

Multiculturalism, Assimilationism and Modernity

Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado

Multiculturalism has failed. So say a British Prime Minister,¹ a German Chancellor,² and politicians, academics, and journalists, in Europe, America and elsewhere. For such politicians, multiculturalism threatens security. It leads to alien enclaves; no-go zones where the law of the land is not enforced, and home-grown terrorists breed.³ For such academics, multiculturalism threatens civility. The level of trust, responsibility and solidarity is lower in multicultural than unicultural societies. Mutually suspicious people do not cooperate in pursuit of common social goals.⁴ For such journalists, multiculturalism threatens liberty. In otherwise free societies grow ghettos where women are oppressed and enslaved, gays assaulted, children abused and exploited.⁵

Multiculturalism also has proponents and defenders among politicians, academics and journalists. For such politicians, multiculturalism serves diversity; a good in itself, with the added boon that it offends political opponents, while diluting their electorate.⁶ For such academics, multiculturalism exercises human rights, obeys the categorical imperative, and practices liberty, equality and fraternity.⁷ For such journalists, to oppose multiculturalism is to oppose all these, and is therefore evil. Its opponents must be racists, supremacists, bigots, fascists, chauvinists, revanchists and colonialists.⁸

Who are these proponents and opponents of multiculturalism? It may seem, on the surface, that its proponents tend, with some exceptions, to be on the political left; its opponents, also with exceptions, on the right. But the exceptions are so numerous and crucial as to prevent any such simple correspondence. For among multiculturalism's most vocal critics are feminists,⁹ gay rights activists,¹⁰ and children's advocates,¹¹ who, having largely won the legal and attitudinal battle among the mainstream majority in liberal societies,¹² have to start all over again with illiberal minorities practicing cultural apartheid.¹³ And among multiculturalism's most assiduous practitioners are wealthy individuals, fluent in foreign languages, at home abroad, who happily eat exotic foods and drink imported beverages, holiday in far away places, and enjoy the company of similar people of different races and cultures, while showing little interest in or sympathy for less privileged members of their own ethnic and cultural background.

Clearly, multiculturalism is more complex than it seems. So how may a politically independent, academically exigent observer, sceptical of journalism, enter this debate? What exactly is multiculturalism? How does it affect security? Civility? Liberty? One's own culture? To answer this, one must define 'security', 'liberty', 'civility', 'culture' and 'multicultural', and identify one's own culture. Definitions of these terms vary from absolute to relative, maximal to minimal. Since it is key to all the rest, let us begin with liberty, also known as freedom.

In the absolute, liberty or freedom means unrestrained warrant to do as one likes. But we do not live in the absolute. We live in societies. These are relative, even when homogeneous. In societies, warrant to do as one likes is diversely restrained by custom or law. Law is explicit and enforced by the state. Custom may be tacit and implicit, enforced by consensus or authority. Within the rule of custom or law, liberty varies. Some can or can't do this. Some can or can't do that. Some can or can't do

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anything, everything or nothing. At most, everything that is not forbidden is permitted. At least, everything that is not permitted is forbidden. Things forbidden by law may be permitted by custom. Things forbidden by custom may be permitted by law. Liberty, or freedom, is key to security, civility and culture, because freedom is a key factor in all their definitions. All may be defined in terms of how much and what kind of liberty or freedom they grant to whom, and why and how they restrain it.

At very least, security means freedom from the threat of physical attack leading to injury or death. More broadly, security means liberty from threats to one's property, livelihood, and freedom of expression, lawful action, and assembly. To guarantee security for some, one must restrain liberty for others. Since everyone is other to someone, if a society guarantees security to anyone, everyone's freedom is restrained.

At very least, in a negative sense, civility involves reciprocal restraint: restricting one's freedom to do certain things, in order to guarantee individual and collective security within a given collectivity. More broadly, in a positive sense, civility means cooperation in collective enterprises for the common good.

Culture is cooperation for the common good. The most useful theories of culture are proposed by anthropology. These define it as a repertory of tools, material and notional, developed and used to maintain, increase and enhance human life. The first question to ask in discussing culture is 'Whose?' Which is the group cooperating for the common good? What are its inclusive and exclusive limits? Among elements used to answer these questions are identity of language, race or ethnicity, and custom.

According to one anthropological theory of culture, language is the 'tool of tools': the key to all the rest. According to one version of that theory, the nature and structure of a language determines the nature and structure of its culture, and vice-versa. While that may be so for languages used within the context of their own original culture, in an age of globalisation, a given language is not necessarily identified with any given culture, race, ethnicity or custom. Biologists find 'race' very hard to define, yet the concept persists. 'Ethnicity' is looser, thus easier, and often includes, alongside race, both language and custom. 'Custom' is very broad, loosely coterminous with 'culture'.

'Custom' covers all aspects of life, including all forms of relationship, formal or informal, biological or social, voluntary or involuntary, such as kinship, tribe, caste, class, bondage, slavery, marriage, and employment. It embraces law, religion, politics and economics, arts and crafts, cuisine, dress, body language, sports, music, dance, courtship and sexual intercourse. In general it means all acts, terms and signs whereby groups and individuals in them mark and define their own and others' identity.

A loose definition of culture as a mix of language, race or ethnicity, and customs, is used by journalists and politicians. While not false, it fails to show how culture works. Anthropologists' and cultural historians' stricter definitions do, focusing on customs' origins and purposes. We shall use the looser definition till we need to use the stricter.

On the basis of the looser definition of culture we may next define what is meant by 'multicultural'. If only one such culture, shared by a given population, exists in a given place and time, that population is unicultural or homogeneous. 'Multicultural' describes a state or condition where two or more cultures interact among a given

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population, within a given space and time. So ‘multiculturalism’ could simply be the noun corresponding to that adjective: a state or condition described by ‘multicultural’.

As such, it would be politically neutral, eliciting neither attack nor defence, but merely factual identification and description. An example of that usage would be to say that a given empire, say the Persian, Roman, British, Austro-Hungarian or Russian, or a given city, say New York, London or Hong Kong, was multicultural, and to go on to discuss its multiculturalism, meaning only that it contained many different cultures. But that is not the sense of ‘multiculturalism’ which elicits such sharp criticism from its attackers, and such strong emotions from its defenders.

By ‘multiculturalism’ they both mean a diverse array of public policies and social attitudes, adopted and practiced in recent decades in their various nations, by their respective governments and societies, concerning interaction of the state, and of its native cultural majority, with members of resident cultural minorities. The easiest way to understand multiculturalism in this sense is to contrast it with its main alternative: assimilationism. Assimilationism uses the metaphor of the melting pot. It copes with immigrants by making them adopt the host culture in certain ways: public use of the official language and deference to established customs, obedience of the law, and allegiance to the state against enemies and adversaries. Assimilationism was once both public policy and mainstream social attitude in the USA. It remains so in France.

Multiculturalism prefers the metaphor of the salad bowl. Use of the official language is not required, or not enforced. Obedience to the law, particularly family law, is conditional, allowing for the rule of overlapping, possibly conflicting, systems of law or custom. Allegiance to the state, and deference to its established values and customs, do not trump those of a distinct people towards its original or native state, values and customs. Countries espousing official multiculturalism include Britain, Netherlands, Spain, Germany and Canada. The USA and others practice or tolerate it unofficially.

Multiculturalist policies that have been criticised include providing public money to the cultural wings of some religious organisations – analogous to the political wings of militant organisations - whose immigrant preachers preach, sometimes in foreign languages, hatred of the host country’s religion, or lack thereof, and its people’s forcible conversion to the immigrant religion, or their extermination or expulsion. They also include providing public money to teach the languages in which the preachers preach, and the religions and values they espouse. Social attitudes criticised include the form of self-censorship known as political correctness, which seeks to hinder open discussion of these matters, by labelling those who undertake it evil.

Let us step back from the heat of this controversy, and view it coolly and rationally. The public policies and social attitudes in question respond to a social reality: the co-existence in a given place and time, within majority cultures, of cultural minorities. Depending on how, in any given case, culture is defined, different languages, races or ethnicities, and customs, in diverse combinations, may so coexist. This reality, as we have seen, may also be called multiculturalism. But let us here call it ‘pluriculturalism’, reserving ‘multiculturalism’ for public policies and social attitudes under discussion. Let us also forgo discussing future immigration policy. Pluriculturalism poses a perceived present problem: that of other people in one’s own vital space, to which multiculturalism and assimilationism are conservative solutions. They are so because

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they conserve within that space, assimilated or apart, existing cultural minorities. There are, however, alternative solutions to the problem of other people in one's vital space. These include slavery, forced conversion, genocide, and ethnic cleansing.

Slavery and forced conversion also conserve other people within one's vital space. Slavery resembles multiculturalism, in upholding differences between coexisting populations, by treating them differently in law and custom. Whereas assimilationism tolerates diversity in private, while demanding public subservience to the norm, forced conversion obliges adoption, even in private, of the markers of the dominant culture. These can only take the form of language and custom, since race is inalterable. Genocide and ethnic cleansing are more radical. They try to solve the problem of other people in one's vital space by getting rid of them. Genocide exterminates people, usually identified by race, but sometimes otherwise. Ethnic cleansing drives people away. Though illegal, slavery, forced conversion, genocide and ethnic cleansing are widespread. Deferring legal and ethical consideration of these alternative solutions, let us here ask: 'Do they work?' and 'Are they available to us, given who we are?'

Slavery does not necessarily cope with differences of language, race or culture, though it may involve these. In any case, it is becoming difficult to practice openly. Forced religious conversion was once practiced by Islam on peoples 'not of the book'. Those 'of the book', Sabians, Jews and Christians, were subject to punitive taxation and occasional pogroms. Recently, forced conversion has been practiced on peoples of the book as well. Spain practiced forced conversion to Christianity on Jews and Muslims. Recently, most forced conversion has been ideological, rather than religious. Success is patchy. Forced converts relapse, dissemble, or flee. They are not faithful.

Genocide and ethnic cleansing were the norm till fairly recently. Examples include the extinction of Neanderthals, the confinement of Ainu, invasions of Europe and South Asia by Central Asian Aryans, and of the Americas and Antipodes by Europeans. Sudan and Rwanda represent recent attempts to solve ethnic tensions by genocide. In neither case has the targeted ethnicity been successfully exterminated. Ex-Yugoslavia and Iraq have practiced ethnic cleansing with partial success. Different ethnicities now live separately, but still close enough to fight. In Cambodia, class overlay race. Its genocide, though huge, is being undone by a rising middle class. Germany's unsuccessful bid to exterminate the Jews survives in Iran's policy to destroy Israel.

So alternative solutions to the problem of other people exist, but do not always work. Whether they are available or not depends on many factors, international and national. Leaving international factors for discussion elsewhere, let me focus on the national. Let me also limit the discussion to nations where the debate about multiculturalism originates and thrives: democratic nations embracing the culture of liberal modernity. This, by the way, identifies the culture in whose context this discussion is conducted.

Liberal modernity exists in unicultural, but also in multilingual, interracial and multicultural countries. Even in homogeneous countries, it embraces diversity of lifestyle. It is defined mainly by values, policies and attitudes; enforced mainly by law. It assimilates existing customs, if these do not contradict its core values, policies and attitudes; or adapts them thereunto; or if that proves impossible, renounces them. Liberal modernity, but not authoritarian, renounces slavery, forced conversion, genocide and ethnic cleansing. So, having eliminated these from consideration, we

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may now ask how best, absent such drastic solutions, to cope with pluriculturality. Is multiculturalism or assimilationism best, or is something completely different better?

The first thing to be said is that, absent drastic solutions, pluriculturality is here to stay. Indeed, with growing global population, travel and migration, legal and illegal, more, rather than less, pluriculturality may be expected. Thus, within the limits of liberal modernity, thinkers must forge values,¹⁴ statesmen make policies, and societies shape attitudes to cope with it. Those limits, however, must be enforced both ways. Existing cultural minorities must not be forced to leave against their will; but neither may they be allowed to seek to enslave, forcibly convert, displace, or exterminate native populations.¹⁵ Because liberal modernity is mainly defined by values, policies and attitudes, their preservation, and so that of its identity, must be a paramount goal.

The next thing to be said is that neither assimilationism nor multiculturalism cope well with pluriculturality, nor do they preserve core values of liberal modernity. They do not preserve its core values because they do not espouse them. They fail to cope with pluriculturality because they fail to understand culture. They focus on means, not ends. Language and custom are means. Assimilationism seeks their uniformity; multiculturalism their diversity. Assimilationism says the host culture must prevail. Yet that culture is itself in flux, renouncing customs contrary to liberal modernity, and generating new ones. Multiculturalism holds all cultures equal, none better than another. Yet neither considers ends, and whether given cultures serve them well or not.

This is where we must invoke a stricter definition of culture, one which focuses not only on describing customs, but on ascertaining their origins, meaning, and purpose. The purposes of any culture are to maintain, increase, and enhance its members' lives. Those purposes stand in variable priority to one another. Under immediate threat, maintenance – survival - comes first. In the long term, since life is finite, increase by generation trumps individual survival. Both work by enhancement, *via* the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. In this, as in much else, culture imitates nature. Nature transmits adaptive information through genes; culture through lore. Lore takes the form of language, know-how, custom and myth. A given combination of these constitutes cultural identity. Culture is material and notional. If material culture does not change, lore remains adaptive, serving culture's ends. If material circumstances change, by nature or by culture, lore must change. If it does not, it becomes inadapative, even counterproductive, and leads to the extinction of the culture and its people.

Modern material culture changes circumstances. Modern notional cultures, liberal and authoritarian, adapt. Pre-modern cultures remain, but surrounded by modern material culture. Their lore becomes inadapative, counterproductive. Members of these cultures live in liberal modern societies. So the problem of modern pluriculturality differs from that in the past. While pluriculturality existed in the past, modernity did not. While much can be learned from the history of pluricultural empires, and experiments such as the International Zone of Tangier, the problem facing modern pluricultural liberal democracies is new, and so needs clear fresh thinking, as well as lessons from history.

The most important clarification to be sought is to define the basic cultural values, and so the core identity, of liberal modernity, that are to be promoted and defended. Then one must distinguish these from elements of native cultures that may be valuable and worth preserving, but are optional, maybe even interchangeable with others. In view

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of this, one must acknowledge and observe a criterion and hierarchy of values, policies and attitudes. In implementing it, one must be prepared to call a spade a spade, and refuse to tolerate customs that undermine one's own core values and identity.

Let me here identify core values of modernity, liberal or authoritarian. Modernity springs from the dialectic between knowledge and belief, science and religion, reason and emotion. While belief, religion and emotion continue to exist within the culture of modernity, a defining feature of its identity is that they have been subjected, not without struggle, to knowledge, science and reason. In pre-modern societies, including present ones, belief, religion and emotion rule. Thus, for the culture of modernity, the rule of knowledge, science and reason over belief, religion and emotion are core values, to be promoted and defended. The main instrument for this is the rule of law, overriding custom that perpetuates inertia. Liberal modernity differs from authoritarian in preferring voluntary to compulsory compliance with the law.

Let me, in closing, apply these criteria to examples. Let us first consider the proposal by the Archbishop of Canterbury – or Grand Mufti of Lambeth, as he was described to me by one of his chaplains – to introduce Sharia law into Britain, but only for Muslims. This is an example of multiculturalism. Sharia law decrees death for apostates from Islam. Britain, espousing liberal modernity, renounces the death penalty, and grants freedom of religion, or irreligion. It lacks amputation for theft, and stoning for adultery. So one could not enforce Sharia law in Britain without breaking British law. Such conflict is not limited to Britain. The European Court of Human Rights ruled that sharia is incompatible with the fundamental principles of democracy.¹⁶

Next, let us consider the burqa or chadri, the full body tent worn by some Jewish and Muslim women. This matter is diversely argued: by feminists, assuming it is imposed by men on women, as one of women's rights; by assimilationists, as symbolically offensive. Against this, note that some women wear it voluntarily, and that other alien symbols of social oppression, such as Hindu caste marks, do not thus offend. Yet none of this matters. Body tents invoke a more basic duty of culture and the state: to protect their members and citizens from physical attack. The use of body tents as camouflage by terrorists of both sexes is reason enough to ban them, trumping all other arguments.

Now let us turn to genital mutilation of girls, and castration and beheading of boys. Both are practiced in sub-Saharan Africa: the former by peoples of the book, and not thereof; the latter by devotees of the Juju religion. Both have been detected among immigrant communities in liberal modern countries. They are obviously contrary to modern liberal law. So it is incumbent on multiculturalist defenders of the equal value of all customs and religions to defend their toleration in liberal modern societies.

Finally, let us consider blood feuds and honour killing. Again they break modern liberal law. Yet practitioners say they are essential to preserving their cultural identity. Anthropology confirms that their cultural identity would indeed change without them.

These examples raise questions from two quite different perspectives. From a purely scientific perspective one may ask: 'Are all existing cultures equally likely to survive under modernity?' To this the unequivocal answer is 'no'. Then from the ethical and pragmatic perspectives of the culture of liberal modernity one may ask: 'Do all

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cultures equally deserve to survive?’ And ‘Is it in our interest to preserve them, like smallpox in test tubes?’ Depending on one’s answers to these, one may then ask: ‘Should we treat some cultures as endangered species, to be preserved, if not in the wild, in the zoo or museum of ghettos and enclaves in liberal modern societies?’ These are the questions a sceptical, independent academic asks, in entering this debate.

¹ "State multiculturalism has failed, says David Cameron". BBC News Online. 5 February 2011.

² "Merkel says German multicultural society has failed". BBC. October 17, 2010.

³ (a) "Davis attacks UK multiculturalism". BBC News. 3 August 2005. (b) "Report attacks multiculturalism". BBC News. Friday, 30 September 2005.

⁴ (a) D'Souza, Dinesh (1991). *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. New York: Free Press. ISBN 0-684-86384-7. (b) Huntington, Samuel P., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996 ISBN 0-684-84441-9. (c) Paul Cliteur. *De filosofie van mensenrechten*. Nijmegen 1999. (d) MacDonald, Kevin B. (1998, 2002). *The Culture of Critique*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998. Bloomington, IN: 1stbooks Library, 2002. ISBN 0-275-96113- (e) Salter, Frank, *On Genetic Interests: Family, Ethnicity, and Humanity in an Age of Mass Migration*, 2003. (f) 3Putnam, Robert D., "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century -- The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30 (2), June 2007. (g) Scheffer P., *Immigrant Nations (Polity)*, 2011) ISBN 978-0745649610.

⁵ (a) "Too diverse? ", David Goodhart, *Prospect Magazine*, May 2004. (b) "Crisis in Europe", Bruce Bawer *The Hudson Review* Volume LVIII, Number 4 (Winter 2006. (c) Oriana Fallaci, *Il nemico che trattiamo da amico*, *Corriere della Sera*, 2006-09-15.

⁶ Labour's 'secret plan' to lure migrants, *Daily Telegraph*, 09 Feb 2010.

⁷ (a) Paul C. Gorski, "A Brief History of Multicultural Education", *EdChange.org*, November 1999 (b) Trotman, C. James (2002). "Introduction". In C. James Trotman. *Multiculturalism: Roots and Realities*. Indiana UP. ISBN 9780253340023. (c) Modood, Tariq (2007). *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*. Polity. p. 14. ISBN 9780745632889. (d) Parekh, Bhikhu C. (2002). *Rethinking multiculturalism: cultural diversity and political theory*. Harvard UP. ISBN 9780674009950. (e) Susanne Wessendorf, *The multiculturalism backlash: European discourses, policies and practices*, Taylor & Francis, 2010. (f) (Re LGBT rights) "On one hand, the two movements have much in common politically. Both are concerned with tolerance for real differences, diversity, minority status, and the invalidity of value judgments applied to different ways of life." Wikipedia, "LGBT community and multiculturalism: Relationship between the Sexual/Gender Equality and Multicultural Movements."

⁸ Opponents of multiculturalism 'could cause European Union to unravel', *Anti-racism framework* "worldwide fallout from the alleged "failure" of multiculturalism" *Scoop.it*. July 28, 2011.

⁹ (a) Susan Okin. "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?", *Boston Review* 1999. (b) 'American Enterprise Institute Ladies First', speech by Ayaan Hirsi Ali to the Congress of Racial Equality. January 2007.

¹⁰ (a) "Alliance with bigots won't halt fascists", Peter Tatchell, *Tribune*, 17 March 2006. (b) "Liberal Islamic scholar forced to pull out of gay rights speech by Muslim leaders", Benjamin Cohen, *Pink News*, March 20, 2006.

¹¹ deMause, Lloyd (1988). "On Writing Childhood History". *The Journal of Psychohistory*. 16 (2) (Fall).

¹² (Re LGBT rights) "On the other hand, LGBT political organizers can't help but notice that the only tolerance and acceptance available to sexual minority people in the world is extended by predominantly white and/or westernized, rich and well-educated segments of the Western, East Asian and Latin American worlds." Wikipedia, "LGBT community and multiculturalism: Relationship between the Sexual/Gender Equality and Multicultural Movements."

¹³ Barry, Brian M. (2002). *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. ISBN 0-674-01001-9.

¹⁴ E.g. Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.

¹⁵ See: (a) *The Islamic State*, Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, p. 239. Al-Khilafah Publications, 1419 AH / 1998 CE, ISBN 1 899574 00X. (b) Bat Ye'or, *Le dialogue Euro-Arabe et la naissance d'Eurabia*, *Observatoire du Monde Juif*, December 2002.

¹⁶ (a) *Judgement in the case of Refah Partisi and Others v. Turkey*, Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights, February 13, 2003. (b) *Hearing of the European Court of Human Rights*, January 22, 2004. (c) ECHR press release *Refah Partisi*, 2001. (d) *Refah Revisited: Strasbourg's*

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Construction of Islam, by Christian Moe, Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, published at the site of The Strasbourg Conference.