



From Multiculturalism to Interculturalism: A Pragmatic Shift

In today's globalized yet fragmented and polarised world, multiculturalism is often idealistically promoted as an international public good. However, the experience of culturally diverse societies around the world rather reveals a "plural monoculturalism" where genuine dialogue, understanding and harmony are far from reality.

In his latest global update earlier this month, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, stressed that "multiculturalism is not a threat: it is the history of humanity and deeply beneficial to us all." Indeed, the exchange of ideas and traditions dates back to ancient civilizations and has contributed to humankind's rich diversity today. The expansion of the Silk Road from China to Europe is a perfect example, as it left a legacy of technological, ideological, economical, and cultural exchange which has definitively shaped the course of human history. This blend of ethnicities, languages, and beliefs has become increasingly undeniable as globalisation has facilitated unprecedented transnational flows.

Despite cultural diversity being a longstanding reality, both within societies and on a global scale, we don't seem to have fully embraced this fact.

Of course, the concept of culture in itself implies a distinction from another, a dichotomy of "us" versus "them", which can spiral into conflicts. Samuel Huntington's 1996 thesis titled "Clash of Civilizations" regrettably anticipated the predominance of cultural and religious tensions as primary drivers of conflict in the post-Cold War era. So, how can such clashes be averted?

Multiculturalism, a principle supporting the rights of different cultural and ethnic groups to retain distinctive identities, ensuring their equitable access to society, began to gain ground as a policy in the latter half of the 20th century. Canada was the first country to announce an official government policy of multiculturalism in 1971, with Australia and many European countries following suit. The cultural diasporas in cities worldwide are a testament to this move towards diversity and inclusivity.

Importantly, these neighbourhoods provide a home away from home for many people, where a sense of community is created for individuals to freely practice their religions, celebrate their cultural heritage, speak their native languages, and access products and services reflective of their identities. There is no doubt that these are clearly positive outcomes, but this notion of a liberal multiculturalism also has its limitations...

The emphasis on recognising different cultures and promoting diversity has, in many cases, resulted in an increased segregation of cultures. The economist Amartya Sen refers to this tendency as “plural monoculturalism”, suggesting that multiculturalist principles risk forcing individuals into rigid identity groups and thus hinders a real sense of diversity within society. Consequently,

the potential for a genuine understanding across cultures is diminished. This perpetuates perceptions of multiculturalism as a threat, fostering sentiments of “othering”, and thereby maintains tensions and conflicts from a local to a global scale.

The concept of interculturalism provides a promising alternative to these challenges. Interculturalism avoids the potential essentializing of cultural differences, and rather takes a bottom-up approach, focusing on everyday lived-experiences. The Council of Europe’s 2008 Intercultural Cities Programme (ICC) exemplifies this approach and is currently implemented in over 130 cities worldwide. The initiative seeks to promote positive intercultural mixing and interaction, taking into consideration the potential





risks of cultural diversity, and ultimately aims to “achieve inclusion, equality and prosperity by unlocking the potential of diverse societies.” Evaluative research from the ICC cities shows a direct correlation between intercultural policies and citizens wellbeing. The programme improved neighbourhood relationships and led to an increase in openness and tolerance among the city population towards migrants and/or minorities, with a decreased intensity of conflicts. Teachers became more culturally sensitive, children from different backgrounds communicated more, and increased participation of migrants and minority groups in cultural and arts activities encouraged both formal and informal exchanges between groups from different backgrounds.

Various intercultural communal living projects also showcase the success of programmes involving local stakeholders and urban planners. In Antwerp, Belgium, the initiative to provide housing for unaccompanied refugee minors alongside local youth has proved to be significantly positive for everyone involved. Daily social interactions in a shared informal environment create opportunities for a mutual learning of cultures, languages, and household skills. Clearly, local scale initiatives can be very effective in delivering the promised benefits of “multiculturalism”.

Aside from the more grassroots proposals, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of interculturalism at an institutional level. In 2004 Spanish Prime Minister José Zapatero formulated the idea of an ‘Alliance of Civilizations’ to the UN, who formally launched the group in 2005. A direct response to Huntington’s thesis, Zapatero understood the need to fill a “policy gap in the governance of cultural diversity, which was threatened by growing divisions between communities, the rise of violent extremism, the polarization of attitudes and world perceptions, and frequent manifestations of intolerance, xenophobia, and racism.”

The UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) aims to prevent new conflicts and mediate ongoing conflicts, acknowledging the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue through its 5 pillars: education, youth, migration, media, and women as peacemakers. Whilst being a transnational organization, the UNAOC’s main operational role as a matchmaker for dialogue critically involves local authorities, grassroots organizations, religious leaders, and citizens; actors whose involvement is vital to ensure long-term peace.

Yet 20 years on from the creation of the UNAOC, we are witnessing an increasingly fragmented world. Türk summarised this sentiment in his speech; “Rarely has humanity faced so many rapidly spiralling crises... A wave of conflict is



battering people's lives, destroying economies, profoundly damaging human rights, dividing the world, and upending hopes for multilateral solutions.” Unsurprisingly, following this trend, as of May 2023, 89% of conflicts were occurring in areas with low intercultural dialogue. Attempts to resolve conflict will not be effective or endure if the power dynamics are not acknowledged, nor if agency is not given to all relevant participants.

Overall, the need for interculturalism -or more critical forms of multiculturalism- in both global conflict resolution and local community-building efforts is undeniable. The more efforts taken across diverse sectors of society, whether it be citizens supporting local initiatives and events, urban planners designing with interculturalism in mind, or organizations and institutions facilitating dialogue, the more we can harness the benefits of true cultural diversity.

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