was probably more
plural then than it is today: the cultural difference between a factory owner and a factory worker in Britain or anywhere in Europe was far greater than the cultural difference today between a sixteen year-old of north African or Pakistani origin and a sixteen year-old indigenous Slovak or Briton. The difference isn’t that we have become more plural, but that we’ve come to understand pluralism in a very different way. Societies have always been conflictual, riven by class differences, generational differences, gender differences, ideological differences. But today we tend to see social clashes in a very narrow way, in terms of religion, faith and culture, because we have come to see identity in very narrow ways. The debate about multiculturalism is a debate in which certain differences – culture, ethnicity and faith – have come to be regarded as important and others – such as class, say, or generation – as less relevant.

It’s one of the ironies of the multicultural viewpoint that diversity somehow ends at the edges of minority communities. A multicultural view sees societies as diverse because they contain many different cultures, but within those cultures there is apparently no diversity. Yet every minority community is as diverse, as divided – be it by class, age, gender, nationality and so on – as any other community. The consequence of the multicultural stance is that instead of treating people as citizens, we’ve come to treat them as members of ethnic boxes.

There are two ways over the past half-century in which we’ve stopped treating people as citizens. One is through racism. The racist says “you’re not a citizen, you don’t have full rights in this society because you have a different skin colour, you are foreign”, etc. The second is multiculturalism. The multiculturalist says: “we treat you not as an individual citizen, but as a Muslim or a Hindu or a Sikh or a black”. The irony is that multiculturalism developed as an attempt to combat the problems created by racism. But it has recreated many of the problems by treating people not as citizens but as members of groups, and by formulating public policy in relation to those groups and not in relation to the needs of individual citizens.

SA: I lived for many years in Canada, where multiculturalism was a respected and functional policy. In contrast to the US melting pot, minorities of various origin, be it Slavic, African or Asian, were supported by government. You didn’t have the tensions that exist in Europe today. Of course, it is not as rosy now as it used to be, but somehow multiculturalism worked.

KM: I don’t subscribe to the myth of the great Canadian multicultural experiment. Look at the 1970s and the big debate about the role and the status of the French in Quebec and the tensions that caused, or the debates about free speech and hate speech that have arisen in Canada over the past ten years, or the current debate about whether the Burqa should be banned – all those tensions exist in Canada. They play themselves out slightly differently, but they exist. My guess is that in ten to twenty years’ time, we won’t be talking about Canada as the great positive multicultural experiment.

SA: Returning to the question of what went wrong, you have written that it was a kind of cynicism or superiority on the part of British government that led them to say, “we’ll give them money for their cultural events or for schools but we won’t mix with them”. Do you see multiculturalism as an intentional form of discrimination on the part of western governments, or was it a genuine attempt to do something positive for minorities?
KM: Western governments did not set out to create a segregated society. Most politicians set out with the best of intentions to combat racism. But at the same time, we have to say that the multicultural policies were flawed from the very beginning: it wasn’t as if this was a good set of policies that somehow eroded over time. The fact is that it was a lot easier to combat racism by saying to people “go on, follow your own values, cultures, lifestyles, beliefs, we will fund your festival, your dance troupe, your cultural centre”... we used to call it the “saree, samosa and steel band brigade”. When I was growing up in Britain in the ‘70s and ‘80s, we weren’t interested in promoting and pursuing our own ethnic culture. We never recognized ourselves as ethnically different. There was no such thing as a Muslim community. I didn’t see myself as a Muslim. None of my friends did. Actually, we all saw ourselves as “black”, because black in Britain in the ‘70s and ‘80s was a kind of generic term for non-whites facing discrimination. It was not an ethnic term: we saw the issues as political. There was no such thing as a Muslim community in Britain till the end of the ‘80s. Multicultural policies helped create that.

So the point I’m making is the rise of multicultural policies did not primarily come from below. Or only to certain extent, with the rise of identity politics, which is a different issue. It was not because there was a great demand from minority communities for official recognition to be given to our identities, our cultures, our values and lifestyles. What we wanted was official recognition for ourselves as individuals, we did not want to be treated differently by the police, by the immigration authorities, by the housing authorities and so on. What has happened is that the very notion of equality has transformed over the last twenty years. Equality used to mean that everybody was treated the same despite their differences. Now it’s come to me that everybody is treated differently because of those differences.

SA: Fero, you mentioned that Slovakia is multi-ethnic, but doesn’t have a clue about what multiculturalism is. Could we say that Slovakia is where Great Britain was in the 1970s? What would you suggest we do in Slovakia with respect to our Roma community?

FS: The main thing, not only as concerns Roma but also Slovak Hungarians, is that we implement policies that enable them to feel at home and equal in all areas. Simply: to enable them to feel that it is also their state. There is no collective solution because, as you know, there are some Roma living in terrible conditions in eastern Slovakia with no chance of improving their situation, who need a different kind of help than other Roma, who simply need to be treated as one of us.

SA: Roma in Slovakia have no political representation and few organized groups; they feel alienated, they are surrounded by racism both overt and covert. Whatever the failures of multicultural policies, would it not at least provide a basis if the Roma were to recognize themselves as a community with rights?

KM: You are suggesting that one solution might be for the Roma to see themselves in some way as a community – as a people. But don’t they already? And isn’t part of the problem that the rest of society sees them as a group, and only as a group, and imposes upon every individual in that group a set of prejudices about the Roma? I was recently in a debate in Gothenburg, in Sweden, together with the government minister responsible for multicultural policy, including policy towards the Roma. Her argument was that the Roma had been in Sweden for a very long time and that they therefore deserved a special
set of rights. The question was asked: what about more newly arrived migrants, Muslims for instance? Should they also possess those rights? And her answer was, “No, they shouldn’t because they have not been in Sweden long enough to deserve them”. There are two problems with granting people rights by virtue of their belonging to a group, as opposed to their being citizens with specific social, economic and other needs. First, the group becomes a focus not only for providing rights, but also for prejudice: you deal not with the problems of individual Roma, but the imputed problems of Roma as a whole. Second, you deny the same rights to other groups, to others who don’t happen to be in that group, such as Muslims.

SA: There are two developments: first, multiculturalism and its failings and second, the development of Islamism, which has been an issue in the West ever since the fatwa against Salman Rushdie. After 9/11, a culture of fear has arisen, one consequence of which has been restrictions on freedom of speech. How can these two very different developments be reconciled? To what extent are they complementary?

KM: I think they are two sides of the same coin, namely a fear of cultural engagement and a fear of “the Other”. Multiculturalists deal with that fear by seeing different groups as being distinct, and according to them different rights or privileges, and shaping public policy according to that. And then you have those who see the world in terms of the clash of civilizations, of the West versus Islam, who want to protect the West from the taint of Islam, as it were. To get beyond that kind of politics of fear, we need to defend the idea of an open society, of cultural engagement, to celebrate the importance of diversity in helping move society along. We also need to oppose racism on the one hand, and multiculturalism on the other, as placing limits on the benefits of diversity.

As for the relationship between multiculturalism and constraints on free speech, an argument has developed that runs something like this: we live in a society where there are lots of different peoples and cultures, each with deeply set, often irreconcilable, views and beliefs. In such a society we need to restrict what people say or do in order to minimize friction between cultures and to guarantee respect for people embedded in different cultures. Hence the arguments for hate-speech legislation, for censorship against the giving of offence and so on.

I take almost exactly the opposite view: namely that it is precisely because we live in a plural society that we need the most robust defence of free speech possible. It seems to me that in a plural society, the giving of offence is both inevitable and necessary. It is inevitable because we do have societies with deep-seated, conflicting views. But it’s far better to have those conflicts out in the open than to suppress them in the name of respect and tolerance. But most importantly, the giving of offence is necessary because no kind of social change or social progress is possible without offending some group of other. When people say, “you are offending me”, what they are really saying is, “you can’t say that because I don’t want my beliefs to be questioned or ridiculed or abused.” That seems to me deeply problematic.

SA: But what do you say to cartoonist or publishers who are afraid to say and do things for their own security?

KM: I wouldn’t want to minimize some of the dangers, but I wouldn’t want to exaggerate
them either. Part of the problem it seems to me is that we exaggerate the dangers of free speech. And in so doing we create the problem. The real issue is not actually the threat of violence from Islamists. It is something much more internal to western societies, the sense that it is morally wrong to give offence to other groups and cultures. People are frightened of doing things because they fear the repercussions, but they are also frightened of doing things because they think it is morally wrong to offend other people and other cultures. And I think that is a much greater problem. We should say it is morally right to offend people. That is what a plural society is. If we want to live in a plural society, the price of a plural society - though I don’t see it as a price, I think it is the value of the plural society - is that we confront each other. That is what is good about plural society.

FS: I quote an article in the Los Angeles Times by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Daniel Huff, who propose the following: “In the 1990s, abortion providers faced the same sort of intimidation tactics and did not succumb. Instead, they lobbied for a federal law making it a crime to threaten people exercising reproductive rights and permitting victims to sue for damages. The Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, or FACE, passed in 1994 by solid bipartisan margins. A similar act is needed to cover threats against free-speech rights.” I think she is right. Free speech is such an important feature of modern free society that it needs to be protected by law against threats.

KM: I actually disagree with Ayaan Hirsi Ali on this. I do not think that the way to defend free speech is to have another law making threats against free speech illegal. I cannot see the logic...

FS: Death threats?

KM: Well, death threats are illegal anyway. I think we need a much broader debate, and far from having new laws, what we need is to remove the restrictions we currently have on free speech. I also, as it happens, disagree with Ayaan Hirsi Ali on matters of Islam and Islamism. For instance, she has argued in support of the Swiss ban on minarets. I think that is ludicrous. To say “I am standing up for free speech and for freedom” and to say then one should have - in the name of tolerance - a ban on building minarets by Muslims. It is clearly an anti-Muslim sentiment being given official sanction. We should oppose it. If we are standing up for freedom, we should stand up for freedom for everybody and not just for people whose views we happen to like.

SA: We have talked about the failings of multiculturalism, once the great hope of western society; we have talk about curtailment of freedom of speech, a very unexpected development of the twenty first century; and we have talked about the culture of fear in the West. Besides defending free speech, is there anything, in your view, that can prevent western society falling into the abyss of fear and irrationality?

KM: I think there are a number of distinctions we need to make. I began by saying that we need to make the distinction between diversity as lived experience and multiculturalism as a political process. That is very, very important because part of the problem is that the critique of multiculturalism has often come from those who are opposed to diversity and immigration, a rightwing critique of multiculturalism rooted in a kind of anti-immigrant sentiment that needs opposing 100 per cent. We also need to
make a distinction between the idea of individual rights and group rights. One cannot
defend the rights of the individual by giving certain rights to the groups to which they
belong. In fact, in doing so one actually constrains their rights because if they want to
leave that group, if they want to challenge the norms of that group, then their rights
become restricted.

We also need to make a distinction between colour blindness and racism blindness. The
two have become confused, so that in France, for instance, arguments against
multiculturalism have become an argument in defence of racism. Discriminatory policies,
and not just against the Roma, but also against Muslims and others, have been defended
on the basis that they are necessary for assimilation. The law outlawing the burqa, for
instance. In one sense assimilation means treating individuals as citizens and not as
members of a particular group. That seems to me to be a very good thing. But that is not
what assimilation has come to mean in practice somewhere like France, where policies of
assimilation have resulted in the authorities treating different groups of people
differently by pointing up their differences, insisting that certain groups – Muslims or the
Roma, for example – cannot belong to our culture, to our society, because their culture,
their values, their ways of life are so different and inimical to ours. That is the way
assimilation policies have developd and I think that is very dangerous.

A final distinction we need to make is between the public and the private. Part of the
problem of multiculturalism is that the distinction between the public and the private
realms have become eroded. We need to defend the right of people to pursue their
values, their lifestyles, their beliefs in private. By “private”, I don’t mean in the privacy of
their homes, but in those areas of life distinct from the state and state institutions. But
we also need to ensure that, in the public realm, the state does not treat people
differently because of their particular values, beliefs or lifestyles. The ideal plural society
is one where people have perfect freedom to pursue their beliefs, values and lifestyles in
private but in public are treated as citizens, whatever those lifestyles, beliefs and values
are. Multiculturalism has come to mean the very opposite: people are treated differently
in the public realm because of their values, beliefs and lifestyles, but at the same time
restrictions are placed upon the private realm, on what one can say or do, because of fear
of giving offence.

SA: Fero, what would be your solution? How can we maintain free speech yet curtail
racism, be it Slovakia or the European Union?

FS: I don’t think there is any contradiction. Fighting racism doesn’t mean I have to limit
freedom of expression. I hate racist jokes, but I would protect the right of people to tell
them. They are really ugly and stupid, but I wouldn’t dream of regulating it by law.
Actually, I do not believe in collective rights. I think everyone should be treated equally,
but people also need to be free to live how they prefer. Fighting violent racism is
something that should be done by law enforcement authorities. But it is also the
responsibility of the cultural elites: to make racism something one should be ashamed of.
It’s a matter of education, I think. Not of laws limiting free speech.

KM: The point about free speech is this: who is it that benefits from censorship? Is it
those in power, or is it those without power? It seems to me that the only people to
benefit from censorship are those with the power to enforce that censorship and the need
to do so. Those who have no power are much better served by as little censorship as possible. Free speech is always the weapon in the hands of those who want to challenge power and censorship is always a weapon in those who want to preserve their power. That’s why I think anyone who wants to challenge racism should support of the greatest extension of free speech possible.

**Question from the audience:** In terms of legislation, how can a country like Slovakia – which, according to Fero Sebej, is not multicultural but multiethnic – avoid the multicultural experiment, which failed even though the intentions were good? What would you recommend to the legislative? Fero Sebej, as an MP, are you preparing any law that would prevent, or curb immigration, in order that Slovakia avoids the same mistakes that other countries made?

**Question from the audience:** Scandinavia was mentioned as having a large portion of immigrants and especially Muslim immigrants. In fact in Sweden, the number of inhabitants born somewhere other than Sweden is 15 per cent, and 30 per cent when you talk about people with so called migrant background, i.e. second and third generations. Until recently, Sweden was generally regarded as a good example of multicultural policies. But only two weeks ago, a xenophobic party won 20 seats in the Swedish parliament, 5.7 per cent of the vote. Last year, another bastion of liberalism, Britain, fell when the British National Party won seats in the European parliament. In both cases, the response to this development was twofold. On the one hand you point the finger at those parties or party representatives and call them racist, which means you don’t have to deal with what they’re saying. Another response for the already established political parties is to adapt or integrate some of the policies of these extremist parties. From the point of view of the defender of an open society, of a cosmopolitan, diverse society, neither of these answers can suffice. So what is the answer?

**FS:** First, no, we aren’t talking about laws limiting immigration. What we are now doing is trying to abolish the law on the so-called state language, which is perceived by Hungarians living in Slovakia to be threatening because it makes it possible to fine or sanction people for publishing in Hungarian and not Slovak, let’s say, a leaflet for a theatre. My idea would be to throw the whole law into the dustbin wholesale. But obviously there is no – here is a nice expression – “political will“ to do so, so what we are trying to do is to get rid of those paragraphs that make it possible to punish people for using another language. Like culture, language is a living thing. It is something that develops in time and is influenced by history and by people; the next generation will be speaking differently to us. The law also puts limitations on the Slovak language, which is equally stupid.

**KM:** To pick up on this question about immigration as well: what I’m attacking is not simply multiculturalism, but also anti-immigrant sentiment, which are two sides of the same coin. Both sides of the debate confuse peoples and values. The fact that you have people from different parts of the world in one country does not create a problem in and of itself, either in terms of social relations, ideology or values. On the one side you have those who wish to restrict immigration on the grounds that it is impossible to have a common set of values without having a broadly ethnically homogenous nation. On the other side you have multiculturals who say that because we have an ethnically diverse society, it impossible to have a common set of values. Both sides are wrong.
The rise of the far-Right in Sweden is interesting. If you look at the Sweden Democrats or the BNP, or much of the far-Right elsewhere in Europe, they have two kinds of supporters. There is a core of hardline racists – neither reason nor facts will ever change their minds. Then there is a much broader swathe of supporters who have become disenchanted with mainstream politics, and particularly with the parties of social democracy. These people feel abandoned by these parties, which have become cut off from their attachment to working class communities. The interesting thing about this, by the way, is that the argument is usually: “We want to be part of a multicultural map.” Supporters of the far-Right often argue, “Muslims or blacks or Hindus are able to celebrate their identity, their history, their heritage, why can’t we? We want to celebrate white history. We want to promote white heritage.” In a sense, that is the biggest indictment of multiculturalism: it turns racism into another form of cultural identity. If you look at the language of the far-Right, it is the language of difference. It is the language of multiculturalism.

The way to deal with it is this: first, we need to have a completely open debate about race, immigration, multiculturalism and so on, which is why you need the fullest extension of free speech. In Sweden, one of the campaign adverts for the Sweden Democrats tried to compare the treatment of white pensioners with that of burqa clad immigrants. It was banned, withdrawn from TV for promoting hate speech. It was an outrageous, stupid decision. The argument of the ad is not an argument that I accept, but it is an argument that many do accept and it’s a perfectly legitimate political argument to have.

And second we need to challenge head-on the arguments of the far-Right when it comes to immigration and Islam, rather than appropriating such arguments as mainstream politicians so often do. When, in Britain, the BNP won two seats in the European parliament, their leader, Nick Griffin, was invited onto Question Time, a televised political debate that goes out weekly in Britain. There was an outcry: huge demonstrations outside the BBC, with lots of politicians refusing to take part. The whole programme was effectively given over to Griffin and his policies, the other politicians spending virtually the whole programme attacking him as immoral, racist, fascist and so on. Then, near the end, all the mainstream politicians held an auction to see who could be toughest on immigration, each attempting to outbid the other in their willingness to curtail numbers coming in. What that does is both demonizes the far-Right and their supporters, and says “actually, they’re right – their arguments are right”. It’s hardly the most logical way of challenging the far-Right and its prejudices.

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