Kenan Malik: Multiculturalism undermines diversity (2010)

As a political policy, multiculturalism's desire to put people in boxes has left many minorities feeling misrepresented

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Has multiculturalism been good or bad for Britain? It's a question to which the answers have become increasingly polarised in recent years. For some, multiculturalism expresses the essence of a modern, liberal society. For others, it has helped create an anxious, fragmented nation.

Part of the difficulty with this debate is that both sides confuse the lived experience of diversity, on the one hand, with multiculturalism as a political process, on the other. The experience of living in a society transformed by mass immigration, a society that is less insular, more vibrant and more cosmopolitan, is positive.

As a political process, however, multiculturalism means something very different. It describes a set of policies, the aim of which is to manage diversity by putting people into ethnic boxes, defining individual needs and rights by virtue of the boxes into which people are put, and using those boxes to shape public policy. It is a case, not for open borders and minds, but for the policing of borders, whether physical, cultural or imaginative.

The conflation of lived experience and political policy has proved highly invidious. On the one hand, it has allowed many on the right—and not just on the right—to blame mass immigration for the failures of social policy and to turn minorities into the problem. On the other hand, it has forced many traditional liberals and radicals to abandon classical notions of liberty, such as an attachment to free speech, in the name of defending diversity.

The irony of multiculturalism as a political process is that it undermines much of what is valuable about diversity as lived experience. When we talk about diversity, what we mean is that the world is a messy place, full of clashes and conflicts. That's all for the good, for such clashes and conflicts are the stuff of political and cultural engagement.

But the very thing that's valuable about diversity—the clashes and conflicts that it brings about—is the very thing that worries many multiculturalists. They seek to minimise such conflicts by parcelling people up into neat ethnic boxes, and policing the boundaries of those boxes in the name of tolerance and respect. Far from minimising conflict what this does is generate a new set of more destructive, less resolvable conflicts.

To say that clashes and conflicts can be good does not mean, of course, that every clash and conflict is good. Political conflicts are often useful because they repose social problems in a way that asks: "How can we change society to overcome that problem?" We might disagree on the answer, but the debate itself is a useful one.

Multiculturalism, on the other hand, by reposing political problems in terms of culture or faith, transforms political conflicts into a form that makes them neither useful nor resolvable. Rather than ask, for instance, "What are the social roots of racism and what structural changes are required to combat it?" it demands recognition for one's particular identity, public affirmation of one's cultural difference and respect and tolerance for one's cultural and faith beliefs.

Multicultural policies have come to be seen as a means of empowering minority communities and giving them a voice. In reality such policies have empowered not individuals but "community leaders" who owe their position and influence largely to their relationship with the state. Multicultural policies tend to treat minority communities as homogenous wholes, ignoring class, religious, gender and other differences, and leaving many within those communities feeling misrepresented and, indeed, disenfranchised.

As well as ignoring conflicts within minority communities, multicultural policies have often created conflicts between them. In allocating political power and financial resources according to ethnicity, such policies have forced people to identify themselves in terms of those ethnicities, and those ethnicities alone, inevitably setting off one group against another.

The logical end point of such policies came with communities minister John Denham's announcement last year of £12m for white working-class communities. There are clearly many working class, predominantly white, communities crying out for resources, not because they are white, because they have been politically and financially abandoned over the past decade.

Denham's £12m will, however, do little to solve of the structural problems facing such communities, such as a lack of jobs and social housing. What it will do is reinforce the idea that whites have an identity, and a set of interests, that is distinct from the identity and interests of other groups.

The aim of Denham's policy is clearly to ward off the BNP in areas such Barking and Dagenham in East London. Its consequence, however, will be to feed the BNP's own pursuit of white identity and to legitimise the idea that such identity needs privileging. And that is, perhaps, the biggest indictment of multicultural policies: they have helped turn racism into another form of cultural identity.

To challenge all this, we need to separate the debate about immigration and diversity, on the one hand, from that about multiculturalism, on the other—and defend the one, but oppose the other. The lived experience of diversity has been good for Britain. Multiculturalism has been bad.

• Thanks to JayReilly who suggested this topic and author in our fourth birthday open thread