

Their Multiculturalism and Ours

Peter Tatchell

Paralysed by the fear of being branded racist, imperialist or Islamophobic, large sections of liberal and left opinion have, in effect, gone soft on their commitment to universal human rights. They readily, and rightly, condemn the excesses of US and UK government policy, but rarely speak out against oppressors who are non-white or adherents of minority faiths. Why the double standard? The answer lies, in part, in a perverse interpretation of multiculturalism that has sundered the celebration of difference from universal human rights.

The new hierarchy of oppression

Race and religion now rule the roost in a tainted hierarchy of oppression. The rights of women and gay people are often deemed expendable for the sake of 'the greater good.' Misogyny and homophobia are increasingly tolerated in the name of 'maintaining harmonious community relations.' Indeed, the trend among many supposedly progressive people is to reject common standards of rights and responsibilities. They demand that we 'make allowances' and show 'cultural sensitivity' with regard to the prejudices of people within certain ethnic and faith communities. Isn't it patronising, even racist, to judge minority peoples by different standards?

This hierarchy of moral values has shaped public policy on discrimination. Legislation against racism is much tougher than legislation against homophobia. Racial slurs provoke far stronger public condemnation than sexist ones. Some liberals and left-wingers mute their condemnation of intolerance when it emanates from non-white people; whereas they would strenuously denounce similar prejudice if it was being vented by whites against blacks or by Christians against Muslims. The new vogue for sections of the left is the idea that we have to 'understand' bigots from racial and religious minorities; yet few of them ever urge the same 'understanding' of white working class bigots.

Some argue that our western history of Christianisation and colonialism is responsible for ethnic, religious and patriarchal prejudice in certain quarters of some minority communities. The hate-mongers in these communities are, allegedly, more or less blameless. In this guilt-ridden 'anti-racist' narrative, we made the bigots

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the intolerants they are. *We?* How can today's generation of English people be held responsible for what their forebears did 200 years ago in the days of Empire? Such infantilising nonsense is increasingly a feature of left-wing discourse.

These double standards on human rights influence even law enforcement. In Britain and Jamaica, several dancehall singers are free to incite the murder of 'b*tty boys' (queers) without fear of prosecution. As we all know, no gay person could get away with urging the killing of 'n*ggers.' Likewise, certain fundamentalist Muslim clerics are permitted to endorse the so-called 'honour' killing of unchaste women; whereas any woman who dared advocate violent retribution against Islamist misogynists would soon find herself in court.

We have long been used to the hypocrisy of the political right. In the name of defending 'freedom', many Conservatives defended the very unfree regimes of Botha's South Africa, Franco's Spain, and Pinochet's Chile. What is new is that this selective approach to human rights is now being echoed by sections of the left, with their inaction against, and occasional open apologia for, the regimes in Iran, Zimbabwe, and Sudan.

Vive La Difference!

Some critics blame multiculturalism for this political and ethical mess, arguing that respect for diversity has degenerated into a free-for-all, where anything goes. The right to difference has become a trojan horse, subverting human rights, they say. I agree with this view, up to a point. But I also believe that plurality and diversity are valid, providing they don't diminish the rights and freedoms of others. It would be a big mistake to dump multiculturalism on the basis of its sometimes oppressive interpretation and application.

The multicultural ethos that has blossomed since the 1960s is an important advance in social evolution. It is good to recognise, celebrate and respect diverse cultures and people of different nations, races, languages, religions, abilities and sexualities. The embrace of diversity is a welcome respite from the narrow-minded monocultural uniformity of the 1950s, which was dominated by the straight, the white and the male. (There is, of course, nothing wrong per se with straight white maleness. The problem was that straight white males dominated to the exclusion of everyone else. Their agenda was *the* agenda.)

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In the bad old days of the monocultural 1950s, prejudice was tolerated. The voices and interests of minorities were either ignored or actively suppressed. There was racial segregation and the denial of voting rights to black people in the Deep South of the United States. In the UK, male homosexuality was totally illegal and punishable by a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Throughout the West, women's pay was barely half that of men, while women were excluded from a wide range of job opportunities. As an antidote to this exclusivist cultural hegemony, inclusive multicultural diversity was liberating and uplifting for millions of hitherto marginalised people; especially women, as well as disabled, black, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The right-to-be-different ethos of multiculturalism allowed them to claim not just human rights, but also a dignity, a value and a place in the public sphere.

In contrast to the stifling homogeneity, blandness and conformism of monocultural societies, multicultural diversity is enriching, creative and empowering. Out of difference come new insights, which are the motor of innovation. In these senses, the acceptance of diversity can be seen as a positive benefit to individuals, communities and society as a whole.

Some critics of multiculturalism argue that minority communities should assimilate into the mainstream, surrendering their cultural differences for the sake of a unified, egalitarian society. This approach is adopted by the French Republic, which treats (in theory, if not in practice) all its citizens as equally French and equally deserving of rights. It claims to be indifferent to difference. Unfortunately, however well intended, the French integrationist strategy seems to have failed. Witness the racial tensions and the rise of the far right National Front. Moreover, it is surely ethically wrong and socially impoverishing to demand the conformity of minority communities. Why should they be required to give up their cultural uniqueness? Would not the abandonment of difference inevitably lead to a reversion to the stultifying, suffocating social blandness of the Macmillan and Eisenhower eras? I say: Vive La Difference!

London is proof of the plus-side of multiculturalism – the whole world in one city, a joyous rainbow of identities and cultures. The 'united nations' character of the capital is one reason I love living in London. I step out of my front door and, in a typical day, I will probably see people from nearly a hundred different national backgrounds. It is a great joy to savour the many good things that other cultures offer us: unique people with unique histories, music, art, cuisine, design and ideas.

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Where multiculturalism goes wrong

However, by asserting and celebrating difference, multiculturalism can also divide people on racial, religious and other grounds. It risks emphasising divergences between different communities that may evolve into rivalries and antagonisms. We have in Britain, for instance, witnessed riots between factions of Afro-Caribbean and Asian youths, and tensions between sections of the Muslim and Jewish communities. Too much emphasis on difference can easily spill over into separateness, which subverts an understanding of our common humanity and undermines notions of universal rights and freedoms. It can produce a new form of tribalism, where societies are fragmented into myriad communities, each loyal primarily to itself and with little interest in the common good of society and the collective welfare of humankind as a whole.

In my own lifetime, race politics has been transformed, some would say degraded, by the excesses of the 'diversity agenda.' In the 1960s and 1970s, all non-whites united together as 'black people' to fight their common oppression: racism. Then black divided into Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian. More recently, part of the Asian community has split off to identify primarily as Muslim, distancing themselves from other Asians, such as Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. This fragmentation seems to be endorsed and encouraged by some on the left. The Socialist Workers Party and Respect have colluded with the division of the Asian community on religious lines. They have a great deal to say about the oppression of Muslims but little or nothing to say about the racism and disadvantage experienced by Asians of other faiths or of no faith at all.

In short, multiculturalism can sometimes foster a 'Balkanisation' of the humanitarian agenda, fragmenting people according to competing identities, values and traditions. These differences are too often prioritised over shared experiences and interests. Our common needs, and the universality of human rights, are sidelined in preference to an emphasis on racial and religious particularities.

Equally alarming, multiculturalism is usually defined solely in terms of the relationship between majority and minority communities, and rarely in terms of *the rights of minorities within minority communities*. Some liberal-left people are quick, for example, to defend Rastafarians against police victimisation. Many are less comfortable about defending gay Rastafarians who are victimised by their straight Rastafarian brothers. All too often we hear excuses and silence concerning human rights abuses within minority communities. We are told: 'it's none of our business,'

or 'it (homophobia or sexism) is part of their culture and we should respect their traditions.' In other words, the multicultural ethic often ends up affirming group rights at the expense of individual rights, and kow-towing to establishment elites within minority communities. In defending the collective rights of Judaists, for instance, what is frequently ignored or denied is the right of individual Judaists to dissent from the views of the Judaist elite – the Chief Rabbi and the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Indeed, the orthodoxy of the Judaist majority is sometimes wielded to silence the unorthodox Judaist minority. During the battle over the anti-gay law, Section 28, the homophobic Judaist leadership used its dominant status to disparage and sideline liberal and reform pro-gay-rights Judaists. Likewise, the Board of Deputies tends to use its official authority to demand unquestioning support for Israel; disparaging progressive Judaist criticisms of the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and Israel's often indiscriminate attacks in Arab civilian areas.

Reactionary forms of multiculturalism merely replace the hegemony of the dominant culture with a form of 'diversity' that facilitates the hegemony of the dominant forces within minority communities. They involve a qualified degree of pluralism that is limited to giving a voice to minority elites; often strengthening these elites at the expense of grassroots and dissident voices. This restricted form of multiculturalism produces a significant degree of diversity vis-à-vis the relationship between majority and minority communities, but a near absence of diversity within minority communities, where an enforced, tradition-bound monoculturalism frequently still prevails. When the multicultural ethos of live-and-let-live is divorced from the principle of universal human rights minorities within minorities are invariably the losers.

Tragically, it is often this elitist, authoritarian strand of multiculturalism that is politically promoted. We see this in the way Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, has rightly defended Muslim communities against prejudice and discrimination, but wrongly allied himself, more-or-less exclusively, with the reactionary orthodox Islamist elite, such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). Moreover, Ken seems to have gone out of his way to avoid supporting or engaging with liberal Muslims. They have had the doors of City Hall slammed in their face and, in some cases, have been subjected to vilification and intimidation by the Mayor's allies in the MCB and MAB. According to a poll of 1,000 British Muslims for Channel Four's Dispatches programme, What Muslims Want, broadcast on 7 August 2006, only 4 percent of Muslims say the

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MCB represents them, and only 1 percent regard the MAB as reflecting their views. Yet these are the organisations that the government, the Mayor of London, the Socialist Workers Party, Respect and the Stop the War Coalition consult and ally with – to the apparent deliberate exclusion of Muslim progressives. Whereas most Muslims in Britain do not support reactionary Islamism, much of the left acts as though they do.

The assault on universal human rights

Is it really a form of neo-colonialism to insist that every person in every country is entitled to human rights? I think not. But there are some people on the left of politics who now align themselves with traditional right-wingers in their dismissal of the universality of human rights. They claim that human rights are western inventions and impositions, and argue that to expect developing countries to uphold women's rights and gay rights is a new form of imperialism.

This is palpable nonsense. There is a broad global consensus on human rights. It is enshrined in international conventions that have been collectively agreed by the nations of the world – north and south, east and west. Member states of the United Nations have signed up to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – plus the Geneva Convention, the Genocide Convention and the Torture Convention. These conventions constitute the globally-acknowledged framework of human rights, jointly endorsed by both western and non-western nations. They apply to every nation and every individual, without discrimination.

In contrast, a highly selective approach to human rights has been adopted by the Bush and Blair administrations – and by sections of the left! The reactionary left condemns torture by US forces in Iraq but ignores the widespread use of torture by the regime in neighbouring Iran. Closer to home, the race hate of the neo-Nazi British National Party provokes left-wing outrage, whereas hatred of Hindus and attempted forced conversions promoted by some Islamist groups is a non-issue for much of the left.

Multiculturalism is cited as a justification for tolerating beliefs and behaviours that conflict with universal human rights. A good example of this is the veiling of girl children in many Islamic societies – and the attempt by some Islamists to

import this sexist oppression into Britain. We are not talking about the free choice of independent adult women to wear or not wear the hijab, burka or niqab. Girl children have no genuine freedom to choose because they are young and powerless. In many Islamic societies, veiling is either a legal requirement or the result of pressure from families, imams, neighbours and the wider Muslim community. Now, even in the West, some people are saying that the veiling of the female sex is part of Muslim culture and we must accept and respect this cultural difference. *The rights of Muslim girls are thus rendered subordinate to the collective demands of male-dominated orthodox Islam.* This reasoning is typical of the way many multiculturalists ally with the hegemonic forces within minority cultures. They neglect the rights of minorities within minorities and apparently do not care that certain cultural practices conflict with generally accepted international standards of human rights. The result is moral confusion, equivocation, compromise and double standards over human rights abuses in large parts of the world.

Another multiculturalist error has been to bow to demands for 'cultural sensitivity'; permitting some communities to be exempt from the norms of universal human rights when it comes to issues like forced marriages and gay adoption. The liberal-left used to oppose all oppression and stand in solidarity with all oppressed people. The race or religion of the victims - and the perpetrators - did not matter. All oppression, from whatever quarter, was resisted. Now, however, moral and cultural relativism are gaining ground. We are told that every community is different - with different values, different histories and different ways of dealing with issues. All these differences are equally valid and must be respected and accepted. To question them, we are admonished, is to impose our way of life on others - a form of cultural imperialism.

It is true that there is no one-size-fits-all blue-print. But there are certain universal humanitarian values that should be defended in all cultures at all times. We should not accept practices that violate human rights, full stop. If we would not accept such practices in our own society, we should not accept them in other societies either. Allowing people in other countries to suffer indignities that we would not tolerate in our own country is a shameless double standard. While embracing multicultural diversity is often a good thing, we also have to accept that *beyond a certain point a live-and-let-live attitude ceases to be liberating and becomes oppressive.* When sections of the Sikh community persecute their own members who happen to be gay or who subscribe to dissident factions of Sikhism, surely that is not acceptable? In 2004, conservative Sikh activists in Birmingham successfully forced the closure of the play

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Behzti and forced its author into hiding. They did not like the fact that the play's story of rape and murder was set in a Sikh temple. To get Behzti cancelled, they resorted to threats and violence. It was bare-faced intimidation and censorship. A dominant, right-wing faction of Sikhism was able to suppress a play it didn't like. The voices of liberal Sikh's were silenced.

All people possess a culture, but this does not mean all cultures are equally valid and virtuous. There are some laws, political systems and technologies that are morally and practically inferior. Conversely, certain values and ideas are indisputably better than others. The Enlightenment was better than the Dark Ages. Freedom is better than slavery. Democracy is better than fascism. Scientific knowledge is better than superstition. While all human beings deserve respect, not all beliefs and traditions should be respected. Political and religious ideas based on racism, patriarchy and homophobia are unworthy of respect. They need to be challenged, not indulged in the name of respect for other cultures.

There are some Christian fundamentalist sects in parts of Africa, for example, that believe children with disabilities are possessed by the devil. Youngsters with learning difficulties are subjected to cruel religious rituals to exorcise 'evil spirits.' These rituals can involve extreme physical and psychological abuse. Since we wouldn't tolerate the ill-treatment of children by white churches in London, neither should we tolerate such abuse by black churches in Lagos. Nevertheless, in the name of multiculturalism, many otherwise progressive people indulge bigoted racial and religious minorities on the grounds that this bigotry is part of their ethnic and spiritual tradition. In some quarters, it seems, tradition is now an excuse and an alibi for human rights abuses.

The Left goes missing

The practical result of the rise of reactionary forms of multiculturalism has been that the left has simply gone missing when it comes to many forms of oppression. In the UK, Southall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism have long campaigned against so-called honour killings, polygamy, forced marriages, domestic violence and female genital mutilation. Quite right too. But where is the liberal-left solidarity with their campaigns? And why aren't more progressive people in the West supporting women in developing countries who are resisting the patriarchal practice of excising young girl's clitorises and sewing up their vaginas? An estimated 130 million women worldwide are victims of female genital mutilation. This is a

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crime against humanity that happens daily, with hardly a murmur of protest from many left-wing people who see themselves as humanitarians.

When human rights violations are perpetrated by oppressors who happen to be non-white (in Darfur, West Papua, Zimbabwe, Iran, Uganda, the Western Sahara and elsewhere), many progressives run a mile. Terrified of being denounced as racist if they campaign against a black tyrant like President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, they seem more concerned about safeguarding their own politically right-on reputations than with securing justice for the oppressed. Mugabe's regime has massacred more black Africans than South Africa's evil apartheid dictatorship. But in contrast to the huge and highly successful anti-apartheid movement, there is no significant western solidarity campaign to support the Zimbabwean struggle for democracy, human rights and social justice. Why not?

Why did so many otherwise good people in the west stand back and do nothing during the genocides in the Congo and Rwanda? The left rightly kicked up a huge fuss over Abu Ghraib but sat on its hands over Rwanda and the Congo. How can that be right? Nearly a million people were killed in Rwanda, and over three million have died in the Congo. Where was the international campaign to halt these genocides?

Multiculturalism and Islamic Fundamentalism

The political somersaults and ethical acrobatics of sections of liberal and left opinion are equally astonishing on the issue of Islamic fundamentalism. While all Muslims should be defended against prejudice and discrimination, Muslims who oppress others should be challenged (in the same way that oppressor Christians, Judaists, atheists and others should also be challenged). It was odd to see a liberal newspaper like The Guardian give a platform in its comment section last year to a leader of the anti-democratic and anti-Semitic Islamist group, Hizb ut-Tahrir (the Muslim extremist equivalent of the BNP). Even more disturbing, in 2006 the left-wing magazine Red Pepper published articles sympathetic to Hezbollah and Moqtada al-Sadr – despite their grisly record of human rights violations. These same journals rarely offer a voice to progressive Muslims.

I have been accused of 'Islamophobia' for defending the Muslim victims of fundamentalism. My crime? I condemned the stoning of adulteresses in northern Nigeria and Pakistan, and campaigned against the abuse of gay people by the

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Palestinian Authority. In reply, I ask my accusers this question: can we legitimately remain silent when Muslims are suffering persecution at the hands of fellow Muslims? Would we say and do nothing if this victimisation was happening to Muslims in the UK and the perpetrators were white?

In some Islamic countries, Muslims who have renounced their faith, or embraced the 'wrong' sect of Islam, are put to death. Is this Muslim-on-Muslim oppression unworthy of our concern? I cannot see how it can ever be morally right to remain indifferent to the suffering of people in other countries ruled by different political systems and following different faiths. Human rights are, in my view, for everyone – not just some.

Allegations of 'Islamophobia' and 'racism' are increasingly manufactured and manipulated to stop debate, silence critics and discredit opponents. I have been on the receiving end of this mud-slinging by the Mayor of London and his Socialist Action apparatchiks, the National Assembly Against Racism, the Muslim Council of Britain and the notorious IslamophobiaWatch website. The unprincipled, sectarian 'left' colludes with right-wing Islamists, such as the sexist, homophobic and anti-Semitic fundamentalist cleric, Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi. When I, and others, dared condemn Qaradawi's support for suicide bombing and female genital mutilation, we were denounced as 'Islamophobes.' The idea was to marginalise our critique by smearing us as anti-Muslim. These dirty tricks are the copy-book tactics of the far right. They have nothing in common with humanitarian or socialist values.

In today's ethically topsy-turvy world, many self-proclaimed 'anti-racists' seem quite happy to ignore the role of fundamentalist Islam in the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan, where racist Arab Islamists are massacring the black African population. In Britain, we hear no left-wing outcry against the homophobia of the Muslim Council of Britain, the Islamic Human Rights Commission and the Muslim Association of Britain. These reactionary organisations fought to maintain anti-gay laws like Section 28 and the unequal age of consent. While they campaigned in support of homophobic discrimination, the left looked the other way.

Getting multiculturalism right

I continue to defend multiculturalism, but with this vital caveat: *multiculturalism is a force for good, providing it does not involve tolerating values and practices that sustain prejudice, injustice and suffering.* Everyone should have the freedom to

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pursue their own morality and lifestyle, so long as they do not harm others or diminish other people's freedom. With these qualifications, the right to be different should be respected and we should be able to think and do what we like. Christian fundamentalists ought, therefore, be free to practice their beliefs. If they believe homosexuality is wrong, they are entitled to hold that belief and to abstain from same-sex relations. Christian husbands and wives who believe in a Biblical-based, strict male-female gender division of labour in the home should be allowed to lead their domestic lives accordingly. But they have no right to insist that their homophobic, patriarchal interpretation of scripture should become the law of the land and be imposed on everyone else. In the public sphere, all citizens should be treated as equals, with a shared commitment and entitlement to human rights.

This distinction between public and private is vital. It offers a way to manage some of the tensions involving different communities – including tensions between majority and minority communities and within minority communities.

Where some strands of multiculturalism have gone off the rails is in their public institutionalisation of divisiveness through initiatives like the state funding of faith schools, which factionalise pupils along religious lines. It is true that some state schools have poor standards, but the solution is to invest in their improvement and turn them around, rather than to promote sectarian faith-based education, as the Labour government is doing.

Reactionary interpretations of multiculturalism ignore, tolerate or excuse prejudice and abuse in the name of pluralism and diversity. They foster social division, moral confusion and double-standards – often to the detriment of the most vulnerable: minorities within minority communities. Progressive multiculturalism is about respecting and celebrating difference, but within a framework of universal equality and human rights. It is premised on welcoming and embracing cultural diversity, providing it does not involve the oppression of other people. There can be no selective approach to freedom and justice. Human rights are universal and indivisible.

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