

Women living under muslim laws
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

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The Perils of Pluralism

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There are few beliefs more entrenched in the modern liberal imagination than that of the virtues of pluralism and a multicultural society. The degree to which Sarajevo has assumed symbolic significance expresses the measure of attachment to the principles of a multicultural, multiethnic community. Just as in the thirties the struggle for Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War became symbolic of the defence of democracy against fascism, so the siege of Sarajevo has assumed a mythic status as a struggle between pluralism and barbarism. On the other hand there are few crimes which contemporary society regards as more monstrous than that of 'ethnic cleansing', the attempt to eliminate diversity and difference and to create an ethnically and culturally homogenous society. From Bosnia to Rwanda the forcible expulsion of rival ethnic groups has become the measure of the breakdown of civilised values.

Belief in pluralism and the multicultural society is so much woven into the fabric of our lives that we rarely stand back to question some of its assumptions. They are seen as self-evidently good. As the American academic, and former critic of pluralism, Nathan Glazer puts it in the title of a new book, *We are All Multiculturalists Now*. The celebration of difference, the promotion of a diverse society, tolerance for a variety of cultural identities - these are seen by almost everyone as the hallmarks of a decent, liberal, democratic, non-racist society.

I want in this essay to question this easy assumption that pluralism is self-evidently good. I want to show, rather, that the notion of pluralism is a deeply ambiguous one; that the idea of difference has always been at the heart, not of the antiracist, but of the racist agenda; and that the creation of a multiculturalist society has been at the expense of a more equal one.

Even a superficial look at the idea of pluralism reveals how ambiguous a notion it is. Sarajevo may be a symbol of multiculturalism; but it was the assertion of 'difference' that originally led to the break-up of the Yugoslav federation and to a savage civil war. The far right in France has long adroitly exploited the idea of cultural difference to argue against the possibility of Muslims becoming French. The Council of Europe's campaign against racism and xenophobia has adopted a slogan - 'All equal, all different' - that a generation ago was the battle cry of segregationists in the American south and of apologists for apartheid in South Africa.

If such examples reveal the difficulty in drawing a line between respect for difference and contempt for the Other, then the US philosopher Richard Rorty suggests that advocacy of pluralism may be inimical to the pursuit of equality. Pluralism, he observes, places what he calls 'Enlightenment liberals' in a terrible dilemma:

Their liberalism forces them to call any doubts about human equality a result of irrational bias. Yet their connoisseurship [of pluralism] forces them to realise that most of the globe's inhabitants do not believe in equality, that such a belief is a western eccentricity. Since they think it would be shockingly ethnocentric to say 'So what? We western liberals do believe in it and so much the better for us', they are stuck.

Rorty himself solves the dilemma by arguing that equality is good for 'us' but not necessarily for

'them'. This is in line with the argument of many liberals today who want to redefine equality to fit in with a more pluralistic world. But when respect for others means a refusal to judge others' values or norms, when backward habits, reactionary institutions and illogical beliefs are defended on the grounds that they may not make much sense in our culture but they do in others', then the pursuit of difference has turned into indifference, into a callous disregard for the fate of others on the grounds that they are 'not like us'. Rorty is right to suggest that pluralism and equality make conflicting demands on society. The answer, however, is not to abandon our commitment to equality but to rethink what we mean by pluralism.

The promotion of 'difference', far from being an antiracist principle, has from the start been at the heart of the racial agenda. Ever since the Enlightenment, western thinkers and policy makers have wrestled with the contradiction of societies that express a deep-seated belief in, and respect for, equality and yet are themselves profoundly unequal. Out of this contradiction the ideology of race developed. Racial theory attempted to explain the gulf between an abstract attachment to equality and the reality of social inequality by suggesting that inequality itself was naturally given. Society was unequal because the destiny of every social group was in some way linked to intrinsic qualities that each possessed. For racial theorists the nature of a society was explained by the differences it embodied.

In the nineteenth century, group differences were seen largely as biological in nature - as in the ideology of scientific racism. Today those differences are more often than not seen as cultural. The horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust helped discredit racial science and biological theories of human differences. But if, in the post-war world, racial science was buried, racial thinking was not. The biological arguments for racial superiority were thrown into disrepute and overt expressions of racism were discredited. All the assumptions of racial thinking, however, were maintained intact - in particular the belief that humanity can be divided into discrete groups; that each group should be considered in its own terms; that each is in some way incommensurate with the others; and that the important relationships in society arise not out of commonalties but out of the differences between groups. The form of racial thinking, however, changed. It was cast not in biological terms but in the language of cultural pluralism. At the policy level this led to the pursuit of 'multiculturalism' as a desirable social goal.

The concept of a multicultural society developed in the post-war world largely in response to the impact of mass immigration into western societies. Eleven million workers came to Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, encouraged by an economic boom. In the USA a different kind of mass migration took place - the huge movement of African Americans to the northern cities in the fifties and sixties. In both cases the newcomers found themselves on the margins of society, subject to racism and discrimination, and unable to gain access to levers of power. The ideology of multiculturalism developed as an accommodation to the persistence of inequalities despite the rhetoric of integration, assimilation and equality.

In the United States of the 1960s, for instance, most commentators, both black and white, hoped and expected that African American migrants to the north would eventually integrate into US society, as fully as had European immigrants. The title of a 1966 article by Irving Kristol in the New York Times captured that hope: 'The Negro Today is like the Immigrant Yesterday.' Three decades later we can see how sadly misplaced were such claims. Virtually every social statistic - from housing segregation to rates of intermarriage, from infant mortality rates to language use - shows that African Americans live very different lives to the rest of America. The experience even of Hispanic Americans is far closer to that of American whites than it is to that of African Americans.

The failure of the movement for equality has led to the celebration of difference. The black American critic Bell Hooks observes that 'civil rights reform reinforced the idea that black liberation should be defined by the degree to which black people gained equal access to material opportunities and privileges to whites - jobs, housing, schooling etc.' This strategy could never bring about liberation, argues Hooks, because such 'ideas of "freedom" were informed by efforts to imitate the behaviour, lifestyles and most importantly the values and consciousness of white colonisers'. The failure of equality has led radical critics like Hooks to declare that equality itself is problematic because African Americans are 'different' from whites.

Politicians and policy-makers have responded to such arguments by reinventing the United States as a 'multicultural' nation. Multiculturalism is premised on the idea that it is a nation composed of many different cultural groups and peoples. But in reality it is the product of the continued exclusion of one group: African Americans. The promotion of multiculturalism is a tacit admission that the barriers that separate blacks and whites cannot be breached and that equality has been abandoned as a social policy goal. 'Multiculturalism', Nathan Glazer has written, 'is the price America is paying for the inability or unwillingness to incorporate into its society African Americans, in the same way and to the same degree it has incorporated so many other groups.' The real price, however, is being paid by African Americans themselves. For in truth America is not multicultural; it is simply unequal. And the promotion of multiculturalism is an acknowledgement of the inevitability of that inequality.

The 'apartness' of black and immigrant communities in western Europe is probably not so great as that of African Americans in the USA. Nevertheless, here too pluralism has become a means to avoid debate about the failure of equality. As black communities have remained excluded from mainstream society, subject to discrimination and often clinging to old habits and lifestyles as a familiar anchor in a hostile world, so such differences have become rationalised not as the negative product of racism but as the positive result of pluralism.

Many young people in Marseilles or East London call themselves Muslim, for instance, less because of religious faith or cultural habits, than because in the face of a hostile, anti-Muslim society, calling oneself Muslim is a way of defending the dignity of one's community. Their Islam is not the free celebration of an identity, but an attempt to negotiate a difficult relationship with a hostile society as best they can. Muslims in London or Paris no more choose their 'difference' than African American youth do in the Bronx or South Central LA - or indeed Jews did in Nazi Germany. As one Muslim activist from Bradford put it, 'Our Islam is constructed by the strength of anti-Muslim hysteria in this country.' In describing such fractured societies as 'multicultural' we are in danger of celebrating the differences that are imposed by a racist society.

It is useful to compare the experience of post-war immigrants - and of African American migrants to northern cities in the USA - with earlier waves of immigration into Europe and America. Between the 1890s and the 1920s there was a large influx of east Europeans into Britain, of Italians and Portuguese into France, and of east and south Europeans into the USA. These newcomers were often met with the same hostility as greeted post-war black immigrants. They too were condemned as alien, as less intelligent, as immoral and promiscuous, as given to violence, drugs and drink.

Yet they eventually became integrated into the host nations, and unlike today no one regarded their presence as presaging the creation of a 'multicultural' society. The contrast between the experience of pre-war and post-war immigration lies less with the immigrants themselves than with the host societies. Three major changes in society have made the pursuit of integration and equality that much more difficult. First, the material capacity of society to provide equality has been eroded. The recessions that have hit western economies since the 1970s has helped entrench the marginalisation of black immigrants and of African American migrants.

Second, the idea of a common culture has weakened. The break-up of the post-war consensus and the end of the Cold War has created a fragile and anxious mood, in which the idea of a coherent national identity has become problematic. Particularly in the USA, the Cold War provided a common external enemy and a sense of mission around which to articulate what it meant to be American. The loss of that has sapped the belief in a common culture to which all belong.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the notion of equality itself has been transformed. The inability of struggles such as the civil rights movements in the USA to transform the lives of the majority of African Americans has sapped the morale of anti-racists. Campaigning for equality means challenging accepted practices, being willing to march against the grain, to believe in the possibility of social transformation. Conversely, celebrating differences between peoples allows us to accept society as it is - all it says is 'we live in a diverse world, enjoy it'. It allows us to accept the

divisions and inequalities that characterise the world today.

The social changes that have swept the world over the past decade have intensified this sense of pessimism. The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the left, the crumbling of the post-war order and the fragmentation of social movements have shattered many of the certainties of the past. In particular they have thrown into doubt our capacity to change the world for the better. In this context the quest for equality has largely been abandoned in favour of the claim to a diverse society. The idea of multiculturalism, like that of race, is an attempt to come to terms with inequalities in a society that professes belief in equality. Whereas racial theorists used to say that social differences were the inevitable product of natural differences and there is nothing we could do about it, multiculturalists argue that they are the product of cultural differences and there is nothing we should do about it. But this is simply to rename inequality.

Equality is not a 'western eccentricity'. It refers to our universal capacity to act as political equals. In an equal society, that capacity can take a myriad of forms, and hence can become the basis of true difference. Indeed, only in an equal society can difference have any meaning, because it is only here that difference can be freely chosen. In an unequal society, however, the pursuit of difference all too often means the entrenchment of already existing inequalities. Inequalities simply become reframed through the discourse of 'difference'. The challenge today is not to embrace 'difference' as a political goal but to transcend the whole language of race and to put the case clearly for equality.

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