

Multiculturalism: An expression of western inability to create a “Leitkultur” or a valid concept to protect cultural minorities?

Introduction

In one session of the seminar “Comparing Cultures“ in the (summer-semester 2013 at Witten/Herdecke University) we were discussing the issue of multiculturalism. We were asking ourselves whether the idea of multiculturalism includes a “Leitkultur”¹? Or Is it possible to create an order for a multicultural society based on the fact that all humans have in common that we are humans?

In order to give possible answers to our questions and to get a deeper understanding of the ideas behind multiculturalism I will outline two different concepts and opinions on multiculturalism: One rather practical by the Syrian immigrant and professor for International Relations at Göttingen University, Bassam Tibi, who is contributing to the German debate on multiculturalism and who argues in favour of an liberal European “Leitkultur” to face problems caused by immigration today. The other concept of multiculturalism is “the Politics of Recognition” by the Canadian-francophone philosopher and political scientist Charles Taylor (1992). He argues that it is necessary to protect cultural minorities through group-differentiated rights in order to ensure an authentic identity for members of cultural minorities and the survivance of the minority.

In the following paper I am going first to give a definition of multiculturalism, than to outline Tibi and Taylor’s argumentations and finally to compare both and to try to answer to the questions in the discussion of our comparing cultures class.

What is multiculturalism?

Basically “**multiculturalism**”² is the antonym of “**monoculturalism**”³ – a plurality of cultures in contrary to cultural singularity. The term “multiculturalism” was developed in 1924 by the Jewish-German philosopher and immigrant to the USA called Horace Meyer Kallan. He was observing a growing social awareness for the beauty of cultural plurality after a long period of cultural assimilation to the White-Anglosaxon culture (Demorgon/Kordes 2006: 28f.). Multiculturalism is contrasted to the image of a cultural melting pot where different cultures flow into one (Nohlen/Grotz 2008: 343). Historically multiculturalism means valuing cultural plurality in society.

¹ A German term demeaning “dominant culture”, “guiding culture” or “mainstream culture” URL: <http://www.linguee.de/deutsch-englisch/uebersetzung/leitkultur.html> (11th of august 2013)

² From Latin: multus = plenty, numerous. URL: <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/multi-> (13th of August 13)

³ From ancient Greek: monos = alone; only. URL: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mono> (13th of August 13)

Today the term multiculturalism is used in two different ways. On the one hand it is subject to a theoretical debate in political philosophy. On the other hand it is part of a policy promoting cultural diversity and is used as an umbrella term for the claims of different disadvantaged groups like ethnical and religious minorities, gays and lesbians, disabled and indigenous people⁴. In Europe the term multiculturalism is part of a rather negative public assessment⁵ and is often used synonymous with the non-existence of common values in society.

In the theory of political philosophy it is discussed in detail how a society should deal with cultural diversity. It mainly focuses on the question how to solve injustice towards immigrants, minority nations and indigenous people. A liberal approach towards Multiculturalism highlights the necessity to create a common political culture based on human rights. Group-rights are only considered to be good as long as it is good for the individuals. A rather radical approach towards multiculturalism points out the importance of preservation and public recognition of cultures. It is in favour for political self-determination (Nohlen/Grotz 2008: 343), like Taylor who is in favour for the political self-determination of Quebec to ensure the survival of the Francophone culture.

The necessity of a “Leitkultur” – Bassam Tibi

Bassam Tibi is an exponent of the liberal approach towards multiculturalism but quiet critical about the term. He argues that in order to face “mass migration” to Germany (Tibi 2002: 2nd layer) a cultural change towards an European “Leitkultur” based on rationality, individual human rights, secularity and tolerance is necessary (ibidem: 3rd layer). These liberal values and fruits of enlightenment should form a new European and German identity. These thoughts are a reaction to Tibi’s observation of a missing German identity which could become an identity for immigrants as well. A new identity is the pre-condition for immigration and cultural plurality in Germany. In contrast to exclusive ethnical identities this kind of “liberal-value-identity” is universal and open to everybody who agrees and acts according to these values (ibidem: 1st layer). From Tibi’s point of view people immigrating to Germany have to resume this “civilised” identity. Tibi refuses the idea of a “Leitkultur” as a product of one homogenous population which dominates others. The term “Leitkultur” should simply expresses the fact that common values connect people from different cultural backgrounds living in one society and should guarantee peace in a society. Parallel societies are claimed to

⁴ Song, Sarah, "Multiculturalism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/multiculturalism/>. (14th of August 13)

⁵ Specially the German short version of multiculturalism, „MULTI-KULTI“, has a negative connotation in public.

be a danger for a peaceful pluralistic society because they do not accept these common values. Tibi gives the example of a Muslim parallel society living the values of the shariah and not accepting the Basic Law (ibidem).

Tibi distinguishes between “multiculturalism” and “cultural plurality” and supports the latter. Multiculturalism to him means no common values in a society at all. Different groups within a society have different values and no common identity. Due to a lack of these serious conflicts between the different groups will arrive. Tibi claims that multiculturalism is an outcome of moral-relativism: After centuries of western expansion and colonialism based on the universality and predominance of liberal ideas these values aren’t considered anymore to be what they were claimed to be: universal (Tibi 1999: 3f.). Instead all cultural values – including the values of liberalism – are relative and not absolute. This is the reason why Tibi thinks that the Western World of today lost its values and practises multiculturalism.

In a society with cultural plurality in the contrary the different groups are connected by common values (Tibi 1998: 29f). Tibi gives as an example for cultural plurality the United States of America where different ethnical groups live together and share the ideas of the American constitution and the identity of being “American” (Tibi 1999: 4.).

Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition – Charles Taylor

In his essay “The Politics of Recognition” Taylor is arguing in favour for the recognition of every culture. He is observing that societies are becoming multicultural: “Indisputably, though, more and more societies today are turning out to be multicultural, in the sense of including more than one cultural community that wants to survive.” (Taylor 1994: 61). People living in these societies and not being part of the dominant culture live in Diaspora – their cultural identity is outside of the dominant culture (Taylor 2009: 49).

Taylor highlights multiple aspects of multiculturalism: He raises the question, A) what kind of needs humans have in today’s society and B) how to face them with different political approaches. C) He questions the common understanding of liberalism and D) gives a moral answer to the question, how to encounter a different culture. In the following I will try to summarise Taylors thoughts and ideas.

A) For Taylor recognition is a basic need for all human beings (ibidem:14) – without recognition it is not possible to build up an authentic identity and people being marginalised. People with an authentic identity know that they have an unique way of being and they live according to this being and remain true to him or herself (ibidem: 18). The idea that everyone

has his own authentic and individual identity came up in the 18th century⁶ and differed from the common identification through social position which already implied a sort of recognition. A shift towards an individual-authentic identity means a higher need for recognition and a vulnerability in the case of non-recognition. Politics has to give all people the same recognition (ibidem: 22f.).

B) There are two different kind of politics trying to face this need for recognition. The politics of equal dignity is an outcome of humanism: all human beings have the same universal potential. They all have the same value, the same right to live according to this potential and an inviolable dignity – independently from how far their human potential is “developed”. A politics of equal dignity aims to treat all human beings in an equal way.

The politics of difference in the contrary says that everybody is unique. Everyone and every group has a individual identity. If people live according to there potential they will become unique. A Politics of Recognition seeks to treat everyone according to his or her individuality – and focuses specially on the needs of specific groups.⁷ On the one hand the politics of equal dignity accuses the politics of difference to discriminate by focusing on individual needs and on the other hand the politics of difference accuses the politics of equal dignity to negate the individuality of people (ibidem: 29).

C) Taylor tries to solve this dilemma between both kind of politics by trying to establish a new understanding of liberalism. The common liberal understanding⁸ is in favour for a society where every individual has to define him- or herself what his or her indiviudal understanding of a good life is like. The state is neutral if it comes to the question of a good life and rejects the idea of collective goals (ibidem: 43). Taylor emphasises that liberalism itself is an expression of a specific culture and not neutral and compatible with all other cultures (ibidem: 48f). The common liberal understanding of the separation between politics and religion, secularism, is an outcome of Western-Christian culture and not universal. It is for example not a current idea in the main Islamic tradition. Taylors new understanding of liberalism is open for collective goals specially when it comes to obtain a culture. In the same time this liberalism is tolerant towards everyone who does not share this collective goal. To give an example Taylor refers to his home region Quebec (Canada) where the continuity of the Francophone culture is considered to be a collective good (ibidem: 44) The politics of survivance tries to obtain the culture by different regulations. Francophones and immigrants

⁶ Published e.g. by the German poet and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.

⁷ The connection between both politics is the philosophical “movement” from something general - the fact that all human beings share that they do have a potential and an identity - to something specific – the fact that every human being is unique in his or her identity as an outcome of his or her potential.

⁸ He refers to Ronald Dworkin.

are for example forced to send their children to French-speaking schools and advertisement is only allowed in French (ibidem: 45). From Taylor's point of view the common understanding of liberalism is not able to ensure the continuity of cultural groups. A decomposition of a specific culture is a danger for a good and authentic life of its members (ibidem: 47f). With his new definition of liberalism Taylor is advocating his Politics of Recognition and the status of Quebec as a "distinct society" with special rights compared to the rest of Canada and claims that cultural self-preservation has to be considered as a legitimate aim also in juristical context.

D) How to deal the fact that we live in a multicultural society and that we are necessarily in contact with people from different cultural backgrounds? Taylor proposes to recognize the value of every culture (ibidem: 51) and to treat every culture with the same amount of respect (ibidem: 53). That doesn't necessarily means that all cultures have the same value. An objective judgement about the value of a culture is not possible. But to claim that it is not possible that all cultures have the same value should be considered to be arrogant. A romantic attitude highlighting the beauty of distant cultures - without knowing them in detail - has to be considered as a subjective judgement. Instead Taylor is pointing out that while counteracting with a different culture one should have the attitude that this culture can have the same value as the own culture (ibidem: 59). Everybody has to experience on his or her own whether this is the case or not.

Comparison Tibi vs. Taylor and Conclusion

If we want to compare Tibi's and Taylor's approach towards multiculturalism we first have to keep in mind that Tibi focuses mainly on the debate about immigration in Germany while Taylor has the multinational and multilingual Canada and specially the challenges of Quebec in mind. Both authors have in common that they are personally related to the topic of multiculturalism: Tibi as an Syrian immigrant in Germany and Taylor as a Québécois. They argue both in favour for cultural plurality and against the idea of a cultural melting pot, but they differ in their attitude towards the term "multiculturalism". For Taylor multiculturalism is simply a fact (see page 3), while Tibi is dissociating himself from the term. The term would be already an expression of the "negative development" in western societies caused by a loss of values. He disesteems that the term itself isn't more than an image for a society in which more than two cultures live. From my point of view Tibi is making this failure due to the public debate in Germany about immigration and to distance himself from people arguing in

favour for multiculturalism. Although Tibi is naming it “cultural plurality” and Taylor sticks to the term “multiculturalism” they are talking about the same phenomenon.

But they have different approaches towards multiculturalism. Tibi is representing a liberal approach, underlining the necessity to create a common political culture based on universal liberal values and arguing against moral-relativism. Taylor on the contrary is representative of a radical approach highlighting the need for preservation and public recognition of cultures and being in favour for the self-determination of Quebec. He emphasises that liberalism is not neutral or universal but an expression of a certain, Western-Christian, culture. None of the authors is in favour for a dominant culture and Taylor points out that a dominant culture will lead to marginalisation. For Tibi a culture based on liberal values won't be dominant or lead to marginalisation, because liberalism guarantees the same amount of freedom for everyone. Instead he cautions the reader about parallel societies which aren't accepting common values and perils the peace in society as a hole. Taylor on the contrary says that cultural groups need space in society where they can live according to their values and rules, but not without restrictions from the society as a hole. “The demand there was that we let cultures defend themselves, within reasonable bounds.” (Taylor 1994: 64) Unfortunately he is not very precise what he means by “reasonable bounds”. The question of the necessity of a “Leitkultur” is answered differently. While Tibi is in favour for a European “Leitkultur”, Taylor argues for a liberal constitution, but shows that if a specific cultural group wants to ensure their cultural survival, their needs have to be taken seriously also by law.

From my point of view it is obvious that every society needs a common agreement how to live together – otherwise people can't trust each other. In this point I would like to follow Tibi's argumentation. But I don't see a reason to stick to the term “Leitkultur”, if one simply wants to express that a society needs common values. Where shall these values come from? Although moral-relativism seems not to be a useful concept to answer this question I consider it to be an important knowledge. If people in a multicultural society are aware of the relativism of the values of their cultures, it opens up the possibility to engage in a dialogue about values and to reflect on their own culture. Obviously there need to be an agreement how to interact, how to engage in a dialogue. It can't be denied that liberal values are a good starting point for a dialogue in multicultural societies. But why should these values be the only ones and why should they not vary in time? Following Taylor I would like to argue that a constructive dialogue about values is only possible, if all people engaged feel recognised in their culture and have had the possibility to build up an identity.

Is it possible to create an order for a multicultural society based on the fact that all humans have in common that they are humans? This idea is the basic idea of modern-western societies: human rights are part of their constitutions. “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”⁹ Taylor is referring to this idea when he writes about the politics of equal dignity (page 4) and Tibi uses this idea by highlighting liberal values (page 2). But is this egalitarian concept doing justice to the fact that we live in a society where people have different ethnic and religious backgrounds? A multicultural society resides in a dilemma between equality and difference. To me multiculturalism seems to be an attempt to include both in one.

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⁹ Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.