

# Coping with Diversity: republican, multicultural and cosmopolitan Approaches

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## Introduction

This talk tackles a central difficulty of our times: how to assuage the tensions arising from growing cultural diversity and ethnic assertion. What is at risk here is the metaphorical ‘Balkanisation’ of multi-ethnic societies into mutually antagonistic camps for whom the legitimacy of the state is in contest—or, worse, the all-too-literal violence that beset ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s (Silber and Little, 1995) or Northern Ireland during its (still-unresolved) ‘troubles’.

The solution lies in moving beyond what has come to be known as the ‘politics of recognition’, or ‘multiculturalism’, which fails to address relationships *between* reified ethnic groups and can endanger the liberties of individuals *within* them. The alternative is an ‘intercultural’ approach, which focuses on developing a culture of tolerance (Habermas, 2004) *indifferent to difference* (Ignatieff, 1999), so that a ‘normal’ civic society becomes possible.

## Assimilationism and multiculturalism

Multiculturalism emerged as a corrective to the assimilationist notions that prevailed before modern notions of ‘minority rights’ gradually evolved during the post-war period. The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise to power of the ‘nation-state’ in which newly enfranchised but disadvantaged social classes were socialised into political environments in which their rulers presented themselves as embodiments of a unified national-popular collective will (Hobsbawm, 1990).

The collapse of the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Romanov empires in the wake of World War I left a slew of problems in east and central Europe where the ‘imagined community’ of ‘nation’ and state were unhinged. But the failure of the League of Nations satisfactorily to address the consequent minority claims (Mazower, 1998: 51-63), and the abuse of such claims (for instance, on the part of Sudeten Germans) by the Nazi regime meant that the rights architecture embodied after World War II in the 1948 Universal Declaration referred to the rights of human beings *in general*. It thus eschewed what would be detailed in the 1992 UN *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (reproduced in Eide, 1993: 4).

The French state, for instance, took—and still takes—the view that as a republic which upholds the equality of all its citizens it does not have any minorities to recognise, as under the 1995 Council of Europe *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (Council of Europe, 1995). In a world of decolonisation and mass migration, however, such assimilationism has become increasingly unsustainable. In France, it has made it very difficult, if not impossible, to resolve the tensions between public authorities and increasingly assertive Muslim citizens, mainly from the Maghreb, which exploded in the *banlieues* in 2005.

But note that phrase ‘persons belonging to’. Multiculturalism became fashionable in the 90s largely on the back of the experience not of Europe but of north America—particularly, the issue of the

contested place of Quebec in Canada. On this basis, intellectuals like Charles Taylor (1994) and Will Kymlicka (1995) argued rather for the attachment of recognition rights to minorities as *collectives*, understood as embodying enduring ‘societal cultures’—though, in so doing, they provided no practical answer to the constitutional stand-off over the future of the province, or indeed of the position of members of the ‘first peoples’ within it. But, given the Anglo-American dominance of normative political philosophy, these arguments received a ready audience on the other side of the Atlantic, where—particularly in Britain and the Netherlands—they chimed with a multiculturalist ‘common sense’.

This argument has the misplaced premiss that rights claims can only be universalist and individual, on the one hand, or, on the other, difference-based and attaching to a putative group. In fact, the alternative embodied in the UN and Council of Europe statements retains the core human-rights notion that rights have as their subject free and equal individuals in all cases. The distinction is between those rights attaching to individuals in the abstract and those where the individual associates him- or herself with a national/ethnic/religious/linguistic minority.

In that sense, as Chryssochoou (Council of Europe, 2004b: 55) has argued, assimilationism and multiculturalism are in reality two sides of the one, similarity/difference, coin. Both assume homogeneous, bounded and rival majority and minority ‘cultures’: republicans demand that the latter dissolve into the former; multiculturalists insist upon a separate minority existence. Neither is the basis for civic peace. ➤