

Israel: Unsuccessful and Limited Multicultural Education **Zvi Bekerman**

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The paper questions whether the limited multicultural practices implemented in Israel towards sectors of the Jewish collective and those implemented towards the Palestinian minority can indeed be considered as liberalising processes. After some short historical consideration regarding the shaping of Israel's multicultural policy, the ingroup and outgroup multicultural practices in Israel will be discussed, as these are reflected in a variety of theoretical and empirical sources, related to curriculum and language policies. The paper ends with a critique of present multicultural understanding and hints at the necessary changes which need to take place in multicultural theorising and understanding, in an attempt to improve Israel's present situation.

Michael Waltzer (1998) describes three approaches to maintaining multicultural societies. The first approach, typified by the millet system which characterised the working of the Ottoman empire, allowed all groups, while submitting to the imperial rule, to retain considerable autonomy over their communities in all matters concerning family, personal law, and education. The second approach, represented in the organisation of the nation-state, seeks to preserve the culture of the majority group with a rather low (if any) commitment to supporting the minority culture/s. The third approach is exemplified by immigrant societies which are as well organised as nation-states. However, over time they are forced into a kind of neutrality which is expressed through religious tolerance and secularism – leaving the task of sustaining particular cultures to the particular nation's composing groups. Since its inception as a state in 1948, Israel has been plagued by national, ethnic, religious, and political divisions. In its not always successful attempts to overcome the region's complex historical development, the State somewhat reflects the three approaches mentioned by Waltzer.

Historical considerations

In Palestine under the British mandate (1920-1948), which sustained elements of the millet Ottoman political rule, education was divided into an Arab, mostly public, sector and a Hebrew, quasi-private, sector. The Hebrew sector was divided into a Zionist secular sector and an ultra-orthodox non-Zionist sector. The Zionist branch was further divided into religious and non-religious sectors. During the period prior to the declaration of Israel's independence (1948) and in the period immediately following, the dominant secular Zionist establishment struggled to find ways to integrate the sectorial educational system into a state-sponsored system. These efforts incited a political crisis that came to an end only in 1953, with the adoption of the State Educational law. This law aimed to institute an egalitarian and universal educational system but ended up replicating old divisions (Zameret, 1997). Today, and still under the dictates of the 1953 law, the educational system in Israel is divided into two main branches: the Arab sector and the Hebrew sector – with the latter being divided into secular and religious sectors. The ultra-orthodox Jews, the Druze, and the kibbutzim have autonomous enclaves.

Multicultural practices

Multiculturalism has been defined as a method whereby culturally diverse groups are accorded status and recognition, not just at the individual level, but in the institutional structures of society (Parekh, 2002). Moreover, multiculturalism involves the endorsement of harmonious and constructive relationships between culturally diverse groups (Cashmore, 1996). Multiculturalist

perspectives have had a deep influence in the social sciences, and particularly in the field of education (Phillion, 2002; Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2003), where it is on its way to becoming a well-established sub-discipline sustained by a wide variety of theoretical knowledge, practical guidelines and curricula (Banks, 1994; Bloom, 1987; D'Souza, 1992; Ravitch, 1990; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Still, the minimal literature on the impact of multicultural educational reform has yielded its fair share of debate and criticism, and has not always been encouraging (Freeman, 2000; Whitehead & Wittig, 2004).

Two main orders of complexity can be identified when it is attempted to approach issues of multiculturalism in the Israeli sphere. The first touches upon ingroup variations and the second on outgroup national differences.

When Jews in Europe joined the national aspirations of European movements towards the end of the nineteenth century, Jewish culture was imagined as an ethno-national culture that bound Jewish communities through primordial ties everywhere. This powerful perspective tried to blur ingroup religious, national, and cultural variations and was instrumental in implementing the policy of the "Jewish melting pot". This "melting pot" ideology strongly characterised the hegemonic power's strategy geared towards nation-building during the era of colonisation of Palestine and the first decades after the declaration of Israel's independence (Peled, 2008; Yonah, 2005). The second, tightly connected to the first, touches upon the national conflict between Palestinians and Jews in Israel. The same "imagination" through which the modern homogeneous understanding of the Jewish ethno-polity was achieved added to the very "real" bellicose conflict over land and resources sustained by Jews and Palestinians culminated in the becoming of the one (the Jews) through the negation of the "other" (the Palestinians).

The picture becomes even more complex when it is realised that the unifying ethno-national narrative posited first by the Jewish European settlers (Ashkenazi) and their national aspirations can be easily identified as being permeated by Eurocentric and Orientalist preconceptions which ultimately bear responsibility for the processes of alienation and exclusion that negated and marginalised both Palestinians and Mizrahi Jews (Jews from Arab countries whose mass immigration began during the first years after Israel's declaration of independence). In addition, the secularism (and/or the moderate/modernised forms of religiosity) characteristic of the intellectual roots of Ashkenazi Zionist Jews was also instrumental in marginalising the Ultra-orthodox Jewish community.

Needless to say, these cultural and national differences, which stand at the basis of Israel's many social rifts, can also be interpreted and explained through structural perspectives that would easily point towards the fact that the three marginalised groups make up the low income and poor sectors of Israeli society. These three groups, Palestinians, Ultra-orthodox, and Mizrachim, share other commonalities, albeit at different and changing levels. Traditionally, they adhere to hierarchical patriarchal codes of behaviour, they have large families, they are less individualistic in their outlooks and they support group values (Baum, 2007; Shohat, 1988). In addition, they adopt traditionalist or religious perspectives and demographically live more or less segregated from the mainstream secular Jewish population (Baum, 2007; Yiftachel, 1998). Compared to national education averages, these groups score lower on national examinations, have a higher

percentage of school drop-out (CBS, 2000), and are less likely to pass the matriculation examinations (*Bagrut*) (Ministry of Education, 2000).

When they do pass, these groups are less likely to qualify for university admission (CBS, 2000). In spite of the growth in the number of students who qualify for university admission, in 2004 only half of the total 17 year cohort were entitled to matriculation. Out of these, 54% were Jews and only 31% were Palestinians. In 2003, the average of entitlement to matriculation among students coming from urban areas was 63%, while those coming from settlements in the periphery was 49%. For Druze students it was 41%, for Palestinians 36%, and for Bedouin 26%. In 2007, most of the 17 year cohort who were not entitled to matriculation came from low income neighbourhoods, Palestinian villages, and periphery settlements. The marginalised position of these populations is reflected strongly in other components of education, as will be addressed below.

Curriculum

It is a well-acknowledged fact that curricula respond to political, economic, and cultural processes in the countries within which they are developed and implemented. Competing doctrines and practices are always at play in the formation of curricular developments because it is upon them that political forces try to construct shared cultural understandings (M.W. Apple, 2001; McEneaney & Meyer, 2000). Ben Peretz and Zeidman (1986) describe three main and distinctive periods of curricular development in Israel. The first is strongly related to the early days of the state and is characterised by an emphasis on ideological/cultural values; the second is typified by a more scientific approach to knowledge; and the third has been described as more attuned to humanistic values. In their own analysis, Sabar and Mathias (2003) describe this last period as carrying less of a homogenising force and yet limited in its response to the sectorial needs of the multiple groups which constitute the Israeli polity.

In a more recent study, Hofman, Alpert and Schnell (2007) point towards what they identify as a state of confusion regarding the definition of the national and cultural identity of Israel. They describe Israel as a society which is undergoing radical changes and moving from being a hegemonic society, co-opted by the values of the Zionist Ashkenazi elite, to one that at least tries to confront the competing narratives and values of its conforming groups. This move is not easy and traditional Zionist orthodoxy can still be identified as dominating the scene, although some sectors are able to more openly defy the official discourse. As an example, we will now consider developments in the history curriculum in Israel.

Official history is generally determined by the dominant group and is used to perpetuate its cultural hegemony (Crawford, 1995; Phillips, 1998). This reality leaves little space for alternative narratives, which are recognised as a major part of a group's cultural rights. Modern countries have long made use of history curricula to promote a strong sense of belonging among citizens (Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1998). In areas of conflict, these curricula become central tools in the prolongation of conflict (Bar-Tal, 1999).

In general, national narratives are produced so as to justify the nations' necessary existence. In countries in conflict, these narratives tend to be partial. They explain the conflict from narrow, particularistic perspectives of truth and from a position of indisputable morality. These narratives

also tend to exclude, dehumanise, and devalue the enemy and the accompanying narrative (Cole, 2007). If at all present, the narrative of the enemy is judged as morally inferior. The enemy is depicted as being immoral and holding to irrational and manipulative views (Opatow, 2001). A society's ideology and its ethos are formally represented in textbooks (Apple, 1979; Bourdieu, 1973; Luke, 1998) designed for massive educational consumption in the homogenising efforts of the nation state. As such, textbooks are assumed to stand in a dialectical relationship with schooling and violent conflict. In order to begin the process of post conflict reconciliation and to prevent the replication of educational structures that might have contributed to the conflict, this dialectical relationship needs to be recognised and explored (Tawil, Harley, & Porteous, 2003).

Recent research concerning Palestinian and Israeli textbooks has shown them to be lacking in complexity and criticality when presenting the multifaceted events and outcomes that have brought about the present conflict affecting both peoples (Adwan & Bar-On, 2004; S Adwan & Firer, 1997; Firer & Adwan, 1999). In a detailed study of the Israeli curriculum, Bar-Tal (1999) found that while Palestinians were not necessarily delegitimised, they were still presented through stereotypical perspectives. At the same time, Jews were required to identify with Jewish heroism and Jewish victimisation in all the various curricula produced from 1950 to 1990. Bar-Tal also found that the curriculum supports an ethos of continuity in relation to the present conflict so as to allow students to cope with the current situation.

Over the course of five decades, Reznik (1999) conducted a study on the national Jewish school curricula in bible, history, civics, and literature. His study concludes that these curricula enforce particularistic perspectives at the expense of universal and civic outlooks. Studies conducted by Podeh (2000), during a similar period as the one covered in Bar-Tal's studies, point towards the fact that in all aspects related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the history curricula in the Jewish schools have, as many other tools of socialisation, acted as "memory agents" that help crystallise the Jewish nation's collective memory. Though he identifies a changing and diminishing particularistic national sense over time, and thus a lessening of Palestinian stereotyping, these curricula still do not seem to open the Israeli education system to a true Palestinian-Jewish dialogue regarding historical narratives. In a comparative analysis, conducted on the new history curriculum for junior high schools in the Jewish sector and a new experimental curriculum for senior high-schools in the Palestinian sector published in 1999, Al-Haj (2002) found that there is no attempt to expose Jewish students to the rival national Palestinian narrative. However, within the Palestinian curriculum some innovation can be identified. It is stated that the curriculum fosters a feeling of identification with the Arab nation and its culture while at the same time fostering their identification with the state of Israel. That said, the curriculum makes neither specific reference to the Palestinian people nor any reference to the nature of the State of Israel (as a Jewish state) and to the marginalised status of the Palestinian citizens in it. These findings bring Al-Haj to conclude that Jewish curricula are still very far away from exemplifying multicultural perspectives. On the other hand, the Palestinian curricula reflect a multicultural perspective, albeit one that is imposed upon them, given that the Palestinian minority has no say in the development of its own curriculum or that of the majority population.

The curricular emphasis on the Jewish character of the state has naturally marginalised Palestinians. The emphasis on this character is not universally Jewish but is tinted by the European Ashkenazi Zionist tradition and thus has also served to marginalise other Jewish groups. The ambivalence of the Zionist ideology towards its non-European subjects has had

grave consequences for Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab countries – the Mizrahi/Sephardic Jews. The prevailing educational policies instituted by the reigning Ashkenazi hegemony sought to turn these immigrants into Israeli citizens through a process of cultural assimilation (Zameret, 1997). The Ashkenazi Zionist rhetoric of the melting pot basically meant merging the Mizrachim with the Ashkenazi. The justification for this process was based upon the idea of an existing cultural gap which needed to be remedied. The new immigrants were settled in peripheral areas and schooling was the main tool used to foster Mizrahi socialisation into the new state. Education was used to modernise the immigrants by secularising them and adapting them to an industrialised economy. Equality was offered in exchange for the erasure of cultural components considered alien and inferior to the dominant group. Yet, the offer was misleading because Mizrahi children were relegated to lower-level schools and special education classrooms, which ultimately undermined their self-respect and marginalised them. In the late 1960s, fearing that the national unifying project was in danger, the government implanted a policy of desegregation between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews with the hope of diminishing the growing inequalities. Within a decade this reform was shown to have failed and research results showed processes of segregation taking place within the integration initiative (Dahan & Levy, 2000).

With its values of individuation and market economy, the era of the 1980s and 1990s brought about a process of liberalisation which for the first time allowed for the organisation of two alternative educational Mizrahi initiatives to evolve – Kedma and Shas. Kedma was an initiative aimed at establishing academic high schools in underprivileged neighbourhoods. In addition to implementing a regular academic school programme, the initiative implemented curricular projects that emphasised Mizrahi cultural heritage and attempted to reinstitute Mizrahi history in the history curriculum. Mizrahi history was almost totally absent from the Zionist historiography (similarly to the case of Palestinians). Shas, an ultra-orthodox political party, established its own autonomous educational system geared towards ultra-orthodox Sephardi Jews and also towards low income traditionalist Mizrachim. Shas encouraged individuals to take pride in the traditional values the Zionist movement had previously denied. Today, both these educational initiatives are perceived as a threat by the Zionist secular establishment and it is yet to be seen if and how they will develop in the future.

There are many other examples of autonomous educational initiatives in Israel, many of which developed after the liberalising policies adopted in the 1990s within the Jewish educational sector, but space does not allow for them all to be discussed here. Therefore, this section will conclude with reference to the Ultra-orthodox (Ashkenazi) stream, the oldest of its kind in Israel. Today, this stream is said to have served as a model for the development of the initiatives previously mentioned. Though recognised by the state, the Ultra-orthodox Ashkenazi stream is “non-official”; it gained its autonomy by refraining from openly opposing the Zionist leadership during the political struggles which preceded the establishment of the state and were rewarded by having their educational autonomy respected (Maoz, 2007). In their curriculum, these schools reflect the traditional, pre-emancipation values of the Jewish religious community and have struggled to prevent their education from being contaminated by the Renaissance and Enlightenment values which affected Jewish modernisation and Zionist streams. In a sense, these schools are the first example in Israel of a successful struggle against the Zionist homogenising forces which advocated educational uniformity through their melting pot educational policies.

But this struggle carried a high exclusionist price: the ultra-orthodox community lives mostly in segregated areas and is excluded from the centres of power.

Language policy

It is well-acknowledged that the imagining of a nation includes struggles with respect to language diversity. There are many issues, such as which language should be privileged and/or whether monolingualism or multilingualism should be practiced. Furthermore, ideologies of the state are partly constructed through ideologies of language (Heller, 1999).

The Hebrew language has traditionally been associated with Judaism and thus considered a natural option as the national language of Jews in the period of Jewish national revival. However, Hebrew is not necessarily the language of the Jews. Prior to the establishment of the State, Yiddish was spoken among Eastern European (Ashkenazi) immigrants and Arabic or Ladino was spoken among Middle Eastern Jews (Sephardic, Mizrahi).

Deutch (2005) identifies two main documents as the ones that shaped language rights in Israel. The first, the Israeli Declaration of Independence, suggests a strong relationship between the revival of the Hebrew language and the national revival of the Jews. Nevertheless, the document also guarantees freedom of language to all its citizens. The second, Article 82 of the Palestinian Order in Council over the Land of Israel, which was adopted from the British mandatory law, mandated the use of English, Arabic, and Hebrew in its official publications. It was modified in Israeli law by repelling the requirement to use the English language. Thus Arabic and Hebrew remained Israel's official languages. However, these documents lack legal authority and Hebrew has a dominant status in all aspects of communication (Bernard Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). The hegemonic status of Hebrew in Israel was not easily achieved because other languages (German, English, Yiddish) were used by contesting groups in the early Jewish settlement in Palestine. By 1948, Hebrew had gained full institutional backing, which stressed the centrality of this language for the conformation of an Israeli identity which now had to cope with the influx of major waves of Jewish immigration arriving from Arab countries. The Hebrew literacy campaign that was started in 1949 was successful and by 1972, 77% of the immigrant population reported Hebrew to be their principle language; such a success was premised on pragmatic requirements to enter the workforce. Ben-Rafael (1994) has documented the rapid loss of immigrant languages mostly by Jews from Arab-speaking countries following the policies implemented which discouraged public use of any language other than Hebrew. The Hebrew literacy campaign became the main tool for the homogenisation of the Jewish population in Israel.

As for the Palestinians and their language, it was already mentioned that the Arabic language was formally acknowledged as an official language of the State, while English was denied this status. Yet, customary use has retained a higher status for the English language over the one given to Arabic. In spite of its official status, Arabic is not regularly present in all official documents or public signs which are normally bilingual but prefer English as the second language. There are Arabic radio and television broadcasts and Arabic remains the language of instruction in the Arab educational system but Hebrew literacy is a necessity for all Palestinians. Without it they are even more marginalised from employment opportunities. Moreover, given that higher education in Israel is only offered in the Hebrew language, lack of Hebrew literacy would prevent Palestinians from studying at universities.

In more recent years, following the weakening of Zionist ideology and the slow but steady growth of neo-liberalising perspectives, some changes have occurred regarding language policies in Israel. The new guidelines in language education published by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 1996; Ministry of Education of Education, 1995) sets multilingualism as a desirable goal while still affirming the primacy of Hebrew. The Ministry of Education now recognises the importance of immigrant languages, the Arabic language, and international capacities to secure Israel's place in the world community and economy. In spite of these developments, Hebrew and English hegemonic power prevails and mandatory efforts invested in teaching Arabic in Jewish schools, for example, have had little influence in helping Jews gain Arabic literacy. These programmes are unsatisfactorily implemented and there are few schools that offer them (Shohamy & Spolsky, 1999; Bernard Spolsky, 1997). Even in special educational settings, such as the recently created bilingual integrated Palestinian-Jewish schools, Jews seem not to be able to reach any satisfactory level of Arabic literacy while Palestinians become easily and fluently bilingual (Bekerman, 2005). In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, it can be said that though Arabic is officially recognised, Hebrew speakers in Israel have more cultural capital in the linguistic market place than those who speak Arabic.

Discussion

Israeli society has traditionally endorsed homogenising policies towards its Jewish citizens in the hope of creating a strong collective, shaped through ethno-cultural principles. Towards its non-Jewish minorities, Israel has maintained a policy of systematic exclusion. While the approach towards Jewish citizens and the approach towards non-Jewish minorities seems to be radically different, the effects exhibit some similarities. Homogenising the Jewish population meant working towards the exclusion of those elements (Mizrachi, Ultra-orthodox) in the population that were alien to the dominant group (Ashkenazi) and trying to erase their cultural components. While acknowledging serious differences, in this sense the process produced similar effects to the ones produced by the exclusionary practices implemented towards the Palestinian population.

Similar educational practices were implemented towards the two main groups who were targeted – Mizrachim and Palestinians. Mizrachim were required to abandon their cultural identifications and historical heritage. Palestinians were required, though to a somewhat different degree, to abandon much of the same facets. Unlike the Mizrachim, the Palestinians were allowed to be educated in their mother tongue, Arabic. However, as a language, Arabic offered them little in the public sphere, particularly in terms of work opportunities and further educational opportunities. It is also true that in exchange for the abandonment of their roots, Mizrachim were supposedly offered an entrance ticket into mainstream Israeli society, but for Palestinians, this option was never available. Yet, both groups ended up constituting the lower socio-economic strata of Israeli society. The third group that is considered here, the Ultra-orthodox, were allowed to sustain their cultural heritage. However, they were allowed to do so at the expense of marginalisation and low socioeconomic status. The work invested by the sovereign powers has been so successful that these three groups are more attentive to the ethnic cultural differences between them than to the similarities they share regarding their marginalised place in society. For the most part, Mizrachim support right wing politics and Palestinians identify them as their arch enemy within the Israeli Jewish sphere.

The rather recent emergence of multicultural schools in Israel, such as the ones described above (Kedam and Shas), schools dedicated to the children of Russian (Jewish) immigrants (Resnik, 2006b) and the bilingual integrated Palestinian-Jewish schools (Bekerman, 2004, 2005), have attracted mixed and varied reactions from the authorities. While responses have ranged from criticism to indifference, in general these schools are not considered to represent a real challenge to the hegemonic national identity. It is worth mentioning that this recent multicultural tolerance has not been directed towards schools in the Arab system.

Some might want to believe that the multicultural initiatives mentioned indicate a move towards a more decentralised and tolerant educational policy well in line with present global processes that push towards the diffusion of multiculturalism (Pieterse, 2007; Resnik, 2006a). These processes might be viewed as positive because they might ultimately spill over and embrace the Palestinian minority.

It needs to be questioned if the limited multicultural practices implemented in Israel towards the Jewish collective and those implemented towards the Palestinian minority can indeed be considered as liberalising processes. In particular, because Israel has not changed its firm position of differentiating between two separate collectives – Jews and Palestinians.

The position in this argument is that the epistemological premises that underlie present neo-liberal multicultural policies in Israel make it impossible for Israel to reframe itself as a more tolerant society. Moreover, it is questionable whether Israel can offer true recognition of its conforming groups if it stays attached to the ethno-national differentiation it so naturally supports.

Affiliation with a group is not a matter of identity but of *identification* (Carbaugh, 1996; Varenne & McDermott, 1998) that develops along with human activity. It is shaped and reinterpreted as a kind of cultural activity conducted together with one's partners and neighbours. In different historical and social contexts, the same behavioural pattern may give rise to different kinds of group identification. According to this point of view, being a Jew or a Palestinian is not destiny but achievement, attained with the permission of all partners in efforts carried out at a given moment in history. Conceptions, beliefs, views and especially scenarios involving parents, teachers and friends – supporters and detractors alike – are active partners in the structuring of identification. It is reiterated that this complex admixture is imparted through the vigorous social activity occurring in a particular place. "Palestinian" and "Jew" are not characteristics in people's minds but the result of work accomplished in the contexts in which these characteristics exist. Multiculturalism offers a solution to distinctions that engender problems in a modern world in which many cultures are situated in one social space. It is maintained that such distinctions are problematic and even erroneous. Modernity did not give rise to a multiplicity of cultures but rather to extensive cultural/social variation. The acceptance or rejection of a particular cultural shade has never been a part of an all-or-nothing package deal demanding total rejection or total assimilation. Those who claim otherwise, do not portray the historical world realistically but rather perpetuate an ideological school that previously served identity and culture with the purpose of consolidating priority for the ruling authority (Hall, 1996; Zizek, 1997) to identify those who resemble them and to incriminate all others. The ruling group's reasoning is obvious: *accounting for* otherness is preferable to *accountability for* it.

In calling for appreciation and recognition of cultural variety, multiculturalism adopts an essentialist approach to culture. Although it aims to improve society, it misses the mark by assuming that each group has a defined number of participants that become similar to one another and different from other groups by virtue of the circumstances of their birth or early processes of socialisation (a Jew is a Jew and not a Christian; Chinese are Chinese and not French). In its most extreme formula, multiculturalism assumes that each person has one legitimate and authentic culture whose legitimacy is acquired by biological heredity and from whence the demand for and right to ownership is derived by its heirs (Verenne & McDermott, 1998).

These conceptions are rooted in the positivistic approach that has characterised traditional Western epistemic approaches over the past few centuries. From this paradigmatic perspective, culture, like other objects of research (e.g. identity), is viewed as a kind of substance that is ideal, objective, autonomous, fixed and stable. Moreover, from this view, culture lacks dynamic and developing historical contexts which, unlike identity, exist outside the self (Bekerman, 1999; McDermott, 1993). At times, culture is accomplished so autonomously in the eyes of theoreticians that it is perceived as *acting* on humanity.

In his book *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams notes that towards the end of the eighteenth century, five well-known terms acquired new and important meaning. In their new format, these terms, *industry*, *democracy*, *class*, *art* and *culture*, react to and shape the social, economic and political changes that affect our world to this day (Williams, 1958; p.13). At that time, the word “culture” was accorded a distinct and abstract meaning, addressing two processes taking place in the developing national sovereign community: on the one hand, it reflected the Christian differentiation between moral and intellectual pursuits and the manufacture of goods and products in a world of industrial development. On the other hand, it set itself up as a human court that transcends practical human judgment. This second, abstracted meaning of culture accords significance to the definition of culture posited by the British educator and philosopher Matthew Arnold: “the best which has been thought and said in the world,” the best we have to learn and teach – according to Kant, however, “the best,” i.e. *good*, necessarily lacks purpose (1869, p VIII). This view allows for a ruthless differentiation between “high” and “popular” culture, a distinction that largely blocks penetration of alien (i.e. non-hegemonic) cultural aspects into the pantheon of the ruling culture that the putative “multiculturalism” seeks to change. Proponents of multiculturalism may not always be aware of these meanings. It is doubtful whether their call for a change in this situation is even possible without an intensive examination of the relevant epistemological processes which sustain such a hierarchical understanding of culture and without suggesting practical measures to address them

Culture and its reification are linked closely with the development of the nation-state. Elias (1998) and Williams (1961) shed light on the reciprocal relations between these two phenomena, a process that includes transition from expression and representation of culture as open and constantly growing, through interpersonal and group encounters, to its conception and presentation as an organised, well-formed, closed and fixed system of cultural items or objects, such as ideas, values, norms, texts and ceremonies, complete and autonomous in themselves. These objects may be used to foster unity among inhabitants of a given nation-state, thereby neutralising local-regional and linguistic variations/subcommunities said to belong to the

national group. Furthermore, direct, unmediated contact may be promoted between members of this group and the state. Citizens devoid of any affiliation with ethnic, national and religious groups (and to whatever extent possible also professional associations and the like) will be entitled to *prima facie* political equality (Mendus, 1989).

Cultural identities reinforce their unity not by relying on meanings from the past but by reconstructing and reinterpreting cultural materials accessible to all in the present (Bauman, 1999). Cultural development is consolidated through translation – an act that from the outset does not address the intercultural sphere alone but also accounts for all communicative activity between human beings, even those who ostensibly belong to the same culture; indeed it should not be assumed that necessarily all French or Israelis today belong to the same culture (Becker, 1995; Ortega & Gasset, 1957). Consequently, the arguments propounded in this critique should not be perceived as an appeal against commitment to one community or another – nor against differentiation among groups – but rather only against their conception as possessing any exclusive character.

To achieve a situation in which culture has no exclusive value, requires a re-evaluation of the concepts of culture and identity which have been accepted in the West over the past few centuries. It also requires a re-examination of epistemological and ontological conceptions as well as an examination of the ways in which they have shaped political and social organisations reflected in the nation-state. Modern thought has led to an understanding of culture as a kind of prison in which the self and its identity are incarcerated and to a perception of relationships among cultural identities representing different cultures as the manifestation of a communication problem. However, the theoretical developments reviewed above point towards a different view. Just as culture is soft, permeable and dynamic, so too is the cultural self and its identity. This was well expressed by Bakhtin (1984) and his non-coincidence principles concerning humanity. Žižek (1997), in turn, stresses that a person's *prima facie* status as an unfinished entity in constant dialogue with the environment may well constitute a solution to the communication issue and not necessarily the problem. Furthermore, the difficulties encountered have nothing to do with the linguistic constraints that preclude our understanding of one cultural language or another. The impossibility of grasping the precise meaning of a given symbol is a universal principle imprinted in all human beings (meaning is always positional and never precise). Hence, the cultural approach that undermines "enlightenment" is the one that posits that cultures exist within clearly-delineated boundaries (precise meanings) that are entitled to recognition by the reigning powers. "Enlightenment" will be achieved only through a cultural conception that demands equality because all human beings are entitled to choose what they wish to be. Only such conditions accord there appropriate universal meaning in support of multicultural perspectives.

It is important to recall that most of the world's problems – hunger, disease, poverty, pollution, displacement and the like – do not originate in the term "culture" in its axiological or symbolic sense but rather in culture as work or human interaction. It is this aspect of culture that ought to constitute the focus of Israel's socio-cultural and political solutions. When in search of justice, redistribution is preferable to accounting for otherness.

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