

MULTICULTURALISM AND ITS DILEMMAS: A PROLOGUE

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Much of the debate on multiculturalism has so far been directed to the following themes – differences between ‘race’ and ‘culture’, a container view of the state, the disconnect between nation and state or to use Rex’s definition, in terms of nations and nationalism, the consequences of immigration, globalization and the displacement of traditional elites. It will emerge however, that on closer inspection, multiculturalism and how it is defined is a resource that groups employ to achieve their interests, however articulated.

A great deal of the debate has also focused on the issue of race and culture. It is accordingly important to recognize the importance of the difference between the two concepts. The idea of race has a lot to do with the earlier conception of race in terms of physical attributes, such as size of skull, nature of the hair, height and colour and size of the lips. In short visibility of individuals becomes an essential ingredient in the identification of ‘races’. The notion of culture, on the other hand, refers to the practices, customs and way of life of a group of people or of groups as they cope with the problems that confront them in a specific context.

One then has to agree with Van de Berghe (1967) that race is based on historical criteria while ethnicity has to do with cultural manifestations. In short, one is constant while the other is structural. In much of the earlier literature, particularly in cultural anthropology, and based on rather impressionistic data, there was a tendency towards what Gluckman and others have described as ‘reification’, that is a tendency to see customs and cultural forms as unchanging and static. Since most cultural groupings in most cases shared similar physical features there was a tendency to use race and culture interchangeably. It is important also to recognize that at times racially similar groups often have prejudices and resentment towards one another much like other groups have towards one another. Culture is therefore a critical factor in the relations between and among groups.

This would be the factor that gave visibility its importance in race relations studies. But as researchers were quick to point out, African-Americans were largely American in culture but were deemed to belong to a separate race in a way that Italian, Poles British, French and Spanish were not. For this reason research into race relations can safely be classified into an environment from a preoccupation with a ‘pure’ and ‘closed’ system into one that is moderately open, and ultimately into ‘open’ approaches stimulated no doubt by imperial expansion, explorations and discoveries and other forces of globalization as well as by the growth of the discipline itself. The ‘closed’ approach was clearly associated with writers such as Geertz, M.G. Smith, Van den Berghe, Shils and Weber whereas the relatively open was closer to the approaches of writer such as Cox, Miles, Kuper, A.D. Smith and Schermerhorn. The ‘open’ model on the other hand was clearly associated with Rex, Gordon, Baiton, Barthe, Park, Brass, Cohen and Hall.

It is important to appreciate also that the multiculturalism debate emerged during the seventies and eighties in countries as disparate as the U.K. and Canada, Australia and France, and in the context of differing circumstances. In Australia the problem was due to population whereas in the other countries the policy emerged in the aftermath of the break-up of Empires and in the attempt to establish new States. Indeed the Imperial powers – whether British, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese or Danish, all had to face the problem of a clash of cultures and how to deal with them. Generally, France had pursued a policy of assimilation but was forced to abandon it in favour of a policy of association to avoid becoming “a colony of her colonies” to use the words of one of the deputies in her legislative chamber. The British who concluded partly that the colonies were beyond the reach of English civilization and could not be ruled directly, opted for systems of ‘district administration’ and indirect rule through traditional institutions and delegated a great deal of power and initiative to ‘the man on the spot’.

This is the historical legacy that has bequeathed to multiculturalism in so many countries the dilemmas and problems that they now encounter. Yet it must also be recognized that under colonial rule, there were also problems associated with multiculturalism. In Trinidad and Tobago, while de facto policy was to assimilate both East Indians and other ethnic groups, the colonial state was also pledged to protect and respect East Indian culture.

There can be no doubt however, that race is a powerful unifying symbol. One has clearly to distinguish between predisposing and triggering factors. Although the experience reveals that a great deal depends on the mass of a country. Also racial appeal has to compare with other demands. In Trinidad and Tobago it is often claimed that Whites have a separate culture and that Indian and African cultures are the more authentic cultures that should be given due recognition. Yet it should be noted that the white category includes Spanish, English, Scottish, German, French and that each group has had to endure discrimination against its culture. In the case of Indian and African culture it was also clear, as Braithwaite’s study social stratification in Trinidad and Tobago made clear that substantial modification had taken place in the original cultures. New elites have emerged and contend for power. However as universal adult suffrage was introduced, contending cultures were created and appealed for recognition and ascendancy.

In countries such as Canada and Australia a similar tendency has been observed and has shown that the definition and demarcation of multiculturalism has altered and shifted according to the imperative of political and economic interest. In Australia however, the demographic ratio between different groupings has had an important influence on the shape of multiculturalism. Clearly political interests have been a driving force in some of these. One accordingly cannot agree with Rex when he observes that recent cultural expressions in Scotland, Wales and Ireland have no major political significance. Recent political developments in central-local relations clearly demonstrate otherwise. In the case of the U.S, M.G. Smith convincingly demonstrated that changing the policy on multiculturalism did have some surprising results (Smith in Premdas. 1993:27).

In that article, Smith demonstrated that the change in Federal Policy to award grants to all ethnic groups led to the resurrection of dying ones and the creation of some new ones. Such groups were thus able to attract financial support for its elites as well as its mass and also were invested with a potential for political capital. More importantly Smith had shown that scholars had

confused the entire issue by “the analytic handicaps and obfuscations that result from indiscriminately assimilation as one, phenomena of differing kind and basis” (1993:2). Importantly he points to the failure to distinguish ‘perduring’ features that are difficult to alter as against those related to situations such as dress, hairstyle or behavioural patterns.

This explains why political parties find it necessary to court some cultural groupings. It will be recalled in Trinidad as elsewhere, the theme of slavery and its associated discriminations was able to mobilize a potential among many ethnic groupings and catapult its political vehicles into power. By 1970 however, that theme was exhausted as new forces and groupings along with their elites had emerged. Thus it is clear that multiculturalism and its changing versions are intricately bounded up with the nature and emergence of the changing elites.

There can be no doubt too that the stage has been set by emigration and immigration as a result of the need to meet the demands of the various economies. The perennial labour shortage in the Americas and the Caribbean and elsewhere explains the coming together of a medley of peoples and cultures all competing for space and ascendancy. Undoubtedly the forces of globalization then as now also are having an impact on the cultural debates within countries and which finds expression in what are described as Diasporas. The importance of the Diasporas, of course, varies with the size, history and power of such ethnic groupings. The Jews have long been regarded as an important diasporic grouping. Recently in a number of emerging countries however there is renewed interest in overseas communities and their relations with the ‘home countries’. In some cases, dual and even multiple citizenship is allowed and even encouraged.

In this respect Steven Vertovec in his insightful paper has cogently brought together the various problems associated with multiculturalism and classified them into the conventional as against the new challenges it faces (Vertovec 2001). According to Vertovec, there is the policy aimed at correcting the shortcomings in the assimilation of disadvantaged ethnic groups in a number of areas. This may also involve institutional restructuring as well. There is also ‘weak’ multiculturalism, allowing diversity in the private sphere, but insisting on a high degree of assimilation in the public domain. A stronger version exists where there is recognition in the public sphere and in political representation. Vertovec also quotes approvingly a section of the Parekh report in which the Commission wrote: - “The Communities today are neither sufficient nor fixed and stable. They are often porous formation. It is impossible to invest totally as the sole bearer of the legal rights to difference. Many individuals with a strong sense of belonging and loyalty towards their communities do not intend their personal freedom to be bound in perpetuity by communal Norms. (Vertovec 2001:8)

While one can agree with Vertovec that recognition of cultural identity ought also to involve multiple identities, for a variety of reasons having to do with voting rights or with security of the State, it might at times be necessary to distinguish between primary and secondary identities. The primary identity will always have the greater claim. (Parekh 2000:8) How such multiple identities and relations will square with appropriate diversity in public institutions Parekh does not say but if identities and boundaries are “porous” their allocations based on diversity will be accordingly quite fluid Vertovec (2001) is right to point out that policies of multiculturalism will not only have to face the challenges of transnational loyalties but also the very real phenomenon of the inability of the so-called ‘container state’ to administer policy within its own borders. The

age of the Internet and Facebook has certainly dramatized the limits of state power. In this respect, it should be noted that the state no longer has a monopoly as the agent of socialization.

In Trinidad and Tobago it will be remembered that Dr. Williams following the incidents of 1970 reminded his listeners that there could no 'Mother Africa' or 'Mother India' or 'Europe', forgetting that soon after independence there was the famous African Safari; forgetting as well that there would always be a 'grandmother Africa' or a 'grandmother India' or 'Europe' given the responsive and historical chords that they represent. For this reason in the U.S., Canada, South Africa, the Caribbean and Australia in one form or another, Diasporic Associations will always exert a major force on the social and political environment. In the U.S. at one time race relations theory argued that relations would follow a predictable trajectory namely conflict, accommodation, culminating in assimilation. History has been unkind to this prediction. What is clear though is that political calculations are critical for multicultural policies.

This is clearly revealed in Ang & Stratton's paper on the Australian experience with multiculturalism (Ang & Stratton 1999). Following Canada, by the early 1990's, Australia proudly declared that it was a multicultural nation. By 1996 however the Government fell because it was perceived that it had gone too far in that direction. A major opponent even called for the abolition of the policy in a country with 150 different cultures, 80 religions and 90 different languages. Yet as Ang and Stratton pointed out official representation of multiculturalism policy may not fit nicely with prevailing cultural realities.

Part of the problem in Australia was the constant need for population. In the words of one Minister the issue was "populate or perish", a dilemma it should be noted faced by both Europe and the U.S. In the latter case though it is the shortage of specific skills and the age composition of the host population that is the problem. Some critics like Hanson contend however that some cultures are alien to the host society. What is clear though is that some interests in the broad sense fear that a particular interest would be endangered by demographic imbalances.

Factors such as these explain why in countries such as the Netherlands there has been a retreat from multiculturalism and a return to the policy of assimilation. Indeed in many countries this retreat is becoming more visible while in 2008 the Council of Europe declared that the policy had led to 'Communal Segregation and mutual in comprehension'. Multiculturalism, it was argued in European circles, had culminated in the social isolation and ghettoization of immigrants, political radicalism and the fostering of illiberal practices among immigrant groups and to increased stereotyping among ethnic groups. Europeans societies were said to be "sleepwalking to segregation". Not surprisingly these concerns have been imported into the debates in Canada as well as other Countries. Yet according to Will Kymmincka the evidence based on careful comparison does not bear out the various criticisms levelled against multiculturalism in Canada. It must be conceded though that anti-immigrant postures by political parties do have electoral appeal (Kymmincka n.d).

What is at issue then is a problem faced by colonial rulers and modern leaders alike namely the appropriate policy for highly visible minorities by the host Society. Various solutions have been devised over the years. They range from affirmative action, scholarships, incentives, and preferential treatment in appointments, quota systems, and expulsion or as a last resort genocide.

Some of these approaches have been criticized as being reverse discrimination. The source of the problem is clearly the distance in social and at times geographic distance between the centre and the periphery.

So far as Trinidad and Tobago is concerned it should be noted that some cultures are more easily integrated than others. Hindu Culture with its caste system is more resistant to assimilation than say Muslim culture. Yet the history of colonial rule and the aftermath of globalization reveal clearly that the forces of assimilation are now far more powerful than they were during the seventies and eighties. Bollywood is now a pale imitation of Hollywood, with almost all its drawbacks. There is now Hindi rap and many imitators of Michael Jackson. In Trinidad what passes for African and Indian culture is a highly modified and reconstructed version of what are essentially composite cultures. Once it is recognized that culture is not a reified template but a set of rules that enables groups to cope with their problems, that it involves adaptation and reconstruction it will become clear what Indian, White or African culture in Trinidad and Tobago really is. Our elites do not shop in New Delhi or Accra. Their destinations are usually Miami or New York.

Why then does culture have the capacity to influence politics in the ways that it does. The answer is to be sought in the nature of the society in which it plays out. Societies where foundations have been shaped largely and decisively by immigration or emigration are more prone to these problems. The demographic ratios of various groups under the system of universal adult suffrage are also a major factor as the differing political histories of Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago make clear. There is also the question of economic benefits for the various ethnic grouping involved. This is why the issue of reparations becomes enmeshed with that of multiculturalism. There is also the question of the attraction and retention of political support. Appeals to race and culture, it is important to note, resonate during periods of economic and political crisis. Finally there is the issue of the competing claims between the centre and the periphery. Public policy becomes more complicated and costly to administer when it has to be modified to suit a variety of disparate cultures. One solution that is increasingly being adopted is to have Equal Opportunity Commissions to filter and evaluate the various processes involved. Yet the powers conferred on such Commissions can be crucial since in many cases it involves the accountability of those who have the power to distribute the resources of the society. In this way, power, interest and resources are all locked together. The essays that follows address these and related themes.

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