

THE UK AS A HIGHLY DIVERSE SOCIETY (DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO MULTICULTURALISM)

Mgr. Desiatniková, L.

Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Košice, Slovakia

Contemporary United Kingdom is often referred to as a multicultural and multi-faith society. There have been a number of significant migrations into the UK over the last 200 years. The descendants of these migrants, and the intermarriage that has taken place since, have created the multicultural society that now exists. At present, the expression 'multicultural' is wide-spread and has been a heavily debated phrase all over the world.

There are as many definitions of multiculturalism as there are scholars, experts and intellectuals who have debated this issue in the field of interest. One of them says that multiculturalism is: “the belief that different cultures within a society should all be given importance” [Cambridge Dictionaries Online]. Another one states that it is: “the practice of giving importance to all cultures in a society” [Oxford Learner’s Dictionary]. These definitions can be understood as the phenomenon of multiple groups of cultures existing within one society. Multiculturalism occurs naturally when one society is willing to accept the culture of immigrants with, ideally, immigrants also willing to accept the culture of the country to which they have come to live in. Supporters of multiculturalism claim that different traditions and cultures can enrich society; however, the concept also has its opposite point of view where the term 'multiculturalism' may well be used more by critics than by supporters. For Parekh “culture is (...) a body of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world they organize their individual and collective lives around” [Parekh 2000, p. 2-3]. Identity and difference are interlinked with multiculturalism. Parekh highlights when he states that “multiculturalism is about cultural diversity or culturally embedded differences” [Parekh 2000, p.3]. Another author Bolton underlines: “we are all culture bound – physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually. We might change that culture, but can never make ourselves culture free” [Bolton 2010, p.67]. It is believed that there is no escape from culture, as there is no escape from multiculturalism. Bhikhu Parekh further explains: “(...) human beings do share several capacities and needs in common, but different cultures define and structure these differently and develop new ones of their own. Since human beings are at once both similar and different, they should be treated equally because of both” [Parekh 2000 p.240]. It seems a relatively straight forward challenge to distinguish between the grouping of cultures as well as ethnic groups. However, some problems occur at this point.

On one hand, many people do not fit neatly into these categories – many of us have relatives and forebears with different national backgrounds and ethnic characteristics. (...) On the other hand, it can be difficult for individuals to identify with clarity which ethnic or national category applies to them. There is no straightforward relationship between country, colour or culture and ethnic identity [Abercrombie, Warde at al., p.227].

The British population has been built up through various waves of immigration from different parts of the globe. It could be assumed that they are all mongrels. “Ethnicity, it can be said, comprises a mix of characteristics. ‘Race’, on the other hand, is often placed in inverted commas to highlight the fact that there are no pure, genetically different races” [Abercrombie, Warde at al. p.227].

Also the term equality is articulated at several interrelated levels. It involves “equal freedom or opportunity to be different, and treating human beings equally requires us to take into account both their similarities and differences” [Parekh 2000, p.240]. As Parekh further explains “[at] the most basic level it involves equality of respect and rights, at a slightly higher level that of opportunity, self-esteem, self worth and so on, and at a yet higher level, equality of power, well-being and the basic capacities required for human flourishing” [Parekh 2000, p.240].

As we can see, multiculturalism as a concept has different histories and origins. It is based on the recognition that different groups in a heterogeneous community derive their identity from different cultural traditions which should be recognized by the host society and acknowledged also by law and administration.

The multiculturalists approach is relatively new and has been accommodated above all in Australia, the USA and Canada, but in the last decades also in the United Kingdom. These approaches can, however, be different. Canada was the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy in 1971. The contemporary Canadian government defines the concept as follows:

Multiculturalism is not simply a government program: it is the day-to-day reality of our country, in which Canadians of very different origins live and work side by side, in which new Canadians work hard to learn our languages, our values, and our traditions, and, in turn, are welcomed as equal members of the Canadian family. Canada’s peaceful pluralism, which is the envy of so many nations, depends on that welcoming community spirit being multiplied across the country (...). Multiculturalism has become a shared value that encourages new Canadians to maintain those family, religious, and cultural traditions that are consistent with Canadian values such as human dignity and equality before the law [Annual Report on The Operation of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act 2013].

As we can see the Canadian experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding, and discourages ghettoization, hatred, discrimination and violence. However, there is also the unfortunate fact that some cultures simply do not mix, and multiculturalism can sometimes lead to the development of rancorous subcultures. Multiculturalism is itself a cultural value, and that value is particular to Western culture. Sometimes other cultures can be intolerant of other cultures, and when we insist on them to respect other cultures it means that we do not respect them. Recognition and acceptance of differences in law and the discouragement of discrimination and racism is fundamental in any country that believes all citizens are equal. Certainly, the processes of implementation of multicultural policies have not always been perfect and the debate continues as Canada, like other countries, continues to culturally change and become more diverse. The irony

of multiculturalism is that, “as a political process, it undermines what is valuable about cultural diversity. Diversity is important, (...) because it allows us to expand our horizons, to compare and contrast different values, beliefs and lifestyles, and make judgements upon them” [Malik 2002]. Kenan Malik, an Indian-born English writer, lecturer and broadcaster, trained in neurobiology and the history of science, further adds:

A truly plural society would be one in which citizens have full freedom to pursue their different values or practices in private, while in the public sphere all citizens would be treated as political equals whatever the differences in their private lives. Today, however, pluralism has come to mean the very opposite. The right to practice a particular religion, speak a particular language, follow a particular cultural practice is seen as a public good rather than a private freedom. Different interest groups demand to have their 'differences' institutionalised in the public sphere [Malik 2002]

What the author wanted to show is that the notion of pluralism is both logically faulty and politically dangerous, and that creation of a 'multicultural' society has been at the expense of a more progressive one.

Australia, the USA and Canada have had a long history of acceptance of all races and ethnic groups, all languages and religions. UK government, on the contrary, has been fighting the problems within recent years often forgetting the fact that multiculturalism has always existed in this country. The problems occur when it is used as a political weapon. This view was presented in February 2011 by David Cameron, the UK Prime Minister who delivered a speech arguing against state multiculturalism saying:

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. So, when a white person holds objectionable views, racist views for instance, we rightly condemn them. But when equally unacceptable views or practices come from someone who isn't white, we've been too cautious frankly – frankly, even fearful – to stand up to them. (...) this all leaves some young Muslims feeling rootless. And the search for something to belong to and something to believe in can lead them to this extremist ideology. Now for sure, they don't turn into terrorists overnight, but what we see (...) is a process of radicalisation [State multiculturalism has failed, says David Cameron 2011].

According to Cameron, in a sense, multiculturalism has failed. However, he strongly expressed the idea that we ought to stand up to extremism and he surely wants the country to develop a stronger sense of shared identity. Education and awareness rising through young generations should be the way to follow. Yet, the conditions of contemporary history are such that we may now be at the starting point of a new kind of person, a person who is socially and psychologically a product of the interlinking of cultures in the modern world. A new type of person whose orientation and view of the world exceptionally exceeds his or her native culture is developing from the complex of social, political, economic, and educational interactions of our time.

In contrast to the prime minister, in a speech in Luton, Deputy Prime Minister Mr Clegg stressed the importance of multiculturalism to "an open, confident, society" [Nick Clegg sets out vision of multiculturalism. 2011]. He said the prime minister was "absolutely right to make his argument for 'muscular liberalism', and "to assert confidently our liberal values". Labour accused the government of showing a lack of clarity on the issue. He added: "(...) where multiculturalism is held to mean more segregation, other communities leading parallel lives, it is clearly wrong. For me, multiculturalism has to be seen as a process by which people respect and communicate with each other, rather than build walls between each other." [Nick Clegg sets out vision of multiculturalism. 2011]. Followingly, Hansen states that:

Despite this opposition, the United Kingdom enters the millennium as a multicultural society facing integration imperatives – the encouragement or discouragement of cultural diversity, the acceptance or prohibition of non-Christian edicts in public and private life, the reform of educational forms that grew up in the era before non-European migration – identical to those of self-avowed multicultural societies [Hansen 2000, p.5-6].

What we all should look for is resisting division on one hand and welcoming diversity on the other. An open modern society must aim for this kind of multiculturalism. More recently, there has been a growing number of refugees and people seeking asylum. In the years following the fall of the Iron Curtain, a new movement of people began, some fleeing political persecution, others seeking a better life in Western Europe. However, the rise in asylum seeker arrivals has seen a rise in racial tensions. Questions are still being asked about whether or not the UK can become a multi-ethnic society at ease with itself - or whether there is still a long journey ahead.

Literature

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Summary

The paper focuses on contemporary United Kingdom often referred to as a multicultural and multi-faith society. It gives a brief insight into multiculturalism as a concept with different histories and origins. It is based on the recognition that different groups in a heterogeneous community derive their identity from different cultural traditions which should be recognized by the host society and acknowledged also by law and administration.

Supporters of multiculturalism claim that different traditions and cultures can enrich society; however, the concept also has its opposite point of view where the term 'multiculturalism' may well be used more by critics than by supporters.