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MULTICULTURALISM AND GLOBALISM

Pat Wong

As much as “globalisation” is the buzzword today, “multiculturalism” continues to share the global spotlight. Appropriately or inappropriately, societies are all too conveniently termed “multicultural”, too often on the basis of a single criterion—population diversity. Following that definition alone, it would appear that many countries today are multicultural. Japan, often cited as an example of a homogenous society, would be multicultural. So would Indonesia. So would, in fact, Iraq. Does the trend toward multiculturalism have anything to do with globalisation? Do the two concepts overlap or are they mutually exclusive?

There are at least two divergent views of multiculturalism. One is that it is a unifying movement—through its essential thrust of “recognition”. The other is that it further divides, unnecessarily divides, in fact, balkanises—through the calcification of group-differentiated rights. The roots of multiculturalism are western,

more specifically North American. “Recognition” and “group-differentiated rights” therefore are specifically relevant to societies like Canada and the United States with respective histories of the denial of recognition and equal rights to indigenous and other minority ethnic groups.

Multiculturalism, both as a concept and a practice in its various guises, however, continues despite the fact that its earliest incarnation in the 1950s was misunderstood. Certainly, it is a murky concept in our local understanding of it and since this essay’s intended readership is primarily Singaporean, it would be profitable to survey its import and its ramifications before bringing into the discussion globalisation.

So what is multiculturalism? As is often the case, it might be easier, particularly so in this instance, to say what multiculturalism is not. Multiculturalism is not simply diversity.

It is not merely the coexistence within a single society of diverse ethnicities. I think “ethnicity” is more preferable a term to engage in than “race”. The most popular concept of race is that it is essential or natural. This is of course not the case, and in order to pre-empt any position that stems from the long-held notions of the essential quality of “race”, “ethnicity” might be a more profitable—that is to say, less fraught with misplaced emotion that comes with “essential”—term to use. Ethnicity at least posits the idea that one is not merely born so but born into, and what one is born into speaks of environment and some degree of self-determination. Ethnicity speaks of being part of a community that identifies itself through its cultural roots and orientation—“race” can certainly be a part of that, though not the only factor—despite its exposure to other cultural roots and orientation, and not because of the heritage of blood and of kinship that derives only from bloodline. For example, my ethnicity is Chinese if I were to identify myself in Singapore. My ethnicity would be Chinese Singaporean if I were to identify myself outside Singapore. I am Chinese by race only because my identity card says so. It means something within Singapore—I am not “Malay” or “Indian” or “Eurasian” or some other labelling that would appear under “Race” in our identity cards. By the same measure, it is relatively meaningless to say that I am Chinese by race outside Singapore. If you like, that is at best incomplete. It may indicate that I might be able to

trace my ancestry to physical China, to ancestors who called themselves Chinese unequivocally because of location, in a time when the definition of “nation” differs markedly from our notions of nation, when “a people” held a much more homogenous definition.¹

So multiculturalism is not merely about the existence within a society of different ethnic groups. Multiculturalism is also not a mere display of peaceful coexistence. “Racial harmony — polyphonic harmonisation (?)—is often cited by foreign observers as a feature of Singapore’s multiculturalism. But a careful observer of our official line would note that our leaders almost never refer to Singapore’s “multiculturalism”; instead, multiracialism is what is underscored. Peaceful coexistence alone, then, of diverse groups, whether one segments these groups through ethnicity, “race”, politics, class or educational background, is not what makes a society multicultural.

As multiculturalism is not a mere display, it follows that the pageantry mounted on Racial Harmony Day in many of our schools, for example, is not an indication of multiculturalism. Costumes and food may speak of heritage and tradition, but the concerted display of music and musical instruments, of dance and crafts, the partaking of others’ food—these are not necessarily the manifestations of multiculturalism. For if they were, what then is the difference

between multiculturalism and multiracialism?

All right, then: multiculturalism is not multiracialism. Let's compare the instance of Singapore and the United States. How has the United States arrived at "multicultural"? It has done so through a very conscious effort in recent decades to recognise fully the many groups of people who have been left out of its national consciousness for far too long. These groups include blacks, Native Americans, Latino/Latinas and Asians, who had all along contributed to the larger enterprise of the "united states", but who had been systematically ignored in the construction of the overarching (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) American identity. It meant, of course, that much or almost all of their individual and collective history—including state, regional and national contributions—was omitted or obliterated. In recent decades, however, the groups mentioned above (and many others) were rehabilitated in the American national consciousness, re-inserted, named, in fact, recognised.² The United States, then, so long functioning as a *de facto* monocultural state, finally valorised through its embracing of its many hitherto-unrecognised groups of people its diverse nature. It was always a diverse land, only the recognition of its diversity came much later—in fact, only in the last three or four decades of its 227-year history.³

Singapore, on the other hand, has always recognised its diversity. As an

independent and sovereign nation from 1965, one of the underpinning tenets of our statehood has been that the "four major races" are not only officially recognised but accorded equal status. So while the United States has recognised its diversity through highlighting its diverse cultures, Singapore has pinned its diversity through the ostensibly more "essential" differences emanating from race. To illustrate further the differences between the United States' multiculturalism and Singapore's multiracialism, I would like to introduce the following diagrams.

Diagram 1 might represent the United States through much of its history: where the idea of a "melting pot" existed, and where the melting pot could not integrate or resisted the integration of certain groups of people, we might see the large circle representing the melting pot and the smaller circles on the periphery representing minority groups which were excluded.⁴ (We might in fact put a line across each of the smaller circles to indicate that each was under erasure.) Diagram 2 then represents the efforts of inclusiveness—where the larger circle of Diagram 1 represents status quo and the normative, the larger circle in Diagram 2 now embraces all groups. The larger circle that previously represented the "in" group has been redefined and the original larger circle now takes its place alongside the other circles within the (new) status quo.

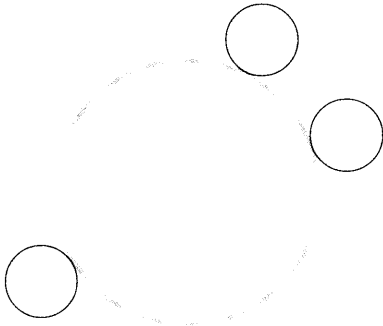


Diagram 1

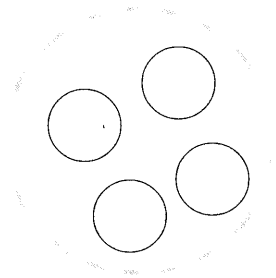


Diagram 2

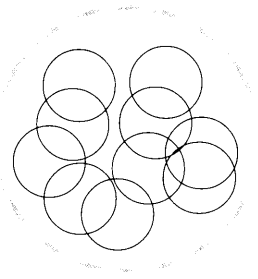


Diagram 2a

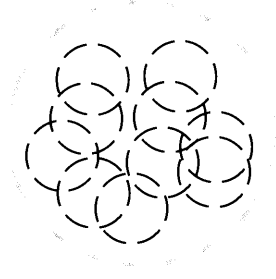


Diagram 3

Since diversity is defined through culture in a multicultural model, we need not stop at the progress suggested by Diagram 2. With Diagram 2a, we see a further development. We see that circles overlap. The possibility suggested here is that cultures by nature adapt and evolve, and very often there is as much similarity as there is difference among cultures. American critics of multiculturalism, however, have seized upon the difference that the non-overlapping

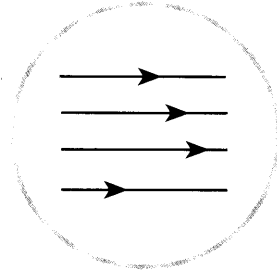
parts represent, lamenting that multiculturalism has rent asunder the idea of “one nation under God”. These critics would say that with multiculturalism too many unnecessary new boundaries now exist—boundaries here referring to the re-surfacing of ethnic identification—and would in fact see the multicultural model to be represented by Diagram 2, with its discrete inner circles suggesting a society re-segmentalising along ethnic lines. To them, this is

objectionable since the preferred model of “one nation under God” would be Diagram 1a. And what is 1a? This is a single circle; there are no aberrant smaller circles on its periphery. But this, of course, reverts dangerously back to the old principle of assimilation, in fact, the melting pot with its inherently racist ideology.

What I see of multiculturalism is a much more optimistic one—one in which there is due recognition of difference and yet “borders” are transcended. This would be graphically represented by Diagram 3. The dotted lines suggest differences that come from ethnicity and culture, but also more realistically allow for individual and/or group potential to change, adapt and evolve. (In other words, if cultures and ethnicities are static, then different cultures and ethnicities within the same political borders are merely cohabitating, never transformed by any vibrant co-existence with other cultures and ethnicities.) People are free to move between categories. Let us specify that with one example: someone who is bicultural because of parentage or other circumstances has the immeasurable freedom to transcend the need for categorisation.

So which diagram best illustrates Singapore’s multiracialism? Unhesitatingly it would be Diagram 2. Since race is the basis of our diversity, and race is “essential”, there is little room for manoeuvring. While culture may involve overlapping circles, as in Diagram 2a, race does not. There is,

of course, another possible representation of the multiracial model. It is this:



The outer circle corrals, marshals, ensures consensus and works for a common cause; the inner lines similarly point toward a common objective. The inner lines, however, are steadfastly parallel.

So multiculturalism is not multiracialism, at least not from the two respective models discussed above. It is, more emphatically, not a mere recognition of diversity, but as it originated in the West, it is a conscious political, historical and social realignment and re-imagining of one’s society.

So what then of globalisation? Does globalisation, in terms of the “multiculturalising” trend of many societies today, mean that all societies have become homogenous in a new way?⁵ That is, they are beginning to become more and more alike—that through immigration into each national boundary there are many of the same ethnic and cultural groupings? And then there is the larger, dare I say, more insidious (invidious?)

question of countries willing to be more alike: think markets, MNCs, consumerism; think about the global adoption of commercial labels, the absorption of popular icons from Madonna to the golden arches that have helped to make us all live in a single “global village”.

In the most superficial way, globalisation, through (relatively) new channels of dissemination and exchange like the Internet, free trade and popular culture, has made the world seem more multicultural—in the sense that elements of previously distant and/or inaccessible foreign cultures have found their way around the globe. But if this has resulted in the moderation of existing societies, this is merely cross-fertilisation at work. This has been happening for centuries, perhaps millennia. Globalisation is a measurement—a measurement of the acceleration of that process. That and the thrust of modernity have created what we call today “global cities”. All this, however, does not (necessarily) mean our societies are more multicultural. It means we have created large urban areas that have become holding zones for whatever passes for “modernity” or “western” (often assumed to be synonymous with “modernity”) or “having arrived”.

Instead of societies becoming more multicultural, we have invested in the much more superficial process of creating similar or even identical urban areas. (Every city worth its 21st century credentials would not easily turn down the architectural fingerprints of a Rem Koolhaas, a Norman Foster or a Frank Gehry. And is it true that an air

traveller, having flown from Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport, knows exactly where the toilets are at Changi?) It can mean that these urban areas will become far removed in sensibility and self-consciousness from their national hinterlands, that is, from the rest of their respective nations. (This is along the lines of that old tussle between cosmopolitan and heartlander.) It can also mean that often the urban area in question has lost much of its recognisable character as “the” or “an” urban area of a particular nation. Apart from such incidental differences as latitudinal or longitudinal positioning, Rio de Janeiro will be Berne will be Shanghai will be Kuala Lumpur will be Sydney will be Boston. (And imagine the golden arches all lit up as runways for global Santa, ho ho ho.)

No, globalisation has little of the humanising aspects of multiculturalism. It recognises not the uniqueness of peoples, only the uniqueness of societies that can be measured by how many phone companies can compete in each before market saturation is reached. Much as we are often tempted to think so, globalisation does not make us all alike through making us aware of universal humanity. It makes us all more alike because we eat, drink, buy, watch, enjoy, play with and form attachments to (things) more alike. This brings us back to the “display of peaceful co-existence”. Who says we need to understand and respect each other more? We have large-screen televisions to meet and cyberplaces to go.

Notes

- ¹ See for example the discussions of “nation” by such cultural commentators as Michael Walzer, Nathan Glazer and Will Kymlicka.
- ² See for example, Charles Taylor’s “The Politics of Recognition”, David Theo Goldberg, ed., *Multiculturalism, A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1994), in which the issue of “recognition” is put in perspective.
- ³ If we started chronicling the settling of the North American continent by Europeans, specifically in the areas that became the United States in

1776, that diversity might go back another century and a half, and perhaps all the way back to 1492.

- ⁴ It is important to remind ourselves that “melting pot” as was adopted by and referred to the United States was specific to “the great melting pot where *all the races of Europe* are melting and re-forming” (italics mine), as penned by British playwright Israel Zangwill in his play *The Melting Pot*.

- ⁵ I say “multiculturalising” because once again we need to be reminded that far too many societies today are either calling themselves so or are being labelled so by the international media.

I consider the world as made for me, not me for the world. It is my maxim therefore to enjoy it while I can, and let futurity shift for itself.

Roderick Random, 45
Tobias Smollett (1721–1771)