Chapter IV: “Sleep-walking Into Segregation”: The Backlash Against Multiculturalism and Claims for a Differentialist Citizenship

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“We are sleep-walking our way into segregation.” Trevor Phillips, Chairman, CRE, 2005

“The assertion, re-imagining and negotiation of difference is central to group formation and evolution and thus to multiculturalism.” Modood, *Multiculturalism*

Culture is a space neither wholly private or public but one in which public and private spheres intersect in ways that can be hard to legislate. These public/private cultural spheres include religion, codes of dress, education and schooling, women’s rights, laws governing marriage and divorce, housing, and forms of institutional negative and positive discrimination. Since postwar immigration into Britain and France became recognized as permanent in the late 1970s, some form of multiculturalist policies that address minority cultures, positively or negatively, have been adopted by both countries. Often they have tried to legislate those aspects of “culture” which span this divide between private and public worlds: housing, dress, women’s rights, ways of bringing up children, tolerance for different ways of living. Over the years this process has been often criticized or seen as “pandering” to minorities, accused of insufficient assimilative power, and diluting native national culture. It also set up a us vs. them mentality where minorities were seen as recalcitrant and unwilling to accept dominant national culture. The idea of nation, therefore, has steadily proved a stumbling block to the state’s efforts at multiculturalism. In the last few years, there has been a demand to discard or radically revise multiculturalism as it has traditionally been practiced and to recognize, not just tolerate, new religious identities. This has upset the status quo accommodation of ethnic identities, and changed the political left/right divisions in European politics. For what is being challenged here is the historical identity of the nation itself.

In Britain, multiculturalism was officially accepted since the 1970s as a way to “deal” with the immigration “problem”; in France, though the term “multiculturalism” was never used and the concept is still debated, French policies around anti-discrimination meant that despite the insistence on integration, France has practiced a *de facto* form of multiculturalism (lately known as “positive discrimination”). The British embrace of multiculturalism reached its apogee under Tony Blair’s government when he pronounced a “New Britain” had arrived and symbolically replaced the Georgian cross of British Airways with a plethora of abstract “multicultural” icons. Even as the era of multiculturalism co-existed with egregious cases of institutional racism like the 1991 Stephen Lawrence murder, policy discourse remained in favor of diversity, unlike the case in France. Dissent from the multicultural orthodoxy, as in the case of Ray Honeyford’s article in *The Salisbury Review* in Bradford in 1985, was seen as racist and dismissed. The unquestioning attitude remained in place until 2001, when the summer riots in the Midlands led to the beginning of a backlash. The Midlands riots in 2001 and
the London bombings in 2005 both signaled an about-turn on the issue of multiculturalism. Like a deposed monarch, multiculturalism was suddenly held responsible for isolation, segregation, lack of citizenship and national identification. The situation in France had less ground to travel away from the tolerance (read benign neglect) as the November 2005 urban riots demonstrated that far from being integrated, national minorities had become an angry underclass, largely due to a severe lack of economic integration. The perception of excessive multiculturalism in Britain, and not enough “positive discrimination” in France, both focused attention on the link between multiculturalism, acculturation and citizenship. More importantly, this shift made it clear that the assumption of an “individualist” case by case acculturation would have to grapple with the concept of group identities, whether those groups be those of gender, religion or race. Along with issues of belonging, multiculturalism has also raised the issue of citizenship, and its links to culture and religion.

Groupthink in both countries has, in a hasty reaction, seen the lack of a common citizenship as being brought about due to multiculturalism gone wild. Trevor Philips, chairman of CRE, famously called it “sleepwalking into segregation”, and the Cantle report on the English Midland riots of 2001 cited lack of community cohesion as a major cause for disaffection among British minorities. While a lot rests on the definition of multiculturalism or diversity, both code words for integrating minorities, I argue that the fault lies in a pious tokenist or piecemeal multiculturalism rather than in its excess. Secondly, it cannot be implemented only as a social policy. The nation has to include minorities in its symbolic and historical Imaginary. Unless multiculturalism is integrated at every level with symbolic signifiers and myths of nationhood on the one hand, and into every policy around education, employment, religion and education on the other, a common sense of citizenship and belonging will not emerge in European countries. The temptation is to read the lack of minority acculturation as simply an educational issue or only an economic or racialist one. But it is all that plus the lack of identification with the nation-state. What this means is that the narrative of nationhood has to be changed to include minorities, both post-colonial ones and those that have suffered under colonialist regimes of discrimination and marginalization. So the battle is equally on the planes of equality and signification.

That is not simply because the state has failed in acknowledging and including minorities, but also because the national Imaginary, in its reading of history and identity, has insisted on seeing all minorities as newcomers and immigrants, with no place in the nation. National identities, as in the Netherlands, insist on a distinction between “allochthonus” and “autochthonus” identities, “auslnderen” and “volksdeutsch” in Germany, or “françaises de souche” and “beurs” in France; other countries like Italy still use racial categories. France still calls its second and third generation minorities ´immigrées´, thus coding race and belonging through divisive language. Even though this language may arise out of well-meaning targeting of immigrants for social welfare programs, it ends up re-enforcing their place outside the nation. This is true, especially on the right, where economic resentment of migrants and minorities as undeserved welfare scroungers has been reinforced by the sense of their permanent outsider status in a “thick”, cultural sense. (Koopmans, 14) Habermas discerns between two definitions of citizenship that are
at stake in debates over the nature of multiculturalism: the nationalist and the republican. Germany and France are good examples of this schism. In the nationalist or volkish definition, the communitarian nation (defined successively as “pagan people” to “politically organized people” to people united by common history and descent) is the source of state sovereignty and power, i.e., it defines the “political identity of the citizen within a democratic polity”. (Jürgen Habermas, 1992) The republican definition, made most famous by Ernst Renan’s 1871 phrase, “the existence of the nation is …a daily plebiscite” focuses on a nation of citizens. “The nation of citizens does not derive its identity from some common ethnic and cultural properties but from the praxis of citizens who actively exercise their civil rights.” (Habermas, 1992, original italics) However, the republican, post-national citizenship cannot explain the role of patriotism, or feeling of belonging to a community or a group identity. Conversely, if we see communitarian nationalism, as Habermas does, as chauvinist (he calls the European version a “chauvinism of prosperity”) and un-ethical, in the sense that the arguments for a communitarian nation do not hold up under moral or ethical scrutiny, then we countenance that it has no role in public life. Yet as Habermas himself admits, “Citizenship is an answer to the questions ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What should I do?’ when posed in the public sphere.” (16) Thus he concedes that the mythology of nation has a important emotional in the nation-state, through national mythologies and symbolism, but in order to be also ethical and inclusive, this has to be tied to an inclusive, plural, definition of citizenship.

In this paper, I look at some of the debates around multiculturalism, its uses and drawbacks, in order to argue for the benefits of using multiculturalism to redefine national identity. This redefinition is crucial to closing a chapter on the era of instrumental immigration of the guest-worker era, and a proper acknowledgement of decades, sometimes centuries long imperial and post-colonial links between the sending and receiving countries. The politicking around anti-immigration and anti-immigrant policies cannot be ended unless immigrants, now national minorities, change the definition of the nation-state from a falsely homogeneous to an existing pluralist and diverse one. In this way, if none else, European countries have to look at North American models. While it may have been true in the 1950s that European countries were not countries of immigration, as Canada and the US were, this distinction no longer holds true. Most of Western Europe has been an area of immigration for the last half-century and if demographic trends continue, will continue to be one. Both France and Britain have almost ten percent minority populations with roots in post-war immigration. Nations cannot look over their shoulder at an imaginary past of racial and religious unity that predates post-war immigration, since it was not till the end of the nineteenth century that states like Germany and Italy even came into being. The United Kingdom itself owes much of its regional unity to its imperial adventures overseas from the seventeenth century on. If nation-states like France and Britain expect well-acculturated minorities, people who take citizenship and dialogue seriously, they have to extend acceptance and opportunity in turn at all levels, including the symbolic, the cultural, the religious and the racial. National histories will have to be re-written to include the silent presence of racial and religious others, and their still evolving cultures, in the body of the nation-state. Fundamentally, national identity will have to be re-articulated to include pluralism and
diversity. In Ernest Renan’s terms, both the Staatsnation and Kulturnation will have to include the new minorities. ((Asari, 2008) Or as Tariq Modood puts it, multiculturalism is “the story a country tells about itself to itself, the discourses, symbols and images in which national identity resides and through which people acquire and renew their sense of national belonging.[has] to be revisited and recast through public debate in order to reflect the current and future, and not just the past, ethnic composition of the country.”(Modood, 2007) I would go further and argue that this story should reflect not just ethnic composition, but colonial histories, ethnic history and culture as well, because without the two, there can be no true citizenship.

Sleepwalking Towards Multiculturalism

There are some commonalities to the objections against multiculturalism in Europe. One common rhetorical strand is that multiculturalism has “gone too far”. That governments have pandered and appeased minorities for electoral gain and as a result, minorities have faced no pressure to assimilate. Like many overstatements, there is a tiny germ of truth in that the way multiculturalism, particularly around housing and schooling has functioned in Britain has had the effect of segregating entire ethnic minority populations over two generations. The effects of segregation: poverty, lack of educational attainment, unemployment, marginalization and lack of engagement with the national public sphere, have held minorities back from engaging with other groups and the larger public sphere.

But what conservatives mean by rampant multiculturalism has more to do with what Koopman calls assertive or claims making discourses, whereby minority groups ask the state for exceptional rights based on a group’s special religious or ethnic needs.(159) For example, Muslim minorities may ask for girls-only schools, or halal meat to be served at school lunches. While both Britain and France are liberal democracies open to parity demands, which seek equal rights, they are less open to 1) group demands, (specially true in Britain when the group is based on religion, not race or ethnicity, which is how groups are officially distinguished) and 2) group demands that go against dominant values of secularism or dominant cultural mores (for example, in France whose secularism does not allow for the state to recognize religious groups).

A second oft-repeated objection to multiculturalism is that minorities ought to assimilate to the dominant culture and not vice-versa. This argument sounds reasonable, but does not hold up to a practical examination. First, how do groups assimilate if there are institutional, social, economic and housing barriers to assimilation? Second, if group rights exist for dominant groups, why not group rights for newer groups? Next, is complete assimilation even possible when there are phenotypical markers of difference that engender discrimination? When most postwar migrant groups are unskilled labor and postcolonial, they suffer from economic and status marginalization: so what kind of assimilation is possible in that case? Academically, there are other arguments. For example, is dominant culture homogeneous and clearly defined? Does “culture” include religion or just language and clothing? Does the pressure to assimilate infringe on the
individual’s right to dress, speak, marry, worship as she chooses to? Thus the conservative demand to ‘just assimilate’ raises too many problems to be a viable option.

Therefore, the emphasis on multiculturalism. But even multiculturalism is not as straightforward as it sounds. How is multiculturalism defined in Britain and France? Is it pluralist, hegemonic, segregationist or assimilationist? Is it ethnic or civic? Is it voluntaristic? Open or assimilative? Different countries have experimented with various forms of multiculturalism across history. Not surprisingly, present forms of multiculturalism have their historical roots in the heyday of nationalism under imperialism. In fact, Asari points out that the British nation owes much of its unity after the English Civil War (1642-51) to harnessing regional and provincial identities such as the Scots and the Welsh to a larger imperial project. They did this by drawing upon the symbolic resources of Scottishness and Welshness while subscribing to British political boundaries and partaking of the imperial nation’s riches. “The common mission of empire was in large part what enabled this, because whatever else Empire might be, it is multicultural…its legitimating ideology is one that fundamentally rejects the ethno-nationalist principle that cultural homogeneity is the primary basis of political legitimacy.” (Asari, 11)

An third debate around the failure of multiculturalism is that traditional “Anglo-Saxon” (liberal) multiculturalism only deals with the individual and does not address the need that new minorities have for group rights and recognition as a means of asserting citizenship within European countries. Most recently, the groups in question have been defined not racially but according to religion. This is not only an external definition, but also and more importantly, a self-definition that marks what sociologists have started calling the post-secular age in Europe. The most important proponent of group rights in Britain in Tariq Modood. Over the last two decades, he has analyzed, critiqued and suggested changes to British multiculturalism, particularly as it impinges on Muslims who make up a significant majority among British minorities. He rejects Kymlicka’s argument that religious and ethnic groups should be treated differently under multiculturalism, making the case of ethno-religious groups. Modood also rejects multiculturalism as it is now constituted on an individualist basis.

Modood defines four elements that should make up a multicultural policy: race, ethnicity, cultural heritage, and religious community. While there is an overlap among these categories, they are all modes of differentiation. And for Modood, the concept of difference is the starting point of any just multiculturalism. For him, multiculturalism has to address not the individual but the collective. “A collectivity is targeted, [so a] collective response is needed.” (Modood, 2007) The collectivity includes not just race or phenotype but community structure, cultural heritage, and religious tradition. Thus a group could be defined not just through religion but through any of the above categories that designate difference. “The assertion, re-imagining and negotiation of difference is central to group formation and evolution and thus to multiculturalism.” (41) The aim of such a reformulated multiculturalism, according to him, is not the eventual erasure of difference but its transformation into something for which civic respect can be won. Since group identities are stigmatized, he sees identity discourses and the remaking of
group public identities as being central to this transformation. Ultimately, Modood would like to see a British model of communitarian pluralism in place which would help with the process of claims-making through political mobilization and policy outcomes.

Group rights and communitarianism are very controversial, not surprisingly, as they go against the history of secularism, the European wars of religion that marked its history from the 16th and 17th centuries, and also a xenophobic attitude to foreign religions that are seen as non-European. A fear of social fragmentation is often cited as a reason for resisting group based claims-making. This is coupled with Islamophobia, both historical and contemporary, post-colonial arrogance and race and class prejudice. Having listed these obstacles to religious groups is not to dismiss them. Prejudice is rooted in history and self-identity as well, and unfortunately, people cannot be insulted out of their beliefs. The only recourse is constant debate in the language of law and rights discourses, and the application of constitutional and other laws to cover minorities fairly.

The fear of separatism and social fragmentation is also at the bottom of the French resistance to the formula that Modood suggests: “communitarian pluralism plus claims-making”, which they see as an extension of Anglo-Saxon style multiculturalism. Within Britain, a milder term such as diversity (toothless, according to some) is seen as more acceptable than “difference”. But according to many communitarians, difference is central to defining identity, and having a clearly defined identity central to equal and participatory citizenship. The “backlash” against multiculturalism has many reasons, some conjunctural and others historical, but the fear of excessive alterity and the governability of difference is certainly a part of it. Critics like Ralph Grillo suggest a toning down of difference and others like Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Michel Wieviorka see how the engineering of false binaries and the engineering of symbolic and real violence leads to transnational conflicts and domestic radicalisation. What is an optimum response to this fear? Is the solution heavier governance, more consensus or less difference?

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i See the website [http://aad.english.ucsb.edu/docs/Halstead2.html](http://aad.english.ucsb.edu/docs/Halstead2.html) for a thoughtful assessment of the controversy around Ray Honeyford. While it is true that some of Honeyford’s claims about self-segregation were quite inflammatory, his main point: that multicultural piety produces bad educational attainment and insufficient acculturation, have been borne out since the mid-1980s.

ii For a good historical account, see the essay by Eva-Maria Asari et al., “British national identity and the Dilemmas of Multiculturalism” in Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, 14, 1-28, 2008.
