

Institute of Ideas and Institut français

**Attention Seeking: multiculturalism and the politics of recognition**

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**Can multiculturalism work?**

Speakers:

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Discussion chaired by **Tiffany Jenkins**

### **Kenan Malik**

Thanks to the Institute of Ideas and the Institut Français for organising this debate. Part of the problem in a debate such as this, I think, is a confusion between two different meanings of multiculturalism: what I would call multiculturalism as an ideology and multiculturalism as a lived experience. When most people say they think multiculturalism is good, what they mean is the experience of living in a society that is less insular, less homogenous, more vibrant, more cosmopolitan than before. Those who advocate multiculturalism as an ideology however are talking about something different.

Multiculturalism, they argue, requires the public recognition and the public affirmation of cultural differences, and the argument goes something like this: we live in a world where there are deep-seated conflicts between cultures embodying different values; different peoples and different cultures have different beliefs, different values and different lifestyles, many of which are incommensurate but all of which are equally valid in their own context. And in such a world social justice demands that individuals are treated as equal, but also that cultures are treated as equal, and indeed that cultural differences become institutionalised in the public sphere. The American scholar Iris Young put this quite well: groups, she says, cannot be socially equal unless their specific experience, culture and social contributions are publicly affirmed and recognised.

What I want to suggest is that this multiculturalism as ideology, this insistence on the public recognition of cultural differences, on the public affirmation of all cultures as equally valid, is not only politically dangerous but also able to undermine much of what multiculturalism is as lived experience. Equality of cultural identities is not the same as political equality, and indeed I think it undermines the possibility of political equality. Political equality requires not a plurality of meanings, but a common measure of judgement. The very demand that we accord equal recognition to cultures is a demand to some kind of universalistic principle of social justice, but the possibility of establishing any such principle is ironically undermined by our embracing of a pluralistic outlook.

To try to treat different cultures with equal respect, indeed to treat them with any kind of respect, we have to be able to compare the one with the other. The principle of difference cannot provide us with any standards that allow us to, or oblige us to, respect the difference of the other. At best it invites our indifference to the other, at worst it licenses us to hate and abuse those that are different from us. After all, why should we not hate and abuse them, if there is no common standard by which we can compare and contrast each other's cultures. On what basis can they demand our respect, and we demand theirs?

What all this suggests, I think, is that we can either recognise people as equal, or we can recognise cultures as equal – we cannot do both. Equality arises from the fact that human beings are political creatures and possess a capacity for culture. But the fact that all humans possess a capacity for culture – does that mean that all cultures, or all cultural forms, are equal? Some societies, some political systems, some cultural forms, are better than others: some are more just, more enlightened, or simply more conducive to human flourishing. And it seems to me that if we want to talk about political equality, equality between people, then we have to accept that different cultural forms and different cultures are unequal, and that some are better than others, and all cannot be given or should not be given equal recognition.

It seems to me that this is where the question of diversity comes in. Ask yourself: what is good about diversity? Diversity is not good in and of itself. It's important because it allows us to compare and contrast different values, beliefs and lifestyles, to broaden our horizons, to make judgements upon other ways of thinking about things, other values, other beliefs, and to decide which are better, which are worse. It's important, in other words, because it allows us to engage in political dialogue and debate, and, paradoxically, a more universal set of values and beliefs.

But it's precisely such dialogue and debate, and the making of such judgments, that multiculturalists often attempt to suppress in the name of tolerance and respect. I've lost count, for instance, of the number of times of the past decade that I've been not allowed to quote from *The Satanic Verses* by both newspaper and radio editors, on the basis that is offensive to do so. The very thing that is valuable about diversity, the clashes and conflicts it brings about, is what contemporary multiculturalism most fears.

Multiculturalists often say to me that they live, that they deal with the messiness of the real world out there, the conflicts of values, of beliefs and lifestyles, and I as a universalist see things in nice black and white terms. In fact, I think it's the other way round. Multiculturalists seem frightened of the messiness of life, and want everything nicely and neatly parceled up with little conflict, all neat and ordered. Such order, I think, can only come at the expense of our own liberties. Tariq Modood, the academic and activist, calls for what he terms an equality encompassing public ethnicity. Equality, he says, is not having to hide or apologise for one's origins, family or community, for others to be required to show respect for them, and for public attitudes and arrangements to be adapted so that the heritage that they represent is encouraged, rather than contemptuously expected to wither away. But why should that be so?

Why should I as an atheist be expected to show respect for Christian or Islamic or Jewish cultures, with views and arguments I often find reactionary and despicable? Why should public arrangements be adapted to fit in with the misogynist, homophobic, often backward claims that religions often make, and what is wrong

with me wishing such cultural forms and cultures to wither away, and how, given that I do view these cultures and many others with contempt, am I supposed to provide them with respect, without disrespecting my own views? Only, I think, as the philosopher Brian Barry once put it, with a great deal of encouragement from the thought police.

A truly plural society would be one in which citizens have full freedom to pursue their different values and their different practices in private, while in the public sphere, citizens would be treated as equal, no matter what the differences in their private lives. Today, however, pluralism has come to mean almost the opposite. The right to practice a particular religion, the right to speak a particular language, the right to pursue a particular cultural practice, is seen as a public good, rather than a private freedom. By contrast, our rights to do, write, or even think as private citizens are increasingly curtailed in the name of tolerance and to maintain the harmony of such a society. It seems to me this is the opposite of what a properly, truly plural society should be.

So can multiculturalism work? As a form of social regulation, and as an increasingly authoritarian form of social regulation, yes. But as a process through which we create a more just, a more free, a more equal society, in which we can critically engage with the diversity around us, no it can't. It seems to me that what multiculturalism does, as an ideology, is to undermine everything that is valuable about diversity as lived experience.

### **Adam Kuper**

I agree with much of what's been said so far. I find the ideas behind multiculturalism the ideology and multiculturalism the analytical idea deeply confusing and problematic. What I'm going to try to suggest to you is that if we think about it historically, we can work out what these ideas have come to mean, and why they seem confused today, and we'll be able to understand better some of the problems of this argument. But on the other hand, while this discourse is confusing and complicated, I think that it rests on top of a very very simple idea, a very simple and very old idea, which is – let's pull no punches – racism. In my view, the whole ideology of multiculturalism is a modern translation of a very classic European ideology of racism. Now where does this idea of multiculturalism fit in in Europe?

In the United States, it has rather a different history. European societies experienced a large immigration from non-European countries in the generation since 1950. People began to think about a new kind of society and new kinds of social problems which were beginning to emerge. The idea was that the country, the city of London, was being confronted for the first time with a new kind of challenge, which was the emergence of different racial groups in society. A new kind of society was arising, a multi-racial society. How should politicians deal with this? How should human beings deal with this? What was the future? Was the future, as Enoch Powell said, rivers of blood? Later, this same model of society was translated into a new idiom, and we began to talk about a society in which there were different cultures. The word *culture* is used in a very similar way. I mean, I'm quite struck by the way that young people today say: 'What culture do you come from?' And, when you think about it, this is very much the same sort of notion of identity. The same question is asked about how to deal with a society which is made up of people from different cultural blocs: can they live together, can they understand each other?

Now the simplicity of the thing is that we have this politically correct notion of culture replacing the politically incorrect notion of race without, however, greatly changing the arguments. Part of the reason that this is possible conceptually is that the idea of a culture is a very very difficult, complex, muddled idea. In fact, in the European tradition, there are three very different notions embodied in this word *culture*.

The first is Matthew Arnold: 'the best that has been thought and said'. This is culture as represented in the ministries of culture in different European countries, responsible for the ballet or the language, for museums of folklore and so on: that's one notion of culture.

A second notion of culture emerged in the 1870s, just after Matthew Arnold had published *Culture and Anarchy*. This said that no, no culture is not the possession of a small elite. Culture is something human, which distinguishes humans from all other animals. What was the cause of the difference? Remember Darwin's *Descent of Man* had appeared in 1871, raising this question of what makes human beings different from animals; the answer came that what makes human beings different is the capacity to transmit knowledge, to transmit understanding of the world, not by biology, not through instinct – or, as we would see it, not through genes – but through learning. So culture is the cumulative learnt heritage of human beings. So that's the second notion of culture that comes in.

There's a third notion, which was developed in the Germanic countries, which comes into French and English later, which is that culture – a cultural group and a culture – is associated with a language, and it defines a nation. It is the heritage not of all humanity, but of a particular national group and ethnic group, and that because this group has its own culture, it should also have its own political identity, it should also be a political nation. It emerges in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it emerges in central Europe, where you have all sorts of groups of different languages being ruled by French speaking courts of German princes. So we have these three very different notions.

Now the idea which has come into our contemporary discourse about multiculturalism, is this notion that you have a collectivity, a community of some kind – what in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would have been called a race or a nation, ideas which would have been assumed to be very very similar – which has certain characteristics which make it unique and special; ideally its own language, its own religion, but also its own ideas about sex, about marriage, about sport, about leisure, about morality, all of which are very distinctive to it. Now if you adopt this idea, you have to ask yourself what collectivity owns the culture. If I say there are three or four different cultures represented in this room, I'm assuming there's a collective group of people who own this culture and who are at once defined by the culture and whose own lives are shaped by this culture. What are these groups? Are they nations? Are they races? And I suggest to you that in contemporary Europe, the notion is taken for granted, that these groups are defined by common biological descent. You inherit a culture. This means that once you use this notion of culture to think about groups of people, it is going to be used in a very broad brush way.

So people in England, people in London, talk about African culture, or they talk about Indian culture, but they don't ask whether the people involved are Hindus or Muslims, whether they are Punjabi speakers or Hindi speakers, whether their parents came from a small rural village or whether they came from the middle of Calcutta,

whether they are English-speaking and university educated or not; there's the assumption that all those differences are comparatively superficial as opposed to this essence, this inborn essence, this shaping essence. So that is the idea. I'm not saying that it's an idea that a sophisticated audience like this would have but it's the idea that is out there in the community and the country, this a framework people use to shape their ideas. This is an idea that is shared by both racists and anti-racists.

There was very interesting debate, about 10 or 15 years ago, about adoption. Should white couples be allowed to adopt black babies? An argument was made by minority group activists saying no, they should not be allowed, because they would not be able to nourish the culture of the black children. So the idea is that race implies a culture, there's absolute identity: culture is not something that you learn in this kind of model, culture is something that you are born with, and if you're not taught your own proper culture, you're somehow robbed of a kind of identity which is a birth identity, which is an inherited identity, which is a genetically determinable, racially determined identity of some kind.

Now it's quite clear I think – I hope – that these ideas, this way of thinking can only nourish illiberal policies which will feed fears of difference, which will stereotype people by their appearance, and which will label groups of people with all sorts of classic, stereotyped notions that were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century associated with race. I just want to end with an example that I find deeply shocking, which is right out there in the society in London at the moment, and which I find doubly shocking because it has hardly met with any opposition. And this is Scotland Yard's contemporary probe into what is called 'the torso in the Thames'. Are you all familiar with this story? The idea is that this black child of five years old is picked up, a headless torso in the Thames. Detective sergeant from Scotland Yard gets into his head that this is a South African medicine murder. He travels to South Africa where he finds an ex-Apartheid so-called racial scientist, who says yes, that's quite true, there's a lot of it about, very likely that this is indeed this kind of witchcraft murder. Several months later, nothing further is heard on this front, the detective sergeant pops up again saying we were wrong in saying it was a South African medicine murder. No, it is a Yoruba Voodoo murder.

The reason they thought of this was that some policemen walking along the Thames came across a Yoruba ritual which was a celebration of the fact that a child that had been travelling from the United States had escaped the 11<sup>th</sup> of September bombing. They said well, of course once we'd investigated this we found out that there was nothing sinister going on. But it shows that these kinds of rituals are about. This is, ladies and gentleman, a classic blood libel. This is a classic libel associated with a minority group by the authorities of a country, which reflects the collective fears and hatreds which feed on stereotyped group differences and the notion of unification. Why has nobody stood up in the press to denounce this? Why has it seemed plausible to the journalists and intellectuals who write about this? I have here an article from *The Observer*, which carries a series of 19<sup>th</sup> century stereotypes at which Kipling would have blushed. And it ends with a statement that Scotland Yard believe the death of this child may be linked with an extreme element of the Yoruba people, a tribe with Voodoo-like rituals. Is this how we think about life in London today? Is this the discourse which we're entering into? It is. And by talking multiculturalism we will only feed this discourse. What we must do is break down this kind of stereotyped thinking, this attribution of group identities. Break down this easy association of culture and race. It's a long job because it is very deep out there in the society. But I commend it to you.

## Farhad Khosrokhavar

I would like to thank the Institute Francais and the Institute of Ideas for extending an invitation to me. I would like to apologise for the poor quality of my English, I'm supposed to be French speaking. So far as multiculturalism is concerned, I think that in a way it is a fact in modern societies. Even in France where there is long tradition of the Jacobin state and centralisation, we are in a multicultural society, compared to fifteen, twenty years ago even. We have many groups coming into the open, calling into question what might be termed the universalistic view of culture, society and politics.

I think that in many respects, French, English, German and other societies are looking towards a culture based tolerance. Multiculturalism can be understood as a kind of *Zolen*, as the Germans would say. That means that you have to accede to some sort of respect towards the other sub-cultures, and try to have a sort of tolerance towards each other. Of course the dilemmas of this idea have already been developed by the two preceding speakers and I think that this is a notion which is full of ambiguity. That's perhaps why in some Continental countries, Latin countries, some people question multiculturalism as a word, as a notion, and as a concept. Some think it is too much of an Australian, Canadian, English speaking Canadian and perhaps Anglo-Saxon ideology, so sometimes they prefer *metisaje*, or *metisage* in French. The French anthropologist Kozinsky, for instance, or sociologists in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes like Viavoqua, Turen and the others would have preferred a more neutral word for it, although the content would be very similar to multiculturalism and its ambiguities.

Anyhow, if you take some Continental countries like France, one can at least speak of monoculturalism, that is what I try and defend in an article. That means if you think that there is one dominant culture which excludes the others to the private sphere, and that this dominant culture is based on some sort of dichotomising idea of the private and the public within it, there is some sort of ideology which excludes other sub-cultures in the name of universalism. I think even in France nowadays, we are living the end of monoculturalism, the basic idea was in France that there was an opposition between the Republicans and the Catholics in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and between the bourgeois and the working class people. All those dichotomies are being put into question nowadays in French society as well as other parts of Europe, and the crisis of the Left in many European countries feeds in a way the multicultural ideologies within these societies, because multiculturalism – and this has been mentioned by other speakers – is very difficult to be put into practice within a just society. That means sometimes it becomes a kind of justification for social inequality, by putting forward a the idea that subcultures or cultures have to be respected as such, so the idea of tolerance might be a kind of tool to cover up the idea of social justice within societies. That's perhaps one of the reasons why many people, many intellectuals that have some sort of leftist leaning, have difficulties with this idea.

Another point I would like to raise is an empirical study I made with an English institution in Warwick on Muslim detainees, Muslim prisoners in France and in England. The result was somehow disturbing because many of those people whom we spoke to within the prisons had a kind of multicultural life-world; among those who were radicalised, many of them spoke between three and six languages, so in a way they shared the multicultural world of ours. I would say, though I cannot give

you a detailed description of this because of lack of time, that the fact of participation in a multicultural world does not mean respect of all of them. If we describe phenomenologically the life-world of these people we see multiculturalism might end up in a contradictory way, in a paradoxical way, into a kind of loneliness, solitude, paranoid attitudes, and some kind of antagonistic and radicalised attitude towards the others. This is because multiculturalism leaves many spaces, in a kind of vacuum. If you live within many cultures, of course there are many positive aspects and I don't want to reject that, and in a way it can enrich our lives, but the reverse side of it, the dark side of it, is that sometimes this vacuum between cultures might end up in the relativisation of all cultures and all norms, and that might end up in a kind of radicalisation and ideologisation of one de-culturalised utopia, which might be very dangerous.

I think that some of those Islamic radicals that I interviewed in the French prisons were in that situation; they were factually, as a matter of fact, living in a multicultural world. They spoke many languages, they had lived many years in foreign countries – England, Germany, United States, Holland, Australia and so on. But this reverse side of multiculturalism means that being between many cultures means participating in none of them, and I think there is something of the dark side of multiculturalism in that respect. I would just like to say that multiculturalism is not something always brilliant and good; there are other sides of it which have to be taken into account.

### **Bonnie Greer**

I just want to speak from a cultural aspect, I mean that's what I do in the world, I'm a writer and also a critic of culture. I'm not intellectual or anything so I won't talk from that end but I would just like to add to what was said. My brother's [Farhad Khosrokhavar's] idea here of *metisage* I think that is exactly what we need to be speaking about now. My film company is called *Emerald City* and the first initial of it has an F in it and the F is for our partner Fred Fortasse, who is a Franco-Algerian actor, based in Paris, he speaks about five languages, he isn't here today because he's in Ramadan, but he sends his greetings, Fred came here and worked with us, at a little theatre called the Alcoa Theatre, which is located in London, run by a young Turkish director, in a Turkish community. The play was called *Jitterbug*, and it had on stage Jewish, African-Caribbean, African-American, Muslim, Christian, White and Black actors in a common story about humanity, and that's what the theatre company is about. The G is for myself, African-American, naturalised British citizen, and the H is for my husband, David Hutchins who is indigenous English, and his family's probably been here for a long time, and we work together to make art about Europeans of non-Western European, non-Christian ancestry.

Just two quick things: what is multiculturalism? First it is a political term, and it's probably not a very good political term at all. In fact I think it's probably very old fashioned. My particular interest would naturally be in people of African decent, and multiculturalism – well, from my experience of living here and teaching here in Britain, and being in France for the past 17 years, multiculturalism doesn't begin to describe a young black man growing up in Brixton right now. Multiculturalism does not describe a young person in the banlieu Saint-Denis. They are way beyond that, and I think we need to start to look at the way people actually live.

Secondly, I think if we use the word multiculturalism or *metisage*, I think it is a point of view, it is a fluid point of view, and it must include, within its definitions, the reality of this new Europe. This is very important especially coming from a country like America – and this is the thing about America, it is deeply and profoundly racist. The difference is that America's base is fluid. France and Britain do not have fluid bases but they are beginning to be impacted upon by the new Europeans. I would say that these new Europeans, they are here, we are all here and we'll make an alternative to the threat of globalisation – i.e. Americanisation – which is new Europe's biggest threat. And by taking in and embracing the new Europe, we will begin to have, as the French would say, a defense, another way of being in this world. So for me, the 'metisagation' is the most important thing. I would urge us to start thinking, not so much of including cultures into anything, but to look at the way things really are, and to proceed from there, because the Europe of the year 2025, as we all know, is going to be a very different place than it is today.

### **Tiffany Jenkins**

I've really got one question for the panel before I go out to you, so if they could keep their comments brief. I was very interested in what you said, Adam – and perhaps Kenan can begin – when you said anti-racism shares the same basis as racism. Obviously we like to think that we live in a very anti-racist society now, so can we have a few more thoughts on that, can we expend it a little bit?

### **Kenan Malik**

I agree very much with what Adam said on this. I think both racism and anti-racism – or rather contemporary anti-racism – are rooted in a romantic notion of human differences in the way Adam described, of human beings as being composed of incommensurate groups, each with particular essences, each with particular lifestyles, values, beliefs and so on, with the difference being that 19<sup>th</sup> century racial scientists considered these groups to be established on a racial hierarchy, on an evolutionary hierarchy with some higher than others, while the contemporary multiculturalists regard different groups on a horizontal basis if you like, none better than the other, equally valid. That to me is the primary difference, not very important in the kind of underlying message it sends out. If you look at Britain, if you look at how anti-racism has changed in Britain over the past 50 years, it's interesting that you can have three generations, if you like.

The first generation who came here in the 1950s were those who largely accepted racism and lived with it. The second generation, my generation, were those who fought it, but fought it on the basis that what we wanted was equality with everybody else, we wanted to be treated as Britons, with the same rights as everybody else. What you now have is a third generation of anti-racists, who have given up on the fight for equality, or rather refashioned the notion of equality to mean not the right to be the same, not the right to have the same rights as everyone else, but the right to be different. So they have gone back to a notion of difference which underlies racism, which was what we fought against when we were fighting for equality. So to me it seems contemporary anti-racism is in many ways very regressive.

### **Tiffany Jenkins**

Adam, do you want to say a few things about that? In particular in relation to Bonnie's point about how identities are much more fluid than we allow for – is that perhaps the solution, to go towards a more fluid identity?



**Adam Kuper**

Well, I agree with everybody.

**Tiffany Jenkins**

Very politically correct

**Adam Kuper**

This question of identity is an interesting one in relation to this; it's a new kind of question. People out in the world there are looking for their identities. I don't know if any of you have this problem, you wake up in the night, 'Who am I?' It's a sort of adolescent problem that many people have evidently carried on into adult life. It hasn't bothered me for a long time but people have this problem, 'Who am I?' – and the answer is, the answer we're supposed to find, is that I find my identity when I find what group I belong to. And there can only be one group. So I discover I am gay. Or I discover that I am Muslim. I make this discovery, and then I search out my group, and I adopt the ways of thinking, the prejudices, the views, the manner of speaking and so on of this group, and then I have found my identity, I've found my place in the world and from then on I can be happy and fulfilled as a human being.

The reality, as Bonnie said of course, is that we all contain multitudes. We are all sorts of different people all the time, we're in different contexts, we have different notions, we contradict ourselves, we play with one idea rather than another. What we don't want is for someone to look at us and say 'I know who you are, I can tell who you are by your accent, by your colour or by your hairstyle, I know who you are and so I know a whole range of things about you, I can put you in your box.' That, of course, is very dangerous and a degenerate way of dealing with other human beings. So I am a liberal, I take the liberal point of view that what matters is allowing the greatest possible freedom for individual choice and individual self-expression, and also the freedom to change, so I am very much against all collective attributions of identity, and I'm against all sorts of movements that demand from an individual solidarity with a group with which they have some kind of imaginary identity.

**Bonnie Greer**

I agree absolutely, and I think that if we can take for a moment take a sort of long view, and if we can look at ourselves from the vantage point of people 50 years from now, I think one of the things that they're going to be saying was that the beginning of this millenium there was a crisis of identity. The reason there is a crisis of identify, one of the reasons, is that the base known as Europe, the cultural entity known as Europe, this entity known as Western Europe, this peninsular off Asia, is changing, and it has pressures against it from its knew populations, who are claiming it as their home, but also from a great power, the United States, which is actually encroaching more and more on the identity of the peoples of Europe. So at the beginning of this century the peoples of Britain and Europe were actually asking the question 'Who am I' in relation to these things. I would say again that I'd urge us to think fluidly, not so much in rigid compartments. I think it is extremely important.

If you look at what's happening in music, for instance, music is and has always been a melange of things, a mixture of things. You can look at the French hip-hop scene, the French rap scene, you can look at what's happening here in the music scene, so these things are on the ground. We would be retrograde if we didn't actually take up what culture is doing, take up some of the issues that culture is dealing with, take up some of the moral models that culture has made and move those models into other

realms: the social realm, the political realm, and so on. The fact that there are right now 45% of under 5 year olds in this town with one non-white parent tells us something about the future which we're not even discussing today. There is a reality that is very different.

### **Farhad Khosrokhavar**

I think there is a kind of consensus, mutual agreement on one of those topics, that most of the time, multiculturalism arises within societies where social justice is being put into question directly or indirectly. That means it might be looked at as the noble side of hyper-liberalism in the continental sense of the word. That means a society where social justice and economic justice are less and less relevant is where this kind of situation, partially at least, is legitimised through the respect of the others. But respect of the others might mean as well indifference towards this situation within the framework of the economy. So again, what bothers me about multiculturalism is that it separates in an artificial way economics, politics and cultural aspects of social life which are integrated – I mean, integrated with each other within our real lives.

### **Tiffany Jenkins**

I think the key question is can we take on a fluid identity where we choose effectively who we are – is that the solution?

### **Audience Member 1**

My name's Cliff Codona, I'm a Romany gypsy, and I come from one of the most persecuted peoples there are on the planet today, and I'm really interested in what the gentleman there said about our identity as something that we do not want to lose, as something we fight so strongly for.

### **Audience Member 2**

The question about difference does exist. What we're trying to put across is how those differences can work within society so that people can live together as well as possible. So how do you deal with the fact that people do feel persecuted, they do feel different, yet want to develop a society where there is tolerance, understanding and equality, as was mentioned earlier.

### **Audience Member 3**

Celia Palacios at UK New Citizen. I am very interested on your point of view because our organisation promotes equality and recognition for new citizens, who are for different reasons already settled in the country. My question is, in your analysis of multiculturalism, apparently you haven't considered the problem of political representation of ethnic minorities that at the moment is in real danger because community leaders acting as the most important person in ethnic organisations have a great deal of power representing their communities but actually the people that they say they are representing are in fact citizens; they should be better represented by democratic organisations and institutions such as councillors, MPs etc. If you analyse multiculturalism, it is not only important to consider the ideological aspect, which is of course very important, and the historical aspect, but also the practical effect on democratic society because at the moment our opinion in UK New Citizen is that ethnic minorities are being offered a second class democracy for second class citizens.

### **Audience Member 4 (Simon Thompson)**

This question specifically to Kenan Malik. It's an attempt to answer his question which I found fascinating, namely 'Why should I respect Christians?' I have the same

problem, as I find many of their beliefs bizarre and mystical, and some practices carried out in their name barbaric. My answer would start by saying that my own moral beliefs are partly the descendent of Christian beliefs, that my humanism is partly a set of post-Christian values, and so I have a debt to a certain form of Christianity, that would be the first strand of my argument.

The second would be that to respect them as Christian doesn't mean I have to believe all that strange stuff about trans-substantiation and so on. I respect their Christianity because I know their religious beliefs are important to them as a person. So I can separate out my respect for them as Christians from any kind of belief that Christianity is as good as Satanism or anything else. I don't have to reach a judgment about their values – and, developing that point a little bit, I believe that Christians should not suffer excessive costs for their Christianity. In other words, they shouldn't find it harder to live a decent life than I do because of the way in which the political institutions of my society are set up. In that sense again, it makes sense to act against forms of discrimination without being involved in any way with any kind of judgement about the value of the cultures in question.

**Audience Member 5**

Helene Guldberg from *spiked*. I'm not sure whether all the panellists agree on rejecting all group identities and all group solidarities and the embrace of fluid identity, but is there not a danger of excessive atomisation, individualisation and isolation, if you are rejecting all group identities and solidarities, as you pointed out Adam?

**Audience Member 6**

Hi, I'm Jill Simpson from the BBC. Just a quick question: to what extent do you think that the far right could usurp notions of cultural respect to make cultures more separate? One of the things that concerns me is that the language used by the Far Right now is far more sophisticated; it takes on the mantle of respect for other people's cultures and so maybe we should have separate faith schools, maybe we shouldn't live together, maybe we should have walls like we have in Northern Ireland. One of the things that worries me is how you get beyond that; they're kind of talking the talk of respecting other people's cultures, but they're not actually, because we know they're not.

I was looking at the BNP's website recently and it's salutary reading to have a look at the recommended reading list: Norse Mythology, King Arthur, Histories of England. So my two questions: to what extent is this assuming the mantle of cultural respect as a vehicle of actual cultural separation is going to be the way the far right argues not just here but abroad, and secondly to what extent by resuscitating King Arthur and the Vikings are they creating a Northern European mythology, trying to create an identity, a false one that you can buy off the shelf? It's salutary to read it, it's really worrying what they think we should know about how to be white and northern European.

**Audience Member 7**

I'd just like to take up Kenan Malik and Adam Kuper. How can you argue that today the chief problem in relation to multiculturalism is that they're trying to make culture based on race and genetic determinism? That's something that's much criticised today by the multiculturalists as fascistic, of the fascist aesthetic. Today multiculturalism is based on not making race or biology the basis for culture but art and fantasy. Now what I want to ask you two is whether a multiculturalism of art and

fantasy and fluidity, as you put it, an ok way of organising and regulating society? That is what multiculturalism is today, where art and fantasy is used as a way to politically regulate society, not this notion of culture based on biology.

#### **Audience Member 8**

My question is, there was a comment that some cultures are better, and some of your said that culture is natural or inherited, and in this aspect, who doesn't have a culture to be entrusted with the mandate to decide which culture is better and which culture is a sub-culture. I look at multiculturalism and recognition as a political multiculturalism, where the one who wants to be recognised is the one who is setting up this arena, in a stereotyped sort of setting, to make him in position to govern his ethnic group and then be recognised in the event of what is expected in time. I would just ask for a comment from any of the speaks that this multiculturalism is not a social but a political phenomenon.

#### **Audience Member 9**

I've got a question that relates to a point put forward by Kenan Malik, and it relates to the point made by the gentleman earlier who classified himself as having a Roma-gypsy background. The question I would like to put to the panel is in relation to the right of people who have a nomadic, travelling culture. The idea I'd like to put forward is in relation to the post war developments that Kenan Malik outlined about people fighting for the right to equality and the right to difference. It seems to me what would shed an interesting light on this debate is if we look at the plight of gypsies and travellers.

For instance, their nomadic culture does not seem to be tolerated in Europe. There seems to be a consensus that a settled way of life is a monocultural norm, and travelling people represent a challenge to this. Now the way forward to them seems to be merging individual and group identities and putting forward mixture of those, and saying, for instance, that the traveller culture or the Romany culture could be accepted on a cultural level. In the criminal justice act travellers are not given the right to have sites, and the education system doesn't allow for their nomadic lifestyle so that their children can still get an education if they're travelling, the way that could be enshrined by a system that acknowledges equality and difference and in some way celebrate multiculturalism.

#### **Audience Member 10**

Well, I wanted to come back to Kenan Malik's point about multiculturalism being a form of social control, and a way of policing people's thoughts – and I'd like to introduce a little bit more conflict here as there seems to be a lot of consensus and I'm not sure if there is. My question is how can multiculturalism be replaced with the idea of respecting everybody's individual identity? It's not just a matter of groups, it's not just a matter of individuals – and how far can one go with that? I mean, if a street beggar says his is an identity as a street beggar, therefore I have to respect him as a street beggar, is that what I'm supposed to do? I feel increasingly that you cannot say things like street beggars should be kicked off the streets. I think it's important to explore this idea of multiculturalism or even the support of identity, the idea that we should respect everybody's identity, as being a way of controlling thought

#### **Audience Member 11**

Kerry Dingle from World Right. We're an international NGO actively opposed to multiculturalism because of the way in which it justifies material inequality locally

and globally. I want to ask whether in the light of what multiculturalism is now responsible for, especially in terms of justifying inequality, whether we should be promoting an aculturalism, or is it that we simply want cultural forms, or the fluidity that you talk about, as Kenan suggests, to be something completely separate from political ideas, in order to reclaim universalism?

### **Audience Member 12**

Carlton Brigg, University of Surrey. I'll try to be brief. I'd like to address this question of fluidity and especially this point that Bonnie and Adam raised, if I understood them correctly, that fluid identity is a response or a resistance to multiculturalism. I think they have turned it on its head, in that actually I think multiculturalism is about fluid identities in the sense that it's not about putting gays or Muslims in boxes but about saying you can be gay and you can be a Muslim. I think the notion of fluidity as a response or a resistant point to multiculturalism is problematic, as it extenuated the divisions that multiculturalism is all about. It about breaking down boxes. So my polemical question is that surely the resistant point to multiculturalism is for us to get back into our boxes, not to get out of them.

### **Audience Member 13**

I had to fight against multiculturalism in my society. I worked in a factory in which there were Bangladeshis, Indian, Pakistanis and White workers, and women workers, and I saw the point as was made in the debate to try to unite us, as there are classes in society, there are sections in society: there were the employers, and one of their slogans that had been passed down from their childhood was 'divide and rule'. Multiculturalism is one of the ways in which they divide us and rule us. We had a slogan. If you called someone a bastard that's fair enough. He may be, he may not. But if you called someone a white bastard, you're attacking all of us. Or a Bangladeshi or a Pakistani bastard – you're attacking all of us, because you're saying we're different, and we're not, we're all the same. In the factory, we're the workers and the management, and unless you organise as workers, you're under the sway of the management all the time. And it's the same internationally. The Americans, all this about globalisation, you know, everything's blamed upon Americans now. Well there's Americans and there's Americans. And it's the American working class that we're looking to to help us free the world.

### **Tiffany Jenkins**

The panel should come back on what they want, but what I'm particularly interested in is that a few people raised the problem from the floor that this notion of fluid identities is just a further breaking down and individualisation rather than a bringing together.

### **Bonnie Greer**

Especially to the Romany gentleman, I hear everything that you're saying. For example, one of the things that's interesting for me is that I've lived in this country for 17 years, but I've refused to get rid of my accent, which is the voice of my mother and father. I could've done it, but I didn't do it, for that very reason. Yet at the same time I know people who are British who know more about America than I do; they live there, they're there now. I have a British passport but I'm still considered American.

So what I'm saying is that on the ground, in reality, we negotiate our identities every moment of our lives. We know exactly who we are, we know exactly what we want to be. These other notions, or other ideas, or intellectual constructs, the unspoken

ones that I hear on this floor – and maybe this is because I was born and raised in America – what I hear are all of us bumping up against a notion. There is a notion of a French identity, the French have worked a long time at creating that. This country is a constitutional monarchy, there's a very ancient culture, there's a notion of what being British or English is, and we are all in reality pushing up against that notion and the conversations that I'm hearing are basically about coming from that as a given. These two entities, these two monoliths. And I'm saying – why does it have to be that? Why – because it isn't that way on the ground? I think we need to change the system that we're working under to reflect the way we actually live in the world. And that's what it is to be fluid.

### **Farhad Khosrokhavar**

I think multicultural life is part of our daily problem, and each of us, you know, have to deal with it in an almost daily or hourly way. But what multiculturalism induces is a sort of cold tolerance. I would like to replace it with a sort of warm tolerance, that means something which should not exclude the concern for others in terms of cultural justice. In Europe, independently of the governments, the gap between the haves and the have nots has increased; in the United States, of course, even more so. So in a way, we are in societies which are more and more unjust, and I think we have to take into account this fact, otherwise in the name of tolerance we might just ignore them, saying, you have your own sub-culture, live the way you can, and middle and upper class people will have their own lives, justifying the ignorance of those who are left over – you know, the working poor, or those who have no job at all – in the name of this cultural difference.

### **Adam Kuper**

Let me just first tell you a little story, as it sums up a lot of my problems with this notion. I regard the notion of culture as so completely incoherent that I think we should all stop using it. Let me give you an example. In New Zealand at the moment, the government is concerned that there is an apparently disproportionate representation of those with so-called Maori decent in the prisons. It used to be said that this was the case because of discrimination, unemployment, slum living and so on. Now, the official view is that the Maori people are over-represented in the prisons because of a cultural problem. Not that Maori culture makes them criminals – on the contrary, it is because they have lost their culture. They are seeking an identity, they have no roots, they have no values, and then they drift into smoking marijuana, then beating up their wives, raiding banks and so on. So how are you going to rehabilitate them? Rehabilitate them by teaching them culture – their culture. So you now have these New Zealand prison guards forming these study groups teaching Maori prisoners dancing, etc. Now if some poor Maori prisoner says "Well look I'm Christian, I don't want to go back to..." – no! "Well, rugby's my game, I want to play rugby, I don't want to..." – no! You have to go back to your roots. So this is now the policy of one of the most liberal governments in the world.

This seems to me to absolutely beautifully exemplify my point, that so-called cultural thinking is actually racial thinking, and the idea behind it is that each of us has this inherited identity, and if you drift away from it you have lost something, and therefore you are a rootless drifting creature, and you can only regain it by becoming what you are. Now, somebody asked this question about political representation in multi-ethnic groups. It's a very good point, and I agree with you entirely, it's an artificial government policy. So there was this comic business about a year ago before his disgrace, where Keith Vaz used to be treated by Tony Blair as the spokesman for the so-called Asian community. It is absurd. This is a colonial policy

of indirect rule imported into Britain. It makes no sense at all. You're Asian, I can see from your colour that you're Asian, your parents were born there etc, so you are going to be represented by Mr Vaz, not by somebody who represents your political views, not by somebody who stands for your particular interests.

The lady over there made a point about the Far Right. This is absolutely true, it's a very fascinating development, particularly fascinating at the moment in the Scandinavian countries. You also have in Austria a more classic form of racism, and in Holland with Pim Fortuyn. In the Scandinavian countries, people were developing this new racism, which uses this language of culturalism and cultural difference, because, of course, as soon as you adopt that language of culture it is very difficult for people who are asserting the ethnic politics of the last generation to find a way of opposing it. Because they are making the same kind of claims and the same kind of assertions, but from a minority view. If we make these assertions from a majority view it is very hard to object to it.

It also becomes very difficult – and this is the other side of it – for ethnic minority politicians in a country like Britain to criticise racists back home. So it's a great problem for some African political representatives in London at the moment to denounce Mugabe, for example, for racism, because what he is asserting is the right of the indigenous peoples to land and so on. This language, this whole ideology which is essentially a racist's colonial ideology gives support to the Far Right and racists' groups, and very much undermines democratic debate.

### **Kenan Malik**

Let me return to this question about multiculturalism as fixed identities and multiculturalism as multiple identities. It seems to me that the celebration of difference as a melange is as problematic as the celebration of difference as a set of fixed identities. Both arguments are present today in the way people think about multiculturalism. And quite often, to a certain extent, people like Bonnie take on multiculturalism as a set of fixed identities by positing instead this kind of multiculturalism as a kind of melange whereby we can take on a multiple set of identities. It seems to me that this is highly problematic. I go back to the question of why should we value diversity. It seems to me there is no use, no good in diversity in and of itself. All it's saying is you live in a world with lots of difference in it. So what? In many cases this is seen as difference for the worse not better, as in many cases it's difference we want to get rid of, not to save. So there is nothing good in and of itself about diversity.

What can be good about diversity is when it forces us into political conflict, into political dialogue, political debate, to make judgements upon those differences, to decide which are better and which are worse, and, through the process of political dialogue and debate, to decide which political systems, which cultural forms, etc, are better and which are worse. The problem with the notion of multiculturalism as a melange, or a celebration of differences as a melange, is that it tries to undercut that process by which we are actually creating more universal forms of political and moral thought. I don't think there's any point in celebrating diversity, but simply using diversity as a way of creating more universal political and moral forms, gives us a more common ground on which we can agree.

The important distinction, I think, is between the private and the public spheres. In the private sphere there are all sorts of differences, all sorts of collectivities we can or cannot belong to, and to me that's immaterial. In the private sphere one can say I

am gay, I am black, I am Maori, or whatever. The problem arises when you bring those notions of difference of identity into the public sphere, and organise public life according to those differences, whether in terms of single or multiple identities. It seems to me that we need to make a distinction between the public and the private sphere. In the private sphere, one should be able to pursue one's differences unconstrained in terms of habits, lifestyle, values, beliefs and so on. In the public sphere, we should use our differences to create a more universal, a more common set of value to which we can all adhere and belong to.

This is why I disagree with the idea that we should get rid of all collectivities, I think collectivities are important. But collectivities in the private sphere are different from those in the public sphere, I think. Part of the problem is a sort of a conflation of the two. Collectivities in the public sphere, it seems to me, should be based on politics, on political differences, on the kind of society we want to see. Those sort of collectivities are crucially important. They should not be based on those kind of private differences that commonly exist in private life. I think we should separate the kind of collectivities that exist in private life, and the collectivities that are very important for political progress and for the political process that exist in public life.

In public life I think we do not want to exist as individuals with multiple identities, but as collectivities fighting for particular political goals, that are crucially important. I think the problem with seeing diversity as a melange is that it undercuts the idea that you can have public collectivities fighting for public political goals and instead it assumes that what we do in the public sphere is a representation of the kind of collectivities and identities we have in the private sphere, and that it why I think the two should be kept separate. Without a distinction between the private and the public, and a distinction between the collectivities in the private and the public, I don't think any kind of equality is possible, or any kind of political progress is possible.

### **Bonnie Greer**

I agree with most of what you said, but I think I didn't make myself clear about fluidity, and I'd like to tell my own little story. When I came here in 1986 the first place I went was Brixton. I went to a party in Brixton and walked in straight from New York going "hey brothers and sisters" and everybody turned and looked at me. Everybody was black in that room, and basically the face was "hey, we're the same colour, we have the same racial background, but I am not your brother or sister". I learned a lot from people, and what I learned was that there is diversity within diversity, which is far more subtle than what these labels and blockages tell us.

My point is not to have some happy clappy we are the world let's just forget what colour, we are let's just forget where we come from, let's get together – that's not the way it is, that's not the way humans function. We need our home ground, we need our mothers and fathers and our religion, this is what makes us human beings. But I am interested in understanding and dealing with how we as human beings function for real, how then can we translate that into power. Its power that we're really talking about. The only reason that we're talking about being a black person is not because you wake up in the morning, look in the mirror and say "oh God I'm a black person, it's another hard day...". No, we don't do that, nobody does that.

What we're talking about is power: how do we make the changes and the kind of world that we want to be in for the sake of ourselves and our children. That does mean coming together, but also coming together in a fluid sense and respecting my



sister who has an Afro-Caribbean background, my brother who has a Ghanaian background, that we do have the same colour, we may have some of the same goals, we may not. In some way we can come together to effect the kinds of changes that we need to make without being in a box called multiculturalism.