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An excess of alterity? Debating difference in a multicultural society

Ralph Grillo

Abstract
Debates about the incompatibility of different ways of living are occurring in the UK as in most multicultural societies. These debates, which include diverse voices among both majority and minority ethnic populations, may be observed in public policies, the speeches of politicians and religious leaders, printed media, radio, television, the Internet, in novels, plays and films, and ethnographically in everyday conversations. One point of view, now widely expressed in Europe, is that multicultural countries have become ‘too diverse’, and the presence of communities adhering to values at odds with those of ‘Western’ secular society threaten cohesion. Focusing on the UK, the article examines what has been called a ‘cultural-diversity skeptical turn’ or ‘backlash against difference’, emphasizes the ‘fuzziness’ of the concepts involved, and proposes that the backlash should be understood *inter alia* in terms of the problems of the governability of what are, in a neo-liberal, transnationalized ecumene, increasingly fragmented societies.

Keywords: Integration; multiculturalism; diversity; difference; UK.

European multi-ethnic, multicultural societies have gone through three phases in the governance of diversity. From the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth, when national and racial stereotypes were at their strongest and closely linked, the principal way of dealing with ethnic/cultural difference was to abolish it. Nation-states sought to ‘nationalize’ their regions and there was an expectation that immigrants (if admitted at all, and there were often strenuous objections to admitting anyone of a different ‘racial’, ethnic, national or linguistic background) should *assimilate*, conform to what were perceived as relatively homogeneous national norms. By the mid-1960s, an ideology of assimilation became harder to sustain (Grillo 1998), and in a second phase, which persisted through much of the second half of the
twentieth century, there was a shift to what may be called ‘integration plus’ (*infra*). National norms were increasingly perceived as heterogeneous, and the diversity of identities and values represented by immigrants could, it was thought, up to a point, be accommodated within a ‘multicultural’ framework. Generally, though by no means universally, and certainly not uniformly, there was growing recognition of the legitimacy of claims of immigrant/refugee/ethnic minorities to be ‘different’, certainly in the private sphere, especially around issues such as language, religion and family life, and acceptance, in public rhetoric, that negative discrimination on racial and other grounds should not be tolerated.

This assessment of a passage to an identity-benign form of integration may seem overly sanguine, and with some justice it might be argued there was no slackening of racism or xenophobia, with, in Britain, Powellism in the 1960s, the National Front in the 1970s and the British National Party [BNP] in the 1990s, illustrating their abiding presence. Nonetheless, in a multitude of ways attitudes towards ‘race’ and racism, and interethnic relations generally, changed significantly between 1960 and 1990 (Amin 2003; Gilroy 2004). By the early years of the twenty-first century, however, there was mounting evidence for what has been called a ‘cultural-diversity sceptical turn’ (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2005), or ‘backlash’ (Grillo 2003). Indeed, the period seems characterized by a European-wide moral panic about ‘difference’, apparent in populist movements (such as the BNP) which make rejection of difference a central plank in their policies, but also in wider public debates about the rights and wrongs of different ways of living and the governance of diversity.

These debates, which include diverse voices among majority and minority ethnic populations, may be observed in the speeches of politicians and religious leaders, policy statements and strategies, the media, the writings of academics, Internet discussion groups, and everyday conversations. One point of view, now widely expressed in Europe, is that immigration has led to an ‘excess of alterity’ (Sartori 2002) with countries becoming ‘too diverse’ (Goodhart 2004), and the presence of communities with values at odds with those of ‘Western’ secular society threatening social cohesion. This ‘backlash’, which some have interpreted as a return to ‘assimilationism’ (Back *et al* 2002; cf. Brubaker 2001; Sivanandan 2006) is a more complex, multifaceted, multivocal phenomenon, and the primary purpose of this article is to expose this complexity by examining how certain ‘fuzzy concepts’ (Markusen 2003) – integration, multiculturalism, diversity, difference – have been deployed in debates within the UK. What emerges is a concern about governability, based on an imagined ‘strong’ multiculturalism, which it is believed permits ‘diversity’ to become ‘difference’. The essay explores the reasons behind this shift
and considers the implications for contemporary academic theories of multiculturalism.

Investigating this discursive terrain poses problems for anthropology. The discipline’s ‘signature practice’ (Marcus 1998, p. 120) is still considered to be ethnography. Anthropologists prefer local-level fieldwork entailing detailed analyses of closely interconnected sets of institutions, discourses and practices, which through the ‘orchestration and representation (or evocation) of voice’ (Marcus 1998, p. 13) bring out the complexity and ambiguities of what, in the present case, Schierup (1996) might call ‘actually existing multiculturalism’. While ethnography of the ‘local’, excavated through fieldwork, remains crucial, when lives are ‘multi-sited’ and/or imbricated in events and processes distant from immediate experience, which nonetheless constantly impinge on them, it cannot be the discipline’s end-all it once was (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Alternative strategies are necessary. Hence the attraction of Holmes (2000) whose ‘project’ Marcus characterizes as ‘piecing together the manifestations, resemblances, and appeals of certain related discourses that have made themselves present’ (1998, p. 124).

Against a background of the ethnography of the UK and other European countries (notably France and Italy), the article draws on a ‘multi-sited imaginary’ (Marcus 1998) through which certain events can be contextualized, and certain ‘texts’, sometimes written, sometimes spoken, can be analysed. Modood et al. (2006) comment that academic writing on multiculturalism has been either ‘normative’, operating at an abstract level, with the assumption that ‘philosophical reflection alone will provide philosophical solutions to the apparent problems of liberal multiculturalism’ (p. 5), or ‘institutionalist’ (in the political scientist’s sense); they seek to link and go beyond both approaches, and inter alia emphasise the importance of contextualization. Anthropologists would agree, but would also stress the importance of understanding what actually happens ‘on the ground’, a crucial aspect of which is the subjective dimension, the ideas, models, projects, definitions, discourses etc that actors bring to bear on a situation, sometimes very hesitantly, often seeking to work with (or clarify) concepts that are difficult, opaque, elusive, and with multiple contested meanings. In other words they are ‘fuzzy’, and one of anthropology’s tasks is documenting the complexities of the fuzzy concepts that people use everyday.

Integration?

Let me begin with an episode that illustrates some of these points. It occurred during a conference held in January 2005, hosted by the Runnymede Trust, to launch the UK government’s strategy, Improving...
Opportunity, Strengthening Society (Home Office 2005). Attended by some 500 delegates, there were workshops, plenary sessions with ministers, with the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (Trevor Phillips), and with Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh, and a ‘Question Time’ in which a distinguished panel was quizzed by the audience. One question concerned ‘integration’. A Mr S asked what he should do as a Muslim to show that he had integrated. Did it mean, for example, that he must stop praying five times a day and ‘start going to a pub during the lunch hour with my colleagues for a pint’? Panellist Sir Iqbal Sacranie (then Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain) said he too would like to know the answer, but believed that being British meant sharing some common values while not abandoning what differentiates one from others. Going to the pub, for example, ‘cannot be enforced on any other person: unless you go to the pub you can’t be a good British citizen!’ For Michelynn Lafleche (Director, Runnymede Trust) the debate about ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘integration’ had added little to understanding:

It has caused many problems in terms of how the general population understand what it is to be a diverse society, what it means to live in a society where we come from different backgrounds. We have different traditions but we also share a common space together, and how do we build that successfully? So we need to have a clear understanding of what “integration” is and a shared understanding of what that means, but it certainly doesn’t mean that one culture predominates over another, and other cultures therefore have to fit into that culture.

Fiona Mactaggart (MP, then Parliamentary Under Secretary for Race Equality, Community Policy and Civil Renewal) claimed that the Government’s consultation document Strength in Diversity (Home Office 2004b), provided the answer: ‘You don’t have to merge cultures together, you don’t have to assimilate people into one grey mass . . . you can be British and Muslim and proud, and proud of both those things separately’, a point supported by other panellists. Their replies did not satisfy Mr S:

I would like to know how I can prove that I’m a Muslim and I have integrated into society. Look at me. I wear British clothes. I speak broken English but, still, I speak English and I have got a beard. That gives away my identity. Some people would recognise who I am. Now, people ask me “Why don’t you integrate?” and I say, “How do you mean?” And they can’t answer me back because I go to schools, give talks about how to deal with racist incidents and
very often the teachers ask me, ‘Why don’t Muslims integrate?’ I say, “What do you mean? I pay tax. I obey the law of the land”

Fiona Mactaggart: ‘I don’t think it’s he who needs the practical suggestions, I think the people who need the practical suggestions are those who ask him to prove his integration’.

As Mr S found, there are difficulties with ‘integration’. The word appears in numerous European languages, but as Castles et al note ‘the concept continues to be controversial and hotly debated’ (2003: 3.1.1), with no agreed definition. Sometimes it is taken to mean, simply, assimilation, with immigrants ‘expected to discard their culture, traditions and language’ (ibid). Sometimes the emphasis is on ‘inclusion’ (ibid 3.1.3). After an exhaustive survey, an IMISCOE study takes that tack, defining integration as

a long lasting process of inclusion and acceptance of migrants in the core institutions, relations and statuses of the receiving society. For the migrants integration refers to a process of learning a new culture, an acquisition of rights, access to positions and statuses, a building of personal relations to members of the receiving society and a formation of feelings and belonging and identification towards the immigration society (Heckmann (ed.) 2005, p. 15).

In fact, a broader interpretation of ‘integration’ has generally prevailed in Europe similar to the definition advocated in the UK in the 1960s which characterized British policy and practice for many years. This was the so-called ‘Jenkins formula’ (Rex 1995), developed by Home Office advisers (Lester 2003) under the then minister, Roy Jenkins:

Integration is perhaps a rather loose word. I do not regard it as meaning the loss, by immigrants, of their own national characteristics and culture. I do not think we need in this country a “melting pot”, which will turn everybody out in a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone’s misplaced vision of the stereotyped Englishman .... I define integration, therefore, not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity, coupled with cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance (Jenkins 1967, p. 267).

The key phrase was ‘coupled with cultural diversity’: the future for immigrants and the next generation was within a common public sphere of shared norms and values with equal opportunity in employment, housing, education, health and welfare, equality before the law, and protection from racism, with distinctive beliefs, values,
practices, religion, language, in private. Immigrants and minority ethnic groups would be ‘Here but Different’, the motif of policy in Canada and Australia and across much of Europe, including, albeit to a lesser degree, countries like France grounded in grand Republican ideals of ‘One and Indivisible’ with (officially) no space for difference. Although philosophies may be dissimilar (Favell 1998), reality may be closer than many, in France certainly, would believe.

Integration is a ‘fuzzy concept’ which, as Mr S’s question, and the answers it received, show are capable of multiple interpretations. Equally fuzzy is ‘multiculturalism’. Consider the following, from the former British Prime Minister:

I never know, although I use the term myself occasionally, quite what people mean when they talk about multiculturalism. If they mean people living in their separate cultures and never integrating at any point together, I think that’s actually certainly not what I mean by the word and I don’t think it’s what most people would regard as sensible. So I think you can get hung up on the word, to be absolutely frank, and debating exactly what it means (Tony Blair, *Press Conference*, 5 August 2005, http://www.publictechnology.net/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=3431/)

When Trevor Phillips announced (in a an interview in *The Times*, 3 April 2004, his desire to ‘kill off’ multiculturalism, his predecessor at the Commission for Racial Equality, Lord Herman Ouseley, ‘admitted he no longer understood himself what [it] meant’. There was further evidence of confusion in a BBC/MORI poll (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/multiculturalism_poll_10_08_05.pdf) which reported that while 62 per cent of respondents thought multiculturalism ‘makes the country a better place’ (and only 21 per cent that it had been a ‘mistake and should be abandoned’), 58 per cent thought that ‘people who come to live in Britain should adopt the values of and traditions of British culture’. The survey also revealed fundamental differences within the population with 59 per cent of a Muslim subsample believing that ‘people who come to live in Britain should be free to live their lives by the values and traditions of their own culture’. There are, too, confused readings of what is happening elsewhere: ‘How can you possibly have a multicultural society?’, said a contributor to a BBC Website discussion (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/4741753.stm/), ‘it’s a contradiction in terms. Do you ever hear France, Germany, Holland, even America being referred to as multicultural?’
‘Sleepwalking to segregation’?

Although confusion surrounds the concepts of integration and multiculturalism it is possible to identify some significant discursive trends. Multiculturalism, says Werbner, ‘probably has more critics than defenders’ (2003, p. 52), and evidence for this could be cited from the UK and elsewhere across the political spectrum. Among academics, multiculturalism has been criticized for transgressing the principles of liberal democracy; for essentialism; for treating cultures as static, finite and bounded ethnolinguistic blocs; for privileging patriarchy and disempowering women; for allowing a concern with ‘culture’ to override traditional social issues, or alternatively for tokenism and condescension.3 It has, notes Gilroy, ‘equally uneasy relationships with the contending vocabularies of liberalism and post-Marxian speculation’ (2000, p. 242).

A number of themes recur in these critiques of multiculturalism, but outstanding is a belief in its divisive character. As Trevor Phillips put it in his Times interview ‘multiculturalism suggests separateness’, and this is further illustrated in contributions to the BBC Website:

I live in multi-ethnic Leicester and find that multiculturalism exists largely to divide . . . the workplace is (perhaps sadly) where ethnic minorities speak, dress and behave as mainstream society does (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/4741753.stm).

In my hometown there are two distinct and very separate cultures. There is the Muslim Asian culture and the white British culture. People from both of these communities live parallel but separate lives with hardly any interaction between the two. There is a very large Muslim population in this town, but I don’t personally know any of them. We tend to work in separate places, socialise in different places, and live in separate places within the same town. The cultures of the two communities are from the furthest opposing ends of the spectrum. Multiculturalism has failed in Burnley (ibid).

There are other objections (multiculturalism’s supposed emphasis on religion in a secular society, the threat to ‘British’ culture and values, with much confusion about what these are, the division of loyalties of those with multi-sited, transnational lives etc), but it is separatism, e.g. in faith schools (Bell 2005), which permeates objections. This is a key motif in what McGhee (2003) calls the ‘community cohesion archive’. Seminal was the Cantle Report (2001) into the background to disturbances in northern cities of Britain (see inter alia Kundnani 2001; Back et al. 2002; Amin 2003; McGhee 2003, 2005; Burnett 2004;
Robinson 2005). ‘Whilst the physical segregation of housing estates and inner city areas came as no surprise’, said the Report,

the team was particularly struck by the depth of polarisation of our towns and cities. The extent to which these physical divisions were compounded by so many other aspects of our daily lives, was very evident. Separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives. These lives often do not seem to touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful interchanges (2.1).

A similar concern with ‘parallel lives’ (a phrase repeated by the BBC respondent cited above) permeates Huntington’s reflections on the trajectory of the Hispanic population in the USA (2004), and in France the report of the Commission Stasi worried about a repli communautaire among Muslims (2003: 3.3.1) with the attendant threat of inter-ethnic tension (crispations communautaires, Le Monde called them, 15 April 2005), as evidenced by disturbances in Paris in March 2005, and throughout France that November. Writing about Italy, the political scientist Giovanni Sartori characterizes multiculturalism as ‘aggressive, separatist and intolerant … the negation of pluralism’ (2002, p. 29). Its dominant form is tribalism, a ‘disintegrating cultural separatism’ (p. 91).

Multiculturalism’s allegedly divisive character stems from its supposed institutionalization of difference and undermining of ‘cohesion’, ‘common values’, ‘common aims and objectives’, ‘common moral principles and codes of behaviour’ (Cantle Report 3.2; ‘cohesion’ occurred 162 times in the Report, multiculturalism not once). Critics find evidence for what Benhabib calls ‘mosaic multiculturalism’ (2002, p. 8), in growing demands for publicly funded schools for Muslims and adherents of other faiths such as Sikhism. Since 1997 these have been available in the voluntary-aided sector alongside those for Catholics and Jews and the desire for separate education is seemingly increasing (Association of Muslim Social Scientists, 2004). A UK survey (Guardian, 16 March 2004) found half of Muslim families wanted their children to go to a Muslim school; a quarter believed integration had gone too far. This might seem to justify fears that multiculturalism entails social, economic, cultural, religious, educational, and possibly legal and political separatism, with the UK ‘sleepwalking to segregation’, as Trevor Phillips (2005) controversially argued.

‘No reasonable person wants an unbridled multiculturalism’, said Michel Wieviorka (1997, p. 7), a trope echoed by former British Home
Secretary David Blunkett (2002, p. 76), but for many critics multiculturalism is always already ‘unbridled’. Yet British-style ‘integration plus’, as it might be called, was a historic compromise which constituted a ‘weak’ form of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is best understood as a political project, involving strategies, institutions, discourses, practices, seeking to address multicultural reality. Multicultural initiatives across Europe may be said to fall along a spectrum, depending on how much difference, where and when.

» **WEAK** Multiculturalism: cultural difference recognized (to varying extent) in the private sphere, with acculturation in many areas of life and assimilation to the local population in employment, housing, education, health and welfare;

» **STRONG** Multiculturalism: institutional recognition for difference in the public sphere, with special provision in language, education, health care, welfare etc, and the organization of representation on ethnic/cultural lines.

It is ‘weak’ multiculturalism which has characterized practice across Europe, yet critics assume it is always in its ‘strongest’ form.

In writing about multicultural societies, diversity and difference are sometimes used interchangeably, sometimes in reduplication, perhaps with ‘heterogeneity’ added, as in ‘the value to be attached to heterogeneity, diversity and difference’ (Phillips 1993, p. 144, one example among many). They may also be distinguished. ‘Cultural diversity’, says Bhabha,

is an epistemological object … whereas cultural difference is the process of the enunciation of culture as “knowledgeable”, authoritative, adequate as to the construction of systems of cultural identification. If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity (1994, p. 34).

A distinction between ‘diversity’ and ‘difference’, which for Bhabha is methodological-cum-political, appears implicitly or explicitly in public discourse about multiculturalism in the UK. Yet, whereas Bhabha privileges the engagement and dialogue implied by ‘difference’ (as he defines it) over diversity, contemporary rhetoric and policy in Britain reverses the evaluation: diversity is good; difference – interpreted as diversity institutionally embodied through multiculturalism – definitely bad. One is exhorted to ‘celebrate diversity’, but not ‘difference’.

An excess of alterity  987

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Cohesion with diversity?

Against a background of concern about the circumstances recorded in the Cantle Report (Back et al. 2002) and a belief in multiculturalism’s divisive character, and shocked by the events of 9/11, the UK government sought to re-orient policy in a series of consultations and strategy initiatives concerned with economic and social exclusion on the one hand, and cohesion and identity on the other. Cantle was followed by a White Paper (HM Government 2002), a new Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002), guidance to local government from a Community Cohesion Unit (2002), the Crick Report (2003), which amplified aspects of the 2002 White Paper, the Strength in Diversity consultation (2004), the Community Cohesion Panel Final Report (2004), and Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society (Home Office 2005), launched with the Runnymede Conference in 2005. Additionally, since 2001 there has been an annual ‘National Conference on Integration’, concerned principally with refugees, bringing together, with little publicity or fanfare, researchers, policy experts, practitioners and activists, especially from the voluntary sector. The Home Office also commissioned a review of the field of integration (Castles et al. 2003), and drawing on the report and the experience of the conferences, launched a further consultation on strategies for refugee integration (Home Office 2004a), with policies announced in March 2005.

It is instructive to look more closely at some of these interventions. The Crick commission, for example, was established in 2002 to seek ways of implementing policies introduced in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act which inter alia required those seeking citizenship to be tested in the English language and their knowledge about the UK, and to take a ceremonial oath. Following Cantle, the commission sought to contribute to government policy in the areas of ‘enhancing the significance of British citizenship’, ‘encouraging community cohesion’, and ‘valuing diversity’ (Crick Report 2003, 1.2). Acquiring citizenship is a ‘significant life event’ (2.1, the phrase comes from a speech by the Home Secretary in 2002). To be British means to respect the laws, the elected parliamentary and democratic political structures, traditional values of mutual tolerance, respect for equal rights and mutual concern; [ ] give our allegiance to the state . . . in return for its protection [and] respect those over-arching specific institutions, values, beliefs and traditions that bind us all, the different nations and cultures, together in peace and in a legal order (2.7).
Nonetheless, immigrants are joining a society ‘of a diverse range of cultures and identities’, and such societies ‘under a framework of common civic values and common legal and political institutions, not only understand and tolerate diversities of identity but should also respect and take pride in them’ (2.6). Integration means ‘neither assimilation nor a society composed of . . . separate enclaves’ (2.10), and there must be commonalities, notably the English language. Moreover, integration implies ‘continual interaction, engagement and civic participation’ (ibid). The Crick Report is perhaps more accommodating of diversity than the then Home Secretary (it quotes with approval the Jenkins Formula), though its discussion of ‘Britishness’ (e.g. 2.7) is far from that of the Parekh Report (2000), dismissed by one commentator as ‘clinging to the idea of “multiculturalism”’ (Winder 2004, p. 365; on the Parekh Report, see Grillo 2003; Fortier 2005).

Repeating the mantra ‘integration is not about assimilation into a single homogenous culture’, the Strength in Diversity consultation paper (Home Office 2004b) drew attention to the way in which public services sought to accommodate diversity, and argued that there is ‘space within the concept of “British” for people to express their religious and cultural beliefs’. Nonetheless,

respect for diversity must take place within a framework of rights and responsibilities that are recognised by and apply to all – to abide by the law, to reject extremism and intolerance and make a positive contribution to UK society. Different ways of living our lives, different cultures or beliefs all coexist within this shared framework of rights and responsibilities (Home Office 2004b, 2.5–2.6).

The Community Cohesion Panel Final Report (2004), welcoming Strength in Diversity, similarly agreed that while recognizing the unalterably multi-ethnic character of Britain more integration was needed:

We also want each community to feel proud of its heritage and traditions – in other words we need a type of multi-culturalism in which everyone supports the values and laws of the nation, whilst keeping hold of their cultural identity. To achieve this everyone must have a real sense of belonging and they must share common values (p. 8)

At the Runnymede Conference, Fiona Mactaggart said that the strategy outlined in Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society had ‘honied [Strength in Diversity] down to two key elements: (1) improved life-chances, especially for those who need it most . . . and (2)
building greater cohesion between and within communities’. There was a ‘focused tailored approach’ to improving life chances of ‘black and minority ethnic’ groups in education, employment, health, housing, and criminal justice together with policies to build community cohesion, ensuring that young people have a ‘common sense of belonging’, new immigrants integrated, diversity celebrated ‘through sporting and cultural opportunities’, and hatred tackled through new laws. She concluded:

What we’re trying to do is make sure that we do “what it says on the tin” of this strategy. That we improve opportunity and, through doing that strengthen society. That to improve opportunity we’ve got to increase race equality, and that if we do that we need to focus on cohesive communities … We’re building more effective action to make more cohesive communities, and doing this isn’t a kind of political correctness, it’s actually about making a society in which all of us can thrive (http://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects/SocialCapital/FMctaggartSpeech.pdf).

‘National cohesion’, Improving Opportunity argued, ‘rests on an inclusive sense of Britishness’ (Home Office 2005, p. 20). Britishness is not a singular thing, but ‘encompasses the collective contribution diverse communities make to the country. People should not need to choose between their British identity and other cultural identities. They can be proud of both’ (ibid). Addressing the Runnymede conference, Trevor Phillips emphasized how the strategy brought together community cohesion and racial equality. Noting the way it recognized that ‘different groups have different needs’ (and commenting that ‘in the last 18 months or so we’ve begun to understand that Muslims are not just Asians and Asians are not just Muslims’), he believed the strategy would lead us towards a Britain where our ethnic origin does not determine our destiny … a society which is diverse, but in which we encourage and we use our diversity to create a single rainbow, rather than allowing that diversity, our differences, to fester into separate cultures and separate communities (http://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects/SocialCapital/TPhillipsResponse.pdf).

Bhikhu Parekh also welcomed the strategy’s ‘pluralist vision’, and the way in which, so he thought, it drew on the Parekh Report. Echoing a key phrase from that Report, and reading the strategy through its lens, he commented that it showed that the government was ‘thinking of Britain as a “community of communities”’. 
Common values, a more inclusive (if elusive), civic, notion of Britishness, these are the themes which policy has emphasized. Diversity, ‘Yes’, but diversity is two-faced: a ‘source of great strength’ (*Strength in Diversity*, 1.5), and ‘rich cultural interactions’ (1.8), its celebration-recognition may encourage ‘segregation’, ‘fear and conflict’, and that is what it is imagined multiculturalism does. A central problem is, and has always been, balancing diversity with solidarity. This was emphasized by Trevor Phillips at the 2004 National Integration Conference where he sought to clarify his position on multiculturalism. Calling for ‘greater equality and greater interaction between people of different backgrounds’, he referred to two ‘poles’ in the integration debate, and commented:

I abhor French dirigisme, and also reject anything that will emphasise historical difference such as the Dutch system of polarisation (sic), a respectable word for what is religious and civic segregation. Every community needs to retain its traditions but we can’t simply meet the needs of African or African-Caribbean or Asian people by putting them in a box marked “different culture” (in Cleary and Daniel (eds), 2005, p. 5).

**Diversity and difference: The governmentality perspective**

What accounts for this shift against multiculturalism, now imagined as institutionalising difference and separatism? Is it an oblique (or not so oblique, Burnett 2004: 10) xenophobia? Certainly, opposition to multiculturalism (along with full-blooded xenophobia) is a feature of many so-called ‘new right’ movements, a significant factor in local and national politics across Europe. ‘Young Nationalist’, for example, writes on the BNP’s website:

Multiculturalism, if we will be honest, is only the very latest in a series of “darling schemes” by which our nation has been oppressed in the last fifty years or so. It is the latest, and quite possibly the most baleful of all the ideological enchantments whose influence we have hitherto come under (http://www.bnp.org.uk/articles/failure_multiculturalism.htm/).

Mainstream politicians sometimes echo such populist voices, as did Labour in its reaction to protests over asylum-seekers, and Conservatives in their 2005 general election campaign (‘It’s not racist to talk about immigration’). The mainstream seemingly meets the new right. Of course, the two should not be conflated (Fieschi 2005). Principled opposition to multiculturalism (or immigration) and objections voiced by the BNP are not the same. But they are not
totally different, and there is a complex intersection between mainstream discourse and that of minority far-right groups (Grillo 2005b).

Although opposition to multiculturalism may emanate from different sources, a common discursive feature is a contrast between the (imagined) immigrant/minority ethnic and the (equally imagined) national subject. While such subjects may be represented as (generalized) ‘Western’ or ‘European’ persons, they are most often national ones. At certain moments, the imagined person of the immigrant contradicts the national narrative, offends the concept of the imagined national. Immigrants’ difference, their supposed qualities, are contrasted with, and seen as questioning what it means to be British, French, or Italian. For example, wearing the veil in public institutions such as the school, which the Commission Stasi (2003) interpreted as provocatively demanding recognition as a Muslim, is seen as contravening a fundamental French principle, laïcité: the Commission returned to Year Zero, so to speak, and reaffirmed its central importance in the construction of the Republic.

This puts the prominence of Islam in these debates in broader perspective. Certainly, concern about ‘Islamization’ was central to the deliberations of the Commission Stasi, and the assumed beliefs and practices of Europe’s immigrant Muslim population have long been contrasted unfavourably with ‘our’ values (as national, ‘European’, ‘Western’, or ‘Christian’ subjects), and cited as examples of intolerable difference, e.g. Sartori’s argument (2002) that Islam’s failure to separate religious and secular authority threatens liberal pluralism. 9–11 and 7–7 added to this by questioning Muslim transnational loyalties, and the role of militant Islamic organizations and imams (Kepel 2005). Certainly, Islam has been a force behind demands for ‘stronger’ forms of multiculturalism, but objections to multiculturalism are not in any simple sense about Islam or Muslims, but more generally about the institutionalization of difference that it seemingly implies, and more generally still about national inclusion and exclusion.

The population of Europe includes many people with origins outside the continent, their presence often the result of a colonial legacy, whose lives and life-styles continue to reflect those origins. Moreover, migrants’ lives increasingly cross national borders, with individuals, households, families, whole communities having simultaneous stakes in interconnected worlds, widely separated spatially, politically, economically, socially, and culturally. Orientations are transnational and loyalties multiple: to localities and countries where they are residing, and to those whence they came, or to entities, like the ummah, of a religious rather than ethnic or territorially-grounded character. In the 1990s it was suggested that this means we are now in a ‘post-national’ era; transnationalism transcends the national entity,
with implications for citizenship and human rights (Hammar 1990; Bauböck 1994; Soysal 1994). This now seems premature. ‘We have smashed the bottle of national identity and proper and purposeful assimilation’, says William Bennett (2005), and there is a need to reassert ‘composition over decomposition’. Such pleas for a re-statement of national identification appear to signal a return to classic views of ‘one nation, one culture, one language, one state, one citizenship’. Although transnationalism is sometimes celebrated as liberating from essentialism, by challenging the idea that ‘we’ are bearers of a national culture, it engenders a nationalist response. Immigration seemingly threatens national coherence; opposing immigration seemingly strengthens it. The nation-state is far from dead, though whether this is a dying flourish or longer-term resurrection is too early to say.

The immigrant’s offence is, however, not just to disrupt national narratives, but to do so at a particular conjuncture. Wieviorka (1997) has suggested that the debate about multiculturalism in France is a response to a series of crises (over the economy, youth, education) involving the state and political order. Contemporary neo-liberal globalization (‘fast-capitalism’, Holmes 2000) has created a period of great economic and political change and uncertainty. Conjunctural processes manifestly threaten ways of life and livelihood, and the order of things, and pose difficult questions about identity. On the ‘marginal landscape where the BNP ranges’, says Holmes (2000), p. 190), ‘alienation and anomie can sustain, paradoxically, solidarity and a fierce politics’. What is at stake in the debate about difference and cohesion is the disrupting, disembedding character of contemporary neoliberal globalization and the governability of increasingly fragmented, transnationalized societies. In this context, ‘difference’ seems ungovernable; ‘diversity’ may be managed.

Conclusion

This article suggests two points about contemporary accounts of multiculturalism. First, speaking and writing about multiculturalism (including academic writing in philosophical and normative vein), is often based on an imagined (strong) multiculturalism rather than its reality. This is partly because ‘actually existing multiculturalism’ is poorly documented, though there is also ignorance about what is happening on the ground, as Ceri Peach observed of Trevor Phillips’s ‘sleepwalking’ speech (Guardian 29 September 2005, see also Simpson 2004). Ghettoization, for example, where it occurs, is not exclusively willed by non-Western immigrant minorities seeking the haven of ethnic-religious enclaves in which to practise their faith. ‘Forting up’,

An excess of alterity  993
withdrawing into gated, fenced and patrolled residences, is increasing among majority ethnic populations in North America and Europe (Low 2003), and migrants have often found themselves placed in hostels or other forms of collective accommodation away from the public gaze, or concentrated in public sector housing as in the French banlieues. The demonization of Islam may itself motivate a repli communautaire.

Secondly, there is the fuzziness of the concepts. Parekh is right that multicultural societies confront questions ‘that have no parallel in history [and] need to find ways of reconciling the legitimate demands of unity and diversity’ (2000, p. 34). The conceptualisation of ‘multiculturalism’, ‘integration’, ‘diversity’ and ‘difference’ is an ongoing process. These are not finished products but vague ideas or impulses. It is therefore, perhaps, not surprising to find confusion about key concepts in public debates and uncertainty about the balance between unity and diversity, and inevitably contradictory messages emerge (e.g. concerning the role of ‘faith’). No wonder Mr S is puzzled.

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Notes

1. Quotations from the Panel debate are taken from Runnymede Trust 2005.
2. France, the Netherlands (especially after the van Gogh assassination), and the USA are popularly compared with Britain, often misleadingly (e.g. in comments by Conservative spokesman, David Davis, Daily Telegraph 3 August 2005).
4. The establishment in mid-2006 of a ‘Commission on Integration and Cohesion’, responsible to a recently formed Department for Communities and Local Government, and the appointment of Trevor Phillips as the head of a new ‘Commission for Equality and Human Rights’ cannot be discussed here.
An excess of alterity

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