

**Marie Macey, *Multiculturalism, Religion and Women: Doing Harm by Doing Good?*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2009, 209 pp.**

*Multiculturalism, Religion and Women: Doing Harm by Doing Good?* is a feminist and sociological critique of multicultural theory and its application to reality in the particular setting of Bradford, UK. Through empirical research, Marie Macey, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Bradford, goes back to the controversial question posed by Susan Moller Okin: 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?' (Okin 1999: 9–24), arguing that multiculturalism is not only bad for women from an ethnic minority, but also for liberal democracy, for the coexisting communities (majority and minority), and for the society as a whole. Through six chapters, she develops these arguments and tries to demonstrate the negative effects of multiculturalism as a political tool in different fields, questioning whether 'political correctness' can take priority over fundamental issues, such as: academia, by limiting many research findings; the law-making processes in the policy-making arena; and the blocking of professional practice.

The first part of the book provides the reader with an overview of multiculturalism's development as an answer to the cultural and religious diversity in society in the particular case of Britain. An awareness of social divisions and racism starting in the early 1960s led the British government in the late 1980s to implement a series of tolerance and non-discrimination social policies and practices from different ideological perspectives, such as assimilation, integration, cultural pluralism, and multiculturalism. The acceptance of the right of self-definition in the academic, policy, and practice spheres showed the growing influence of minority pressure groups operating from an anti-racist and multicultural framework. Thus the riots in 2001, perpetrated by Muslim Pakistanis, resulting from residential and social separation, led to the concepts of community integration and social cohesion emerging as the latest ideologies, based on the belief that interaction between groups and inter-ethnic mixing can reduce stereotyping and prejudice.

In the second and third chapters, Macey elaborates her main argument, dealing with the main omissions of multiculturalism regarding religion and women, while arguing how multiculturalism has influenced government decision-making in several areas, impacting on the professional practice of teachers, social workers and the police, so that women and children in minority communities are left more vulnerable to physical and mental abuse. Indeed, the current trend towards social integration, both privileging religion and promoting community cohesion, is controversial, because while giving more autonomy to ethno-religious leaders, governments also perpetuate rooted forms of discrimination against women. Moreover, when failing to realise that women are key elements in the transmission of culture and religion and giving more autonomy to leaders in patriarchal communities to define the group needs, multiculturalism facilitates male control over women, which helps to create a context that hides women's suffering and makes professionals reluctant to interfere in community affairs for fear of being accused of racism. Macey defends her point very warily, when stating that it is not religion *per se* that oppresses women, but its cultural interpretations, highlighting the negative effects of a multicultural approach on minority ethnic women living in Western societies, such as the impossibility to work in public institutions if they insist on wearing the *niqab*. Indeed, the disadvantages suffered by some minorities are not the result of discrimination of their differences, but of cultural/religious beliefs and the lifestyles. Thus, she questions the validity of blaming inequality only on racism and discrimination, while from her perspective there are other cultural aspects of some minorities fostering such disadvantages. Moreover, Macey touches on the development of *sharia*' courts in the UK and their negative impact on women, since these courts particularly affect family law. The logic of multiculturalism is used to defend certain types of violence against women, since its practice comes from the requirement to respect all cultures as equal and the principle of non-interference in minority cultures. Macey bluntly accuses the British legal and social policies of being gender-blind when permitting situations such as entitling polygamous marriages to full welfare benefits for all the wives and kids, or providing no social benefits for women brought into the country as brides, which forces them to accept the abusive conduct of their partners.

In the fourth chapter, through a series of examples, Macey develops her second argument; namely, how multiculturalism can be seen as a threat to liberalism and liberal democracy, a concept that highlights citizenship, equality and basic civil, political and social human rights, in seeking to protect the individuals. Macey bluntly and somewhat harshly tackles the issue of 'political correctness' in Western societies, which has led to the suppression or distortion of publicly available information, encouraging the hiding or covering up of wrongdoings by minorities, while fostering a feeling of exaggerated discrimination against Muslims. Indeed, she criticises how multiculturalism's influence in the public sector arena has an impact in the access to, and quality of, information, both essential to democracy.

Moreover, while multiculturalism prioritizes the group over the individual, liberal democracy functions the opposite way. This focus on 'the group' tends to push communities to maintain long-established country-of-origin-based traditions, which may collide with those of the host society. Thus, Macey poses the question of how far should liberal democracy tolerate groups whose cultures are intolerant or non-democratic.

The author also deals with the issue of the individual's moral equality, institutionalized in social, civil, and political rights. Indeed, equality of opportunity is not the same as equality of outcome. This is clearly obvious in women's restricted access to work, which is not usually imposed by the labour market, but by social norms about responsibilities for caring. Although Macey agrees with extending the application of human rights to groups not previously covered by legislation, she still has concerns regarding the exaggerated perception of discrimination and the increasing focus on proactive action or positive discrimination.

In the following chapter, Macey analyses the most important practical and theoretical problems of multiculturalism from the perspective of a feminist sociologist. These include cultural relativism, racialisation, essentialism, culture and identities, regarding their impact on women, young people, minority ethnic communities and society as a whole. Although this could be considered the most theoretical part of the book, since her aim is to demonstrate the effects of multiculturalism more practically, references to dense theoretical aspects are limited.

At this point, Macey justifies her argument that multiculturalism is not only bad for women, but for the whole society, since it neglects the 'white population', expecting the change to come from the majority. On the one hand, multiculturalism is accused of essentialism since it does not acknowledge the internal differences *within* minority groups, such as gender, age, etc. On the other hand, multiculturalism sees culture as something static. Thus, when encouraging the maintenance of the homeland culture, multiculturalism removes the minorities' responsibility of engaging with new ways of understanding the world, acting against the natural dynamics of cultures. Macey argues that multiculturalism 'legislates' for culture through policies and practices, at all levels of education, locking people into rigid reactionary cultural and religious categories, and emphasizing the ethnic and religious identity over other individual aspects. This is precisely the root of the clash between feminism and multiculturalism. As Okin questions in her book, what should be done when the claims of minority cultures or religions clash with the norm of gender equality endorsed (at least formally) by liberal states? (Okin 1999: 9)

Indeed, in Britain multiculturalism has had a negative effect on women, because it advocates for non-interference in 'community affairs'. However, multiculturalists argue that as long as individuals have the right to leave any oppressing community, there is no injustice in the system. Nevertheless, as Macey points out, one could wonder where the limits of coercion or brainwashing are and when oppression starts. Moreover, do women (in particular) have to renounce their culture in order to preserve their rights? Aside from material and financial limitations to women's agency, if a culture does not allow a woman to develop a sense of self, it is very unlikely that she will even consider the option of leaving.

Macey finishes the book by questioning the real effectiveness and results of multiculturalism, whose main aims (theoretically) are enhancing integration, reducing inequality, and achieving social justice and human rights via the public recognition of minority cultures. Nevertheless, as Macey and other authors such as Stephen Castle and Mark J. Miller (Castle and Miller 2009: 275) state, multicultur-

alism's main result has been to encourage social separation. Thus, after giving an overview of some of the problems previously explained, she concludes that in the current globalised world, multiculturalism is an unachievable and illogical project, and advocates for a true liberal democracy which respects the individual, promotes equal opportunities, and eliminates all sorts of discrimination.

All in all, *Multiculturalism, Religion and Women; Doing Harm by Doing Good?* could be classified as a feminist and sociological academic critique to multicultural theories. Nevertheless, besides the controversies of this topic and other concepts the author tackles (such as 'liberal democracy', 'assimilation', 'integration', etc.), the structure of the book (with a very basic historical introduction and a summarizing conclusion at the end of each chapter), the abundant use of examples based on her own experience and the use of an informal vocabulary position the book away from strictly academic literature.

Another important aspect brought up by Macey is the overstated weight given to multiculturalism as something essential to self-respect and agency, resistance to external threats to minorities, and the struggle for ethnic justice. Macey has a point in stating the impossibility to protect every culture, language, or religion existing in highly diverse societies, which besides representing less than 8% of the population are also highly diverse. Thus, if all these minorities cannot be 'protected', which ones are entitled to this protection? Only those that 'look different'? What about religious minorities within the white population? Is multiculturalism's concern for these groups the same as for the Muslim Pakistani minority, for instance?

Contrary to some authors, such as Will Kymlicka, Macey argues against multiculturalism as opposed to feminism and liberal democracy, in the sense that it disregards the individual rights of minorities (particularly women) and claims group rights not available to the rest of the population. As Kymlicka and others argue, many feminists support the same argument about gender equality and other group-specific rights and benefits (Kymlicka 1999). From this perspective, it can be argued that both multiculturalism and feminism struggle for a more inclusive conception of justice, challenging the traditional liberal democratic assumption that equality means identical treatment.

As Macey states, one would agree that one of the main controversies of multiculturalism lies in the fact of it becoming a public policy, as is happening in the UK. When it comes to multiculturalism being something bad for society as a whole, she focuses on the current trend of the British Government to maintain that diversity is positive for society, ignoring the economic burden of having to pay benefits to unemployed and unskilled people and polygamous families, the provision of interpreters and translators, or the millions spent in special programs directed at Muslims because of their potential involvement in terrorism. With regard to these last arguments, even though her point is to show how this public expenditures on minorities can be seen as unfair and excluding by the white majority (especially in times of crisis), which at the same time can be the source of potential conflict, it can be argued that the way Macey puts it, it might sound somewhat radical, if not actually against these minorities.

All in all, Macey manages to get the reader to reflect on whether multiculturalism 'unintentionally' actuates against the majority as well as minorities within minorities (such as women), and whether it encourages cohesion or separation. Lately the emphasis has been placed too much on the 'multi' and not enough on the common culture. Multiculturalism prioritizes race and ethnicity over gender and sexuality, emphasizing differences with an essentialised and romanticised view of minority cultures. There is thus a need to balance the rights of cultural minorities with those of society for social cohesion, as well as a need to rethink the democratic management of multicultural societies, where the personal, sexual, reproductive and family spheres must be addressed as central issues of any culture. A more cohesive agenda is needed where both minorities and majorities commit to diversity, highlighting the special efforts for minorities to adapt to the host culture if the need arises, and where cultures are not seen as static or monolithic blocks, but as different and changing. Britain, like many other countries, has to work harder to develop this necessary national identity, and forms of belonging to each other.

**References:**

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