

Interculturalism: For the Era of Globalisation, Cohesion and Diversity

In the April edition of *Political Insight*, Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood argued that multiculturalism provides the best approach for managing diverse societies. Here, **Ted Cattle** says that it is interculturalism that offers the only effective framework for diversity in an increasingly globalised world.

The writing is on the wall for multiculturalism. But Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood, writing in the April edition of *Political Insight* and elsewhere, make a valiant effort to shore up support by suggesting that interculturalism is merely a variant of multiculturalism, rather than an alternative framework for managing diverse societies.

Their arguments, no doubt, reflect the great danger in giving credence to the idea that ‘multiculturalism has failed’, as supporters of this view often – and sometimes wilfully – conflate the idea of the failure of multicultural societies with the failure of multicultural policies. Meer and Modood’s

sensitivities are laudable, but now need to be set aside as there is an evident and pressing need for a new and progressive conceptual framework, based on interculturalism. This is essential to reflect the reality of increasingly super-diverse and globalised communities.

Multiculturalism: A ‘Toxic’ Brand

Meer and Modood have previously been bold enough to recognise some of the very different tenets of interculturalism:

First, as something greater than coexistence, in that interculturalism is allegedly more geared toward interaction and dialogue than multiculturalism. Second, that interculturalism is conceived as something less ‘groupist’ or more yielding of synthesis than multiculturalism. Third, that interculturalism is something more committed to a stronger sense of the whole, in terms of such things as societal cohesion and national citizenship. Finally, that where multiculturalism may be illiberal and relativistic, interculturalism is more likely to lead to criticism of illiberal cultural practices (as part of the process of intercultural dialogue).

(Meer and Modood, 2011)

However, in their attempt to support the concept of multiculturalism, they then stretch credibility too far by attempting to argue that these features were ‘foundational’ elements of multiculturalism all along. This argument cannot be sustained.

While the original UK race relations legislation from 1968 did create a duty to ‘promote good race relations’, this was never translated into any meaningful programme of activity. Further, when community cohesion emerged in 2001, with many new inter-relational programmes being introduced for the first time, the whole concept of community cohesion was attacked by avowed multiculturalists as an illiberal and politically motivated denial of established race relations policies (although Meer and Modood were not apparently among the critics).

But more importantly, Meer and Modood have, as yet, failed to acknowledge that multiculturalism has been locked into the context of the 1960s and 1970s, and has simply not even begun to come to terms with the new era of globalisation and diversity, and the conceptual changes that result.

There is also a timely and obvious need to develop a progressive rebranding of multiculturalism. For many reasons – not all of which are based upon a fair assessment of the gains made over the last 40 years or so – the multicultural brand has become toxic and enjoys little by way of popular or political support. A recent and significant report commissioned by the Searchlight Educational Trust (SET, 2011) set out to explore the issues of English identity, faith and race. It is one of the largest and most comprehensive surveys to date. It showed how limited the support for multiculturalism is at present. ‘Confident multiculturalists’ were found to number only 8 per cent of the population; ‘mainstream liberals’ made up another 16 per cent. The

Multiculturalism has no formal or accepted definition, but it is generally held to be a set of policies that enable different cultures to live side by side, none of which take precedent or have higher value. This has enabled minority cultures to be maintained and not swallowed up or assimilated by the majority culture, but has also tended to create a fixed and ascribed set of identities, which give rise to divisions and tensions and prevent interchange.

Interculturalism also tries to avoid the charge of assimilation, but recognises that heritage and identity are dynamic and that cross-cultural interaction in increasingly globalised and diverse societies is inevitable and desirable. Interculturalism suggests that such change has to be facilitated and supported, and that identity has to be seen as chosen and developmental.



Many in the UK have a deep-seated resentment towards immigrants, particularly Muslims, which is feeding far-right groups. Corbis

report somewhat alarmingly, suggests that only one quarter of the population are comfortable with our present model of multiculturalism.

It concluded that:

there is not a progressive majority in society and it reveals that there is a deep resentment to immigration, as well as scepticism towards multiculturalism. There is a widespread fear of the 'other', particularly Muslims, and there is an appetite for a new right-wing political party that has none of the fascist trappings of the British National Party or the violence of the English Defence League.

Interculturalism is underpinned by at least five conceptual issues that multiculturalism has simply failed to address:

- From national to global/international drivers of difference
- New power and political structures
- Identity as a dynamic concept
- From 'race' to recognition of all other forms of difference
- An inter-disciplinary (structural and relational) understanding.

Matt Goodwin (2011) confirms this rather depressing attitudinal picture with a review of the opinion polling on migration and race related issues over the last 10 years or so. This indicates that immigration in particular

Meer and Modood's multicultural sensitivities are laudable, but there is an evident and pressing need for a new and progressive conceptual framework based on interculturalism

has been a totemic issue for race relations and consistently opposed by around 80 per cent of the population in the UK (and mirrored in many European countries). No wonder the Commission for Integration and

Cohesion and the Council of Europe both declined to use the 'multicultural' concept in their reports.

The Future is Interculturalism

Meer and Modood wish to protect the multicultural brand. The shift to interculturalism is not, however about rebranding –although, frankly, this would help the debate to move on. The move is more profound and based upon the need to address at least five conceptual problems with the present basis of multiculturalism.

National to International Drivers of Difference

Multiculturalists assumed 'difference' was driven by the minority–majority relationship between communities within nations. That was largely true in the 1960s, but globalisation and super-diversity has meant that the influence of diasporas, transnational communications, social media and international travel has created entirely new relationships. 'Difference' is no longer determined within national borders. And it is no longer based upon the majority–minority

'You Can't Put Me in A Box'

In an age of super-diversity where people do not identify around single identities and feel conflicted allegiance (if any allegiance at all) to pre-defined groups, activism around particular 'strands' seems irrelevant to many people and may not even be that effective in addressing the true causes of inequality. Even the very categorisations that we rely on (For example, 'black', 'gay', 'Asian' or 'disabled') no longer seem to be able to tell us much about who people are, what lives they lead, who they identify with, or what services they need from government and society. And the tick box approach seems to be missing out on growing numbers of people who fall outside or across standard classifications. Yet society seems to treat ethnic identities as if they are clearly bounded, static and meaningful, and public bodies insist on a tick box classification

(Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah, 2010, p. 11)

relationship; there is now a multiplicity of tensions within and between minorities. The black–white binary divide is no longer central and should no longer underpin our view of race and racism.

New Power and Political Structures

Globalisation has brought many new international agencies and structures into being, and fundamentally altered power relationships. These new agencies have responded to a range of issues such as international finance, crime, environmental concerns such as climate change, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and many more. The European project perhaps stands out most in this regard. This – together with the process of western de-industrialisation, the growth of global business and brands, and international migration on a new scale – has created a popular sense of powerlessness and alienation. This has also had a profound impact upon the way people see themselves and the claim of nationalistic identities has inevitably been weakened. The growth of regional and separatist appeals as people 'hunker down' is one part of this.

Castells (1997) supports the view that the state has been bypassed by networks of wealth, power and information, and lost much of its sovereignty. In later work, Castells (2006) draws upon the research of Professor Pippa Norris of Harvard University, who has analysed the World Values Survey to show that regional and local identities are trumping national loyalties. Professor Norris calculated that for the world as a



Trevor Phillips, chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the successor to the Commission for Racial Equality

whole, 13 per cent of respondents primarily considered themselves as 'citizens of the world', 38 per cent put their nation state first, and the remainder (i.e. the majority) put local or regional identities first.

None of this should suggest that national identity could or should be downplayed. In fact, there is a great danger in suggesting that the one area of identity that many working class people feel able to cling to in a time of uncertainty should be wiped

away. The reality is, however, that national and cosmopolitan identities do now need to sit alongside each other (they are not opposed) – something that multiculturalism has never acknowledged.

Identity is a Dynamic Concept

Multiculturalism positioned identity as static and bounded – or ascribed and fixed. The reality for many people, however, is that it is transitory and, at least partly

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chosen. The growth of intermarriage across national, faith and other boundaries means that 'you can't put me in a box'.

Multicultural theorists have never accepted this perspective and attempted to reinforce past conceptions of identity, supported by systems of over-protective community leaders and single-identity funding that have homogenised and hardened in-group boundaries and stereotypes.

From 'Race' to All Other Forms of Difference

Multiculturalism revolved around race and failed to take account of other forms of difference that have moved firmly into the public sphere – particularly sexual orientation, gender, faith and disability. This has had profound implications, because race has been defined in relation to social class and therefore racism is inextricably bound up with economic issues. This still has some salience, but difference – and the prejudice it has created – is founded on relational bases too. Identity is now a hybrid concept for many people (particularly younger people) and combines faith, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality and other ideas.

An Inter-disciplinary Understanding

Such an understanding is required to allow multiculturalism to move on from a purely class-based structural approach to one where multi-faceted relationships are understood. Many multiculturalists have insisted that divisions revolve around structural divisions and see 'relational' concerns

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as a smokescreen designed to hide the more fundamental problems. Most of the principal multicultural texts have failed to even consider the contribution of social psychology and hardly mention contact theory, or any other concept of in-group and out-group divisions. It would also appear that

social psychologists and sociologists have been living 'parallel lives'.

Social psychologists are beginning to provide a better understanding of inter-ethnic relationships, challenging some of the structural basis of the sociological approach. In reality, we need both. New and pervasive experiential learning opportunities need to be created to combat insular communities and extremist views. This has never been part of the multiculturalist approach; instead, past attempts at tackling racism and resolving inter-ethnic divisions have been based on legislation and punitive measures to control behaviours. That will undoubtedly have to continue, but now needs to be supplemented by measures that address the causes and understand why and how such attitudes are formed in the first instance.

In an era of globalisation and super-diversity, relational issues have become as important (if not more so) than structural divisions, simply because there are now many more cross-cultural and multi-faceted inter-relationships that arise within and between communities. However, it is also necessary to avoid equating intercultural dialogue (ICD), which is almost entirely 'relational' in both concept and practice, with interculturalism. The European ICD approach, which Meer and Modood unfortunately also present as one type of interculturalism, is rightly criticised by them as 'relatively apolitical, offering civil society-based local encounters and conviviality in everyday life to critique multiculturalism'.

Interculturalism as a New Idea

Branding is important. We need to be able to talk about race and diversity in a new way. Interculturalism is likely to be much more readily accepted at a popular level – it is associated with more positive language of 'inter-dependency', 'integration' and 'internationalism'. It represents a break with the past.

It also represents a break with the tired old identity politics that younger people are already rejecting – the huge growth in mixed-race/dual-heritage relationships is testimony to this. There is an untapped desire to dispense with past language and fears about difference, and to recognise that the world is made up of just one human race. Younger people – particularly those that have grown up in diverse areas – reject such ideas. Small projects like the 'Luton in Harmony' pledge, signed by 60,000 people, are beginning to endorse this intercultural view of the world.

Previous debates have focused on the pros and cons of multiculturalism. This is not a productive debate and has generally been brought back to past policies – especially the rights and wrongs of immigration,

Interculturalism allows us to talk about race and diversity in a new way

and supposed political correctness such as the mythical 'banning of Christmas'. Interculturalism can be positioned as a future-orientated debate that focuses on all aspects of diversity in an ever-changing environment. It will be challenging, but will also become acknowledged as a progressive attempt to create a fairer society and a modern conception of difference fitting for an increasingly globalised world.

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