# EDUCATION AND THE MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: THE PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE[*]

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## Abstract

Multiculturalism, as the coexistence of different cultural traditions inside the framework of a single sociopolitical structure is one of the most salient characteristics of Western Democratic Societies. This situation is due mainly to two factors. On the one hand, we find a plurality of historical communities within the State that have different cultural roots, and each one of them deffends the right to have its cultural identity recognized. On the other hand, there is a growing exodus from people from less developed countries towards the western ones.

In this paper I analyze from a philosophical point of view the multicultural situation that has its origin in immigration, paying attention to a public debate on this topic that has been held in Spain recently. I analyze as well some conditions that must be taken into account by educators if they want to promote an adaequate integration of immigrants in society, being respectful both to their cultural identity and the rights of the society of destination.

## Introduction

Multiculturalism, understood as the coexistence – peaceful or otherwise – of different cultural traditions within the same political and administrative framework, is one of the characteristic features of western societies today.

This situation presents a challenge for both education and the State, and politicians and educators must recognise it and orientate the decisions they make in a spirit of respect for this plurality of cultures if they want to carry out their own roles properly.

When education is considered in the context of a democratic State where different cultures coexist, a series of theoretical problems arise which must be taken into consideration before practical solutions can be put forward. For example, it is necessary to consider the relations that are established between education and culture, between the public and private sphere, between the rights of the person and the common good, and so on.

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The phenomenon of cultural diversity is nothing new in itself, nor is it peculiar to our own time.  What is specific to our day is the particular way in which different cultural traditions live together in the same socio-political sphere: people in different cultural groups are aware of their own cultural identity and demand the right to express this, and there is a need for cultural diversity to be integrated harmoniously in political unity.

It could be said that in other periods of history the problem of the coexistence of cultures was not really an issue.  Each culture occupied its own territory and only came into contact with others for reasons of war or trade.  When one people conquered another, the culture of the victor was imposed on the conquered people.  When people came from other places with different cultural traditions, if they wanted to stay peacefully in their new political community they had either to assimilate to the dominant culture, or, if they preferred to maintain their cultural identity, they had to stick together and take refuge in ghettos, so that true intercultural exchange did not really take place.  That is, for centuries the social trend tended towards homogenisation or the juxtaposition of independent cultural groups.  These tendencies are respectively reflected in the ideal of the melting pot in the USA, or the salad bowl in Canada.

However, among the citizens of the present-day democratic State, as a political and administrative unity, there is a cultural diversity which calls for recognition.  And when there is dissonance between the political community and the cultural communities, a grave problem arises for the State: it must determine to what extent it is possible to respect and encourage cultural diversity without cohesion and unity in the political sphere being placed under threat.

Cultural pluralism in the framework of democratic States today has two major causes.  On the one hand, there are the different historical communities which make up the State, which have different cultural roots, and which claim their right to their own cultural identity: we need think only of Catalonia and the Spanish State, Scotland in the United Kingdom, or Quebec and Canada.

On the other hand, we are faced with the growing phenomenon of immigration to western countries for basically economic or political reasons.  In many cases the immigrants come from former colonies which have gained independence, and so the State which receives them cannot simply consider them to be foreigners, but must acknowledge a special responsibility for them -  as is the case with Spain and Latin American countries or the United Kingdom and its former colonies.  Among the immigrants we also find people from countries with a much poorer economy and living conditions, as is the case with Eastern Europe and North Africa, who seek a better future for themselves and their families beyond the borders of their own land.

Spain is one of the countries which has received a greater influx of immigrants in recent years.  This phenomenon has given rise to kinds of exploitation, and has also resulted in some conflicts.  This circumstance, as well as other factors, has meant that the debate on multiculturalism is no longer confined to specialised journals: it is now front page news.  I shall devote the rest of this paper to a philosophical analysis of the multicultural situation which originates out of massive emigration, as it has been discussed in the public debate to which I have just referred.

The first thing that must be defined is the way in which the term "multiculturalism" is being used.

Some authors take the view that democracy is not only a State of law, but a cultural system. The basis on which it rests is that people are all equal, they are not subject to each other, they are free, autonomous individuals; the law serves all equally, and we must all obey it; the machinery of justice is only acceptable because it is impartial, and so on.[1]

According to this view, the question at stake in multiculturalism is not how several cultures can live side by side within the democratic State, but the coexistence of two cultures – one which is democratic and another or others which are not – in the same territory.

However, this is not the most usual way of looking at this issue, and so we shall work with the more widespread opinion: that within the limits set by one political authority, different cultures can coexist, including different cultures with widely divergent outlooks on life. If we concede that our society is multicultural, then the way that this divergence is handled, both in theory and in practice, and the way the host culture reacts to incomers, can both differ widely. The following five different attitudes are fairly typical of what can be observed:[2]

> a. Rejection and expulsion of immigrants, or barring their entry, or even trying to prevent controlled immigration.
> b. Excluding immigrants from citizenship, banishing them to the fringes of society and to life "beyond the walls" of the city.
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> c. Forced assimilation of cultural forms which are not their own.
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> d. Granting unlimited rights to all cultural communities which live within a democratic community.
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> e. Integration in society, but conserving their beliefs to the extent that they do not contradict the basic principles and values of the State.

For easily comprehensible reason, the first three options are offensive to immigrants. The debate will therefore focus on options d and e, which from now on we shall call "multicultural" and "pluralist" respectively.

Multiculturalism de facto questions the democratic principle that "we are all equal before the law" because it supports the notion that some groups have the "right to be unequal"; that is, the right to dissent is permissible as far as minority self-determination is concerned. The peaceful discourse of "tolerance" gives way to the more belligerent discourse on the "politics of recognition".[3]

Furthermore, if we fall into the error of treating the citizens of the State as blocks or separate ethnic groups in terms of their origin, we are fomenting a mentality

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[1] See Azurmendi, M., "Democracia y cultura" in *El País*, 23 February 2002, p. 14.
[2] See Sánchez Cámara, L., "Multiculturalismo contra integración" in *ABC*, 5 March 2002, p. 3.
[3] See Ollero, A., "Igualdad y multiculturalismo" en *ABC*, 21 May 2002, p. 74.

which favours segregation, the return to the ghetto, as well as encouraging the attitude of some minorities which consider that they are socially disadvantaged if they are not exempted from keeping the law.[4]

Multiculturalism knows nothing of the value of mixing cultures and races, and ignores the vital fact that all cultures are the result of external influences which they receive throughout history. A culture shows how healthy it is by its capacity to assimilate the achievements of the other cultures with which it comes into contact, not by seeking an uncontaminated purity which, in any case, is illusory.[5] The more free relations between people there are, the more the cultural manifestations that produce suffering and humiliation will be changed. So multiculturalism does not offer a good solution, because it prevents immigrants from constructing out of the best values of their culture of origin a spiral to hook into the best values of our own, and destroying their less worthy values, just as we should when we come into contact with theirs.[6]

In contrast to this, the pluralist position attempts to recognise the legitimate rights of immigrants from other cultural traditions, while also defending the rights of those who belong to the host culture. The idea is to strike a balance, which it is easy to talk of in terms of general principles, but hard to determine in its practical consequences because the key issue is where the dividing line lies between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, always abiding by the law and by the principles of democracy. Pluralist democratic societies ought not to give in to aberrant practices, or weaken in their defence of their grounding principles, but they should also show themselves to be capable of accepting customs and practices which are not prohibited by law, and which do no harm, even though they may seem strange or even unpleasant.[7]

How can we put into practice this task of forming a pluralist society out of our multicultural situation? Replying to a questionnaire on this subject, the Coordinator of a Multicultural Integration Project in Murcia (Spain) declared that "the best way of integrating immigrants is through the school".[8] I consider that this is a good answer, but this means in practice that we may have to wait one or two generations before the desired integration takes place.

What characteristics should define a style of education which aims to achieve this? For it is obvious that not every kind of education is appropriate. Reyero outlines some pedagogical duties which education must fulfil if it is to contribute to the development of people who are capable of bringing together "us" with "you". Among these aspects we would like to emphasise the following:[9]

    a. Education must respect the individualisation at the heart of culture, because there are different ways of expressing belonging to a culture.

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[4] See Azurmendi, M., "La invención del multiculturalismo" in *ABC,* 18 March 2002, p. 3.
[5] See Goytisolo, J., "El multiculturalismo es sospechoso" in *ABC*, 20 March 2002, p. 57.
[6] See Azurmendi, M., "¿Por qué integrar a los inmigrantes?" in ABC, 6 April 2002, p. 3.
[7] See Arango, J., "¿De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de multiculturalismo?" in *El País*, 23 March 2002, p. 11.
[8] Mármol, P., in del Barrio, A., "¿Fusión, asimilación o convivencia multicultural?" in *El Mundo*, 3 March, 2002, p. 16.
[9] Reyero, D., "El valor educativo de las identidades colectivas: cultura y nación en la formación del individuo" in *Revista Española de Pedagogía* (2001), vol. 59, pp. 117-118.

b. It should permit a critical reading of the history of one's own group, which also helps us to think about that of others in a way that is not homogeneous or essentialist, as if it were the monolithic history of one single people over the centuries.

c. It must allow us not to identify nationality with ethnicity, granting civil rights only to the people who belong to a particular privileged biological or cultural group.

d. It must permit and promote the quest for what is good, not only defend the survival of a particular idea of collective identity which is not a value in itself.

e. It should respect human rights and basic freedoms, as well as promoting relations with other collective identities, favouring policies of solidarity and not confrontation.

In short, the value of a certain attachment to our origins should be taught, although this is always subordinated to human rights: our origins do not only give us a certain sense of patriotism, but also provide us with the cultural elements which enable us to live.[10]

Of course, it is not easy to negotiate the means to do this, nor is this specifically the task of Philosophy of Education, but rather of other areas of Pedagogy such as Didactics, School Organisation or Educational Policy. But it is not only necessary, it is urgent that these issues should be tackled. We must act before it is too late.

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[10] See ibid. p. 112.