

Conceptual and Political Paradoxes of Multiculturalism (Abstract)

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Multiculturalism is one possible conceptual worldview. It implies both a particular way of looking at social reality and the domain in which political solutions are sought to the problems that come to light in a 'reality' thus conceived. As such we approach multiculturalism not just as a political but also and especially as an epistemological issue.

The purpose of the following paper is to show that the way in which the concept of culture is used in various multicultural perspectives presupposes a connection between culture and physical attributes. That point of view, however, sharply contradicts the definition of multiculturalism in the contemporary social sciences, wherein it is on principle considered inadmissible to make associations between biological and cultural frameworks.

One of the objectives of multiculturalism as a normative concept is recognising 'ethnic groups' in the terms of their 'cultural distinctiveness', or, more precisely, recognising the bearers of these 'ethnic cultures' in the context of contemporary complex societies.

Yet multiculturalism approaches 'ethnic groups' as ontologically grounded 'entities', whose 'members' are fundamentally the 'bearers' of a specific set of essential qualities (essences) that are attached to an *ethnic* 'group' framework. This set of essences is usually presented rhetorically as a 'culture' or 'ethnic culture'. Multiculturalism has a tendency to approach these 'cultures' as though they were 'actually existent' static *objective* qualities, that is, it approaches them as *objects* that are the 'property' of ethnic groups, and with this *conviction* of their 'objective existence' it endeavours to secure for them 'political recognition'. In the context of multiculturalism, whether or not someone belongs to a particular 'ethnic group' and, by extension, to a particular 'culture' is determined on the basis of appearance, that is, on the basis of physical attributes. This manner of reasoning is also becoming the model for conceptualising other groups as well as 'ethnic' ones.

In this sense, multiculturalism only treats those social differences that are constituted on the basis of physical qualities as 'cultural' differences. Alongside 'racial' or 'ethnic' (or 'ethno-religious') 'groups', which in a multicultural context are usually defined by (consanguineous) 'origin', manifested as a notion of physical distinctiveness, the multicultural project is then also applied to populations defined on the basis of sexual orientation, health disability, age, or gender. In other words, it is applied in a way that must be generally understood to suppose some type of distinction relating to the physical body. Multiculturalism envisages a 'cultural' boundary wherever popular discourse perceives a physical difference.

Yet, at the same time, multiculturalism is clamouring for changes to the nature of contemporary state nationalisms, towards making them more open to those who are 'different', whom, however, it defines according to attributes based either on the category of 'origin' or some other form of 'physical feature'. This method of understanding is in conflict with the idea of *change* as it relates to 'group affiliation'. The paradox is that the call to open up and to abandon exclusivist definitions of 'group affiliation' or 'otherness' on the part of the 'majorities' is not matched by an analogical requirement made of 'minorities', which multiculturalism construes as

closed within their own frameworks, frameworks defined by attributes that are seen as physical and are therefore *unchangeable*, even though rhetorically they are treated as 'cultural'. In a multicultural perspective, 'cultures' are conceptually portrayed as tightly closed social categories with a fixedly defined 'membership', although the normative ideal of that same perspective is openness and the rejection of stereotypes.