

# Thirty years of multiculturalism and anthropology

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## Abstract

On 5 February 2011, the Prime Minister of the UK, David Cameron, announced at a public conference that ‘State multiculturalism [had] failed.’ This was just one of the best known episodes that highlighted the return of “multiculturalism” as a topic of public debate. Multiculturalism represents a widely discussed concept in anthropology: a concept that sparked heated critiques and allied the discipline with a rejection of this concept. Distinctly from the past, in recent years, anthropologists appear to have become protagonists of the contemporary discussion about the future of multiculturalism. In this article, I will provide a brief history of the relationship between anthropology and multiculturalism, and show the reasons that brought anthropologist from the sound condemnations of the 1990s to the recent active engagement of this discussion. In doing so, I will show the changed political and intellectual agenda that underpinned this transformation.

KEYWORDS: multiculturalism, anthropology, conflict

## Anthropological uneasiness

Multiculturalism is one of those concepts that made generations of anthropologists year feel uneasy over the past thirty years. In order to understand the reasons for such a perception, a short definition is needed. While in the previous thirty years, other disciplines in humanities and social sciences debated, clarified, and deepened this concept, as Turner observed in the early 1990s, cultural and social anthropology kept out of this heated discussion. It was often judgemental of the entire debate, which was frequently labelled as monumental, ontological ‘no-sense’ (Turner 1993).

This critical position may surprise some. At the end of the day, was not anthropology that discipline that taught the diversity of cultures? That just respect and dignity that must be guaranteed to any of them? Anthropology is indeed that discipline, and those are the main teachings that it offered to modern thought. However, it is in the long debate about culture and diversity that distinguished anthropology that we can find the principal motivations that induced anthropologists to oppose to multiculturalism: a concept that they considered limited and narrow.

To understand this position, which too easily risks appearing to be another academic oddity, it is necessary to clarify two points: First of all, what culture is, at least in anthropology; secondly, what the archaeology (cf. Foucault 2002) of multiculturalism is.

## **Culture and anthropology**

‘What’s culture?’, though. This is a question that has animated all the history of modern anthropology since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A fundamental definition was given by Taylor in 1871: ‘Culture, or civilisation, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’ (1903: 1).

This definition *per se* tends to define culture as a sort of fixed set of immutable traits that would presumably distinguish a particular social group or community. In other words, culture is all the traits that differentiate a Nuer from an Inuit, a Chinese person from an Argentinean.

For more than a century, the anthropological paradigm of culture was linked to that idea and based on the conviction that every society, every social group was marked by some particular characteristics that clearly distinguish it from other social groups. It was a definition, an ideology that was based on the interpretation of local community and social groups as immutable cosmos that were stable and static in time. These convictions were the epistemic pillars for the discipline. However, they were based on social premises that might have been true in the time of the colonial empires, but did not mirror the complexity of modernity.

In the post-World War Two world, as an effect of decolonisation and the increase of infra- and trans-state mobility, those pillars crumbled. Thanks to the studies of post-colonial thinkers such as Fanon (1961), Said (1978), Asad (1973) since the 1960s, researchers recognised that local communities were far, far from being a static cosmos. Religious, political and kinship systems change in time and adjust themselves to the necessities of contemporary times. From this recognition, a new conceptualisation of culture that opposed the classical one by Taylor was raised. Culture became interpreted as a fluid, changeable, positional reality. Since the 1980s, with the tools of deconstructivist critique, the concept of culture was revised up to the point to negate, in some cases, the meaning of such category. To the eyes of a post-modern anthropologist, such a thing as culture does not exist. There are just fluid networks of relations self-regulated on the basis of arbitrary principles where individuals transmitted knowledge. For the innate fluidity of these nets, moreover, every individual may be part of multiple networks and, in so being, she would make the knowledge of each network dialogue with the one transmitted within others. Thus, she would be able to make networks interact and mutate.

## **The birth of Multiculturalism**

This vision of culture clearly opposes the concept of culture that underpinned the idea of multiculturalism that had been created and spread since the 1980s. In fact, multiculturalism became a fundamental concept in the public and political debate in that decade, as it was a response to the introduction of the concept of “culture” imposed by the “new right” of Thatcher and Regan. Since the end of the 1970s, in the same years when it was proclaimed that ‘such a thing as society [did] not exist,’ culture became the fundamental ideological hinge of the immigration policy both in the UK and the US, and more broadly of their

entire political discourse. In that context, it was affirmed that to become an “American” or a “British” person, one had to be an American or a British. In other words, an individual had to embody a particular set of intangible social and behavioural characters defined as culture. If we consider what we said about anthropology, this idea of culture appears to be the direct descendent of Taylor’s: it was not acknowledging the fluidity of knowledge; instead, even worse, it was affirming a principle of superiority of a particular culture over all the other forms of knowledge and lifestyles (Wright 1998).

As an answer to this ideology, multiculturalism was introduced into the public debate by movements and left-wing parties. In their perspective, multiculturalism was to reaffirm the respect towards any form of culture and to denounce publicly the iniquity of any imposition of a culture over another. However, in so doing, it did not unhinge the post-Taylorian concept of culture employed by the new right; instead, it was adopted and became part of the DNA of multiculturalism. This is the reason for the opposition of anthropologists to multiculturalism, and the reason that this concept was scarcely debated until the previous decade.

## **9/11**

Ten years ago, however, we experienced a change both in meaning of multiculturalism and the attitude of anthropology towards it, because, ten years ago, something historic happened: 9/11. This event was, first of all, a turning point for the international political debate that also caused a radical change in the political use of the word culture. Where in the 1990s a certain belief in an inter-cultural egalitarianism had become widespread, in the previous decade we have seen the rise of a form of new-Orientalism. In other words, the public debate was radicalised by highlighting the differences among communities, among cultures. A renovated form of cultural discrimination spread: the one that is based on the contraposition between “Western” and “Christian” against “Oriental” and “Islamic” culture. It may be superfluous to add that in the West the former was presented as the good and just, to be imposed also with the use of force to anyone would have opposed it. I recognise I am generalising, and apologise for it. Unfortunately, this generalisation is not so far from what happened (Carrithers 2008).

In this political context, multiculturalism has revived and become a theme of extreme relevance. It has become a trans-disciplinary debate to which also anthropology is taking part. In this case, the aim of this debate is not just a problem of policy (Prato 2009). It aims to defuse the ideological machine that has been structuring in the previous decade (Wright 1998). This debate is still on-going. It is continued in academia as well as outside of it.

## **Conclusion**

Coming to a conclusion, in this perspective, the only suggestion I would like to give you is to not repeat the mistakes of the past. In our reasoning, let us try to abandon an idea of culture as set of fixed distinguishing traits, which is also at the basis of post 9/11 ideology. Instead, let us try to consider a fluid idea of culture made with knowledge in motion, where people are places of contact, creation, propagation of knowledge towards other individuals that, in their turn, are also places of contact, creation and propagation of kno-

wledge towards other individuals. Perhaps in this way, we will be able to find those new and fresh resources we need to break the ideological iron cage in which the West and the world are living and to prove that multiculturalism, as the claim that we all are members of one diverse humanity, is far from being failed.

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## **Povzetek**

Predsednik britanske vlade, David Cameron je 5. februarja 2001 naznanil: ‘Državni multikulturalizem je propadel.’ To je bila ena izmed najbolj znanih epizod, ki je poudarila vrnitev “multikulturalizma” med teme javnih debat. Multikulturalizem v antropologiji predstavlja široko obravnavan concept. Je concept, ki je sprožil vroče kritike in združil discipline v zavrnitvi tega pojma. Za razliko od preteklosti pa so v zadnjih letih antropologi postali protagonisti trenutne diskusije o prihodnosti multikulturalizma. V prispevku predstavljam kratko zgodovino odnosa med antropologijo in multikulturalizmom in razkrivam razloge, zaradi katerih so antropologi prešli od ostrih sodb v devetdesetih letih 20. stoletja k dejavni vključitvi v debate v zadnjem času. V argumentaciji bom prikazal na spremenjeno politično in intelektualno agendo, ki je botrovala tej preobrazbi.

**KLIJUČNE BESEDE:** multikulturalizem, antropologija, konflikt

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