

Don't Respect Difference: Ignore Difference

Cultural relativism, the philosophy that no culture is superior to another, is one of today's widely accepted doctrines. In the twenty-first century, to assert the superiority of Western civilisation over any other culture elicits accusations of eurocentricism, arrogance or even racism. 'All cultures are equal' is a now a commonly-heard mantra. The manifestation of cultural relativism in social policy, multiculturalism, is ubiquitous. We are persistently exhorted to 'celebrate difference' and ethnic diversity in countless fields—politics, academia, museums, films, television and literature. A Department of Trade and Industry report of 2002 summarised this dogma: 'We want to see a Britain where there is increasing empowerment; where attitudes and biases that hinder the progress of individuals and groups are tackled; where cultural, racial, and social diversity are respected and celebrated.'¹ If these words seem familiar, it is because you have most likely read them in similar form on countless occasions—at your local library, on local government leaflets, job applications—or heard them parroted by politicians over the last 40 years. Multiculturalism is one of the most resilient orthodoxies of our times.

It has also become one of the most contested issues of our times. Since its emergence as a doctrine of social policy in the 1960s, multiculturalism has had the capacity to arouse strong emotions from its apologists and detractors alike. Its apologists contend that it is imperative that we should 'celebrate difference', that it is vital for the health and well-being of a liberal society to embrace a 'live-and-let-live' attitude that accepts and embraces the value of difference. Multiculturalism is

perceived as the greatest safeguard against cultural conformity that leads to racism, fascism and totalitarianism. Thus, we are commanded never to be 'judgmental'. Judgmentalism is not only derided as oppressive and offensive; it is deemed to be philosophically untenable. Because all cultures have different standards, and no culture is superior or inferior to another, it is impossible to say what is truly right and what is wrong.

Conversely, multiculturalism's critics have argued that it has been a malevolent force, that its promotion has been divisive. They maintain that state-sponsored multiculturalism patronises ethnic minorities, that it has pitted ethnic groups against each other, that it has unfairly denigrated the culture of the indigenous population, and, ironically, actually served to exacerbate racism. This book is in broad agreement with the second camp. *The Poverty of Multiculturalism* argues that state-sanctioned multiculturalism has indeed been counter-productive and worsened race relations. It contends that cultural relativism, its philosophical parent, is self-contradictory: cultural relativism is an invention of the West, and thus it is self-invalidating. To promote multiculturalism is, paradoxically, to champion Western values.

The Poverty of Multiculturalism argues that this veneration of non-Western cultures is the symptom of a growing disenchantment with our own values, and even of a form of self-hatred. It is time that we respected our own culture, both as Westerners and Britons. Western culture has a rich and admirable tradition of social liberalism that says that one should be rendered as much freedom as possible in the private sphere, that one should dress according to one's desires, worship freely without molestation from the State, be afforded equal rights and participate in culturally-specific ceremonies. It is time we cherished the tradition of the Enlightenment, with its aspiration that the prizes of liberty, democracy, colour-

blindness, equality of opportunity and progress can be shared among all. We should certainly afford respect to traditional British values which influenced the beneficent aspirations of the Enlightenment. While admitting our country's short-comings in the past, we should desist from perpetually dwelling on them, and recognise that of which we should be proud.

Tolerance is something for which we should strive. What we might call 'Soft Multiculturalism', the idea that minorities should not face unfair discrimination and that cultures and customs of different peoples should be tolerated, is a benign force. As the broadcaster and commentator Kenan Malik has pointed out, there is a difference between multiculturalism as a lived experience and multiculturalism as an enforced ideology.² There is a difference between living alongside people who have different customs and outlooks, and the State encouraging us all to retain these differences, using its financial muscle to do so.

Cultural intercourse can be a healthy, fascinating and rewarding enterprise. Exploring and embracing other cultures are means of learning about our own culture's shortcomings—about what wisdom we can appropriate from 'the Other'. The study of difference, of contrasting languages, kinship structures, religions and ethnic arrangements has led us to a better understanding of the human condition in general. As Bhikhu Parekh points out in *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, a recognition of diversity leads to exchanges of ideas and philosophical enrichment: 'Different artistic, literary, musical, moral and other traditions interrogate, challenge and probe each other's ideas, and often throw up wholly new ideas and sensibilities that none of them could have generated on their own.'³ On a pragmatic level, it is advantageous to understand how to conduct oneself elsewhere, that, for example, in India you do not use your left hand for eating, or that in Iran and Nigeria the 'thumbs-up' gesture

is considered obscene, or that for Arabs, Thais and Japanese pointing the sole of your shoe at the person to whom you are talking is considered rude.

This is not to say that we can speak of cultures as monolithic entities that do not mutate, merge or appropriate aspects from each another. Neither is it to ignore the substantial shortcomings of the Western tradition, nor the achievements of non-Western cultures. What is more, *The Poverty of Multiculturalism* is not a call for the adoption of a brutal form of monoculturalism as witnessed in Nazi Germany. Most of all, this book is not principally concerned with race, even if racial and cultural categories often do overlap. Science has demonstrated to a near irrefutable degree that pigmentation is no determinant of mental ability, and that the concept of 'race' as a fixed entity is highly dubious.⁴

As opposed to race, conversely, culture does have an enormous effect on one's mental make up—and some cultures are better than others. It is true that criticism of non-Western cultures is often a cloak for racism, much in the way that anti-Israeli sentiment is often a mask for anti-semitism. But in both cases, often it is not. The very fact that any critique of another culture's shortcomings is commonly interpreted as thinly-veiled racism tells us just how far extreme multiculturalism has managed to suffocate any debate on the subject.

There is a difference between respecting different cultures and actively promoting them. The target of this book is not Soft Multiculturalism. Rather, its aim is to expose the flaws of what we might call 'Hard Multiculturalism'. This is the manifestation of cultural relativism that deems no culture better than another, which believes that a society should not merely tolerate difference, but actively promote it. We see this in evidence all around us: local and central government giving financial aid to ethnic minority groups and funding artistic projects; state schools celebrating foreign

festivals and teaching the languages of ethnic minority groups; street signs in multiple languages; local libraries stocking disproportionate numbers of titles that represent the 'ethnic diversity' of its boroughs; and census returns being printed in thirteen different tongues.

This celebration of non-indigenous cultures is often accompanied by the simultaneous belittlement or vilification of British culture. History in schools concentrates not on the UK's role as a pioneer of parliamentary democracy, how it was one of the first countries to abolish slavery, how it has been a place of refuge for minorities fleeing persecution, or how it has been one of the most tolerant and peaceful nations that has ever existed. Rather, we are told to hold our heads in shame at our nation's abominable record of colonialism and oppression, the legacy of which is, today, the spectre of endemic racism in society, and 'institutional racism' in the public sphere. Multiculturalism does not mean (as it should) engaging in a spirit of mutual tolerance, while applauding assimilation; it has mutated into a philosophy of self-loathing, in which everything that is the preserve of 'the Other' has to be celebrated, and everything perceived as indigenous is regarded with indifference or contempt.

How did we get to such a state of affairs? It is partly to do with what has been dubbed the 'crisis of Britishness', in which, in a post-imperial, post-devolutionary world, the United Kingdom is no longer sure of what it stands for. Multiculturalism is a product of this vacuum. The elevation of non-indigenous cultures is both a symptom of this identity crisis and an aggravating factor: the more we have to 'celebrate diversity', the more fragmented we have become.

It is also part of a wider problem in the Western world: we live in counter-Enlightenment times. Since the Holocaust and Hiroshima, the West has lost faith in its capacity to use reason and science to make our world a

better place. What with the Greenhouse Effect, the hole in the ozone layer and Chernobyl, we treat science and industry with suspicion and hostility. The failure of the socialist projects of the twentieth century led many on the Left to give up any hope in the 'Enlightenment Project'. As the success of Michael Moore's 2002 book *Stupid White Men* illustrated, we have become self-hating, deeming Western man as an agent merely of war, racism, slavery, colonialism and environmental catastrophe. The fruits of Western society are now deemed not products of its superior values, but the results of its oppression of minority cultures. It is accepted that we grew prosperous and free and enriched the quality of our lives not because we had more progressive ideas, but because we plundered the resources of the Third World and exploited its people.

How can we possibly call ourselves superior after the carnage of the two world wars, and the cruelty of totalitarian regimes that sent millions to an early grave? We may have had the genius to split the atom, but we used that technology only to create atom bombs. We may have mostly liberated ourselves from the chimera of religion, but this has only left a spiritual void. Western society is regarded by insiders and outsiders alike as vacuous and decadent: we seem to spend our existence making money, gorging ourselves on fast food or glued to the television. Multiculturalism is a response to the perceived dreadful shortcomings of our own culture.

Because of their perverse self-loathing, many left-liberals lend their tacit or overt support to oppressive cultures that deny equal rights to its population or condone the killing of homosexuals and the virtual enslavement of women. Many exalt non-Western cultures on the understanding that they are more peaceful, 'spiritual' or 'closer to nature' than Western man, and untainted by his arrogance, brutality and greed.

This has been aggravated by and reflected in the growth of cultural relativism. Although this phenomenon was formulated by the German Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it blossomed in the late twentieth century in the fields of anthropology, sociology and philosophy, and through a process of osmosis has filtered down into society in general. Just as Western man has come to hate himself, he has come to regard the culture of disenfranchised ethnic minorities as not backward or primitive, but of equal value to ours.

The contradiction is that cultural relativists sometimes want it both ways. They simultaneously assert that no culture is better than another, but they will happily elaborate that Western culture is actually inferior, and shy away from celebrating it for fear of causing 'offence'. We see this confused line of thinking in domestic social policy. While, since 1994, central and local government have been eager to use state funds to promote 'Islamic Awareness Week'—in November 2004, for instance, 50,000 copies of a package entitled *Islamophobia – Don't Suffer in Silence* were sent out to police stations, mosques and Muslim community centres in three London boroughs, West Yorkshire, Lancashire and Lincolnshire, with concomitant special lessons in state schools⁵—or fund St Patrick's Day carnivals—Birmingham City council funds such celebrations to the amount of £12,000 per year and in January 2005 promised to contribute an extra £60,000 to the celebrations⁶—these same local councils are simultaneously reluctant to celebrate Britain's Christian heritage. Indeed, they are wont to belittle it, using the excuse of 'not offending other cultures'. For instance, in 1998, Birmingham City Council—an enthusiastic supporter of Islamic Awareness Week—renamed its official Christmas celebrations 'Winterval' for fear of offending non-Christians. In November 2004 Stoke City Council followed with its 'WinterFest', as did that month

Oakengates Town Council in Telford, Shropshire, with its 'Winter Celebrations'.⁷ This inconsistency exposes the poverty of multiculturalism. Either public bodies should fund the celebration of Christian and Islamic faiths, or desist from spending money on celebrating either faith, but to denigrate one and venerate the other displays cognitive dissonance. Some consistency would be most welcome.

There is a more glaring paradox. Hard Multiculturalism, as formulated by Herder and the German Romantics, and systemised by anthropologists such as Franz Boas in the 1930s, is itself a Western ideology. The notion that 'all cultures are equal' was conceived uniquely in the Euro-American school of philosophy, and is thus self-contradictory. To say 'we mustn't judge other cultures' is ironically a eurocentric statement.

Hard Multiculturalism legitimises global and domestic injustice: we are loath to criticise the oppression of women at home and abroad for fear of being admonished with the riposte: 'but that's what they do in their culture. Who are we to judge them?' Whatever the controlling section of a society does – whether it be forcing women to wear *burkhas* or stoning people to death – is deemed permissible and legitimate 'because that's how they do things there.' Hard Multiculturalism means that anything goes. It has also opened the door to irrationalism. Postmodernists have entered into an unholy alliance with Christian fundamentalists, defending their right to teach Creationism in schools, because, like evolution, it is an equally valid theory or 'discourse'.

The fruits of 30 years of state-endorsed multiculturalism have been increased inter-racial tension and intra-racial sectarianism. Different ethnicities in the United Kingdom have grown more antagonistic towards each other, each fearing that another camp is getting a bigger slice of the financial pie than they are. In northern English cities this has not only led to increased

ghettoisation between Asian and white populations, but between the Sikh, Hindu and Muslim populace. A country divided between increasingly antagonistic ethnic tribes will find it difficult to survive. The fact that the London suicide bombers of 7 July and the would-be bombers of 21 July 2005 were born and bred in Britain—and encouraged by the state to be different—illustrates that Hard Multiculturalism has the capacity to be not only divisive, but decidedly lethal.

As Samuel Huntington argues in his book *Who Are We? America's Great Debate* (2004), any society requires a core set of common values to function; a nation wracked by ethnic division is likely to be doomed, as Yugoslavia demonstrated. Even Hard Multiculturalists, such as Bhikhu Parekh, concede that some form of homogeneity 'facilitates a sense of community and solidarity, makes interpersonal communication easier ... is held together with relative ease, is psychologically and politically economical, and can count on and easily mobilise its members' loyalty.'⁸ David Goodhart, editor of *Prospect* magazine, recently argued that this is something that should concern the Left as well as those on the Right. Goodhart, a man of impeccable left-liberal credentials, put forward the contention that a welfare state can only function when those who contribute to it feel it will be redistributed to those with whom they feel an affinity. People are reluctant to give money to those whom they do not regard as 'one of us'.⁹ Unsurprisingly, even Goodhart was accused of being a racist.

Western culture has spawned the most open, liberal and progressive societies. Thanks to its Enlightenment, it has unshackled itself from oppressive and barbarous régimes, creating states in which universal franchise, free speech and democracy are the norm and the expectation.

It's time these values were cherished. It's also time to expose the poverty of multiculturalism.