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Authors

Leggewie, Claus
Cho-Polizzi, Jon

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Multiculturalism (Multiculturality)

By Claus Leggewie

Translated by Jon Cho-Polizzi

“Multiculturality” and more specifically “multiculturalism” are words that have not yet managed to receive recognition as serious academic concepts. They have too often been employed as terms of combat (as –isms) for the identity politics of minority and majority groups, and have too infrequently been found in the empirical data created by scholars of *Kulturwissenschaft*. Their value and meaning have been too deeply influenced by their normative and descriptive facets.

The term “multiculturalism” arose in the 1970s, when Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau promoted it as his official political doctrine for a nation of immigrants. Like Canada, other nations of immigrants are unable to identify one single hereditary group of origin (*qua descent*). Rather, as an inherently transnational “nation of nations”¹, they must rely more upon a social contract based on mutual consent to define their pluralistic nature.² Multiculturalism enjoyed a similar political value in Australia and at times in the United Kingdom, while a national identity based on an ideal of “colorblindness” took precedence in the United States and France. In these latter two countries, a concept of multiculturalism was never officially recognized, and the term took on a more polemic and pejorative association.

The backdrop for these political developments was a growing recognition of the consequences of consecutive generations of immigration introducing a continuous flow of new foreign nationals into civil society and adding to the preexisting cultural, ethnic and religious multiplicity. This development (often coming to a crisis only as the result of increasing ethnic and religious differences) was recognized long before the onset of modern mass migration as an ineluctable element of interculturality. Ethnology, cultural anthropology and sociology assume that humans (as active participants in their daily lives) always perceive reality as intercultural exchange—that is, that they are constantly confronted with the experience that the world is not culturally unambiguous “from the start,” but rather layered and crisscrossed with diverging systems of perception.³

Alfred Schütz concluded that, as a general rule, four basic assumptions are intrinsic to human experience: that things remain as they are; that we can rely upon the information provided us; that knowledge of only the most general type of experiences suffices; and finally, that there is a separate form of common knowledge that encompasses but is not defined by the three preceding assumptions.⁴ Like Hannah Arendt, Schütz viewed the position of the foreigner as defined by the fact that these four basic assumptions no longer retained their validity for him or her as “outsider”—

¹ Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America,” in *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916), 86–97.

² Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

³ As per the standard works of Georg Simmel, *Soziologie* (1908), particularly “Exkurs über den Fremden,” and Robert Ezra Park, “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment,” in *The Collected Papers of Robert Ezra Park*, vol. II, 13–51 (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1968).

⁴ Alfred Schütz, “Der Fremde,” in *Gesammelte Aufsätze. Studien zur soziologischen Theorie*, vol. 2, ed. Arvid Brodersen, 53–69 (Den Haag: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1972).

this was the existential pariah-experience of twentieth-century exiles and asylum seekers, and before them, of European Jews.

This formative “fringe condition” of the so-called intercultural experience of perpetual alienation is manifest in the intense, global stream of migrants and the transnationalizing of our immediate environments through telecommunication, tourism and advertisement. While it may have remained plausible during the age of the nation state to establish and demand distinct spaces of cultural identity—namely the State, itself, with its institutions that affirm national culture, such as language, education, literature and the military—and to banish or sideline the existence of a (very real) global community from the experiences of everyday life, this phenomenon is simply no longer possible in today’s world. Modern immigrant societies can neither postulate nor obligate a central cultural identity (or mainstream) any longer. Rather, they are defined by a “generalization of otherness.”⁵

In light of Schütz’s four basic cultural assumptions, this means that the existence of a common knowledge which would help in the routine management of interactions has become progressively more precarious for members of any given society. Instead, both participants and observers in daily situations are confronted with asymmetrical knowledge, that is, unequal distributions of knowledge and variable irritants are increasingly difficult to overcome.⁶ This leads to an expansion of those areas about which no practical foreknowledge exists due to (at least potentially) multiple, simultaneous dependencies and entanglements. More and more, one searches in vain for solutions to daily problems in an inventory of socially accepted knowledge, and finds contradictory formations in its place. In other words, it has become increasingly unclear to individuals what “their society” society actually is; “normal” life—be it grocery shopping in a supermarket, a financial transaction in a bank, or a modest excursion by train—proves appreciably more problematic by the day.⁷

Interculturality as a core experience of modernity demands far more from its subjects than mere tolerance: references to a common heritage (ethnicity) or a shared belief (religious community) as well as their elicitation of a collective identity (guiding culture) should serve to reduce both confusion and a sense of “foreign domination”. However, because interculturality can be associated with discrimination, multiculturalism has been promoted as an anti-assimilatory alternative. In both education and in sectors of the labor market, policies that affirm diversity and aim to subvert discrimination have been institutionalized in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, as well as to some degree in the United States (though highly contested in the educational system). These policies have been heavily criticized in the US, the Netherlands, and the Federal Republic of Germany, and the downsides of diversity have been emphasized in Germany, the paradigm of a “*Leitkultur*” was formulated as the antithesis of “*Multikulti*”.⁸ The violent collapse of “multicultural” Yugoslavia, characterized by bouts of ethnic cleansing, served for many as proof of the

⁵ Also Alois Hahn, “Die soziale Konstruktion des Fremden,” in *Die Objektivität der Ordnungen und ihre kommunikative Konstruktion*, ed. Walter Sprondel, 140–163 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 162.

⁶ Susanne Günthner and Thomas Luckmann, “Wissensasymmetrien in interkultureller Kommunikation,” in *Kultur(en) im Gespräch*, ed. Helga Kotthoff, 213–243 (Tübingen: Narr, 2002).

⁷ Claus Leggewie and Darius Zifonun, “Was heißt Interkulturalität?,” in *Pragmatismus als Kulturpolitik: Beiträge zum Werk von Richard Rorty*, ed. Alexander Gröschner and Mike Sandbothe, 220–248 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011).

⁸ For the history of the term, see Claus Leggewie, *Multikulti. Spielregeln für die Vielvölkerrepublik* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 2011); Sabine Stemmler, ed., *Multikulti 2.0. Willkommen im Einwanderungsland Deutschland* (Göttingen 2011).

impracticality of multiculturalism. Talk of a “guiding European culture” underestimates the European Union’s potential to be an exemplary model of a supranational political body *without* a concrete, cultural center. Similar to the situation in the United States, the acquisition of a burgundy-red EU-passport signifies a person’s origin far less than his or her legal permanent residency, and “Europe”, unlike the US, is a community made up of multiple nations in which (local, national) attributes of origin with different standards of social certitudes (access to social rights and services) and residency (Schengen and non-Schengen) overlap.

The work of the Canadian philosophers Charles Taylor (“politics of recognition”)⁹ and Will Kymlicka (“group rights”)¹⁰, as well as that of postcolonial studies (e.g., Parekh’s “inclusive liberalism”) arose in parallel to these developments and controversies. Crucial to the development of social theory, they underline the point that even the umbrella term “culture” cannot be associated with an essentialist understanding of commonality or nation. At its core, culture is interactional and constructivist, a sphere of symbols and practices in which (not only, but also) ethnic and religious differences must be permanently negotiated. This conception of culture has developed in contrast to many influential positions, such as that of Samuel P. Huntington who has long advocated a more conflict-oriented “clash of civilizations”, expanded in his US treatise, *Who Are We?*

Nevertheless, the flaws of multiculturalism have also become increasingly apparent. From the perspective of universal human rights—whose Western origins should not be dismissed, but rather rescinded—cosmopolitanism represents a more goal-oriented solution for global human problems than pulling minorities and ethnic nationals back into the framework of static group identities and exclusive “parallel societies”. Focus has fallen on the “internal minorities” within communities, the outsiders and dissenters who often experience the same discrimination and paternalism from representatives of minority groups who have achieved some level of assimilation into the majority culture.

In this way, the emphasis is also transposed (inevitably in liberal communities) from collective identities to individual rights and demands. The units of measurement for multicultural societies remain the autonomy of each individual, his or her personal freedom to be able to live differently in *every* constellation, as well as a perspective of human progress in which similarity and difference coexist for all.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).