

REVIEW ARTICLES

Multiculturalism: Theoretical Challenges from Anthropology

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John Nagle, 2009, *Multiculturalism's Double Bind: Creating Inclusivity, Cosmopolitanism & Difference*. Farnham: Ashgate.

and

Giuliana B. Prato (ed.), 2009, *Beyond Multiculturalism: Views from Anthropology*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Both these books are published in the Urban Anthropology Series. Both are concerned with examining multiculturalism from an anthropological viewpoint - that is, from the close study of particular situations - but otherwise they are remarkably different publications. John Nagle's book is primarily concerned with minorities in a 'global city' seeking to take advantage of state-sponsored multiculturalism, through grants to people organizing 'ethnic' arts festivals etc.. The irony is that ethnic groups are encouraged to make their cultures inclusive and accessible in order to contribute to a 'liberal-pluralist celebration of cosmopolitan diversity. Yet, at the same time they must maintain their ethnic differences in order to maintain their rights to maintain their claim as a distinctive group to resources. Nagle looks particularly at those claiming an Irish identity in inner London Boroughs, such as Camden, particularly during the '80s and '90s as leading members sought to move 'the Irish' into the category of a recognised 'ethnic' group. *Beyond Multiculturalism*, on the other hand, is a collection of papers dealing with ethnographic accounts ranging from Europe, with papers on a wide variety of topics that, amongst other things, examine immigration of outsiders from many areas into Southern Italy, and Vienna, to the analysis in China and India (Calcutta), of the influx, within a single state, into urban areas of rural peoples with very different cultures. There are also papers on particular situations in Canada and Argentina; and also on the migrant family as a cross cultural kin-based organisation.

The most challenging essay is the Introduction to the latter book by the editor, Giuliana Prato, in which she confronts key important issues. Multiculturalism is widely seen as 'benign'. It is widely assumed amongst the intelligentsia of the democratic west that it is indisputably a morally

good thing for states to be ‘multicultural’ for this term assumes that an underlying ‘philosophical good will’ translates ‘into policies that truly promote pluralism, the peaceful coexistence of diverse cultures and equal citizenship’. In relation to each of these assumed results, she raises questions.

Writing this in the week that has seen the Norwegian massacres carried out by a self-proclaimed opponent of multiculturalism, I understand the difficulty of publicly doubting whether multiculturalism is benign, but Prato, confronting detailed analyses of the consequences of so called multicultural policies, has the courage to raise doubts, and in doing so raises also fundamental issues. She doubts whether the assumptions behind the multicultural project can stand up to analysis. A common assumption is that the host society is an undifferentiated cultural entity, and that a minority group, moving into it, presents an unchanging cultural object that needs to have its culture protected. Both assumptions, she thinks, are faulty because they make false judgements about the very nature of culture; ‘culture’ refers to learned behaviour and is not genetically inherited so it is inherently malleable. The indigenous population of a ‘host’ society normally manifests different cultures; and an incoming group changes culturally even when shown toleration. Multiculturalism is, moreover, an obstacle to integration because ‘[by] celebrating diversity in the form of group membership, [it] does not break down cultural barriers but reinforces them’. And, fundamentally, she posits an irreducible dilemma between individual and group rights on two counts. Positive discrimination on the basis of membership of a minority group in effect means that the state empowers the leaders of such groups to which privileges have been granted, to define the rights of their individual members, and this may have the effect of confining them within the group instead of granting them equality of opportunity in the society as a whole. Positive discrimination by the political class, also, on the other hand ‘grants privileges to selected minorities (and) creates new forms of inequality’ that commonly further disadvantage sections of the host society that were already disadvantaged – Thus the ultimate question is raised ‘is multiculturalism compatible with equal citizenship for all?’. Prato confronts these uncomfortable ideas and introduces examples of a variety of types of multicultural situations presented in this book and musters the empirically based insights of ethnographers into the increasingly complex and ambiguous concept of multiculturalism. For reasons of space I can comment on only a selection of the papers here presented.

In relation to Southern Italy, Pardo builds on his very fine earlier studies of the ‘popolino’, the ‘little people’, of Naples, the very disadvantaged local inhabitants, historically and in contemporary society the abused targets first of the aristocracy and in recent years of corrupt politicians, to show how the ordinary citizen continues to lose out. He examines the situation in Naples from this viewpoint and places the lack of integration of non-E.U. immigrants in the context of the failed integration of the indigenous Neapolitan. He sees the irony in the multicultural demand made on them today that those who have never been respected by others should now show toleration and respect for the cultures of immigrants even when some of the latter make no secret of their own lack of any respect for the culture either of the popolino or of Italians generally.

Fong, writing on Canada presents the dangerous slope that had to be negotiated when an apparent simple initial decision in the post 1945 era, to grant equal status to Francophone and Anglophone rights was taken up by those who promptly demanded equal rights for the speakers of indigenous languages, to be followed by the claims of immigrants from a range of other areas, that their languages too should be respected. The question is raised – does all this ultimately promote the equality of citizens?

A chapter on the influx of an indigenous ethnic group into Rosario, a large urban area in Argentina previously devoid of native South American inhabitants, shows the complexity of the problems that arise when a population accustomed to exercising special rights as indigenous inhabitants expect to translate such rights into their new urban environment. These rights include linguistic and educational priority; control of land and the right to have their indigenous medical practices recognised. Should their demands ‘involving the presence of aboriginal medical practitioners in the public hospitals’ be accepted as their multicultural right?

A chapter that discusses the structures of immigrant families in multicultural societies raises other very significant issues that have implications for integration. It has been generally assumed by ‘host’ governments that in two to three generations, the children of the original new arrivals will cease to have linguistic problems, and in general families, even while retaining elements of their original culture, will in fact be in many respects ‘acculturated’. But in the modern era of easy communications such assumptions may be false. Mobile phones and emails can mean daily contacts between family members resident in different parts of the globe. Relatively cheap flights may mean frequent visits as those who have gone abroad for economic

reasons return 'home' for holidays. Rubel and Rosman look at the 'transnational' family 'as it is manifested by the Tongans and the Dominicans and south-east Asian Indian families in the USA, the Pakistani family in Britain and Sikhs in many areas.

As I have seen it, the transnational family is of great significance amongst the Bangladeshis in London. This is evident at two levels. The father of a family in the East End may have his interest so fixed on raising his status in Bangladesh that he ploughs his savings (that may come in part from family welfare payments, at cost to his wife and children) into buildings in his home village. At the same time he may strengthen alliances with important people there by negotiating marriage alliances for his children with families in his home village. In fact it is still not the norm for marriages to be contracted between young people already resident in the U.K. Such traditional contracts demand not only that individuals should be of the right caste, but also be actual cousins.

Interestingly, the custom of arranged marriages may involve the confrontation of the state with the fundamental multicultural rule, that immigrants' cultural practices be respected. As Prato points out this rule can lead, via political correctness, to moral relativism. This demands that the indigenous population must not object to cultural practices that offend their moral norms; and the organs of the state must not object either. Certainly this was until recently the case in places like the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, where social services have been reluctant to notice the problems of women generally, and in particular of young teen-age girls forced into unwelcome marriages. In recent years, however, there has been a growing awareness of the fact that such girls, taken by their parents 'on holiday' to Bangladesh, may have their passports removed, be browbeaten (if nothing worse) into accepting the father's choice of husband, and then be allowed to return to the UK only with husband, and hopefully baby, in tow. When I asked a girl to tell me what she most hoped for in marriage she answered promptly: 'a husband who sees me as more than a travel ticket'. More recently so called 'forced marriage' has been identified as a public service scandal because the institutions that should protect British youngsters fail them (and these teenagers, boys as well as girls, are especially valued as marriage partners in Bangladesh precisely because they hold British passports that entitle them to enter the U.K. accompanied by a spouse). The result has been direct conflict between two opposing principles – the right of immigrants to pursue their own cultural practices, and the rights to protection of all British

citizens. In a few extreme cases, the state has imprisoned, to their considerable indignation, male immigrants who have killed or injured recalcitrant female kin.

Against such complex backgrounds showing the varieties of multiculturalism, it is instructive to return again to the London of the 1980s onwards, and the very detailed study by John Nagle of the environment of state-sponsored multiculturalism and the endeavours of some Irish leaders to benefit from the advantages to be gained from achieving an 'ethnic minority' status. He shows with meticulous detail, the very tangible benefits that the Greater London Council, under the leadership of Ken Livingstone, who was aiming at 'municipal socialism' based on a network of sub-group alliances, was making available to those it classified as disadvantaged ethnic minorities. Unsurprisingly, the aim of these Irish leaders was to reap the reward such a status would bestow on the organisations they represented. It seems that particular official encouragement was given to the Irish organisations, possibly linked to the fact that Livingstone was nursing a parliamentary seat in Brent with a very high Irish population. Cynics might say that the programme, unconstrained, would have taken a significant step in the direction of pork-barrel politics. From my own experience in Camden at this time, I know that the greatest advantage was gained by those groups classified as 'Black'. Extra funding for example was made available to schools with a high percentage of 'black' pupils, and the local authority instructed them to classify Greek Cypriot children as Black. Various Irish organisations, I was told made an understandable, but ultimately unsuccessful, bid for this classification; but Nagle documents the successes they achieved, even against the opposition of many middle class Irish immigrants, of whom there were an increasing number, in their striving for 'ethnic minority' status. The greatest achievement of the leaders was the attainment of a separate, Irish, category on the 2001 and 2011 U.K. census forms. On this, people were invited to tick the 'Irish' box if they 'regarded themselves as of Irish cultural background', even if they were not born in Ireland and could not show evidence of Irish ancestry. (The leaders seem not to have been outstandingly successful in getting people to adopt this identification since in the event those who ticked this box were fewer than those known to have been born in Ireland.)

It has been difficult to review together two books that, despite both dealing with multiculturalism and both doing so from an explicitly anthropological basis, are so very different. *Beyond Multiculturalism* suffers from the problems inevitable in a book based on a wide range of papers. In comparison the narrative of *Multiculturalism's Double Bind*, that considers in depth

the case primarily of a group of leaders, is easy to grasp as they seek to take advantage of state-sponsored multiculturalism, to raise the profile of their social network and turn it into a recognised ethnic group. The story, well handled, is a remarkable tale of what may prove ultimately to have been a unique situation. It is undoubtedly a good read. I would not say that of the other volume, but ultimately *Beyond Multiculturalism* is the more rewarding as it bubbles with ideas and challenges readers to think seriously about multifarious social situations, all of them labeled ‘multicultural’.