ABSTRACT. After differentiating multicultural democracy (MD) from other types of democracy (liberal, consociational, ethnic and Herrenvolk), this article explores both the conditions favouring MD and the problems it faces. The main obstacle to MD is the model of the ‘nation-state’, which has been the basis of legitimacy in most liberal democracies since the French Revolution. Multiculturalism has existed in many non-democratic states (such as colonial and traditional empires) and in city-states. A distinction is made between minimal MD (the simple tolerance and legal protection of cultural diversity) and maximal MD (the celebration, encouragement and official support thereof). The article concludes that minimal MD is the more feasible of the two, and that political and social conditions for it are the most favourable in urban environments, especially in city-states.

Introduction

Over the last 200 years, the world has changed from one in which nearly everybody lived within a day’s walk of where she was born, to one in which some 120 million people live in countries other than that of their birth (Parfit 1998: 21). Even what we think of as the epochal migrations of the past – the ‘barbarian’ invasions of Europe, the Crusades, the European Conquest of the Americas, the transatlantic Slave Trade, the great pilgrimages – seldom involved the annual movement of more than 100,000 people, often only a few thousand or even a few hundred. Mexico and Peru were each conquered by a few hundred Spaniards who could have fitted in one or two jumbo jets. A week’s arrivals in the New Delhi, Johannesburg or Mexico City airports exceeds all immigrants from Europe to these destinations during the centuries of colonial history.

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In 1993, some 500 million people travelled internationally, spending some $304 billion (World Tourism Organisation 1994: vol. I, 2). Perhaps some 90 per cent of them travelled for the sheer fun of it, as tourists. But that still leaves scores of millions of people on business or political trips, on family visits, on study or technical missions, on conference meetings and the like; ‘guest workers’ from poor countries in search of better jobs in rich countries; and refugees from civil wars, genocides, political or religious persecution, famine and chaos. In 1997, for example, the UN High Commission for Refugees estimated that 22 million people fell under its jurisdiction, roughly the population of Benelux or Scandinavia (Parfit 1998: 16).

This acceleration of migratory movements took two main upward jumps. The first started in the second half of the nineteenth century when trains and steamships began to make travel relatively cheap, fast and reliable. That is when the yearly migrant flux began regularly to exceed the million mark. The second coincided with the advent of mass air travel in the second half of the twentieth century, with an annual volume of international movement of people now in the hundreds of millions, and long- or medium-term migration in the tens of millions. The volume of international travel increased from 25 million people in 1950, to 69 million in 1960, to 166 million in 1970, to 288 million in 1980, to 458 million in 1990, to something like three-quarters of a billion by the turn of the millennium (World Tourism Organisation 1994: vol. I, 2). By comparison, the largest trans-oceanic, preindustrial migration – the transtlantic Slave Trade – involved around 10 million people, but spread over 300 years, peaking at around 50,000 a year (Curtin 1969; Davidson 1961).

This second transportation revolution has been the main stimulus for the invention of the concept of multiculturalism. To be sure, plural societies have existed for millennia, created by conquest, slavery, colonialism, voluntary and involuntary migration, commerce, and other forces that juxtaposed different ethnies in complex multinational states. However, the situation that developed in the last half-century, especially in the rich countries of the First World, is radically new. Put bluntly, the rich countries share what they see as democratic institutions, and they want to remain both rich and democratic. As they are the principal destinations for millions of destitute migrants and hundreds of millions of would-be migrants, the rich countries all preach the virtues of democracy, openness and liberalism, but practise varying degrees and forms of discrimination, exclusion and containment of the ‘great unwashed’. They all establish ethnic and racial hierarchies between natives and immigrants, or citizens and non-citizens, and degrees of desirability or undesirability of immigrants (stratified by wealth, skills, region of origin, religion, physical appearance, purpose and length of stay, and other criteria). ‘Guest workers’, for instance, are often regarded as a desirable source of cheap labour, but as undesirable immigrants, especially if they are black or Muslim.

Ideological debates between the left and the right often rage around immigration, but verbal hypocrisy and rhetorical disagreement frequently
hide a basic consensus that the ‘boat is full’, or nearly so. This broad consensus across the ideological spectrum includes the following tenets:

1. states (read: the controlling political and economic elites of these states) have a sovereign right to control entry into them;
2. the distinction between citizen and non-citizen is legitimate, and only the former have political rights;
3. each state has a sovereign right to define the criteria of citizenship.

In one respect, however, the rich countries differ and that is the extent to which they define themselves as *nation* states. At one extreme are countries such as Japan, Italy, Germany and Israel that practise *jus sanguinis* citizenship (that is, citizenship is established by descent, generally in the male line, but increasingly bilaterally) and identify the state with a particular ethny, defined by biological descent, religion, language or some such hereditary or ascriptive criterion. At the other extreme are countries such as the United States and Australia that have long seen themselves as countries of immigration, though preferably from Christian Europe, and often practise *jus soli* (citizenship is established by birthplace). In between are countries including Canada, Britain, Spain, Belgium, and Switzerland that have been ‘natively’ multi-national, long before the ‘new immigrants’, and that have evolved various forms of consociationalism between the native ethnies. In the European Community, a new sense of supra-nationalism is gradually emerging, creating essentially an open club of rich countries. Of course, each country or sub-group of countries has unique characteristics. Thus, Britain, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, different though they are from each other, all share a special relationship with their former colonies, or some sub-population thereof, such as the South Moluccans in the Netherlands, and the harkis (Algerians who had served in the French armed forces before independence) in France.

**Multiculturalism**

Enter multiculturalism. It is difficult to pinpoint when and where a concept is invented and politicised, but multiculturalism, both as an ideology and as a political and educational programme, seems to have first arisen in North America, starting in the 1980s. It took rather different forms in Canada and the United States. In Canada, it was a postscript to, and, later, expansion of, the notion that Canada was a bilingual and bicultural country, made up of Francophones and Anglophones. Multiculturalism meant to include the indigenous ‘First Nations’ and the other immigrant groups who were neither English- nor French-speaking. All these groups justifiably felt excluded from the definition of Canada as bicultural. In the United States, too, multiculturalism was meant to be all-inclusive, but with the additional agenda of deracialising and delegitimising the white–black divide and redefining it as a
cultural distinction. Multiculturalism was paired with ‘diversity’ to subsume both race and ethnicity, and pretend the former was synonymous with the latter.

Multiculturalism, both as a concept and as an ideology, seems, like so many other American inventions, to be spreading to Europe, Israel and other societies where intellectual discourse is dominated by a liberal intelligentsia. It is fast becoming the politically correct solution to ethnic diversity, the answer to a quest for democracy-in-diversity. Sammy Smooha identifies characteristics that differentiate ‘multicultural democracy’ (hereafter MD) from other forms of democracy, specifically, liberal, consociational, ethnic and Herrenvolk. MD, he suggests, is characterised ‘by an agreement to disagree (rather than consent on liberal values), civil and political rights for all, existence of a civic sphere common to all groups, state recognition of and support for the separate cultural communities, and state neutrality (the state is neither identified with nor appropriated by any group)’ (Smooha 1999). Let us provisionally accept this as a working definition, and differentiate MD from other types mentioned by Smooha, namely liberal democracy (LD), consociational democracy (CD), ethnic democracy (ED) and Herrenvolk democracy (HD).

LD is straightforward enough, since it was the original model to which all Western democracies trace their ideological ancestry. LD assumes that the state holds its mandate from ‘the people’, that civil and political rights are vested in individuals, not in collectivities, and that the state is an impartial enforcer and protector of these rights against individual or collective abusers. Aside from the citizens and the representative institutions of these citizens (which constitute the state), there exists a ‘civil society’ made up of a multiplicity of interest or affinity groups (classes, ethnic groups, voluntary associations, churches, etc), but the state is distinct from, and independent of, all other collectivities. It does not officially favour, support, or even recognise them. The constitutions of France and the United States are classic examples of LD, although, in practice, the United States and France have radically departed from that model in their external and internal colonies. (The colonies of France were mostly external to the ‘hexagone’, as the French call their metropolitan European homeland, and were explicitly recognised as falling outside the scope of the status of ‘regular’ French citizens. Except for the Philippines, and various Caribbean, Pacific and Central American territories controlled and militarily occupied by the United States at various times, the US colonies were mostly internal and took the form of ‘Indian Reservations’.)

CD is a concept developed by Arend Lijphart (1977) and adopted by many others, sometimes under different words, such as ‘proportional democracy’ (Lehmbruch 1967), to refer to multinational states such as Canada, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland and others that recognise and incorporate the principle of collective representation and proportional allocation of state resources to officially defined communities. These communities are generally defined by
ethnicity, religion or language, and are institutionally represented, defended and entrenched in all organs of the state, including notably the public schools. The state also recognises its citizens not only as individuals, but also as members of collectivities.

ED, as defined by Smooha, is an ethnic regime falling somewhere in between CD and HD. An ED is a state that has many of the features of representative government but is clearly associated with one or more collectivities to the partial exclusion of others. Israel is a good example: it is a Jewish state, which gives citizenship and voting rights to Arabs who stayed within the pre-1967 borders, but discriminates against them, both _de jure_ and _de facto_.

Finally, HD is my term (van den Berghe 1967 and 1981) to designate states such as South Africa under apartheid and the antebellum United States, that limit representative government to a privileged racial or ethnic group, and administer all others as disfranchised subjects with separate and inferior status as slaves, pariahs or conquered nations.

Where does MD fit into all this? If one orders LD, CD, ED and HD on a scale from official non-recognition to official recognition of ethnic groups, and from equal individual rights, to proportional collective rights, to unequal treatment of collectivities, MD would have to be inserted between LD and CD. MD differs from LD in that it decouples the concepts of nation and of state, and openly recognises that the state in question is not ethnically homogeneous. If the term MD only gets one away from using the misnomer of ‘nation-state’ as a synonym for ‘state’, it will already represent both a conceptual and an ideological advance.

The history of the twentieth century has abundantly demonstrated the lethality of the ideology of the nation-state. If the state claims legitimacy by associating itself with a nation – if France is for the French, Germany for Germans, Poland for Poles and so on – then it follows that all others are excluded from citizenship, from representation, from political life. Nationalism entails a programme, at best of cultural assimilation, at worst of exclusion. And exclusion carried to its logical conclusion carries the seed of genocide. Any move in the direction of denationalising the state is a step away from harnessing state violence in the service of ethnic intolerance.

MD also differs from CD in that it avoids the political institutionalisation of ethnicity at the sub-state level. The high cost, fragility and limiting conditions of CD have also been amply demonstrated (Horowitz 1985; van den Berghe 1981). CD is a clumsy, inflexible, conservative model that benefits mostly the ruling elites. It works best, and even then not very well, in relatively affluent countries with stable, highly territorialised, indigenous ethnies of approximately equal socio-economic status, and in the absence of a history of conquest between the constituent ethnies. Belgium is a typical example of the limiting conditions for CD, and of its high cost. Even under favourable conditions, consociation makes for wasteful duplication of governing bodies, continuous renegotiation of territorial boundaries and of proportionality to
reflect any demographic changes, and perennial, albeit low-intensity, conflict over trivial and often purely symbolic issues (such as the language of road signs). Even then, consociation leaves in limbo a large minority of the population who do not clearly fit in any of the recognised categories: immigrants, children of mixed marriages, residents in the ‘wrong’ part of the country, and the cultural melting-pot of the joint capital city. Nobody gets killed over the ‘language problem’ in Belgium, but most people bear the cost of daily irritation and inefficiency. Consociation, in short, prevents substantive change and promotes inefficiency and waste by fixating on proportionality.

MD, by contrast, seeks to make room for cultural diversity without making it official. It seeks solutions to the problem of integrating disparate groups into complex, urbanised, post-industrial societies, while avoiding both the imposition of an assimilationist model based on a dominant-group definition of what the society should be, and the political expedient of disfranchising and excluding some groups from the polity and the society. It seeks to integrate without either assimilating or making official cultural differences.

**Is multicultural democracy a workable model?**

Can MD work? We do not know yet, because as yet no state has clearly and self-consciously applied the model. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands probably come closest, and other states (the United States, Canada, Germany) are taking cautious steps in that direction. A cautionary look at India, however, might shed some light on the question. After all, India has a good claim to be ‘the world’s largest democracy’, with only occasional lapses into states of emergency and presidential rule (Brass 1994). Almost uniquely among post-colonial states, its armed forces have remained non-political and supportive of the civilian state. Despite recent attempts by the BJP to transform India into a Hindu state, the official ideology of secularism and freedom of religion has, so far, proven resilient to sectarian pressures. Finally, in spite of a concerted (but highly unsuccessful in the Dravidian South) push to make Hindi the ‘national’ language, tolerance and recognition of linguistic diversity at the level of the individual states has been a cornerstone of Indian policy and practice.

In short, then, India has largely practised a policy of multiculturalism long before the term became fashionable. Indian multiculturalism was not a concerted new ideology, but simply a pragmatic continuation of policies of state neutrality toward, and recognition of, the numerous cleavages of caste, ethnicity, language and religion that had been the hallmark of the British Raj. Independent India fell far short of a model of consociational democracy, in that it did not institutionalise autonomous ethnic communities as corporate bodies in the larger Union. However, it also deviated from a straightforward liberal democracy, in that it went a considerable way in recognising, protecting and entrenching special rights to the multitude of groups, most
notably numerous Dalit (‘untouchable’) castes and ‘Hill Tribes’. India did not *celebrate* its diversity, but it officially recognised and accommodated it in a clumsy multitude of special rights (Mahajan 1998).

India, in short, invented multiculturalism, affirmative action and quota systems long before Western countries naively rediscovered ethnic diversity. To mention just a few instances of Indian MD in action, Scheduled Castes and Tribes have reserved seats in the Lok Sabha (‘House of the People’ or House of Commons). Together with other ‘Backward Castes’ making up over half of the Indian population, they enjoy special recognition and representation in innumerable official and academic bodies, and reserved quotas in nearly all sectors of public employment (the civil service, railways and post office, for example). Minority rights and recognition have also been extended to numerous religious and linguistic groups, though on a somewhat more restrained and piecemeal scale (Brass 1994; Mahajan 1998; Weiner and Katzenstein 1981).

Indian politics, in summary, has become a vast cacophony of groups clamouring for state recognition, and organising for the achievement of special rights and the defence of collective interests. Far from defusing the demand for autonomy of caste, ethnic, language and religious groups, the state concession of special rights has generated a spiral of escalating stridency and, frequently, violence. Indeed, India has probably become the country where caste and communal violence has become the most routine, institutionalised order of the day.

To be sure, independent India has, so far, avoided a repetition of the orgy of religious genocide that gave it birth in 1947, but communal disturbances, riots and deaths have become endemic, daily events, as any casual reading of the Indian press reveals. (Internationally, it is hardly news any more.) For example, in Uttar Pradesh alone, riots of all types (defined as five or more people creating a public disturbance) numbered between 9,000 and 14,000 a year for every year between 1979 and 1991 (Brass 1998: 47). In a number of states, especially Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, there was a correlation of over 0.9 between riots and crimes, and for India as a whole the correlation was 0.891 (Nayar 1975: 83). To be sure, not all riots are communal in nature, but many are. Riots between Hindus and Muslims alone produced 6,634 fatalities in India between 1960 and 1993, and those are only the communal riots reported in the *Times of India* (Varshney and Wilkinson 1996: 27). Communal and caste violence in India has become an endemic ingredient of politics.

This violent Indian experience with MD might be attributed to poverty, but many equally poor or even poorer countries (such as neighbouring Nepal, also quite linguistically and religiously diverse) have escaped such turbulent communal politics. Nepal, unlike India, did not institutionalise multiculturalism, nor, until the last ten years, has it been very democratic. In my view, the great object lesson of Indian MD is that any state recognition of special rights to ethnic, religious, caste, racial or linguistic groups almost automatically politicises these cleavages, generates a system of rewards for
organising along lines of division and, therefore, produces an escalation of strident demands for entrenched, privileged separation. Far from reducing the disadvantages of underprivileged groups, such policies frequently increase the isolation and marginalisation of such groups by entrenching their ‘special’ (and inferior) status.

India may be dismissed as an extreme case, as, indeed, it probably is, because of its enormous size, high level of poverty, extraordinary diversity of religion, language and ethnicity, and the deeply entrenched inequality and stigma of caste. The caveat extends, however, to other societies, such as the United States, that have recently embarked on policies of recognition of group rights and privileges. So long as the civil rights struggle in the United States was firmly grounded in the universalistic application of laws without reference to race or ethnicity, and on the removal of racial or ethnic discrimination, considerable progress was being made in reducing inequalities and promoting equal opportunities. When the emphasis shifted in the 1970s to using ethnic or racial criteria to promote equality of results, racial consciousness increased, social cleavages and segregation deepened, resentment and backlash rose, and demands for race- or ethnic-based remedies escalated (Glazer 1975; Sowell 1981). Even demands for ‘race-norming’ of standardised tests, which implicitly recognise racial inequality, are now common. So are race-based demands for reparation for slavery, when, clearly, not all blacks were slaves, not all slaves were black, most whites were never slaveowners, and not all slaveowners were whites.

The problems with multicultural democracy

MD faces two staggering obstacles, one ideological, the other pragmatic. Ideologically, MD clashes with the idea of the ‘nation-state’, which historically has been inextricably linked with LD. This contradiction can only be resolved by denationalising the state. Pragmatically, MD contains the seeds of societal disintegration by rewarding communal politics, frequently promoting an escalation of demands for special rights, and entrenching invidious distinctions that proponents of multiculturalism often seek to minimise. Indeed, one of the internal contradictions of MD is that its proponents are often of two minds about whether they want to celebrate diversity or eradicate disabilities and discrimination encountered by ‘minority’ groups. These two aims are generally antithetical, as clearly shown by Gurpreet Mahajan (1998) in the case of India. Celebrating diversity between unequal groups is most likely to increase all differences between them, including the ones that the policies of affirmative action seek to reduce. Thus, MD is a self-defeating instrument for reducing invidious group differences, and should be clearly recognised as such.

Ideologically, MD implies (and often openly asserts) the desirability of cultural diversity as inherently enriching. In this basic postulate, it constitutes
the antithesis of the tacit LD premise that the *nation*-state is the most desirable political form. True, LD is *not necessarily* linked with the concept of the nation-state, but the entire history of Western democracies has been inextricably linked with the triumph of nationalism as the basis of state legitimacy. Democracy supposedly expresses the ‘will of the people’, and ‘the people’ has implicitly been identified with the dominant ethny in each state. Where the state was initially close to being a nation, for example in Japan, the ideology was a reasonably good fit to reality, but such cases were the exception rather than the rule. Where the fit was poor, several ‘solutions’ evolved to make ideology and reality concord.

First, in some states, the dominant ethny imposed its language and adopted an ideology of more or less forceful ‘nation building’. If the state was not initially a nation, state power and social pressures were used to make it so, through genocide, expulsions, forced linguistic assimilation, abduction of children, or simply a liberal laissez-faire of letting the dominant culture prevail through a combination of cultural ‘market’ forces and the biasing of state resources toward the dominant culture (for example, making only one language ‘official’ and imposing monolingual education at all levels). Even countries with ‘liberal’, ‘democratic’ traditions have often resorted to brutal policies of cultural homogenisation, justified them under the loftiest of motives, and suppressed minority opposition to such methods. Effective ‘nation-building’ generally meant ‘nation-suppressing’, if not nation-killing.

Secondly, some states have lacked either the resources or the resolve to conduct policies of ‘nation-building’, and have simply *pretended* to be nation-states, at least on the international scene (such as in the doubly misnamed United Nations), if not domestically. Most African states, while highly multi-national, have simply lacked both the resources and the resolve of conducting a programme of ‘nation-building’, and declared themselves to be ‘nation-states’ by elite self-definition. The use of the former colonial language as the ‘official’ language of the new elites has often favoured that fiction.

Finally, a number of states have recognised their multinational character and institutionalised a wide variety of arrangements, ranging from internal colonialism and apartheid to extra-territoriality, internal autonomy, special status and consociation, to accommodate their heterogeneity.

This crude typology disguises many complications – for example, that the states have often shifted policies over time, or have applied different policies to different groups, or even inconsistent policies simultaneously to the same groups. Two interesting observations emerge, however, from this bewildering variety of attempts to solve the ‘ethnic diversity problem’ in the face of a reigning ideology of nationalism.

First, self-styled ‘democratic’ states have often unhesitatingly pursued genocidal or ethnical ‘solutions’ to the stubborn reality of ethnic diversity. Indeed, the correlation between general liberal democracy and tolerance of ethnic diversity has probably been *inverse*. The old-style despotic regimes such as the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, and the European colonial regimes,
have been, on the whole, more tolerant of, or at least indifferent to, ethnic diversity in a way that nationalism seldom was.

Secondly, attempts to accommodate ethnic diversity within the framework of the ‘modern’ Western-style, liberal democracy have been notably unstable, unsuccessful and costly even when well intentioned and democratically negotiated. There is a fundamental incompatibility between nationalist ideology and multinational populations. Unfortunately, the entire tradition of Western liberal democracy (and its post-colonial offshoots and non-European extensions) has been inextricably linked with an acceptance of the nation-state as the template of political legitimacy. A better prescription for ethnic strife and genocide could scarcely be imagined.

The conclusion is, thus, inescapable: the state must be denationalised, much as it was secularised in most Western-style democracies. So long as there were confessional states, there were endless religious wars. The more secularised the state, the more subdued and non-violent religious conflicts became (except where religion overlaps with ethnicity, and thus with nationalism). If the state could be secularised, there is no reason why it cannot be denationalised. More easily said than done, it will be retorted. True enough, but then the birth of secularisation from the ashes of the ancien régime did not come easily either. It took a couple of centuries, and the process is not yet complete. It is, however, quite possible for states to be indifferent to religion, tolerating all faiths but embracing none. The same could be accomplished with ethnicity under a model of MD.

The question is how. The problems must not be minimised. I would suggest at least three such problems. First, in one respect, the denationalisation of the state is not exactly coterminous with its secularisation. It is easy enough, in principle, for a state not to be associated with any religion, for example to substitute secular holidays for religious ones, but it is nearly impossible for the state not to have some kind of implicit or explicit language policy or practice, and language is most commonly associated with ethnicity. Education, political debates, government publications and countless other functions associated with the state must necessarily be conducted in some language, and whatever language (or languages) is chosen imposes greater transaction costs on some groups than others. The ‘official’ language almost always has, if not an ethnic bias, then a regional or a class one. Even within a given language group, some regional or class dialects, for instance, can be preferred or stigmatised. At the limit, it could be said that the ruling class of a country hardly ever speaks the same language or dialect as the rest of the people. Making a language or dialect official is always invidious to some, often to most, of the country’s citizens. A truly democratic language policy is an oxymoron. This, in turn, makes state neutrality in matters of culture quite problematic. Should, for instance, stigmatised dialects like ‘Ebonics’ in the United States or Cockney in the United Kingdom be made official? Should teachers ignore students using a stigmatised dialect, encourage them to use it, or ‘correct’ their speech in conformity with the ‘standard’ (read: ‘dominant’) dialect?
There is no right or wrong answer to any of these questions, except perhaps that the wisest language policy is that which is implicit and unofficial. There is no need for the state to enforce, regulate, enjoin, encourage or discourage the use of any language. The actual use or disuse of any language is determined much more by a marketplace of utility, status and advantage than by state policy, though state policy can make a difference, as in the use of Hebrew in Israel. Any explicit state language policy, however, is more likely to exacerbate than to solve ethnic problems. Polyglot environments as such do not create language conflicts, but state language policies almost invariably do. States should merely accommodate local usage, not tell people what to speak. Recent US history in states such as California, Texas and New Mexico, for example, is illustrative. Efforts to make Spanish–English bilingualism official have produced an ‘English-only’ backlash. Even without any official policy, much of the ‘Sun Belt’ is becoming de facto bilingual, and, except perhaps in schools which should offer to parents a choice of language of instruction for their children, there is no need for any state to declare either a bilingual or a monolingual policy. It should be noted here that multilingual education can easily be implemented without resorting to consociational mechanisms recognising language communities. A school in, say, San Antonio, Texas, or Los Angeles, California, could easily offer instruction in both English and Spanish, leaving completely open the choice of either linguistic regime to members of all ethnic groups. Anglos would be as free to choose instruction in Spanish, as Latinos in English.

The second problem is that multiculturalism as an ideological orientation is often related to, but nevertheless separable from, immigration policy. Open-ended tolerance or even celebration of cultural diversity is, in principle, congenial with an open-door immigration policy. Yet, many ‘progressive’ elements (such as trade unions) that favour ‘equal pay for equal work’ and support multiculturalism within the country are often opposed to the liberalisation of immigration, and, conversely, conservative elements (such as agribusiness) favour opening the borders to the influx of cheap labour while opposing multiculturalism. There is, then, a pragmatic, interest-based contradiction between the liberalism implied in multiculturalism, and that inherent in freedom of international movement. Ideological consistency on these two issues often sinks on the rock of divergent interests. Very often liberal proponents of internal multiculturalism prefer not to raise the issue of liberalising immigration policy, or even accept restrictive, exclusionist immigration policies as a pragmatic quid pro quo to avoid a xenophobic backlash.

The final problem is that the concept of multiculturalism can take two forms, which I shall label maximalist and minimalist. The maximalist multicultural programme involves the celebration and state subvention of cultural diversity, while, in its minimalist form, multiculturalism stops at the recognition and tolerance of it. It is, of course, much more difficult to muster broad popular support for the maximalist agenda than for the minimalist ‘non-agenda’. But, aside from the issue of popular support for multiculturalism,
the maximalist version of it is also much more pragmatically problematic. State promotion and active support of cultural diversity is not only costly, but generates an escalation of private demands on the public purse. It is in the logic of the maximalist programme that, since cultural diversity is deemed to be intrinsically valuable, the smaller, the poorer and the more threatened a group is, the more deserving it becomes of state support. If, say, a Spanish-medium high school is established in San Antonio to accommodate the city’s large Hispanic population, then why not also open a Maya high school to help Mexicans of indigenous descent to preserve their much more endangered culture? (In fact, I am oversimplifying, because there is not one, but some thirty living Mayan languages, not to mention some forty-five other indigenous tongues in Mexico alone!)

Both pragmatically and ideologically, the minimalist position is much more realistic than the maximalist one. Ideologically, a maximalist policy of special recognition and support to disadvantaged minorities, such as ‘affirmative action’ in the United States, for instance, invariably generates a backlash of many who now feel themselves the victims of reverse discrimination, and escalating demands for further special consideration by groups that feel overlooked.

Perhaps an illustration from two European countries – France and Britain – will support the case for minimalist, but not for maximalist, multiculturalism, namely the wearing of ethnic headgear. The demand for Sikh men to wear a turban, even in police or military uniform, was readily acceded to in minimalist multiculturalist Britain, a tolerant policy that seems to carry little cost of any kind. (The tolerance might stop at the Grenadier Guards or the Household Cavalry, however.) In France, on the other hand, there was a storm of opposition to Muslim girls wearing headscarves to public schools, as this was seen as an affront to official French secularism, even though French pupils do not wear school uniforms. In France, clearly, the climate of public opinion is still firmly behind Jacobin nationalism. Indeed, the same kind of dogmatic secularism led to exactly the same prohibition and controversy in a Muslim country: the Turkish government recently prohibited women from covering their hair or faces in Turkish schools and universities.

It is easy for most thinking intellectuals to see the British reaction as sensible and the French or Turkish one as silly. Indeed, the minimalist form of multiculturalism seems to be gaining ground in Western Europe, more so in some counties (Britain, Scandinavia and the Netherlands) than in others, to be sure. Now, consider what kind of response a maximalist form of multiculturalism would encounter, even in the most liberal countries. Say that the state would build prayer rooms for Muslim pupils in state schools, or allocate school funds to buy Christmas trees. Obviously, satisfying one such demand would lead to an escalation of conflicts that would, in the end, undermine the very foundations of the secular state.

In response to an earlier draft of this article, Smooha suggested that by splitting multiculturalist policies into a minimalist and maximalist
programme, I was perhaps reverting the former into LD and the latter into CD, thereby making MD a vanishing category. At the limit, Smooha may be right, but pragmatically, this is not so. Maximalist MD can be clearly differentiated from CD, in that the latter recognises and institutionalises communities and collective rights, thereby almost automatically establishing invidious distinctions between degrees of institutionalisation and recognition for various communities, and unleashing a game of recognition-seeking between communities. The case of Canada is illustrative: it began with bi-national consociation between Franco- and Anglo-Canadians, but quickly extended a policy of multiculturalism toward the many other ethnis. The First Nations (indigenous groups) among them are now the most vocal claimants for the extension of the consociational model to them, on a par with Anglo- and Franco-Canadians.

Maximalist MD, on the other hand, can easily stop short of any official recognition of group rights. Courts can easily allow or proscribe certain religious practices, for instance, without in any sense favouring or disfavouring certain religious communities; for example, polygyny or prayer in public schools may be proscribed or allowed for everybody without prejudice to any religious group. To allow, however, polygyny for Muslims but not for Christians or Jews, would no longer be MD but CD, because it would give Muslims a special collective status.

How is minimalist MD different from LD? It is, of course, easy to define LD as synonymous with MD, for the ideological premises of MD are clearly compatible with liberalism. MD, whether minimal or maximal, seeks to establish the widest possible sphere of cultural expression to individuals. However, the ideology of LD, as first exemplified by the French Revolution and the Wars of Independence in North and South America, and later extended to the rest of Europe, has been inextricably welded to the historical model of the nation-state. The ‘will of the people’ was almost invariably identified with that of the dominant ethny in the state. ‘Liberté, égalité, fraternité’ was seen as axiomatically synonymous with ‘la France aux Français’. The ringing Jeffersonian pronouncement that ‘all men are created equal’ and ‘endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights’ was made by a slaveowner, and indeed, in all probability, the biological father of some of the slaves he owned. Not all nationalist states have been LDs, but most LDs have been nationalist at home, and often imperialist abroad.

The conclusion seems clear: a modern, liberal, secular, democratic state should give all of its inhabitants equal rights to celebrate their diversity in any way they choose, so long as it is consistent with certain international accepted standards of morality and human rights. Even a minimalist stance would encounter certain problematic areas that test the limits of tolerance, the foundations of modernity or the canons of human rights: clitoridectomy, cannibalism, child marriage, polygamy, spousal and child abuse, human sacrifice, drug use, poison ordeals, witchcraft murders – many examples come to mind. But the general policy still seems both sensible and pragmatically
feasible. The maximalist version of multiculturalism, however, quickly runs into cost, opposition and absurdity.

Finally, consider what kinds of society are most congenial to multiculturalism. I have already shown that classical despotic empires did, for the most part, practise a minimalist version of multiculturalism. They may have privileged the language and culture of the ruling class and used the dominant language as a *lingua franca* at the elite level, but they also frequently left their subject peoples much linguistic and cultural autonomy and even often religious freedom, so long, of course, as ethnicity did not turn into nationalism. The Ottoman and Habsburg empires are classical cases of self-consciously multicultural societies (a *Vielvoelkerstaat*, as the Habsburgs called their empire), where ethnicity only began to threaten, and ultimately destroy, the state when the nationalist virus began to sweep through Europe in the nineteenth century.

Clearly, these large, ‘pre-modern’ multicultural empires were not democracies, and they may be dismissed as not being relevant to the feasibility of MD. Their multiculturalism, far from assuming an equality of rights between ethnies, invariably created ethnic hierarchies. Different groups often had special rights and statuses, and the protection of cultural autonomy and differences accorded by the central state was almost invariably purchased at the cost of subordination to, or even exclusion from, the ruling circles. What these empires demonstrate, however, is that the basic condition for multiculturalism – state tolerance of, or at least indifference to, cultural diversity – can exist under a variety of political regimes, and is not empirically linked to liberal democracy. Tolerance or even promotion of cultural diversity by the state, for example, is fully consistent with a Machiavellian policy of divide and rule. Any facile association of multiculturalism with LD does not stand historical scrutiny.

Besides the large empires that often became multinational by conquest, there is another preindustrial environment in which workable polyglot, multicultural societies developed, on a much smaller scale, and through immigration rather than conquest, namely cities, including city-states. These city-states have often been freer or, at least, less despotic than larger states around them, and thus provide a better model for the development of modern MDs. From antiquity to the present, most cities of any size and commercial importance (that is, most cities beyond the level of local market towns) have, to some extent, been polyglot and multicultural. Insular Japan is a notable exception, but Rome, Alexandria, Cairo, Córdoba, Baghdad, Istanbul, Paris, Rome, Florence, Venice, the Hansa towns, Amsterdam and countless others were, at various times, towers of Babel with established communities of foreigners (scholars, merchants, craftsmen). Some, like Jews, were persecuted, but generally they were welcome and left to revel in their diversity with few pressures to assimilate or conform. Indeed, these cities were at their most cosmopolitan when they were at the zenith of their political, intellectual and economic influence. Modern analogues are New York,
Singapore, Hong Kong, Brussels, London and Paris. Clearly the cosmopolis is both a workable and appealing model. It is also worth noting that, while many of these cities were merely the capitals of large states, and often despotic states, many others were city-states with relatively democratic governments, at least for their respective bourgeoisie. Even in imperial cities, the cities were often freer than the rest of the state. *Stadtluft macht frei* (city air makes one free), as the medieval dictum went.

**Summary and conclusions**

An historical overview of multiculturalism leads one to conclude that, in practice, it worked well in two kinds of political systems, neither one a democracy in the contemporary sense. Multiculturalism, in the sense of benign state tolerance or at least indifference to cultural diversity with tacit or explicit freedom to practise one’s religion, speak one’s language and apply one’s customary law, existed in many traditional or colonial empires of the past. It was cheap to rule ‘indirectly’, and convenient to stress the divisions between subject peoples since the legitimacy of the state was largely divorced from language, culture and even sometimes from religion. Thus, it was quite unproblematic that the subject peoples continue to be as different from the ruling class as they pleased, provided they paid their taxes and remained docile.

The other historical context congenial to multiculturalism has been the cosmopolitan city, often a city-state plutocratically ruled by its patrician bourgeoisie. These states existed basically to make money, with a minimum of ideological baggage. The language spoken was a matter of convenience, with the elites being frequently polyglot. Religious laxity or indifference was common. The cultural communities occupied specialised niches in an economic system where the market ruled and politics were shaped by interests rather than ideology.

Can multiculturalism now be wedded to democracy, as commonly defined in the contemporary world? Only if certain stringent conditions are met:

1. The state must be denationalised. Multiculturalism is antithetical to the notion of *a national* state.
2. Multiculturalism must be clearly decoupled from policies aimed at reducing educational, economic, social or political disabilities or inequalities between groups. The aim of protecting cultural diversity is fundamentally antithetical to remedial policies of ‘affirmative action’ intended to *reduce* group differences (Sowell 1990). The two sets of policies might be pursued independently of one another, and on different fronts, but one must be clearly aware that they are not the same, nor, indeed, that they are generally compatible.
3. The multiculturalism most likely to produce the desirable result of peaceful coexistence is the minimalist programme defined above, namely
official policies that recognise and protect diversity, but do not celebrate and actively support it.

(4) The most congenial setting for MD is the city. If our aim, then, is to promote MD, the city, especially the city-state, provides the best model. It might be countered that the above sample is biased, and that there are plenty of large polyglot cities that are mired in poverty and chaos. Tropical Africa offers countless examples: Lagos, Kinshasa, Accra, Abidjan, Lusaka and Kampala are all highly polyglot, but hardly attractive models. But it is their poverty that creates the problems, not their multiculturalism, and even those cities are often marginally better places to live in than their surrounding hinterland. That is why people continue to migrate to them despite all their squalor and violence. A certain level of material wellbeing is a prerequisite for a successful MD, but then it is also a prerequisite for a decent existence of any kind.

In conclusion, I would argue that the best hope for successful MD would be a modern return to the city-state, Luxembourg- or Swiss Canton-size states made up of cities and their surrounding areas, or, at least, massive devolution of central state powers to local communities along Swiss lines. In many ways, the European Community is slowly moving in that direction. And within it, the more polyglot, cosmopolitan cities also tend to be the most prosperous, peaceful and pleasant ones, irrespective of size: Geneva, Zurich, Strasbourg, Luxembourg, Brussels, Amsterdam. MD, it seems, is a model best suited to the kind of multicultural environment produced by immigration to important urban centres. We must reinvent the city-state.

References