

# The Democratic Contradictions of Multiculturalism

Written by Jens-Martin Eriksen and Frederik Stjernfelt

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## The Democratic Contradictions of Multiculturalism

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JENS-MARTIN ERIKSEN AND FREDERIK STJERNFELT, MAR 22 2012

### A historical imperative

Although multiculturalism has become a familiar concept in newspaper debates, political discussions, sociology, political science and other public and academic discourses, the term *multiculturalism* is often confusing and imprecise. It is frequently used to describe a condition, which already exists in Western Europe, the United States, and elsewhere, because of the actual presence of various cultural and religious groups and immigrants in these countries. Yet, there is little elaboration of how these diverse cultures coexist in reality. The concept of multiculturalism also has another meaning, which points toward a development in the not-too-distant future whose challenges we must be prepared to meet.

Multiculturalism is something in the making, which will be realized rather than something already existing in our societies. Both usages are *descriptive*. But neither offers a substantive description of social coexistence, its various experiences, nor even which cultures constitute the supposed multitude, nor how these should co-exist.

A third way to use the concept of multiculturalism is *normative*. Here the meaning does not point to an existing or a coming condition, but rather to a set of changes in politics and ways of thinking necessary in order to meet the challenge of various cultural groups living together according to rules and ideals that each envisions as morally right. Here the use of multiculturalism sets up a declaration of intent, but the ambiguity of the concept persists as it remains unclear precisely what set of political changes this normative use of the concept implies.

Whether multiculturalism is understood as a definition of an already existing condition, a coming development or a declaration of political intent, the concept implies a historically determined condition in which political decisions are already fixed. It presents itself as a historical imperative; that is, a concept we are morally compelled to seek, simply because it represents an inexorable tendency in human history that will be realized no matter what. Much like liberal democracy or human rights. To question the normativity of multiculturalism often meets much political resistance. Given such pressure, our only choice as citizens in gradually more mixed societies is claimed to be the embrace of multiculturalism and its often-unclear demands. But rather than blindly following such imperatives, we should seek out a better, more substantive understanding of multiculturalism, both in its descriptive and normative definitions.

### Soft and hard multiculturalism

In what we tentatively could call the individualist or the “soft” version of multiculturalism, it is perceived as a system where the individual can choose to live in whatever way she or he wishes. One can worship whatever God one wants to, or no God at all, one can live according to whatever cultural, sexual or gender preference one desires without discrimination from society. One can dress in whatever way one finds attractive or culturally right or individually expressive. In this meaning, the concept seems to define the rights and freedoms of the individual. This diversity of cultural expression might appear hurtful, provocative or insulting to some with different cultural and religious norms, but others will have to accept that. For in this individualist or “soft” meaning of the concept, multiculturalism is defined by the rights of individuals to express their cultural identities. Moreover, the realization of the diversity of cultures in society implies that all individuals can demand their rights and express themselves freely as long as the freedom of others is not restricted.

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There is also, however, another definition of multiculturalism contrary to the one which emphasizes individual human rights and freedom. In this version, a community may legally and socially enforce its own mores and traditions, whatever it holds sacred. In the most extreme form of this version of multiculturalism, the community may even mobilize its own police force and legal system in order to demand, to some extent or another, the conformity of individuals. This version of multiculturalism underlining collective rights we could define as the “hard” version.

The majority, at least in Western Europe, would perhaps not find many problems in the first, “soft” version of multiculturalism. But the second, the “hard” version, would appear a dubious project to many, despite the persistent fact that neither soft nor hard versions of the concept are employed with any kind of regular precision — particularly not when promoting “multicultural society” as an ideal. Multiculturalism is such a volatile concept, however, that it is crucial which version is promoted. Since most societies and academic institutions eschew both extreme “soft” and “hard” versions, the question arises whether a variant somewhere between the two extremes could function as a political ideal.

What initially looks like a semantic problem about ambiguity and precision related to the term is in fact a political problem. What variants of multiculturalism are compatible with Western political standards such as rule of law, liberal democracy, human rights? It is the hypothesis of our book, *The Democratic Contradictions of Multiculturalism*, that a proper understanding requires a plural perspective, arguing from both existing multiculturalism, from conceptual clarification, and from political discussion.

## Culturalism – left and right

Despite the fact that the question of culture was introduced into political vocabulary just after World War II, with the opposition to the universality of human rights by American anthropologists, there have not been many principled discussions dealing with the conflict between cultural dogmas and universal ideas about individual freedom. Nor have many studies examined the problems of real, existing multiculturalism, or the political complications of the concept that individuals are wholly determined by their culture. This is the point of view we describe as “culturalism,” according to which collective rights and community rights take precedence over individual rights.

Surprisingly, we find this culturalism represented both on the right and on the left of the political spectrum. On the left, it is propagated under the term of multiculturalism, much too often accepting any value, dogma, or rule as long as it can be justified with religion or culture. On the right, we find culturalism in the form of nationalism, a repressive ideology against anything that fails to conform to the national culture. This philosophical identity between the two forms of culturalism — right and left, conservative and liberal — is ignored in both academia and in the general public debate, most probably because they are political opponents. Our book points to the fact that, although the right and left are adversaries, they are nevertheless *homologous adversaries*. They remain generally uncritical defenders of territorial nationalism or cultural-religious particularism, respectively. Culturalism is the term that captures this common tendency; in both cases, culture becomes a political ideology.

In the West, multiculturalism is little more than a popular collective dream, a blurred vision. But in Malaysia, a society with different dynamics, multiculturalism is real. That is why we open up our examination with a journey to Malaysia, a country which has implemented a “hard” version of multiculturalism. What is it really? What does it specifically imply? What are the implications of a multicultural political concept and what kind of compromises must be made to accept the multicultural dream? The core elements are ‘legal pluralism’, which means different laws for different kinds of people with respect to their religious and ethnic background, different police corps to enforce different laws, and government-sponsored discrimination in relation to religious and ethnic background. This postcolonial country, with a new complexity of culture and ethnicity, represents a stage in the history of diversity at which the West has not yet arrived. That might be the best reason to listen to voices there and reflect over their anger, emotions and experience, of which we have but little so far.

## The anthropological concept of culture

The historical backgrounds of multiculturalism have much too rarely been charted. A major strand of the development

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of multiculturalism stems from the anthropological concept of culture and its dissemination as a political concept among Western middle classes, and, more specifically, in the United Nations. From there, it took root first of all in former British colonies like Canada, the USA, Australia, Malaysia, and later spread to European countries like the UK and Germany. The anthropological concept of culture is the root of culturalism. Early American anthropological doctrine claims that Man is a cultural being through and through, that the beliefs and behaviors of the individual are determined by the culture he or she belongs to, and that once “enculturated” it is impossible to adopt the position of cultures other than one’s own. In order to understand the intricacies of multiculturalism, it is important to appreciate that this theory of culture was originally conceived to be progressive. Early anthropology resolutely acted against racist assumptions in the social sciences, the idea that culturally specific features of different groups had a biological origin.

This is why culturalist theory is immediately coupled with a doctrine of anthropological incomparability: it is deemed impossible to pass judgment on the practices of other cultures, and their institutions, practices, and conceptions may differ in any conceivable manner. The upshot of such a culturalism, however, would seem to be the immediate incompatibility, enmity, hostility and war between cultures. This is why it is strange but understandable that anthropological culturalism hastens to add the conclusion that all cultures possess equal dignity and thus merit the same degree of tolerance and respect. The noble intention in this idea is clear: to break with earlier theories of evolutionary scale of different human races. Fair as it may seem, however, this culturalist doctrine entails some often overlooked dark sides. One corollary is that even the most cruel and anti-democratic practices must be accepted, once they acquire the noble status of being “cultural” rather than political. Thus, many of the tensions in actual multiculturalism originate in anthropological culturalism.

On the practical level, these contradictions give rise to an imminent tension between culturalism and democratic principles: if a “culture” favors beliefs and behaviors which clash with the rule of law, democracy and human rights, which should yield? This tension appeared in an important and prophetic clash in 1947 between the American anthropologists and the UN committee writing the UN Human Rights declaration, led by Eleanor Roosevelt. Already, the incompatibility between culturalism and individual rights had begun to appear.

Some theories of multiculturalism eventually end up willing to sell out important democratic principles in order to compromise with culturalism. A concrete example of such compromises can be seen in the famous case of the Danish cartoons of Muhammad. An analysis of the central drawing of Muhammad with a bomb in his turban points out that it is normal, in everyday international caricature, to portray the originator of a doctrine as a symbol of that doctrine. Thus, the famous Muhammad caricature addresses the doctrine of Islam rather than targeting Muslims as worshippers of the doctrine. In the same vein, equipping politicians or thinkers with bombs, grenades or other weapons to convey their violent intent is just as common a device in caricature drawing. Despite the normalcy of such drawings, many of the arguments against them (in Muslim countries as in the West) rest on a multiculturalist assumption that certain groups are entitled not to be offended, to have religious belief protected, to attack people taken to offend them, etc. The Cartoon Crisis thus offers a conspicuous example of the clash between basic, universal human rights claimed for all individuals, such as free speech, and the group rights claims of hard multiculturalism.

## Political Conclusion

Our empirical examples, seen in the light of our theoretical approach, open up to a number of political discussions. Malaysia, with its legal pluralism and government-sponsored discrimination, and the Cartoon Crisis exposing the general and unreflective acceptance of the anthropological concept of culture — these case studies are conceived within the framework of the historical and theoretical charting of multiculturalism and leads to a criticism of multicultural discourse. Islamophobia, Respect and Tolerance, Asian values, etc. may now be analyzed in a new and refreshing fashion. The bottom line of the investigation is the importance of embracing the basic principles of liberal democracy. To give in on issues like group rights, split legislation, legal pluralism, protection against defamation, differentiated rights according to gender, religion, ethnicity, culture, etc. is to give up on equal rights and liberties so basic for a dynamic democracy. Celebrating difference and group rights identities will inevitably lead us to place religious and ethnic authorities at a higher level than universal values. Against the inherent conservatism of all

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culturalisms, the basis of democracy is individual freedom granted by human rights.

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