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Multiculturalism Defined Seven Ways

By Friedrich Heckmann

With large-scale immigration into Western and Northern Europe, "multiculturalism" has become a major topic of political and intellectual discourse. The terms "multiculturalism" and "multicultural society" are being put forth strongly as concepts that could help clarify the confusing picture of European immigration, both in a descriptive-analytical and in a politico-normative sense. Many are recommending the concept of a "multicultural society" as a new model for societies whose populations have become increasingly multi-ethnic through immigration.

In this brief note, I will try to show that the terms "multiculturalism" and "multicultural society" in their present usage not only cannot help clarify the discourse, but may very well contribute to its further confusion. As I analyze the discussion, there are at least seven different uses of the terms in Europe:

(1) First, "multiculturalism" or "multicultural society" are used as indicators of social change, referring to the *changing ethnic composition of the population*; an allegedly rather homogeneous population has become more heterogeneous. In this sense, "multicultural society" is a descriptive category.

(2) Secondly, the terms are used in what might be called a *normative-cognitive way*. This use could be circumscribed as follows: we should recognize the fact that we have become a country of immigration, that we need immigration, at present and in the future, and should accept the social and cultural consequences.

(3) A third use describes both an *attitude* and a *norm*: multiculturalism as tolerance toward others; as friendly and supportive behavior toward immigrants; as a liberal and democratic attitude which is based (among other things) on learning from the errors and fatal consequences of nationalism, chauvinism, and ethnic intolerance.

(4) Fourthly, multiculturalism is an interpretation of the *concept of culture*: there are no "pure," original cultures. Each culture has incorporated elements of other cultures; cultures are the result of interaction with one another; culture is continuous process and change. In this sense, the cultures of immigrants are seen as opportunities for the enrichment of one's own culture.

(5) Fifth, on a more superficial level, multiculturalism is an *attitude* that looks upon some aspects of the immigrants' culture (folklore, food, for example) and sees these as possible enrichment of "our" culture. Very often, in a socio-romantic view,

the immigrants are viewed as people with qualities that "we have lost" (emotions, stable social relations, spontaneity, etc.); we could learn from them.

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(6) Multiculturalism as a *political-constitutional principle* is a sixth meaning in the discussion, referring to ethnic identities as a major basis for political and state organization, for the distribution of rights and resources; it means the reenforcing of ethnic pluralism, ethnic autonomy, and speaks out against acculturation or assimilation, against one "state language."

(7) A seventh, different meaning: as a *critical category*, multiculturalism is regarded as a well-intended, but illusory concept which overlooks the necessity for a common culture, language, and identification to enable societal and state integration and stability. The unifying and homogenizing effects of the nation-state are looked upon as an achievement that should not be easily given up.

A concept with such a multitude of meanings hinders a rational discourse instead of helping to clarify it; "multiculturalism" and "multicultural society" are concepts which blur the core questions:

- Under what conditions and in which numbers does immigration enrich or erode the material, social, and cultural conditions of a country?
- How can the further material decline of the former communist countries and of Third World countries (and thus the push-pressures of immigration) be halted?
- How important is cultural and ethnic integration for an immigrant-receiving country? How important are acculturation and assimilation?
- What are the conditions for the stability of multi-ethnic states (with territory-based ethnic minorities)?
- How can the cultural needs of ethnic minorities

be met?

- What should be the legal status of immigrants? Should they have political rights without citizenship?
- How can "asylum" as an international institution be saved from misuse?
- What can be done to help war refugees?

When giving a list of questions, I do not pretend to have ready answers to all of them, but these questions should be at the center of political and intellectual discourse. For purposes of clarity, it is advisable to discuss these questions separately instead of mixing them in a discussion of "multi-culturalism" as is being done in Europe at the present time. ■