MULTICULTURALISM OR COSMOPOLITAN IDENTITY?

THE UK RIOTS REVISITED

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Abstract: In our highly mediatized world power is knowledge, and knowledge means free access to 24/7 real-time information. Following the comparative description of multicultural vs. intercultural societies, my paper aims to approach and analyse the UK riots from several angles, touching upon the relationship between multicultural and economic issues. The paper also investigates the role of popular culture, mainly hip-hop culture, in forecasting societal tensions both in the EU and worldwide. The main argument of the paper is that multiculturalism is not over; it simply experiences a new ideological realignment.

Key words: multiculturalism, interculturalism, UK riots, hip-hop culture

Is multiculturalism really to blame for the cultural decline in many countries?

In the summer of 2011, in times when the social networks have turned the "global village" into a real commodity accessible to millions of people living in closed or open societies, in the wake of the riots and the protests that had swept the Maghreb countries as well as the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron as well as German Chancellor Angela Merkel argued that multiculturalism was over. Their speeches have been considered provocative and bore ambivalent fruit. As in most cases these statements have been misunderstood; thus, my paper aims to highlight some cornerstones of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism vs. Interculturalism

In order to understand the message of those statements, I consider it important to define the concepts behind the dichotomies of multiculturalism/multilingualism vs. interculturalism/plurilingualism. The lay reader, who gets most of their daily information via the media, will definitely consider the two terms as synonymous, at worst

a mere "slip of the tongue." The issues of multiculturalism/multilingualism are incredibly difficult to discuss since different societies interpret them in very different ways.

Today we may say that a large number of societies are multicultural as migration has reshaped them. But multiculturalism makes rather an inventory of the new cultures without establishing any actual link between the host country (normative culture) and the new cultures brought by the new inhabitants or citizens. In the past multiculturalism had been an addition of different particularities, a highly fragmented whole without coherence. However, it has now become fully evident that this old model is no longer appropriate in a world where people are searching for new values and codes that allow them to have good relations with the society in general and the inhabitants in particular.

Basically one would agree that by multilingualism we understand the multitude of different languages spoken in a geographical territory or in a specific community, while plurilinguism is more the result of a properly conducted linguistic policy. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to make a distinction between multilingualism and plurilinguism as the difference has never been declared officially. Moreover, as far as terminology is concerned, it is also worth remembering that for a long time the Anglo-Saxon multicultural societies (USA, United Kingdom, Australia) did not employ the word plurilinguism, a term quite common in the Latinate world (France, Spain). If we analyse the administrative usage of multilingualism, we discover that the term has always carried a slight negative connotation in the sense that it has been perceived as a phenomenon only worthy of note in societies where there has been a certain tension between minority groups in respect to the usage of their own languages, regarded as poorly known and used as jargons/slang. On the other hand, plurilinguism is more the expression of cultural and intellectual wealth, a modern conception of new perspectives in linguistic policy. (Hortobagyi, 2008, p. 208)

As early as 1994, Goldberg noticed that interculturalism is an extension of multiculturalism (p. 10). By now a large number of societies have become multicultural, and in these societies different cultures are living side by side and basically respect their imminent differences, while the state is providing proper collective rights for minorities. The best example of a multicultural society is the USA, where history has woven a colourful tissue of languages, ethnicity, race, and economic structures. Interculturalism, on the contrary, is the exploitation of these differences, a process which is accompanied by projects of "attraction" and translation in the form of fruitful exchange at both individual and group levels. According to Dubois and Horvath (p. 255), these societies are facing continuous changes and mutations in the ethnicity-race-language-economic structure matrix.

In Europe we encounter an intercultural approach to society, where the emphasis lies on respecting not so much the cultural differences but the different identities that

emerge from them. Consequently, understanding the mechanism behind certain types of behaviour linked to a specific culture leads to a better insight into one's own identity. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that culture exits as a palpable static reality. As the cultures – by changing and developing – are in a permanent process of adaptation, we might quite rightly call them elements of dynamic knowledge. Sapir was right when in 1961 (Nader et al., 1975, p. 68) he formulated the idea that it is variation that always determines the norm. The cultural representations are not intrinsic; they are the result of the interaction of its constituting elements in a given environment. In general, culture has two functions. On the one hand, we can distinguish an ontological function, according to which the person identifies themselves and analyses their relationship to the other. On the other hand, we encounter an instrumental or pragmatic function, according to which a person learns new behavioural forms and adapts them to the new environment. Consequently, we may well admit that culture is not a mere reproduction or mirror of reality, but it definitely is the result of societal activity, constructing and reconstructing varied realities. In addition, contemporary philosophers, such as Francis Fukuyama (Gottfried, 2002, p. 18), see multiculturalism and political correctness as building blocks of liberal democracy, cornerstones of the only system able to deliver long term economic prosperity.

Changing the paradigm

At the moment, we are living in an age of cultural mutations. Let us take the example of the UK, a country considered so far as one of the most expressive examples of balanced multiculturalism, a country where a great variety of cultures, ethnicities and religions coexist. If we have a look at migration histories, we can see that following WWII Britain received large flows of migration encouraged as a response to the labour shortage experienced in certain sectors of the economy at that time. The Caribbean, familiar with British culture, the English language and Christian religion should not usually have encountered difficulties in adapting to the new cultural background, except that they were noticeably black. Of the groups from South Asia, Indians with training in higher education and possessing recognised skills had enjoyed relative economic success and made social mobility. On the other hand, the Bangladeshi and the Pakistani, with lower levels of education and mostly of Muslim religion, had a harder time to integrate into the society, as they found social mobility difficult and have remained the poorest ethnic minority (Statham, 1999, p. 597).

Some current popular opinion assumes that Muslims and South Asians develop anti-mainstream attitudes because they live in impoverished and segregated ghettos. However, in 2003, survey data contradicted these assumptions. Results showed that

Muslims and South Asians are almost as likely as whites to identify themselves as British. Despite retaining ethnic and religious networks, Muslims and South Asians have actively built integrated networks and consider themselves part of the larger British community (Griffiths et al, 2006, p. 892). They are more likely to identify as British as a result of political participation.

Main causes of the riots

The major cause of the UK riots is supposed to be found in the end of multiculturalism. In June 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron criticised his country's longstanding policy of multiculturalism, blaming this for fostering Islamist extremism and articulating the need to develop a stronger national identity among citizens. "Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream," Cameron said during a panel discussion also attended by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. "We have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong" (MSNBC, 2011). In fact, his speech had echoed Chancellor Angela Merkel's statement from 2010 when she considered multiculturalism a failure. It is also true that lately, all across Europe, multiculturalism seems to be a philosophy in retreat as hinted by the growing number of countries where far right parties are attracting nearly 30% of popular vote.

   It is interesting to remark that international opinion also blames multiculturalism along with the economic crisis for the riots that have occurred in London and other British cities. Mikhail Margelov, head of the Russian upper house's international affairs committee said in the aftermath of the riots:

> I think the events occurring in the English cities have at least two reasons. One is fundamental: it's the death of multiculturalism, a eulogy which the heads of Germany, France and Great Britain have recently delivered. The value of tolerance, or in other words the value of difference, has been accepted neither by 'indigenous' Europeans nor by immigrants. (Haris, 2011)

In the UK, similarly to other former European colonising powers, the "myth of responsibility" towards the historical past opened the borders to a large number of migrants from the former colonies. As governments try to aid these people by guaranteeing them social allowances, economic recession weakens mainstream societal tolerance towards them.

Media reactions to the riots

Most minorities are asserting multiple identities as a result, on the one hand, of extensive media coverage of all possible global events and, on the other hand, of the need for people to socialize within the secondary societal institutions, such as school and workplace. Moreover, when functioning in society at large, they will be observing not only basic legal requirements (from obeying the highway code to considering labour protection and employment rules), but also standard practices related to mainstream lifestyles (purchasing all the commodities of consumer society, from the market leading food chains to the latest IT gadgets). And when it comes to culture in general and popular culture in particular, minorities are both source and target audience.

In the attempt to prove my hypothesis, namely, that multiculturalism is far from being dead, I have tried to concentrate mainly on public opinion and gathered information from different manifestations of the media. From the onset we have to admit that a very high level of media literacy is needed when we decode media messages, as the information directed towards a target audience is so abundant that we have to put our minds onto automatic pilot to avoid the flood of seemingly biased and unnecessary information. In relation to the causes of the UK riots, few people would bother to consult different forms of the media (news, comments on social networks, forums or the blogosphere). Moreover, the visual effects used in the footage often fail to show what is behind the narrative of a riot. We could go back as far as the Scarman Report of the 25 November 1981 UK riots, which "rather than looking at the wider implications of the findings, the immediacy of the visuals – of the rioting, the looting and of the violence – pulls us back into the problems of law and order" (Wrenn-Lewis & Clarke, 1982, p. 33).

In some comments the parents are blamed for their children's participation in the "flash mobs." Others put forth more sensitive issues related to more focus that should be laid on family planning and birth control. But visibly, the lack of proper education is considered to be the major cause of the riots. One blogger blames the government openly:

> it's the summer holidays, people are bored. They see one riot, and think "oh that looks fun". They have nothing else to do because the government are cutting all money to local councils in the poorest areas so leisure centres and things like that are shut (Tom p., 2011)

In times of severe recession a direct cause of the riots is the high number of poor jobless people, mostly immigrants and their youths. If we consider the basic

characteristics of multicultural societies, we remember that minorities living in their own neighbourhoods, and at the level of primary societal institutions such as friends and family, do not mix with the mainstream and whenever they have to face problems, they see things as "Us vs. Them." According to many comments, when looking for the indirect causes of the riots, multiculturalism can also be blamed as it allowed isolation for entire foreign societies within the British society. In addition, the policy of mass migration could also be blamed, as more immigrants have been allowed into the society than there are jobs. In a larger context one could develop this idea further since this situation also calls for definitions of jobs, availability, and willingness to work in given conditions. It is true that allowing immigrants into aging societies might offer a short-term solution, but in the long term all these people also will need social security and pensions. At times we can also read very articulate, though questionable, opinions:

> Quite clearly the London riots are the result of MultiKult and mass immigration. The people to blame are British politicians who have been allowing third-worlders to flood the country since WWII the same as in America. Also complicit in this treachery are the media, both television and newspapers. (Northwesterner, 2011)

Rather than blaming multiculturalism and the media for social problems, I would rather support the idea that, on the contrary, riots prove that multiculturalism works. It is true that multiculturalism could be "on fire," as a twitter poster remarks, but at least under this umbrella term the media tackle issues that have social and cultural impact.

Here are some controversies that can be read in/through the media. According to one blogger (Hoozo, 2011), high levels of unemployment are due to the high levels of cultural diversity and the riots spread from areas mostly inhabited by less prosperous families. The comment also mentions that strangely enough, these upheavals do not occur in areas that are predominantly white where people have high aspirations. A counter reaction mentions that looting has been seen in Bromley and Liverpool, which are predominately white. TV footage also made it clear that the rioters in places such as Hackney were of a mixed ethnicity.

Some argue that multiculturalism is partly responsible for the cultural decline in many countries and any other argument is just an attempt to legitimise a multicultural society whilst ignoring facts. It is interesting to note that in the UK, way before mass immigration and multiculturalism, longstanding ethnic and religious tensions had persisted in society when the Irish, the Scots, and the Welsh resorted to violence in order to achieve their cultural independence (Cymru, 2011). Multiculturalism, spread via globalized media can dilute and damage cultural cohesiveness. Much of the

cultural decline could be the result of people embracing mediatized "American culture" and the lack of proper media literacy taught in schools to raise conscious awareness on how to decode cultural globalization and understand glocalization. From most online comments, one can draw a basic conclusion: nowadays, even without the presence of the array of diverse cultures, the UK would still experience the problem of cultural decline. Here is what one comment highlights:

> People try and paint it as a cultural struggle where British culture is battling it out against the foreign cultures present on our isles but nothing can be further from the truth, which is that the British public have become really apathetic towards their own culture to the extent that they find the most enjoyment in American video games, rap music, Hollywood movies and fast food (mostly amongst the younger generation who will be our future leaders). (Cymru, 2011)

The linguistic component of the media rhetoric

These days we seem to have returned to a highly narrative culture of communication, as people are developing individual voices which they express mostly in writing. No wonder that the media are also employing a whole array of persuasion techniques to get their messages over to their readership. Let us take some examples form the online media (Chakrabortty, 2011):

> - "not far from **the ground zero of the disturbances** – in Edmonton, just north of where this week's violence began in Tottenham"

In the wake of WWII, and more recently following the 9/11 WTC attacks, the phrase *ground zero* has had an extremely negative connotation ranging from mass destruction to terrorist attacks coupled with ethnic and religious tensions.

> - "Edmonton and Tottenham may be parts of the capital, but they aren't central or glamorous or promising **punts in the property market**; for most Londoners, they're just bits you drive through to get to **Ikea** or the M25."

This passage might carry the message that globalization and the market economy – echoing Francis Fukuyama's ideas – could reduce ethnic distance and lift the invisible yet robust barriers that isolate minorities. Yet, a totally opposite feeling of globalization being at the roots of cultural dilution is hidden in the following sentence:

- "while the youth running amok through branches of JD Sports are what happens when **you offer a generation plastic consumerism** rather than meaningful jobs."

- "these disturbances have a common cause: The **broadcasting of poisonous rap**."

This sentence is overtly blaming hip-hop culture for the outbreak of the riots. Several media are also debating over the terms by which the events could be conceptually designated. From an academic and historical aspect, the events cannot be classified as riots, as a riot has a political program. Then we come across an article entitled: "The UK riots and language: 'rioter', 'protester' or 'scum'?" (Henley, 2011), where criticism is drawn on using the word 'protesters' to describe the people who took part in the events. Initially, all seemed to have started as a protest against the lack of proper police response related to the death of a young man. Live-blogging and twitter posts kept inquiring why rioters should be called protesters as they do not protest about or for anything. A blogger even went further by calling them criminals at the best. Some agreed that it was extremely difficult to find the appropriate term as many of the people in the streets were suffering from high taxes, low income, unemployment, and high prices. In their subjective judgement, others called them "thugs, hooligans and opportunists […] even terrorists." And here we are again, at the connotation of ground zero. The more careful ones suggest alternatives such as militants, radicals or separatists. The same article quotes some tabloid linguistic choices:

> "Copycat cretins", was how Metro described the rioters on Wednesday. The Mirror opted for 'gangs of mindless yobs', the Daily Mail 'anarchists', and the Sun 'morons', 'thugs' and 'idiots'…'Looters are scum' was the verdict emblazoned on the T-shirt of a woman helping with the clean-up in London. (Henley, 2011)

Similarly the media serve other interesting linguistic loans from American slang – or eventually online globalized slang. We can mention some examples from the same article in the Guardian:

> "The feds are following me" was what Duggan texted to his fiancée, Semone Wilson, shortly before he died, and the word is everywhere on Twitter and Blackberry messenger (BBM). "Annoyed that the rioters call the police 'feds'," a tweeter asks: "What happened to proper British nicknames like old

bill, pigs and filth?" Or another example of urban slang: "Bare (a lot of) yutes shooting at the feds #tottenham !!!" (Henley, 2011)

Heralds of Unrest

When it comes to riots and protests in a multicultural background more often than not the 1992 Los Angeles riots would pop into mind. Or these events had also had their warnings in the 1991 film *Grand Canyon*, which tackled the divide between people of different race and class in L.A., was widely seen as a script of the later riots or in the song entitled *Cop Killer* and performed by the hardcore metal band called *Body Count*.

Let us make a short retrospective detour of urban violence and take as a first example the 2005 French (more precisely Paris and outskirts) events. In an article dated December 8, 2005 Joe Muggs reports on hip-hop culture being blamed for the Paris riots. The lead-in of his article reads as follows: "French politicians have called for legal action to be taken against hip-hop musicians in the wake of the French riots"(Muggs, 2011). Two hundred politicians backed this petition against the aggressive lyrics of hip-hop musicians and accused the rap world for causing the riots. In fact French rap, as the voice of the poor suburbs, had been warning against possible violence calling attention to the need to solve societal tensions. These tensions as well as the musical culture had already been outlined as early as 1996 in the film called *Hate* (the title originating from the proverb *Hatred breeds hatred*.). In addition, quite ironically, the 1994 legislation – which aimed at the protection of the French language and obliged radio stations to play at least 40% French music – provided proper grounds for the French underground rappers to receive as much of a platform as their famous American counterparts. Thus, paradoxically, the legislation that should have protected French identity created a movement that is now considered a threat to this very identity; therefore, often artists, mainly in areas where the National Front is strong, have been prosecuted for their "dangerous lyrics." Laws designed to protect French identity thus helped create a movement which is now seen as a threat to that identity. Rap artists can rightfully be considered journalists, as their songs are anchored in actual society.

Along similar lines we can cross the Mediterranean to the Maghreb countries to take a look at the January 2011 riots in Tunisia, where quite overtly hip-hop was blamed for the violence and upheaval (Muggs, 2011). Among the youth it was underground rap that contained the message and social networks (mainly Facebook and Twitter) that served as the medium that fuelled the revolution. As early as 2010 the police had urged the young rapper El General to stop criticizing the government in his songs. His song entitled "Rayes Lebled" ('Head of State') is considered to have

started the revolution. After his January arrest, another young rapper, Lak3y recorded a nine-minute song entitled "Don't Touch my Tunisia." The importance of hip-hop culture in dubbing the voice of the people is clearly expressed in the creation of a new branch of diplomacy, namely, alongside cultural we can now speak about hip-hop diplomacy as well (hiphopdiplomacy.org).

This takes us back to the UK riots, in the wake of which British urban music had been accused of promoting a culture of entitlement. Famous rappers, such as Professor Green, Lethal Bizzle and Wiley explain how the centuries-old grime allows them to articulate their voices and describe a world that the politicians "have chosen to ignore" (Hancox, 2011). Roughly twenty years ago, famous American rapper Chuck D, a founder of the politically and socially conscious rap of the 1980s, called rap music "the black CNN" (Hancox, 2011), a means of going beyond the borders of news networks when reporting about people's daily lives. By the same token grime and rap in the UK could be seen as "the BBC News 24 of the British urban working class – not necessarily black, not necessarily young, but mostly so" (Hancox, 2011). Five years earlier, Bizzle wrote an article in *The Guardian* to complain against rap having been blamed for spreading knife crimes. One of his works, "Babylon's Burning the Ghetto," carried the message that more attention should be paid to the youth, irrespective of their ethnic identities.

The big society or cosmopolitan identity?

We may be moving towards an extension of multiculturalism, this time even beyond interculturalism. Current ardent issues related to multicultural societies are anchored in new contexts which reflect new takes on the kinds of economic, political, social, and even cultural dimensions. The contemporary processes of globalization open the way to new alliances and relationships. The globalized world has also yielded unintended consequences, which generated new forms of uncertainty. In this new reality people are asserting multiple identities rooted in their daily functioning in society. Multi- and intercultural societies tend to have opened the way to a new age, the age of "Cosmopolitan identity" (Mitchell, 2007, p. 706). Quite often people choose to promote cosmopolitan identity from positions of safety. Today, travelling and migration allow people from all walks of life to build cross-boundary alliances to transcend not only frontiers but also ascribed identities. Cultural cosmopolitanism feeds on the symbols and practices represented as non-local and non-particular. One way of developing this new, all-encompassing identity is through conscious education.

Finally, the question arises whether education could reduce ethnic prejudice or not. Approaching multiculturalism from a different angle, the diverse cultures present

in a society encompassing different components, ranging from religion and language to traditions, are the lenses through which individuals and groups perceive the world. Multiculturalism is present in different areas of most European societies, but the most visible trends are found on college and university campuses. Some think that the "contact hypothesis" yields the best results and increased contact between the groups can reduce prejudice. Others think that multiculturalism education, which focuses on teaching about different groups rather than allowing actual contact, could reduce prejudice without building the resentment which sometimes occurs in contact. Nowadays, when people assert multiple identities either as a result of their changed environment or of globalization, encouraged re-categorization might be a solution.

By way of conclusion, news from the other side of the Atlantic serves as further food for thought. Aaron Smith reporting in his article "Bloomberg: Jobs crisis could spark riots here" cites the mayor of New York – a role model of a successful multicultural and cosmopolitan society –, who fears that the precarious financial situation of jobless people might lead to upheavals similar to the ones described above. Let Mayor Bloomberg's words warn us that societies in general and the youth in particular need to be given opportunities to study and work in a world that by now can be seen as one single multicultural global village.

> Riots have gripped various countries in European cities, including Athens and London, fueled by young people infuriated by high unemployment and austerity measures, which in some cases has led to looting. High unemployment among youth is also one of the driving forces behind the Arab Spring, as impoverished protestors in North Africa and the Middle East rose up against their heavy-handed governments […] The damage to a generation that can't find jobs will go on for many, many years. (Smith, 2011)

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