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Has 'Multiculturalism' Become a Dirty Word?

Streszczenie

Czy wielokulturowość jest dziś brzydkim słowem? Takie pytanie można by sobie zadać śledząc wypowiedzi przywódców politycznych Niemiec, Włoch, Francji i Wielkiej Brytanii. Autorka wraca do początków wielokulturowości jako świadomej polityki władz w Wielkiej Brytanii w latach siedemdziesiątych dwudziestego wieku, porównuje różne znaczenia tego słowa w języku angielskim, przedstawia argumenty politycznych przeciwników i zwolenników wielokulturowości w Wielkiej Brytanii oraz modyfikacje tych argumentów w reakcji na ataki terrorystyczne w Nowym Jorku w 2001 roku i Londynie w 2005 roku. Porównanie argumentów obydwu stron pozwala dostrzec brak porozumienia na temat znaczenia słowa 'wielokulturowość'. Zarówno przeciwnicy, jak i zwolennicy kontynuowania tej polityki wobec mniejszości etnicznych i kulturowych są zgodni w wielu kwestiach: obawiają się izolacji społecznej, nawołują do dialogu międzykulturowego i rozwijania postaw obywatelskich.
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1. Introduction

On May 9th 2011, the news broadcast by the high-brow Polish radio channel, Radio 2, contained two items in which the Polish equivalent of the English word 'multiculturalism' – 'wielokulturowość', featured prominently. In the first news item, the director of the Book Institute, Grzegorz Gaudan, announced the opening of the Czesław Miłosz festival in Kraków emphasizing its multicultural character. In the second item, the director of Kraków Philharmony, Piotr Szczepanik, declared the, soon to be open, Gustav Mahler festival to be "truly multicultural". As both speakers were referring to the nationalities of guest performers, and the experience of travel and migration in the lives of both celebrated artists, one might wonder if a more old-fashioned word,

'cosmopolitanism' would not have described more precisely what they meant, but it was clear from the context that both cultural professionals used the adjective proudly and with most positive connotations in mind. The audience could infer that in Poland multiculturalism is trendy. This does not seem to be the case in all European countries any more; reports of thousands of refugees from Northern Africa have added to the now ten-year-old fear of Islamist terrorism, which made the Italian, French, German and British leaders speak out against multiculturalism within the last six months. Writing three months after the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, made a speech in Munich, which was reported by the BBC with the heading "State multiculturalism has failed" (BBC News 5th February 2011), I would like to examine the meaning and connotations of this word in English in the course of the twentieth century, as well as to present the various positions in the debate about multiculturalism today.

2. Definitions of 'multiculturalism'

It is significant that the second edition of the OED published in 1989 does not contain a separate entry for 'multiculturalism', it only defines the adjective 'multicultural' as, "of or pertaining to a society consisting of varied cultural groups" (Bembow *et al*. 1989: 79). The first usage of the adjective is recorded in 1941, in *New York Herald Tribune Books* and of the noun in 1965, in Canada. All the sample sentences provided present both words as neutral or positive. In the *Longman dictionary of English language and culture* published in 1992, still only the adjective is defined, but the definition is broader, "including people or teachings from several different cultures" (Rundel *et al.* 1992: 894). This expanded definition reflects a debate about multiculturalism that has been one of the most contentious issues in the American humanities since the late 1980s, when Allan Bloom famously protested against the demise of the traditional Western canon of knowledge, which he saw threatened by the introduction into the university curricula of the works of minority groups and minority cultures together with an insistence that various cultures merit equal respect and academic attention. Wikipedia offers a broad discussion on multiculturalism accompanied by a revision of multicultural policies in various countries. For Wikipedia authors writing in 2010, multiculturalism is a political term which "has come to mean the advocacy of extending equitable status to distinct ethnic and religious groups without promoting any specific ethnic, religious and cultural community values as central". This last definition best describes the policy of multiculturalism which is questioned today in Britain and other Western European countries.

3. History of multiculturalism as government policy in Britain

In Britain, multiculturalism was a policy of the government and local authorities dealing with the tensions and political conflicts caused by the influx of immigrant groups of distinctly different ethnic, religious and cultural background. Immigration after World War II was encouraged by the British Nationality Act of 1948, which gave all Commonwealth citizens free entry into Britain. The immigrants from West Indies and later from the Indian subcontinent arrived as unqualified workforce enticed by the economic prospects offered by the postwar labor shortages in Britain. The first significant group arrived from Jamaica onboard *HMS Empire Windrush* in the summer of 1948; the first anti-immigrant riots directed at West Indians took place in the winter of the same year. The racial tension over public housing and jobs led to Immigration Acts in 1962, 1968 and 1971 which progressively reduced non-white immigration. Popular anti-immigrant feeling in Britain reached its peak in 1968 when Enoch Powell made his ill-famed *Rivers of blood* speech warning that immigration would lead to racial violence and when "a month later a Gallup poll recorded that 74 per cent of Britons supported his views" (Black 1997: 296). Multiculturalism began to be used as a political policy of counter-Powellism, it was built through grassroots mostly on local government level and was based on respect for Britain's diverse cultural groups. This policy resulted in various Race Relations Acts (1968, 1976 and 2000), which provide legal basis for stamping out race discrimination, and secure equal rights of ethnic minorities. One of the most frequently cited documents outlaying multiculturalist policy was written in the wake of Brixton riots in 1981, when the government commissioned an inquiry which resulted in the Scarman Report. Lord Scarman was concerned with the "plight" of the ethnic communities in UK inner cities and their relationship with the rest of the national "community". He concluded that it was essential that "people are encouraged to secure a stake in, feel a pride in, and have a sense of responsibility for their own area". In conclusion he called for a policy of "direct coordinated attack on racial disadvantage" (Rich 1990: 212–13). For a visitor to Western Europe the most visible sign of multicultural policy in Britain was the state's tolerance for religious and cultural practices of ethnic minorities. Unlike in secular France, in Britain a Sikh police officer could wear a turban, and a Muslim woman could work in the NHS with her face covered.

The success of multiculturalism in Britain was first questioned in 1989 during the, so called, *Rushdie affair*. The book burnings, riots and Khomeini's *fatwa*, which forced the author of *The Satanic Verses* into hiding and brought on attacks on publishers and translators all over the world began to change the way in which the West looked at multiculturalism, free speech, radical

Islam and terrorism. Interestingly enough the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London met with relatively moderate comments about multiculturalism, as if the Rushdie affair had taught the British politicians and journalists to distinguish between British Muslims and radical Islamists. As one of the journalists wrote less than one month after the attacks on London public transport:

> It seems, in fact, that far from being about to crumble, our multicultural society has come to develop strong roots. [...] We are left, despite the tragedies and confusion, with the more normal burden of getting by, being accommodating to one another and to new groups, to transformations and all the social and cultural fluidity that London especially, but not uniquely, has come to embody. (Hewitt 2005)

4. The debate

The debate about British multiculturalism must be distinguished from the way in which the media choose to report it. As Jeremy Harding wrote in his important text on refugees, "bigotry, for the media, is a better story than tolerance" (2000: 7). This is best illustrated by the haste with which the BBC announced that David Cameron declared that "state multiculturalism has failed" in his famous speech during the conference in Munich on February 5th, 2011. In fact, the four-page-long speech on the subject of terrorism and possibilities of preventing young men from joining Islamist extremist groups is very "politically correct", with the PM emphasizing that "Islamist extremism and Islam are not the same thing" (Cameron 2011) and that it is possible that young men are attracted to Islamist extremism due to a crisis of British identity. David Cameron uses the word 'multiculturalism' in his speech only once, when he declares that:

> ...we have allowed the weakening of our collective identity. Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. (Cameron 2011)

A close reading of the text shows that his main target is not multiculturalism *per se*, but specific practices of British authorities and security services which have tried to gain control over Muslim youths by patronizing "non-violent extremists". As he says, "Some organizations that seek to present themselves as a gateway to the Muslim community are showered with public money despite doing little to combat extremism" (Cameron 2011). But he also rec-

ognizes that extremism is a distortion of Islam and appreciates that the vast majority of Muslims in Europe "despise the extremists and their worldview" (Cameron 2011). His main objective is building social cohesion i.e., "meaningful and active participation in society" since, as he says, "we are all in this together" (Cameron 2011). Not much of the above is announced by the title of the report in *The Daily Telegraph*: "Muslims must embrace British values", and its subtitle: "David Cameron declared that the doctrine of multiculturalism has 'failed' and will be abandoned" (Kirkup 2011) goes much further against multiculturalism than the Prime Minister in his speech. Cameron did speak of promoting certain values, but it is a mark of the patriotic feeling of *The Telegraph's* political commentator that he chose to label "freedom of speech, freedom of worship, democracy, the rule of law, equal rights regardless of race, sex or sexuality" (Cameron 2011) to be "British values" (Kirkup 2011). It is clear that the newspaper reports are colored by the ideology and attitudes of the reporters as *The Guardian* report carried a very different heading: "Cameron begins extremism crackdown as cash withheld from 'suspect groups'" (Wintour and Percival 2011).

In the media the most prominent critic of multiculturalism has been Trevor Philips, most probably due to his position of chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality. The newspapers were eager to report that he declared multiculturalism an obsolete policy, but frequently failed to explain his reasons. In an article published in *The Guardian* in 2004, Philips wrote,

> Integration only works if it both recognizes newcomers' differences and extends complete equality. Celebrating diversity, but ignoring inequality, inevitably leads to the nightmare of entrenched segregation.

In his critique, he focuses on the failure of multiculturalism to secure equality of opportunity for ethnic minorities and on continuing racial discrimination. The journalists do not mention this context when they write that even "Trevor Philips ... has called for multiculturalism to be scrapped" (BBC 2004).

The critic of multiculturalism that most probably inspired David Cameron's speech is Kenan Malik, an Indian-born, left-wing writer and philosopher. He introduces an important distinction into the debate when he points out that "both sides confuse the lived experience of diversity, on the one hand, with multiculturalism as a political process, on the other" (Malik 2010). He goes on to say that:

> The experience of living in a society transformed by mass immigration, a society that is less insular, more vibrant and more cosmopolitan, is positive.

As a political process, however, multiculturalism means something very different. It describes a set of policies, the aim of which is to manage diversity by putting people into ethnic boxes, defining individual needs and rights by virtue of the boxes into which people are put, and using those boxes to shape public policy. It is a case, not for open borders and minds, but for the policing of borders, whether physical, cultural or imaginative. (Malik 2010)

Malik's main objection to multiculturalism is that in an attempt at minimizing conflict, the policy results eventually in isolating various communities.

A similar point is raised by a Dutch sociologist, Paul Scheffer, who first became famous as a critic of multiculturalism in 2000, when he wrote a provocatively titled essay, *The multicultural disaster*, on the demographic situation in the big cities of Western Europe. In his most recent publications, however, he points out that in history, immigration has always had three stages: avoidance, conflict and social compromise, and that Europe has entered the second phase in her relationship with the Muslim immigrants. Like Kenan Malik, Scheffer argues that conflict should not be avoided, that it must be resolved if a compromise is to be reached: "I see the conflict as a sign of integration, as a sign of looking out for an answer to the question how are we going to live together", and to move on "our tolerance has to be redefined: not being indifferent, but being far more active and engaged" (Scheffer 2010) and that this may be achieved by inviting the immigrants to see themselves as citizens. What is more, this process of encouraging the immigrants to participate in the life of the host society requires reciprocity and will force the host society to rethink what being a citizen means (Scheffer 2010). Scheffer's argument throws some light on the current situation in Britain, which, in fact, was also signaled in David Cameron's speech in February, namely the correlation between lack of integration of immigrant groups and a crisis of national identity. The relationship between Englishness, Welshness, Scottishness and Britishness, as well as the meaning of this last term have been discussed for well over a decade now. The devolution of 1999 brought more political and, in the case of Scotland also economic, independence to the nations building the United Kingdom, which resulted in fostering of those national identities and undermining Britishness. The disintegration of British national identity was examined in great detail by Richard Weight, who declared that "Britishness has now virtually disappeared" (Weight 2002: 729); far from regretting the decline, he launched an attack on the political and cultural elites which failed to provide an alternative to an England-dominated, war-obsessed, Eurosceptical and racist British identity (Weight 2002). His account is full of left-wing irreverence for the

traditional institutions, but it still provides a good background for the current debate about British citizenship and makes it quite clear why Gordon Brown's plan to introduce an oath of allegiance for the new citizens, which they were to swear to the Queen, was ridiculed in the press.

Among the defenders of multiculturalism Sir Bhikhu Parekh, a political theorist and Labour peer, holds centre ground objecting to the general tendency to equate multiculturalism with "racial minorities demanding special rights"; he argues that multiculturalism is about "the proper terms of relationship between different cultural communities" and that the standards by which the communities resolve their differences must not come from only one culture, but "must come through an open and equal dialogue between them" (Parekh 2002: 13). Parekh is far from "putting people into ethnic boxes" that Malik objects to, on the contrary, he advocates multiculturalism as "intercultural fusion" (2002: 27). If one looks closely at the arguments on both sides, it becomes quite clear that both the critics and the defenders of multiculturalism are worried by the same symptoms e.g., segregation and ghettoization of immigrants; and calling for similar solutions e.g., dialogue and cooperation. In other words, "the vision of many of those seeking to replace multiculturalism is very much the vision of its original proponents" (Spencer quoted in Lerman 2010). Nick Pearce, the director of Institute for Public Policy Research, a few months after the bomb attacks in London in 2005, defended multiculturalism by stating that:

> the recent challenges to multiculturalism raise at least three ... questions. First, do we need to do more to integrate different communities around a core of common citizenship? Second, can we better tackle community segregation and the social exclusion of minority groups? Third, should we more forcefully insist on basic human rights and democratic norms against some of the claims of different cultures? The answer to all these questions is yes. (Pearce 2005)

David Cameron advocated all the above in the speech in Munich in which, according to the media, he declared the end of multiculturalism.

Britain is not the only European country revising her policy towards immigrants. In a review of a highly controversial book written last year by the former director of the Bundesbank, Thilo Sarrazin, Timothy Garton Ash notes that the badly researched, heavily biased anti-immigrant *Germany abolishes itself* is a cultural and political phenomenon. Garton Ash claims that the book owes its unprecedented popularity to the fact that it is the first book written in post-war Germany on the subject of the integration, or rather, lack of integration of Muslim minority. According to Garton Ash " (2011: 24), "In Ger-

many, not merely the inflammatory, but even the frank discussion of this subject has been constrained by the kind of nervous taboos attacked by Sarrazin and his supporters as 'political correctness'". Keeping a lid on the discussion has brought on a true explosion of frustration and resentment towards immigrants, hence the enthusiastic reception of Sarrazin's book. Timothy Garton Ash admits that Germany is not alone:

> All West European societies are wrestling with the legacy of their multiple past mistakes with respect to immigration and integration. These mistakes include [...] the unacceptable moral and cultural relativism of some of the policies that have passed for 'multiculturalism' during the last decades.
>
> Sarrazin sums up his recipe for better integration as 'expect more, offer less.' Mine is 'expect more, offer more'. However, that 'more' we offer should not be indiscriminate welfare benefits or state-subsidized multiculturalist folderol, but good education, professional training, genuinely equal opportunities in the labor market, and a welcoming, open, free society, confident in upholding its own values, such as free speech, tolerance and equal rights for women. The 'more' that a free country is entitled to expect of those who wish to live in it is summed up by Mustafa Cerić, the thoroughly down-to-earth grand mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina. His simple message to the immigrant: first, respect the laws of the land; second, learn the language; third, do something useful for the society in which you live. (Garton Ash 2011: 24)

5. Final remarks

As I have shown in this short paper, even if 'multiculturalism' has not become a dirty word, although Anushka Ashtana from *The Observer* fears so, and offers her own life experience as proof of its success (2010), certainly the consensus that multiculturalism is the best way to secure a balance between respect for diversity and a sense of shared national belonging is gone. The future of multiculturalism seems to be as uncertain as its meaning in the mouths of various politicians and journalists.

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