Cultural and Religious Diversity in Europe: The Challenges of Pluralism

Parvati Nair
Director,
United Nations University Institute on Globalization,
Culture and Mobility, (UNU-GCM), Barcelona

In early 2014, tensions brewed in Whitechapel, in the East End of London, an area that is at once quintessential of the city and has been home to successive waves of immigrants over the past hundred years or more. According to numerous reports, a 'British patrol,' composed of members of a far-right group, made it their business to stand outside the East London Mosque at Whitechapel to drink alcohol and chant slogans in what could only be interpreted as deliberate provocation of the local Muslim population. They claimed to be a response to the Taliban-like 'Muslim patrol' that is said to walk the streets in order to ensure that the local Muslim population adheres to religious laws regarding dress and behaviour.[1] Inside the mosque and outside, among the wider public, many say that they identify with neither patrol. Both are extremist groups that occupy extreme positions and thereby have more in common with one another than with the majority of the British populace. Nevertheless, the very existence of these two groups must be seen as symbolic, for, when bracketed together as they inevitably are (the one would not exist without the other), they reflect the fact of pluralism in Europe and the challenges that fetter such pluralism in the contemporary global context that has emerged in the wake of 9/11. What is also interesting in this incident is the emergence of tensions between a supposed, but unclear, idea of 'Britishness,' versus those of a group that is religiously and ethnically different, although also part and parcel of the variegated cultural landscape of Britain.

The incident in London's East End is not isolated. Clashes, provocation and dissent between religiously and culturally different groups have characterised many mainstream European concerns. On the one hand, the commitment to pluralism is a touchstone of democracy as envisaged in Europe, especially in the wake of the Second World War and the threats of fascism. On the other hand, democracy – and with it, pluralism – comes undone in the everyday due to the existence of of multiple borders that are more economic, legal and political, than they are to do with race, ethnicity or religion *per se.* As a result, at the heart of plurality in Europe lie major questions regarding tolerance, equality and justice.

The Making of Europe

Of note in the incidents at Whitechapel is the inevitable conjoining of the local and the global. These small histories of the everyday take place within a larger, more complex historical frame, one that is shaped by ideological and economic concerns. Europe, a geopolitical entity formed through imperial ventures, has always been plural. The European project has at its core the germ of empire (a term that instantly brings difference, inequality and violence to the fore); as, ultimately, this was the larger objective that led to the formation of Europe. By no means has Europe ever been devoid of pluralism or diversity, for it is precisely on the premise of the latter that the very idea of Europe has taken shape. Today, the construction of Europe remains an unfinished project that grapples with, and indeed relies on, difference

---

[1] http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201402062000-0023451.

and strives for an ever-clearer definition. To take a historical perspective, the extension of the Roman Empire and its subsequent decline, a key force that lent cohesion to the imagination of Europe, was already an attempt to unify diverse peoples and places under the banner of language, culture and religion. The clashes resulting from the simultaneous expansions of Christianity and Islam led to the Crusades, with the Holy Land as the bone of contention. The Crusades were also among Europe's early ventures into unknown terrains, blazing a trail for the imperial ventures that were soon to come. In this sense, the making of Europe has always relied on the overriding presence not merely of diversity, but also of conflict. Empires and the colonisation of other continents helped confirm the political and economic might of Europe, thereby sharpening the sense of what it meant. As Kidner, Bucur, Matthisen, Mckee and Weeks state in their book *Making Europe: People, Politics and Culture* (2007), the making of a European consciousness took shape crucially through the complex crossings of the Roman Empire, the Christian Church, classical tradition and pre- and non- Christian societies. It was greatly enhanced by European colonisations of Asia, Africa and the Americas. Colonisation is key to understanding Europe, as it brought to the fore the question of diversity and difference. Postcolonial migrations to Europe are also important sources of diversity there. The idea of Europe drew cohesion from a shared modernity that emerged as the result of the Enlightenment. It has led to the notion of a shared Western civilisation, which has been shaped, crucially, through and against the idea of the 'other,' be this in the form of colonised peoples, slaves, indigenous peoples or cultures that remain connected to the pre-modern or traditional.

Selective Pluralities

The European Union dominates the idea of Europeanness. In contemporary times, no alliance of nations anywhere in the world has paralleled that of the European Union. As a community of nations that collaborate in mutual and shared interests, the EU remains unique in its assertion of rights for its citizens, together with the freedom of circulation of capital, goods and peoples. Whilst inequalities between the different Member States remain palpable, there is nevertheless the guarantee brought by treaties and laws that assure certain basic safeguards, not least of these being over half a century of peace in the wake of centuries of war, and the sheer matter of its size in a globalised context, although overshadowed by the might of the United States. Most importantly, Europe prides itself on its guarantees of democracy. Few would deny that the majority of European citizens enjoy not only the right to vote, the basic touchstone of democracy, but also many other democratic rights, such as freedom of expression, access to a judiciary that safeguards citizens' rights and, albeit in an increasingly endangered way since the 2008 economic crisis, a basic standard of living that is supported by the State.

The establishment and expansion of the European Union has led to a legal and political citizenship that overrides and exceeds the national. European citizenship remains, for many, more valued than state citizenship. An implicit aspect of such citizenship is the public practice of secularism, whereby religion remains a spiritual and relatively personal pursuit, rather than one espoused overtly by any Member State. Belonging in Europe is a token of membership to a privileged body, one that asserts its power most forcefully at its borders. It is on this matter that Europe flounders in the face of pluralism. For pluralism implies much more than diversity,– that ambiguous term that levels differences and reduces them to ahistorical categories –. Pluralism implies a truly political openness that is equitable and just. This is not the case for Europe. 'Pluralism,' as practised in Europe, is focused on managing difference in ways that enhance the idea of Europe, itself an imagined geo-political entity that aims to continue dominating its neighbours. As Etienne Balibar notes in his *We, the People of Europe?* (2004), the rise of Europe has also led to a European 'apartheid,' the reinforcement of external borders as sites of exclusion.

Nowhere is this more palpable than in the Mediterranean, a historically, geo-physically conjoined space that has been slit by European powers into a border zone where inequalities, which are at once historical, political and economic, are at their most evident. Here, the boundaries of Europe, culturally and geographically, are part of a shifting, fluid border that both divides and connects Europe from its significant 'others,' both Africa and Asia. As David Abulafia states (2011),

the 'Great Sea' has been, since Medieval times, a pathway to connections and trade, rendering the two shores of the Mediterranean, as well as its East and West, geographically and irremediably interconnected. Today, as much as ever before, the Mediterranean continues to be a point, not solely of contact, but of crossings. As such, it is Europe's most porous border, a significant source of European pluralities and a significant challenge to policies that seek to both contain and engage with pluralism in ways that uphold Europe over and above its 'others.' It is also the point where Europe bleeds into Africa and Asia, geographically and culturally. Borders are places of control, of demarcation, where the play of power is at its most naked. Borders are where differences are marked out. The Mediterranean is a challenging border zone. For Europe, the Mediterranean is a gateway to challenge, for it is from its southern shores that another perspective on Europe comes into view.

The Plural Question

A key phenomenon in Europe over the past fifty years or more has been the influx of immigrants, most often from the poorer continents of former empires. These minority groups form the testing ground upon which European pluralism meets its challenges. The idea of pluralism is, by definition, fraught with tensions. On the one hand, it encompasses diversity, but, on the other, it most often adopts the route of multiculturalism. In an attempt to cohabit with religious and cultural groups on terms that both offer spaces for difference, but also do not threaten the imagination of Europe, multiculturalism draws borders around ethnic, religious or cultural groups as a way of managing them. As policy and practice, multiculturalism relies on fixed notions of identity, which, in the increasingly mobile and hybridised contexts of today's world, simply do not adequately reflect mobile and mutating social realities. As a result, numerous borders traverse the European landscape, undoing the project of pluralism even as it is being fashioned. As Tariq Modood states in his book *Multiculturalism* (2013), at stake in the practices of multiculturalism are questions of inclusion and exclusion, turning integration into a key issue in contemporary Europe.

Border Proliferation

There is little doubt that the proliferation of borders in Europe undermines its commitment to pluralism. This is most acutely apparent in the context of the issue of immigration to Europe, itself a key source of challenges to pluralism and always a major issue of debate at times of elections. Across European states, systems of inclusion and exclusion work to create and maintain (il)legalities, thereby establishing numerous border zones that inevitably impinge on everyday experiences of difference, tolerance, equality and pluralism. Borders may protect the 'legal,' but, in so doing, also create the 'illegal.' State and security apparatus combine efforts to deal with such (il)legalities, yet as a result produce more of both. With modalities of exclusion at the heart of the European project, pluralism is undermined and, with this, the notion of democracy. The proliferation of borders that are at once legal, political, economic and historical produce what Deleuze and Guattari term 'microfascisms' (1987: 214-215). The manifestation of these microfascisms traverse everyday life in Europe today in numerous, very tangible ways – not least as seen by the extremist positions taken up by minority groups in London's Whitechapel –. Theirs are the everyday voices of contestation, challenging the implementation of democracy in Europe.

References

Abulafia, David, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Balibar, Etienne, *We, the People of Europe?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Kidner, Frank, Maria Bucur, Ralph Matthisen, et al. *Making Europe: People, Politics, Culture*, Volume 1, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

Modood, Tariq, *Multiculturalism* (2nd edition), Oxford: Polity Press, 2013.