

WARSAW STUDIES IN POLITICS AND SOCIETY 1

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# Found in Multiculturalism

Acceptance or Challenge?



 SWPS

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EDITION

## Preface

Amid the globalisation of economic life, followed by the myriad of powerful challenges posed to the traditional notions of statehood and nationhood, it is now routinely contended that multiculturalism is in resurgence. Nevertheless, much of the debate on the purported renaissance of the plurality of cultures occupying the various social and political systems around the world is bedevilled by confusion over what the term implies.

At first glance, the notion in question seems to be seemingly easy to define, since one can simply assume that “multiculturalism” denotes a plurality of cultures gathered in a particular social space. Yet, treating “multiculturalism” as a mere concentration of cultures in a certain social space does not capture the essence of the social reality which bears the sociological stigma of “multicultural”. This is so because “multiculturalism” entails not only the existence of cultures side by side, but also, and perhaps above all, the contribution of cultures to forming various types of interactions, both cooperative and confrontational in character. Moreover, widespread confusion over the definition of “multiculturalism” in the contemporary world results from, *inter alia*, deepening globalisation and metropolisation, which make multicultural reality more common and tangible. Still, its catholicity and proximity does not necessarily imply better comprehension of the term itself, which is frequently misinterpreted and thus applied interchangeably with the congeneric concepts of “interculturalism” and “transculturalism”. Although, as in the case of “multiculturalism”, both the above notions refer to the coexistence of different cultures in a particular social space, neither of them is synonymous with “multiculturalism”. The former dates back to the 1970s, when it was used to describe permanent and dynamic interactions between transmitters of distinct cultures. At present, it refers to the interpenetration of elements belonging to diverse cultures resulting from the global network of information flow. The latter, in turn, indicates a permanent intermingling of cultures which create the so-called “third culture”, hybrid in nature, from which one finds it impossible to distinguish its particular components.

Furthermore, the eponymous phrase “Found in Multiculturalism” constitutes a direct allusion to the “Lost in Translation” metaphor coined by Stanisław Barańczak. First of all, this is primarily because functioning in any multicultural reality frequently entails the lack of understanding of “the Other”, which has been

aptly explored by the authors who have contributed to this book. Secondly, coming back to the term “multiculturalism” itself, it turns out that its quintessence may be easily overshadowed by the existence of two (or more) separate words in another language which may be automatically treated as different equivalents of the English word “multiculturalism” – whereas, in reality, they are not. Consequently, in terms of the Polish context, scholars dealing with various aspects of multiculturalism may be literally lost in between *wielokulturowość* and *multikulturalizm*, which seem to constitute two distinct translations of the English notion of multiculturalism, causing unnecessary misunderstandings and perplexity. Such (linguistic) confusion over this eponymic term is further enhanced by an analogous mystification as to why an apparently self-explanatory juxtaposition of different cultures in a given context turns out to be a notable success or an abject failure.

This collection of readings has been prepared with a view to assembling, in one volume, representative statements of a variety of theoretical approaches that have had an impact on the development of multicultural studies over the last couple of years, and which today attempt at comprising the main contending lines of approach to both teaching and research within this rapidly expanding area of inquiry. Notwithstanding the plurality of voices, reflected to a great extent by various aspects of multiculturalism presented in the volume, all of them seem to revolve around two major dimensions of the eponymous notion: ethnic and non-ethnic, using the division proposed by Janusz Mucha, or, as Stanley Fish defines it, “strong multiculturalism” and “boutique multiculturalism”. The former, ethnic or “strong multiculturalism”, focuses on the sphere of inter-ethnic relations among numerous ethnic groups that intend to openly manifest their identity and distinctiveness as well as participate fully in all forms of social life. The latter, non-ethnic or “boutique multiculturalism”, comprises a natural complement to ethnic or “strong multiculturalism” by concentrating on the superficial attachment to objects or elements of a different culture. Such multiculturalism comes down to a simple saturation of the social space with symbols denoting cultural diversity, such as, among others, popular ethnic restaurants or festivals.

Bearing in mind the dichotomous understanding of multiculturalism, most authors have presented its non-ethnic dimensions, the multitude of which has been additionally emphasized by an intentional presentation of particular texts in an alphabetical order marked by the surnames of their authors, not according to any artificially created thematic division. Conceived with the multifaceted needs of a variety of our target readers sharing an undivided interest in the labyrinthine nature of multiculturalism, we have endeavoured, indeed, to make

the somewhat complicated and far too often abstract debates lying at the foundations of the arts and humanities more accessible to the uninitiated, thus striving to make them of value to both academics specialising in the area and readers eager to expand their knowledge and broaden their horizons.

Lying at the heart of this book is our firm conviction that if the theory on issues in multiculturalism, such as, among others, nationalism, citizenship and identity, along with their interrelations, is to be endowed with real meaning and relevance beyond mere intellectual curiosity, it must be both applicable to, and derived from, empirical analysis. This analysis, whether carried out on an intensive case study basis, or following reflections on more generalizable processes and trends, is necessary to determine how social and political experience and practice are intertwined with the ways in which different groups and individual actors perceive and conceive of their relations to space. Given the cumbersome nature of the intellectual *tour de force* posed by the idea of multiculturalism itself, we are fully aware of the fact that in order to bring clarity to this concept, a phenomenon that is clearly not new, yet has only recently gained incredible political salience, is a fine achievement. Drawing on conspicuous cases worldwide, we have endeavoured to establish a framework of identity politics that would encompass both temporal and spatial influences on the processes of identification, belonging, reproduction and group interaction. In so doing, we have set ourselves the task of not only constructing a new means of analysing a variety of individual-community relationships, but also the task of shedding new light on how society as a whole constructs itself *vis-à-vis* with the minorities it has to interact with.

This collection of readings draws from what is best in the already existing publications conceived to convey the potential of positive interaction among cultures and, perhaps more importantly, to put forward the idea that multiculturalism ought to be seen primarily as a state of mind. Over the years, this notion has been approached as a continuous movement towards reflection, self-knowledge, and awareness of our humanity, enhanced by the desire to better understand the differences between human beings. Recently, however, the term multiculturalism has achieved meanings never conceived of prior to the 1990s. This has been particularly true in the academic world. When the title of our book came up in numerous conversations with our friends and colleagues, the meaning we had given to multiculturalism was often lost in endless debates and lengthy intellectual propositions. Some saw back then, and continue to do so at present, multiculturalism as a challenge to the traditions of Western civilization; others perceive it as a call to the disintegration of national identity, or worse yet, as a

first step to moral relativism. If human conduct is justified by culture, everything goes; right and wrong are no longer discernible. Oddly enough, multiculturalism has suddenly become the source of all human ills: from being the cause of inner-city problems to challenging fundamental truths.

Having said that, we are committed to the idea of endlessly moving towards multiculturalism – our *terminus ad quem*. In light of the numerous controversies surrounding the righteousness of a plurality of cultures, however, it is important to understand why it has been conjuring up so many reactions. It is our intention, therefore, to offer our readers an explanation and a possibility of taking the challenge of being faced with a contextual way of defining and analysing the phenomenon in question, hoping that the probable doubts and queries it will stir, a new set of debatable issues, will offer follow-up research on such a formidable concept.

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