

Thinking Outside the Box - by Kenan Malik

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Should public policy be colour blind? Or must governments and public institutions take account of people's race, ethnicity, culture and faith in formulating policy?

This debate is often seen as a clash of ideologies between the French republican tradition and Anglo-American pragmatism, between assimilationists and multiculturalists.

Assimilationists argue that equality requires that every individual be treated as a citizen, not as a member of a particular racial or cultural group. We should be wary not only of introducing suspect categories into public policy but also of institutionalising discord and division. Used as a criterion for allocating resources or opportunities, such critics argue, racial categorisation inevitably confers advantages on members of some groups and disadvantages on members of others and hence helps perpetuate social antagonisms.

The idea of a neutral public space and of colour-blind public policies, multiculturalists retort, is a myth. Racial discrimination is a fact and without taking into account the reality of racial and cultural differences it is possible neither to measure the degree of discrimination that people face nor to combat it. Moreover, they argue, policy must respond to people's real needs, and one of the most important needs is to sustain an identity and a culture, and for these to receive public recognition.

One of the ironies of this debate is that the quarrel between assimilationists and multiculturalists has become particularly acute in recent years less because both sides are confident of their arguments than because both have developed deep misgivings. Both appear perplexed by the problem of how to manage a diverse society while maintaining a sense of common identity.

Both the debate, and the misgivings, were brought into sharp focus in the autumn of 2005, when France and Britain were almost simultaneously rocked by riots. From Paris to Marseilles French cities were set ablaze in two weeks of violent mayhem, largely at hands of North African youth living in the banlieus. In Britain a weekend of rioting between African Caribbeans and Asians in the Lozells area of Birmingham culminated in the murder of a young black man at the hands of an Asian gang.

In Britain, the impact of the riots was to confirm the sense that something had gone wrong with multiculturalism. Yet, paradoxically, it was also to reinforce the sense that there was no alternative to multiculturalism. France, many suggested, had reached the point Britain was at in the late seventies when inner city riots forced its policy makers to take racism seriously and to adopt a multiculturalist approach. Britain is in no position to lecture, Jonathan Freedland wrote in the Guardian but the French model of colour-blind integration gives racism a free hand. France cannot face up to its racism because it 'does not officially recognise the concept of ethnic differences'. Whatever the problems of multiculturalism, ran the argument, at least Britain has faced up to the problem of racism and is attempting to deal with it, even if in a cackhanded fashion.

It seems common sense that without acknowledging racial and cultural differences it will be possible neither to monitor discrimination nor to combat it. But is introducing ethnic classification into public policy the best way to combat racism? And does the collection of ethnic data really help the struggle against discrimination?

The criminologist Marian Fitzgerald worked as a researcher in the Home Office in the 1980s. When she first arrived there, she was astonished at the paucity of data on racial and ethnic differences within the criminal justice system. The only figures routinely collected were on prisoners, and then in a desultory fashion. Americans, on the other hand, 'not only had a range of data on ethnic minorities and the criminal justice system that was way beyond anything that I could imagine the Home Office collecting, they'd also been collecting it for decades'. But to what avail?, Fitzgerald asked herself. Despite the surfeit of data the position of poor blacks in America had deteriorated, not improved, over time.

Of course, however much information we may collect about discrimination, it is meaningless without the political will to enforce change - something that has often been missing in America. There is, however, another problem too: the very nature of ethnic classification produces data that often hinders rather than helps the struggle for equality. Social differences that are politically salient are not necessarily the ones that are meaningful in assessing the causes of discrimination or helpful in combating it.

There are clearly wide disparities between racial and cultural groups when it comes to issues such as employment prospects, educational attainments, poverty levels and treatment at the hands of the police and the criminal justice system. What causes such disproportionalities? The default multiculturalist assumption is that they must be the product of racism. Indeed, any attempt to view such disproportionalities in terms other than racism is itself often dismissed as racist. As the MacPherson report into the Stephen Lawrence murder put it in discussing stop and search figures, 'Nobody in the minority ethnic communities believes that the complex arguments which are sometimes used to explain the figures... are valid'. Since 'attempts to justify the disparities through the identification of other factors... simply exacerbates the climate of distrust' so we must accept that any disproportionality must be the result of either direct or indirect racism.

This belief that any kind of racial or ethnic disproportionality is de facto evidence of racism is deeply rooted in our political culture. Although British political leaders have largely shied away from imposing quotas and affirmative action policies, they have encouraged the idea that combating racism entails ensuring the right percentage of minorities in every aspect of social life.

Two assumptions underlie the disproportionality principle: first, that race, ethnicity and culture (and these are often seen as interchangeable) are the most important labels we can place on people; and second that there is a causal relationship between membership of such a group and disproportionalities between groups. Neither assumption is valid. Minority groups are not homogenous entities but are as divided by issues of class, gender, age, geographical location, and so on, as the rest of the population. These factors often shape individuals' lives far more than do race, ethnicity or culture.

Take, for instance, the problems faced by Bangladeshis in Britain. Bangladeshis used to be Asian. Now they are Muslim. What has not changed is the fact that they do badly on most measures of social deprivation, educational attainment or employment prospects. The disproportionality principle suggests that their problems used to stem from discrimination against Asians. Now it is the result of discrimination against Muslims. There is an element of truth to both claims. But both also miss the real problems facing Bangladeshi communities.

We can see this more clearly if we look at the debate about educational attainment among Asians and African Caribbeans. We all know that Asians excel at school and African Caribbeans, especially African Caribbean boys, do badly. Some, CRE chief Trevor Phillips among them, are so worried that they want black boys to be educated separately.

The trouble is that what we think know about race and education has little bearing to reality. For in reality race has little to do with the differing performance of blacks, whites and Asians. For a start, not all Asians perform well at school. Pupils of Indian origin generally tend to do well, but the performance of Bangladeshis and Pakistani is very similar to that of blacks, particularly when we are talking about boys.

When Bangladeshis were Asians they were bracketed together with Indians, and the differences between the two groups were largely ignored. Now that they are Muslims, the poor performance of Bangladeshis has attracted attention, but is put down to 'Islamophobia'. In fact, in discussions about education, Bangladeshis really belong with African Caribbeans - and the cause of their poor educational performance relates not to their race or their faith but to their class.

At the age of seven the performance of African Caribbean boys is virtually identical with the national average. However it falls dramatically in secondary schools as it does for Pakistani and Bangladeshi boys. When Marian Fitzgerald used eligibility for free school meals (FSM) as a surrogate measure for poverty, she demonstrated an even more dramatic fall - at the age 14, the scores of FSM boys are half of those of non-FSM boys. In other words class and poverty seem more important determinants of poor educational performance than race. Yet so obsessed are we by racial categories that the question remains 'Why do black boys do so badly?' rather than 'Why do boys from poor background of whatever race ethnicity or faith do so badly?'. Racism clearly shapes the lives of many Bangladeshis and African Caribbeans but race (or culture or faith) cannot be a one-stop explanation for all problems.

Fitzgerald, together with criminologist Chris Hale, has demonstrated a similar problem with discussions of race and crime. Black people are over-represented in robbery statistics (both as perpetrator and victim) leading to the widespread belief that there is something about black culture (or even black nature) that gives rise to criminality. Fitzgerald and Hale have shown that with careful analysis of the data, race and ethnicity drops out of the picture entirely. Street crime is much more likely in areas in which there is a high population turnover and a combination of young people living in poverty alongside others who are not just more affluent but also trendy enough to own gadgets like mobile phones or iPods that are both valuable and possess street cred. It just so happens that young blacks live disproportionately in such areas. But where such areas contain large numbers of poor young whites, they too are represented in the robbery figures.

The category 'lives in an area of high population turnover with a mixture of poor people and affluent trendies' is not a politically salient group. The category black is. So we tend to associate street robbery with blackness. The result is what Fitzgerald calls 'statistical racism'. Because the relationship between blacks and robberies seems statistically so fixed, so people start believing that little can be done to change that relationship and there develops notions of innate black criminality. Ethnic monitoring both makes us see racism where none exists and creates new racial stereotypes.

The problem with ethnic classification is not just that the data may not be useful. It is that the process of classification often creates the very problems it is supposed to solve. Identities are not natural categories. They are created through social interaction. But as multicultural categories receive official sanction, so they become in a certain sense fixed and appear almost natural. Once the distribution of political power, financial resources and social opportunities become linked to one's membership of a particular group, so these group identities acquire a reality denied to other identities.

To see this process in action, we need look no further than the Lozells riot. The riots demonstrated how the process of politically recognising distinct identities can give rise to communal conflict. The roots of the riots lie 20 years earlier in 1985 riots which took place down the road in Handsworth,

when blacks, whites and Asians took to the streets together in protest against poverty, unemployment and, in particular, oppressive policing.

In response, Birmingham council proposed a new framework for the engagement of minority communities. It created a number of community organisations, labelled Umbrella Groups, the function of which was to represent the needs of their communities. By 1993 there were nine of these, defined by ethnicity and faith - the African and Caribbean People's Movement, the Bangladeshi Islamic Projects Consultative Committee, the Birmingham Chinese Society, The Council of Black-led Churches, the Hindu Council, the Irish Forum, the Vietnamese Association, the Pakistani Forum and the Sikh Council of Gurdwaras. A Standing Consultative Forum was established as a single body through which the Umbrella Groups could collectively represent the views of minority communities and to aid policy development and resource allocation.

Once political power and financial resources became allocated by ethnicity, then people began to identify themselves in terms of those ethnicities. And they began to identify others as also belonging to particular ethnic blocs. The consequence was the creation of tensions between groups, as in the words of one academic study of Birmingham, 'the different Umbrella Groups generally attempted to maximise their own interests'. The deepest animosities were created between African Caribbeans and Asians, each viewing the other as responsible for their problems. Multicultural prescription had made real the description to which it was supposedly a response.

Where does all this take us in the debate between multiculturalists and assimilationists? Ignoring racism on the grounds that all citizens are equal and hence that racial or cultural differences are immaterial is clearly unacceptable. But so is labelling individuals by race, culture or faith and creating conflicts by institutionalising such differences in public policy.

To get beyond the increasingly sterile debate between multiculturalism and assimilationism, we need to make four kinds of distinctions. First we need to separate the idea of diversity as lived experience from that of multiculturalism as a political process. The experience of living in a society made diverse by mass immigration is to be welcomed. The political project of institutionalising such diversity through the public recognition of cultural differences should be resisted. As lived experience, diversity is an argument for open borders and open minds. The consequences of multiculturalism as a political project is, however, to seal people into ethnic boxes and to police the boundaries. At a time when the political failures of multiculturalism are being increasingly exploited as an argument for a Fortress Europe, we need to defend to defend the idea of open borders both at national boundaries and between cultures.

Second, we need to distinguish between colour blindness and racism blindness. The assimilationist resolve to treat everyone as citizens, not as bearers of specific racial or cultural histories, is an important step in the fight against racism. But the insistence that individuals should not be treated differently because of their racial and cultural identities does not mean that discrimination against particular groups should be ignored. The French policy of corralling hundreds or thousands of the poor and disadvantaged into sink estates, exposing them to unemployment rates of up to 40 per cent and subjecting them to daily discrimination at the hands of employers and the police is not designed to produce *liberté, égalité et fraternité*. Citizenship has no meaning if different classes of citizens are treated differently, whether through multicultural policies or through racism.

Third, we need to distinguish between equal treatment of individuals and equal treatment of the groups to which they may belong. Policy based on the idea that racial and cultural groups should necessarily be proportionately represented tends both to ignore the real roots of inequality and to create inequality and conflict. We should reject too the idea that the beliefs and values of different groups should be protected or accorded respect.

Finally, we need to separate our attitudes to the public and the private spheres. The private sphere is inherently unequal. Political equality only becomes possible with the creation of a ring-fenced public sphere, which everyone can enter as political equals, whatever their cultural, economic or ethnic backgrounds. Both multiculturalists and assimilationists seek to erase the distinction, on the one hand by demanding public recognition of cultural differences, on the other by insisting that the state step in to impose cultural norms on immigrants - such as, for instance, banning the wearing of the veil. In so doing, they make equality impossible. Only by establishing a distinction between the public and the private can we forge a relationship between diversity and equality, allowing citizens to have full freedom to pursue their different values or practices in private, while ensuring that in the public sphere all citizens are treated as political equals whatever the differences in their private lives.