

The Failure of Multiculturalism?

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Angela Merkel has [declared](#) that in Germany “the approach [to build] a multicultural [society] and to live side-by-side and to enjoy each other... has failed, utterly failed.”

I don't want to offer an analysis of German politics. As [with France](#), dipping into German political culture without knowledge of, and sensitivity to, its unique and complex history will lead only to declarations of [ignorant nonsense](#). So I'll confine myself to general remarks, equally applicable to Britain as to Germany.

“Multiculturalism” is a phenomenon much debated, much misunderstood, and consequently much abused. Nonetheless, it will be helpful to employ a basic – thus imperfect and loose – definition:

Multiculturalism refers to the manner of ordering a state whereby no one “culture” – be it ethical, religious, political or ethnic – is given over-riding and official privileged status, and to which citizen conformity is demanded. Competing and differing “cultures” are allowed to exist alongside each other, as well as any dominant “established” or “traditional” “culture”, provided they conform to a set of basic precepts demanded of all citizens (and groups) within the legal-coercive structure of that state.

That last qualification is important. Multiculturalism does not mean “anything goes”. Whilst religious and ethnic groups may be free in a multicultural state to eat, dress, pray etc in whatever way they choose, certain activities are proscribed *regardless* of whether they are part of some group's “culture”. Thus activities such as pederasty, ritual sacrifice and forced female circumcision are outlawed by most multicultural western societies insofar as such practices fall outside the remit of permitted cultural difference. Groups that persist in such activities will not be tolerated by the state legal apparatus, and conformity will be extracted coercively via police and courts. Those that refrain from such “out-of-bound” activities will be free to live as their “culture” demands.

With that basic understanding of multiculturalism in place, I would immediately add that multiculturalism is in fact a relatively *superficial* phenomenon; a product of more profound underlying forces than the above definition can possibly intimate. This is because multiculturalism is clearly a political response to deeply political - and *economic* - tensions.

Over the past 30-60 years western European nation states have experienced large influxes of disparate ethnic and religious groups. A means of accommodating these groups both to the coercive-legal state apparatus of their new nation state and, crucially, to *other* ethnic and religious groups within that nation-state, needed to be found to ensure the peaceful continuation of stable society. In short, multiculturalism has been that answer.

More specifically, the past 30-60 years have seen a processes migration into western states driven by two factors in particular. First (and particularly in the more immediate post-war era) former colonial powers accepted the influx of cheap-labour provided by migrants from former exploited territories, who aided post-war recovery and economic advancement, but then stayed and settled families as citizens with relatively distinct ethno-religious cultures. In Britain this mostly meant migration from the Indian sub-continent, and the West Indies. In France it was north, and to a lesser extent west, Africa. Other west European nation states have different ethnic migration

patterns largely depending on their relevant political-economic histories. Germany's complex relation with Turkey, and its present large ethnic-Turk minority, reflects its unique, complex and not-quite-colonial history.

The second major factor is the advent of truly globalised capitalism, which demands enormous cross-border flows of not just goods and services, but also of labour. Demand for migrant work has been high in west European nation states, and foreign-born labourers have been prepared to take the menial and poorly-paid work native citizens have had the luxury of being able to turn down. (Thus the recent phenomenon of east European labour in west European states and the concerns of how many of these peoples may be "[flocking](#)" to ones shores).

These two factors have meant that, increasingly, west European nation states have needed to accommodate influxes of different groups over different times, many of whom brought deep (and not-so-deep) cultural differences with them. Luckily, within the frameworks of broadly liberal and broadly secular modern nation states this has been largely possible. Indeed looked at in the context of Europe's long and bloody history of sectarian religious violence, post-war multiculturalism has, if anything, been a resounding historical *success*. Western nation states have not disintegrated into bloody inter-group massacre, and for the most part immigrant communities have accepted the social, political and economic inequalities that come with being a near-permanent economic lower class with remarkable good will and passivity. Similarly, grumbling from figureheads of dominant "native" cultures has largely been kept precisely to grumbling, rather than vicious political persecution (though France may be [trying to change things](#)).

When Merkel declares that multiculturalism has been a "failure", she is not only playing to a xenophobic and reactionary gallery, she is also being profoundly short-sighted. Firstly, because she mistakenly focuses only on the day-to-day tensions between different groups that multiculturalism inevitable throws up. Given the great social and economic tensions western nation states face in an increasingly economically globalised world (and as the rise and thankful fall of the British National Front in the 1980s shows, this is nothing particularly new), it is *unsurprising* that multiculturalism does not always run smoothly. It is *unsurprising* that dominant ethno-cultural groups – i.e. white Christians (and secularised former Christians) – resent and fear the unknown and different Other "taking over" areas of cities where the *white native* Christian working class formerly lived and provided labour. It is *unsurprising* that white Christian working classes feeling marginalised and vulnerable thanks to receding skilled economic opportunities in a globalised economic world. It is *unsurprising* that they blame the Others who are perceived as "taking" jobs, and whose non-native cultural identities are read as offensively invasive. And it is *unsurprising* that economically and politically marginalised immigrant communities hunker-down and cling fiercely to their shared cultural heritages in the face of hostile native majorities, thus "refusing" to "integrate" in the manner demanded by dominant cultural groups.

Precisely because multiculturalism is a political solution to very serious and complex underlying political and economic tensions, it is imperfect in its daily workings and experiences periodic tensions, aggravations and crises of confidence within and between heterogeneous groups. Having said that, multiculturalism does also boast some [unambiguous successes](#) – but which Merkel pays little attention to in decrying it a "failure".

Secondly – and as importantly – Merkel's comments betray no grasp of the underlying economic and political problems which underpin the political arrangement she chastises. Multiculturalism is a response to a world in which the mobility of labour necessitates political compromise, and thus the development of a *modus vivendi* between groups. The logic of economics (especially modern

trans-national capitalism) is always global and disrespectful of historically-created national borders. But the logic of modern democratic politics is by necessity *national*. Economic forces propel (and have in the past propelled) migrant labour across arbitrary national boundaries, thus transplanting and re-rooting different ethnic and cultural communities within different nation states. Transplanted groups themselves develop and react over time, not least to further generations of migrants as well as the established “native” culture of any given state.

Political tensions within nation states inevitably develop precisely because one *nation* no longer underpins one *state*. It is hopeless to brand multiculturalism a “failure”, therefore, without acknowledging the underlying economic forces that have brought it into existence and make it a very necessary feature of contemporary West European politics. Merkel's (wilful?) ignorance is aptly displayed when she gives a speech claiming multiculturalism has “failed”, yet which the BBC can report as “[making] clear that immigrants [are] welcome in Germany.”

And it is, finally, worth asking: if multiculturalism has “failed”, what exactly does Merkel think can be put in its place? Given the above it should be clear that multiculturalism – contrary to the myths of many of its right-wing detractors – is not some sinister imposition of the “politically correct” left, but a spontaneous and necessary response to the fundamental political and economic challenges faced by west European nation states. Multiculturalism is an accommodation, a way of trying to contain potentially explosive forces without resorting to the intolerance and jack-booted politics that led west Europe (and the rest of the world) into so much grief and bloodshed in the last century.

One worries what Ms Merkel thinks could possibly replace multiculturalism. One also hopes that a German Chancellor, of all people, will be especially alive to the dangers that lurk beneath a discourse of claiming that this most difficult of modern political solutions has “utterly failed”.