Wishful thinking and unresolved tensions

David Goodhart
Policy Exchange, London, UK

My book, *The British Dream*, included a section on the philosophy of multiculturalism, which concluded with these thoughts (Goodhart, 2013: 208–209):

> Much of the work of multiculturalist writers is highly abstract, with little attempt to test the ideas against the real world. And multiculturalism in the universities has had no significant internal opposition to bring it back down to earth. Yet, as one of the intellectual manifestations of post-war immigration, it has brought some insight, and passion, into old debates on liberalism, pluralism, universalism, relativism, religious freedom and identities. And a few good ideas have emerged over recent years. One example is Bhikhu Parekh's idea of 'operative public values' – how values are often hidden or implicit in national institutions, which then tends to favour insiders who enjoy a kind of implicit knowledge. These values should be made more explicit; indeed, if we are trying to reimagine national citizenship for a more plural but still coherent society, many things must be made more explicit.
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> But the great advances of recent decades in minority rights and antidiscrimination legislation owe little to academic multiculturalism (despite the claims it sometimes makes) and much to conventional, colour-blind liberalism. Moreover, academic multiculturalism's uncritical championing of minority traditions, its neglect of majorities, and suspicion of integration, its continuing promotion of minority autonomy even after Britain has become a much more accommodating country, has left it politically marginalised.
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> The broader story of multiculturalism as a 'live and let live' approach to the management of minority – majority relationships can, however, count some successes.

Corresponding author:
David Goodhart, Policy Exchange, 8–10 Great George St, Westminster, London SW1P 3AE, UK.
Email: david.goodhart@policyexchange.org.uk

There is, indeed, some truth in Tariq Modood's 'ethnicity paradox'. By allowing the post-war minorities to find their own way to an understanding of the country and their own hybrid versions of what it is to be British, it has probably ended up binding them into the country more thoroughly than if they had been more vigorously pushed.

This has worked especially well for those minorities, such as Hindus and Sikhs from India, East African Asians and some black Africans, which have the right level of 'cultural protection' – a benign combination of supportive family networks, a powerful work ethic, a pro-education tradition and a cultural confidence that has also helped them to integrate successfully. But 'laissez-faire' has worked much less well for those groups such as Kashmiri Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Somalis who were often poor and even illiterate when they arrived and brought with them a conservative, rural version of Islam and family networks that often locked them away from mainstream society.

Successful immigrant groups do not need an integration strategy, they already have one in their culture and their socio-economic starting points. Britain's brand of multiculturalism has allowed the well-equipped to succeed and other groups to flounder and self-segregate. That is one reason why it is possible to hold apparently contradictory views about the multiculturalism record.

I would stand by that rather sweeping overview today but hope to elaborate some of those thoughts in relation to the discussion of the Bristol School of Multiculturalism (BSM) that has been, correctly, identified by Geoffrey Levey (2019).

Reading Levey's piece, and the response from Varun Uberoi and Tariq Modood (2019), I am reminded of the avuncular kindness shown to me by Bhikhu Parekh in particular when I stumbled by accident into this field in the early 2000s. Despite my criticisms of the multiculturalist worldview, of which he was a world-renowned exponent, he was always unfailingly polite and patient in dealing with this newcomer journalist.

For that reason, I often attributed the 'all things to all men' intellectual fuzziness, that seems characteristic of the BSM, to a desire not to cause offence in a field of inquiry in which emotions can often run high.

An ethos and personal style of calmness and equanimity is, indeed, part of the honourable BSM tradition that has been bequeathed by Bhikhu, but the fuzziness is more deeply embedded in the ideas themselves.

So what are the distinguishing features of the BSM according to Levey? First, it is a muscular, assertive, identitarian form of multiculturalism that has grown 'bottom up' in response to political events, such as the Rusdhie affair, and supports a stronger group ethos than traditional liberal multiculturalism. Second it takes national identity and the importance of national belonging to ethnic minorities more seriously than liberal multiculturalism.

Uberoi and Modood do not really demur from this account though they take issue with some of Levey's minor criticisms and seem to prefer to locate the roots of their thinking in the philosophy of Michael Oakeshott than in the fact that all three main BSM thinker – Parekh, Modood and Uberoi – come from visible minority backgrounds, as Levey points out, and thus feel the issues more personally than many of the white multicultural theorists like Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor.

I am more critical than Levey and think that the BSM do not resolve the obvious tension between their stress on group rights and the centrality of individual rights in western liberalism. And nor do they resolve the equally obvious tension between a more assertive minority identity, along with hostility to alleged majority privilege, and yet the desire for a strong sense of inclusive national belonging too.

There is a strong stand of wishful thinking in their analysis and a reluctance to accept tradeoffs, moreover they have failed to develop a plausible idea of the ethnic majority and how it might respond to the rather large demands for change placed upon it. So far as I am aware the BSM do not draw on the empirical work of social psychologists in their thinking about groups, nor have they grappled with the political challenges presented by Louise Casey's (2016) recent report on integration, nor Eric Kaufmann's (2018) on declining majorities (see also the Ethnicities review symposium on *Whiteshift*: https://journals.sagepub.com/etna/symposium).

First, the liberalism question. How universally applicable are liberal ideas in modern Britain and how far should minorities be able to challenge them on issues like the role of women and free speech? The BSMers are not cultural relativists but are critical of aspects of western liberalism both on the standard grounds that it does not live up to its own principles but also on the more radical grounds that its principles – as spelt out in the UN Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) for example – are too western-centric and secular.

Parekh finds the UNDHR too supportive of free expression and unlimited property rights, and too hostile to arranged marriages. Modood is also critical of untrammeled free speech, and he and Uberoi appear to be supportive of polygamy in certain circumstances (Uberoi and Modood, 2019).

Legitimation for rejecting some current liberal norms appears to come from a belief in group rights. The traditional defence of difference or exotic practices is the Millian principle that they should only be stopped if they cause harm to others. This can be hard to measure. If a neighbourhood suddenly fills up with an immigrant group speaking a foreign language and bringing their own shops and cultural centres, the original residents may feel psychological harm.

But, in any case, a multiculturalist supporter of group rights could justify causing harm to someone – say forcing them to accept an arranged marriage against their will – by arguing on utilitarian grounds that the continued existence of the group culture is a source of happiness to many and depends on the persistence of such practices.

BSM reasoning on group rights appears somewhat arbitrary – who will decide which illiberal practices are acceptable, and justified by group rights, and which are not? It is also potentially authoritarian, a legitimation of the common sense of self-appointed traditional community leaders trying to prevent young people being lost to the corrupting liberalism of the host society. As Maajid Nawaz (2016) puts it: 'Multiculturalism comes to mean diversity between, rather than within, groups'.

What about the second big cluster of questions relating to national culture, majority privilege and national identity?

BSMers want a positive politics of recognition to compensate for what Modood calls the demeaned identity minorities have had to suffer; minority rights for individuals is not sufficient. Moreover, they do not accept that the nation state can provide such recognition if it only reflects the interests of the dominant group. As Varun Uberoi has written:

> If the state only establishes this culture's religion in its political institutions, teaches only this culture's history, uses only this culture's language . . . it is treating minorities inequitably because they too are citizens but their cultures receive no such support. (Uberoi, 2008: 406)

Instead, BSMers want equality in connection with the symbolic dimensions of public culture, which means, for example, that they want the state to provide official recognition to all significant religions in the public sphere, not just the Church of England.

Many people, probably most, would be perfectly happy to see religious leaders from other faiths sitting in the House of Lords. And beyond that? A bias towards the historic majority is probably inevitable. You cannot cut up the state like a cake. Lots of things about it must be indivisible, like the rule of law or the national language. Or should significant minorities have their own separate legal/political/linguistic space and even Parliament, like Scotland within the United Kingdom?

The BSM in its rejection of liberal minority rights as inadequate is guilty of underestimating liberalism; majority domination is something that liberalism has wrestled with for a long time. Over several hundred years the principle of Cuius regio, eius religio – meaning the religion of the ruler was the religion of the ruled – gradually ceded to the liberal idea of minority religious rights. Catholics, in Britain for example, first became free to practise their religion at the end of the 17th century and then by the middle of the 19th century lost all significant social and political handicaps (though they never took the next, multiculturalist, step of demanding equal recognition of Catholicism with Protestantism!).

There are all sorts of anti-majoritarian checks and balances in a modern liberal state, not to mention the private space that minorities enjoy to practise their different religions and cultures. And it is simply wrong, or at least out of date, to claim, as Varun Uberoi and Tariq Modood do, that 'cultural majorities often think that only they comprise the nation' (2013: 24). Moreover, majorities themselves consist of many different minorities, often with conflicting interests or values.

BSMers are also in danger of getting on the wrong side of democracy and of being hostile to a sense of democratic 'ownership'. The British state does not, of course, belong only to the ethnic majority. But the BSMers feel it is reserved too much for the majority and so want to dilute or undermine that sense of ownership. Consider this from Varun Uberoi, Tariq Modood and others in an essay on national identity: '. . . the English majority . . . are privileged because they are dominant and it is difficult to justify why this dominance should continue' (Uberoi et al., 2011: 207).

This is the wrong way round. Instead of trying to deny the majority its sense of ownership, the point is to include the minority in that feeling of ownership. The BSMers over-sensitivity to the 'second class citizen' status of minorities leads them to make unrealistic and destructive demands on the political status quo – a sort of multicultural over-reach.

This is another way of talking about multiculturalism's 'two-way street' problem, the belief that too much of the onus of integration falls on the immigrant and too little on the host society. 'Integrationists', Bhikhu Parekh writes, 'worry if immigrants retain a strong sense of commitment to their country of origin, reproduce its political controversies in their new environment, direct their philanthropic activities there' (Parekh, 2005). This is true. But so apparently does Parekh, who writes: 'a political community requires a common sense of belonging . . . a shared collective identity, a degree of mutual commitment and attachment, to underpin and nourish the practice of equal and active citizenship' (Parekh, 2005).

The act of immigration is, normally, freely chosen. The immigrant has chosen to come to an already existing country with its own laws, history, language and so on. Those need to be respected and understood. The host society must offer equal rights to the newcomer, including the right to be different in a way that does not foster separation. Majorities do then adapt to accommodate minorities but it is a long-term and largely unconscious process, whereas the immigrant's adaptation is shorter-term and more conscious. That is as it should be. But the stress placed on the 'two-way street' implies that the immigrant is doing the host society a favour by coming to the country and that its citizens should be grateful; a somewhat eccentric view of immigration. A far better metaphor was coined by Louise Casey (2016) when she talked about integration as like a motorway slip road, with minorities flowing from the slip road onto the motorway and members of the majority having to adjust their speed somewhat to allow them in.

The host society majority are, in any case, largely absent from the multiculturalism story. It is one of the blind spots of most of the BSMers, indeed multiculturalists in general, though Bhikhu Parekh and Tariq Modood (2014) have both publicly acknowledged the failure. Multiculturalism encourages, and wants funded from the public purse, the expression of minority ethnic identification, but has often been silent about, or hostile to, the expression of majority ethnic identification.

But white Europeans do not belong to a different species, like minorities they have patterns of life and traditions that many of them wish to preserve. If multiculturalism only addresses the concerns and promotes the identity of minorities – what Eric

Kaufmann (2019) calls 'asymmetrical multiculturalism' – it will not help Britain to adapt successfully to the big demographic changes taking place. A successful integration strategy must engage the attention, consent and sympathy of the majority, particularly in the areas of high immigration, if the formal equalities offered to minorities by politics and law are to become the felt equality and acceptance of everyday life.

Majorities are the absent centre in most multicultural, and indeed liberal democratic, thinking. Political progress and much political theorising for the last two centuries has been focused on limiting and spreading power and thus, in part, on preventing majorities from abusing their dominance.

Two reasons are usually given in defence of this majority – minority asymmetry. First, majorities do not need special rights or protections in the way that minorities do because their culture and way of life is already pervasive, as Uberoi argues: the language that is spoken everywhere, the national ceremonies and rituals, the culture and history that is transmitted through the school system, and so on.

Second, while ethnic majorities may exist in some abstract sense of a shared ancestry there is no substantive majority culture or way of life, there is too much value and life-style diversity, too many different sociological tribes, in a country like modern Britain.

There is, however, a certain tension between the argument that majorities don't really exist and that their culture is so pervasive that it needs no protection in the way that minorities are protected.

In any case I think the traditional defence of asymmetrical multiculturalism has been weakened by the current demographic facts: people of white European ancestry are already a minority in most major cities of North America and by 2050 the US, Canada and New Zealand will all be majority – minority with Western Europe and Australia following later in the century. In an increasing number of cities, towns and neighbourhoods in Britain today, the majority way of life and its institutions – the shops, pubs, churches – is no longer dominant.

The BSM represents an interesting historical compression of the two phases of minority inclusion. The first from the mid-19th century to the 1970s requested entry to the national club with equal rights and status. The second requested the right to be different as well as equal.

This is a legitimate claim but inevitably sets up a tension with the need for the common norms and high levels of trust that an inclusive national identity, encompassing majority and minorities, requires.

Too much difference especially of an illiberal, or at least non-liberal, kind, as advocated by the BSMers, will strain those common norms and lead to the parallel lives that we can witness in too many parts of Britain today.

On the one hand, BSMers, along with communitarian integrationists, agree that for a strong sense of national belonging it is not enough for people to merely obey the law and pay their taxes. On the other hand, they advocate fostering greater cultural difference than even other multiculturalists. Neatly resolving this contradiction in journal articles is not really sufficient (Modood, 2018; Uberoi, 2018).

As Levey points out, the effect of more separatist forms of minority life – and the constant stress on difference and diversity in the public culture – has quietly alienated many millions of citizens of all backgrounds and led to a desire to reduce immigration and possibly even contributed to the vote to leave the EU.

A successful multi – ethnic society is one in which minorities are seen as strengthening the national team (quite literally in the case of football) and blending into the national story, while retaining many of the beliefs and traditions that they came with.

What exactly the right balance is between different traditions and common norms is not easily susceptible to general rules, as Bhikhu Parekh has pointed out, but rather needs to be established and negotiated case by case, minority tradition by minority tradition. It is this concrete everyday negotiation that the BSM should be studying and reporting on.

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