

The Trouble with Multiculturalism (Multiculturalism, Norwegian Style)

«The Trouble with Multiculturalism (Multiculturalism, Norwegian Style)»

by Aleksandar Bošković

Source:

Forum Bosnae (Forum Bosnae), issue: 46 / 2008, pages: 91-100, on www.ceeol.com.

THE TROUBLE WITH MULTICULTURALISM (MULTICULTURALISM, NORWEGIAN STYLE)

Aleksandar Bošković

Introduction

The issue of multiculturalism has become increasingly important in discourses related to European integration processes.¹ In *theory*, if we take it to mean the plurality of cultures that can coexist, with respect for each other, it certainly makes sense. However, *in practice*, the existence of different cultures, coupled with recent trends of increased immigration from less developed countries, can cause interesting frictions and uneasiness, as well as raising questions about the limits of tolerance.²

One relatively recent anthropological attempt to deal with the concept is Watson (2000). Watson uses his own fieldwork experience (especially in Malaysia) to illustrate and explain the complex phenomena associated with multiculturalism. In so doing, he does not really define multiculturalism (which would require a working definition of “culture”) but illustrates the ways it manifests itself in everyday life. He demonstrates the distinction people draw between “multicultural” and “multiculturalism,”

- 1 Debates on multiculturalism have also been connected with those on “the end of history,” with all the necessary implications (Huntington 1996a, 1996b; Fukuyama 1992, 1995; Žižek 1997/1998, 1998). Ultra conservatives, like the US political analyst Pat Buchanan, have also warned of its dangers — using the example of the bloody dissolution of former Yugoslavia — claiming that it simply cannot function in practice.
- 2 Cf. Žižek 2000, 2001. In the second paper (on the limits of tolerance), the Slovenian cultural theorist gives a particularly hilarious example of a Nazi German film director who emigrated to the US and was deeply unhappy during the 1950s because American Jews did not like him.

drawing examples from South Asia, Britain, and the US. In the Asian contexts, people tend more readily to “shift” their cultural allegiances – seen as inherently unstable and fluctuating. On the other hand, in developed countries like the UK and the US, the dominant culture puts itself more firmly on a pedestal, as the norm or standard of what all the other cultures within the country should look like. Countries like Germany provide interesting examples of different cultures co-existing, but without much actual contact with each other – or at least so people think. According to Watson, the whole issue of multiculturalism has a lot to do with the building and appropriation of different identities (considered to be the ones that guarantee privileged position – as in the case of the Han in China). One of the strongest points that Watson makes is the fact that we are all multicultural – culturally “pure” societies simply do not exist. While this sounds like quite an obvious point, it is not something that most people consciously perceive or even think about.

In this paper, I want to outline some problems that multiculturalism poses for a developed (Western) European society, Norway, which prides itself on its liberal and progressive tradition. The Kingdom of Norway stretches over 311,000 square kilometers and has approximately 4.5 million inhabitants. It is not officially part of the EU (the majority of its voters flatly rejected this in a referendum), but it has very close ties with it. (For example, it is part of the Schengen Treaty, allowing for hassle-free travel within most EU countries.) “With its specific combination of a bureaucratic welfare state and an open globalized capitalist economy” (Gullestad 2002: 1), Norway presents an interesting and quite intriguing example of the modern Western state and one with which most of its citizens appear to be satisfied. Culturally, Norwegians see themselves as not entirely “European,” although they are keen to participate in international missions (peace keeping, foreign aid, etc.) with international organizations like the UN. Norway is also considered to be an exceptionally rich country (unlike most of the other developed countries, it actually has problems with a *GDP surplus*), as soaring oil prices and natural gas revenues have in recent years been invested in funds that will provide for at least next two generations of its citizens in the future — so it is also a model of a *functioning* welfare state, as well of a society where the sense of inner solidarity has not been completely lost. Most

international statistical surveys place Norway as one of the most pleasant countries to live in, with highly developed social services, a very low crime rate, and, overall, a reasonably satisfied population (Gullestad 2002, Eriksen 2006).

In recent years, however, some interesting debates within Norwegian society have questioned the limits of multiculturalism. On a popular level, there are questions related to whale hunting, which is still practiced by Norwegians. How far does it really relate to their own cultural identity? There are also some more serious issues, with far-reaching consequences for the future of the society. How far does one go in respecting others' rights to religious expression, for example? Are women allowed to wear veils, if they choose to? How should parents educate their children, and what kind of values does the society want to promote? This all leads to a crucial question: what does it mean to be a Norwegian in the contemporary world?

In the present paper, I draw primarily on the analysis of the prominent (and recently deceased) Norwegian anthropologist, Marianne Gullestad, as well as on a book, originally published in Norway, that attained world fame by (mis)representing others.

The Norwegian Case

From the late 1960s, immigrants from developing ("Third World") countries started to settle in Norway. An immigration ban was imposed in 1975. The so-called "immigrant"³ proportion of the country's population (including refugees and asylum-seekers) has increased steadily, from 2 per cent in 1980 to 5.5 per cent in 1998. In 1970, only 6 per cent of the "immigrant population" came from Asia, Africa, and Latin America — while in 1998, the figure was 49.5 per cent. Between 1977 and 1998, 109,000 foreign workers became Norwegian citizens. They come from many different countries, with the largest number originating from Pakistan, followed by Sweden, Denmark, and Vietnam. One-third of all "immigrants," and 41 per cent of all the "non-Western immigrants," live in Oslo. In the capital, their presence is highly visible, particularly in certain inner-city neighborhoods. Many so-called "non-Western immigrants" work in unskilled and semiskilled oc-

3 This is a particularly loaded term. Legally, it means: 1/ *a person born abroad* (outside Norway); but also 2/ *a person whose parents were born abroad* — meaning that even Norwegian citizens can be considered "immigrants."

cupations, such as taxi-drivers, hotel personnel, cleaners, and so on, doing many of the jobs that “Norwegians no longer want.” Educated “immigrants” often experience difficulties in obtaining employment that corresponds to their educational level.

Although the relative number of “immigrants” is considerably smaller than in, for example, Sweden, Germany, or France, the debates about them are extensive and very polarized. The groups of political extremists (including self-defined racists and neo-Nazis) are small, comprising only a few hundred individuals. On several occasions, thousands of people have demonstrated publicly against the actions of these marginal groups. At the same time, anti-immigrant sentiment is also strong. The Progressive Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*), a right-wing populist party, fighting for lower taxes, fewer regulations, more money to care for the aged, more police, and a more restrictive immigration policy, is comparable to the *Freiheitspartei* in Austria and to the National Front in France. The leaders of the Progressive Party do not use explicitly Nazi, neo-Nazi, or traditional racist arguments.

Despite their North Sea oil wealth, this specific point in time in Norway is one in which many people feel insecure about the direction their society is heading in. The Cold War is over, leaving Western countries with no clear outside enemy. The so-called “modernization” of the welfare state has triggered much opposition, as does the proliferation of neo-liberal ideas and practices. Unlike in many other European countries, unemployment is not extensive, and the state does provide social benefits for the unemployed, but significant numbers of people still experience the loss of their jobs as a result of closing-off and restructuring in many workplaces. Resistance to “modernization” often takes the form of “ethnic nationalism.” The way migration is currently interpreted brings out and exacerbates the ethnic subtext in how the nation is imagined.

A Professor and a Lady

In her paper, Gullestad mentions a story related to her by “an Emeritus Professor of Nordic languages.” This example is interesting, because it clearly demonstrates how even well-meaning people, operating from a majoritarian perspective, can fail to grasp the complexities of others.

Some time ago, the professor received a telephone call from a woman he did not know. She wanted to discuss the notion of the *innvandrер* (immigrant) with somebody proficient in the Nordic languages. The professor was friendly and ready to converse. She told him that she had been born and brought up in India, but had lived in Norway for many years. According to the professor, “she spoke Norwegian well, but not perfectly.” “Now I have lived in Norway for a long time,” she told him. “I know Norway, and I have become a Norwegian citizen. Therefore I want to know if am I still an immigrant (*innvandrер*)?” “Yes,” answered the professor, on the basis of his lexical understanding of the problem. “You were born and bred in India, and this makes you an immigrant to Norway.” The woman, who had apparently hoped to throw off this label, voiced her disappointment and posed a further question. “But for how long will I then continue to be an immigrant?” “All your life,” answered the professor. The conversation then reached its peak, as he later explained it, in that the woman became angry. The professor, who is an amiable person, was sorry to disappoint her, but found that the meaning of this word in Norwegian did not allow him to do otherwise. In order both to explain his view, and to comfort her, he therefore added: “This is the way it was for the Norwegians who emigrated to America, too. You just have to accept it.”

The conversation was a private one, in that the professor had been sought out by the woman because of his formally sanctioned academic knowledge. He thus spoke from a position of authority when he explained the meaning of the word *innvandrер* to her... *Innvandrер* is today not only a word in the dictionary, but a rhetorically powerful concept. Within such a frame of analysis, *innvandrер* has become a stigmatizing way of labeling “them.” In the dictionary (and for the professor), the term denotes all those who come from outside Norway, including Swedes, Danes, and North Americans. But in the streets and the mass media, a more restricted use is emerging. The meaning of the word now seems to oscillate between an implicit code based on “Third World” origin, different values from the majority, “dark skin,” working class (unskilled or semi-skilled work), and a dictionary definition to which these characteristics are irrelevant. This span of ambiguity is the basis of considerable rhetorical power. For example, the leader of the right-wing Progressive Party often implicitly plays

on the term's restricted and racialized meaning, but when he is accused of racism, he shifts to the wider lexical meaning.

When the woman in the episode became disappointed and angry, it was presumably because she perceived the label, *innvandrер*, as conveying a meaning of “not Norwegian,” and excluding her from the community of unmarked citizens. The term is often used in a totalizing way, covering many nationalities of origin, and overriding other statuses and identities. For the professor, being a Norwegian citizen did not overrule the woman's status as an “immigrant.” The term locks her conceptually into a position she thought she had long since left, and it does so for “all her life.” (Gullestad 2002: 50-51)

Anthropologists as Interpreters

Gullestad also mentions an example of a prominent Norwegian anthropologist, Unni Wikan, who has experience of fieldwork in Muslim countries, is regarded as an expert on Islam, and who has been instrumental in shaping some of the government's policies during the 1990s.⁴ In her numerous public appearances in recent years, Wikan claims that Norwegian society (primarily the country's social services) has essentially betrayed “immigrants” children — especially the girls — by allowing their parents to practice their own cultural patterns. Gullestad (2002: 52) quotes both from her book (Wikan 1995a) and from a newspaper article (Wikan 1995b):

“Immigrants” and the “immigration problem” have virtually become synonymous with Muslims.

Why?

Let me state immediately: I do not think that this is due to “racism.”

When so many Norwegians – including myself – regard Muslims as a problem, there is a reason for this: Muslims in Norway are problematic in many ways: one has the impression that they distance themselves further from basic Norwegian values than do other groups. Many practise segregation. Many oppose their chil-

4 Anthropologists in general are quite important in Norway — the country has more than one thousand professional anthropologists, who are frequently asked for opinions on a variety of issues and interviewed in the printed and electronic media. A recent survey listed three anthropologists among the ten most influential Norwegians (Eriksen 2008).

dren having Norwegian friends. This does not apply to all, but it applies to far too many. (1995a: 85-6; 1995b: 26)

Every choice has its price, and the price for living in Norway is that one must accept that one's children become Norwegian – if they themselves so wish. For no one 'owns' his or her children ... for me it is also unacceptable that people who have come here and benefited from Norwegian possibilities, such as freedom and material welfare, so readily denounce aspects of the "culture" we have built up, and that provides the basis for the welfare which immigrants take advantage of. The majority of immigrants to Norway have had a choice – they were not among the worst off in their home country... They have also had the possibility to return: to go back home. The choice they have made bears its obligations. (1995a: 91; 1995b: 30-1)

Wikan here speaks (again) from a majoritarian perspective (something that I find a bit odd for an anthropologist — especially of her stature and experience), essentially blaming "others" (Muslims) for being different (and even "problematic in many ways"). Interestingly enough, she never questions models of the functioning of her own society, with its mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and never even thinks of a possibility that at least part of the problem lies in the fact that members of some communities are simply *excluded*, and, as such, forced to "denounce aspects of 'culture' we have built up."

This last "we" also raises an interesting question as to who owns a culture. Can it be owned? Is it the domain of white, educated, well-off, privileged women, such as Wikan? Or perhaps the many "immigrants" who have lived and worked in Norway for decades (and paid their taxes in the process — considerably helping in the building of the welfare state) also have something to do with it?

The Bookseller of Kabul

My third example is one well known in these parts as well — the case of a young Norwegian woman who lived with a family in Kabul in early 2002 and later wrote a book. *The Bookseller of Kabul* became an instant hit when it was published in Norway,⁵ but it reached world fame with the English translation a year later.

5 The book sold half a million copies in Scandinavia alone — and by early 2004 had been sold to 19 countries.

In her book, Åsne Seierstad, already an accomplished journalist, described the daily life of an Afghan family. Even though she changed the names of the main actors, it was not too difficult to find the real “bookseller of Kabul.” Mohammed Shah Rais was not at all pleased with the description of his family life, regarding it both as a breach of trust and a pack of lies. In one extreme case, when hinting in her book at premarital sex by his daughters, Seierstad might have even exposed them to mortal danger — as this is a crime punishable by death in traditional Afghan society — or condemned them never to be able to marry.

On the one hand, Seierstad exposed what she claims was “a real story,” but primarily a story of male domination and female oppression. In the process, she “removed” herself completely from the book, presenting all the data as “given,” or as “hard facts” — despite Rais’s angry denials and the process that he initiated for libel. The topic of her book sat well with many of her colleagues, even after anthropologists began questioning her methods and asking how was it that she was able to gather the information, as she spoke no Afghan languages. The subject of gender oppression seemed very important, however, overriding ethical misgivings. According to a Norwegian anthropologist:

The representation of Afghan men as an abusive “other” conversely constituted Norwegian “selves” as enlightened and liberated. Extolling the book meant furthering female liberation, even if it entailed the imposition of a neo-colonial vision on Afghan women and men alike. As the Iraq war is increasingly justified on grounds of “liberation” — rather than the elusive “weapons of mass destruction” — it is worth remembering that colonial projects have often been accompanied by such a discourse. (Myhre 2004: 22)

Furthermore, the author claims that:

The danger inherent in the proliferation of books like Seierstad’s is that they spin a web of versimilitude wherein all social phenomena, particularly in the Islamic world, are depicted solely as means of subjugation serving the sexual, social and material interests of men. This is not to deny the existence of gender oppression, but to dispute it as a fixation in terms of which all social practices can be accounted, and neo-colonial projects can reliably be justified. (Myhre 2004: 22)

Concluding Remarks

I do not think that one can really fight against multiculturalism in Norway or elsewhere. Just as there are no mono-cultural, so there are no mono-ethnic societies anywhere in the world, and the idea of the “nation-state” is an obsolete myth that belongs to Romanticism. The examples that I have mentioned here, however, serve to show that the process of accepting our own (shared) multicultural future may be made more difficult, both by extremists and by well meaning (but strangely insensitive) representatives of the majoritarian way of thinking.

Exposing all the fallacies and inconsistencies of this way of reasoning perhaps will not bring one too many political points. As a matter of fact, my Norwegian friends recently assured me that the Progressive Party will almost certainly form part of their country’s government after the next elections. If the idea of a “Europe without borders” is to be taken seriously, however, political actors will have to try to come to terms with the boundaries and fences they erect *within* their own countries and societies. For it will be increasingly difficult to distinguish “us” from “them,” or to establish any meaningful authority on which to legitimize such a distinction. The way I see it, ethnic and racial boundaries can only serve to multiply these boundaries, obstructing the integration processes, and making our shared future much more difficult.

References

- Bošković A., (ed.), 2008. *Other People’s Anthropologies: Ethnographic Practice on the Margins*, pp. 169-185. Berghahn Books.
- Eriksen, T. H., 2006. *Engaging Anthropology*. Berg.
- Eriksen, T. H., 2008. The Otherness of Norwegian Anthropology. In: Bošković 2008.
- Fukuyama, F., 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Avon Press.
- Fukuyama, F., 1995. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. Free Press.
- Gullestad, M., 2002. Invisible Fences: Egalitarianism, Nationalism and Racism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8(1): 45-63.
- Huntington, S., 1996a. The West: Unique, Not Universal. *Foreign Affairs* 75 (November/December 1996), pp. 28-46.

- Huntington, S., 1996b. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon & Schuster.
- Myhre, K. C., 2004. The Bookseller of Kabul and the Anthropologists of Norway. *Anthropology Today* 20(3): 19-22.
- Seierstad, Å., 2002. *Bokhandleren i Kabul: Et familiedrama*. [The Bookseller from Kabul: A Family Drama]. Cappelen.
- Watson, C. W., 2000. *Multiculturalism*. Open University Press.
- Wikan, U., 1995a. *Mot en ny norsk underklasse?* [Towards a New Norwegian Underclass?] Gyldendal.
- Wikan, U., 1995b. Kulturfundamentalismen. *Samtiden* 5, 21-33.
- Žižek, S., 1997/1998. Multikulturalizam ili kulturna logika kasnog imperijalizma. [Multiculturalism, or, the cultural logic of late imperialism.] *Arkzin* N. s., Nos. 4-6.
- Žižek, S., 1998. *The Spectre is Still Roaming Around!* An introduction to the 150th anniversary edition of *The Communist Manifesto*. Bastard, Arkzin.
- Žižek, S., 2000. I'm sorry, but hypocrisy is the basis of civilization. *Time*, special issue *Fast Forward*>>Europe, p. 88.
- Žižek, S., 2001. What is wrong with Tolerance? *Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Jahrbuch 2000/2001*, pp. 339-348. Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut.