



Whose 'Identity'? Multiculturalism vs. Integration in Europe

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Abstract

This article examines the question of migration from the perspective of long-term integration. In recent decades, the latter has often yielded to multicultural policies shaped on the recognition of groups and their alleged identities and demands. Through a case study of blasphemy against Islam, this article argues that multiculturalism has three main flaws: first, it shrinks the complexity of identities in order to assign individuals to pre-made boxes, thereby essentialising communities; second, it fosters social conflicts by opposing different groups and their supposed demands; and third, it creates a discriminatory system, contrary to the principles of equality and dignity. To avoid the ruination of the European dream of openness and diversity, it is necessary to return to an individualistic view of integration based on freedom, equality and universal citizenship.

Keywords

Migration, Integration, Multiculturalism, Identity politics, Islam

Introduction

This article examines the question of migration from the perspective of long-term integration. While policy discussions tend to focus on the recent refugee crisis, the socio-political problems related to migration have much deeper and older roots and are the consequence of integration policies that have not worked as expected, creating tensions and a deficit of societal cohesion. Certainly, processing disembarkation and asylum requests and providing hospitality for an unexpected number of migrants are issues that create acute hurdles in the short term, and therefore have a considerable political impact. However, in the long term, the most important challenge is ensuring Europe's capacity to

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remain open and welcoming without breaking apart or compromising on its values of equality and individual freedoms.

In the first section I examine identity politics and multiculturalism, claiming that they have created artificial group identities which disregard individuals and their complexity. In the second section I use the example of blasphemy against Islam to show how the essentialisation of Muslims has empowered extremists, to the detriment of liberal voices and societal cohesion. Finally, I argue that this attitude is unfair not only vis-à-vis the rest of society, but also towards Muslims themselves, who are seen as unfit to play by the rules of a liberal democracy. A reversal from identity politics to universal equality, in rights and duties, is most definitely needed to avoid our societies breaking apart.

Integration, identity, multiculturalism

‘Integration’ is a polysemous term which does not enjoy a commonly agreed definition. When considered in its socio-cultural dimension, the concept of integration challenges a society to realise what it expects from newcomers—that is, those features it considers existential, so that their absence would subvert its very nature. This requires a process of deep introspection, which parallels the newcomers’ self-awareness of what defines their own being and how this could fit into the host society. Hence, integration is necessarily intertwined with the notion of ‘identity’, both of the newcomers and of the receiving society (Parekh 2008, 4).

Identity, in itself, is a multifaceted concept, constituted of multiple layers, both individual and collective: biological, social, geographical, cultural, political, religious and so on. While certain aspects may coexist easily, others may be more problematic and create inner or external tensions. For instance, whereas being a socialist gentile is quite unremarkable, being a neo-Nazi Jew clearly involves more of a conflict; whereas atheism and heterosexuality comprise an uneventful coupling, religious belonging and homosexuality may trigger tensions inside the person and within her community; whereas being a biological male identifying as such is unproblematic, this is not the case for a biological male identifying as a female; and so on. These are simple, binary examples, but reality obviously becomes more tortuous the more we add identity elements and start digging into each of them. Another element of complexity concerns the *perception* of identities: there might be a clash between how individuals perceive themselves and how society appraises them. In other words, a certain identity aspect may be cherry-picked and imposed upon a person as her dominant feature, regardless of her will or self-identification (Manea 2015, 15).

In the context of integration, both scholars and policymakers have often simplified this complexity by ‘explicitly or implicitly recognising people primarily as members of groups’ (Novotny 2015). This has come to shape the ‘politics of identity’—a socio-political idea whereby it is not enough to implement formal equality between individuals but it is also necessary to give public recognition to marginalised group identities and their demands (Parekh 2008, 31). Identity politics is therefore strongly linked to political

multiculturalism—a concept which does not denote the values of pluralism, but more dogmatically a ‘set of policies, the aim of which is to manage and institutionalize diversity by putting people into ethnic and cultural boxes, defining individual needs and rights by virtue of the boxes into which people are put, and using those boxes to shape public policy’ (Malik 2012a). In practice, this has led to the pillarisation of society, namely the formation of semi-autonomous communities, constituted upon geographical, ethnic or religious commonalities, living to a large extent according to their cultural traditions and without significant intergroup exchanges (Novotny 2015; Manea 2017).

Facing the radical disconnection between certain immigrant communities and their host society, which has occasionally produced episodes of violence and the concomitant disquietude of the native majorities, many political leaders have come to acknowledge the practical failure of multicultural policies in integrating newcomers (Murray 2017, 96). However, a thorough reflection on the deeper theoretical reasons behind this fiasco has yet to happen. Multiculturalism has not only failed as a process by allowing the existence of separate, non-communicating clusters of society; rather, it was doomed from its very foundation for the hubris of encapsulating the complexity of identities in rough-hewn boxes, pre-made according to the dominant taste of the epoch. First came race, then nationality, then religion. In this process, migrants’ identities are essentialised to fit the political needs of simple categorisations (‘brown’, ‘Pakistani’, ‘Muslim’ etc.), and even *reconstructed* according to the dominant narrative within the group, or to the clichés attached thereto (‘Muslims believe’, ‘Muslims feel’, ‘Muslims demand’ etc.) (Manea 2015, 9). From this perspective, multiculturalist policies, nurtured by short-sighted identity politics, have actually *created* the communities they claimed to recognise, with a corollary of demands that were not originally part of the minorities’ struggle for equality (Malik 2016). This has happened because multiculturalists tend to speak of groups almost metaphysically, in terms of autonomous agents ‘as real as individuals’ (Triandafyllidou 2015, 220), rather than sticking to the banal reality of a conglomeration of human beings sharing certain characteristics, traditions, views and goals—while at the same time differing, even deeply, on others.

Blasphemy as a case study of the essentialism of the ‘Muslim identity’

My claim is that identity politics and multiculturalism have posed formidable obstacles to the integration of migrants in Western European societies, and I am going to utilise the relevant example of blasphemy against Islam to illustrate my point.

A notion by no means alien to the religious cultural and legal tradition of Europe, blasphemy has gained new momentum in connection with episodes of violence and terrorism stirred by alleged defamations of Islam. The most renowned cases are the fatwa issued by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini against British–Indian novelist Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* in 1989, the assassination of the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in 2004, the fury against the cartoons portraying the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and the terrorist attack which massacred

the editorial board of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 for the same reason. As I write, a new case has broken out in France, where 16-year-old Mila Orriols has been forced into hiding in her own country over death and rape threats because of social-media videos where she insults Islam (Battaglia and Herzog 2020).

Certain analyses of these cases embody the essentialism of Muslims at its best (or worst). For instance, speaking of the *Jyllands-Posten* affair, Tariq Modood—a scholar championing multiculturalism—argued that ‘the cartoons are not just about an individual but about *Muslims per se*’ (Modood 2006, 4, emphasis added). Similar arguments had been already advanced in connection with the Salman Rushdie case: ‘The Muslim claim is that their identity is, and should be, formed in terms of their religious community; this connection is not contingent but essential. And because the religious community is necessary for social identity, the state and law have an obligation to protect it’ (Slaughter 1993, 185).

Space constraints prevent me from addressing the numerous flaws in this reasoning. Therefore, I will limit my rebuttal to the identity aspect: does such a thing as ‘Muslims per se’ really exist? Who are these prototype Muslims whose ‘claims’ are so unmistakably assumed? Whose is, in one word, the ‘identity’ under consideration: that of Islamist or secularist Muslims? Orthodox or Sufi? Afghan or Azerbaijani? Yusuf al-Qaradawi or Mustafa Kemal Atatürk?

While I am denying neither the existence of cultures as systems of collective heritage nor the differences between various sensitivities and traditions on this and other topics, the claim to speak on behalf of ‘Muslims’ represents an artificial operation of essentialisation which denies the complexity of identities described above. The underlying assumption is that ‘Muslims are homogenous and identify themselves first and solely as religious persons. Islamists make a similar argument’ (Manea 2016, 7). Islamists worldwide have indeed exploited this narrative as a political weapon, and many non-Muslim intellectuals and politicians have supinely embraced it. It basically consists of attributing an ontological essence to the ‘Muslims’ who are viewed as a monolithic entity, in line with what I have above called the metaphysical reification of ‘groups’. Any other characteristic of the ‘Muslim’ individual is thus erased: ‘[r]ather than being Pakistanis, Indians, Saudi Arabians, Britons, Germans, Londoners, Berliners, Europeans, cosmopolitans, gays, atheists, workers, or anything else, the foundation of their identity can only be Islam’ (Hansen 2006, 13). What is worse, Western leftists and liberals have often regarded radicalism as a manifestation of ‘authenticity’, thereby empowering Islamists as true representatives of Muslim communities in Europe, in lieu of ‘Westernised’ Muslim liberals. The ethnocentric right, on the other hand, does the same in looking at Muslims as a monolithic entity that threatens the Western civilisation (Malik 2012b). Whether coming from Islamists, from leftists or from far rightists, essentialism is a self-fulfilling prophecy, for it contributes to shaping both the perception and self-perception of Muslims around certain narratives—typically the loudest and most extreme. Another aspect not to be underestimated is that foreign countries sometimes exploit group allegiances to advance their national interests abroad (Murray 2017, 155). These dynamics

advantage Islamists while being detrimental to liberal Muslims, who have an existential interest in reasserting the individual nature of identities: ‘There is no more such thing as a typical Muslim; we have all become atypical Muslims’ (Bidar 2007, 59). Ludovic Mohamed Zahed has put the point as follows: ‘Could you imagine that anybody could talk in the name of Islam? This is something which frightens me much more than the cartoons . . . Islam does not exist per se: *we* are the Muslims’ (BBC 2012).

But there is more. Let us assume for a moment that certain Muslim groups speak for the majority of European Muslims on certain stances, thereby effectively representing a prevalent collective identity: what about the minorities, who are perhaps not so disdainful of the liberal systems that in some cases they reached for the very purpose of escaping theocratic¹ regimes? Consider heretic Muslims; ex-Muslims; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Muslims; and so on: which group should represent their identity and related claims?

Let us even take this reasoning to the extremes, under the fictional hypothesis that *all* Muslims in Europe are unanimous on a certain topic—for instance, the prohibition of desecrating the Prophet: why should this affect other groups? In other words, why should a secular, liberal democratic state compromise on its core principles to accommodate the demands of a specific group? A possible answer, which could be read either as a pragmatic or a moral stance, is that ‘Europe has to choose which is more important, the right to ridicule Muslims or the integration of Muslims’ (Modood 2006, 6). This argument calls into question the legitimacy and appropriateness of the positive discrimination of certain groups for the purposes of integration; the quite evident implication seems to be that Muslims have every right not to integrate if their demands are not met, confirming that “multiculturalism” has been misinterpreted as meaning a justified refusal to integrate’ (Redgrave et al. 2019, 3). This is what Hansen calls ‘Muslim exceptionalism’—which is not acceptable as it creates an area of privilege for certain groups, whose beliefs are to be respected but also ‘to be accommodated within the norms and principles that underpin the liberal constitutional state’ (Hansen 2006, 8).

The reason for refusing group-based preference is not only ethical but also practical: a liberal democratic society is a melting pot of different beliefs, convictions, tenets and ways of life, whose only way of coexisting is mutual tolerance under a common roof of ‘colour-blind’ laws. Anything different would constitute discrimination against less vocal groups, or give rise to a spider’s web of censorial regulations to appease everyone, or result in pure anarchy. In the words of the Muslim human rights activist Raquel Evita Saraswati, commenting on cartoons of Muhammad, ‘the real insult is not to Muslims: the real insult is to pluralism and our potential to coexist’ (BBC 2012).

This is the very nature of a liberal democracy: the same values that protect one’s rights to practice one’s religion also require one to tolerate others’ views:

It is not Europe that has to choose; it is rather those who wish to restrict free speech, whether they be Muslim or non-Muslim, citizens or non-citizens, recent immigrants or long-standing

permanent residents. They have to decide whether they wish to live in a liberal democratic society. If they do, they have to accept that they will hear and see things that offend them, sometimes deeply. . . . It is part of the liberal democratic framework, not a negotiable addition to it. (Hansen 2006, 16)

In a liberal democracy everything can be an object of negotiation and discussion except the liberal democratic framework itself. This implies that no one can rightfully invoke their ideological or religious tenets to challenge the liberty of others. After all, we still allow shops in Jewish neighbourhoods to open on Saturdays, gay parades to pass by the Vatican, and butchers to ‘turn sacred cows into hamburger’ (Pipes 2013). Virtue does not always stand in the middle.

Equality, in rights and duties, is in everybody’s interest

In the previous paragraph I argued that integration cannot pass through a multi-speed process that depends on the level of tolerance and specific demands of presumed communities, as this would inflict a fatal blow on pluralism and coexistence. Now I wish to expand on this reasoning, showing that it is in the interests of minorities themselves to live in a system based on the principle of universal equality.

First, there is an evident connection between identity politics on the one hand, and populism, nationalism and white supremacy on the other. Such a link comes from the delusion of an ‘asymmetrical multiculturalism’ that encourages ‘minority groups to celebrate a politicized version of their identity’, whilst ‘white majorities are compelled to be cosmopolitan, urged to supersede their ascribed identity’ (Kaufmann 2019). This is clearly untenable: the fragmentation of society into groups of interests based on a certain identity not only cannot exclude the formation of a ‘white’ group of interest, but actually encourages it (Sunder Katwala, quoted by Redgrave et al. 2019, 17). Hence, while until a few years ago identity politics was a weapon of minorities, it is now also embraced by majorities who are anxious to defend their group interests against what they see as anti-theoretical group interests (Krastev 2018).

If only for this practical reason, I deem it in the very interest of minorities to stick firmly to the principle of universal citizenship. However, there is also an ethical argument which strongly links equality—in rights and responsibilities—with equal respect. Universal citizenship means looking into another’s eyes and recognising him or her as our equal. This moral absolute is the only possible cornerstone of social justice in the interpersonal relations across different groups and within each of them. Multiculturalism, instead, has subverted the idea of equality: ‘[e]quality now meant not possessing the same rights as everyone else, despite differences of race, ethnicity, culture or faith, but possessing different rights, because of them’ (Malik 2012a). Yet, this is a mere simulacrum of respect—the same condescension an indulgent adult would sport before a child’s tantrums—which reinforces the ‘patronizing, racist stereotype that Muslims are barbaric and inferior to Westerners, . . . or that Islam is monolithic and that repression is the Muslim norm’ (Arzt 1996, 364). In this regard, I argue that it is absolutely misleading to

speak about the radical alternatives of bending to the Islamist ethos or forgetting about the integration of Muslims. The very opposite is true, as Flemming Rose, the editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, has stressed:

Equal treatment is the democratic way to overcome traditional barriers of blood and soil for newcomers. . . . Those images in no way exceeded the bounds of taste, satire and humor to which I would subject any other Dane, whether the queen, the head of the church or the prime minister. By treating a Muslim figure the same way that I would a Christian or Jewish icon, I was sending an important message: You are not strangers, you are here to stay, and we accept you as an integrated part of our life. . . . It was an act of inclusion, not exclusion; an act of respect and recognition. (cited in Foster 2009, 28)

Here Rose raises many fundamental questions—shared also by Muslim intellectuals (Colombo 2007)—which have in common a high respect for the equality of all individuals in dignity and rights. Positive discrimination towards Muslims is not only discriminatory against other groups, but is also equally unfair vis-à-vis Muslims themselves. In fact, by using a different yardstick for Muslims, they would be confined to a sort of ‘Indian reservation’ and considered impaired, unfit for the mature game of liberal democracy. The ‘patronizing, racist stereotype that Muslims are barbaric’ would be thus perpetuated. This would be the real discrimination, insult and humiliation against them.

Conclusion

Facing unprecedented challenges of societal cohesion both within its own societies and vis-à-vis newcomers, Europe does indeed have to choose. It has to choose whether it wants to build a community of equals, in rights and duties, or whether it prefers to bend its knee to the politics of identity. In the latter case, the struggle between the strongest identitarian groups will inevitably continue to sharpen, and only the balance of power (and, increasingly, of brute force) between and within them will decide the ultimate winner. In this scenario, none of the possible outcomes is going to be pleasant for the ‘European dream’ of an open and tolerant democracy.

To avoid this, European authorities and policymakers should repeal once and for all the failed multicultural policies, and invest conspicuously in a new universalist model. Concerning newcomers, this implies making socio-cultural integration courses compulsory, with the aim of clarifying the rationale behind the laws and values protecting everyone’s freedom and equality and the fact that these are not open for negotiation under cultural pretexts. As regards the wider society, no group preference or exemption should be allowed, whether by legislators, judges, municipalities, police or other authorities. Finally, those intellectuals and activists so anxious to embrace any sort of demand, as long as it comes from a ‘minority’, would do better to recall that the smallest minority on earth is the individual, whose vibrant polychromy no group can reproduce.

Note

1. I follow Bernard Lewis in using the term in the wider sense of ‘religious domination’, rather than in the stricter one of ‘clerical government’.

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