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Multiculturalism and its ambiguities

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Abstract This article deals with the notion of *multiculturalism* as the universal and global political, ideological and cultural matrix of contemporary liberal democracy. Multiculturalism is based upon the idea of cultural cohabitation of various cultures and ethnicities within one society. As the ruling and dominant cultural model of democratic societies, multiculturalism appears as the critic of monolithic cultural patterns. By referring to the importance of the category of *difference* (of classes, gender, sex, ethnicity etc.), multiculturalism predominantly promotes the concept of symbolical equality of different cultures. Openly advocating the concept of cultural diversity and symbolical equality, multiculturalism has abandoned the idea of the domination of one cultural monolith, and by avoiding valorization of different cultures, has introduced the notion of cultural diversity. The complexity of this concept is confirmed by certain problems multiculturalism is facing with.

Keywords: multiculturalism, tolerance, liberal democracy, cultural identity, cultural policy

From the beginning of the sixties when significant social movements arose within the Hippie culture, showing the specific politics of rebellion towards the *bourgeois* social praxis and values till now, the modern world encounters permanent cultural wars. On the other side, the ‘cold war era’, no matter it’s memorized through the tension between the Blocks, was in fact for both sides the most radical mode of *political war in culture*.

In spite of the expectations, the fall of Berlin wall didn’t release the tensions which have marked that nightmarish epoch. On the contrary, this historic event opened the space for new cultural wars and conflicts. Thanks to the intensive development of technology, especially in the media sphere, the above mentioned ideological confrontation between two paradigms of the ‘democratic capitalism’ and ‘totalitarian socialism’ has been transformed into the clash between the ‘primitive nationalism’ and ‘supranational multiculturalism’ as the cornerstones of the new global-politics matrix.

As the ruling and dominant cultural model of democratic societies, multiculturalism appears as the critic of monolithic cultural patterns. By referring to the importance of the category of *difference* (of classes, gender, sex, ethnicity etc.), it predominantly promotes the concept of symbolical equality of different cultures. Openly advocating the concept of cultural diversity and symbolical equality, multiculturalism has abandoned the idea of the domination of one cultural monolith and by avoiding valorization of different cultures, has introduced the notion of cultural diversity.

Multiculturalism is based upon the idea of cultural cohabitation of various cultures and ethnicities within one society. As the model of *cultural policy*, multiculturalism is profiled by two objectives:

1. Creating mechanisms to support harmonious relations among different ethnic and cultural groups.
2. Defining clear relations between the state and minorities.

The main premise of multiculturalism is the model of cultural politics based upon the common civil society culture characterized by the

individual freedom and the right to cultural expression. As the value opposed to hegemony, *particularism* which is in the very center of multiculturalism became *universal and obligatory*.

The term *multiculturalism* is very close to the term of ‘*cultural pluralism*’ which was promoted as one of the principles of UNESCO’s cultural policy, especially in the era when many Third World countries as former colonies struggled to create its own national and cultural identities. Theoretically speaking there is an important difference between the term of ‘*cultural pluralism*’ which signifies equal, tolerant and open relations between *national cultures*, and the term ‘*multiculturalism*’ which serves to designate relations between *different cultures, on the sub-national level* (Semprini 1997).

Within the theoretical frame it seems that the most important question is how to understand the notion of differences, and what place it should have within modern society. Stressing out that diversity is not only the philosophical-theoretical concept, but a concrete reality of the modern world, which is globally and locally multicultural. A. Semprini (1997) indicates the importance of ‘minority discourses’ as the problem of cultural and national identity. But as H. Bhabbha (1994) pointed out, social differences aren’t simply present in the experience by a cultural tradition whose authenticity is already confirmed. More than that, they are signs of formation of a community observed as a project, which is, at the same time, a vision and a construction.

The notion of multiculturalism confirms the thesis that at the beginning of the 21st century global politics as the symbolical frame of the “chortle of capital” has become something like the inevitable “horizon that can’t be overcome.” This means that the term multiculturalism is so politicized that almost nobody questions its real meaning but only takes just the *pro* and *contra* stand, instead. The complexity and the ambiguity of the term are confirmed by its deep connection with the question of cultural diversity. In fact *multiculturalism* provokes some *controversies* due to its double perspective – *political and cultural*. *Political perspective* of multiculturalism leads to the question of *political rights of minorities* within the national state. According to some authors (Goldberg 1994),

this question must involve the elaboration of the difference between national minorities and ethnical groups. *Cultural perspective*, on the other side predominantly points out ‘minority discourse’, which is based upon the system of common values, cultural identity and the experience of social marginalization.

The above mentioned difference just sublimates the borderline between politics and culture, as the difference between the civil and private life. Democracy, economic prosperity and tolerance are great accomplishments of modern societies, but taken apart or together they are not sufficient responds to many ambiguities of ethnical and cultural diversities, which challenge modern democracies. Some theorists (Taylor 1994) warn that persistence on ethno-cultural diversities as the operational principle of social communication can become a powerful source of conflicts, no matter that the above mentioned democratic values are already established.

As the political project, multicultural community offers conditions for development of collective and individual identities, only if it encourages chances for free development of all its constitutional parts. Such community doesn’t limit expression of diversities but supports them by continual cultural interactions, instead. But the simple coexistence of different cultures, without the mutual influence to one another, and without the diffusion of cultural styles, symbols or practices doesn’t necessarily means a productive cultural interaction.

Academia already pointed out the significance of the relation between the “dominant” and “other” cultures within one society. Furthermore, this perspective clearly leads to the insight that the discourse of multiculturalism involves the question of ‘tolerance’, which obviously can’t be mutual but represents a sophisticated way to legitimize and at the same time to dissemble a ‘strong subject’ of communication. This is confirmed predominantly by the fact that modern liberal-democracies put issues of diversity and tolerance at the basis of its institutions. Moreover they conceptualize the *problem of cultural integration* as the mayor argument for their civilizational and moral superiority towards minority cultures.

If there is no positive, pacified and projected intercultural communication, multicultural community is not beyond the scope of simple coexistence. And then, instead of creating common cultural pattern as the foundation of social integration, various tensions between cultures of different nations can appear. So, if the multicultural society is to be the positive ground for constitution of common and particular identities within, it must focus on resolving existing confrontations and ambiguities.

If the particular cultural identities are substantiated, then their ideological and political reinterpretation endangers the real basis for building the narrative of 'supranational identity'. Taking into account the fact that almost all modern societies are multicultural, regionalization of social identity can be interpreted as a step back, especially when it means a restriction of rich potential of different cultures' encounter. That is why the main question is whether regional and multicultural identification are mutually exclusive?

In many democratic societies identity is formed on the basis of multiculturalism and reciprocity, with particular and general solidarity complementing each other. But some authors (Buden 2002) have stated that today, in the light of actual massive political crisis, this tendency represents a sort of an ideal social environment, far from reality even in the most developed European countries, because individuals in these societies integrate themselves not by constitutional patriotism, but by homogeneous or xenophobic nationalism instead.

Thus, the special issue is the weakening of democracy due to ethno-nationalism, which many authors have already indicated as the very severe problem. When political conflicts are reduced to the requests of ethnical groups, political arena is shrunk, and by limiting numbers and types of political participants, the democratic development is inhibited. In other words, when state is interpreted as the 'home' for national groups, such national identity opposes democracy, because democracy requires political participation of all citizens without any discrimination. According to this, in politics of national identity individuals are not primarily recognized as political subjects, but only as members of ethnic collectivity.

Although the idea of creation of so called *supra-national identity* which could overcome the limitations of particular national and cultural identity based upon tradition, pride and mythology of uniqueness, seems as the perfect realization of the dream of liberal democracy, the question is can it provide satisfying heritage to produce such an identity? For example the project of the European integration is, among other things, based upon the idea of supra or *post-national* identity of the European citizen. But as Buden (2002) already noticed, it is not clear what will be the real destiny of this European project, especially because not only theory but practice as well notices certain doubts on its capacity to produce the desired loyalty and devotion, mostly because it seems more as construct and political recommendation than as the real choice of European nations, and all other nations which tend to enter it.

Judging by the unsolved problems and disagreements among the EU members, and due to the awakening of nationalistic and separatist movements (Great Britain, Spain, France, Italy, etc.), one may say that not only those conditions for constituting the 'European identity' are not ripe yet, but that such concept is pushed into the background.

Democracy and multiculturalism are deeply and essentially connected. Social communication within multicultural community offers various opportunities to individuals and social groups for establishing modern *post-national* identities, since only in those circumstances they can free themselves from isolation, monolithic existence and tightness. Therefore, the tension between regionalization and globalization logically leads to the main question:

How to understand relation between the call for supra-national integration and need for national identity?

Focus on multiculturalism in the era of globalization, on the other side, naturally opens the question that H. Bhabha (2004) already posed. The question is how strategies of representation or empowerment accreditation can be formulated in rival request of various communities. How come that in spite of the common history of deprivation or discrimination of various communities within one society, exchange of

values, meanings and priorities may not necessarily be cooperative and dialogical, but deeply antagonistic, full of conflicts and even immense?

Controversies and problems

1. One of the most recent problems which multiculturalism encounters is the problem of ‘minority discourses’, in the sphere of education, in which the right to lecture particular subjects is completed by modifying traditional education especially in the field of literature, history and civilization.

On the other side, as some researchers reported (Semprini 1997) social mobility of minority groups, easy accessibility to the higher education, but low scores on tests, according to the “positive discrimination” introduced the “inequality principal”, which forced, for example, many universities in the US to bring down their criteria. It is rightfully pointed out that the “inequality principle” in order to compensate historical injustice may lead to the implicit discrimination of some others (Gitlin 1995). Special problems are arousing in schools and universities on ‘minority languages’, since it is potentially the mode in which one mono-cultural paradigm (the ruling system of the state, or dominant mayor culture) is just replaced with another one, on local or regional level.

2. The question of sexual identity and gender issues, apart from masculine values of the western cultural model, is focused on the equal rights for sexes. Requests for recognition of special feminine contribution to the culture, modification of the relationship between the sexes and real equality in all spheres of private, public and professional life, are on the agenda. The problems of abuse of women and violence against women issued the request for identification of specificity ‘feminine identity’. Other concerns are issues of sexual allusive behavior and mobbing, which sometimes get grotesque forms of communication; namely, since hippie generation abandoned system of rules advocating absolute freedom of sexual expression, these attempts to defend freedom of individual, by canonizing and standardizing everyday behavior and communication, are ridiculous because they paradoxically shrink the sphere of free communication. Tendency of

moralizing relationship problems and individualizing social communication by inventing new terms and normative regulations, in order to primarily solve cultural and civilizational crisis, is movement which is principally incompatible with the idea of the free individual.

The problem occurs when a liberal state tries to negotiate 'multicultural' policy with the concept of 'freedom of cultural expressions' of minority ethno-cultural groups, which presumes their rights to gender inequality. How should a liberal state cope with the fact that members of these groups, even women, are in favor of sexual discrimination? Thus, the state will be criticized for being unjust no matter it advocates equality or it supports the fostering of diversity. If values of liberal democracy are demanded, members of ethno-cultural or religious groups might object that their cultural identity and tradition are in stake and on the other hand if the state emphasizes the concept of cultural diversities, it may be taken as a form of discrimination. Therefore, both equality and special status for a certain cultural or religious group can be a source of problems.

Answering the question as to what extent and how should multicultural pluralism accommodate community cultures that deny gender equality, it can be concluded that liberal democracies cannot actually do nothing without comprising their own fundamental values: equal freedom for all, equal dignity, equal respect. These values present the bottom line that has to be accepted by all members of society, but what can be done when members of some 'minority groups' deliberately choose to be 'unequal' within their communities?

3. The Most important question is one which is oriented towards the request of minority groups to *be recognized as special*, in order to gain privileged position and even more to demand political autonomy and self-government. Controversies concerning this aspect of multiculturalism are numerous. For example, the recent problem with Islamic feminine costume ("burqas") in France opens the question of the limits of multiculturalism which Europe can cope with. If multicultural paradigm is based upon the concept of encouraging the differences, how the need for their (even declarative) cancellation appears? Isn't the idea to defense concept of liberal democracy by

repression, in fact, a form of its own suspension? How can differences be cherished, if they are interpreted as the signs of threat? Does this example show that Europe, who invented political concept of multiculturalism, faces its own limitations? Finally, according to this, hasn't the category of tolerance, which is the ground-stone of multiculturalism, only limited validation?

4. If some homogeneity of ethnical groups can be detected, that isn't the case with other 'minorities' as homosexuals or disabled people, which social, political and cultural engagement appears as the effect of self-awareness about their own marginalized or unrecognized social status. Abandoning republican vision of relation between identity of society and national unity, W. Kymlicka (1995) points out paradoxical content of minority requests for identity, because their main goal is better and more solid integration into the national community, and not taking distance from it. According to other authors, separatist requests can be interpreted as a reaction to the unwillingness of majority to really integrate minority groups.

5. Appearance of a minority doesn't depend only on its own self-observation as the minority, not on internal recognition of common identity as well, but mostly on achieving external evidence, and the possibility to be perceived and accepted as the minority in the public space. Therefore, politics of identity, no matter how different requests they deal with, predominantly refer to the problem of visibility in the public space. But besides the cultural visibility principle, the other demands appear as well, such as acceptance of their specificity, not only as visible but also as politically and culturally influential.

6. Multiculturalism also encounters problems of its own definition. It is considered as a phenomenon born within contemporary global capitalism, in its globalization phase. Detecting modern phenomenon of corporative multiculturalism, Goldberg (1994) points out that it is nothing but the strategy of governing, i.e. manipulating the differences, which basically confirms one mono-cultural paradigm, in fact, with strictly limited, controlled and determined minority discourses within. Concept of "positive discrimination" or "affirmative action" faces the objection that it is nothing but the discrimination as well, since instead

of the principle of equal chances for all according to their skills, which is the basic principle of meritocracy in liberal democracy, some kind of “discount” is demanded for minorities.

7. In spite of declarative commitment to multicultural values, minority cultures are presented only as ‘minor’ and ‘marginal’. Thus it is nothing but stressing out the ‘strategies of representation’, which actually legitimize the position and power of the ‘Strong subject’ of discourse. More interestingly, contemporary global media support this interpretation of multiculturalism, since they provide the space for processes of signification and presentation of identities, and therefore, open the space for questioning the real meaning of tolerance.

8. Structural changes of the nature of public sphere have enabled the dissolution of the clear borderline between the private and the public sphere, which already Habermas (1962) signified as the “*conditio sine qua non*” for civil societies. Those changes indicate further questions on the position and meaning of private and public sphere. According to the liberal-democratic model, public sphere should stay neutral, as some kind of abstract space which enables the opportunity to create the notion of citizen and ensures the absolute civil equality for all individuals. Consequently, this concept neither oppose nor discriminate differences, but instead leave them in the private sphere of every individual, which means that as such, they can’t be relevant in public domain. Neutrality of public sphere stands as ground for individual identity of citizenship.

9. Therefore it seems that the Internet Universe represents the real “dream come through” of multiculturalism. Many various voices, freedom to articulate and present diversities, and possibility for many minority groups with equal status within one polycentric and dispersive communicative universe, to network and organize interchangeable communication are not only communicative, but socio-cultural phenomena as well. Instances that were considered as private became spots in public sphere, which is already detected as the phenomenon of “digital universe.” “Hyper-openness” of the new public sphere for various voices, structurally transforms public space as “*res publica*”,

into the stage for permanent multiplication of unrelated, indifferent and dispersed “micro-enclaves” of the public (Tomic 2004).

10. Special issues of power in multi-cultural public space, are also visible because it doesn't matter whether the social stratification was vertical (top-bottom) in the pre-internet era or is horizontal (center-periphery) as is in the age of Internet. Within this concept the another paradox of multiculturalism appears, concerning the noticeable transition from category of ‘visibility’ and ‘recognition’, to requests for autonomy and secession, which finally results as a ‘clean ethno-cultural’ space, with the same universalistic pretensions.

Finally, one can say that perhaps the biggest problem multicultural paradigm encounters today is in fact category of ‘diversity’ treated as a transitional category. This category is understood just as a phase in the process of its own dissolving into the general notion of civil equality. Many strong voices advocating ‘differences’, which appear as requests for recognition of particular identities, the liberty of their symbolic recreation, or the option of openly separatist pretensions, are in fact, multicultural ‘dead ends’ which developed liberal democracies face with.

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