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Assessing the backlash against
multiculturalism in Europe

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Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,
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Abstract

In recent years across Europe ‘Multiculturalism’ has taken a beating, and many governments have been purposefully dropping the notion ‘multicultural’ or other references to cultural diversity in their policy vocabularies. More and more politicians and public intellectuals have criticized a perceived shift towards ‘too much diversity’. This Working Paper describes a variety of instances and cases across Europe in which ethnic diversity and multiculturalism (recognizing that the term is contested and used variously) has come under attack in public discourse, local and national policies, and politics across the political spectrum. Anti-multiculturalist sentiments are shown to be certainly not new, but the language, images and instances recently thrown up have taken on new forms. Moreover, there seems – on the surface – to be far greater ubiquity, simultaneity and convergence of multicultural ‘backlash’ discourse across Europe, in both ‘old’ and ‘new’ countries of immigration. This Working Paper discusses how these parallel discourses have arisen, and why they have taken root in divergent political cultures and countries with divergent migration histories and composition.

Seit einigen Jahren steht in Europa der ‘Multikulturalismus’ im Fokus der Kritik. Viele Regierungen haben multikulturelle Ideen und positive Bezüge auf kulturelle Diversität aus ihrem politischen Vokabular gestrichen. Unter Politikern und Intellektuellen nimmt die Kritik an gesellschaftlichen Entwicklungen in Richtung auf ‘zu viel Vielfalt’ zu. Dieses Working Paper umreißt, wie in unterschiedlichen europäischen Ländern ethnische Vielfalt und Multikulturalismus im öffentlichen und politischen Diskurs hinterfragt werden. Diese Kritik ist nicht neu, aber die Begriffe und Bilder haben sich verändert. Zudem scheinen sich die Diskussionen in verschiedenen europäischen Ländern zunehmend ähnlicher zu werden, und zwar sowohl in den traditionellen als auch in neueren Einwanderungsländern. Dieses Working Paper diskutiert die Entwicklung dieser parallelen Diskurse und die Gründe für deren Etablierung in nationalen Kontexten mit unterschiedlicher Immigrationsgeschichte.

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‘Multiculturalism is dead.’ This was a headline in Britain’s Daily Mail on 7 July 2006 – the first anniversary of the London bombings. Such a pronouncement followed a long course of public criticism – indeed, over several preceding years – suggesting that a particular, liberal ideology had dominated politics since the 1970s, had failed miserably, and moreover had produced a dangerous social condition in which Islamic terrorism could flourish. This growing skepticism, culminating in a verbal backlash against multiculturalism, had reached such a point that The Economist’s (2007) columnist Bagehot commented,

Once it connoted curry and the Notting Hill carnival; these days, when applied to British politicians or their policies, ‘multiculturalism’ is almost as derogatory a term as ‘socialist’ or ‘neocon’. Even more than they agree about most other things, the main political parties are united in their convictions that multiculturalism is a perniciously naïve idea whose time has gone, or ought never to have come at all.

The backlash, moreover, was certainly not confined to Britain. Since the early 2000s across Europe, the rise, ubiquity, simultaneity and convergence of arguments condemning multiculturalism have been striking. How and why have such seemingly similar public debates unfolded across such varied social and political situations?

This paper addresses this question by examining public policies and debates concerning multiculturalism (inherently combined with issues of immigration and immigrant integration) across a number of European nation-states. It draws out the core idioms of European discourse on multiculturalism and highlights the main themes and stratagems which have been paralleled in various national contexts across Europe. Furthermore, it addresses the impact the backlash has had on policies and institutional practices on the ground. By describing the backlash against multiculturalism as a ‘crisis of perception’, the paper points to the disjointed development of public discourse, policies and public opinion, with the backlash discourse being accompanied by little actual shift in policy.

Multiple Modes of Multiculturalism

Despite the ‘-ism’ suggesting a distinctive ideological canon, multiculturalism is actually rather hard to pin down. Numerous philosophies, institutional frameworks and political interventions have been referred to under a collective rubric of multiculturalism. Yet social scientists have identified a wide variety of types of multicultu-

ralism. [Here we are focusing on multiculturalism by way of specific policies and public institutions; that is, we are less concerned with debates over multiculturalism in political philosophy, as represented for instance by Charles Taylor (1992), Will Kymlicka (1995), Bhikhu Parekh (2000), Brian Barry (2001), Tariq Modood (2007) and Anne Phillips (2007).] A divergent set of civic programs might be labeled as ‘radical multiculturalism’ or ‘polycentric multiculturalism’ (Shohat & Stam 1994), ‘insurgent multiculturalism’ (Giroux 1994), ‘public space multiculturalism’ (Vertovec 1996), ‘difference multiculturalism’ (Turner 1993), ‘critical multiculturalism’ (Chicago Cultural Studies Group 1994), ‘weak’ or ‘strong’ multiculturalism (Grillo 2005). Indeed, Steven Vertovec (1998) has pointed to at least eight different kinds of multiculturalism while Garard Delanty (2003) suggests another list with nine types of multiculturalism.

When attempting to bracket together an array of public measures as ‘multiculturalism’, the task is further complicated if undertaken comparatively across countries most known for the implementation of policies deemed, officially or not, multicultural: Australia, Canada, the United States, Great Britain, Sweden and the Netherlands. These countries – and different cities within them – have not undertaken the same approach, introduced the same measures nor set up the same institutions (cf. Martinello 1998, Bennett 1998, Rogers and Tillie 2001). Even within a single country, policies relevant to an overall multicultural agenda have not taken the same perspectives, aims and course of development. Hence, as Stuart Hall (2001: 3) observes,

Over the years the term ‘multiculturalism’ has come to reference a diffuse, indeed mad-deningly spongy and imprecise, discursive field: a train of false trails and misleading universals. Its references are a wild variety of political strategies.

That it is difficult to formulate a specific corpus of tenets or practices around multiculturalism should come as no surprise. Gary Freeman (2004) importantly points out that practically everywhere, governments have dealt with immigrant and ethnic minority incorporation through a rather disordered closet full of measures. ‘No state possesses a truly coherent incorporation regime’, Freeman (*Ibid.*: 946) notes,

Instead, one finds ramshackle, multifaceted, loosely connected sets of regulatory rules, institutions and practices in various domains of society that together make up the frameworks within which migrants and natives work out their differences.

Such a patchwork of policies indeed characterizes numerous domains of public governance. Rather than a singular set of well-integrated policies and institutions,

most often we find ‘subsystem frameworks that are weakly, if at all, coordinated’ (Ibid.).

Moreover, Freeman observes, ‘immigrants are mostly managed via institutions created for other purposes’ (Ibid.: 948). That is, immigrants and ethnic minorities engage, and are incorporated through, a range of public institutions including: various levels of administration from neighborhood associations and municipal councils to regional and national government departments; schools and universities; libraries; hospitals and health clinics; law courts and the police; social services; youth clubs; employment agencies; sports and leisure facilities; and various forms of print, radio, television and internet media.

Within and cutting across such varied institutions, the rubric multiculturalism has entailed diverse measures such as:

- Public ‘recognition’: support for ethnic minority organizations, facilities, and activities; public consultative bodies incorporating such organizations;
- Education: consideration for dress codes, gender-specific practices and other issues sensitive to the values of specific ethnic and religious minorities; creation of curricula reflecting the backgrounds of ethnic minority pupils (intended to teach non-ethnic minority children about the background of their peers, and to bolster the self-images of ethnic minority pupils); mother tongue teaching and language support; the establishment of minority groups’ own schools (usually religious, publically financed or not);
- Social Services: information, restructuring and retraining for delivering culturally sensitive practices among public employees, social workers, healthcare providers, police and courts;
- Public materials: state-sponsored information (such as health promotion campaigns) provided in multiple languages;
- Law: cultural exceptions to laws (such as Sikhs being allowed to wear turbans instead of motorcycle helmets); oaths on sacred books other than the Bible (e.g., Qur’an, Bhagavad Gita); recognition of other marriage, divorce and inheritance traditions; protection from discrimination or incitement to hatred;
- Religious accommodation: permission and support for the establishment of places of worship, cemeteries and funerary rites; allowance of time off work for worship;
- Food: allowance of ritual slaughter; provision of proscribed foods (halal, kosher, vegetarian) in public institutions;
- Broadcasting & media: monitoring of group images to ensure non-discrimination or to avoid stereotypes; provision of own media facilities for minority groups.

A singular principle does not equally infuse all these domains. That is not to say, however, that within and across these domains, and within a number of countries since the 1960s, a range of institutional initiatives have not had some broad, complementary objectives. Foremost among these we can identify tenets aiming to: reduce discrimination; promote equality of opportunity and overcome barriers to full participation in society; allow unconstrained access to public services; recognize cultural identities (as opposed to assimilation) and open-up public spaces for their representation; and foster acceptance of ethnic pluralism and cultural understanding across all groups. These are dissimilar objectives requiring different public measures, but obviously they sit well together. In this way, multiculturalism can at best be described as a broad set of mutually reinforcing approaches or methodologies concerning the incorporation and participation of immigrants and ethnic minorities and their modes of cultural/religious difference.

The slow death of multiculturalism?

Since the 1970s when multicultural policies were increasingly operationalized in various nation-states, criticism has never been lacking. For instance in Britain, the Swann Report, Honeyford Affair and Rushdie (Satanic Verses) Affair were a few of the issues that prompted considerable public debate about multicultural initiatives and frameworks throughout the 1980s (see respectively Verma 1989, Halstead 1988, Lewis 2002). From the beginning of the 1990s in the Netherlands, there have also been political attacks on dominant Dutch policies meant to assist ethnic minorities (Prins and Slijper 2002).

Yet beginning around the turn of the millennium, sporadic critical voices seemingly became harmonized into a chorus. (To push the metaphor, however, as described below it is questionable as to whether the critics have been singing from the same hymn sheet). Perhaps the main reasons for this – as with most political processes – are events. Since 2000 one occurrence or prominent public statement after another sparked a flurry of debates in government assemblies, newspapers and journals, TV talk shows and radio phone-in programs. Immigrants, Muslims and multiculturalism were at the heart of these. By no means exhaustive and mostly drawing on cases in Britain (the context known best to the authors of this paper), some key incidents are listed below.

January 2000. In the Netherlands, journalist Paul Scheffer (2000) publishes an article entitled ‘the multicultural drama’, in which he points out that ethnic minorities are overrepresented in statistics concerning unemployment, poverty, criminal activity and school drop-outs. In what purports to be the first outspoken criticism from the Left, Scheffer claims multicultural policy has made politicians blind to these facts.

May 2001. Riots, largely pitting British Bangladeshi and Pakistani youths against White youths, break out in three northern British cities. An official Report into the disturbances (Home Office 2001, known as the Cantle Report) suggests that

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

(Ibid.: 9).

September 2001. 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in the USA make the threat of Islamic terrorism in the West an uppermost public concern.

Year to May 2002. Rise (and death) of Pim Fortyn, outspoken Dutch politician who openly castigated Muslim immigration and Muslims’ inherent unassimilability.

February 2003. Results of 2001 UK Census published, showing extremely poor socio-economic conditions among some groups (especially Bangladeshis and Pakistanis). Public debates ask whether multicultural policies are to blame, or migrants (and their Muslim cultures) themselves.

February 2004. Prospect magazine editor David Goodhart (2004) publishes ‘Too Diverse?’. It is an article, again from left-of-centre, which controversially suggests that collective attitudes toward welfare are threatened by ethnic diversity. Also in this month, the French parliament votes in favor of a new law to ban the wearing of Islamic headscarves in schools. Throughout Europe commentators weigh up the issue in their own societies.

March 2004. Madrid train bombing prompts further fears of Muslim terrorists-among-us in Europe.

April 2004. In yet another critique from the Left, the chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, proclaims that ‘multiculturalism’ should be ditched, as it suggests separatism when there is an increased need for common British identity.

November 2004. The murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim extremist sparks more public discussion about tolerance, free speech and intolerant Muslim minorities.

July 2005. London terrorist bombings. Especially because the perpetrators were British-born and bred Muslims, there is much public comment on how such a condition could have arisen, and what should be done about it.

September 2005. In Denmark the Jyllands-Posten publishes notorious Muhammad cartoons, causing considerable controversy that in many places across Europe pits Western/'host' country open-mindedness vs. Islamic/migrant intolerance. In the UK, this month Trevor Phillips makes another contentious speech, this time suggesting the country is 'sleepwalking into segregation' by way of increasingly separate communities.

October-November 2005. Riots in Paris suburbs and other localities throughout France are depicted as troubles wrought by migrant youths (despite considerable activity among White French youths too); some reports even portray the disturbances as caused by Muslim youth.

October 2006. Cabinet Minister Jack Straw says he would prefer Muslim women not to wear veils which cover the face. The ensuing debate entails questions as to how much conformity a society should demand of minorities vs. to what extent they should be allowed to practice values no matter how disagreeable to the majority.

Although most of these cases specifically involved issues around Muslims and Islam, they each represent events flagged by critics in order to condemn, for various intents and purposes, policies of migrant/minority cultural accommodation. These events seemed to provide for critics, who had long been seeking to pronounce – and to ensure – the death of multiculturalism, nails with which to seal its coffin.

Backlash against Multiculturalism: Core idioms

Prompted by the public debates around these and other (usually nationally specific) events, the backlash against multiculturalism has involved specific idioms or tactics of condemnation. Sometimes these are used in conjunction, or argued through one line of reasoning that depends on another. In each case the discursive strategy is posited upon portrayals of multiculturalism that are set up to be readily and plainly impugned. The portrayals themselves, it will be shown below, are demonstrably partial, erroneous or false. Nevertheless in these ways across Europe, we witness remarkably common claims by way of critical assessments of multiculturalism (in the process of discursive convergence, though, one is unsure how much of a particular national commentator's argument has been adopted directly from another country's: e.g., a Brit drawing upon Paul Scheffer, a Dane or German inspired by David Goodhart). Drawing upon a few exemplary statements again mostly from Britain, but resonating in backlash discourse elsewhere, we outline the core critiques found since the turn of the millennium in the backlash against multiculturalism – we should say, what critics claim to be multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism is a single 'doctrine'

A basic device common to most such critiques is to describe and emphasize multiculturalism as a singular, fixed ideology or dogma. In this way 'it' can be more readily condemned. Proponents of backlash discourse either don't know about, overlook or purposefully ignore the diffuse and myriad patchwork of policies, practices and institutional adjustments through which immigrant and ethnic minority accommodation and incorporation are actually undertaken. Instead, critics find it important to paint an undemanding picture of an integrated and dominating 'multicultural industry' comprised of White liberals and ethnic minority activists. In this way columnist Melanie Phillips (2006a) suggests that

Multiculturalism became the driving force of British life, ruthlessly policed by an army of bureaucrats enforcing a doctrine of state-mandated virtue to promote racial, ethnic and cultural balkanization;

Sunday Times writer Jasper Gerard (2006) describes how 'many immigrants, encouraged by multicultural orthodoxy, retreat into their differentness'; Patience Wheatcroft (2006) writes in the Daily Telegraph how 'The doctrine of multiculturalism dic-

tated that all beliefs should be allowed to flourish', while the Daily Mail's James Slack (2006) describes 'the dogma of multiculturalism' and 'the Left-wing doctrine' which

dictates that different communities should not be forced to integrate. Instead, they are allowed to maintain their own cultures and identities.

With such a consolidated enemy to fight, politicians can mount campaigns. Hence in 2007 Conservative Party leader David Cameron criticized 'the creed of multiculturalism' for contributing to a 'deliberately weakening of our collective identity' (in *The Economist* 2007); Cameron has therefore picked a fight with, as he calls it, the 'disastrous' and 'discredited doctrine of state multiculturalism' (Daily Mail 26 February 2008).

Multiculturalism stifles debate

Drawing on the idea that multiculturalism is comprised of a single, prevailing ideology that has been foisted on the country, critics contend that this has created an atmosphere in which thought and speech is controlled. In this way many backlash critics claim daringly to speak out against a 'tyranny of political correctness' (Wheatcroft 2006) that has stifled any attempt to discuss race and immigration in, as they see it, real terms. For instance David Cameron has attacked multiculturalism and its concomitant 'fear of causing offence or being branded a racist' (Daily Mail 26 February 2008). With another way of positing this, a senior politician of the German CDU party, Volker Kauder, said that certain subjects had become 'taboo' in public and that 'the time of looking away and blindness resulting from a false multi-culti ideology is over' (*Bild* 1 April 2006). Another example comes from Britain's Daily Express (2007a), which asserted that Muslims and Islamist terrorists have been 'allowed to live an existence entirely separate from the non-Muslim neighbors'; consequently, 'The era of politically correct cultural surrender must be brought to an end.'

Multiculturalism has fostered separateness

With multiculturalism presumably identified so concretely, probably the most common complaint is that 'it' has led directly to social breakdown. This is particularly claimed in terms of multiculturalism promoting ethnic separatism, an explicit rejection of common national values, and a lack of interest in social integration. For instance, David Davis, the Conservative shadow Home Secretary, has said Muslims

must start integrating into mainstream British society (Daily Telegraph 4 August 2005),

signaled a shift away from the policy of multi-culturalism, which allows people of different faith and cultures to settle without expecting them to integrate.

He suggests that

often, the authorities have seemed more concerned with encouraging distinctive identities rather than promoting the common values of nationhood.

John O'Sullivan (2007) wrote in the Daily Telegraph that

'multiculturalism' encourages minorities to retain their culture and identity. Thus, our rulers set out, eager and well-intentioned, to maximize the differences and therefore the tensions inherent in diversity.

The tide of backlash discourse (again, seemingly underpinned by events) eventually led members of the ruling New Labour party to adopt the argument. Thus in 2006 the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly MP, said that

we have moved from a period of uniform consensus on the value of multiculturalism, to one where we can encourage that debate by questioning whether it is encouraging separateness

(Daily Mail 24 August 2006).

The Conservatives happily continued this theme, with David Cameron warning that

multiculturalism – the idea that different cultures should be respected to the point of encouraging them to live separately – had dangerously undermined Britain's sense of identity and brought about 'cultural apartheid'.

(Daily Mail 26 February 2008).

Much of this kind of discourse stems from the 2001 Cattle Report and its image of 'parallel lives'. In Germany, where the notion *Parallelgesellschaften* ('parallel societies') has existed since a prominent report of the 1990s (see Heitmeyer 1996), the backlash against multiculturalism has been argued directly in terms of self-separating, 'parallel societies' (Focus 24 October 2004, Tagesspiegel 17 January 2008). Similarly in France, this image of increasing separateness of some parts of the population has been expressed by way of the fear of a 'balkanization' of French society and concerns about 'communitarianism' (Simon and Sala Pala, forthcoming).

Multiculturalism refuses common values

Another aspect of the argument that multiculturalism promotes separatism is that it is thereby not interested in any form of commonality. This was even the view of one New Labour Home Secretary in Britain, David Blunkett, who was weary of an ‘unbridled multiculturalism which privileges difference over community cohesion’ (Blunkett 2002: 6). Since, some suggested, ‘a blend of multiculturalism and Europeanism [has] drained all pride and meaning out of Britishness’ (O’Sullivan 2007), the solution must be to drop multiculturalism and promote national identity. This was exactly Trevor Phillips’ 2004 argument, mentioned above, which was depicted as the Left ‘waking up’ to the damage multiculturalism had done. For the right, this has been clear all along. For example, in 2007 a report by the right-wing thinktank Policy Exchange castigated

multi-cultural policies implemented since the 1980s which have emphasized difference at the expense of shared national identity and divided people along ethnic, religious and cultural lines

(Daily Mail 29 January 2007).

In Germany, too, such discourse is present. Stefan Lust has argued that multiculturalism’s insistence on recognizing identities-of-origin, instead of a common host-culture, ‘must lead to disaster’ (Tagesspiegel 17 January 2008; also reiterated in his 2008 book *Abschied von Multikulti*, ‘Farewell to Multiculti’). Multiculturalism has, he claims, inherently led to separation and ethnic conflict in places like the UK and the Netherlands.

Multiculturalism denies problems

The idea that a single ideology has controlled the ability to see things clearly, to speak about them truthfully, and to promote commonality have been conjoined in an argument that multiculturalism refuses to acknowledge social problems connected with immigrants and ethnic minorities. This was a key feature of Paul Scheffer’s (2000) original critique: that is, that a new divide has emerged within Dutch society, particularly represented by a new class of the economically and socially unsuccessful – a group made up of non-Western migrants and their second and third generation offspring. The government turns a blind eye towards this new division, Scheffer said, since it seeks only to praise the multicultural society from an illusory cosmopolitan viewpoint. A similar claim has been made by the Mayor of Berlin’s borough of Neu-

kölln, Heinz Buschkowsky: he castigated a ‘multi-culti-romanticism’ that closed the eyes of politicians to a ‘ticking time-bomb’ situation of ethnic separatism and disaffected youth (Focus 24 October 2004). A further example came in 2006 when Bild newspaper interviewed historian Arnulf Baring, who represented the view that Ausländer (‘foreigners’) in Germany don’t accept German culture and that this is simply overlooked by many. ‘It’s not the Germans who are the fools’, Baring said, ‘but the politicians and do-gooders who have given us decades of a multicultural dream’ (Bild 5 April).

Multiculturalism supports reprehensible practices

Cultural relativism – itself portrayed as all-aspects-of-all-cultures are good – is depicted as the underpinning the blindness of the doctrine of multiculturalism. For this reason multiculturalism, critics say, supports backward minority cultures’ unequal treatment of women, forced marriages, honor killings and female genital mutilation. Critics draw on such examples to profess moral outrage, again boldly and candidly against an overbearing climate of political correctness. Paul Cliteur (2001), writing in NRC Handelsblad, condemned politicians and the intellectual elite for upholding their view that all cultures are equal. Cultural relativism, he said, serves only to suppress an open debate about common values. According to Cliteur, it is nonsensical to state that all cultures are equal since some cultures are evil, some cultures suppress women, and some cultures excessively punish misdemeanors. As discussed by Ulf Hedetoft (forthcoming), in Denmark such arguments have made their way into government documents, where ‘culture’ – described in terms of fixed ‘core values’ – is used as a yardstick by which immigrants’ integration is to be measured. This fixed notion of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural differences’ is thereby directly related to notions of a ‘cultural battle’ (kulturkamp) which must be fought against both new immigrants and the enemy within (including left-wing liberals).

Such views have been long present in Britain too (especially around the Rushdie Affair and its depiction of Muslim intolerance), but the tragedy of 7/7 terrorism particularly sparked this backlash idiom. Immediately after the event, Daily Mail columnist Melanie Phillips (2005) wasted no time in blaming multiculturalism. She contested that in the wake of the London bombings, ‘Muslims have been presented not as the community which must take responsibility for this horror, but as its principal victims.’ Combining several of the backlash tropes outlined above, Phillips continued,

This moral inversion is the result of the cultural brainwashing that has been going on in Britain for years in the pursuit of the disastrous doctrine of multiculturalism. This has refused to teach Muslims – along with other minorities – the core of British culture and values. Instead, it has promoted a lethally divisive culture of separateness, in which minority cultures are held to be equal if not superior to the values and traditions of the indigenous majority.

Even worse, multiculturalism causes the moral paralysis of “victim culture”, whereby to say an ethnic minority is at fault is to invite immediate accusations of racism.

We have already paid a terrible price for multiculturalism and this cancer of moral inversion and irresponsibility.

This argument is expanded in her book *Londonistan: How Britain is Creating a Terror State Within* (Phillips 2006a). Elsewhere, she also carries on this combined line of argument, based on the core assumption that ‘At the heart of multiculturalism lies a radical egalitarianism by which everyone’s culture and lifestyle has equal validity and moral stature. The consequence is that people are increasingly unable to make moral distinctions based on behavior’ (Phillips 2006b). Phillips’ reasoning has been persuasive, or at least rehashed. On anniversary of 7/7 and with the flagrant headline ‘Multiculturalism has let terror flourish in Britain’, Britain’s *Daily Express* (2007b) wrote about Muslims:

Many will not understand our culture, our attitude to women, our liberal values. Many will not even want to try. At best they will be out of touch, at worst they will be inclined to radicalize the young and spread the word that leads to death and terror. The pernicious doctrine of multiculturalism has allowed this situation to develop. The Government must not allow it to continue.

Indeed, as part of his growing backlash campaign, Tory leader David Cameron warned that the ultimate outcome of multiculturalism, if unchecked, could be the recognition of Sharia law in Britain. Managing to combine three key idioms (multiculturalism as single doctrine, the fear of concession to Islam, the fostering of separatism) in one sentence, Cameron said that

The reality is that the introduction of Sharia law for Muslims is actually the logical endpoint of the now discredited doctrine of state multiculturalism – instituting, quite literally, a legal apartheid to entrench what is the cultural apartheid in too many parts of our country.

(Daily Mail 26 February 2008).

Multiculturalism provides a haven for terrorists

As already indicated by Melanie Phillips' interventions, among others, public discourses comprising strands of a backlash against multiculturalism have combined with fears surrounding terrorism (or, some would say, a manipulation of such fears). Following the arrest of 17 Muslims charged with terrorism in Canada, Phillips (2006c) herself wrote:

In particular, both Canada and Britain need to face the fact that multiculturalism, which for both countries is an article of faith, has brought havoc in its wake. This doctrine holds that all minority cultures must enjoy equal status with the majority, and that any attempt to impose the majority culture over those of minorities is by definition racist. It has helped create a cultural vacuum into which has roared militant Islamism – the interpretation of Islam that preached holy war. Multiculturalism not only creates the environment in which this clerical fascism can flourish but – crucially – also undermines our ability to defend ourselves against it.

... Multiculturalism has exacerbated the alienation that has left so many British Muslims vulnerable to the siren song of jihad.

In more condensed form, Phillips (2006b) states that 'Multiculturalism plus radical Islam is an explosive cocktail.' To be sure, others have taken this cue. In its coverage of a report by the defense and security thinktank Royal United Services Institute, the Daily Mail (15 February 2008) proclaimed 'Multiculturalism is making Britain "a soft touch for terrorists"'. Moreover, said Tory shadow Home Secretary Dominic Grieve (Guardian 27 September 2008), multiculturalism in the UK has left a 'terrible' legacy, creating a vacuum that has been filled by extremists from across the political spectrum. He said 'long-term inhabitants have been left fearful'.

Backlash against Multiculturalism: Themes and stratagems

As the current phase of multiculturalism debates were getting underway, Baukje Prins and Boris Slijper (2002) undertook a discourse analysis of several such arguments. They identified five key themes or recurrent theses running through such debates regardless of national context: (1) the clash between cultures (particularly Islam versus Western values), with toleration and unassimilability as basic issues under scrutiny; (2) ethnic diversity and national identity, with separateness or the ostensible unwillingness to assimilate stressed as threats to social cohesion; (3) the socio-

economic position of immigrants, pointing to high unemployment, dependence on welfare, and juvenile delinquency as failures of integration. Here the question of who is to blame – the system or the victims? – tends to be posed not in terms of structural inequality or deep-set discrimination, but as multicultural policies pandering to immigrants’ culture, inherent lack of loyalty to the nation-state, and over-reliance on welfare; (4) policies of immigration and asylum, through which debates on multiculturalism and integration are linked directly to debates about immigration, including immigration as over-population, as a breeding ground of disease, as a security threat, and liable to produce more failure of integration (especially under conditions of multiculturalism); (5) debates on the debate, meaning the ways in which discussants talk about the issues becomes talked about; this includes controversies about the ‘correct’ terminology, strategies to counter or demonize opponents, what can and cannot be said, what counts as racism and what does not. Prins and Slijper emphasize that

in the end, concerning each of the five issues that we discern in the debates on multicultural society... positions cannot be simply reduced to the classical opposition between right and left, or to more recent distinctions such as those between black and white, immigrant and indigenous, or Muslim and Western

(Ibid.: 327).

Indeed, they observe,

in each national debate, we find ample examples of anomalous, of “abnormal” positions, such as xenophobic immigrants, politically incorrect Muslims, and progressive realists

(Ibid.).

As evidenced by the examples in the preceding section, linking all such discourse is an assumed, sequential logic that (a) multiculturalism fosters accentuated or preserved cultural differences, (b) such differences lead to communal separateness, and (c) separateness deepens socio-economic standing, intensifies the breakdown of social relations, and provides an incubator for extremism and possible terrorism. Within this line of thinking, the blame on multiculturalism also entails blame on immigrants/ethnic minorities themselves: as the reasoning goes, it is their own desire to maintain cultural traditions and distinct identities – a desire that multiculturalism supports – which leads to all these negative consequences.

In addition to the typical themes developed within the content of backlash arguments, there is also a common set of stratagems or discursive maneuvers. Prins and Slijper (2002) examine Dutch public debates around multiculturalism through the 1990s into the late 2000s. Throughout this period they observe the emergence of what

she style as the ‘new realism’. It is characterized by what its proponents see as the courage to confront taboos, break silence, intervene ‘with guts’, and speak the truth surrounding societal ills hidden by a (leftist) consensus of political correctness. Prins and Slijper note how the genre of new realism comprises four distinct features. First, the author presents himself or herself as someone who dares face the facts, who speaks frankly about ‘truths’ that the dominant discourse has supposedly covered up. Second, a new realist set himself up as the spokesperson of the ordinary people, that is, the autochthonous population (who know what’s really going on). A third characteristic of new realism is the suggestion that it is a characteristic feature of national society (in Prins’ and Snijper’s case of the Netherlands, where new realists assert that being Dutch equals being frank). A fourth feature is resistance to the left, suggesting that progressive elites have dominated the public realm and stifled the possibility of true debate. A final feature of new realism is its gendered discourse, bringing presumed attitudes toward gender and sexuality into the debate as deliberative weapons for their own cause.

Another significant maneuver entails the accusation of political correctness. This is often put forward as the ultimate disqualification and weapon of the right (countered by accusations of racism by the left, which are thrown in order to have the same effect). Anti-multiculturalists declare that by means of controlling language, the ‘politically correct’ refuse to talk about real issues and social problems; they are therefore untruthful, although presumed to dominate the public sphere. Again, new realist-style critics of multicultural subsequently model themselves as intrepid truth-sayers promoting the uncontestable viewpoint that freedom of opinion and open debate is more important than the risk of stigmatization. Yet this maneuver only works by first painting the picture of multiculturalism as a dogmatic, debate stifling, separateness fostering, common value refusing, problem denying, overly relativist, terrorist harboring entity.

Impacts of the Backlash

In contexts throughout Europe the discourse attacking multiculturalism has certainly created a certain climate within the public sphere. Broadly, one might say, the term has successfully been associated with the idea of misguided policy. Politicians to the right and left of centre prefer to disassociate themselves from multiculturalism. One telling example came in 2002, when the senior author of this Introduction was

explicitly told by the head speech-writer for the British Home Secretary, David Blunkett, that ‘the minister will never use “the M-word” again’. This conceptual distancing became a significant political trend. When the Home Office (2005) launched its major policy platform, *Improving Opportunities, Strengthening Society: The Government’s Strategy to Increase Race Equality and Community Cohesion*, the words ‘multicultural’ and ‘multiculturalism’ were nowhere to be found in the document. By the time the UK’s Commission on Integration and Cohesion was set up in 2007, its stated approach was that

we need to update our language to meet the current climate. We therefore intend to avoid using the term “multiculturalism” in our report because of its “catch all” and confusing quality

(CIC 2007: 13).

There has not been, however, a complete paradigm shift away from multiculturalism in public debate. In fact, in some quarters the criticism has led to a kind of backlash against the backlash (cf. Eller 1997). This was evident following David Goodhart’s ‘Too Diverse’ article: soon after its original appearance in *Prospect* magazine, *The Guardian* newspaper re-printed the piece and provided a special section with numerous essays and letters strongly disagreeing with Goodhart’s assessment; later in 2004, too, on its website *Prospect* itself published critical responses from a range of commentators including Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka, Nathan Glazer, Bhikhu Parekh and Saskia Sassen. As the backlash continued, Anthony Giddens (2006) voiced his concern over the nature of public debate. ‘Much of the debate about multiculturalism in this, however, is crass, ignorant and misconceived’, Giddens said, ‘Multiculturalism simply does not mean what most of its critics think.’ *The Economist*’s (2007) columnist Bagehot, too, was uneasy about the tone of criticism, noting how ‘multiculturalism’s detractors tend to concentrate on the easy targets’ such as honor killings, forced marriage, and the need for national language learning; ultimately the prominent journal came out praising multiculturalism’s intents and results.

What effects has the backlash discourse had on actual policies and institutional practices? Christian Joppke (2004) suggests there has been a ‘wholesale retreat’ from official multiculturalism policies in Europe. He posits a number of causes for this, including:

(1) the lack of public support for official multiculturalism policies..., (2) these policies’ inherent shortcomings and failures, especially with respect to the socio-economic margina-

lization and self-segregation of migrants and their children, and (3) a new assertiveness of the liberal state in imposing the liberal minimum on its dissenters

(p. 244).

These three purported trends sit well with, and are often recapitulated by, backlash discourse. Has there been such a wholesale retreat, and are these causes actual? Below we examine some evidence surrounding each of these claims.

(1) lack of public support

Joppke nor any other recent observers actually demonstrate a significant public opinion turn against multicultural policies. One should not conflate the appearance, ferocity and ubiquity of backlash discourse in newspapers, by politicians and on talk shows with actual changes of opinion among the general public. To the contrary, one could argue that much of the backlash seems to be but ‘sound and fury’ rather than a true reflection of public opinion. There have been few polls explicitly about multicultural policies; the closest we can come to evidence is mainly by way of broader opinion polls concerning the accommodation of ethnic diversity.

As with many political issues, quite often public opinion shows itself to be inconsistent or uncertain. This was the situation in August 2005 – one month after the London bombings – when a BBC/MORI poll found the public to be ‘confused’ about multiculturalism (BBC 2005). At that time, while 58 per cent of the British public who were polled agreed that ‘People who come to live in Britain should adopt British values / traditions’ and only 35 per cent felt that ‘People who come to live in Britain should be free to live by their own values / traditions’, at the same time 62 per cent of these Britons agreed that ‘Multiculturalism makes Britain a better place.’ Further, only 32 per cent believed that ‘Multiculturalism threatens the British way of life’ while just 21 per cent agreed that ‘the policy of multiculturalism in Britain has been a mistake and should be abandoned.’

Additionally, a UK government poll found that around this time (when the backlash discourse was steadily growing), measures actually indicated an improvement in already highly positive views toward diversity: it reported that

Between 2003 and 2005, the percentage of White people in ethnically mixed neighborhoods who felt that their local area was a place where people respected ethnic differences increased from 79 per cent to 82 per cent

(DCLG 2007: 219).

Such findings have been replicated across Europe, too. Eurobarometer is a regular poll of 27,000 people across the European Union. It has examined ‘resistance to multicultural society’ based on questions such as to whether ‘It is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different races, religions or cultures’ and whether ‘diversity in terms of race, religion or culture adds to [a country’s] strengths’. Only 25 per cent of the polled European public indicates such resistance to multicultural society. Certainly in some countries a trend toward more resistance did unfold over time, but a longitudinal analysis of these Eurobarometer measures found that

Overall, resistance to multicultural society has remained rather stable as a result of a general increase between 1997 and 2000 and a general decrease between 2000 and 2003

(Coenders et al. 2003: 43).

By 2007 Eurobarometer similarly found that almost three-quarters of EU citizens believe that people with a different ethnic, religious or national background enrich the cultural life of their country (Gallup 2007). Further,

A remarkably high number (83 per cent) of EU citizens agreed about the benefits of intercultural contacts, and two-thirds were of the opinion that family (cultural) traditions should be kept by the young generations

(Ibid.: 4).

These findings should not imply that everything’s rosy. Racism and xenophobia are rife and discrimination is widespread (see, e.g., FRA 2008). Still, although public opinion polls are not precise nor entirely reliable, these findings seem to suggest that attitudes toward multicultural society and minority culture initiatives have not been drastically affected, despite the backlash barrage.

(2) policy shortcoming, socio-economic marginalization and self-segregation

There is no doubt that throughout European societies, minorities of recent migrant origin are broadly marked by low educational attainment, poor quality housing conditions, high unemployment or low-grade employment conditions. From context to context, such characteristics have been entrenched through failed policies, to be sure. But have these policies been ones of ‘multiculturalism’, or just plain failed education, housing, and job-creation policies? That is, there is no evidence that policies of cultural accommodation (as mentioned in the first section of this Introduction, such as

provision of halal food in hospitals, retraining for culturally sensitive health services, or support of minority media) have led to or worsened these disadvantageous socio-economic traits. Rather than failed multicultural policies, such traits are more likely to have developed and been sustained by sheer discrimination, labor market dynamics and geographies of deprivation.

And what of the claim that migrants and ethnic minorities are, with the help of multiculturalism, retreating into self-segregated enclaves? Again, pockets of ethnic concentration certainly to exist, but data over recent years indicate no particularly alarming patterns or increases. For instance in the UK, where many members of the public believe that Muslims purposely set themselves apart, Deborah Phillips (2006) has studied one well-known context, the city of Bradford. There, she found,

Discourses of ethnic ‘self-segregation’ have given rise to the myth that minority ethnic communities live, or wish to live, separate lives and disengage from wider British society. However, neither the evidence on the ground (in terms of residential patterns) nor the diversity of lived experiences and views about social mixing expressed by British Muslims in Bradford would seem to support this conclusion.

...The construction of minority ethnic segregation as a ‘problem’ and British Muslims as alien, inward-looking ‘Others’ perpetuates, and indeed normalizes, the view that the responsibility for community tensions lies principally with the ‘self-segregating’ minorities. Yet the evidence from this research suggests that the radicalization of space in Bradford speaks more loudly of white control and bounded choices, both past and present.

(Ibid.: 36–7)

Looking across Britain, Ludi Simpson (2007) has analyzed current data and found that the indices actually show more ethnic mixing and a greater evenness of population distribution in the UK. Therefore, he (Ibid.: 423) concludes, ‘A doom-laden view of increasing segregation and the threat of ghettos is not supported by the evidence.’

Elsewhere in Europe, there exists a similar mismatch of public rhetoric and actual statistics. Reviewing a number of studies on segregation in the UK, the Netherlands and Sweden, Karen Schönwälder (2007: 6) observes that ‘in all three countries, the levels of residential segregation are moderate’, especially compared to US levels, and

the trends seem to be towards decreasing concentration of residential environments rather than towards consolidating ethnic enclaves.

Similarly in Germany, Schönwälder and Jamina Söhn (2007) demonstrate that nowhere are there large-scale concentrations (e.g. over 10 per cent of a city’s population) of particularly ethnic groups; there are certainly cities in which over 30–40 per

cent of inhabitants are of migrant background, but these areas always comprise a mixture of ethnic groups.

Hence with regard to the assertion of self-segregation – a key tenet of the backlash against multiculturalism – the situation seems to be that ‘the anxieties are better seen as ghettos of the mind rather than ghettos of reality’ (Simpson 2007: 423).

(3) new assertiveness of liberal state

With regard to the third trend purportedly leading to a wholesale retreat from multiculturalism, Joppke (2004: 249) states that

The turn from multiculturalism to civic integration reflects a seismic shift not just in the Netherlands, but in other European societies as well.

Over the past few years, there is no doubt that ‘integration’ (of immigrants and ethnic minorities) has become one of the foremost themes in national domestic policy throughout Europe and at the EU level itself. Most countries of substantial immigration in Europe have, in recent years, rolled out new policy platforms for the integration of immigrants (see Carrera 2005, Süßmuth and Weidenfeld 2005).

In Austria, Belgium (Wallonia and Flanders), France, Germany, Denmark, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and elsewhere, governments have relatively newly established integration policies and programs. These often include implementing citizenship courses and mandatory tests for immigrants surrounding knowledge of national civics, dominant cultural norms and values. Increasingly, language requirements for immigrants are being called for in many places too. Newcomers must demonstrate certain standards or levels of competency in the official language, again through compulsory courses and tests – sometimes even prior to entry. Failure to engage or pass such language requirements may threaten secure legal status. In these ways and more, the onus and obligation is being placed on immigrants and ethnic minorities to take up ‘host’ country values and cultural practices and to actively demonstrate their desire to ‘belong’. In Switzerland, for example, such expectations that immigrants should demonstrate their efforts to ‘belong’ are expressed within a discourse of *fordern* (calling on immigrants’ own efforts to integrate) as opposed to *fördern* (supporting immigrants’ integration; see d’Amato, forthcoming). Such measures are seen by policy-makers as crucial steps to ensure immigrants’ and ethnic minorities’ own socio-economic mobility, to avoid unrest and to guarantee security.

Joppke's 'seismic shift' would imply that these changes run throughout and deep into policies and public infrastructures. However, apart from an obvious avoidance of the word 'multicultural' within most policy documents across Europe (to the extent it was ever in some), arguably there has not been such a massive change. If so, one would expect a genuine retraction of cultural accommodation measures of the kind listed early in this Introduction. Clearly in most European countries and at EU level there has emerged a pervasive emphasis on so-called integration – but this set of policy reorientations has not emerged with the eradication, nor even much to the detriment, of actual measures, institutions and frameworks for minority cultural recognition.

While 'multicultural' has mostly disappeared from political rhetoric and 'integration' has plainly appeared, continuing support for immigrant and minority cultural difference is evident in the growing use of notions of 'diversity'. For example, while 'multicultural' or 'multiculturalism' are words entirely absent from the key British strategy document *Improving Opportunities, Strengthening Society* (Home Office 2005), 'diversity' – mostly mentioned in terms of 'promoting diversity' – appears 34 times within a 54 page document; similarly, in the 202-page German national plan for the integration of immigrants (Bundesregierung 2007), 'diversity' (Vielfalt) appears 84 times as something to endorse and encourage.

Multiculturalism by any other name

In national and urban policy, 'diversity' – alongside or alternative to 'multicultural' – is not a particularly new concept. 'Diversity policy', in one form or another, already arose in the late 1990s. 'Diversity' emerged in part as a kind of transference from a corporatist, or 'group-ist', approach to ethnic minority incorporation – indeed criticism of the corporatist model of multiculturalism was widespread in the 1990s (see Ålund and Schierup 1991, Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993, Vertovec 1996, Baumann 1999) – toward more individual modes of inclusion (Uitermark et al. 2005, Bader 2008, Faist 2009). Behind many emergent 'diversity' policies there is the idea that, rather than treating members of ethnic minorities as ever-representative of bounded collectives, institutions should recognize cultural difference as an individual trait. This view has spearheaded the development of 'diversity management' in public administration, corporate structures and industrial workplaces, where 'diversity'

calls attention to a range of overall benefits to be gained from recognizing and valuing individuals' cultural differences (see Wrench 2007).

Other uses of 'diversity' in today's policy documents are wholly interchangeable with earlier uses of 'multicultural'. That is, 'diversity' is the term now meant to do much of the work that 'multicultural' used to: as mentioned earlier in this Introduction, this mainly entails measures to reduce discrimination; to promote equality of opportunity and overcome barriers to full participation in society; to allow unconstrained access to public services; to recognize cultural identities (as opposed to assimilation) and open up public spaces to their representation; and to foster acceptance of ethnic pluralism and cultural understanding across all groups. In this way 'multicultural' programs have been replaced by ones concerned with 'diversity'. Examples are now myriad; below we list some selected to indicate variety and range.

On the urban level, across Europe cities such as Copenhagen, Stuttgart, Vienna, and Dublin have built diversity principles into their current policies and practices (Spencer 2008). At national level, the Belgian government's action plan 2005–7 for developing diversity include the goal of

respecting differences in the attitudes, values, cultural frameworks, lifestyles, skills and experiences of each member of a group

(Ibid.: 7).

And at European level, in 2004 the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities adopted a resolution which included as a key aim

the use of cultural diversity as a resource, by opening up urban life and public services in an intercultural manner

(Ibid.: 12–3).

Also at this latter level, an important set of guidelines that emerged as part of the 'integration' trend are the European Union's 'Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the European Union' (Council of the European Union 2004). The Prelude to this document describes cultural diversity as one of the benefits that member states receive from immigration (acknowledged as 'a permanent feature of European society'; Ibid.: 15). Principle No. 7 states that

Frequent interaction between immigrants and Member State citizens is a fundamental mechanism for integration... [including] Shared forums, inter-cultural dialogue, education about immigrants and immigrant cultures...;

Principle No. 8 notes that

The practice of diverse cultures and religions is guaranteed under the Charter of Fundamental Rights and must be safeguarded, unless practices conflict with other inviolable European rights or with national law

while the EU promotes

Constructive social, inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, education, thoughtful public discourse, support for cultural and religious expressions that respect national and European values, rights and laws

(Ibid.: 23).

Such clear statements show that there has not been a real rolling-back of measures to recognize cultural difference – indeed, ever new schemes are being launched (some still using the term ‘multicultural’, as alternative to or indeed in combination with ‘diversity’ and ‘intercultural’). Illustrations, drawn from the European Commission’s (2007) Third Annual Report on Migration and Integration, include: the Swedish government declared 2006 as the ‘Swedish Year of Multiculturalism’ to create cooperation between different cultural traditions; in Slovenia a ‘unit for the cultural rights of minorities and for the development of cultural diversity’ was established while the federal government of Belgium set up a Diversity Unit and the French and Flemish Communities created programs for intercultural communication and awareness raising; Denmark embarked upon various initiatives fostering intercultural dialogue and stressing religious diversity, including dialogue meetings between the Danish Prime Minister and the Minister for Integration and various ethnic minority organizations; in Luxembourg there was a ‘festival of migrations, cultures and citizenship’ and other ‘multicultural initiatives’ organized to promote integration; Finland had a ‘Multicultural personality of the Year’ award and in Portugal ‘many initiatives are carried out to manage cultural diversity including television and radio programs, such as the ‘Week of Cultural Diversity’; and in France ‘a group of big enterprises drafted a ‘Diversity Charter’ to commit themselves to create an intercultural environment among their staff (Ibid.: 13). Germany has also initiated a Diversity Charter, currently signed by over 500 leading companies such as Daimler, Deutsche Bank, Deutsche BP and Deutsche Telekom. Among its policy goals are:

to acknowledge the diversity of society in and outside the organization, appreciate its inherent potential and put it to profitable use for the organization; to publicly report on our activities and the progress we have made in promoting diversity and respect for differ-

ence on an annual basis; and to inform our employees about diversity and involve them in implementing the Charter

(www.diversity-charter.org).

In sum, the signatories state that ‘We are convinced that embracing and appreciating diversity has a positive impact on society in Germany.’

Still other policy developments show that, despite – or better, alongside – the centrality of ‘integration’ measures, minority cultural recognition remains prevalent within public policy. In *Improving Opportunities, Strengthening Society* (Home Office 2005), while community cohesion was flagged as a central tenet, the British government listed among its goals that:

In health our overall drive to provide greater patient choice will include more tailored services to meet the particular needs of different cultural and ethnic groups...

(Ibid.: 9);

As youth services and school partnerships are developed, we will improve opportunities for young people from all backgrounds to learn and socialize together and to develop an inclusive sense of British identity alongside their other cultural identities...

(Ibid.: 11);

We also expect museums, galleries and community cultural programs to play an increased role in promoting an understanding of, and celebrating, the diverse elements of our local and national society...

(Ibid.: 12);

More broadly, health services need to be sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of all patients...

(Ibid.: 18);

Today, Britishness 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.: 20)

Although now under the rubric of ‘integration’, these statements and plans were basically the same as those under the rubric ‘multiculturalism’.

Other examples demonstrate a reluctance to shift policy strategies. As part of the drive toward fostering community cohesion and being seen to shift from old-

style, ‘separatist’ multiculturalism, in February 2008 the UK government signaled that funding for single ethnic or religious groups would be cut back or phased out altogether. Hazel Blears, the Communities Secretary, proposed that local councils should not ‘risk using public money on projects that might... unnecessarily keep people apart’ (in *The Economist* 2008a). However, by the end of 2008 the central government dropped such plans, accepting that such funding should be decided on the local level and acknowledging that such single groups themselves often play important roles in building social cohesion.

It is particularly on the local level that cultural accommodation policies are still to be found in number. Indicative of this fact, in December 2008 *The Economist* (2008b) published a substantial piece pointing to the many ways local governments across Europe are practically and unproblematically accommodating Muslim values and practices, including: approving the building of mosques, providing halal food in schools, regulating facilities for ritual slaughter, consenting to headscarves among Muslim city workers, zoning special areas for Islamic burial in cemeteries, and creating times for women-only swimming sessions in public pools. Despite national backlash discourse it seems that, as *The Economist* concludes, ‘Local pragmatism works best.’

A crisis of perception

Policies and programs once deemed ‘multicultural’ continue everywhere. As Derek McGhee (2008: 145)

we have entered into a phase of reflexive multiculturalism in which the term ‘multiculturalism’ has been driven underground, while some of the strategies associated with multiculturalism continue to influence policy and practices at the ‘local’ level.

Yet little public knowledge of the facts around the recognition of minority cultural practices provides fertile ground for backlash discourse to grow. This was notably exemplified in Quebec’s recent ‘accommodation crisis’, a French Canadian version of the backlash against multiculturalism.

In the mid-2000s a growing number of reported cases in Quebec sparked public controversies surrounding the accommodation (or as they came to be portrayed by critics, ‘privileges’) of migrants’ and ethnic minorities’ cultural differences. Fore-

most cases included reported incidents such as when: men who accompanied their spouses to prenatal classes were excluded at the request of Muslim women; female driving instructors were asked to relinquish their places to men when Orthodox Jews were taking their driving tests; customers at a dance hall were expelled so that Muslims could recite prayers; food sectors were told to modify recipes and invest heavily to make products conform to Orthodox Jewish standards; a gym had to frost over windows so that exercising women wouldn't be visible to Hasidic Jews. These kinds of claims, and sense of majority outrage about them – were all increasingly given press coverage and were exploited by populist politicians in Quebec. This trend became particularly intense between 2002–6, and reached a kind of moral panic by 2006–7.

Therefore the Provincial government set up a Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, headed by sociologist Gérard Bouchard and philosopher Charles Taylor. With a \$5 million budget, over the course of a year the Commission gathered the findings of 13 research projects, 31 focus groups, 22 regional forums, 59 meetings with experts and representatives, and 900 written submissions surrounding the issues. After all this, the Commission concluded that the 'accommodation crisis' was a really a 'crisis of perception' in which the media had grossly misrepresented the controversial incidents. 'The negative perception of accommodation often stemmed from an erroneous or partial perception of practices in the field', say Bouchard and Taylor (2008: 22), 'Had the public been more familiar with such practices, perhaps there would not have been an accommodation crisis.' It seems that this might also be said about the backlash against multiculturalism in Europe.

Trends of opinion, political shifts and crises of perception appear, at first glance at least, common to many countries. However, public debates surrounding multiculturalism should be assessed within existing national contexts and all the distinct political frameworks, historical trajectories of policy and discourse, key incidents and institutional experiences surrounding immigrants and ethnic minorities that such contexts entail.

Conclusion

Across a range of countries, there seems to have arisen a kind of convergence of backlash discourse, idioms and stratagems attacking a presumed multiculturalism. Although each set of public debates has developed within discrete national political contexts, there has subsequently emerged, too, a convergence of policy responses. As summarized by Gary Freeman (2004: 945), across Western democracies

there is now a clear trend toward a middling form of incorporation – call it integration – that rejects permanent exclusion but neither demands assimilation nor embraces formal multiculturalism.

While focused on ideas of integration, the form this policy strategy takes is practically everywhere permeated with notions of ‘diversity’, especially surrounding the value of ensuring expressions of cultural and religious difference. In public debates – especially when combined with or echoing elements of multicultural backlash discourse – the integration theme might come across as highly proscriptive and based wholly on majority cultural values. But despite the ‘integration’ banner, when one examines the gamut of local and national policies – now, as before,

ramshackle, multifaceted, loosely connected sets of regulatory rules, institutions and practices in various domains of society that together make up the frameworks within which migrants and natives work out their differences

(Ibid.: 946)

– there does not seem to have materialized a particularly heavy-handed neo-assimilationism or ‘new assertiveness’ described by some commentators.

If there was such a hard assimilationist approach re-emergent, one would expect a more manifest cancellation of programs, restructuring of services, and rolling back of cultural accommodation measures. While the prominent discourse of ‘integration’ has certainly been placed at centre stage, complete with a number of new policy initiatives, the question remains: why are politicians and policy-makers still making so much effort to ‘promote’ and ‘value’ diversity? To answer that it’s all meaningless rhetoric just to get votes is simply too flippant and cynical: there is real and extensive public money, political commitment, and institutional activity surrounding the diversity agenda across Europe. A full answer to that question ‘why is there still so much attention to diversity?’ is beyond the scope of this Introduction; for now, it is important just to raise the question as a way of rebuffing the death-of-multiculturalism / return-of-assimilationism claim.

Again, following the backlash against multiculturalism that has occurred in public discourse since the turn of the millennium, we have seen that at least in policy development and especially on local levels,

In many ways this retreat from and open hostility to multiculturalism is, on examination, an exercise in avoiding using the term ‘multiculturalism’ rather than moving away from the principles of multiculturalism altogether

(McGhee 2008: 85).

This is not to say that the widespread backlash has had no impacts other than killing the ‘M-word’. Relentless attacks on multiculturalism – and thereby on basic principles of accommodating cultural and religious difference – might not have changed the basis of policies radically, but they have certainly fomented a negative atmosphere surrounding immigrants, ethnic minorities and particularly Muslims. The backlash discourse has not necessarily been racist in itself, but for those with racist views it provides ample wind to their sails. As Veit Bader (2008: 11) says of anti-multiculturalism pronouncements in the Netherlands,

Even if they have not been followed by similarly dramatic changes in actual policies..., they have not been innocent (the ‘power of words’). The political climate became increasingly inimical towards ‘aliens’, ‘asylum seekers’, ‘immigrants’ and ‘allochtonen’ [non-Dutch-born].

Overall public opinion might not have been greatly altered, but the terms in which politicians and media pundits address migration and ethnic minority issues have been reworked. Such changes in terms of public discourse ultimately find their way into everyday discourse. These processes put truth to the adage, ‘shit sticks’. That is, if a negative image – no matter how untrue – is persistently directed at something or someone, even after its correction a certain amount of enduring damage is done.

The backlash against multiculturalism in Europe demonstrates how public discourse, policies and public opinion do not form a piece: while certainly touching and even influencing one another from time to time, in effect they move disjointly. The backlash discourse has been strong in its own right; it’s fair to say that some political reactions have ensued – but these seem to have mainly taken the form of rhetorical adjustment rather than a significant alteration of course. Public opinion surprisingly does not appear to have profoundly changed in this period either, in spite of the media backlash and even notwithstanding significant events like the London bombings.

A close look at national – and particularly, local or municipal – policies reveals that multicultural principles generally remain intact, and may even be embellished through their incorporation into ‘integration’ and ‘diversity’ agendas (see Vertovec and Wessendorf, eds. forthcoming). In sum, it is fair to conclude that ‘reports of multiculturalism’s death are very much exaggerated’.

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