

Hostages of Culturalism

Written by Milan Vukomanovic

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MILAN VUKOMANOVIC, JUN 10 2010

What is multiculturalism? Is it a concept that is often uncritically used in the contemporary 'civic' and academic discourse, whereby those who employ it rarely feel the need to define it? Is it the *state of affairs* in some countries, the fact that several cultures coexist there, or perhaps some *ideal* that is still to be reached, something that implies political and social changes in a society? Or, again, is this something *that had really existed* in the states based on an ideology of inter-ethnic tolerance or utopia of ethnic pluralism (the case of former Yugoslavia, especially Bosnia), but soon disappeared with the dissolution of those countries, their inability to achieve democracy and guarantee security to their own citizens as *individuals*, and not only as collective members of the 'sovereign', 'constitutive' nations? This is only one of the topics tackled by Jens-Martin Eriksen and Frederik Stjernfelt in the concluding chapters of *The Anatomy of Hatred: Travels to Bosnia and Serbia* (2004), but discussed in much more detail in their recent work *The Politics of Segregation Multiculturalism – Ideals and Reality* (2008), republished in English as *The Democratic Contradictions of Multiculturalism* (2012).*

In its 'soft' meaning multiculturalism is, according to these authors, quite compatible with the idea of democracy and liberal-democratic political culture. It concerns the freedom of an individual to choose culture, religion, worldview and identity that suits him/her, as long as that person does not represent an obstacle to freedom of others who also wish to affirm, or determine, themselves within their own individual rights, values, proclivities and norms. However, problems arise in the context of a „hard“ interpretation of multiculturalism seen as a system that advocates inviolability, and even sovereignty, of collective cultural rights. In other words, as Eriksen and Stjernfelt argue, this is a version of multiculturalism based on the holiness and immunity of different cultures as their collective rights. In the most extreme form of multiculturalism, collective authorities “discipline” members of their community, and impose law and order in the cases concerning the specific cultural and religious rules. In those cases cultural groups claim their rights to autonomous legislation, judiciary, police and other independent institutions. In Malaysia, a multicultural state inhabited by two thirds of ethnic Malays, 26% Chinese and 8% Indians, young Muslims, for example, are not allowed to publicly hold their hands, participate in games or drink alcohol. The local religious police carefully monitor all that, by patrolling parks, bars and restaurants, photographing, punishing and arresting culprits on the spot. Those measures, however, do not affect Indians and Chinese in this country, albeit these communities in Malaysia live in their own segregation ghettos, within the system of ethnic quotas. Inter marriages and conversions from Islam, a dominant religion in this state, are practically impossible. Ethnicizing and religionizing politics represent, therefore, great challenges for human rights in such countries, because the states put the rights of cultural communities in front of individual, human rights. Accordingly, moral values stem from the cultural, and not individual, autonomy.

Culturalism, a key concept that Eriksen and Stjernfelt assess from different angles in their *Politics of Segregation*, is employed, as an ideological construct, both on the political left and the political right. On the left, multiculturalism is uncritically accepted as any initiative that has legitimacy of a religion or culture. On the right, culturalism is most often vested in nationalism, with a necessary (and sufficient) legitimacy provided by a local culture, history, tradition. Danish authors note that the link between these two forms of culturalism is often overseen, mostly due to the fact that they are advocated by the political opponents. But the consequences of the blank support that both of them give to this idea are far-reaching: this is where the modern adherents of ethno-nationalism and religious fundamentalism feed themselves, albeit in two different ways.

According to Eriksen and Stjernfeltu, the theoretical bases of culturalism, as an ideology and doctrine, are to be

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sought in the works of anthropologists, cultural relativists of the 20th century. This could at least partly explain how the hard version of multiculturalism has prevailed among the left liberals, and not just among the rightists, who were traditionally more preoccupied with the notions of race and biological determination. Danish authors follow this theoretical thread in the modern social-cultural anthropology back from Franz Boas, via his students Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovits, all the way to Clifford Geertz and his *Anti anti-relativism* (1984). At least some of these anthropologists (primarily Benedict) create an ontological postulate and new ethics (the ethics of “hard” multiculturalism) from a methodological principle. An insight into cultural differences led these anthropologists to derive their postulate about impossibility of understanding one culture from the standpoint of the other. Furthermore, individuals are completely determined by their own cultures, “drifting” in them unwillingly like castaways. ‘The personality of the individual can develop only in terms of the culture of his society’, emphasized Melville Herskovits, member of the executive board of American Association of Anthropologists (AAA), an organization that protested against the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1947. One of his arguments was as follows: „Standards and values are relative to the culture from which they derive so that any attempt to formulate postulates that grow out of the beliefs or moral codes of one culture must to that extent detract from the applicability of any Declaration of Human Rights to mankind as a whole.” It is interesting that similar arguments are often heard today from both left and right, in their critique of human rights. What is also emphasized there is that the standards of western societies could not easily be applied to other, non-western cultures. But the idea that an individual fully belongs only to his/her own culture, namely that he/she is determined by it, is, according to the *Politics of Segregation*, a dream of every totalitarian state!

The liberal concept of multiculturalism, on the other hand, has to cope with the tensions between the cultural community rights and universal human rights. It rejects the rightist xenophobia and racism dressed in the critique of multiculturalism, being, at the same time, challenged by the scope of the collective rights of minorities to their own autonomous religion and culture. For it is not always clear what these rights really include: common prayers only, or bans on blood transfusion; ritual lunches or mutilation of women? For example, religious communities in Europe demand their special status and rights in relation to other institutions, invoking the principles of religious freedom as a heritage of the Enlightenment. But this freedom may involve two different things: freedoms and rights of *individuals* to belong to religions of their choice, as well as the rights of religious *organizations* to their special status. And this is where the powerful multicultural challenge of our time probably lies: it puts to the test the European policy in the domain of human rights and religion.

In one of their chapters, Eriksen and Stjernfelt discuss the controversy caused by the publication of 12 ‘portraits’ of the Prophet Muhammad (only some of them are satirical) in the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. They scrutinize this controversy and its international escalation in the context of the religious pressure on the freedom of expression, a serious political problem of the West in early 21st century. The publication of the drawings was first challenged as a violation of religious and cultural rights of a Danish minority, but during the internationalization of this case, various international actors caused one of the greatest pressures on the freedom of speech and expression in the most recent European history. Among these actors were: The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), various Muslim states, the Vatican, Russian Orthodox Church, Lutheran World Organization, World Council of Churches, European Council for Fatwa and Research, United Nations, Council of Europe, Al Qaeda, and, somewhat unexpectedly, English Prime Minister Tony Blair, whose 2006 attempt to criminalize critique of religion failed by only one vote in the country that had introduced freedom of expression in the 17th century. Under the influence of the OIC, calling upon western governments to limit the freedom of expression for the sake of protection of cultural and religious identity, the United Nations passed the resolution against the “defamation of religions”. Eriksen and Stjernfelt thus ironically remark: „But if, for instance, a decidedly political current like islamism succeeds in being subsumed under the ‘culture’ headline, it immediately becomes protected against attacks, and political criticism of islamism may be rejected out of hand as ‘islamophobia’ or ‘racism’, because it does not ‘respect’ a ‘culture’.” Therefore, the idolatry of cultural differences can have similar antidemocratic political consequences, on both the left and the right, in the cases of xenophilia (multiculturalism) or xenophobia (nationalism). In both cases a person is ‘arrested’, as it were, in his/her own culture, and that „prison“ is not easy to leave. “Culturalism strives for making individuals forget they have the autonomy of taking the step out of their culture – and instead subject this autonomy to ‘culture’, that is, to priesthoods, politicians spokesmen, traditions, authenticity, in all cases authorities which will deny the individual the basic freedom of mind which may only unfold in a free, public sphere.”

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Ethnic and cultural background of a person may thus suppress all other identities, so that the dialogue and communication between different ethnic and national cultures become almost impossible. And this is where coercion and violence may enter the stage, as the recent war in Bosnia painfully warns. What if three cultures on the same territory promote cultural dogmas which are mutually irreconcilable?

The provocative book cover of the *Politics of Segregation* displays a photograph of a kiss between a young Muslim woman and an Orthodox Jewish man. Is this the picture of multiculturalism that even in Western Europe lurks only as an ideal (and perhaps utopia?), i.e. something that awaits to be attained in the future?

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* Jens-Martin Eriksen, Frederik Stjernfelt, *Adskillenses politik: Multikulturalisme – ideologi og virkelighed (The Politics of Segregation: Multiculturalism – Ideals and Reality)*, Lindhardt og Ringhof Forlag A/S 2008, København. Also published in English as *The Democratic Contradictions of Multiculturalism* (New York: Telos Press, 2012), available at: http://www.telospress.com/main/index.php?main_page=news_article&article_id=513