Multiculturalism, culturalism and public incorporation

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Abstract

In the name of ‘multiculturalism’, Western societies have witnessed since the 1980s a proliferation of discourses concerning the general place of minorities, programmes designed to foster equality, institutional structures created to provide better social services, and resources extended to ethnic minority organizations. Despite much goodwill and not inconsiderable evidence of progress in local and national initiatives concerning minorities, however, such developments have often in effect excluded minorities from, rather than facilitated their engagement with, the majority public domain. In significant ways this has been because many public policies and wider political discourses surrounding multiculturalism tend to employ ill-defined ideas and implicit notions – particularly regarding ‘culture’ – which, when operationalized, function socially and politically to separate and distance members of given minorities. These ‘culturalist’ underpinnings found in a variety of multi-culturalist initiatives can be seen to echo or to parallel views espoused in the so-called ‘new cultural racism’. Examples on the level of local government authorities in Britain are cited. Clearly, initiatives promoting all forms of equality for minorities must be encouraged while ‘culturalism’-in-multiculturalism must be overcome. Instead of attempting to redefine ‘culture’ for policy-makers, the author suggests that in rethinking and restructuring modes of public incorporation affecting minorities (roughly following certain key ideas of M.G. Smith on plural societies, John Rex and Bhikhu Parekh on the public domain), we may be able to begin to move beyond some currently exclusive and divisive aspects of institutionalized multiculturalism. Certain modes of local government interface in the British city of Leicester which have been co-developed by local government authorities, by a complex range of local Islamic organizations, by a uniquely successful Muslim representative federation, and by prominent Muslim individuals are examined by way of suggesting one new model of public incorporation.

Keywords: Multiculturalism; local government; Muslims; pluralism; Leicester; culturalism.
Multiculturalism and culturalism

Since the 1970s multiculturalism has emerged as a term increasingly called upon in parliamentary debates and political party manifestos, the rhetoric of ethnic group leaders, the logic of local government structuring and budgeting, social scientific analyses, popular media, and commercial marketing. The term has also had far-ranging impact on numerous professions; educationalists are inundated with texts, journals, conferences and debates concerning multicultural education, while health-care practitioners, social workers, police and other public professions are increasingly the focus of ‘multicultural awareness’ training programmes. In the last few years, scores of texts and manuals have appeared with titles such as Counselling and Psychotherapy: A Multi-cultural Perspective; Child Health in a Multicultural Society; Multicultural Healthcare and Rehabilitation of Older People; Dance: a Multicultural Perspective; Art and Design in a Multicultural Society, and Multicultural Mathematics.

As such ubiquitous usage has emerged, ‘multiculturalism’ has been evoked in widely divergent discourses by persons and groups located all along the political spectrum. At present multiculturalism may refer to: a basic demographic description of a society (the sheer presence of $x$ number of immigrants from countries 1, 2 and 3 offered as evidence of cultural diversity); exotic otherness displayed in the observance of lively festivals, spirited dances, spicy cuisines, and colourful costumes; a vague vision of how society, with its minorities, should function (with keywords ‘tolerance’ and ‘respect’); public policy aimed at minorities, including the promotion of equal opportunity; or distinctive institutional arrangements designed to benefit, or called for by, specific minority groups including special advisory offices, consultation boards, representatives and funding.

Other areas of public concern surrounding multiculturalism which have arisen in recent years include law (especially regarding the difficulties of protecting or accommodating minorities’ traditional practices, beliefs, religious laws: clashes over blasphemy law in Britain during the Rushdie Affair provide one important example) and citizenship (a status which, because it is usually conflated with ambiguous ideas about national culture, raises doubts among members of the majority as to minorities’ capacity for ‘loyalty’ to the state). Furthermore, some newly emergent discourses which employ the term multiculturalism are those which herald the self-conscious production of synthetic or hybrid forms of expression derived from two or more lines of cultural heritage, and those (especially witnessed in the USA) which advocate a politics of resistance to perceived forms of majority cultural hegemony by calling for several kinds of public ‘recognition’ of group identities rooted in facets of minority cultural ‘difference’.
The increased usage of the term 'multiculturalism' in myriad discourses and by a variety of actors certainly marks a significant and widespread 'change of semantics, a change of the codes in which society is describing itself' (Radtke 1992, p. 2). But given such a wide range of actors and arenas, it is apparent that multiculturalism currently means no single thing, that is, it represents no single view of, or strategy for, contemporary complex societies.

Many of the diverse uses of 'multiculturalism', however, seem to share certain implicit understandings of 'culture'. In this set of understandings, 'culture' is: a kind of package (often talked of as migrants' 'cultural baggage') of collective behavioural-moral-aesthetic traits and 'customs', rather mysteriously transmitted between generations, best suited to particular geographical origins yet largely unaffected by history or a change of context, which instils a discrete quality into the feelings, values, practices, social relationships, predilections and intrinsic nature of all who 'belong to (a particular) it'. Populations and population segments, it follows, are categorized culturally according to cultural essences which are presumed to be imparted at birth.

By the 1990s the wide-ranging rhetorics and policies of multiculturalism, regardless of their political provenance, have come to draw upon and to enhance this understanding of 'culture'. Whether located within discourses on cultural difference which can be interpreted as 'heterophobia' or 'heterophilia', such rhetorics and policies may amount to a differentialism legitimating a variety of forms of social and political exclusion (Taguieff 1990).

In this way notions of multiculturalism convey a picture of society as a 'mosaic' of several bounded, nameable, individually homogeneous and unmeltable minority uni-cultures which are pinned on to the backdrop of a similarly characterized majority uni-culture. In common parlance these discrete uni-cultures are regularly referred to as 'communities.' Uncritical discussions of 'cultural communities' give further credence to understandings which posit bounded social collectivities identified by a single, evenly shared set of essential and deterministic values and behaviours (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1991, Baumann forthcoming).
Such widespread culturalist understandings comprise or reinforce all kinds of stereotypes of minorities and, indeed, of majorities like 'the British'. When manifested, albeit often with good intent, in public policies and local government structures, these understandings have often served to isolate members of minorities from, rather than facilitate their engagement with, encompassing social, economic and political spheres.

Below are given some British examples surrounding the development of multiculturalism by local government authorities which, by way of culturalist assumptions, amount to a kind of benevolent isolation of minorities. These developments, it is suggested, are akin to those M.G. Smith described among classic 'plural societies' as 'differential incorporation'. Towards the end of this article, an alternative structuring of the relationship between minorities and local government - and therefore one possible new model of multiculturalism - is proposed by way of the example of Muslims in the British Midlands city of Leicester.

Minorities, 'culture' and the local state

Since the early 1960s the highly decentralized local authorities throughout Britain (metropolitan, county and district councils, London boroughs) have undertaken a variety of measures to recognize and to assist numerous minority groups. Most of these measures have been within the purview of special councils or committees functioning under, and to a large degree controlled by, the local authority itself. Having grown out of grass-roots friendly societies and other groups established to assist immigrants, the local authority Voluntary Liaison Committees of the mid-1960s were superseded by Community Relations Councils (also Councils for Racial Equality, Committees for Community Relations). These were coordinated throughout Britain by the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants which was itself replaced by the Community Relations Commission, later the Commission for Racial Equality. On the local level, most Community Relations Councils [CRCs] have now been supplanted by Race Relations Units and/or a range of ad hoc bodies. The traditional roles of these councils and boards set up on behalf of migrant minorities have been simultaneously as social welfare advisers, legal watchdogs and policy advocates. Administratively, such structures have seemed a solution to issues of combating discrimination and providing equality of opportunity. Yet at every stage of liaison or point of interface between local government and minority populations, deep-set problems of representation and authority have been endemic.

One such problem surrounding CRCs and similar structures is that of freezing a specific kind of relationship between local authorities
and those minority groups which are already highly institutionalized (Messina 1989). This creates the impression that CRCs and the like are performing well, while other, less organized, groups – groups which may challenge the conservative orientation of local authorities – consequently receive little support or recognition. Furthermore, as Rex and Samad (forthcoming) describe when writing about Birmingham in the 1960s, ‘the very existence of the C.R.C. meant that ethnic minority issues could be marginalised and left off the main Council agenda’.

Another basic problem involved with such relationships is that local authorities falsely assume a ‘cultural corporatism’ among minority populations which functions, Rodney Barker (1991, pp. 50–1) suggests, so that the state can deal with ‘those who claim to both speak for and define those cultures. In so doing the state may well increase the authority of patriarchs at the expense of individuals’. Pnina Werbner (1991b) describes such a situation in Manchester, where the corporate unity among ethnic groups assumed by local authorities falsely conditions most matters involving designated membership of ethnic relations boards and committees or involving funding for ethnic minority projects. Similarly in Coventry, Jean Ellis (1991, p. 6) observed that

there were reasons of political and administrative simplicity for a relatively uncomplicated view of the community, and this was reflected in the assumption that the community could be served through dialogue with its ‘representatives’, even though these individuals were quite clearly heading up oligarchical organisations.

Although expedient for the Community Relations Council in Coventry, Ellis notes, the ‘representatives’ (here, ‘of the Asian community’) had little democratic foundation. Yet their central roles of interaction between local government and minority citizens virtually made them ‘the sole rulers of the Asian community – not because they were influential in the community, but because the authorities gave them that role’ (ibid., pp. 51–52). Ellis (1989) describes a similar pattern which characterized Rochdale in the 1970s, when local authorities chose to work with a single Pakistani Welfare Association (which promised ‘to deliver the Asian vote’) by way of addressing all the needs of all the Asians in that town.

Given such patterns of liaison with local government authorities, the pursuit of ‘community leader’ status or representation on CRCs has had considerable impact on local minority populations. Alison Shaw (1991), for instance, has detailed how systems of patronage, nepotism, the anticipation of favours and the manipulation of social networks among Pakistanis in Oxford functioned with respect to one man’s quest
to be a CRC representative. Werbner (1991a; 1991b) calls the roles of such individuals those of 'ethnic brokers'.

The rather narrow form of representation or minority – local state liaison in the 1960s and 1970s eventually gave way, however, to more diverse forms arguably even more dependent on culturalist understanding of minorities. In Britain during the 1980s, local government initiatives exhibited a ‘new political drive towards pluralistic welfare provision’ (Reeves 1989, p. 183) by extending public resources to a range of ethnic (cultural) ‘communities’.

In this way, multiculturalism tended to comprise an ideology through which the presumed unicultural communities would be ensured of equality, respect or at least tolerance, and continuity of tradition by public financing of cultural organizations and activities.

In tracing the development of local authority policies regarding minorities in Leamington Spa, Manchester, Wolverhampton, Birmingham and Ealing, Mano Candappa and Danièle Joly (1994) point to such a shift in the 1980s when new approaches to policy for ethnic minorities were characterized (although not always together adopted) by notions of ‘racial disadvantage’ and notions of ‘cultural identity and difference’. The former involved policies designed to ensure equal opportunity, while the latter underscored the importance of ‘consulting with communities’ and ‘assisting communities and their associations’. It was with regard to the latter ideals and strategies that the ensuing competition for resources, on top of the ongoing internal struggles for ‘community’ leadership (now especially to control such resources) and for consultative roles on local government boards, tended to define and to concretize cultural ‘communities’. Most of such programmes and consequences usually developed without specifically addressing sources or manifestations of basic social and economic inequality affecting minorities (Ben-Tovim et al. 1986).

Minority populations were often divided, sometimes violently, when seeking funds designated for a singular ‘community’ which did in fact comprise a great diversity of elements and backgrounds. In Coventry, for example, Ellis (1991) examined a range of disputes among the local population of Muslims stemming from local government policy in the mid-1980s according to which, as the authority stated bluntly, ‘the city Council will only make money available to a project which is truly representative of the whole community and all the groups within it’.

With the twin possibilities of obtaining ‘community’ funding and of gaining the ear of local government decision-makers, sometimes hitherto locally unknown or unmobilized ethnic groups suddenly emerged with a view to pursuing these ends. Iris Kalka (1991, pp. 218-19) refers to such a process in a west London borough as ‘the politicisation of ethnicity’. She writes that although
it is unlikely that the needs of the people concerned were fundamentally different during the 1970s from during the 1980s, the establishment of ethnic groups in Harrow during the 1980s... was directly connected with the equal opportunities policy issued by the borough of Harrow, and subsequently with the creation of forums, i.e. committees, for debating ethnic minority issues.

The research of Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992), in examining organizations and local authorities in a south-east London borough, also indicates ways in which notions of ‘community’ emerged and were increasingly conflated and politically operationalized. These processes commenced with the establishment of CRCs in the 1960s, and continued through the growing anti-racism versus multiculturalism debates of the 1970s and on into the 1980s when ‘the use of the “community” became completely universalized’, although none the less vague (ibid., pp. 167–68). This usage was often exacerbated by the politics of funding, especially by way of Sections 11 and 57 (of the 1966 Local Government Act). The borough extended resources ‘to employ “special” Black workers to both reflect and serve the “community” where they had been absent previously’ (ibid., p. 168). Moreover, since the 1970s, Anthias and Yuval-Davis point out, the definitions of ‘community’ became increasingly dependent on notions of ‘culture’ at the expense of much else. ‘Asian religious groups or a scheme set up to promote, for example, African drumming’, they observed (ibid., p. 182), ‘would have a stronger chance of survival than, say, a group concerned with the treatment of young West Indians in police detention’.

In yet other ways, the well-meaning multiculturalist policies which local government authorities initiated in the 1980s may work to the disadvantage of minorities by creating conditions of dependency. This may be the case when funding and consultation between an ethnic organization and a political party develop into patronage. ‘If that party loses power,’ Marian FitzGerald (1984, p. 63) observes, ‘groups may be left high and dry and those most closely identified with it may be those regarded with greatest suspicion by its successor.’ Moreover, she indicates that competition for this patronage may divert groups from their primary purpose and collectively weaken them by intensifying the forces of division between them.

Multiculturalism and its underlying culturalism in this way may become ‘enclavization’ (Schierup 1992a, p. 20). By assuming an insurmountable difference in social life and values along with ‘community’ boundaries necessitating special collective representation by appointed (or self-appointed) ‘leaders’, and bolstered by forms of competition between ‘cultural communities’, the culturalism of much multiculturalism can inadvertently support the hierarchical and separatist assumptions surrounding ‘culture’ found in the increasingly abounding
discourses which social scientists describe as those of ‘the new right’ (Seidel 1986), ‘the new racism’ (Barker 1981), ‘differentialist racism’ (Taguieff 1990), ‘ethnic absolutism’ (Gilroy 1987), or ‘racism without races’ (Balibar 1991).

Within all of these latter ‘new rhetorics of exclusion’ (Stolcke 1994), there is an assumption of culture-as-insurmountable difference which is deemed to be ‘commonsense’ or ‘natural.’ Rather than describing some sort of social reality, Schierup (1992b) suggests such rhetoric functions as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, creating a social reality of culturally separate and qualitatively ranked social creativities. Through these

the hidden logic of a new commonsense cultural racism (demarcating, in terms of a fixed cultural essence, ‘other cultures’ as different from ‘our culture’ and disturbing to the normal order) finds its way into the language and practices of public servants, professionals and into the everyday commonsense discourses of ordinary people (Alund and Schierup 1991, p. 10).

Such consequences are particularly deceptive because they are often initiated in altruistic policies and programmes within local governments and public service sectors which are designed to better the plight of disadvantaged and oppressed minorities. However, due to a crude kind of cultural relativism which accompanies essentialist understandings of culture, these have often served further to isolate and to exclude minorities. On this line of thinking, ‘culture’ and ‘community’ represent borders which cannot and should not be crossed for the good of all concerned.

Repercussions of this kind of culturalism can be seen in a variety of spheres. For example, in August and September 1987 twenty-six white parents in Dewsbury refused to let their children attend the local primary school where the enrolment was overwhelmingly Asian and the curriculum held to be multicultural. Throughout the nationally publicized ruckus which followed, the rebellious parents insisted that they were in no way being racist; instead they declared that they objected to the Asians’ ‘culture’ and the educational pandering to ‘it’.

More recently, the benign cultural isolation taught to police and social workers was highlighted by Pragna Patel, who works with the London-based women’s group Southall Black Sisters. She has witnessed the way in which social workers and the police sometimes fail to protect Asian women for fear of being accused of interfering with Asian cultural traditions. She says, for example, that ‘whereas a white woman with a violent husband will be told “you can get an injunction” [to keep the husband away from the woman], an Asian woman will be told “it’s your culture”’ (Observer, 29 August 1993).
Health Service practitioners have been recipients of numerous training programmes and recommendations, often amounting to no more than 'curious collations of facts and speculations that have sometimes passed for guides to practice in a multi-cultural society' (Johnson 1994, p. 313), with the result that culturally-defined no-go areas have been created. For example,

One white psychiatrist said in an article that treating Asians was "notoriously difficult" but that the problem would disappear as they became more westernised. Other practitioners feel a paralysing inability to act because they think it is racist to interfere with 'ethnic cultures' (Guardian, 6 October 1993).

As implied above by Kalka (1991), culturalist understandings have certainly been promulgated by members of minorities, too, not least in order to differentiate a social group and to exercise leadership and control of relevant resources. An example here appears to be the so-called Muslim Parliament with its leader Dr. Kalim Siddiqui and its Muslim Manifesto propounding behavioural and political guidelines for British Muslims. One way in which this organization has drawn upon currently dominant discourses has been to advertise itself in a range of British Muslim periodicals with the headline: 'Is Muslim culture slipping?' The advertisement beckons Muslims to donate funds to the Muslim Parliament, which will, in turn, 'define, defend and promote' Muslim political identity and, thereby, culture.

Among local government authorities, social service providers, and minority groups themselves, ideas and policies meant to foster equality of socio-economic status and respect towards the lifestyles and social patterns of ethnic groups have instead often had the effect of stigmatizing members of ethnic group and pathologizing their behaviour. This is also evident in the 'between two cultures' approach to minority youth – taken by, among others, many members of the media, educationalists, social workers and social scientists – which assumes inherent psychological crises among young persons who exhibit traits neither wholly of one discrete culture or another.

With various interpretations of multiculturalism, policy-makers have proposed measures and created structures meant to address the massive gap between overarching legal frameworks of equality and daily experiences of discrimination affecting minorities. Yet arguably, due to the implicit culturalism of much multiculturalism, many of these measures and structures have merely reified, encapsulated and frozen criteria of collective belonging without bringing about, among the minorities, more effective forms of inter-ethnic alliance and engagement in society while assisting or allowing for the continuity of a variety of traditional institutions. Instead, Schierup (1992b, p. 10) suggests that
a ‘constructed multiculturalism becomes an ethnic tower of Babel, a victim to non-communication and political restraint’.

These kinds of issues associated broadly with questions of universalism versus diversity in society are certainly not new, nor of course have they arisen only in Britain or other Western contexts into which substantial immigrant populations came. In describing comparatively and historically characteristics found in a broad range of complex ‘plural’ societies, the late M.G. Smith provided many important concepts and analyses (see especially, Smith 1965; 1969; 1974). Among them are certain terms and relationships worth re-examining with respect to contemporary models of multiculturalism, models which would address the need to formulate common interests, promote modes of communication transgressing ethnic-cultural divisions, and foster more effective political participation among all members of society.

**Variable systems of incorporation**

Drawing upon original observations by Furnivall (1939; 1948), Smith assessed a variety of conditions and characteristics of societies, especially under colonial regimes, which were comprised of two or more groupings each of which coalesced around specific institutions (kinship, religion, language, etc.). Smith’s descriptions and analyses regarding such ‘plural societies’ have been subject to considerable criticism and reformulation, which need not be rehearsed in the present article. The specific set of ideas which may be worth reconsidering with regard to contemporary discourses of multiculturalism, however, is that which Smith advanced concerning ethnic groupings and diverse modes of incorporating them into overarching public and political life.

The most extreme type of ethnic exclusion – probably exemplified most in South Africa under apartheid – is that characterized by conditions in which, Smith suggested, ethnic groupings are stratified in a system of ‘differential incorporation’, whereby there is established ‘an effective order of corporate inequalities and subordination by the differential distribution of civil and political rights and the economic, social and other opportunities that these permit or enjoin’ (Smith 1969, p. 430). In Smith’s schema, a second type of pluralism is evident in societies characterized by a model of consociation, as in Switzerland or Belgium, in which the incorporation of ethnic groupings in various spheres (especially the political) is structured by a ‘condition of formal equivalence’. The final, ‘universalistic’ social structure he describes is characterized by a ‘uniform incorporation’ of all within the polity. ‘This mode incorporates individuals as citizens,’ Smith (ibid., p. 434) proposes, ‘directly into the public domain on formally identical conditions of civic and political status, thereby eliminating the requirement of individual membership in some intermediate corporation, segmental
or sectional.' Here the state is indifferent to individual ethnic, religious, linguistic differentiation or cultural practices, which are seen as private options and of no difference in relation to civic rights.

Following his typology contrasting forms of incorporation — differential, equivalent, and uniform — Smith draws upon these to describe three related levels or modes of pluralism. These are: structural (marked by differential incorporation), social (in which institutional differences coincide with a division of society sharply demarcated by virtually closed social sections) and cultural (with no corporate social divisions, but with distinct institutional practices maintained).

The distinguishing feature of ‘structural pluralism’ involves restricted modes of incorporation vis-à-vis the public domain (which we can assume to include key political arenas, prominent forms of media, high status professions and roles).

It institutes or presupposes social and cultural pluralism together by prescribing sectional differences of access to the common public domain, and by establishing different contexts and conditions of sectional coexistence, segregation, and subordination. Such conditions preserve or generate corresponding institutional pluralism by fostering diverse sectional adaptations to their distinctive situations and by promoting divergent and sectionally specific collective domains for their internal organisation and intersectional relations. Such an order of structural pluralism may be instituted in one of two ways: by the total exclusion of subordinate sections from the inclusive public domain, which is then the formally unqualified monopoly of the dominant group; or alternatively by instituting substantial and sufficient inequalities of sectional participation in and access to this sector of the societal organization (ibid., p. 440).

Contemporary programmes and policies promoting multiculturalism certainly do not have as a model the kind of overall framework that Smith described as ‘structural pluralism’ coupled with ‘differential incorporation’. The characteristics of such a system are widely disdained in Britain, while those of societies typified by ‘social pluralism’ and ‘equivalent incorporation’ are looked upon as inappropriate models for British majority-minority relations. ‘Cultural pluralism’ and its concomitant ‘uniform incorporation’, as described by Smith, is doubtless the kind of framework envisioned in most discourses surrounding multiculturalism.

But facets of incorporation coinciding with certain implicitly culturalist understandings, programmes and policies of multiculturalism do, indeed, inadvertently channel social developments in the direction of ‘structural pluralism’, as Smith has described it above, through ‘promoting divergent and sectionally specific collective domains for their
internal organisation and intersectional relations’. Multiculturalism comes to involve differential access to the public domain, raising serious questions concerning the actual exercise of power (Asad 1990). This is the outcome of many multicultural policies and programmes despite de jure universalistic incorporation through citizenship and suffrage: effectively, multiculturalism begins to resemble ‘structural pluralism’ through the over-restriction of ‘cultures’ to the private or ‘community’ domain, through a de facto exclusion from meaningful parts of the public domain, and through the construction of special, culturalist-defined spaces within it.

Further, although seeming to provide alternatives to a majority hegemony, multiculturalist policies and frameworks may function to reproduce the status quo.

In this way, Björklund (1986, p. 302) writes

[by] co-opting ethnic leaders into councils, commissions and offices within state-run programmes, and by incorporating ethnic associations into existing systems of state-sponsored organizations, the political centre shows its goodwill, and, at the same time, makes ethnic leaders co-responsible for the administration of state policies.

However, incorporation does not have to mean ‘co-opting’. Nor should it be necessary for minorities to identify themselves with a single ‘cultural community’, which may become dominated by specific individuals, ideologies and definitions of itself, in order to gain support and representation in relation to local government and the overall public sphere. It should be possible to create frameworks allowing for the maintenance of complex, multiple (regional, linguistic, religious, gender, ‘hybrid’ and other) identities, along with a renewed place for group representatives and organizations within and in relation to the public domain.

Kuper (1969, p. 486) has advocated something similar in terms of processes of ‘depluralization’ in the public domain, a concept which ‘indicates subjectively the diminishing salience of racial, ethnic, or other sectional ties’. He urges that this should not be achieved simply by removing such ties, but by rethinking the possibilities for their articulation. Here he refers to R.T. Smith, who advocated that before ethnic identity can be transcended, it must first be asserted to ensure stature, participation, self-respect. Yet Kuper points to the dangers of this process of assertion if it is not controlled. ‘A less hazardous basis for depluralization may be found in some combination of sectional organization and aggression with individuation and interdependence’ (ibid.).

Aspects of the relationship between multiculturalism and ‘public space’ has usually been posed in what Rex (1991, p. 13) has described
as ‘the two domains thesis’. This thesis ‘sees British society as involving simply a confrontation between private familial and communal cultures, on the one hand, and the shared political culture of the public domain, on the other’. He observes further that this ‘public domain’ is commonly understood by the majority not in political terms, but as ‘a whole way of life’ of ‘the British’. Along with rather vague notions about ‘a whole way of life’, the ‘British culture’ of the public sphere includes aspects of class closure and ideals surrounding political struggle for rights. Therefore, Rex (ibid., p. 15) points out, with the formal regulatory structures often conditioned or imposed through multicultural initiatives among benevolent local authorities, minorities indeed gain certain measures but in so doing ‘they find themselves faced with additional suspicions and hostility’ among a majority valuing other criteria.

Ethnic groups should not simply be granted funds nor have certain ‘leaders’ and organizations recognized as representative in order to regulate their often rather patronized place on the public agenda. Instead, Parekh (1990, p. 68) emphasizes that it should be widely accepted that minority communities are an integral part of British society and entitled to have a say in shaping its shared public culture. This does not mean multiculturalism should be a model whereby all persons in Britain eventually come to have the same, syncretic meanings, values, behaviours and institutions. On the other hand, and by way of a more useful model,

[M]ulticulturalism doesn’t simply mean numerical plurality of different cultures, but rather a community which is creating, guaranteeing, encouraging spaces within which different communities are able to grow at their own pace. At the same time it means creating a public space in which these communities are able to interact, enrich the existing culture and create a new consensual culture in which they recognise reflections of their own identity.

... [M]ulticulturalism is possible, but only if communities feel confident enough to engage in a dialogue and where there is enough public space for them to interact with the dominant culture (Parekh, in Parekh and Bhabha 1989, p. 27).

One way of promoting this ideal is to provide forms and manifestations of ethnic diversity with greater public status and dignity (Parekh 1990, p. 70). Multicultural policies in schools have been developed as one prominent way of seeking to affect public space in this way, essentially through gradual change over one or two generations (the motives, strategies, and foreseen outcomes of this strategy are, of course, hotly debated; see, for instance, Lynch et al. 1992). But after the Swann Report’s general recommendations ‘suggesting that, as
distinct from learning to participate in present majority and minority cultures, all children should acquire a new culture which is an enriched amalgam of all of them', Rex (1991, p. 12) believes 'it seems unlikely that a new multi-culturally based British culture will be produced by social engineering in the schools'. Nevertheless, at least a semblance of greater familiarity, if not understanding, should arise from some of the more creative (and hopefully less culturalist) aspects of current multicultural education in British schools.

Another way of altering the public domain, following the constructive ways that Parekh suggests, may be through establishing new modes of incorporation which do not amount to some form of communal 'co-opting', but rather may facilitate multiple and cross-cutting forms of group engagement and representation. Following Ellis (1991, p. 140), such modes should address the fact that 'there are a variety of differing social, economic, gender and generational factors, which cut across the subgroups formed by linguistic and regional background, and the very differing perceptions of identity and multiplicity of need expressed within the community reflect this'. Recognition of such should be made together with, as Kuper advocates, recognition of forms of individuation and interdependence. Such new modes may be found in the direction of certain developments in the East Midlands city of Leicester.

New modes of public incorporation: the Leicester model

In 1991, within Leicester’s population of 270,493, some 28.5 per cent were categorized as ethnic minorities - the highest such percentage of any local authority district outside London (Owen 1992). More than 23 per cent of the population were categorized as ‘Asians’: this includes 22 per cent ‘Indians’ (including persons from the subcontinent and East Africa), 1 per cent ‘Pakistanis’ and 0.3 per cent ‘Bangladeshis’. This considerable Asian population developed predominantly since the 1960s through migration direct from the subcontinent, through the large influx of refugees from East African states in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and from secondary migration within Great Britain (Vertovec 1995). This Asian population contributes significantly to Leicester’s highly plural religious make-up which includes 14 per cent Hindus, 4.3 per cent Muslims and 3.8 per cent Sikhs (Leicester City/County Council 1983).

With such a significant proportion of its population comprising minorities, the city has developed an impressive profile of ethnic organizations and activities. A list of ethnic minority organizations and other related groups in Leicester, compiled by the City Council in 1986, contains 186 associations. Both the Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council have developed links of various kinds with
these associations, through grants, assistance in gaining or maintaining premises, consultation in decision-making, and the creation of a Race Relations Unit (on the level of the city,) and (on the level of the county) a Race Relations Committee and an Afro-Caribbean and Asian Forum. Not all such associations and links are equally successful in representing minorities in Leicester. Those of the general Muslim population, however, have been developed with considerable accomplishment.

Although Muslims comprise a minority-within-a-minority, their linguistic, regional, and ‘sectarian’ backgrounds are complex. The bulk of Leicester Muslims are Gujarati-speaking Deobandis (although from various parts of Gujarat and East Africa). Their social characteristics range from minimally educated, unemployed individuals from rural backgrounds in the subcontinent who now live in conditions of poverty in geographically encapsulated Asian areas of the city, to university-educated professionals and business people living in middle- and upper-middle-class neighbourhoods of ethnic admixture.

Muslim institutional complexity is evident by the presence of more than forty separate Muslim organizations, catering to groups based on family or caste, neighbourhoods, regional-linguistic groups or sects. Examples are the Dawoodi Bohra Jamaat, Ahmadiyya Muslim Association, Gujarati Muslim Association, Ismaili Jamaat, Rawal Community Association, Surati Muslim Khalifa Society, and the Islamic Centre (the main Pakistani group). These organizations have been formed by distinct groups to cater to specific needs. They raise their own funding, manage their own premises, elect their own leaders, and interact independently with the City and County authorities for various reasons, usually to do with planning and building permission. Thus, there exists a broad ‘horizontal spread’ of Muslim institutions interfacing with local government.

Almost all these Islamic organizations belong to Leicester's Federation of Muslim Organisations, which was formed entirely by and for Muslims in 1984. The successful grass-roots formation of the Leicester’s Federation is a source of much pride and cohesion in Leicester, in contrast to other metropolitan Muslim umbrella organizations which were created by the local state, as in Bradford (Samad 1992), or which quickly fell apart amid controversy, as in Coventry (Ellis 1991).

The Leicester Federation of Muslim Organisations, whose officers and members of various sub-committees are elected from among the local Muslim associations, functions effectively in approaching the City and County authorities with a single Muslim voice. Representatives of these local government authorities regularly consult with the Federation on matters affecting Muslims and other minorities. It was through the Federation, for instance, that Muslims received a favourable decision regarding the provision of halal meat in public institutions,
permission to broadcast from loudspeakers in mosques the azan or call to prayer, permission and support to build Europe's only purpose-built janazgah (small mosque for funeral services) in a public cemetery, and the accommodation of several Muslim concerns in state schools. It seems that due to the efficient umbrella structure of the Federation, these were achieved uniquely, or at least more smoothly, compared to most other attempts by Muslims to gain such measures from local authorities elsewhere in Britain.

A final dimension of successful Muslim public incorporation in Leicester is evident in an abundance of 'high profile' Muslims (some of whom belong to the Federation of Muslim Organisations as well as to local Muslim associations). These include no less than the chief executive of the city, two county councillors and five city councillors, the chairman and several members of the county council's Race Relations Committee, a police superintendent, two head teachers and a considerable number of school governors, as well as prominent professionals and business people. While at critical junctures they express issues of concern to Leicester's Muslims, these high-profile individuals are widely perceived, and often quoted in the city's main newspaper, as prominent citizens in their own right. It should also be underscored that they, as well as numerous other Leicester Muslims, are involved simultaneously in other public forums such as political parties, trades unions, housing associations, women's groups, youth groups, parent-teacher associations, and black or Asian political and cultural (arts) organizations.

This three-dimensional model of multiculturalism in Leicester has served to represent the city's range of Muslims in equally diverse yet effective ways. Furthermore, it has helped to create a kind of public space in which Muslims have engaged themselves with seemingly greater effect than elsewhere in Britain where they are less well and less diversely incorporated into city life. For instance, with the eruption of the Rushdie Affair in 1989, Leicester Muslims were equally as upset over The Satanic Verses as their co-religionists in other parts of the country; yet in Leicester, their 10,000-strong demonstration protest, the statements they made to the press and on local radio, and their other types of campaign were more peaceful, articulate and efficient (Leicester Mercury, 15 February 1989; 11 March 1989). Several prominent local Muslims attributed this to the greater experience they had gained, in comparison with Muslims in other parts of Britain, in organizing themselves on several fronts as well as in unison, in dealing with the authorities, and in undertaking public relations. Leicester Muslims' handling of controversial matters - the 'shoe affair' (when a shopkeeper was selling Italian designer shoes inscribed with Quranic calligraphy); the local manifestations of anti-Islamism during the Gulf war; the Kashmir conflict and destruction of the Babri mosque in
Ayodhya – were undertaken with similar adroitness (see Vertovec, in press).

This model suggests that a pattern of effective, multifaceted incorporation among localized institutions, an umbrella organization, and strategically placed and symbolically powerful individuals, as found in Leicester, may well amount to none of the new frameworks needed for creating the kind of public space that Parekh advocates. Such a framework demonstrates one way in which regional and linguistic complexities among specific ethnic groups can be both maintained (for continuity of pre-migration traditions) and bridged (for collective political mobilization).

The recognition of multiple sources of identity and representation may also foster a more democratic atmosphere with respect to local politics, as Ellis (1989, p. 106) found in Rochdale after the monopoly of a single point of local government – ‘community’ interface had shifted to the exercise of multiple points; by the late 1980s

the political patronage previously held [there] solely by the Pakistani Welfare Association had widened out. Smaller local community units were now managing tens of thousands of pounds. . . . In the 1970s, the Pakistani Welfare Association had been able to promise local politicians to deliver a large section of the Asian vote. This had changed; ward candidates were now in the position of having to persuade the Asian vote on a variety of issues.

The Leicester model also points to ways in which high-profile individuals from minorities can work both within and outside community parameters to secure community provisions, to bring about inter-ethnic cooperation, to provide important role models for youth, and to become noted personalities in their own right both as Muslims and as civil servants working on behalf of the public at large.

Conclusion

As an optimist regarding the possibilities for evolving models and strategies surrounding multiculturalism, Rex (1991, p. 18) foresees that

[J]ust as, in earlier times, class conflicts which started in circumstances of riot and disorder gave way to processes of negotiation and compromise, so the relationship of ethnic minorities to British society will be renegotiated. This will include not merely a redefinition of the extent to which differences in the private and communal sphere are tolerated or encouraged, but also a renegotiation of the political culture of the public domain.
Rather than creating structures for the representation of presumed cultural blocs, a renegotiated political culture of the public domain—that is, a better model of multicultural incorporation—would see the facilitation of multiple modes of minority representation and local government interface.

Up to now, debates over optimum kinds of relationship between local governments and minority populations have been polarized between arguments for and against ‘ethnic governance’ through minority leaders and organizations (Breton 1991). On the one hand, there are those critics who hold that backing minority group leaders and supporting ethnic organizations only create potential demagogues, stage feel-good activities, and deflect attention from other more pressing minority needs. This can be especially the case, as pointed out in this article as well as in the writings of several other contemporary observers, when group representation and government interaction are based on ideologies of multiculturalism which themselves rest on highly limited notions of ‘culture’.

On the other hand, sometimes such leaders and organizations are, indeed, successful in addressing many genuine needs and problems faced by the minorities who they represent, so that these should not be discounted by any single sweeping criticism. It must be understood that the full range of minority organizations themselves have very different reasons for choosing their idioms of mobilization, as well as their own orientations, strategies and levels of experience that effect the kind of state liaisons which they foster and maintain. In criticizing the structures and uses of ‘culture’ and ‘community’ by agents of the local state, one must not lose sight of the fact that minorities must be given the chance to organize and represent themselves on their own terms. Here, Rex (forthcoming) urges that

\[ \text{The important point to be made in a democratic critique of multiculturalism is not merely to assert that malevolent governments and ruling classes create ascribed ethnicity for their own purposes, but to consider whether those who see themselves as members of ethnic groups should and can attain their own objectives within society.} \]

In accordance with such a view, a model of multiculturalism evident among Muslims in Leicester—which involves a variety of modes of incorporation—perhaps represents a ‘third way’ of liaison between local government and minorities. This model is desirable in that it can: (a) promote more democratic functions surrounding ‘community leaders’ (by recognizing a breadth and depth of leadership through effective neighbourhood groups, umbrella organizations, and civic representatives all democratically elected); (b) stimulate more active civil participation among minority group members (who have come to
realize that they can, indeed, successfully elect, and interact with, important public figures from their own ranks); (c) publicize more positive images of minorities (by it being shown that they can produce effective organizations and leaders who contribute in many ways to various civic activities and decisions), and (d) generally foster, among members of the ‘majority’ population as well as among ethnic groups, a more open and malleable understanding of ‘culture’ (through being seen to be able to perpetuate a variety of practices, meanings and values drawn from complex and varying backgrounds and seen to be open to hybridized forms without threat to collective identities).

In these ways multiculturalism can come to be better identified with interdependence and representative liberal democracy amongst people manifesting various kinds of difference, rather than with exclusivity and oligarchy based on spurious notions of culture.

Acknowledgement

Research in Leicester was carried out under the auspices of a grant (No. F697) from the Leverhulme Trust. The article was completed at the Institute of Ethnology, Free University of Berlin under a visiting fellowship provided by the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung. I wish to express my gratitude to all of the above. A version of this article was presented as a paper at the COST/ESRC conference on ‘Culture, Communication, Discourse: Negotiating Difference in Multi-Ethnic Alliances’ organized by the International Centre for Contemporary Culture Research, University of Manchester, December 1994.

Note

1. This was not the only perspective affecting policy during the course of the 1980s. Another dominant discourse also impacted upon local government and minority relations, that of ‘Black’ political identity. For their own reasons and through their own understandings, the proponents of this discourse were often very antagonistic to the growing ‘culturalist’ logics of local authority policy. See, for instance, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1991), Werbner and Anwar (1991), Modood (1994).

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