

THE INTRICACIES OF MULTICULTURALISM

Vladimir Malakhov



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■ *Do you agree with Angela Merkel that the policy of multiculturalism has failed, at least in Europe?*

If I recall correctly, Angela Merkel was speaking about Germany - not about Europe as a whole. It actually seemed to me that the Chancellor played a cunning role in this regard. While rebuking the Turkish natives for their poor level of integration into German society, she seems to have forgotten what the policy (and the rhetoric) of multiculturalism was invented for in Germany. It was invented specifically for not allowing the Turks become a part of German society. The refusal to reconsider the old law on citizenship, which was based on the 'blood right', state subsidies for operating Turkish schools, the word 'Gastarbeiter' — these are all factors that have been indicating that, over the last four decades, nobody

actually saw the Turkish newcomers as new members of their society. They were expected to go back home after completing their work to the benefit of the German economy. How can you demand that people who are denied the right to citizenship (i.e. the right to be a fully legitimate member of the society) integrate, thereby effectively becoming part of society?

Multiculturalism means different things in different national contexts. In some cases, multiculturalism is the policy that actually contributes to maintaining segregation. It is meant for certain categories of the population, with the exclusion of all others. For example, for the Arabs in Israel (or for the Turks in Germany until 2000), it means multiculturalism, while for Jews in Israel (or for 'ethnic Germans' in the Federal Republic of Germany, it means assimilation.

Multiculturalism in this case means maintaining the differences in order to avoid the assimilation of a particular category of people at any cost. In Canada, multiculturalism primarily involves the official recognition of an equal status of the French speaking minority among the English speaking majority (bilingualism, etc.). There is no alternative to multiculturalism in this case since, otherwise, Quebec would eventually secede from the federal state. A similar situa-

ture. The thesis about the 'black culture', on an equal footing with the culture of the 'white majority', was somewhat of a pittance to the African-Americans. Then the discourse of 'acceptance' was spread to also include a multitude of other 'ethnic minorities'. It is more convenient (meaning cheaper) to respect ethnic diversity and differences (even though this sometimes involves imaginary ones) than to ensure real equality in terms of access to social resources. The discourse about 'respecting differences', which was imported from the US, also played a kind of compensation role in some countries of Western Europe, with the only difference being that, here, the role of 'cultural minorities' was played by migrants.

And, finally, in such former empires as had by Great Britain and the Netherlands, multiculturalism meant a rethinking of their past. The natives of the former colonies, who were given citizenship in the former empire's metropolis because they used to be among its subjects, could not be expected to totally assimilate. Thus, 'cultural pluralism' effectively became the official position. In the case of the Great Britain, support for pluralism was mainly submitted to private structures, while, in the Netherlands, it was generally sponsored by the state.

However, during the last decade, the

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tion is also observed in India. An attempt to impose a single cultural pattern on the country's entire population (as is desired by the activists of the Bharatiya Janata party) would bring about the country's collapse. **In the United States, the rhetoric of multiculturalism is a symbolic compensation to socially vulnerable groups.** Initially, the Afro-Americans represented such a cul-

pendulum has clearly moved in another direction. The demand for 'encouraging differences' was replaced with the demand for 'integration' (essentially, a politically-correct name for assimilation). Nevertheless, the main thing has remained the same — the belief that the root of the problems related to immigration lies in the cultural sphere.

■ *How is it possible to support democracy and governance in a society that is becoming more and more disjointed?*

The source of the problem called disunity is not immigration (though it certainly contributes to it). The problem that my Anglo-Saxon colleagues refer to as the dissolution of social bonds and cohesion is something that accompanies all *industrial societies*. Let's keep in mind that when Ferdinand Tönnies recorded the shift from 'Gemeinschaft' to 'Gesellschaft'. It was in the last thirty-three or so years of the nineteenth century.

When talking about a compromise between certain groups that adhere to incompatible values, I would like to make three comments.

First of all, I am not quite sure that we should be speaking about groups here, i.e. about some entities that are united by a culture and a religion. When we do that, we accept *statistical units* as the *units of social action*. For instance, if a person comes from a Muslim country, he tends to fall under the 'Muslim' category. But we do not ask ourselves how his/her belonging to a certain group influences his behaviour or the behaviour of his children. It is quite often the case that there is no influence at all. Two-thirds of Morocco natives residing in France and approximately the same ratio of Turkish natives living in Germany are actually ATHEISTS.

At the same time, they do not mind being lumped into the 'Muslims' category. Islam for them continues to be a cultural identification marker. **Thus, we are not facing a group in the sociological sense. It is rather a statistical category, or most probably more of a category for self-identification**, rather than being a category indicating the presence of a coherent group that exhibits the same cultural loyalty and ideological orientation.

Secondly, if we are talking about values, why have we decided to talk about any incompatibility in this particular case? Why have we come to the conclusion that differences in ethnic identity must also be connected with differences in culture and values? **In my opinion, we should stop mistaking the effect of the mass media for a genuine reflection of reality.** We should realise that modern capitalism successfully erases any differences. The only culture that is, in essence, allowed by capitalism is the culture of consumerism. Our television sets did their best to represent the turmoil in the suburbs of Paris, which happened in the autumn of 2005, as a result of the cultural incompatibility between teenagers of Magrib descent and 'native French teenagers'. However, this is a deceptive picture of the situation, as they all share the same values - the values of a consumer society and the hooligans from the suburbs did not actually demonstrate their cultural differences. On the contrary, they demonstrated their desire to be just like everybody else and especially their anger at having been denied such an opportunity.

And, finally, the third thing. In my opinion, a stubborn fixation on the cultural dimension of the immigration problem is an attempt (sometimes involuntarily and sometimes very much on purpose) to avoid resolving the actual social and structural problems related to immigration, but not engendered by it. An analysis should be primarily focused on such issues as the separation of labour (including the ethnic dimension therein), discrimination, social exclusion, marginalisation, etc. ■

Vladimir Malakhov was speaking with Alexander Pavlov

EUROPE IS AT ODDS WITH PLURALISM



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The European and the international Anglo-Saxon democratic tradition have historically had great difficulties in dealing with the questions of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity. For example, ancient democratic Athens harboured a large number of resident 'foreigners', such as women and slaves without civic rights. A unique policy of cultural totalitarianism existed in Europe before the adoption of democracy. The Treaty of Westphalia, which in 1648 ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe, stipulated, as an inter-state compromise, that the ruler should decide the religion of his people. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Western Europe has more problems with multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity than other parts of the world.

Successful multicultural democracies do, in fact, exist in the world. India is the most impressive example of all, with dozens of major different languages, several scripts for writing, two major and many smaller religions, an ancient ethnocultural and North-South divide, not to speak of innumerable

sub-castes and local customs. There have been tension, conflicts, and violence, but an independent India, which had never before been united, has not produced any powerful secessionist movement, nor have there been any suspended or rigged elections. Moreover, there have only been peaceful transfers of governmental power for more than sixty years now.

Thus, democracy has no intrinsic problem with multi-ethnicity. Most citizens, and almost all scholarly observers of Australia, Canada and the USA, for instance, will argue that they have more active, participatory democracies now than was the case 40-50 years ago under the 'Whites Only' rule.

But xenophobia and xenophobic politicians are indeed a problem. The concrete grievances of people who feel that they are losers in a mobile world have to be taken seriously, and met with adequate social and economic policies. At the same time, the demagogues and the mobs have to be confronted and combated relentlessly. ■