

# From culture via multiculturalism to diversity

Culture flows and mixes, and although social groups may have clear boundaries, cultural worlds do not.

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**ABSTRACT:**

*The word ‘culture’ has been central in anthropological research and theory since the 1870s, and in recent decades, it has increasingly entered into mainstream political debate, especially with respect to cultural pluralism, cultural rights, universalism and multiculturalism. This essay problematises a common conceptualisation of culture, namely the notion that ‘cultures’ are bounded and distinctive, showing that in fact, culture flows and mixes, and although social groups may have clear boundaries, cultural worlds do not. For this reason, the term ‘multiculturalism’ is unfortunate in describing culturally complex societies, since it suggests the existence of several clearly defined cultural groups. Rather, it is argued, the contemporary world is characterised by hybridity and mixing. The term ‘diversity’, which may refer to many kinds of pluralism and which does not presuppose the existence of bounded cultures, is therefore to be preferred. Societies may tolerate considerable cultural diversity without becoming fragmented, but divisive identity politics fueled by a misleading conceptualisation of culture is a real danger.*

**I**s ‘culture’ at all a useful word, or is it best discarded? The question may seem exaggerated or even meaningless, but the truth is that in anthropology, it has been raised time and again for several decades (see e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986, Kuper 1999), and anthropologists ought to know what they are talking about, having - more than anyone else - peddled the concept of culture for more than a hundred years and trying to convince others to embrace it.

Let us take a step back in order to understand what the argument is about. The first scientific definition of culture is probably that of E. B. Tylor, a founder of academic anthropology. His 1871 book *Primitive Culture* begins with the following sentence:

*Culture or Civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole*

*which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor 1968 [1871])*

Soon, learned men (and a few women) began to talk about cultures in the plural. A generation after Tylor, the German émigré Franz Boas founded modern cultural anthropology in the USA, based on the principles of historical particularism and cultural relativism: First, every society had its own, unique history and could not be placed on a universal evolutionary ladder, unlike what Marxists and other evolutionists claimed. Second, anthropology has to study each culture on its own terms, eventually arriving at what another pioneer, Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), would soon speak of as ‘the native’s point of view’.

The societies typically studied by anthropologists at the time were small-scale, lacked writing and had a simple political organisation. Anthropologists equally studied their social arrangements (kinship systems, economics, politics etc.) and their culture (worldview, religion, language etc.) It was generally taken for granted that the members of a society shared the same culture.

When anthropologists began to study more complex societies and societies undergoing fast changes, problems with this conceptualisation of culture quickly arose. In a study of, say, plantation agriculture in Puerto Rico, or labour migration in Southern Africa, it is not only difficult to delineate the boundaries of the society, but it soon becomes apparent that the people interacting do not necessarily share a language, a worldview or a religion. In other words, a social system could encompass considerable cultural diversity. Boundaries have become fuzzy.

Soon, anthropologists and other social scientists began to devise models of ‘plural societies’ (Furnivall 1948, Smith 1965), which consisted of several discrete constituent groups, each with its distinctive culture. These groups were poorly integrated

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with each other, however, and met chiefly in the marketplace. The division of labour tended to follow ethnic lines. They were ruled by a colonial elite, and so the need for political compromises was minimal.

Later research in these 'plural societies', especially after they became independent in the 1960s, nevertheless revealed that the boundaries between the constituent groups were far from absolute. Considerable informal interaction took place, intermarriage was sometimes widespread, and at the level of culture, the groups influenced each other as well as being subject to similar influences from outside (see e.g. Eriksen 1992). Culture was, in a word, no longer bounded nor stable.

#### MIXING AND HYBRIDITY

A new, more flexible conceptualisation of culture was needed. In a study of culturally complex Guyana, in South America, the anthropologist Lee Drummond (1980) coined the term 'cultural continuum' in order to do away with the idea of bounded cultures. Drummond (1980) notes that Guyanese routinely apply ethnic ascription in social classification and cultural stereotyping. He then shows that their usage is situational and often self-contradictory (Drummond 1980: 368). Rather than accepting a locally widespread view (which is shown to be inconsistent) of a society made up by distinctive ethnic-cum-cultural groups, Drummond proposes a view inspired by creole linguistics, arguing its relevance for culture theory in general:

*If variation and change are fundamental aspects of cultural systems, then we must consider the possibility that ethnographic studies of small, post-colonial, ethnically fragmented societies such as Guyana illustrate creole processes found in societies everywhere. (Drummond 1980:370)*

The main problem arising from use of the creole metaphor, Drummond then notes, is that of descriptive fragmentation, leading the ethnographer to 'exhaust

himself describing and comparing every little pocket of informants' (p. 371) - a problem which would soon become familiar in postmodern anthropology, and often resolved through recourse to terms like 'multiple voices', 'polyphony', 'discourses' and the like. Drummond's own solution, drawing on Derek Bickerton's creole linguistics, consists in seeing culture as a single entity which cannot be pluralised; as 'overlapping sets of transformations or continua' (p. 372). A similar view is voiced by Hannerz when he states:

*A cultural theory adequate to the task of understanding complex cultures must be able to deal with the fact that the division of labor is in large part a division of knowledge, making very problematic the notion that culture is by definition shared. (Hannerz 1986:363)*

This view represents an advance over the earlier view of the world as an archipelago of bounded cultures (Eriksen 1993, 1994). Ho-

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wever, it remains to be explained why boundaries continue to be reproduced through identity politics, that is movements - ethnic, national or religious, as the case might be - aiming to purge local culture of insidious influences from outside, and through everyday practices which are often not verbalised. Cultural flow and change may be everywhere, but so are cultural continuities. Likewise, hybrid and anomalous identities presuppose the existence of bounded, unambiguous identities. A similar point is made by Hannerz (1990) when he points out that cosmopolitans depend on locals in order to be cosmopolitans. Transgressing boundaries is impossible unless boundaries are being diligently reproduced. You cannot cross a bor-

der which does not exist. There are serious conceptual problems with the classic concept of culture, which depicts the world as an 'archipelago of cultures' - clearly bounded and homogeneous. There are overlaps between 'cultures', and there is variation within any 'culture'. At the same time, the very same concept of culture which has all but been discarded by professional anthropologists, is being used in the identity work of people across the world, who insist on the purity and authenticity of their culture, the ancient history of their group identity, and so on.

It is therefore necessary to make a distinction between culture and identity. Culture flows - not everywhere, not at a fixed speed; some parts of culture flow fast while others remain stuck in a particular location; but it flows and mixes. That is the nature of culture. It creates grey zones, frontier areas, mixtures and hodgepodes.

Identities, on the other hand, are - at least in theory - fixed. Either you are a Czech, a Muslim, a Roma etc., or you are not. It could therefore be said that culture is continuous, while identities are discontinuous; culture has no clear boundaries, while identities do.

#### CULTURAL PLURALISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

With these distinctions in mind - culture is not the same as identity; culture is not the same as society - we can begin to examine the contemporary situation, and dilemmas, of cultural diversity, or multiculturalism.

The term 'multiculturalism' covers a number of current political trends in

- ▶ North America and elsewhere which, although they are quite different in their aims and ideological content (see Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010), share a positive evaluation of cultural traditions and, particularly, the cultural or ethnic identities of minorities.

Multiculturalism is evident in literature and the arts as well as in politics, and it seeks to revalorise the artistic and intellectual contributions of hitherto silent minorities as well as supporting their quest for equity in greater society. Related to the critical Hegelianism of the early Frankfurt school, feminist critiques of epistemology and to postmodernist trends inspired directly or indirectly by Derrida, multiculturalist thought is often accused of inspiring nihilism since it seems to relativise absolute value judgements.

As noted above, it was for many years commonplace to assume that cultures were

Recently the classic perspectives from cultural relativism have become increasingly problematic (see e.g. Wilson 1997), as I have shown. An important contributing cause, or at least a major catalyst, in bringing this change about, is the intensification of the globalisation of culture since the Second World War. The globalisation of capitalism and the modern state, along with innovations in communication technology (jet planes, TV satellites and various wireless telecommunications are key innovations), have been crucial for these changes to come about. When former tribals now apply for mortgages, follow North American TV series, take their Higher School Certificates, elect local governments and are imprisoned for criticising the government, it becomes intellectually and morally indefensible to seek refuge in the fiction assuming that cultures are isolated and committed to their proper logic: Political discourse

nationalism, modern individualism and human rights thought have thus, in the course of the past twenty years, created ideologies and theories dealing with multicultural society. In this milieu of social and political thought, difference is seen not only as politically legitimate, but is also frequently invoked as justification for specific political rights. In this regard, multiculturalist thought could be seen as post-nationalist, since it acknowledges the existence of several 'cultures' within one and the same political system. At the same time, multiculturalism may easily conflict with values seen as universal in modern liberal states, especially those to do with human rights and the rights and duties associated with equal participation in the institutions of society.

#### **THE DILEMMA OF POLYETHNIC SOCIETIES**

The basic dilemma of polyethnic societies can be phrased like this: On the one hand all members of a liberal democracy are (in principle if not in practice) entitled to the same rights and opportunities. On the other hand, they also have the right to be different - and in our day and age, the rights of minorities to maintain and promote their cultural specificity, and to be visible in the public sphere, including the media, school curricula and so on, are increasingly insisted on. A crucial challenge for multiethnic societies therefore consists in allowing cultural differences without violating common, societally defined rights; in other words, the challenge consists in finding a viable compromise, for the state as well as for the citizens, between equal rights and the right to be different.

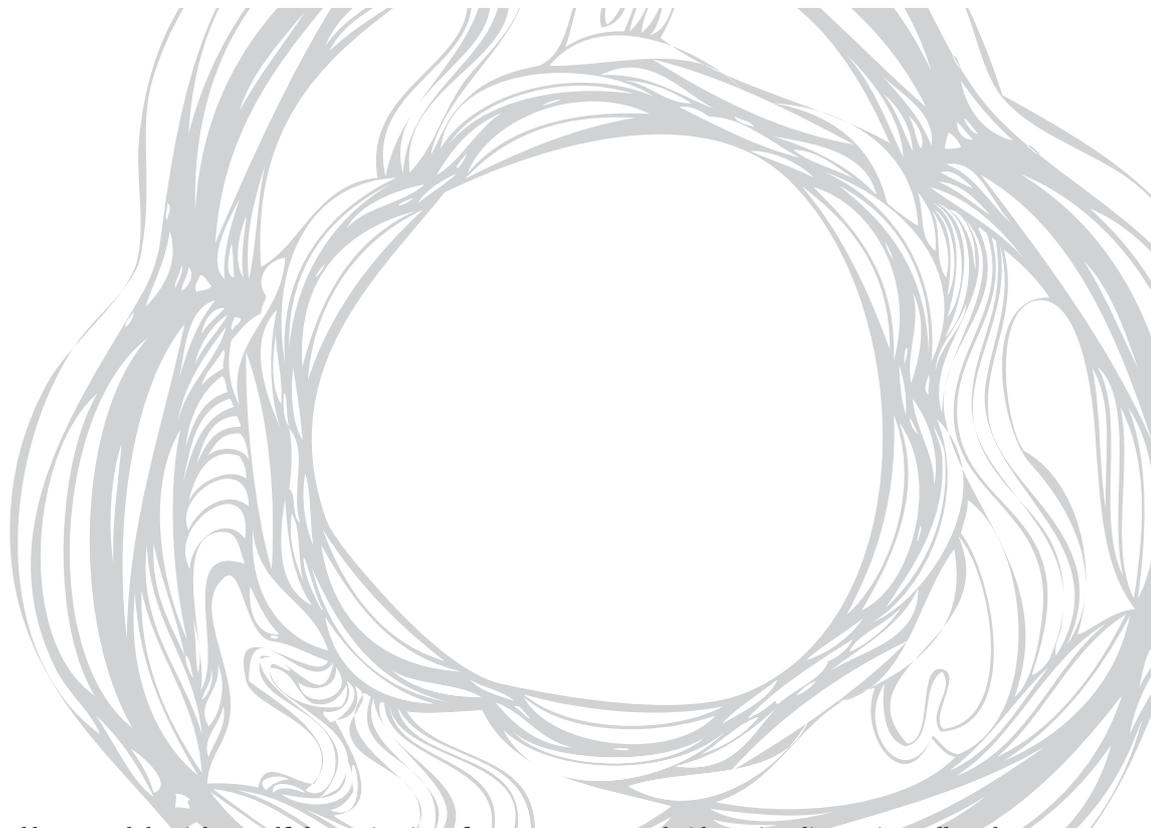
This contradiction is as old as nationalism itself. Nationalism, the ideology holding that states ought to be culturally homogeneous (Gellner 1983, Anderson 1983), has a double origin in German romanticism and French enlightenment thought, which emphasise, respectively, cultural (and, often, ethnic) uniformity, and shared territory and citizenship, as the basis for national

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generally sharply delineated and distinct, relatively homogeneous and stable. The world was thus depicted as a vast archipelago of cultures, each possessing its own internal logic and its own values, and which could exclusively be understood in its own unique terms. Variations in morality, custom and tradition were regarded as evidence of man's ability to adapt to the most variable environments and to shape his existence in a multitude of ways, and it was emphasised that there was no 'objective' standard available for the evolutionary ranking of cultures or the moral evaluation of actions. Value was defined from within. This line of thought is tantamount to the historical particularism and cultural relativism mentioned earlier.

has, to a great extent, become globalised.

The situation may be even more problematic to handle intellectually for persons steeped in cultural relativism when very tangible expressions of global cultural variation suddenly appear at our doorstep, which indeed is happening in most industrialised societies due to labour migration and to the ongoing influx of political refugees. This new polyethnic situation has, especially in European countries, provoked discrimination as well as a revitalised cultural nationalism and chauvinism in segments of the majority, but many - 'indigenes' as well as new arrivals - have also responded by developing ideological and practical models for polyethnic coexistence. Original alloys mixing anthropological cultural relativism,



integration and as the source of political legitimization. According to classic Enlightenment thought, there existed a universal human civilization, which was in principle accessible to all humans. According to German romanticism, represented in the works of Herder above all, every people (Volk) had its proper linguistic and cultural character and the right to defend it. This view of culture, incidentally, was developed largely as a defensive response to French universalism, which was locally perceived as a form of cultural imperialism (probably not without a certain justification).

This perspective and its derivatives (including cultural relativism in its "strong" variants) are currently expressed through ideologies arguing the importance of cultural homogeneity for political identity. This applies whether they are nationalist and champion the idea of homogeneous states, or ethno-political and insist on ethnically based rights for minorities within existing states.

However, the difference between 'German' and 'French' nationalism, so often stressed in the literature (see Kohn 1945 for a classic statement), is not absolute: in actually existing nations, the two principles are generally mixed, and even in principle, French territorialism is far from being culturally innocent. Insofar as the French universalist civilisation insists on speaking French, it has certainly not been perceived as culturally neutral among non-French speakers in Brittany, in Côte-d'Ivoire and elsewhere. Modern human rights thinking is no more neutral either, incidentally, as it assumes global sharing of a specified set of societal values.

#### **HOMOGENISATION AND FRAGMENTATION**

The contradiction between the demands for equal rights and for the right to be different is accentuated at present by two principal tendencies. Firstly, it has finally become clear in public discourse - nearly a century after Woodrow Wilson famously announ-

ced the right to self-determination of peoples - that hardly any ethnic group has its territory by itself. States are poly-ethnic, and any ideology stating that only people 'of the same kind' should live in a country is potentially dangerous. This problem was recognised already by Renan (1992 [1882]), but it has acquired unprecedented importance since the 1960s. Secondly, the current processes of cultural globalisation break down cultural boundaries and make it difficult to defend the idea that a 'people' is culturally homogeneous and unique. Cultural hybridity or mixing, migration and increased transnational communication are important factors in this respect.

A widespread counterreaction against the perceived threat of boundary dissolution through globalisation consists in ideological emphases on "cultural uniqueness". In this sense, cultural homogenisation and ethnic fragmentation take place simultaneously; they are consequences of each other and feed on each other in dynamic interplay.

In other words, societies are multicultural - or so it may seem. I shall nevertheless argue that 'multiculturalist politics' have to be universalistic in their very nature. My position has always been that culture cannot be a legitimating basis for political claims, and that cultural singularities among minorities and majorities in modern societies can only be defended to the extent that they do not interfere with individual human rights. All societies are indeed multicultural, whether they contain diverse ethnic groups or not, since different citizens hold different values and different world views.

Multiculturalism, a term describing doctrines which argue the importance and equivalence of cultural heritages and the decentralisation of defining power as to what is to count as one, may in practice be either a disguised form of individualistic thinking about personhood (the world seen as a smorgasbord of identities to be chosen among by free individuals) and human rights, or else it is liable to regress into nihil-

ism, apartheid, 'nationalism writ small' and the enforced ascription of cultural identities. The former interpretation has many virtues in relation to human rights, while the latter does not.

#### **THE POLITICISED CONCEPT OF CULTURE**

Culture, Raymond Williams has written (1976:87) in a much quoted passage, is one of the two or three most complex words of the English language. The meaning of the word, Williams shows, has gone through many changes since the original Latin *colere*, which referred to the cultivation of the soil. Today, the word has several, if related, meanings.

One of the most common meanings of culture posits it as synonymous with the way of life and world view the members of a particular group or community have in common, and which distinguishes them from other groups. This definition may at first seem plausible, but it does not survive closer scrutiny. Within nearly every 'group' or 'people' there are varying ways of life and world views; the rich differ from the poor, the men from the women, the highly educated from the illiterates, the urban from the rural and so on. Additionally, as shown above, it is often extremely difficult to draw boundaries between cultures. If one argues that a Norwegian culture exists and is by default different from Danish culture, one will need to show what it is that all Norwegians share with each other but not with a single Dane. That is not an easy thing to do. Finally, culture is naturally not a solid object, even if the word unhappily is a noun. Culture is something which happens, not something that merely exists; it unfolds through social process and therefore also inherently changes. It should have been a verb.

Problems of this kind have made such a conceptualisation of culture difficult to manage, and many scholars have ceased to use it, while others insist on using culture in the singular sense, as that which all humans have in common, defining them as

- ▶ a species as opposed to nature in general and other species in particular.

However, ideologists and political entrepreneurs of many shades have embraced this Romantic concept of culture. In recent years, 'culture' and 'cultural identity' have become important tools for the achievement of political legitimacy and influence in many otherwise very different societies - from Bolivia to Siberia. It is used by political leaders of hegemonic majorities as well as by the spokesmen of weak minorities.

Indigenous peoples all over the world demand territorial rights from the states in which they live, emphasising their unique

ce in recent years: The two largest ethnic groups, Africans and Indians (originally from India; they are not American Indians), have gradually acquired more and more in common, culturally speaking; in terms of language, way of life, ambitions and general outlook. At the same time, they have become ever more concerned to express how utterly different they are; culture and cultural differences are spoken about more often, and cultural differences are brought to bear on daily life, public rituals and political organisation to a greater extent than what was earlier the case. Partly, this is because the groups are in closer contact than

dual origins with the logic of nationalism in the Enlightenment and Romantic thought of early modern Europe.

Perhaps it could be said that because people everywhere become more similar due to the forces of globalisation, they try their best to be different. However, the more different they try to be, the more similar they become - because everybody tries to be different in the same ways. Deep cultural differences, which still exist in the realms of religiosity, the conceptualisation of the person, kinship and so on, are less likely to be politicised.

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cultural heritage and way of life as a crucial element in their plea. Immigrant leaders in Europe occasionally present themselves as the representatives of cultural minorities, demanding, inter alia, special linguistic and religious rights. The hegemonic elites of many countries also refer to their 'national culture' in justification of warfare or oppression of ethnic minorities. 'Cultural pleas' are, in other words, put to very different political uses.

A frequently mentioned paradox concerning the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and subsequent wars is the fact that the fighting parties, Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims, were culturally very similar, yet justified their mutual hatred by claiming that they are actually profoundly different. This kind of situation, where ethnic relations between groups which are culturally close take on a bitter and antagonistic character, is more common than widely assumed.

In Trinidad, in the southern Caribbean, the following development has taken place

earlier and compete for the same scarce resources; but it is also partly because members of the two groups feel that their cultural boundaries are threatened by tendencies towards creolisation and therefore feel an acute need to advertise their cultural differences.

The groups have simultaneously become more similar and more different. This paradox is characteristic of globalisation processes, whereby differences between peoples are made comparable and therefore come to resemble each other, and where small differences are enlarged. It could, in line with this, be said that the entire discourse over "multiculturalism" is embedded in a shared cultural framework encompassing, and bringing out the contradictions between, the Romantic notion of culture and the Enlightenment notion of individual rights. To put it somewhat more crudely: To make demands on behalf of a self-professed culture indicates that one subscribes to a shared global political culture. The logic of multiculturalism and ethnopolitics shares its

#### **GOOD MULTICULTURALISM**

It is widely believed, not least in the USA itself, that this great country has been capable of absorbing a great number of different nationalities without homogenising them culturally. This is wrong, and generally, migrants to the USA have changed their language within two generations. One could perhaps say that immigrants to the USA have been assimilated to a degree of 99 per cent, and have been allowed to use the remaining one per cent to advertise their cultural uniqueness, which exists largely as a set of symbolic identity markers; they have kept their identity, but not their culture. As a Norwegian, I have often met Americans who identify themselves as Norwegians but who seem to betray, in their verbal and nonverbal language, lifestyle and values, a strong attachment to the moral discourses of US society.

If political multiculturalists favour equal individual rights, the 'culture' in their rhetoric is but a thin cosmetic film. If, on the other hand, they seriously defend the right of ethnic minorities to run their own political affairs according to a cultural logic of their own, they risk defending practices which conflict with the human rights of individual group members.

The solution, or rather, the 'good multiculturalism', must arrive at a blend of similarity and difference. It requires common

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denominators in key sectors, including politics, education and the labour market, and it must institutionalise a dialogic principle enabling a variety of voices to be heard on an equal footing. This is not relativism, but rather the recognition and democratisation of different value orientations in society, in the manner acknowledged as necessary and non-relativistic by Bauman (1993) when he notes the ill effects of the attempts at extending the Western 'ethical code over populations which abide by different codes in the name of one all-human ethics bound to evict and supplant all local distortions' (Bauman 1993:12). It is a question of striking a proper balance between the demands for equality and the quest for cultural identity, including the right not to acknowledge a cultural identity.

In his very beautiful and melancholic essay on the river Danube and its tormented history, Claudio Magris (1986, Eng. tr. 1989) writes that a fascist is a person who has best friends but cannot understand that others may be just as good friends; who feels love for his homestead but cannot understand that others may feel the same kind of love for theirs; and so on. It may therefore be proposed, as a general principle, that 'human rights missionaries' have an obligation to gain some understanding of the world views and value systems current among their target groups. They would then discover that virtually all 'peoples' are, like Mauritian Muslims, divided on important issues. Some of their members would have gone to school and acquired individualist categories; some would have learnt about women's rights in remote countries; some might see a solution in a Marxist revolution or a liberal multi-party system, and yet others might refuse to question tradition. As Tariq Ramadan has repeatedly pointed out (e.g. Ramadan 2009), individualist thinking and social criticism is just as 'rooted' in Islamic history as fundamentalism.

And as Salman Rushdie (1991) and many others have reminded us of, one scarcely does southern or eastern peoples a favour

by continuously telling them that individual human rights are really a 'Western' invention and far from an aspect of their culture. This kind of attitude essentialises 'other cultures' and alienates the growing numbers in those societies which hold positive views of individual human rights at the same time as they resist cultural neo-colonialism.

Integration in a modern state with a liberal constitution may create a dialogical situation where human rights principles become a common denominator for the many groups and individuals which make up the state. If this sounds like blunt cultural imperialism, it should be noted that the most likely alternative, in my view, consists in a form of segregation whereby the exertion of power is left to the incumbents of traditional forms of authority, leaving everybody else powerless.

In most contemporary societies, processes of cultural homogenisation are taking place in certain social fields (such as consumption, education and the media), while the demarcation of boundaries and the symbolic strengthening of identity, roots and tradition takes place in other fields. It is this process I have described as a dual movement of cultural homogenisation and ethnic fragmentation.

Perhaps it would be useful to speak of a weak and a strong variant of political multiculturalism. The former is the one practised in some liberal modern states, where a high degree of cultural homogeneity is taken for granted. The latter, which I have just argued against, would be a kind of political rhetoric rejecting liberal individualism

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and human rights ideology on the basis of alleged tradition.

The former, weak variety is nonetheless also hard to defend. It may (i) contribute to freezing ethnic boundaries and thereby heighten the risks of ethnic conflict, (ii) remove the protection and entitlement of shared societal institutions from the members of minorities, (iii) strengthen internal power discrepancies within the minorities, (iv) direct public attention away from basic contradictions in society, notably economic ones, and (v) contribute to a general moral and political disqualification of minorities in society: since they are not accorded the same rights and duties as everybody else, there is no apparent reason why they should be treated as equals in other respects either. The conclusion is not that cultural variation in itself should be fought, but that politicised culture is incompatible with the individual rights modern states are, or ought to be, based on. The slogan could be 'cultural nationalism, political cosmopolitanism', as the late Ernest Gellner - who loved his Czech folk music as much as he despised political nationalism - put it.

An excellent alternative to the term multiculturalism is diversity. This is not merely a matter of terminology since the term diversity does not a priori assume that society consists of discrete cultural groups; it merely states that there is variation within the population - some of it individual, some of it rooted in group identities. This diversity must nevertheless be compatible with a shared societal identity. Otherwise, the result will inevitably be tension and fragmentation. On the other hand, history has shown that a society may encompass considerable cultural variation without falling apart. What is potentially dangerous is the degeneration of cultural diversity into politicised multiculturalism and divisive identity politics. •