

After Liberal Multiculturalism: Theory, Policy, and Activism

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The Oxford English Dictionary provides two definitions of multiculturalism: first, as “the characteristics of a multicultural society,” and, secondly, as “the policy or process whereby the distinctive identities of the cultural groups within such a society are maintained or supported.” Reflecting and undergirding the two, respectively, there is a third meaning of multiculturalism, in the realm of political theory: here the word refers to a heterogeneous line of thinking that either rejects or amends liberalism to a context of cultural pluralism.¹ Liberalism, of course, though besieged from the left and right,² continues to be the dominant ideology of Western societies, which stipulates that the individual and their claims for freedom and equality (in this lexical order) are the fulcrum of social life and political organization. In contrast, multiculturalism moves “groups” into the liberal picture of a society of individuals. So, there *must* be a tension between the two. The multiculturalist claim is that ascriptive minorities (on grounds of ethnicity, race, religion, sex, etc.) face certain difficulties and disadvantages that nation-state majorities do not know, and which require to amend or even go beyond the individualistic and universalistic precepts of liberalism.

This article maps recent trends of multiculturalism in political theory, public policy, and in the world of activism. For a while, it seemed that there was a consensus surrounding “liberal multiculturalism.”³ This is a provocative formula, because it combines two opposites, based on the claim that liberalism properly understood *requires* the accommodation of cultural difference.⁴ Never-

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theless, Will Kymlicka, in the optimistic 1990s, pronounced that “multiculturalists have won the day” in their case for a difference-conscious conception of citizenship in the liberal state.⁵ What Kymlicka did not factor in was that after the fall of communism, liberalism no longer needed to compete with a systemic alternative. As a result, liberalism became “complacent,”⁶ shedding its social and ameliorative coating and turning harshly “neoliberal.”⁷ Commensurate with the latter, “interculturalism” and “diversity” policy alternatives to multiculturalism emerged, which repudiated multiculturalism’s trademark focus on justice for minorities in favor of neoliberal efficiency concerns. Parallel to this, in the world of activism, race-focused identity politics took center-stage, explicitly illiberal and less integrationist than the “citizenizing” impetus of liberal multiculturalism.⁸

Hence, liberal multiculturalism is pincered by neoliberal and illiberal precepts and forces, mirroring the crisis of liberalism in Western societies at large.

THEORY: RETURN OF LIBERAL NEUTRALITY AND TOLERATION

But let us begin with recent trends in political theory, the home ground of “liberal multiculturalism.” In its major statement, Kymlicka defined multiculturalism as a necessary stage in the evolution of liberal citizenship.⁹ Citizenship, as understood by T.H. Marshall, consisted of civic, political, and social rights, evolving sequentially over time, and provided equally to all members of a political community or “nation.”¹⁰ Kymlicka added cultural rights to the Marshallian triptych, which—unlike the latter—have a difference-affirming rather than equalizing thrust. Cultural rights, in his view, are a requirement for bringing liberalism’s dual promise of freedom and equality to all members of a state society.

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and aspire for self-governance, but also—though in a weaker form—the cultures of immigrants.¹¹ For Kymlicka, the main problem is that even the liberal state, which came into existence by separating itself from religion, can never completely separate itself from the national culture of its majority, try as it might; it is inevitably *nation-state*. And it *should* be, because the nation, which was

With respect to *equality*, the state does not treat all its members equally if it disregards, in its official language, holidays, and symbols, the cultures of its ethnic minorities, primarily those who are long-settled or indigenous

presupposed or at best fleetingly addressed by Marshall but rendered explicit and foregrounded by Kymlicka, is the source of collective identity and solidarity. Above all, for Kymlicka the nation is bearer of a “societal culture” that allows individuals to make meaningful choices—this is the liberal *freedom* part in his multiculturalism theory.¹²

Kymlicka’s multiculturalism is a kind of pluralized nationalism within one state, in which minorities are compensated by way of cultural rights for a majority nationalism that is both inevitable and necessary. These rights are graded according to the type of minority: they are strong for national and indigenous minorities (including language and self-government rights), but weak for immigrants (who are merely offered fair terms of integration). In this conception, multiculturalism and nationalism are complementary, *if* they are united by a common liberal commitment to freedom and equality. It is obvious that Kymlicka’s Canadian background motivates this marriage of multiculturalism and nationalism; Canada being the one country in the world that is most strongly self-defined by a multiculturalism that even enjoys constitutional status, in the Charter for Rights and Freedoms. While it feeds from less liberal philosophical sources, the “multicultural nationalism” of Tariq Modood and Bhikhu Parekh, in this case inspired by the example of Britain, has the same thrust, not to abdicate but to complement or even complete the nation-state and its nationalism.¹³

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An alternative liberal grounding of minority rights, by Alan Patten, eschews Kymlicka’s endorsement of nationalism.¹⁴ Unlike Kymlicka, Patten deems the liberal principle of neutrality to be realizable, and derives from it the need for “equal recognition.” Rather than compensating minorities for its (presumably inevitable) alliance with majority culture, which is Kymlicka’s implicitly nationalist demarche, the state according to Patten is required to give up on nationalism and to become truly neutral. “Liberal values exclude the notion of a *Favoritvolk*, a privileged religious or cultural group that is given special concern or respect by the state,” argues Patten.¹⁵ He thus moves from Kymlicka’s strategy of “equal opportunity for nation-building” to a strategy of “limiting nation-building by circumscribing the range of contexts in which it is acceptable for government... to favour the majority’s culture.”¹⁶ This yields a pristinely liberal yet unworldly state, a “generic liberal-democratic state” as Kymlicka pejoratively terms it.¹⁷

But, in practice, the treatment of minority groups in Patten’s theory looks much like Kymlicka’s more particularistic (nation-)state model: it is generous toward national and indigenous minorities, but much less generous toward immigrants. This is because, like Kymlicka, Patten is a liberal “luck egalitarian,” for whom people are fully responsible for their choices, and only to be compensated

for disadvantages that stem from their unchosen characteristics. Accordingly, Patten is tough on immigrants, who voluntarily left their homeland and, in doing so, have lost the right to their culture: “(M)embers of the receiving society do have a legitimate interest in requiring that immigrants waive certain cultural rights as a condition of entry into the state on a permanent basis.”¹⁸

Patten’s important move is to recover “neutrality” as historically first approach, and obviously still potent, to accommodate diversity. This runs counter to the standard charge by orthodox multiculturalists, including Kymlicka, that the state cannot be neutral, at a minimum because liberalism itself is not value-free. To this charge Patten plausibly retorts that neutrality and liberalism are not mutually exclusive, precisely because liberalism is not value-free. “Liberal neutrality” is a second-order, “downstream” value, which follows from a commitment to the first-order liberal value of autonomy and self-determination: “It is *because* one accepts certain nonneutral values that one thinks that, in some limited domain, the state ought to adopt a stance of neutrality.”¹⁹

While this part of Patten’s liberal multiculturalism theory looks plausible, one may question the wisdom of tying liberal neutrality to the quintessentially multicultural concept of “recognition,” on which Patten continues to insist. That multiculturalism is a “politics of recognition” has been standard since Charles Taylor’s *Programmschrift*, according to which multiculturalism commands “equal respect to actually evolved culture.”²⁰ In a furious and persistently acute rebuttal, Brian Barry objected to this, arguing that cultures have “propositional content” because they distinguish between true and false, right and wrong. Accordingly, it is logically impossible to “simultaneously affirm everybody’s culture.”²¹

In addition, there is a practical problem with recognition. Under conditions of “super-diversity,”²² with numerous ethnic, national, racial, and lifestyle groups co-existing in almost anyone place, how should it be logistically possible to practice “recognition” with all of them? Given an inevitable degree of selectivity, there will never be agreement regarding which group is “in” and which is “out,” and the process is likely to become mired in a spiralling and uncontrollable “me too” dynamics.²³

The logical conclusion is to go all the way down the liberal road, and to argue that liberal neutrality obliterates the need for recognition. This means returning to the older idea of toleration, which multiculturalists of all stripes have denounced as incapable of accommodating diversity.²⁴ Peter Balint has drawn this conclusion, in one of the most compelling yet little noticed contributions to the liberal literature on multiculturalism in recent years.²⁵ Before Balint, multiculturalists had rejected toleration for its premise of repudiating

or even despising who or what is being tolerated, while abstaining from acting on this aversion—“forbearance.” For its critics, denigration from a position of power, at best paternalism, is thus the truth of toleration. As the Islamic intellectual Tariq Ramadan put it, “toleration is intellectual charity on the part of the powerful.”²⁶ Or in the words of critical philosopher Wendy Brown: “(A)ll objects of tolerance are marked as deviant, marginal, or undesirable by virtue of being tolerated.”²⁷ Tolerance is “act of power”, not “respect”, she concludes.²⁸

However, “forbearance tolerance,” as Balint calls this classic version of toleration,²⁹ is a specific form of toleration, and there are others. In fact, the most general form of toleration is not to despise but to be “indifferent” to what is being tolerated. Indifference, incidentally, is the liberal state’s way of being tolerant.³⁰ Toleration as indifference goes perfectly together with liberal neutrality. This leads Balint to the conclusion that “liberal theory does not require radical modification in order to accommodate diversity.”³¹

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We see that on grounds of the same principle of liberal neutrality, Patten and Balint reach diametrically opposed conclusions about how to treat minorities: “hands-off” (Balint) versus “hands-on” (Patten).³² However, it seems odd to load the principle of neutrality with the multicultural language of respect and recognition, which originally had been meant to be the exact negation of neutrality. One thereby catches all the problems of recognition, such as the reification of identity and the requirement to issue positive judgments on demand, thus adding insult to the injury of oppressed “minorities within minorities,” such as women of racial minorities.³³

Balint’s case for “traditional toleration and neutrality”³⁴ rests on an important yet rarely made distinction, at least on the part of political philosophers: between people and states. Their acts of tolerance must differ as they encounter the fact of diversity. Because the liberal state is culturally thin and in principle incapable of advocating a particular way of life,³⁵ it can impossibly exercise “forbearance tolerance” (that Wendy Brown’s *Regulating Aversion* wrongly attributes to the state). Instead, the state can only practice a toleration that is premised on indifference. If it were otherwise, people would be disabled to pursue *their* favored way of life. Reversely, toleration by people cannot but be of the “forbearance” type, which presupposes a rejection of the ways of life that are not theirs.

But this rules out the possibility to “respect difference”, not only on the part of states, but of people also. Because, as Balint asks, “how is the animal activist...to

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respect the fox hunter’s way of life?”³⁶ All that people can be reasonably asked to respect is the “sameness” of others, in terms of their equal human dignity—what Charles Taylor called the

“politics of universalism”, which he precisely contrasted with the multicultural “politics of difference.”³⁷

If one endorses the classic liberal principles of neutrality and toleration, one arrives at the position that liberal law itself, which revolves around the protection of individual rights, is sufficiently capacious to accommodate much of the diversity that multiculturalists deem possible only in the form of group-specific rights and policies.³⁸

Importantly, the neutrality-toleration tandem, and repudiation of “respect” and “recognition,” is operative not only in law and institutions, but in public attitudes also. In a widely noted German survey of public perceptions on various dimensions of inequality, including the “us” vs. “them” mode that is central to multiculturalism and identity politics, Steffen Mau and co-authors found that the “liberalization” of attitudes has become a “mass phenomenon, in cities and the countryside, among the upper and the lower ranks, and across the generations.”³⁹ However, the “advancing liberalization” of attitudes toward “diversity and tolerance”⁴⁰ abruptly stops if “recognition (*Anerkennung*) goes beyond mere acceptance (in the “each in her own way” mode),”⁴¹ and if a “forced identity and recognition politics” requires people to “change their behaviour.”⁴² The German case suggests that toleration seems to be the direction that liberal societies are taking, evidenced by 60 percent of Germans today perceiving immigration as “enrichment of cultural life.”⁴³ But recognition remains a resounding no.

POLICY: TOWARD DIVERSITY AND INTERCULTURALISM

Moving from theory to policy, it is a well-known paradox that, when it first appeared in early 1970s’ Canada and Australia, multiculturalism was not limited to minorities but notionally “for all.” This needs to be remembered in the face of a recent (mostly academic) liberal movement for cultural majority rights,⁴⁴

some of whose protagonists ask for a “symmetric” multiculturalism that includes majorities.⁴⁵ In contrast to the United States, which has a civic founding myth (however competing with ethnic and racial alternatives),⁴⁶ in Australia and Canada, multiculturalism has been a nation-building project of post-British settler societies without independent founding myths, where either British or white racial identities fell out of fashion or were delegitimized, respectively. In Australia, nation-building multiculturalism waxed and waned, where a multicultural had to compete with an “Anglo-Australian” identity,⁴⁷ or it thinned down to neoliberal “productive diversity” that is good for business.⁴⁸ Only Canada, helped by its southern neighbor, who in the Canadian optic is strangely seen as pursuing an assimilation project, proudly upholds multiculturalism as central plank of its national identity, with the exception of a hostile moment under the conservative Stephen Harper government.⁴⁹ Kymlicka pointedly calls Canadian multiculturalism a project of “citizenization,”⁵⁰ and its liberal nationalist thrust may well explain multiculturalism’s singular persistence north of the 49th latitude.

In Europe, multiculturalism has consistently been associated as something for “immigrants or foreigners” only.⁵¹ This made European multiculturalism vulnerable to attack in the early 2000s, a period marked by Islamist terror and the alleged rise of Muslim “parallel societies.” Highlighted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s famous statement, in 2010, following upon a series of “honor killings” in the Turkish minority milieu, that “*Multikulti*” has “absolutely failed,” there has been a rhetorical retreat from multiculturalism, with similar statements by British and—curiously—French state leaders.⁵²

However, except for a new genre of “civic integration” policies for immigrants,⁵³ there has been no real policy retreat. At least, the persistence of multiculturalism policies is the message of the Multiculturalism Index, developed by Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka at Queens University. It surveys 21 rich OECD societies between 1980 and 2020 for the strength of eight multiculturalism policies, including affirmative action for certain immigrant groups, the funding of bilingual education, religious exemptions from general laws, ethnic representation and speech etiquettes in public media, dual citizenship, and multicultural provisions in school curricula. The index shows that, with the exception of the Netherlands, such policies have impressively strengthened over time. Between 2010 and 2020, a period of strong right-wing populism across the Western arc, multiculturalism policies “strengthened in eight countries, remained unchanged in nine countries, and declined in only four countries.”⁵⁴ The multiculturalism leaders in 2020, mostly unsurprisingly, are Australia, Canada, Finland, and Sweden, in this order, while Japan, Switzerland, Denmark

(the latter two with a mild improvement) and the Netherlands (with a dramatic decline since 2000) are at the bottom of the index. Significant improvements were made by Norway, Germany, and Portugal, which shot up from the very bottom of the scale in 1980 to middle positions by 2020. At the level of public policy, it seems, multiculturalism, at least as defined and measured by Queens University's Multiculturalism Index, is alive and well.

However, it is still incontrovertible that in most places the *notion* of multiculturalism has fallen in disrepute and that other concepts have taken its place, most importantly "interculturalism" and "diversity."⁵⁵ Which raises the question: is this old wine in new bottles? The answer is: partially, yes; but one also might see interculturalism and diversity as instances of a "neoliberal multiculturalism",⁵⁶ in which the accent has shifted from groups to individuals, and from justice to efficiency.

INTERCULTURALISM

One replacement term for discarded multiculturalism is "interculturalism." A policy under this name has long been practiced in Quebec, as a provincial alternative to a despised federal multiculturalism policy, which the Quebecois have rightly suspected of muting their nationalist ambitions.⁵⁷

Interculturalism has become popular in Europe, too, both in the European Union and at the local level of cities. As intellectual construct, interculturalism grows out of a critique of multiculturalism, which is said to have favored group separation over inter-group "dialogue" and to have ignored the common ground, the latter variably understood in national identity or human rights terms.⁵⁸ Multiculturalists have responded, plausibly, that the interculturalist critique thrives on a distorted view of multiculturalism that most of its protagonists do not endorse.⁵⁹

Whereas in Quebec interculturalism is a code word for immigrants to respect French "majority precedence,"⁶⁰ in Europe a more individualistic form of interculturalism has emerged. Its central document is the 2008 Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, entitled "Living Together as Equals in Dignity". It advocates "intercultural dialogue" as alternative to a multiculturalism that is "found inadequate" in fostering dialogue. But simultaneously, intercultural dialogue is presented as alternative to "assimilation"—what must be considered a rhetorical ploy because assimilation has been long discarded at political elite level in Europe.⁶¹ Interesting, however, is the double positioning of interculturalism against multiculturalism and assimilation, as well as the

justification for it: both are found guilty of “the same, schematic conception of society set in opposition of majority and minority, differing only in endorsing separation of the minority from the majority...(or) assimilation to it.”⁶² Interculturalism opposes a picture of society as consisting of groups, whether this is in multicultural or nationalist colors (or a combination of both). This is why it is usually paired with “diversity,” which shares the same individualistic ontology.

DIVERSITY

“Diversity” is the second replacement term for a notionally discarded multiculturalism. And Québec and Europe again take different positions on it. Québec’s majority-affirming interculturalism opposes diversity as part of the plot of a majority-denying, cosmopolitan multiculturalism, which is deemed a façade for Anglo-Canadian hegemony. By contrast, European interculturalism embraces diversity, at a minimum, as an “unprecedented and ever-growing” demographic reality, which is considered to render anachronistic “old approaches” to minority integration, multiculturalism included.⁶³ Within the European interculturalism approach, diversity is an argument to go beyond the majority-minority binary that multiculturalism is said to espouse, the latter fueling “communal segregation” and “mutual incomprehension.”⁶⁴

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Like interculturalism, diversity is often thought “to do...the work that “multiculturalism” used to (do)”.⁶⁵ This ignores the fact that, much like with interculturalism, a new accent is set with diversity, away from multiculturalism’s core intuition of justice

for historically wronged minorities. This is obvious in the first legal appearance of diversity in the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1978 seminal *Bakke* decision on affir-

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mative action. According to it, a “farm boy from Idaho” should get preferential access to elite college if this helps to build the “educational diversity” that is good for higher learning.⁶⁶ Diversity replaces a focus on justice with an efficiency rationale, which applies to multiple spheres, from education to business—which makes it distinctly neoliberal (in that a cost-benefit rationale is imposed across societal sectors).⁶⁷ Today, in fact, diversity has a firm place in the world of business, in terms of “diversity management” or “productive diversity”, to better

manage the workforce and exploit ethnic niche markets, and to increase overall legitimacy for business in a society that celebrates diversity. Thomas Faist is to the point when arguing that diversity “straddles many worlds.”⁶⁸ It is a diluted multiculturalism adjusted to the logic of functionally differentiated societies, without an intrinsic meaning, meant to further sector-specific goals: profit-making, governing, educating, etc. Above all, diversity’s overarching efficiency rationale is perfectly suited to, and determined by, a neoliberal order.

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scholarly level, interculturalists also tend to be diversity advocates, like Ricard Zapata-Barrero, a Catalan independentist intellectual who has praised interculturalism for “placing diversity within the mainstream.”⁶⁹ Zapata-Barrero does not even mind interculturalism’s compatibility with business-oriented “diversity advantage.”⁷⁰ By contrast, the liberal multiculturalist must dislike both, interculturalism, because of its “rhetorical” parroting of right-wing stereotypes about multiculturalism;⁷¹ and diversity, because of its embracing of a “neoliberal multiculturalism” that is “inclusion without solidarity,” reducing “equality” to “equal access to (or perhaps better: equal exposure to) the competitive global marketplace.”⁷²

ACTIVISM: RACE POLITICS

Next to the neoliberal devolution of liberal multiculturalism, there is a second challenge to liberal multiculturalism from the opposite side: a radical, in part explicitly illiberal identity politics, particularly on race.

Indeed, current “antiracism,” spearheaded by the Black Lives Matter movement, shows some elements that deviate significantly from the liberal, integration-minded multiculturalism of old. Ilke Adam identified as the starting point of the Black Lives Matter movement, which post-2020 has been joined by a “growing racialized European citizenry,” the “neglected focus of multiculturalism on racialized economic inequalities, power and privilege, as well as its silence on racism.”⁷³ This “minorities” activism, as she calls it, “moves beyond culture and

addresses questions of power and privilege,” which are equated with “institutional or systemic racism.”⁷⁴ Rather than aiming at “recognition,” this activism aims at “self-determination.”⁷⁵ It posits itself outside and against “racial capitalism,” by means of “non-Western forms of knowledge production.”⁷⁶ We find in this description, in the typical postulate form, most elements of a radical identity politics that is incommensurate with the tenets of liberal multiculturalism.

Kymlicka himself realized that “African Americans” are “unlike other ethnocultural groups in the West”, having “suffer(ed)...the greatest injustices.”⁷⁷ He describes them as “effectively denationalized.” This renders ineffective his multicultural justice approach, which centers on preserving a minority group’s “societal culture” that provides the latter with a “context of choice.” In his view, the effect of slavery is to have destroyed any memory of such culture, except memories of oppression and injustice. This rules out *both* emancipation paths that African Americans have tried: Martin Luther King’s civic inclusion path, which resembles Kymlicka’s “immigrant path to integration”—with the difference that, until the mid-19th century, black people have not arrived voluntarily in the United States; but it *also* rules out Malcolm X’s black nationalism path, because there is no positive cultural basis for it. “(N)either of these is realistic,” Kymlicka concludes.⁷⁸ Instead, he calls for a “sui generis” approach consisting of reparations, affirmative action, guaranteed political representation, and black self-organization, in response to the “complex and contradictory reality” of American Blacks.⁷⁹ Resembling U.S. Supreme Court justice Henry Blackmun’s paradoxical notion (in his minority opinion in the 1978 *Bakke* case) that “in order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race,” Kymlicka argues that “short-term separateness...is needed to achieve...an integrated and colour-blind society.”⁸⁰

There are many similarities between Kymlicka’s recommendations and the current claims of the antiracist movement, even the controversial call for reparations. But there is one important difference: the goal of an “integrated and colour-blind society,” which Kymlicka stipulates, is premised on the assumption of a common ground. Classically, including in Kymlicka’s conception of multiculturalism, this has been liberalism. But it is the defining mark of “identity politics” to deny the possibility of a common ground, liberal or other. Kimberlé Crenshaw has described “identity politics” as a “politics of social location,” and she illustrates it with the binary “I am black” versus “I am a person who happens to be black.”⁸¹ In the latter variant, one is “achieving self-identification by straining for a certain universality.” Her choice of words (“straining”) suggests the impossibility, at least undesirability of this endeavor. Instead, she favors the

first variant, which is the “positive discourse of self-identification.”

Crenshaw’s distinction between “identity politics” and “liberal universalism” opens a non-traversable gulf between identity politics of this kind and Kymlicka’s liberal multiculturalism. Her denial of a common ground resembles the earliest articulation of the Black Power perspective, in which “‘integration’ is a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy.”⁸² But she is also aware of a fundamental difference between then and now: “Today, long after the most egregious discriminatory laws have been eradicated, constructions of rape in popular discourse and in criminal law continue to manifest vestiges of these racist and sexist themes.”⁸³ Accordingly, the struggle has moved from changing the law, which has largely been successful, to eradicating the “vestiges” of racism and sexism, which continue to vex minds and language, at least as she sees it.

This is why the struggle against “institutional racism,” a notion invented in the Black Power manifesto of 1967,⁸⁴ has not relaxed in the meantime. On the contrary, it has intensified under the same flag (now variably called “institutional,” “systemic,” or “structural” racism). It is one of the tenets of contemporary antiracism, which derives from pessimist Critical Race Theory, that “new racism” is different in form but “as effective” as ever: “(S)ubtle, seemingly nonracial practices have replaced the brutal tactics of racial domination of the past as the primary instruments for maintaining white privilege. Yet these practices are as effective as the old ones in preserving the racial status quo.”⁸⁵ “Abstract liberalism,” in fact, is one of the ways in which “color-blind racism” is said to operate today,⁸⁶ so it needs to be rejected. There is no way out of “systemic racism,” which is at its most effective when “claiming to be color-blind”: “Liberal and progressive Whites, the moment you absolve yourself of your racial sins, is when whiteness has seeped deeper into your soul.”⁸⁷ Whites cannot but be profiteers of “white privilege,” influentially described by Peggy McIntosh as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”⁸⁸ Even more drastically, for Robin DiAngelo, “all white people are racist,”⁸⁹ and she calls the unhappy condition of those whites who refuse this designation “white fragility.” The existential position of non-white offers a superior epistemological reach: “We have always been the ethnographers of whiteness,” proclaims Bonilla-Silva.⁹⁰ This so-called “standpoint” epistemology is constitutive of Critical Race Theory. According to it, the “unique voice of color” opens a privileged access to reality, that of the oppressed *and* of the oppressors.⁹¹

Except for the privileged knowledge position of those who are on the losing end of an enduringly and pervasively “racialized social system,”⁹² identity politics,

and the “critical race” scholarship that undergirds it, does not allow objectivity or a third-person perspective. As a result, “antiracism” is not something that one can legitimately disagree with, because this would make you a “racist.” For Ibram Kendi, a leading activist-intellectual of the antiracist movement, one is either “anti-racist” or “racist”—*tertium non datur*: “There is no in-between safe space of ‘not racist’. The claim of ‘not racist’ neutrality is a mark for racism.”⁹³ Kendi’s antiracism is an ultimate frame, not unlike religion, as the whole world is refracted in it in a confessional mode: “power,” “biology,” “body,” “culture,” “behavior,” “class,” “space,” “sexuality,” and more.⁹⁴ In a revealing passage, Kendi tells his readers that “I cannot disconnect my parents’ religious strivings to be Christian from my secular strivings to be an antiracist.”⁹⁵ It is therefore not merely a provocation to call this a “new religion”, with its own “catechism,” “clergy,” “original sin,” “apocalyptic,” and propensity to “ban the heretic.”⁹⁶

In sum, identity politics on race marks a new stage in the evolution of multiculturalism, if the latter is defined in the broadest sense as reflection on “how people might live together in a political community along with their diversity.”⁹⁷ So, if racial identity politics may qualify as “multiculturalism” on this understanding, it certainly cannot be called “liberal” any longer.

CONCLUSION

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As this paper suggests, liberal multiculturalism is challenged from two opposite sides, a neoliberal one and a radical, if not illiberal one. Its crisis thus is really the crisis of liberalism at large, which can no longer be taken for granted as the common ground of Western societies. By the same token, the multiculturalism and liberalism crises have in common to be at least partially fired by highly distorted views about either on the part of their respective (and often joint) opponent(s). Accordingly, if a recent reviewer of “post-liberal” thinking was exasperated by their monochrome view of liberalism’s alleged “logic...to destroy communities and traditions,”⁹⁸ a reviewer of the multiculturalism wars might deplore its opponents’ stereotyped view of multiculturalism as “groupist,” “fragmenting,” etc.

Like liberalism, multiculturalism is a wide tent, and—now perhaps unlike liberalism—it “may not be the prettiest of words.”⁹⁹ Already in its infant days, Stuart Hall had called multiculturalism a “maddeningly spongy and imprecise concept.”¹⁰⁰ This is the beginning and much of the end of thinking hard about multiculturalism; distorted and confused views on it are legion. Consider this definition of multiculturalism (and further reflection on related concepts, like interculturalism and diversity) by the European Commission’s Migration and

Home Affairs Unit:¹⁰¹ “(Multiculturalism is) a policy that endorses the principle of cultural diversity and supports the right of different cultural and ethnic groups to retain distinctive cultural identities ensuring their equitable access to society, encompassing constitutional principles and commonly shared values prevailing in the society.” This is a liberal and inclusive definition of multiculturalism, finding it aligned with “constitutional principles” and “shared values”—much like “liberal multiculturalism” à la Kymlicka. But then the same European Commission document lists “interculturalism” as “synonym” of multiculturalism. This is misleading because, for good or bad, interculturalism has evolved as a centrist and individual-centered critique of an allegedly difference-mongering and groupist multiculturalism. Further down in the same document, one reads that “cultural diversity” is a “related term” (to multiculturalism). This is at best a half-truth, because under the flag of diversity, as we saw, neoliberal content is smuggled in, conflicting with multiculturalism’s original focus on justice for minorities. At the end, the European Commission document surprisingly states that “(m)ulticulturalism emphasizes cultural differences...without necessarily much contact or...interaction.” Hence, the interculturalist standard charge against multiculturalism pops up, which implies that interculturalism cannot be the “synonym” of multiculturalism that the same document had earlier claimed it to be. The separatism charge, this oldest weapon in the anti-multiculturalism arsenal,¹⁰² also contradicts the liberal-inclusive definition of multiculturalism given at the outset.

Confusion reigns about the meaning of multiculturalism, in the European Commission and beyond. Nevertheless, the word is likely to persist, alongside the contestation surrounding it. 

NOTES

1. See the state-of-the-art overview by Geoffrey Brahm Levey, *Research Handbook on Multiculturalism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2025).
2. For the left, see the brief last part of this paper; for the right, the standard work is Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).
3. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
4. *Ibid.*
5. Will Kymlicka, "An Update from the Multiculturalism Wars" in *Multicultural Questions*, eds. Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 113.
6. See Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* (New York: Penguin, 2019).
7. See Christian Joppke, *Political Neoliberalism: Order and Rupture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025).
8. For "citizenizing" multiculturalism, see Will Kymlicka, "The Rise and Fall of Multiculturalism?" *International Social Science Journal* 61, no. 199 (2010): 97-112.
9. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*.
10. T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950).
11. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, ch.6.
12. *Ibid.*, ch.5.
13. Tariq Modood, "A Multicultural Nationalism?" *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 25, no.11 (2019): 233-246; Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).
14. Alan Patten, *Equal Recognition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).
15. *Ibid.*, 28.
16. *Ibid.*, 32 (fn. 42).
17. Will Kymlicka, "Liberal Multiculturalism as a Theory of State-Minority Relations," *Political Theory* 46, no.1 (2018): 81-91.
18. Patten, *Equal Recognition*, 281.
19. *Ibid.*, 109.
20. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), at 42.
21. Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), at 271.
22. Steven Vertovec, "Super-Diversity and its Implications," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no.6 (2007): 1024-54.
23. Claus Offe, "'Homogeneity' and Constitutional Democracy," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 6, no.2 (1998): 113-41.
24. Representative for many, see the rebuttal of toleration by Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).
25. Peter Balint, *Respecting Toleration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
26. Ramadan, quoted in *ibid.*, 23.
27. Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 14.
28. *Ibid.*, 25.
29. Balint, *Respecting Toleration*, 9.
30. See also the libertarian endorsement of multiculturalism by Chandran Kukathas, *The Liberal Archipelago* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
31. Balint, *Respecting Toleration*, 9.
32. Patten calls his approach "evenhandedness," borrowing the term from Joseph Carens, *Culture, Citizenship, and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
33. Susan Moller Okin, "Feminism and Multiculturalism," *Ethics* 108, no.4 (1998): 661-684.
34. Balint, *Respecting Toleration*, 10.
35. But for a powerful affirmation of the opposite, see Alexandre Lefebvre, *Liberalism as a Way of Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2024).

36. Balint, *Respecting Toleration*, 17.
37. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition".
38. This has been my provocative proposal in Christian Joppke, *Is Multiculturalism Dead? Crisis and Persistence in the Constitutional State* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).
39. Steffen Mau et al., *Triggerpunkte* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023), 399.
40. *Ibid.*, 386.
41. *Ibid.*, 399.
42. *Ibid.*, 413 and 399.
43. *Ibid.*, 126.
44. Liav Orgad and Ruud Koopmans, eds. *Majorities, Minorities, and the Future of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
45. Eric Kaufmann, "Identity not Culture", in *Majorities, Minorities, and the Future of Nationhood*.
46. Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
47. Geoffrey Brahm Levey, "Australia's 'Liberal Nationalist' Multiculturalism", in *Multiculturalism in the British Commonwealth*, eds. Richard Ashcroft and Mark Bevir (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).
48. Eddy Ng and Isabel Metz, "Multiculturalism as a Strategy for National Competitiveness," *Journal of Business Ethics* 128, no. 22 (2015): 253-266.
49. Will Kymlicka, "The Precarious Resilience of Multiculturalism in Canada," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 51, no.1 (2021): 122-42.
50. Kymlicka, "The Rise and Fall of Multiculturalism?"
51. Nathan Glazer, "Multiculturalism and American Exceptionalism," in *Multicultural Questions*, eds. Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), at 186.
52. "Curiously" with respect to France, because it had never pursued anything akin to multiculturalism policies (see John Bowen, "Europeans Against Multiculturalism", *Boston Review*, July-August 2011.)
53. For "civic integration", see Sara Goodman Wallace, *Immigration and Membership Politics in Western Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014; Christian Joppke, "Civic Integration in Western Europe: Three Debates," *West European Politics* 40, no.6 (2017): 1153-1176.
54. Keith Banting, "Multiculturalism," in *Contested Concepts in Migration Studies*, eds. Richard Zapata-Barrero et al. (London: Routledge, 2022), at 188.
55. See Steven Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf, eds. *The Multiculturalism Backlash* (London: Routledge, 2009).
56. This is my argument in Christian Joppke, "Neoliberal Multiculturalism," in *Research Handbook in Multiculturalism*, ed. Geoffrey Brahm Levey (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2025).
57. See Gerard Bouchard, "What is Interculturalism?" *McGill Law Journal* 56, no.2 (2011): 436-468.
58. See the statement by a leading European interculturalism theorist, Ricard Zapata-Barrera, "Interculturalism in the Post-Multiculturalism Debate," *Comparative Migration Studies* 5 (2017).
59. Tariq Modood, "Must Interculturalists Misrepresent Multiculturalism?" *Comparative Migration Studies* 5 (2017).
60. Bouchard, "What is Interculturalism?"
61. Consider for this the canonical EU statement on immigrant integration, the 2004 "Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in Europe" (<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14776-2004-INIT/en/pdf>).
62. White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2008), at 18.
63. *Ibid.*, 9.
64. *Ibid.*, 19.
65. Steven Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf, *Assessing the Backlash Against Multiculturalism in Europe* (MMG Working Paper 09-04, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, 2009), at 28.
66. 438 U.S. 265 (*Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*), decision of 28 June 1978.
67. Fred Block and Margaret Somers called it "market fundamentalism", in *The Power of Market Fundamentalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

68. Thomas Faist, "Diversity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no.1 (2009): 171-190; at 173.
69. Zapata-Barrero, "Interculturalism in the Post-Multiculturalism Debate," 6.
70. *Ibid.*, 13.
71. Will Kymlicka, "Defending Diversity in an Era of Populism," in *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism*, eds. Nasar Meer et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).
72. Will Kymlicka, "Solidarity in Diverse Societies", *Comparative Migration Studies* 17, no. 3 (2015): 15-33; at 21.
73. Ilke Adam, *Multiculturalism in Europe in the Post-2020 Black Livers Matter Era* (unpublished manuscript, 2022), 1.
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*, 6.
76. *Ibid.*, 11.
77. Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); at 360 and 361.
78. *Ibid.*, 360.
79. *Ibid.*, 361.
80. *Ibid.*
81. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins", *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (1991): 1241-99; at 1297.
82. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), at 54.
83. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins", at 1267.
84. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*.
85. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 4th ed. (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022), 76.
86. *Ibid.*, 84.
87. *Ibid.*, 32.
88. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege", *Peace and Freedom*, July/August 1989, 1-3; at 1.
89. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility* (Boston: Beacon Press), ch.1.
90. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 27.
91. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 11.
92. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Rethinking Racism", *American Sociological Review* 62 (1996): 465-486; at 470.
93. Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist* (New York: Random House, 2019), introduction.
94. *Ibid.*
95. *Ibid.*, ch.1.
96. This is argued in all seriousness by John McWhorter, *Woke Racism* (New York: Penguin, 2021), ch.2; see also Jean-François Braunstein, *La religion woke* (Paris: Grasset, 2022).
97. Brahm Levey, *Research Handbook on Multiculturalism*, 1.
98. Andrew Koppelman, "'It is Tash Whom he Serves': Deneen and Vermeule on Liberalism", *Notre Dame Law Review* 98, no.4 (2023): 1525-1558; 1526.
99. *Ibid.*
100. Ruud Koopmans, "Multiculturalism and Immigration", *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (2013): 147-169; at 148.
101. European Commission (Migration and Home Affairs), "Multiculturalism," https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/glossary_search/multiculturalism_en.
102. See Arthur Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America* (New York: Norton, 1992).