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Parallel lives

We may live in a multicultural society, but we need a more positive approach to breaking down segregation.

Most Western democracies have been described as "multicultural" for some 50 years and have developed equal opportunities programmes and anti-discrimination legislation over that time. Despite this, many of our minorities are among the most disadvantaged sections of our community and still experience prejudice and unequal life chances. We are also encountering a rise in inter-ethnic conflict and the development of separate identities, often reinforced by segregated, or "parallel" lives and by transnational and diasporic affinities. The gradual integration and the improvements in cohesion of societies, which were expected to develop over time, have not yet been achieved and there are renewed doubts about the value of diversity, particularly in terms of civic and social solidarity.

The concept "multiculturalism" is no longer adequate to describe the extent and nature of diversity and has become seen as a means of legitimising separateness and division. It did provide a very useful way, in the past, of emphasising that "difference" should be respected and celebrated rather than feared. But it has also been used as a "catch-all", encompassing a wide range of differences — economic, political, social, cultural, physical, etc — and conflates concepts of nationality, national identity, and group and personal affinities, and now has very little real meaning.

The lack of clarity about multiculturalism has enabled opponents of diversity to continue to present "Britishness" in narrow and homogenising terms, rejecting all other conceptions and trying to demonstrate that these differences are incompatible and based on "natural" or primordial distinctions. They use terms such as "people like us" to describe their idea of identity. This is a dangerous line of argument and it seems that even liberal-minded commentators can easily fall into the trap this language creates. People are not made up of genetically defined groups, and the ethnic, faith, and other boundaries that we create — and defend — are almost entirely socially and politically defined.

However, many proponents of multiculturalism, and anti-racists more generally, have become so used to resisting attacks on minorities that they will defend all differences automatically, as though "cultural" attributes are also fixed and all worthy of defence, even though they might have fought for more liberal principles in another context that would have undermined these differences. And they are also defended on the basis of uniformity and oneness, rather than as a spectrum of difference within a fairly broad conception of a "culture".

So the debate about identity becomes reinforced by both sides — those that defend as well as those that oppose difference. If "Britishness" is presented in an homogenised form, so, too, are notions such as a "Black culture" or a "Muslim culture", despite encompassing a wide spectrum of values, beliefs, and lifestyles. We have even come to see culture as "pure". This is illustrated by the way in which we often fail to conceptualise people of mixed race in a positive way: they do not feature in the identity stakes — there is even an assumption that mixed race people have no identifiable culture and intermarriage, one measure of integration, is often frowned upon by many communities.

In reality, there are many different conceptions of both majority and minority cultures and as much variation within "cultures" as there is between them — some may even lack the coherence to be called a "culture" — and what do we mean by "culture" anyway? But when identity is instrumentalised and it is under threat — and this can be in respect of either the majority or minority groups — we fall back on an exaggerated, almost stereotypical view of ourselves. We inevitably emphasise our differences rather than what we have in common.

It has taken many decades to defeat the idea that humanity is made up by separate "races", but we are now in danger of using ethnic and faith divisions to create equally spurious boundaries.

The search for identity, then, is like chasing shadows, and much greater emphasis should be placed on how we actually relate to each other, allowing relationships to grow. This should develop in the form of a common sense of belonging and is not restricted to "common culture". Society also grows from political interaction, between the state and individuals and between individuals themselves. The ongoing debate about expenditure priorities, the extent and nature of welfare provision, the regulation of the local environment and the economy as a whole, as much as the everyday discourse of social activities, builds a political unity, even if only a framework within which we can disagree. Social and political capital, and the sense of trust upon which they depend, can only be built by dialogue and exchange. The once derided notions of citizenship and community are beginning to be reasserted, and the concept of nationality, as opposed to the more ephemeral notion of national identity, should also take its place in the lexicon of cohesion. Our nationality, together with membership of our local "state", must provide a basis for political discourse and often the only means by which we can contribute to an international and wider debate.

The historic pattern of settlement means that the possibilities for such interaction are more limited than we generally believe. The development of "multiculturalism" since the Second World War has sometimes reinforced, rather than broken down, the many forms of segregation and separation. One of the most surprising statistics is that in 1961, London contained 47 per cent of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population and the West Midlands conurbation 14 per cent; some 40 years later, the figures are almost exactly the same. A small proportion of the BME population has moved into predominantly white areas over the years, but the areas with a high concentration of minorities have generally been reinforced by new migrants and have also suffered from "white flight". Meanwhile, the BME community, which is much younger than the host community, has a higher rate of natural growth and existing areas of high BME population will expand irrespective of any migration trends. Many areas are becoming more polarised or

monocultural as a result, whether in terms of the white, BME community as a whole or individually.

It has also proved difficult to promote respect and understanding between different cultures when the lack of contact prevents the development of any real knowledge or understanding. In graphic terms, Oonagh King MP described to her colleagues in Parliament her sense of "shock" at finding segregated schools in her London constituency:

I have mentioned before in Parliament my shock at visiting two schools next door to each other soon after I was elected in 1997. They shared a playground with a fence down the middle. On one side of the fence there were white children playing with a smattering of Afro-Caribbeans and on the other there were brown, Muslim, and Bangladeshi children. Perhaps it is because my father was brought up in the segregated South [of the USA] that I was horrified by that, I could not believe it. We read about such things, but when we see them in Britain, we must think that something is seriously wrong.

The fact is, that while Britain describes itself as a multicultural society, most people do not live in multicultural communities. Even though most of the ethnic minority population live in London and a few other regional capitals, the white population dominates most of the rest of the country, with areas such as the North East, Wales, and the South West being almost exclusively white. And in areas that are more mixed, the separation is often just as evident, with most towns and cities divided on a neighbourhood basis.

The term "segregation" is often used to describe this separation but it is not really appropriate. Segregation literally implies divisions that are imposed and enforced by law. Clearly, there is no such regime in force and it is therefore assumed that "self-segregation", in which some people prefer to live in an area dominated by their own ethnic or faith group, is much the same thing. However, in reality, locational choices are often constrained by socio-economic factors, the lack of appropriate social and cultural facilities, the location of suitable schools, and, most of all, by real concerns about the lack of safety and security in other areas. Given that the areas "preferred" by minority groups generally contain the poorest housing and have the worst overall environment, it is hard to believe that they are the consequence of a free choice.

Some ethnic minority households have, of course, had the necessary resources and confidence to move out of their traditional area, but such movement is still limited and is counteracted by the "white flight" in which white families move out of mixed areas, sometimes in pursuit of what they see as better housing or schools, or because they are afraid their present area will "tip over" into a predominantly black area and that this is somehow less desirable. The net result is the growth of even more obvious divisions between majority and minority ethnic groups.

Many of these "segregated" communities are so dominated by particular groups that the possibility of contact between the different communities is very limited. These "parallel lives" do not meet at any point, with little or no opportunity to explore the differences and to build mutual respect, let alone to see them as enriching our communities. Meanwhile, racists can easily spread myths and false rumours and use the ignorance of community to demonise

minorities. That is not to say that we should attempt to move towards some form of total integration or "assimilation". Some degree of "clustering" for each group is essential, if we are serious about preserving cultural identity. A critical mass of each community will also be necessary to support different places of worship, shops, and social facilities.

But little thought is being given to the future form that neighbourhoods should adopt and there are few techniques available to help to shape them. Indeed, little is presently done to understand and map community dynamics and to try to assist mixed developments and the consequent interaction that different forms help to facilitate. By and large, existing settlement patterns — and the segregation and separation they create — are being reinforced and perpetuated. This is evident in the present pattern of migration but, more alarmingly, seems not to have been considered in relation to new developments.

We still fail to put a premium on interaction, but how can we possibly expect people to develop any form of relationship unless they can have the opportunity to build an understanding of each other? If they continue to live in "parallel lives" with no meaningful contact at any point, the ignorance will grow into suspicion and fear. Proximity between different groups is not, in itself, enough. It will generally lead to contact in many different aspects of daily life — for example, mixed school classes and the informal friendships formed at the school gate, the participation in local sports and cultural events, joint training and employment, and so on. But it should not be taken for granted that proximity leads to interaction and even the most benign activities can become segregated — remember the recent Commission for Racial Equality's survey that found that "95 per cent of whites had no black friends". Confidence building has to take place on both sides and relationships have to be built in non-threatening ways. For example, there are now many school twinning arrangements, which allow all-black and all-white schools to undertake joint curricular and extra-curricular activities as a prelude to mixed intakes.

There are real practical difficulties to overcome, too, in particular for the many white children growing up in all-white parts of the country, who have no experience of the multicultural society of which they are a part. Many do not meet people from BME backgrounds until they go to university — and they are still a minority of their peers. Community cohesion has to be directed at them too and it will require some imagination to realise, for example, the way in which Wigan, a largely white area, has teamed-up its young people with youngsters in multicultural Leicester.

Sharing experiences is not sufficient — and will not develop — unless there is also a shared vision and sense of purpose. The way in which different cultures are instrumentalised often means that difference is reinforced. However, as societies become more diverse, there is an increasing need for common values and a greater sense of national solidarity. This is difficult given that our notion of diversity has moved on significantly from just a handful of principal minorities to embrace a much larger number of communities — over 300 languages are now spoken in London schools.

The nature and pattern of difference is also on a new level, with a wider range of people from eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and every corner of the globe creating new "domains of difference", both between the host community and the new migrants, and between minorities. Indeed, we have

created a culture in which each different group feels that it is being unfairly treated in relation to the other and believes that it is in competition for jobs, housing, and public services. Moreover, each group feels that its identity is at risk and under pressure.

There is a danger that we just focus on ethnicity or faith — or even just the Muslim faith, which has been the centre of attention. However, this is a much more complex problem and we have to address the fear of difference more generally. This means investing in education programmes, breaking down the barriers between groups and building bridges between communities at the institutional level and in neighbourhoods and wherever people meet. This is very much about helping people to come to terms with diversity and seeing it as an enrichment of their community rather than a threat. This means that we should not dismiss negative perceptions too lightly as "racist" or prejudiced, and should try to understand the causes and also deal with the real competition over resources and ensure that conflicts are addressed in an even-handed and transparent way. Unfortunately, we have had little experience of "promoting good race relations", despite this being a statutory duty in Britain for 30 years. This aspect of diversity has largely been ignored, or given over to a small number of badly resourced voluntary agencies that have often struggled against the odds, while the main focus has been on the equality agenda. Of course, the focus on equalities remains essential, but it is no longer sufficient and we have to invest in changing attitudes and values — winning hearts and minds. This has to be a "mainstream" activity for all public services.

This also means a much more difficult debate about "commonalities", rather than simply focusing on difference. We have promoted difference in so many respects: encouraging separate schools for different faiths, housing provision for minorities, a wide range of separate cultural, arts, and sports programmes, regeneration schemes based on different communities, separate employment training schemes, etc, but have generally failed to promote the things that all communities have in common. As a defensive mechanism to racism and discrimination, the focus on difference may have been justified, but we now have to redress the balance and challenge areas of difference that conflict with wider societal interests, more vigorously promote a common language and active citizenship, rather than relying on "peaceful co-existence".

This will not be easy, but it is now necessary. We do have to continue to make clear, however, that while we expect to see a much greater sense of commonality — or integration — at the political and economic level, we also expect to maintain a separation at the cultural level to allow diversity to flourish.

Those people that are still in denial about our multicultural reality oppose all attempts to promote equalities and positive action programmes. But the equalities agenda still has to be reinforced, not simply to ensure fairness and social justice, but also as a means of promoting interaction, understanding, and respect. In this sense, racial equality and community cohesion programmes come together and are mutually reinforcing. However, we need a more positive approach to breaking down segregation and "parallel lives", to interact not only in our daily lives, but also as part of a political entity, as nationals with a common interest in the direction and development of the state. If not, we will forever be attempting to micro-manage peoples' behaviour, through ever more detailed legislation to prevent discrimination and ensure equal opportunities, rather than changing underlying attitudes and values and making the changes self-sustaining.

Multiculturalism: a "failed experiment"? Read a [panel debate](#) on Ted Cattle's notion of "commonality".

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