



in cooperation with
University of Manchester Centre for Jewish Studies

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New Neighbours, New Opportunities
The challenges of Multiculturalism and Social Responsibility

Manchester Workshop. Monday, 11:45.

5. Is Multiculturalism Passé? (Reuven Firestone)

International Abrahamic Forum

The post-modern world recognizes that there is no truly universal or objective perspective. We all invest our personhood into every endeavor, which prevents objective assessment of anything. It can be argued that lack of objectivity results in a lack of understanding, but trust seems to require understanding. Harvard and Manchester-based political science professor Robert Putnam conducted a nearly decade long study about how multiculturalism affects social trust and found that the more diverse a community is, the greater the loss of trust. The multi-national states of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia broke into conflicting and often warring ethnic states immediately after strong government collapsed, and the European Union seems to be unraveling and slipping back to ethno-nationalist communities in a state of perpetual conflict. Are we reverting to a truer “state of nature?” Is understanding across ethnic, national and religious boundaries futile? This workshop will take a sober look at pre-modern examples of multiculturalism, compare with today’s environment, and explore the options for the next stage – our post, post-modern world.

Multiculturalism relates to communities containing multiple cultures. (**image**). The term is used in two broad ways, either descriptively or prescriptively. As a descriptive term, it usually refers to the simple fact of cultural diversity: it is generally applied to the demographic make-up of a specific place, sometime at the organizational level, e.g. schools, businesses, neighbourhoods, cities, or nations. Manchester (**image**), for example, is a multicultural city (**image**), with significant populations of South Asian, Italian, Caribbean, Chinese, Sub-Saharan African, Middle Eastern, Irish, and even British descent (and a few Jews, here and there) (**image**). As a prescriptive norm (**image**), it refers to ideologies or policies that

promote this diversity or its institutionalization; in this sense, multiculturalism implies a "positive endorsement, even celebration, of communal diversity, typically based on either the right of different groups to respect and recognition, (**image**) or to the alleged benefits to the larger society of moral and cultural diversity"¹

Historically, Europe (as everywhere else) has always been multicultural. (**3 images**). Here are some of the cultural pools out of which specific sub-groups have emerged: Latin culture, Slavic culture, Germanic culture, Uralic, Celtic, Hellenic, etc. with lots of imported cultural bases from earliest days such as Phoenician, Arab, Berber, Jewish, etc.

The larger the geographic area, the more cultural diversity. When Europe was organized by early empires, multiculturalism was a norm (**2 empire images**). It didn't matter what ethnic or cultural or racial or religious or linguistic community you were a part of. The high leadership represented one cultural community (Greek, Roman, Frank, etc.), but there was no particular interest in **cultural** colonization of the varied peoples that it ruled (**king cartoon image**). Empires did insist on a kind of religious conformity. This was the case under pagan or Christian empires. Offerings were required for the emperor and the state during the Roman period. And we are all aware of the pressure to eliminate "heresy" and unify religious belief under Christian empires (**inquisition image**). But while it is clear that these were cases of forced conformity and resulted in terrible suffering, it was not *cultural* conformity that was required at this stage.

When the empires collapsed and the continent was governed according to feudal norms, polities (independent or semi-independent governed regions) were very small and tended to be culturally distinct (**view map**). During the Middle Ages Europe was no less culturally diverse than under the great multi-cultural empires. The difference was that each province, prefecture, county or district was culturally more or less homogeneous. They also existed in eternal tension if not war with other polities. And there were hundreds of them that existed in a tense and unstable relationship. **View map**.

The diverse feudal districts were unified into more stable, larger bodies by powerful lords in the later Middle Ages and Early Modern periods to create the modern countries or empires of the Stuarts, Bourbons, Hapsburgs, Hohenzollern, Orange, and Romanovs. **View image**. The joining of the small and culturally diverse polities did not homogenize the larger entities. Cultural diversity remained normative. How could it not? It was just the way life was – and is.

But while cultural diversity was recognized, cultural groups always existed in tension with one another. Tension often spilled over into violence and violence into serious bloodshed and killing, pillage and rape – in a word, war. **View battle images**.

In the 19th century, the ideology of nationalism transformed the way Europeans thought about the notion of an independent polity, a state. The notion of state became associated with nation or "national culture." **View nationalism image 1**. What is "national culture?" It is a sense of identity that differentiates between groups according to what we would call general cultural criteria: language, collective memory (which may or may not be historically accurate), common customs, etc. Dr. Geert Hofstede, who is well-known for his path-breaking work in national identity in the workplace, defines it simply as "the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others."² This definition recognizes the synthetic nature of national identity. More on this in a moment.

¹ Kevin Bloor (February 2010). *The Definitive Guide to Political Ideologies*. AuthorHouse. p. 272. ISBN 978-1-4490-6761-8.

² <http://geert-hofstede.com/national-culture.html>

National identity became closely equated with the state in the minds of most Europeans sometime in the 19th century. **View nationalism image 2.** That meant that a governed entity such as a country or state was associated with a particular ethnic-linguistic community. Prior to the emergence of the notion of modern nationalism, ethnicity or culture was not necessarily associated with the polity. In the modern period it came to be deeply associated with the state, which was, in a way, like the situation among the tiny principalities of the Medieval world, except in a much larger area and one in which many different communities lived, often in some kind of tension. In order to run affairs smoothly, the nation-state often strove toward cultural unity.

Where cultural unity was deemed insufficient, it was encouraged or enforced by the state. **View image.** Nation-states developed policies that were intended to homogenize the population of the nation, including compulsory primary education in the national language (**view Académie Française**). The language itself was standardized by linguistic academies that suppressed regional dialects. Compulsory courses or examinations on “national history” were often given or required, as are tests on the legal system required for citizenship of non-nationals. Recently prohibitions against certain clothing customs have become law in places like France (**veil kippah image**), while the teaching of “national values” and literature of the “national canon” is stressed. Social integration, national cohesion, or cultural assimilation has been introduced or enforced in a variety of ways, including even what we call euphemistically today “ethnic cleansing” (**view expulsion image**). This was not new in the modern period, as England and Spain were “cleansed” of Jews in 1290 and 1492, respectively, and Spain of Muslims in 1502. The Roma people have been expelled repeatedly from areas throughout Europe (**view Roma image**).

But we have clear and obvious evidence of much ethnic cleansing in the 19th and 20th centuries, including the US “Indian Removal Act” of 1830 signed by President Andrew Jackson that resulted in the Trail of Tears **View image.**, the Turkish ethnic cleansing of Armenians that resulted in genocide **View image.** and the Turkish and Greek collaboration in cleansing each others’ ethnic communities in 1923 **View image**, the Bolshevik killing and deportation of Don Cossacks in 1920 (**view image**), the murders and expulsion of Poles from Volhynia (Ukraine) in 1943 (**view image**), not to mention the Nazi programs of ethnic cleansing and genocide (**view holocaust image**).

Ethnic cleansing and genocide are of course the most radical form of pressure to create unified nation-states. Other pressures and policies are usually preferred (**view Nazi girl image**). But they are always resisted by those communities who do not wish to assimilate into a synthetic norm. Tension and violence between cultural communities has always been typical of Europe, as it has in other parts of the world as well. But it became increasingly violent and dangerous in Europe with the massing and re-identification of national communities into large states, and the development of more and more deadly weapons. The worst fiasco in this regard was WWII (**view image**). While it took a lot of time and a lot of trouble, the European Union was formed as a result. (**View image**).

But how many people really care about the European Union? While the EU continues to promote multiculturalism, some members such as the Netherlands and Denmark have recently moved toward an official monoculturalism, and fear of outsiders has grown throughout Europe (**View image**), and the UK as well as other members are reevaluating their earlier commitment to multiculturalism based, in part, on a fear of “home-grown terrorism.” “Home-grown terrorism” is a code-word for Muslims. While security is absolutely a legitimate concern, I would argue that the fear that Islam is undermining European security is only a very small part of the motivation

for backtracking against multiculturalism. Muslims are a convenient excuse for the general anxiety that is produced when people feel that their native way of life is being weakened or perhaps eliminated by the homogenization of European culture (**image**). Anthropologists and evolutionary scientists (evolutionary psychologists, biologists, etc.) tell us that our first loyalty is to our nuclear family, then to our extended family, our clan, tribe, and then tribal federation (**family image 1**). That equates roughly with family, football team (**family image 2**), city, perhaps county and then nation. Not continent.

So here is the problem. We humans seem to have evolved to feel loyalty to small communities, and we seem to self-identify not only by who we *are*, but also by who we *aren't*. But a mass of separate and independent cultural or ethnic or racial or religious communities is impossible economically, and also because such an arrangement reinforces and exacerbates stereotypes and tensions that eventually lead to violence. But flattening cultural difference and trying to ignore the reality of the vast multicultural reality that is humanity is futile **View images**. – and it also invites resentment, anger and retrenchment into cultural difference, and violence.

How can we maintain a balance between cultural pride and cultural cooperation? It can be argued that the most successful polities historically were highly multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-racial. Those countries that were able to **utilize** their multiculturalism most effectively were most successful, most powerful. The mix of languages, cultures, styles, ways of doing business, science, worldviews and perspectives – all encourage creative interaction and productive energy. But those countries that fail to manage their mixes of peoples effectively spend huge amounts of energy and resources managing them, and that weakens them and can cause failure. Multiculturalism can be positive or negative. The tension and competition can be constructive or destructive.

There will always be tension between cultural communities. That cannot be eliminated. Success or failure will depend on how we deal with it.

Thank you.