

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND MANAGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCE: A POLISH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The multicultural discourse is taking nowadays various forms depending on local contexts. It is however important to take into consideration other factors shaping this discourse in each case. Europe is therefore a region where the combination of the character of local societies and more global processes clash and shape the multicultural reality. Poland is here a case where this phenomenon is clearly visible, especially when we take into account the culturally homogenous character of the Polish society. This article attempts to highlight the most important debates surrounding the European and Polish debates on otherness, multiculturalism and multicultural society.

Keywords: Poland, multiculturalism, multicultural education

1. Western concepts of multiculturalism at the beginning of the 21st century

As Tariq Modood states in one of his books (Modood 2007) in relation to the current *raison d'être* of multiculturalism, the existence of the concept in which diversity of cultural wholes is being treated merely as a kind of new political philosophy is taking slowly foothold in the field of Western debates on cultural identity, heterogeneous character of the old continent or equality in participation in national issues. This standpoint can be misleading in many ways. It narrows the whole idea of multiculturalism to a certain domain (politics) and gives way to ideologization of multicultural practices. It also affects those institutions (schools for example) who deal with cultural diversity on a daily basis and are forced often to implement various political directives. Therefore regarding multiculturalism as just an another concept which simply covers politically the area of cultural diversity in a new manner is pointed out by Modood as incomplete and false (Modood, 2007, p. 17). As the British scholar clearly states - relaying on politics when speaking of multiculturalism is a wrong assumption. Many European states had a multiethnic and diverse character long before the invention of the national state and later on the politics of diversity itself. These groups co-existed and interacted on the daily basis without reflecting upon the problem of culture. Otherness was conceptualized not in cultural terms, but more in the discourse and categories of religion, power and class.

This diversity *in statu nascendi* wasn't however perceived as something which has to be problematized, and if on occasion it was, than not in terms of modern social sciences. It existed as a kind of reality, which was simply there; taken for granted as something universal in nature and originating in the same area of human being in the world as any other kind of activity. This view has been changed with the invention of ethnicity and national identity in Europe. The notion of cultural (ethnic) heterogeneity as backbone of the idea of multiculturalism is therefore a product of modern Western thought. It was given birth to in the midst of modernity understood as a post-Enlightenment social philosophy put into practice. Furthermore it had been emphasized more along the rise of post-modern reality in which being different is a immanent part of our existence with the others. Contemporary diversity is not just a specific state of multiplication of individual desires and needs. It is also the possibility for a creation of space where individuality is being articulated and reproduced through cultural means and new media. On the other side we cannot deny that we had also gained along with the process of individualization more personal freedom to express our own identities. Nevertheless openly expressing diversity as making the self public became today a compulsive habit and puts often aside the more fundamental side of our construction as humans.

For many postmodern thinkers, like Jean Baudrillard for example, today's struggle for individuality is just an illusion, a simulacra of diversity so to say. We live in a mirage of uniqueness maintained by consumer culture. The world seems to offer us a wide array of commodities that might serve as a basis for the process of identity building. We are able and are encouraged to pick any of them in order to build coherent images of ourselves in the sense of feeling of self-fulfillment. However this feeling, just as our contemporary identities, is also a product of the very same consumer culture criticized so much by the French thinker. We are programmed to experience and search for the ultimate hedonistic happiness in technology, social media or

various forms of pop-cultural esthetics. Our identities are, as Zygmunt Bauman states, reduced to mass produced consumer patterns and are turning into a liquid state of fragmentary visions of ourselves (Bauman 2013). In this light the idea of multiculturalism is being treated as a simple prolonging of the dominant cultural model i.e. consumer culture and therefore seen more as a diversity of goods than cultures. Surely the presented above two main discourses on multiculturalism are narrowing the problem into two areas of the general debate - politics and globalization. Certainly these aspects are important when considering multiculturalism, but the dominant character of those two ways of description cannot be accepted. Furthermore their dominant position relates in large extent to the academic debates around the issue of today's multiculturalism phenomenon than the actual processes taking place in the West.

Nevertheless the issue of multiculturalism and multicultural education today in Europe and Poland itself should be treated more in regard to the current processes of migration that affect the Western societies. These processes of population shifts are being caused by global currents and are also visible in countries like Poland, which in large extent is still being perceived as culturally homogenous. However, in recent years we had observed a significant transgression in this matter, especially in regard to migration from Eastern Europe, Far East and Africa. This is a relatively new phenomena to the Polish society, due to various reasons. First of all, the political change after 1989 has lifted the cold war era isolation in terms of opposing political forces of West and the Soviet Block. Another, much more important factor are military conflicts and economic discrepancies between Europe and other parts of the globe which had caused new migration waves in the past 25 years. The presence of new migrants in Poland and other EU countries is raising today questions about cultural assimilation in the context of transgression of both - national and migrant identities. The effect of those debates is the emergence of a new discourse on multicultural education and the need for transforming the old solutions in the matter of managing cultural diversity beyond the above presented ways of consideration.

2. Multiculturalism Á La Carte - critical approaches towards past and existing multicultural politics

Contemporary European politics of multiculturalism are being criticized today mainly for their ineffectiveness in the sense of cultural adaptation of groups and individuals who fall into the concept of "otherness". In practice this assumption is being related to the problem of assimilation of migrants in countries like France, Germany, Great Britain or Netherlands. The lack of basic language skills, sticking to traditional customs, ghettoization in spatial and social terms - these are just few of the problems pointed out by many observers and creators of this public domain. Many other follow and raise concern about the integration of "cultural others" into some European national discourses. This concern is taking various forms, starting from the rise of radical right wing parties in allegedly liberal states like Sweden, Norway or the Netherlands, and ending with a more intellectual debate on failed integration mechanisms in France and Germany. For instance, the so called "multikulti" approach applied for many years in Germany towards this issue is being targeted as not working as it was supposed to, not by the conservative part of the German political scene, but by Angela Merkel herself. In one of her recent public speeches she describes the current politics of integration as "miserably failed" adding also that "the German economy needs migrant workers desperately". Merkel's words could be interpreted as a significant point in the current debates on migration in Europe and this approach is being shared by large parts of European societies.

The existing dialectics of anti-migrant sentiments in many European countries and the simultaneous need for migrant labor is shifting the contemporary debate on multiculturalism more and more often from politics into the field of neoliberal economic solutions. The common view that Western economic system should undergo a deep deregulation of their basic institutions and areas is an idea proliferated mainly among politicians and economists in old and new EU states. The neoliberal approach does not just treat cultural diversity as an extension of the market and a chance to increase the numbers of potential consumers, but it treats cultural diversity as a merchandise good in general. Otherness becomes therefore a sales object just like any other kind of material good and it needs the same marketing advocacy to gain wide spread success. Selling cultural diversity might however be a tricky business. How could anyone be willing to buy something that isn't as much attractive as a new car or phone? The salesperson has to make the object equal to the car and phone, i.e. change the meaning behind the object itself. Semantic transgressions in relation to the idea of multiculturalism, diversity and otherness could be observed in the mentioned earlier political discourses, who in consequence affect the institutional practices. Migration, also with an economic background, could become a part of advertisement campaigns, just like several years ago billboards picturing "the Polish plumber" were distributed in France. However, the overtaking of the multicultural issues by the language of economy and marketing is today visible in the most peculiar way in the context of illegal migration from Africa and Asia, streaming into the wealthy European metropolises. Migration, but also everything that is connected

to it like human suffering, hunger, war trauma and other disturbing experiences, are becoming a good that might be offered, distributed and sold. For example illegal migration had recently become an national issue Italy in the context of the Mare Nostra operation in the Mediterranean and the increasing number of refugees on the island of Lampedusa. The managing of the problem had been given to Frontex, a private company dealing with law enforcement technology and providing solutions for the border guards around the Old Continent. Privatization of borders, which is a constantly growing on popularity in Europe and United States, is also a symbolic step towards economization of cultural diversity. Certainly culture is for sale now, but only as long it remains attractive to the buyer. Migrant from countries like Iraq or Syria are hardly fulfilling this condition. In consequence cultural diversity is in this light often translated into the language of esthetics and moral judgment.

This notion finds evidence in the criticism expressed by the late Oriana Fallaci in her infamous book "The Rage and The Pride" (Fallaci 2002). In this text Fallaci, expresses her concern about the traditional European values and identity, both being shattered by the presence of migrants in Italy. Just as the Italian author and journalist attempts to show, the world today is falling into pieces. These fragments of reality affect us all in the sense, that we all participate in this process of decay. Fallaci's book points out the main reasons of this situation, which are associated with the erosion of our European cultural pride. The lack of cultural values, the absence of tradition or the liberal approach toward assimilation of migrants are just some of them according to Falacci. Her standpoint and the reaction of her readers (who welcomed the book's theses) is showing us, that contemporary European societies tend to accept a radical turn in cultural and political ideology more, then few years back. Certainly it is just an exaggeration of the many voices visible today within the European cultural discussion, but it is a very loud and visible one.

Thus the case of the latest massacres in Norway had a deep impact on the way we view the cultural landscape in the old continent. Religious and cultural fundamentalism since Breivik's actions are no longer the attribute of the Other, but they arose within the European landscape and is deeply grounded on what is seen as a set of so called true European values. Further more it was considered by the perpetrator as an extreme, but necessary act of self-defense against the growing stream of cultural and ideological otherness flowing into the truly European field of Christian tradition. Breivik's testimony had raised an important question. Are we, as modern European societies, still ready to accept the Other among us? Is it possible to get along with people, who's way of living we do no accept, or even furthermore - we despise their culture? Were the ideas achieved by the changes of the 1960's just a daydream dreamt by few liberals? These, and other questions are the key issues Europe has to deal with nowadays when speaking of the category of cultural otherness. It might be obvious that we tend to face these problems through ideological glasses of politics. It is also important to look closely at the role social sciences play in providing the answers to them.

3. Multiculturalism and the new "Cultural Other" - anthropological perspectives

In the context of Norwegian struggles with multiculturalism it is important to point out that many local debates on the failures of concepts of culturally diverse societies are having trouble to acknowledge the fact that simplification of multiculturalism into plain diversity is a serious mistake. Diversity, considered even in ethnographic terms, is a sort of a key word for a cartographic description of cultural reality which everyone sees. It doesn't grasp the nature of the problem, human motives of behavior or cultural transmission of ideas - it simply states the existence of different groups of people having different cultures. It's metaphor might be the collecting of cultural curiosities for a 19th century museum of natural sciences. The effect might be overwhelming in terms of cultural shock or exotic esthetics, but at the end of the day we are still left with the main problem, i.e. the non-presence of social, economic and other inequalities.

This is also the case of Norway as it is being pointed out by Unni Wikan in her book "Generous Betrayal. Politics of Culture in the New Europe" (Wikan 2002). The Norwegian author and public intellectual portrays the Scandinavian state's policy towards integration of migrants and its demise in confrontation with the reality. Norway's has been perceived commonly for a long time as one of the most social friendly states among other European countries. The Norwegian welfare system and a high level of state help regarding fighting unemployment had created a image of a "society worth living in". Although this well working system provided a high standard of living for most of its beneficiaries the outcome did not provide integration for those who's cultural background was an obstacle to either receive help or they were did receive it but no deeper act of integration were undertaken. According to Wikan, this half-way solutions don't provide any answer to the existing problem, but also make it more obscure for the migrant recipients of state funded submissions and at the end put them in a even more marginal position in the Norwegian society. This, what Wikan calls a "generous betrayal" - financially attractive system, but not solving the basic problem of integration in the first place. Migrants make in Norway a percentage of around 20% the population, but we have to take into account the fact that migrant "is defined a person with two foreign-born parents" (Wikan

2002, p.36) and "as children of immigrants are not statistically marked, it will be impossible to follow their life trajectories" (*Ibidem*). As we can see the number of people who can fall into the category of "otherness" might be actually larger than the percentage of immigrants *per se*. This leaves us with the assumption that the Norwegian society might actually be more divided than Norwegian admit themselves.

Wikan provides us with an evidence for this claim, saying that a common practice of Norwegian institutions is to call groups of people, who somehow differ in the context of their non-Norwegian origins as "minority-lingual" (Wikan 2002, p. 37) instead using categories which were applied not so long ago as race and culture. This practice softens the meaning and gives us the impression of equality. In fact, what happened is that the existing barriers between Norwegians and migrants had been emphasized and their consequence is a large number of people left behind the state's social aid system. Even the "immigration stop" policy introduced in 1975 had not succeeded and the number of immigrants in Norway constantly grew since the 1980's. The problem's outcome was among others "the diversion of would-be immigrants from the labor migrant circuit to the political asylum" (*Ibidem*, p. 39).

The case described by Wikan is unfortunately just one of many examples how politics of multiculturalism and cultural diversity turns into an instrumentalized tool for rather subjecting the "cultural other" to various mechanisms of marginalization than its inclusion. Those mechanisms are based on many occasions on already existing and reproduced stereotypes and prejudice articulated towards those who fall into the void between a old fashioned national identity and the migrant context. The Norwegian author postulates therefore a more open approach towards migrants, especially those who intercultural capital is low (for example due to the lack of basic language skills) and enables an equal dialogue. Wikan's argumentation in relation to the intercultural dialogue is based on an assumption that Western societies should interact more on a daily basis with migrant groups. This will initiate further integration almost "naturally". As she criticizes the criminalization of migrants (like association with "rape culture") she also advocates in the first place for a broad understanding of others in order to overcome cultural distance.

The construction of cultural otherness is in the West today rooted much more deeply in the social, political and economic context than Wikan would like to see it. Simply inviting "the Other" into your home, as she postulates, won't solve the issues surrounding the multicultural debate in Europe. The polarization of worldviews, the current economic crisis and widespread anti-migrant sentiments make a fully equal dialogue in many situations hard to practice or even impossible. The idea of a multicultural society is however dependant of getting close with the others. Cultural differences had become in many ways an issue triggering diverse public debates and cultural wars. The latter term is nowadays used in relation to specific conflicts within the public sphere and the media, reflecting the voices of disillusioned Europeans openly rejecting some of the basic democratic values due to the recent violence outbreaks or terrorist attacks. It is a fact that today's "cultural Other" had gained in Europe the face of Islam and Muslim migrants and population in United Kingdom, France or Netherlands. This specific polarization of cultural standpoints is spreading across public debates in many European countries, including Poland. What is important in this light is the cultural construction of the "Other" as a certain collage of images taken straight from past Western historical discourses, such as colonialism.

4. Otherness and education

Without any doubt the concept of "otherness" is also an important point in the modern educational debates, where it is being put into the issue of multiculturalism and multicultural education. This specific educational and political strategy is implemented in a context of a dramatically changing level of diversity among student groups in those European countries, where the system itself allows them to express their cultural identity in a pluralistic manner. Therefore the multicultural society is a model of a simultaneously pluralistic and a liberal system, in which every single group is being gained access to the cultural mainstream in the name of democracy. Multicultural education in Europe is based upon the fact, or more an assumption, that European societies are pluralistic in their core ideas, whereas the set of those ideas might be as diverse as the multicultural classroom in contemporary schools in Germany, Sweden or Great Britain. This assumption takes us to the point where today's cultural diversity of once homogenous European societies, is being celebrated as one of these ideas, it is being put in the center of our discussion over the future shape of our continent.

The idea of multiculturalism and multicultural education was for a long period of time the dominant element of the discussion around the concept of otherness but not the only one. Cultural otherness was slowly gaining recognition also in relation to more subtle criteria of difference. These criteria could be made by the category of sex, age, political affiliation etc. These fields were the factor for further diversification and social stratification. Just as Bourdieu had put it, social distinction is related to cultural capital and the habitus we are given by the society. Our own creation of the social and cultural field of agency is in that case

conditioned by the cultural values and ideas we share with other people. No matter if these values and ideas are an object of conflict, or an element stabilizing the social structure - they are being expressed through means given us by culture itself.

In the light of these remarks multicultural education seems to be more a question of a processual approach. Cultural change is here a part of a particular system, as well an element of contact between various cultural systems and the phenomena of diffusion of selected elements of those systems. The ambiguous character of this phenomena is paradoxically not always a source of destabilization. It shakes the foundations of the cultural system only if we take for granted the system's integration as the main goal set by people who live within the system. Social praxis shows us clearly that not all participants in social life are interested in maintaining this very narrow understood integration. People tend often more to play their own interests within the given cultural field, which is also conditioned by the historical process it produced. In this sense, the flow of cultural content within the system and between different systems contributes to the dynamics of diversification in a very structural way. The structure of norms, values, esthetics, and beliefs is being enriched by new elements, sometimes treated as alien towards the old system. The discussion on tradition and history emerges as a almost natural cause of this process. Although constant reshaping and transforming of the cultural structure is a process we are witnessing in every possible sphere of our existence, it also takes place in various speeds. In some spheres it might occur as nothing changes at all, and in other the change is being pointed out as a cultural revolution. This situation triggers a wide discussion on the transmission of traditional ideas and in that field education comes to play almost instantly.

5. Multiculturalism and multicultural education in Poland today

Poland's contemporary ethnic and cultural landscape is still being perceived commonly as extremely homogenous in nature. This view is being shared in the same extent by outside observers of Polish affairs as by many Poles themselves. The public discourse on national identity that might be observed in the Polish media is bound by its historical dimension, or, what is more accurate. it is being presented as traditional identity in terms of a unified national community of ethnic Poles. The understanding of the Polish national identity is here often being narrowed into an imagined community of blood ties shared by a certain group of people. The obvious influence of the German tradition of *Blut und Boden* in conceptualizing national identity is an effect of influence of romantic philosophy and the 19th century partitions of Poland due to which large part of the country was subjected to the German empire. These historical factors were emphasized during the 20th century and regaining independence and came back into the discussion after 1989. Certainly also the period between 1945 and 1989 had a deep impact on the described above vision of national unity, but in relation to other ideological points. During the communist era national identity had been officially abandoned and replaced with ideology of a transnational unity of the working classes and other socialist states. Despite the regime's ideological war on national sentiments there were certain phenomena present which made the Polish national identity very much alive during that time. The civic disobedience and the rise of the Solidarity movement, which eventually had led to the fall of communism, played the card of the religious factor in order to call on nation's unified resistance. The Catholic Church's activity during that period was seen as a part of a larger national front against the state oppression. On the other hand the close relation of Polish national identity with Catholicism has much older roots and might be traced back to the early 19th century. Both sources form today the impression shared by many Poles that being Polish is synonymous with being a Roman Catholic, i.e. ethnicity (in the sense of a shared natural origins) is made equal to religion (a culturally defined factor).

Today this notion of specific Polish religiosity is also being treated more and more in the category of a national myth. Especially when it come to public debates it is being brought up often in the context of "traditional" values and the impact of modernization and globalization processes on those systems. We may observe how two optics on national identity clash and collide in the public sphere making the ground for the mentioned cultural wars. This situation is mainly related to the media and politics, but it affects clearly all main areas of public life in Poland now. The acceptance for the transition of these values and re-inventing tradition is still a less accepted perspective in the debate on the direction Polish society is taking now and what path in the European Union it should take. The domination of the vision of a national homogenous community is nevertheless crumbling down in recent years due to various factors. We may divide these factors into two general groups - the structural ones and those more global in their nature.

The first group of these factors is being made among others by the fact that after 2004 Poland had joined the EU with all of the consequences of this step. This means also the opening of borders for people who are now EU citizens but were before already put on the margin of the Polish society. This issue is mostly related to the case of the Roma coming from the Balkans who immigrated into Poland in significant numbers since the 1990's and after 2004 had a legal right to cross the border. Roma migrants, who come mostly from

Romania and Bulgaria, are in Poland an ethnic group which fits the described before image of "otherness". Particularly in this case cultural difference is being described in categories such as race and as well class due to the way Roma culture is stereotypically described in terms of how people supposedly look (darker skin) and what they do for a living (begging). The large scale of social distance towards the Roma is in Poland also an evidence for a low level of tolerance towards that group and a basis for their contemporary marginalization. It is not seldom that their legal status is being criticized and undermined in Poland, as well in other EU countries like recently France for example. This problem is also affecting Polish Roma, as they often suffer the same prejudice and intolerance. The current status of Roma as modern migrants is therefore a perfect exemplification of how the idea of multiculturalism put a social praxis is failing in today's reality. It shows us that the visions of European multicultural politics are merely declarative and have to be changed in order to built a more pluralistic society model that will be not just presented to the public by the politicians or taken by them for granted but also widely accepted by the people addressed by it. We may fairly agree that structural factors shaping the multicultural discourse are in Poland seen as something objectified into processes and phenomena beyond reach of regular citizens.

As for the more global group of factors it is necessary to point out the phenomena affecting the Polish society in the context of European politics of migration. After joining the EU Poland has become a part of a much larger community and was subjected to EU regulations regarding also the issue of transnational migration. Alone in the year 2013 around 15 thousand applications for the status of a refugee had been submitted to the Polish Office For Foreigners and the number is constantly rising. The largest groups of immigrants are currently formed by people from the Russian Federation and Ukraine, but a significant number of people is coming into the country from the Asia region and countries like Vietnam, Iraq or Syria. Another group of migrants is being formed by foreign workers and students staying for a limited period of time in Poland. These groups are present mostly in large cities and industrial regions of Poland like Warsaw, Cracow or Silesia. They come mostly from neighboring countries, but also from United Stats, Netherlands, Latin America and India. The division between people with refugee status and migrant workers/students is not just in the character of their stay. It's grounded more in their presence in the structure of the Polish society. Refugees tend to not participate in the public life in fear of deportation, an attitude shared with a hard to estimate number of illegal immigrants residing now in Poland. Migrant workers, who's stay has more legal privileges, take much more part in the every day practices in the sense of social, economic and, to some extent, political dimension. In the last dimension it is as well important to mention the group of people who gained the status of a Polish citizen and are participating in the public sphere as local politicians and even members of the parliament. In all of these scenarios the processes of global change in the context of migration take effect and influence the transgression of the Polish ethnic map. The scale of this process isn't certainly that extensive as in other European countries, but visible enough to initiate a certain debate on the Polish vision of a multicultural society.

The contemporary Polish multicultural discourse is based on several assumptions. The first one relates to the past character of the Polish society, where the number of culturally different groups made a much larger number, as the Jewish population for example before the Holocaust. The presence of the ethnic diversity might be traced back even further, and points out other groups like the Polish Tatars, still living in the east of the country. Another assumption is taken on the basis of modern migration processes, which were presented above. The interaction of history and the contemporary issues makes the specific nature of Polish multiculturalism discourse today. On one hand Polish society is being confronted with its own experience with diversity. This raises now questions on the moral responsibility for the past events and the possibility of a peaceful co-existence in the future. On the other, the multicultural debate is taken into the area of the assimilation issue. In the latter case one of the most appealing spheres where the assimilation policy is taking part is definitely education.

Contemporary multicultural education in Poland is being shaped by actions undertaken in formal and informal educational institutions. What makes a common denominator for these actions is the postulated attempt to integrate children and adults into the society by providing specific cultural competences that will allow to function them in a much broader spectrum of social agency. It is not my aim here to reconstruct specifically those educational initiatives, but more to highlight the key problems which are tackled within education in Poland in relation to the category of cultural difference. With this notion we bring up a series of issues which are visible within the Polish educational system. First of all it has to be stressed out the fact that many Polish schools lack the teachers trained in multicultural education. This results in a deep discrepancy between official multicultural politics and the educational praxis. Secondly, the system solutions in education at the level of kindergartens, elementary schools and high schools are insufficient when it comes to dealing with pupils lacking the basic cultural skills like knowledge of Polish for example. We may often observe situations where children with a migrant background are being treated with solutions taken straight from special education programs instead of providing them the necessary competences they need. Creating

special classes for Roma children isn't also a fact that makes the right integration policy in the face of the mentioned before marginalization of this group.

However giving back due attention to what is currently being undertaken in Poland it is worth mentioning that a lot of educational initiatives are being started not just by schools or other state run institutions, but also by local communities, activists and NGO's. This agency "from below" is shaping the multicultural education in Poland in a form, which often is much more effective. What seems to be a pragmatic "hands on" approach in the first sight becomes slowly an accepted way of combining formal institutions and citizens with real needs of people lacking the proper intercultural education. This last issue might serve here as a positive example of the direction multiculturalism and multicultural education is taking now in Poland.

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