Is multiculturalism dead?

Multiculturalism has been subject to overwhelming criticism in the last decade or so. **Tariq Modood** asks, is it finally time to abandon the idea?

'How is a balance to be struck between the need to treat people equally, the need to treat people differently, and the need to maintain shared values and social cohesion?' (Commission on Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000: 40)

A certain kind of modest, communitarian, ethno-religious multiculturalism, self-consciously incorporating and building on ideas of institutional racism and anti-discrimination, seemed to be rolling forward in the 1990s and the first few years of this century. It found expression in the Commission on Multi-Ethnic Britain (CMEB) report *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (2000), as well as in some New Labour initiatives. The latter included the Lawrence Inquiry, the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000), the funding of Muslim schools, the multiplying of ethnic minority peers, religious discrimination legislation, and the introduction of the religion question into the 2001 Census.

But, from about the middle of 2001, with the disturbances in the northern towns and, later, the 9/11 attacks, the mood began to shift, and, within a few years, most public commentators pronounced multiculturalism dead. I do not want to directly discuss this backlash. Nor can I here discuss recent public policy, though I believe an analysis would show that the Government has qualified, rather than abandoned, multiculturalism (Meer and Modood, forthcoming

2008). Rather, I would like to look at some of the criticisms of multiculturalism, which I think deserve to be considered seriously.

My view is that none of these criticisms means the 'end of multiculturalism', and each can and should be taken on board to some extent. I think, however, that these ideas can be grouped under those that are generally seen as qualifying multiculturalism, and those that are seen as fundamentally opposed to it.

Ideas qualifying multiculturalism

1. Basic human rights

I do not think that anyone seriously disputes that the kind of multiculturalism appropriate to Britain must be in a context of human rights (the CMEB report had a chapter on human rights), but few are persuaded that multicultural equality (any more than other forms of social equality) can be derived from human rights.

2. Gender equality

We have increasingly become aware that some forms of abuse of women (for example, clitorodotomy, forced marriages) are disproportionately found in some minority communities. Unfortunately, feminism has come to be used as a missionary ideology to express the supremacy of the west and the backwardness of the rest. While this is mainly on the right, the tendency is not absent on the left. Moreover, in terms of practical poli-

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tics, it is clear that some of these problems could be seriously tackled only through the cooperation of the relevant communities. Strident and authoritarian approaches are likely to be counterproductive, and create besieged, stigmatised communities.

For these kinds of reasons there has become a regrettable polarisation on these sorts of issues. But the common ground is actually considerable. For multiculturalists clearly do not support violence, coercion or the undermining of the legal equality of women, though there will also be a few limited areas where people will disagree about what constitutes equality. I do not have space here to discuss such cases but can support the main point I am making by pointing to Anne Phillips' argument (Phillips 2007) that gender equality and multiculturalism are not intrinsically opposed.

3. Ongoing immigration, superdiversity

We have recently experienced, are experiencing, and, it is argued, will continue to experience, large-scale immigration. Given the diversity of the locations whence migrants are coming, the result is not communities, but a churning mass of languages, ethnicities and religions, all cutting across each other and creating a 'superdiversity' (Vertovec 2006). But it does not follow that the settled, especially postcolonial, communities, who have a particular historical relationship with Britain, lose their political significance.

4. Transnationalism

It is argued that globalisation, migration and telecommunications have created populations dispersed across countries that interact more with each other, and have a greater sense of loyalty to each other, than they might their fellow citizens. Diasporic links like this certainly exist, and are likely to increase, but I am unconvinced that the net result is an inevitable erosion of national citizenship: British African-Caribbeans and South Asians have families in their countries of origin and in the US and Canada, but there is little evidence that most, or even any, branches of those families do not feel British, American, Canadian, etc.

Challenges to multiculturalism

1. Community cohesion/citizenship/common values/Britishness

I group all these terms together, but I appreciate they do not all mean the same thing, and some will emphasise one more than the others, and might even deem one of the set as unnecessary. Nevertheless, each of these concepts has recently been invoked as embodying the kind of commonality that members of British society need to have, and which is said to have been obscured by a fetish of difference.

It is argued that Britain as a society and a state has been too laissez-faire in promoting commonality and this must now be remedied. Hence the introduction of measures such as swearing a US-style oath of allegiance at naturalisation ceremonies (as recommended by the CMEB), an English language proficiency requirement when seeking citizenship, and citizenship education for migrants and, indeed, in all secondary schools.

Many advocates of this approach also choose to say something positive about multiculturalism, and suggest that they are seeking to amend it by emphasising that what multiculturalism fails to appreciate is the necessary wider framework for its success. I would say this is true of Bernard Crick, Ted Cantle, and the Commission on Integration and Cohesion among others, including most government statements, at least during Blair's era.

On the other hand, others promote versions of this view by expressly framing it in terms of 'multiculturalism is dead'. While on the right, multiculturalism is seen as always having been mistaken (for example, columnist and author Melanie Phillips, 2006 and Conservative MP Michael Gove, 2006), a more centrist, and sometimes left, view is that multiculturalism was right for its time, but that time is over (for example, the Chair of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, Trevor Phillips and the Editor of *Prospect*, David Goodhart). A major, recent example of this position is to be found in Chief Rabbi Sacks's 2007 book

The Home We Build Together (Sacks 2007), when, in his earlier books, he has been an eloquent exponent of communitarian pluralism.

Such critics substantiate their views by quoting each other, rather than analysing the texts of multiculturalists. This is not surprising, as the political theorists of multiculturalism see it as a project of inclusivity, and this was how the CMEB also saw it.

Strong multicultural identities are a good thing – they are not intrinsically divisive, reactionary or fifth columns

The best that can be said for this view is that, perhaps, we in Europe are more likely to think that the national and the multicultural are incompatible. In other parts of the world, where multiculturalism has been adopted as a state project or as a national project – in Canada, Australia and Malaysia for example – it has not just been coincidental with, but at times integral to, a nation-building project.

Moreover, it does not make sense to encourage strong multicultural or minority identities and weak common or national identities. Strong multicultural identities are a good thing – they are not intrinsically divisive, reactionary or fifth columns – but they need a framework of vibrant, dynamic, national narratives, and the ceremonies and rituals that give expression to a national identity. The national identity should, however, be woven in debate and discussion, not reduced to a list of imposed values. For central to it is citizenship and the right of all, especially previously marginalised or newly admitted, groups to make a claim on the national identity. In this way, racism and other forms of stigmatised identities can be challenged and supplanted by a positive politics of mutual respect and inclusion.

The emphasis on citizenship may be a useful reminder to multiculturalists about what some of them, at times, may overlook, but it is not a critique or substitute for multiculturalism.

2. Critiques of group politics

This can take three forms:

a) Liberal societies can only recognise individual rights

While individual rights are fundamental to liberal democracies, much of social-democratic egalitarian politics would be impossible if we did not also recognise groups in various ways. For example, trades unions, in relation to collective bargaining; the Welsh language, as one of the national languages of Wales; the women's section in the Labour Party; positive action in relation to under-represented racial groups in a workplace; state funding for faith schools; the exemption of turban-wearing Sikhs from motor-cycle helmet safety laws.

These examples could be multiplied, and they suggest that a liberal democratic polity undertakes, in many different ways, to recognise and empower diverse kinds of groups.

b) Groups such as Muslims are internally diverse

There is an argument from social theory that groups are composed of individuals; there are no essential group characteristics, and no group monism, and so to talk about groups is theoretically facile, and usually masks a political motive.

It is true that we can sometimes work with crude ideas of groups, but that is not the same as saying that the groups that multiculturalists speak of do not exist. We do, perhaps, need looser concepts of groups, but the issue is to do with the nature of social categories, not multiculturalism *per se*. In this sense, all group categories are socially constructed, but it is clear that people do have a sense of groups (to which they feel they belong, or from which they are excluded).

One of the reasons we cannot ignore the communitarian conceptions of difference is that minorities often see and describe

themselves as sharing a group identity through such categories as 'Jewish', 'Muslim' or 'Sikh', among others. If we accept that these are no less valid than categories of 'working-class', 'woman', 'black' or 'youth', it appears inconsistent to reject some groupist categories simply because they are subject to the same dialectical tension between specificity and generality that all group categories are subject to. This is not to 'essentialise' or 'reify', however, since the category of 'Jew', 'Muslim' or 'Sikh' can remain as internally diverse as 'Christian', 'Belgian' or 'middle-class', or any other category helpful in ordering our understanding.

There is no reason to exceptionalise and overproblematise the claims of religious groups by deceiving ourselves into thinking that they are incompatible with secularism

c) Hybridity and beyond race/ethnicity to multiple identities
The above directly relates to the third point, namely that communal ethnicities are dissolving in front of our eyes, as people, especially young people, interact, mix, borrow, synthesise, and so on. It is not communities that people belong to, but an urban melange, alive to globalised and commercialised forms of recreation. Indeed, this is often what people are thinking of when they say that they like 'diversity', or are in favour of a multicultural society (but not multiculturalism).

Much research supports this sociological reading. But research also shows that such 'new ethnicities' and hybridities exist alongside, rather than simply replace, more prioritised identities. Just because we all have multiple identities does not mean that they are all equally important to us. Indeed, marginalised, stigmatised groups, groups that feel that they are always being talked about,

stereotyped or are under political pressure – exactly the kind of minorities of concern to multiculturalism – are likely to be much more wedded to, if not one, a few identity elements, than to luxuriate in multiplicity.

This is exactly what we find with groups such as British Muslims, who are more likely to think that it is important to them that they are 'Muslim' and 'British' (typically both), and that these identities have a macro-significance that is present in most public contexts.

3. Secularism
Multiculturalism was not conceived in relation to religious groups, but groups championed by multiculturalists as racial or ethnic groups have also started asserting, and sometimes giving primacy to, religious identities. This, then, causes friction or worse with those, including many multiculturalists, who assume that religion should be a private, not a public, even less a political, and certainly not a state, matter. From the other side, this looks just like an arbitrary, if historically grounded, bias against one kind of minority.

This has divided multiculturalists and weakened support for multiculturalism. And the issue is not a minor matter, given the political salience of Muslims, and the estimate that they may form about 15 per cent of the population of western Europe around, say, 2035.

But secularism is not, in all forms, inherently opposed to an ethno-religious communitarian multiculturalism. As a radical, ideological idea, it looks like that, and this is the favoured interpretation in France, but, in most democracies, secularism takes more moderate forms, and compromises between organised religion and the state are the norm. These compromises vary from country to country. For example, in the UK, bishops sit in the legislature, and religion is absent in electoral competitions; in the US, it is the other way round, but both countries are secular polities.

This means that, in every democratic secular polity, there are precedents, status quo arrangements, and institutional

resources for accommodating some public claims of religious groups. I would suggest, therefore, that multiculturalists have to study these historical arrangements (for example, state funding of faith schools in England), and look to see how they can be multiculturalised, in other words used to meet the needs of new groups of citizens.

Sometimes the extension of a precedent will be regarded as controversial (for example, extending the legal recognition of Jewish courts of arbitration on matters such as divorce [the Beth Din] to Muslim ones), and sometimes faiths relatively new to Britain may raise issues without clear precedent. So, my point is not that there will be no political dilemmas in this area, but that there is no reason to exceptionalise and overproblematise the claims of religious groups by deceiving ourselves into thinking that they are incompatible with secularism.

Conclusion

My conclusion, then, is that many genuine criticisms of multiculturalism have to be taken seriously, but none of them are reasons for abandoning, rather than strengthening through modifying multiculturalism. In particular, the three alleged challenges are actually akin to the qualifying ideas in that they are correctives not alternatives. I am sympathetic to all three challenges when they are combined with multiculturalism, and used to correct, strengthen and go beyond each other. This is what I believe we tried to do in the CMEB (cf. the quote at the head of this article) and what I have tried to do in my book (Modood 2007).

It is a difficult and unstable combination, but I continue to think it is the task of the moment. What we need is a vision of citizenship that is not confined to the state, but dispersed across society, compatible with the multiple forms of contemporary groupness, and sustained through dialogue; plural forms of representation that do not take one group as the model to which all others have to conform; and new, reformed national identities. That is multiculturalism.

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