Multiculturalism: Inclusive or Divisive?

Multiculturalism is often presented as a modern dilemma, something born of recent migration, globalisation, and political change. But if we take a longer view, it becomes clear that multiculturalism is not new at all. What is new is how we think about it: how we justify it, question it, and struggle to live with it.

At its simplest, multiculturalism describes a social reality: people from different cultures, traditions, languages, and belief systems living alongside one another. That has been true of human societies for as long as large-scale societies have existed. The ancient empires of Greece and Rome, for example, were deeply multicultural in practice. They governed vast territories filled with diverse peoples. The difference lies not in the presence of diversity, but in the interpretation of it.

In the ancient Greek world, cultural difference was often framed in stark terms. The distinction between Greek and "barbarian" was not merely descriptive; it carried an implicit hierarchy. To be Greek was to be civilised, rational, and ordered. To be non-Greek was, by implication, something less. And yet even within this framework, there were early philosophical stirrings that challenged such divisions. Thinkers like Diogenes, who famously described himself as a "citizen of the world," began to hint at a more universal conception of human identity. The Stoics would later develop this further, suggesting that all human beings share in a common rational nature.

The Roman Empire took a different approach. Where the Greeks often judged difference, the Romans managed it. They governed a vast and culturally diverse population not by erasing difference, but by incorporating it. Local customs and religions were often tolerated, so long as they did not threaten political stability. Citizenship itself was gradually extended beyond the Italian peninsula, becoming a tool of integration. This was not pluralism in any philosophical sense. It was pragmatic governance. Diversity was something to be administered, not celebrated.

As we move into the medieval period, particularly in Europe, the picture shifts again. Cultural and religious unity became more pronounced, with Christianity providing a dominant framework for social and moral life. Difference, especially religious difference, was more likely to be seen as error or threat than as variation. And yet even here, there were exceptions. In parts of the medieval world, particularly in regions like Islamic Spain, there were periods in which multiple religious communities coexisted with a degree of stability. These moments remind us that the tension between unity and diversity has never been fully resolved, only expressed in different ways.

The early modern period, marked by the rise of European empires, reintroduces diversity on a global scale, but again under conditions of hierarchy. The Spanish, French, and British empires all encountered cultures vastly different from their own. Their responses varied, but they shared a common assumption: that their own way of life was, in some sense, superior. The Spanish often sought to convert and control. The French developed a more explicit ideology of assimilation, offering inclusion on the condition that colonised peoples adopt French language and culture. The British, by

contrast, were often more indirect in their rule, allowing local customs to continue while maintaining political and economic dominance. Across these empires, diversity was not denied. It was structured. Managed. Ranked. The question was not how to live as equals across difference, but how to govern difference from a position of power.

It is only in the modern period, particularly after the collapse of these empires, that multiculturalism begins to take on a different meaning. Migration reshapes societies from within. Former colonial subjects become citizens. The language of human rights emerges, asserting, at least in theory, the equal worth of all individuals regardless of culture or background. Multiculturalism is no longer just a fact to be managed; it becomes an ideal to be debated.

Remember the Pragmatists? William James argued for what he called a "pluralistic universe," the idea that reality is not a single, unified system but a "multiverse" made up of many overlapping perspectives, experiences, and truths. For James, the test of ideas was not whether they conformed to some absolute standard, but whether they *worked* in practice; whether they helped human beings live more successfully and meaningfully together. Later Pragmatists such as John Dewey extended this into social and political life, seeing democracy itself as an ongoing experiment in managing diversity through dialogue, learning, and adaptation. From this perspective, multiculturalism is neither a problem to be solved nor an ideal to be perfected, but a practical, evolving process: societies try ways of living together, learn from experience, and adjust over time. Pragmatism therefore offers a more grounded, less abstract view of pluralism; less concerned with ultimate truths, and more with what enables diverse people to coexist, cooperate, and flourish.

Pluralism, as developed by thinkers like Isaiah Berlin, recognises that human values are multiple, and often in conflict. There is no single, universal way of living that can fully capture what it means to live well. Freedom, equality, tradition, and autonomy are all valuable, but they do not always sit comfortably together. In a multicultural society, this becomes particularly visible. Different cultural traditions may embody different priorities, different moral frameworks, different visions of the good life.

Pluralism does not resolve these tensions. It names them. It insists that they are real, and that they cannot always be harmonised. This is both its strength and its difficulty. It allows us to take diversity seriously, not as a problem to be eliminated, but as a condition of human life. At the same time, it forces us to confront the limits of compromise. If values genuinely conflict, then some degree of tension is inevitable. The question becomes not how to eliminate disagreement, but how to live with it.

From here, the move to postmodernism deepens the challenge. If pluralism tells us that there are many valid ways of living, postmodernism asks a more unsettling question: who decides what counts as valid in the first place? Thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard challenge the idea of "grand narratives" – the overarching stories societies tell about progress, reason, or universal values. What if these narratives are not neutral truths, but expressions of particular cultural and historical perspectives?

Michel Foucault takes this further by examining the relationship between knowledge and power. What we take to be normal, rational, or acceptable is not simply discovered; it is shaped by institutions, histories, and power structures. In the context of multiculturalism, this raises uncomfortable questions. When we talk about integration, whose norms are being privileged? When we define certain practices as unacceptable, are we applying universal standards, or culturally specific ones?

Jacques Derrida adds another layer by questioning the stability of meaning itself. Categories like “nation,” “identity,” or “culture” are not fixed; they are constructed, contested, and constantly shifting. This makes the idea of a stable national identity - something into which others might integrate - much more problematic. Postmodernism, then, does not simply add to pluralism; it unsettles it. It suggests that even our frameworks for understanding difference are themselves shaped by perspective and power. This can be liberating, as it opens space for marginalised voices and challenges hidden assumptions. But it can also be destabilising. If all values are contingent, on what basis can we criticise practices we find harmful? If all perspectives are situated, is there any common ground left?

And so we arrive at the present moment, where multiculturalism, pluralism, and postmodernism intersect in complex and sometimes uneasy ways. Multiculturalism describes the reality we inhabit. Pluralism offers a way of taking that reality seriously, acknowledging the legitimacy of different ways of living. Postmodernism questions the foundations of that acknowledgement, asking us to reflect on the assumptions and power structures that shape our judgments.

What has changed, over this long sweep of history, is not the presence of diversity, but our attitude towards it. We have moved, at least in principle, from hierarchy to equality, from control to recognition, from certainty to doubt. And yet some things remain remarkably constant. Human beings still draw distinctions between “us” and “them.” Societies still struggle to balance cohesion and difference. Power still shapes whose voice is heard and whose values prevail. Periods of rapid change still generate anxiety about identity and belonging.

Perhaps the most honest conclusion is that there is no final resolution to these tensions. They are not problems to be solved once and for all, but conditions to be navigated. Multiculturalism is not an endpoint, but an ongoing process. Pluralism does not remove conflict, but makes it visible. Postmodernism does not provide answers, but sharpens the questions.