

The Debate Over Multiculturalism: Philosophy, Politics, and Policy

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The murderous rampage by right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik in Norway in July, which was fueled by Breivik's hatred of Islam and fierce opposition to multiculturalism, focused the world's attention on the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment and extremist politics in northern Europe.

The claim that multiculturalism undermines social cohesion and local cultural values has fueled the political success of far-right groups such as Geert Wilders's Freedom Party in the Netherlands, the Sweden Democrats Party, the True Finns Party in Finland, the Danish People's Party, and the Progress Party in Norway.

Yet concerns over multiculturalism are also part of the political mainstream. In October 2010, German Chancellor Angela Merkel proclaimed that a multicultural approach had "utterly failed" in Germany. In February 2011, French President Nicolas Sarkozy also called multiculturalism a failure, and British Prime Minister David Cameron indicted his country's policy of multiculturalism for failing to promote a sense of common identity and encouraging Muslim segregation and radicalization.

The debate surrounding multiculturalism is likely to continue. But what is multiculturalism really, and what do social scientists know about its effects on social cohesion and immigrant integration?

If the purportedly divisive effects of multiculturalism are borne out by empirical evidence, they provide support for calls to reduce immigrant flows or to differentially select new migrants, and for the creation of more aggressive assimilation policies and programs in destination countries.

If such effects are unsubstantiated, however, the rhetoric against multiculturalism might reflect the scapegoating of minority cultures faulted for problems rooted in others causes, such as economic globalization or discriminatory treatment.

The Many Faces of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism can refer to a demographic fact, a particular set of philosophical ideas, or a specific orientation by government or institutions toward a diverse population. Much of the contemporary debate over the value of multiculturalism centers on whether public multiculturalism — that which finds expression in concrete policies, laws, and regulations — is the appropriate way to deal with diversity and immigrant integration.

Conceptual differences over the meaning of multiculturalism often lead to confusion and outright misunderstanding when people debate its challenges and benefits.

Demographic Multiculturalism

For some people, the term “multiculturalism” is descriptive: It reflects the actual pluralism present in society. Such pluralism might stem from the coexistence of longstanding minority groups, such as the distinct linguistic communities within Belgium, Canada, and Switzerland, or it might be due to the migration of people with different cultures, religions, languages, and origins, as is the case in many countries around the world. In this sense, the United States and France are multicultural countries, as are Singapore and Kuwait.

Most of the contemporary debate about multiculturalism centers on immigrants and their descendants rather than on longstanding minority groups. Indeed, in some arenas multiculturalism has become synonymous with the demographic and social changes that stem from migration, resulting in the conflation of multiculturalism with immigration policy. This is sometimes seen in debates about whether multiculturalism as a demographic fact undermines social capital and social cohesion. When the term multiculturalism is evoked in these debates, it usually refers to population diversity, not a particular philosophy or public policy.

Multiculturalism as Political Philosophy

Typically, however, multiculturalism means more than demographic pluralism. It can also be a philosophy centered on recognizing, accommodating, and supporting cultural pluralism. The philosophy of multiculturalism is a general orientation than can be held by people, institutions, and governments, but it also refers to a particular set of philosophical ideas advanced by political theorists. The ideas of these theorists have been consequential since many have taken an active role in public debates.

To understand multiculturalism as a political philosophy, consider the British prime minister’s appeal to “muscular” liberalism in February 2011. In his speech, Cameron called in part on a vision of classical Western liberalism predicated on universalism and individual equality. Under classical liberalism, all people must be treated the same, and governments should remain blind to particularities of ethnicity, religion, or national origin. They should not, for example, provide public funding for cultural minority groups. Such a stance has long been associated with the French Republican approach to diversity.

The multicultural critique of this position argues that cultural neutrality in public institutions is impossible. Since democracy is based on government by the majority, minorities face disadvantages in the public sphere despite laws guaranteeing certain rights and freedoms. For example, even if a country does not declare an official language, the public school system will be run in just one or (at most) a few languages. Immigrants who don’t speak that language are thus placed in an inherently more difficult situation than the majority group.

Others add that the assumption of individualism is also problematic. Political philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Bhikhu Parekh argue that all humans are born into particular social and cultural communities that provide meaning and identity. Such groups are consequential to people’s lives; people are not just atomized individuals free from social ties and cultural moorings. Choosing which pair of shoes to wear, for example, probably does not

carry the same weight for a Muslim woman as choosing whether or not to wear a burqa or a headscarf.

Multicultural thinkers argue that social equality is enhanced when governments explicitly recognize cultural minorities, valorize pluralism, and accommodate the cultural needs of groups. In this way, if a legislature mandates store closings one day a week to give workers a day of rest, businesspeople of different religious faiths should be able to choose the day they close rather than having a Sunday closing — rooted in Christian traditions — imposed upon them.

The relevance of philosophical multiculturalism reaches beyond academia. Charles Taylor served as co-chair on the Quebec government's Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences in 2007, while Bhikhu Parekh headed the Runnymede Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain from 1998 to 2000. Both commissions produced highly publicized and contentious reports.

Multiculturalism as Public Policy

Multiculturalism as a philosophical orientation recognizes *de facto* pluralism in a society, and celebrates that diversity. It also requires governments and institutions to encourage pluralism through public policy, though the precise way this is done can vary across places and time.

For example, schools might require teachers to adopt a more diverse set of literary texts or highlight the contributions of ethnoracial, cultural, or religious minorities in history classes. In other cases, multicultural policies might make accommodations for the particular cultural or religious practices of minorities — such as providing a prayer room or allowing a particular style of dress on school grounds — or they might provide public funding for separate schools for racial, ethnic, or religious minorities.

In some places, public policies around cultural recognition and group accommodation preceded the large-scale international migration of the last four decades. This is the case particularly in countries that were dealing with domestic conflicts involving longstanding ethnic, racial, and religious minorities.

In the United States, for instance, US-born African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans made concerted calls for cultural recognition within schools and colleges starting in the 1960s. In Canada, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau announced a federal policy of multiculturalism in a 1971 speech, committing the government to supporting minority communities given that “National unity, if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one’s own individual identity.” Rather than antithetical to integration, the Canadian policy was to be embedded in official French-English bilingualism and integration through intercultural exchange.

Governments in Australia, Sweden, and the Netherlands also adopted policies of multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s; other countries followed these early adopters.

Social scientists have only recently begun to evaluate multiculturalism as public policy. Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka of Queen’s University in Ontario, Canada, have constructed a multiculturalism policy index (MCP Index) that measures the extent to which eight types of policies appear in 21 Western nations. The index accounts for the presence or absence of

multicultural policies across these countries at three distinct points — 1980, 2000, and 2010 — thus capturing policy changes over time (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Multiculturalism Policy Index Scores for Selected Countries, 1980-2010



Source: Multiculturalism Policy Index. Accessed September 2011. [Available Online](#).

The countries were each evaluated for an official affirmation of multiculturalism; multiculturalism in the school curriculum; inclusion of ethnic representation/sensitivity in public media and licensing; exemptions from dress codes in public laws; acceptance of dual citizenship; funding of ethnic organizations to support cultural activities; funding of bilingual and mother-tongue instruction; and affirmative action for immigrant groups.

This typology is similar to those of scholars who use alternative measures, such as that created by Ruud Koopmans and colleagues in 2005 or constructed by the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX).

The evidence from these indices indicates that, despite Chancellor Merkel's reproach of multiculturalism, Germany is not a country of strong multicultural policies. In fact, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, and Switzerland are among the least multicultural of all countries measured, though Germany has adopted more multicultural policies over time. Belgium, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States all rank as moderate multicultural countries, while Canada and Australia rank highest as having adopted the broadest range of multicultural policies.

In many of the countries analyzed, we find an increase in the number of multicultural policies over time - a perhaps surprising development given current political rhetoric. Sweden's multicultural policies in 1980 and 2000 could be categorized as modest, for instance, but by 2010 they were widespread and strong. Spain and Portugal, countries with very little international migration in 1980 and correspondingly weak multicultural policies, had moved to a moderate level of multicultural policy development by 2010.

This suggests that actual policy in many countries is slowly inching toward greater accommodation of pluralism, despite the political rhetoric around the perceived problems of diversity. Of course, policy developments are a moving target. While the general trend is toward a greater range of multicultural policies in most Western countries, some nations, like the United States, have experienced no appreciable change in national multiculturalism.

The Netherlands and Italy both had lower scores on the MCP Index in 2010 than in 2000. It is unclear at this time, however, whether this represents the beginning of a downward trend for multicultural policy, or whether it is anomalous.

Multiculturalism, Social Cohesion, and Immigrant Integration

How much do ideologies and policies of multiculturalism matter? Does the promotion of pluralism and diversity conflict with social cohesion and immigrant integration, or is multiculturalism a pathway to incorporation?

The arguments advanced by multicultural theorists suggest that by recognizing and accommodating minority cultures, members of those communities will feel increased attachment to and engagement in the larger polity. Critics retort that excessive emphasis

on diversity reifies differences, undermines a cohesive collective identity, and hinders common political projects — from backing the armed forces to supporting social benefits and redistribution. Detractors also worry that promoting multiculturalism leaves minorities living “parallel lives” in segregated communities, retarding majority-language learning, hindering economic integration, and weakening social ties and, thus, social capital with those outside the ethnic enclave.

Empirical research on these questions has been limited, and evidence on the socioeconomic consequences of multiculturalism is mixed. Some scholars argue that facilitating ethnic closure — a presumed consequence of multicultural policies — prevents or discourages immigrants from competing in the broader labor market, leading to higher unemployment and welfare use. Others argue instead that it is precisely the retention of ethnic social capital and culture that facilitates the educational success of immigrant children and the native-born second generation.

The reality might lie between these two positions, as the mechanisms tying multiculturalism to outcomes like employment or educational attainment are not clear. Labor market policies, educational institutions, and welfare state structures likely influence economic integration much more than policies of multiculturalism.

The consequences of multiculturalism for immigrants’ civic and political integration are somewhat stronger. Immigrants living in countries that adopt multicultural policies are more likely to engage in nonviolent political activities directed at their country of residence rather than their homeland, more likely to report trust in government, less likely to report discrimination based on their group membership, and more likely to become citizens.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 89 percent of working age (15 to 64) immigrants who had been living in multicultural Canada for at least ten years had adopted Canadian citizenship by 2007 — a large share compared to the citizenship acquisition of the same population of immigrants in countries with few multicultural policies. By 2007, only 57 percent of such immigrants in Denmark took on Danish citizenship, 47 percent in France became French citizens, and 37 percent in Germany adopted German citizenship. To the extent that taking on citizenship is an indicator of civic incorporation and a facilitator of further integration, either in politics or through access to certain jobs, we find greater integration in countries with more developed multicultural policies.

What about members of the majority group, however? Do multicultural policies increase their sense of social inclusion or political cohesion with immigrant-origin minorities? Even if multiculturalism increases immigrants’ civic attachment and sense of inclusion, the negative perception of multiculturalism by certain politicians and right-wing parties in various European countries suggests that some people are very alarmed about diversity.

Revealingly, in seven of nine studies tracking anti-immigrant attitudes over time, researchers found stable or increasingly negative attitudes toward immigrants, especially in Western Europe, while only two studies reported more positive trends.

The distinction between the various meanings of multiculturalism becomes important in thinking about the potentially different responses of majority and minority populations to diversity in society and how the government deals with that diversity. Some of the backlash against multiculturalism by majority residents stems from frustration over the perceived

accommodation of diversity in public policy and institutions. But much of this opposition reflects concern over demographic multiculturalism, namely the increasing pluralism in Western societies brought about by immigration. Thus, even politicians in countries with few multicultural policies stand opposed to the idea of multiculturalism.

Do multicultural policies ameliorate the potential negative reactions by majority group members to increased demographic multiculturalism, or do such policies exacerbate them? Very few research studies examine this question with hard data. One study of 19 Western nations found that, in societies experiencing immigration, multicultural policies appear to mitigate or reverse the erosion of trust or political participation that can occur in situations of demographic change. In contrast, another study found that residents of countries with more multicultural policies might have moved to more exclusionary notions of national identity over the last ten years.

These findings raise difficult questions for academics and policymakers over how to weigh majority preferences against minority interests. The majority population might express declining or limited support for policies of minority recognition and accommodation – an attitude that some politicians articulate and encourage. Yet the evidence suggests that multiculturalism probably facilitates immigrants’ sociopolitical integration and contributes to their sense of civic inclusion.

It is possible that, in the medium to long term, accommodating minorities through multicultural policies will also benefit majority residents. If minority integration is facilitated, greater civic and political cohesion might follow and prevent the negative consequences that can flow from marginalization and feelings of exclusion among minority residents. Given the tenor of the current debate and the political climate in some countries, however, the maintenance and expansion of multicultural policies could be in jeopardy.

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