

Has Multiculturalism Failed in the UK?

Rodney Biddle

This paper considers part of an ongoing debate about the relevant state of multiculturalism in Britain, and by extension to much of Europe as well. This debate centres on the idea of whether multiculturalism, the existence of many cultures, has ceased to function or not. At the risk of pre-empting the contents of this paper, the answer to the question posed in the title is either a qualified 'yes', or a qualified 'no', depending on how you choose to interpret the current situation. The details of this apparent contradiction will be considered in more detail below, although it might first be valuable to establish what multiculturalism actually is.

For most British people of the so called 60s generation, myself included, it is probably inconceivable to question the success of multiculturalism, as a look around the country indicates that there are many established ethnic groups with their own languages and customs. In this respect, the understanding of multiculturalism conforms to a traditional definition of a community with multiple cultures, or a 'community of communities' (Parekh, 2001, page 3). Multiculturalism is consequently about cultural diversity. This diversity from a descriptive viewpoint is about acceptance and respect. It means to understand that each individual is unique, and to recognize individual differences. These differences can be of race, gender, rich/poor status, age, physical appearance, religious beliefs, political beliefs, artistic or of other ideologies. The notion of diversity also includes the idea of finding out about these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. On the normative side is the thinking and planning promoted by government policies to achieve this vision of diversity, and for example in the employment sector there are laws which allow for a diverse workforce. In Britain this equates to the Sex Discrimination, (1975), and the race relations act, (1976). These are laws and government policies which attempt to *'eliminate social, group-based discrimination and disadvantage'* (Kirton/Greene 2010).

In this sense Britain has always aimed to be a country,

"at ease with the rich tapestry of human life and the desire amongst people to express their own identity in the manner they see fit." (Bloor, 2010).

In general the term multicultural is generally applied to the demographic make-up of a specific place which may be at the organizational level of schools, businesses, neighbourhoods or cities, or at the national level of an entire country. Ideologies or policies can vary widely from country to country and may be concerned with the promotion of an equal respect for the variety of cultures in a society, or creating policies in which people of various ethnic and religious groups are looked after by the authorities, and allowed to be defined by the groups they belong. Multiculturalism traditionally has been described therefore as a "salad bowl" or a "cultural mosaic". The opposite of which would be assimilation. Assimilation meaning to

absorb and make fit, so that new people have to change to fit the new society which they find themselves in.

Has multiculturalism failed in the UK?

In the United Kingdom Multicultural policies were adopted by local administrations from the 1970s and 1980s onwards, and in 1997 the Labour government committed itself to a multiculturalist approach at a national level. There has however since 2001 been something of a protest against these policies (Howarth & Andreouli, 2014). In particular, in 2011, Prime



Minister and present incumbent David Cameron stated at the Munich security Conference that 'Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We've failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want

to belong. We've even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values." The Prime Minister of Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2010 had also expressed a similar sentiment stating that multiculturalism had failed in Germany. French president Nicolas Sarkozy declared that



in France, "We have been too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not enough about the identity of the country that was receiving him," he said in a television interview in which he declared the concept of multiculturalism a "failure" (2011).

What these leaders have been concerned with is a loss of national identity (BBC News, 2011) which in the case of the United Kingdom would mean a loss of 'Britishness'. Why have these and many others arrived at this conclusion regarding multiculturalism? They argue that it is so because of the rise of home grown Islamic extremism and terrorism. A well-known example of home grow terrorism would be that of the Boston Marathon bombing in America. Two young people born in America, and who had become Muslims came to hate their own country and killed people in the country to which they were born. We have had similarly bad incidents and killings within the UK, most notably the London bombings of 2005, and the Woolwich murder of an unarmed British soldier in 2013. The failure of multiculturalism, and the separation from mainstream culture which the European heads of state refer to is seen as the direct cause of this terrorism. This terrorism is in turn manifested by a process of radicalisation which teaches groups of primarily 'young Muslim men' (Prechat, 2007) to believe in values which run counter to the British culture. In this sense, Britain is a country where 'groups live in parallel universes' (Barry, 2001), and the answer to the question, 'Has multiculturalism failed?' is an unequivocal 'yes'.

There however are those who find a failure of multiculturalism as the cause of these

parallel lives (Heath & Demireva, 2014) to be problematic. A key objection is that that the idea of multicultural means different things to different people. To not be 'multicultural' is not simply to be between those who agree, and those who disagree (about the stated aims of society), but a far more complex concept.

We propose that multiculturalism, from a social psychological perspective, cannot simply be studied in terms of attitudinal preferences, but needs to be seen as a more complex system of knowledge and practice.' (Howarth & Andreouli, 2014)

Before exploring this complexity it is worth taking note of an empirical study which examined the intercultural practises of bonding through the marriage, cohabitation and the friendships of UK minorities (Heath and Demireva, 2014). This study found that minorities 'overwhelmingly support the maintenance of their own ethnic customs and traditions alongside equally striking support for mixing and integrating' and that, 'In the case of British identity and social distance from white people we see major changes across generations of greater integration, rather than of increased corrosion' They answer the question 'Has multiculturalism failed?' in the title of their dissertation as '*not really*'.

While for many British people multiculturalism is not a problem, clearly for a dangerous minority it is. In terms of multiculturalism, the problem emerges from a failure of the message of multiculturalism to reach these people due to the apparently inconsequential nature for this message.

'On an everyday level, the people of these islands generally accept that different identities exist and for most, thankfully, this is trivial - what people choose to eat, what music they listen to, how they choose to dress, are not generally seen as controversial in this country. The notion of a shared political space and the protection of individuals' human rights however seem to be more problematic - and the inability to deal with these issues may explain why this debate so often generates more heat than light' (Berkeley, 2011).

To reference the 2011 speech of David Cameron, 'This hands-off tolerance by mainstream society has only served to reinforce the sense that not enough is shared.' However, a reading of the literature indicates that the notion of 'sharing' is seen by many of these minority groups as not referring to the *values* promoted by the concept of multiculturalism, but rather to the sharing and distribution of responsibility and power within the UK. Indeed this is echoed in the Parekh report which states that British values, (fair-play, tolerance, love of freedom and eccentricity to name but a few), are understood in different ways by different generations. The report further suggest that the term 'Britishness' refers largely to a predominantly English, specifically southern view, and that the notion of 'Englishness' has 'largely unspoken, racial connotations' (page 38). These connotations could by definition exclude many of those who are of Asian, African-Caribbean, African or Muslim origin, and who wish to define their

cultural identity not, as the report suggests, from a predominantly white perspective. While there is a collective understanding of what it is to be British, quite rightly shared by many, and which allows many of us to collectively define our identity, the problem appears to be that 'groups or individuals who have no place within the dominant national story find it difficult to understand how they could ever properly belong', (Parekh, page 17). It may be that the message of 'Britishness' is not reaching the ears of these people or, it may be that this message needs to reflect an even more inclusive society. The objections from minority groups are not against the idea of multiculturalism per se, rather with the as yet unachieved aims of multiculturalism, namely to achieve a fully collective and integrated society. In other words, and to answer the so called 'multicultural question' of 'How can we have difference and equality?' (Hall, cited in Howarth & Andreouli) we need to progress from an equality of sameness, to an equality of difference. This would answer the original question 'Has multiculturalism failed in the UK?' within the answer '*no, because it has never yet fully materialised.*'

A view of division and unrealised political and social harmony is stated forcefully by the current chairman of the Armed Forces Muslim Association who argues that young Muslims in inner-city Britain have been left disenfranchised by politics, and let down by imams and other community leaders (Amin, 2014). It is perhaps interesting to note that an essential element of the radicalisation process which leads the extremist Muslim position includes the 'group bonding and commitment' (Precht, 2007) which it is suggested is clearly missing from the lives of those unable to find a place within British culture. As Alibhai-Brown (2011) has stated, 'Laissez-faire multicultural policies do not serve our times. State institutions should fund shared spaces, crossover ideas, openness and modernity'.

Conclusions.

This is a difficult and controversial subject, and the arguments presented above are a simplistic attempt to explain the complexities of the matter, and there is a far more detailed analysis which can be given. Nonetheless, there are apparently two viewpoints outlined in the literature. The first is that multiculturalism has gone 'off message' as it were, so that extremists emerge who are refusing to accept the stated aims of multiculturalism. The second is that the problem is not confined to a limited number of bad people, rather that the stated aims of multiculturalism have not been achieved nationally, have not allowed for enough significant integration, and that this is the 'failure' which needs to be considered as the significant factor, not the apparent instability of the concept of multiculturalism.

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