

Multiculturalism vs. human rights?

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Defending multiculturalism but warning against its excesses

Multiculturalism has many positive benefits. It defends the right to the different, which is a very important and precious human right, especially for those people whose difference has historically resulted in social marginalization and exclusion: including women, black, disabled and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

The multicultural ethos first blossomed in the 1970s, and took off in the 1980s. It was a breath of fresh air after the stifling, boring and often repressive monoculturalism of most western societies in the 1950s.

Half a century later we can now see that the multicultural ethos can also have its downside. The way it is sometimes interpreted is divisive and oppressive. In particular, it can lead to a shameful betrayal of women's rights, here and abroad, in the name of respecting "ethnic diversity" and "cultural difference."

Despite the extreme oppression of tens of millions of women in many parts of the Middle East, most of multiculturalism's left-wing promoters rarely protest against female genital mutilation, forced marriages, execution by stoning, compulsory veiling and the pervasive system of gender apartheid. Why the silence?

Sure, women are not equal in Britain or the US, but the inequalities faced today by women in the West pale into insignificance compared to the barbaric crimes against female humanity in parts of the Arab and Muslim world.

Here in the UK, a perverse interpretation of multiculturalism has resulted in race and religion ruling the roost in a tainted hierarchy of oppression. In the name of "unity" against Islamophobia and racism, much of the left tolerates misogyny and homophobia in minority communities. It rejects common standards of rights and responsibilities; demanding that we "make allowances" and "show sensitivity" with regard to the prejudices of some people in ethnic and faith communities. This attitude is patronizing, even racist. It judges minority peoples by different standards.

This moral (or immoral) hierarchy has shaped public policy on discrimination. Legislation against racism is much tougher than legislation against homophobia. Racial slurs provoke far stronger public condemnation than sexist ones.

It is curious to note how some liberals and left-wingers mute their condemnation of intolerance when it emanates from non-white people; whereas they would strenuously denounce similar prejudice if it was being vented by whites against blacks or by Christians against Muslims. They argue that we have to "understand" bigots from racial and religious minorities; yet few of them ever urge the same "understanding" of white working class bigots.

Some multiculturalists argue that western Christianization and colonialism are responsible for prejudice in minority communities. The hate-mongers in these communities are deemed more or less blameless. They are victims, not perpetrators, according to this guilt-ridden "anti-racism." Such nonsense infantilizes non-white people, treating them as inferiors who are deemed incapable of

taking responsibility for their actions and of behaving morally. Besides, it is absurd to excuse today's ethnic bigots on the basis of the victimization of their forebears two centuries ago in the days of empire.

Double standards on human rights influence law enforcement, even in the UK. Jamaican dance hall singers are free to incite the murder of "b*tty boys" (faggots) without fear of prosecution. No gay person could get away with urging the killing of "n*ggers." Likewise, fundamentalist Muslim clerics are tolerated when they endorse the so-called "honor" killing of unchaste women; whereas any woman who dared advocate violent retribution against Islamist misogynists would soon find herself arrested and in court.

We have long experienced the hypocrisy of the political right. In the name of defending "freedom," many conservatives defended the very unfree regimes of Franco's Spain, and Pinochet's Chile. Alarming, this selective approach to human rights is now echoed by sections of the left, with their lack of protests against the murderous regimes in Iran, Zimbabwe and Sudan.

President Mugabe has massacred more black Africans than P.W. Botha in apartheid South Africa. In contrast to the global anti-apartheid movement, there have been no worldwide protests to support the Zimbabwean struggle for democracy and human rights. Why does a black tyrant murdering black people merit less outrage than a white tyrant murdering black people?

These double standards have many downsides. Respect for diversity and the patronization of minority communities have sometimes degenerated into open support for human rights opponents.

The leaders of the UK's left-wing campaign group, Unite Against Fascism (UAF), embraced the right-wing Muslim leader, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, after he denounced gays as immoral, harmful and diseased. They said it was important to unite with homophobic Muslims for the sake of the "more important" battle against the far right British National Party; implying that the struggle against homophobia was not really very important at all. In other words, in this leftist hierarchy of worthy causes, religious fundamentalism trumps gay human rights.

Sadly, as this example illustrates, the multicultural ethos has sometimes become a Trojan horse for the subversion of human rights and for the promotion of bizarre double standards.

We all know that a gay leader who was prejudiced against Muslims would not be invited to address a UAF conference. He'd be denounced and declared a pariah. Yet UAF happily invited the anti-gay bigot Sacranie to speak at its conference as an honored guest. Hypocrisy or what?

By asserting and celebrating difference, multiculturalism can divide people, often on racial and religious lines. We have sadly witnessed conflicts between some factions of Afro-Caribbean and Asian youth, and tensions between sections of the Muslim, Hindu and Jewish communities.

This shows that too much focus on difference can spill over into separateness, which subverts an appreciation of our common humanity and undermines notions of universal rights and equal citizenship. It can produce a new form of splintering and factionalism, where societies are fragmented into myriad communities, each loyal primarily to itself and with less interest in the common good of society as a whole.

The anti-racist struggle, for example, has been weakened by the excesses of the "diversity agenda." In the 1960s and 1970s, all non-whites united together as "black people" to fight their common oppression: racism. Then black divided into Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian. More recently, part of the Asian community has split off to identify primarily as Muslim, distancing themselves from other Asians, such as Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and atheists.

This fragmentation has been endorsed by some on the left, who have colluded with communalism and the division of the Asian community on religious lines. These left-wingers have a great deal to say about the oppression of Muslims but little or nothing to say about the racism and disadvantage experienced by Asians of other faiths and Asians of no faith at all.

Multiculturalism can thus sometimes foster a “Balkanization” of the humanitarian agenda, fracturing communities according to their different cultural identities, values and traditions. When these differences are prioritized, our common interests get sidelined. Racial and religious particularities dominate. This can promote social division and antagonism.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to dump multiculturalism because of its sometimes regressive interpretation. Just because some sections of liberal and left opinion seem to have gone soft on their commitment to universal human rights, and lapsed into a dodgy “cultural relativism,” this is no reason to reject the multicultural ethos per se.

Progressive multiculturalism is worth defending. It involves respecting and celebrating difference, but within a framework of equality and human rights. It is premised on embracing cultural diversity, providing it does not involve the oppression of other people. Human rights are universal and indivisible.

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