Multiculturalism in Twenty-First Century Britain
Le Multiculturalisme au XXIe Siècle en Grande-Bretagne

Abstract

In 2012, the opening ceremony of the London Olympic Games projected an image of a New Britain: multicultural, liberal, and a well-meaning country. Astonishingly, after the Brexit referendum of 2016, it seemed as a system of multicultural values about what Britain was like had been overturned. Hence, this article examines the notion of multiculturalism in relation to other concepts such as immigration, Britishness, terrorism, and Brexit. Further, the article attempts to explore whether multiculturalism is a divisive factor that leads to disunity through promoting cultural differences or it is a driving force for unity that leads to more integration of ethnic minorities and a fairer British society.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, immigration, Britishness, terrorism, Brexit.

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Résumé

En 2012, la cérémonie d'ouverture des Jeux olympiques de Londres a projeté l'image d'une Nouvelle-Bretagne : pays multiculturel, libéral, et cohérent. Etonnamment, après le referendum sur le Brexit de 2016, ce qui semblait être un système de valeurs multiculturelles incarnant l'image de la Grande-Bretagne a été définitivement défait. Ainsi, cet article examine-t-il la notion de multiculturalisme par apport à d'autres concepts tels que l'immigration, l'identité Britannique, le terrorisme, et le Brexit. En outre, l'article tente de déterminer su le multiculturalisme est un facteur de division qui conduit à la désunion par la promotion des différences culturelles ou s'il est un moteur de l'unité menant à plus d'intégration des minorités ethniques et à une société Britannique plus juste.

Mots Clés : multiculturalisme, immigration, l'identité Britannique, terrorisme, Brexit.

ملخص

أعطى حفل افتتاح الألعاب الأولمبية بلندن عام 2012 صورة واضحة عن بريطانيا الجديدة كمجتمع متعدد الثقافات، وليبرالي، ومتجانس. غير أنه وبعد استفتاء بريكست عام 2016، بدا وكأن نظاما يمتاز بالتنوع الثقافي ويجسد صورة بريطانيا قد تمت زالته تماما. لذلك، يعنى هذا المقال بدراسة فكرة التنوع الثقافي ببريطانيا وما يتصل بها من أفكار أخرى تؤثر فيها مثل الهجرة، والهوية البريطانية، والإرهاب، وبريكست. كما يسعى المقال إلى معرفة ما إذا كان التنوع الثقافي في بريطانيا عامل تفرقة يؤدي إلى تحلل النسيج الإجتماعي عن طريق تشجيع الفوارق الثقافية أم أنه قوة اتحاد تؤدي الى شعور الأقليات الثقافية بانتمائها لمجتمع بريطاني أكثر اتساقا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التنوع الثقافي، الهجرة، الهوية البريطانية، الإرهاب، وبريكست.

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Introduction

Like any other nation, Britain has some features that constitute its identity such as a homeland, history, language, traditions, and its political and legal institutions. At the same time, this country has been a culturally diverse society for decades. However, 9/11 attacks in the United States had their catastrophic impact on the fabric of the British nation. Fear of cultural difference emerged, and the feeling that the state should remain neutral between the cultural and ethnic groups and not favor any of them has been disturbed. Additionally, the sense of Britishness, as many white Britons would claim, is disturbed by internationalism, supra-national institutions like the European Union, ethnic minorities, and even modern concepts such as the so-called multiculturalism. This article, hence, attempts to answer two crucial questions: what are the reasons behind the conceptual rivalry to the notion of multiculturalism? And does this notion help foster a better society or lead to cultural division and disunity? The article addresses multiculturalism and places it in historical context. Additionally, through identifying the relationship between multiculturalism and other concepts, the article explores whether multiculturalism in Britain is truly in retreat or not.

1. Multiculturalism as a Disputed Term

Britain is a multiethnic society. It is a far more diverse nation that it was in the years immediately following the Second World War. The concept of multiculturalism in Britain originates in the group of post-war migrants who travelled to Britain as citizens of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. The 1948 British Nationality Act had granted freedom of movement to people living in British Commonwealth territories.[1] Together with subsequent British-born generations, they have been recognized as ethnic and racial minorities who merit state support in order to overcome barriers in their exercise of citizenship.

Key thinkers of multiculturalism such as Will Kymlicka, Bhikhu Parekh, and Charles Taylor agree that the notion describes a situation where many cultural communities live in one country free from any obligation to forgo their cultures of origin.[2] All these thinkers emphasize the full acceptance, even celebration, of cultural differences founded on the belief that mutual tolerance will grow and that there are no absolute values.[3] However, it is crucial to mention that multiculturalism is not only about the acceptance of difference, it is also about integrating different identities into the collective national identity of being British. What is important, after all, is complete adherence to the idea of Britishness no matter what the ethnic or the cultural background is, as politician Tony Blair stated:

> Let's build a new and young country that can lay aside the old prejudices that dominated [Britain] for a generation. A nation for all the people, built by the people, where old divisions are cast out. A new spirit in the nation based on working together, unity, solidarity, partnership. One Britain. That is the patriotism of the future. [4]

In his speech, politician Tony Blair emphasized that the need to recognize difference does not outweigh the importance of adherence to a British national identity. Nor does national identity itself eradicate cultural differences among the British citizens. More interestingly, multiculturalism contributes positively to the cultural vitality of Great Britain.

However, the notion that cultural differences between ethnic groups should be tolerated or even celebrated has come under an unceasing debate since the beginning of the 21st century. On 5 February 2011, British PM David Cameron denounced multiculturalism's damage to social cohesion, arguing that it "has encouraged culturally different people to live apart from one another and apart from the mainstream."[5] Cameron added at the Munich security conference in 2011 that "[Britain has] even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to [British] values."[6] Stated differently, Cameron suggested that the notion of multiculturalism resulted in a fragmented society in which some groups act in an undesirable way that did not go along with the British values. Yet, probably Cameron had political motives in rejecting multiculturalism such as holding the notion

responsible for segregation, fragmentation, and even terrorism. Or he might have a mythical version of the notion that is shattered by the harsh reality of British society.

Surprisingly, Cameron's deputy, Nick Clegg, had a different view. In March 2011, he argued that the term of multiculturalism was very contested and that the topic was still sensitive. Clegg notably praised multiculturalism as a "process by which people respect and communicate with each other, rather than build walls between each other. Welcoming diversity but resisting division."[7] According to Clegg then, it is the understanding of the notion of multiculturalism which is really problematic. The notion itself does not bring any contradiction to the core of British values as Britain has been a multicultural society for decades.

2.   Multiculturalism and the Migrant Crisis

The UK population grew due to immigration as free movement was the biggest advantage for many citizens of Europe. The Maastricht Treaty of December 1991, [8] and the completion of a single internal market for the European Union in January 1993, [9] had broad implications for the member states, not least the United Kingdom. Hence, immigration had been a constant of British life. What was new was the scale and variety. In May 2004, the European Union was again expanded by admitting ten new members: Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Malta, Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. [10] The arrival of workers from the ten countries was a different issue, and the immediate impact of open borders appeared significant. Hundreds of thousands applied to work in Britain. Even the economic growth of the early 2000s was fueled by the influx of talented people from the admitted European countries. According to *BBC News*, around three million citizens of other European countries were living in the UK by 2016. [11]

Eastern European migration to Britain was of course alongside continued heavy migration from other parts of the world. One result of the wars of the West in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria was the migration of many asylum-seekers to Britain. British cities now harbor large populations of non-white immigrants. It is the migrant crisis. Frank Ellis thinks that the reasonable assumption is that these migrants also believe that Britain has something to offer them that is vastly superior to the desperate situation within their own countries.[12] Trevor Philips declared Britain as "the best place in Europe to live if you [were] not white."[13] However, many immigrants refuse to or are unable to adapt to the British values and traditions. Therefore, lurid debate about immigration and multiculturalism is raised frequently in Britain.

Those who speak against the large scale of immigration, such as the UK Independence Party, are accused of mere racism. However, they insist they are not racist, and they call for the adaptation of a strict immigration policy. [14] Additionally, they have a number of solid reasons that illustrate why the influence of multiculturalism on Britain is disastrous and something to be firmly resisted. First, they base their legitimacy on claims of common ancestry. Immigrants, though part of the social fabric, have nothing that may connect them to Great Britain, and they have a long way to walk in order to arrive to a comparable level of acceptance. Second, immigration has profound consequences for a small densely populated island like the UK. Allowing the huge numbers of non-white immigrants to enter the white nation of Great Britain will, in the long term, change the racial composition irreversibly in favor of non-whites. [15] The economic reason against immigrants focuses on the scarcity of job opportunities that have become thin on the ground. Anti-multiculturalists believe that real wage rates have been suppressed by immigrants who seek to undercut and underwork their British rivals. The Migration Observatory presented data that claimed that about half of the new jobs in Britain were going to immigrants, and immigrants were "more likely to be employed than the UK born (83% vs 79% in 2018). [16] Consequently, the British want their jobs back.

Political rivals of the UK Independence party, like the Labor party, are concerned with multiculturalist values. They argue that it is the British government that encouraged immigrants to travel and settle down in Britain after WWII. They filled the void and did dirty and undesirable work. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the British

government to help improve the communities that have inherited that unprivileged status.[17] In 2012, the Olympic Games that Britain hosted turned out to be a huge success. There was an extraordinary triumph of the British athletes. Britain came fourth in the global league table, behind only the United States, China, and Russia, winning twenty-nine gold medals.[18] British success seemed to confirm the multiculturalist tone of New Britain: Mo Farah, of Somalian origin, was the biggest British star. Jessica Ennis, of Jamaican origin, was also a star.[19] These are examples of the benefits and successes of immigration and multiculturalism.

Nonetheless, the perennial problem of multiculturalism is that the attempt to create unity and diversity through the isolation of ancient British values and establishing core values shared by all communities is a highly problematic issue. It is practically impossible for different communities to feel like a united group. Racial and ethnic discrimination remains a stubborn fact of New Britain. Violence and even murder against ethnic minorities occur with depressing frequency. In June 2019, 17-year-old student Daniel Ezzedine was assaulted and beaten half to death by a gang of youths in Canterbury in what local people believed to be a racist attack.[20] Though a multicultural and anti-racist strategy might attempt to promote respect for cultural diversity, there is no practical solution to how to stop the ongoing scourge of racial attacks. Multiculturalism's main enemy in Britain is loyalty and commitment to communities and cultures that are hostile to others.

3. Multiculturalism as a Threat to Britishness

Cultural pessimists fear that the concept of Britishness is weakened by the wave of mass immigration. It is true that the majority culture- Anglophone, broadly liberal, Christian in ethos remains strong; however, other cultures are threatening and subverting it. For the indigenous whites of Britain as a whole, a great deal is at stake because the large scale of immigration is deconstructing the British identity and reconstructing it along multicultural lines. The struggle, thus, in Britain is between Britishness and multiculturalism. To subjugate or to weaken a nation, it is necessary to destroy a nation's sense of history, or at least dilute it. Many of the migrants look similar to the white British, but share no linguistic or imperial history. Britons do have a sense of how their country is being changed by multiculturalism and by the arrival of immigrants from parts of the world that have little or no affiliation to the British empire.[21] Practically, immigrants changed the sights of urban Britain. The veiled women from the Muslim world have become common sights. Polish tradesmen are followed by sights stocking up with Polish food. Britain has found itself a 'world island' in a new way.

For the multiculturalists in the UK, culture and identity must be perceived as minor differences. Loyalty to the country must be privileged above all other racial and religious identifications. Derek McGhee points that the indigenous white population should be convinced into believing that identities can be remade and reinvented, and that they are endlessly malleable.[22] Logically, this view recognizes no one culture as superior to another. Yet, white Britons are proud of their identities, and they have a strong sense of their own history. Now, they claim that they no longer feel their unique identity, and that they lost their sense of community. They further claim that there is a covert war being waged against their history, language, culture, and traditions.[23] Multiculturalism, according to them, destroys that very sense of belonging. As a matter of fact, modern Britain is a society characterized by ongoing debates about identity, and it is not so easy to come to terms with its own diversity.

There are some reasons that have shaped the perception of the ethnic minorities and immigrants as non-British. They are accused of not being interested in the idea of Britishness, and they only want to make money to support their families. It is all about money. Further, as the capital London boasts more than 350 different separate language groups, English is rarely spoken or heard. According to an article published in *The Telegraph* by Graeme Paton, English is no longer the first language of half the primary school children in London. Hence, anti-immigration groups fear that the immigrants' culture might overwhelm the national culture.[24] The British governments have often tried to protect the minorities from what they regarded as racist attitudes, yet the

protection of these minorities might itself hinder free expression. Simultaneously, there are debates regarding the rights of such minorities to their own free expression. In practice, resistance to multiculturalism in the UK is widespread among the white Britons. For instance, the English Democrats and the English Defence League explicitly trade on anti-minority platform.[25] In turn, the response of ethnic and religious minority groups to white intolerance is to affirm and find support in their own communities, cultural traditions, and social identities.

The recognition of the rights of minorities or a respect for racial difference is an obligation in a democratic society, but there are also areas of more problematic conflict where the recognition of minority rights and identities and the demand of exemptions from national laws clash with a broader liberal society or with animal rights or women's freedom. For example, one especially disputed issue concerns Islamic dress. It has been deemed that, as the Immigration Minister Damian Greene put it in 2010: "telling people what they can and can't wear, if they're just walking down the street, is a rather un-British thing to do."[26] Yet, those supporting the ban of the burka believe that this Islamic female dress runs contrary to the conventions of a British liberal society.

4. Multiculturalism and Terrorism

Anti-multiculturalists fear that Europe, which has been historically a Christian continent, is invaded by Muslims. On July 7, 2005, four young Muslim men from West Yorkshire murdered 52 people and injured 770 more by blowing themselves up on London underground trains and one London bus. Suicide bombing had arrived in Britain, and the bombers were home-grown British citizens. They were part of Al-Qaeda, yet part of their motivation was British foreign policy in Iraq and Afghanistan. In August 2005, the French scholar of Islamism Gilles Kepel observed that the London bombers "were the children of Britain's multicultural society."[27] Similarly, British commentators have declared that multiculturalism was killed off by London bombings. William Pfaff said that "these British bombers [were] a consequence of a misguided and catastrophic pursuit of multiculturalism."[28] Hence, a big cultural challenge was whether Muslims wanted to fully integrate or not.

The London bombings of 2005 reinforced the feeling among many Britons that their country became more exposed to terrorism. Furthermore, the incident showed that there were examples of the threat from home-grown extremists. PM Tony Blair declared that "there would not be any doubt the rules of the game [were] changing."[29] New Britain found itself in a struggle between preserving its multicultural tone and a new borderless dangerous world. The other challenge was how to separate the peaceful new arrivals from the dangerous ones. In Iraq, a new group calling itself Islamic State emerged. This group was behind horrific attacks in France and Belgium. Terrorist suspects hid themselves among refugees and profited greatly from the freedoms granted by borderless Europe.

By the time David Cameron became PM in 2010, wars in the Middle East produced mass migration at levels Britain had not experienced before, combined with a security threat that was real. Cameron associated multiculturalism with terrorism and extremism. The British governments- both Labor and Conservative- responded to the security threats by devising a strategy under the banner 'Preventing Extremism Together (PET)'. Between 2006 and 2015, some 830 million pounds have been spent on the prevention of radicalization schemes.[30] Funding for domestic counterterrorism policing alone has risen exponentially to 670 million pounds for 2016-17.[31] This funding strategy is interpreted as an anti-terrorism approach that identifies integration as one of the primary objectives of counter-radicalism.

Ironically, much of the anxiety about the alleged lack of Muslim integration in Britain is misplaced and misinformed; it tends to be driven by alarmist Islamophobia press coverage. Contrary to popular opinion, most Muslims in Britain are patriotic, loyal, and integrated. According to a Gallup poll published in May 2009, British Muslims are more likely than non-Muslim Britons to say they identify strongly with the UK (77 percent for the former, compared to 50 percent for the latter). British Muslims

are also more likely than non-Muslim Britons to want to live in mixed areas, among people of different backgrounds (67 percent, against 58 percent).[32]

5. Multiculturalism and Brexit

The real multicultural change within Europe had begun in 2004 when the European Union embarked on its most ambitious enlargement including ten new countries; eight of them were central and eastern European countries such as Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary. With more people moving from poorer European nations to richer ones in search of work, both immigration and multiculturalism were in the spotlight. About half of new jobs were going to immigrants. Marx and Salverda apply the term 'wage compression' for being undercut by incomers.[33] The rise of radical nationalism was among the consequences of borderless Europe. In Britain, complex questions about immigration and race relations emerged. For the far right wing, the biggest threat to the British identity is the scale of immigrants. They claim that Britain is obsessed with multiculturalism and Europeanism at the expense of Britishness. For them, Europe does not speak with one voice. As the gap between the governance and the governed became greater, Britons felt they lost identity. The clash between nationalism and Europeanism started to emerge.

Astonishingly, resentment about all this was virtually ignored by Britain's political class. Partly, this was because so many politicians lived and worked in the richest parts of the UK. The Labor party was so concerned with internationalism and multicultural values. The UK Independence party (UKIP) was a euro-sceptic party struggling since the 1990s for disintegration from Europe. Alex Hunt states that the UKIP was treated as politically untouchable driven by mere racism. Yet, it became a very serious political force, and it quickly became the party of choice for the anti-government vote.[34] In 2006, UKIP elected a new leader, Nigel Farage. His accession brought with it elements of the far right support as his themes were very familiar: anti-migrant, ant-EU, and anti-Islam.

In 2008, there was a financial meltdown that started with the credit crisis in America. It gave the far right the opportunity that laid to its key agenda. Multiculturalism came under threat. In 2010, the British Prime Minister David Cameron declared the failure of multiculturalism in Britain. As the clash between nationalism and Europeanism became crystal clear in Britain, the far right pressed decisively for disintegration from Europe. Being under political pressure, the PM David Cameron announced a referendum over the EU. He had always been pro-European, yet he had meant the referendum to silence his enemies and scupper the UKIP leader, Nigel Farage.[35] The disintegration of Britain from Europe was the question put to the British people in a referendum in 2016.

There seemed to be a spike of racist and xenophobic abuse and attacks during the referendum campaign. The worst incident was the murder of the Labor MP Jo Cox on June 16, 2016, by a white supremacist man, Thomas Mair. Jo Cox had been a prominent pro-European and pro-refugee campaigner.[36] Her death, just a week before the poll, shocked the entire British political establishment. Brexit dominated the national conversation in Britain during the summer of 2016: for by 17 million votes to 16 million, Britain voted to leave the European Union.[37] However, not everyone who voted to leave the EU was a racist or supremacist: older people were the most likely to vote 'leave.' There was talk among angry young voters of the old stealing their future.

Brexit was the first victory in foreign policy for the far right in Europe. Yet, it had not been expected by the pollsters or most of the Westminster class. Even some of the very most imminent pro-Leave politicians did not believe to the last moment that they would win. The general expectation was for a narrow win for 'Remain.' This attitude was supported by all the main party leaders and most of big business. The British voted as they did because of the subject of immigration. In 2016, around 3 million citizens of other EU countries were living in the UK. It is thought that about 270,000 citizens of other EU countries arrived to live and work in Britain in 2015 alone.[38] This of course was alongside continued heavy migration from other parts of the world: Pakistan, India, and the Caribbean included. Brexit then was an expression of multiculturalism failure and popular resentment about immigration.

In the 21st century, Britain, like many other countries, is struggling to find common responses to its national crises. Among the issues that divide Britain is that of immigration. In Brexit, British turned against British, and it is not known precisely how much further the integration of immigrants should go. After the referendum, PM David Cameron resigned immediately as Brexit smashed his Conservative government to pieces.[39] Britain's efforts to create a just multi-ethnic society came under a tough examination. It seemed as a whole system of values and underlying assumptions about what Britain was like had been overturned.

Conclusion

No society can last long without some degree of cohesion and a sense of common belonging. Yet, the forces of supra-nationalism, more porous borders, the need for cheap labor, and a wave of mass immigration mean that Britain is quickly changing. Instead of a mono-cultural white Britain, there is a multiplicity of cultures. Multiculturalism forces a re-examination of the features that comprise Britain's identity and Britons' sense of it. As expected, reactions have been skeptical and even hostile to multiculturalism because the latter presented itself as a threat to the hegemony of British nationalism. Moreover, consisting of not only different but sometimes contradictory cultural beliefs, multiculturalism stands in stark contrast to the most fundamental features of Britishness. In that regard, many Britons consider multiculturalism as a dividing concept. However, despite this conceptual rivalry to the idea, multiculturalism still makes a notable impact across Britain and continues to influence debates and even policies that shape the future of the nation. Though rejected by many Britons and even by prominent political leaders, the idea seems to be inescapable.

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