

Multiculturalism as a method?

It wasn't long ago when the British Prime Minister stated that multiculturalism in the UK had failed. As predicted, such a statement raised polarised opinions and invoked the need for much more sensible, in-depth analysis and discussion. In fact, some weeks later, it is worth thinking again about his statements as they reflect fears shared by many across Europe, while simultaneously providing other European countries with an easy platform to endorse, and therefore justify, their anti-multiculturalism policies and practices.

I believe Cameron's statements were wrong for three main reasons.

First, because of where they were made. Germany is governed by Angela Merkel, who has positioned herself in the cultural and philosophical tradition of Christian roots in Europe. As a Christian, she is a true interpreter of the discourse surrounding Christianity that underpins European development and positioning, and as such has shown that belief can be mainstreamed into actions, as indicated by the more political and less pastoral views of Pope Benedict XVI.

Second, is *when* Cameron's speech took place. At the time, Tunisia's uprising was showing the world the possibility of a modern Islamic democracy. Europe failed to understand the situation — as it is failing now —, thinking that such an uprising would be limited to Tunisia. Hardly anyone in Europe would have guessed that such desire for freedom would lead millions to protest and hundreds to lose their lives, sacrificing themselves in the name of liberty from atrocious and degrading regimes.

Third, Cameron's speech was given at a conference on security that linked multiculturalism, and especially Islam, with terrorism.

However, with the news showing what is happening in North Africa, it should be clear that the biggest threat does not come from other cultures but from failing to embrace their call for democracy, and their cry for citizenship. Millions of Libyans, Algerians and Tunisians live and work in Europe. Embracing their genuine and generational uprisings, instead of fearing them, as well as opening up for those escaping and supporting those who remain, should be the mission of a modern Europe.

Indeed, Cameron's remarks are the direct consequence of the common fear described above and the lack of a strategic long-term perspective on the role of Europe. It is probably the same fear that led to the UK's threat to drop out of the European Convention of Human Rights over the issue of prisoners' right to vote.

It is a shame. The UK could show Europe a way forward in these uncertain European times.

While France has been pursuing strategies reminiscent of Nazism, evicting Roma camps and deporting people on the grounds of their ethnicity, the UK has shown how culture, faith and background can co-exist, by nurturing one other and sharing the same space.

Of course, nothing is perfect, and this has its limits. It would be wrong to say that because people live together then multiculturalism works.

The reality is, probably, that multiculturalism cannot succeed or fail. Multiculturalism is, in itself, a matter of fact. It exists, as a natural consequence of people's movements and individuals' aspirations to relocate to where it is better for them. Of itself, therefore, multiculturalism is meaningless.

What it is worth doing, therefore, is to define it appropriately, in order to identify a way forward and respond to fears and uncertainty.

I believe multiculturalism should be defined as a *method*, applied to decide and make policies aimed at creating social cohesion. Multiculturalism, in other words, becomes a tool; a way to define strategies, value options and inform choices. As a tool, multiculturalism can become a powerful instrument to establish democratic governance and inclusive development.

To make it less abstract, it is worth applying multiculturalism to one of the most controversial and populist topics of discussion. All across Europe, countries and governments tend to use women's rights as a powerful argument to point out differences and limitations to successful integration; claiming that it is impossible to mediate and negotiate with cultures which place women in a subservient position.

Multiculturalism as a tool could provide a rigorous instrument for analysis and intervention. First of all, it would need indicators against which to measure success: evidence, statistics, comparative data and best practice. It would show how violence against women does not have boundaries, class divisions or ethnic background. It would show how women in Europe die more from battery and abuse than from accident and disease.

Such an instrument would also demonstrate how women's rights are nurtured by access to education and health care, In addition, it would prove how necessary it is to embrace a gendered approach to community and social development, and how essential are rules which regulate equal political and institutional representation.

In a context where women are used as a battleground to create division between peoples and cultures, multiculturalism would provide a genuine way to progress women's rights for all.

If multiculturalism is a tool, it needs shared values against which to measure it. This is a crucial point. Using multiculturalism as a method would lead inevitably to a debate on which those shared values are.

However difficult, this debate needs to take place.

Democracy is undoubtedly a demanding exercise and values are not established once and for all. Identifying which values keep a community together within the context of a pluralism of communities is, in itself, the practice of exercising democracy. No one should fear this debate as long as the method applied to its development is, once again, multiculturalism.

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