

Beyond Cultural Chasms: A Comprehensive Exploration of Integration vs. Assimilation in Global Societies

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Abstract

This lecture explores the concepts of integration and assimilation, particularly in the context of ethnic minorities in Europe. I emphasise that integration is a dynamic process where individuals maintain their unique cultural identity while becoming active contributors to the broader societal fabric. In contrast, assimilation involves individuals adapting to and adopting the cultural norms of the host society, often compelled to relinquish or subdue their primary cultural identity. The lecture also probes the Dutch model of integration, which has been subjected to criticism and significant transformations due to increased immigration and societal tension. I conclude by highlighting that the dynamics of integration and assimilation continue to evolve in response to changing societal circumstances and that it is the people, their cultures, their narratives, and their aspirations that create the vibrant mosaic of society.

Keywords: integration, assimilation, cultural chasms, Dutch model, immigration

Introduction

Asalaamalaikum

Salutations to all esteemed attendees,

The privilege of standing before you today, addressing the eminent intellects and burgeoning leaders of Pakistani lineage who grace this gathering, is an honour I sincerely appreciate. In anticipation of this evening's schedule, my heart burgeons with pride and a profound sense of elation.

The subject of my discourse has been tasked to me with the intent of engaging with themes of integration and assimilation. In determining an appropriate avenue for exploration, I found inspiration in my own body of work that spans the past quarter-century. During this time, I have engaged in rigorous study of ethnic dynamics and matters pertaining to minority groups within the European context, where such themes perpetually retain their prominence.

Therefore, I consider it beneficial to revisit foundational understandings of these terms while also contemplating their practical implications. In this context, the Dutch society serves as an intriguing backdrop. It is a complex landscape replete with enduring challenges that prove resistant to change, juxtaposed with prospects that spark enduring optimism. Such features are intrinsic to the varied experiences of minority populations within societies where they encounter manifold obstacles and resistance in their quest to fully integrate.

Our collective intellectual endeavour today will involve navigating the arduous terrain of cultural dichotomies and dissecting the dynamic discourse on integration versus assimilation within global societies. Have you ever pondered upon the vibrant constituents that infuse

societies with diversity? Or the intricate challenges that surface when multiple cultures intersect within a single geopolitical domain?

Regrettably, numerous individuals perceive this diversity as a threat to the prevailing status quo, posing challenges to the privileged. Indeed, this apprehension stems from the fear of relinquishing or redefining these privileges, thus triggering a defensive response. However, another perspective views diversity as a fertile opportunity, one that enhances the shared experiences within a society, enriching the cultural, artistic, and social fabric. This approach fosters a broadened conceptualisation of self and other, a process that is undoubtedly enriching.

To my mind, the latter stance is not only effortlessly rational but also inherently valuable. Particularly from an Islamic perspective, teachings underscore the necessity and significance of diversity. For instance, the frequently quoted verse from the Quran asserts, ‘We have created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another (2:2).’ Further, the Prophet’s final sermon is instructive: ‘All mankind is from Adam and Eve; an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab; also, a white has no superiority over a black, nor does a black have any superiority over a white, except by piety and good action.’

It is these nuanced dilemmas that we shall grapple with in today’s session. Without further ado, let us delve into this intellectual journey.

Definitions and contextual background

Prior to commencing our intellectual discourse, it behoves us to establish a clear comprehension of the salient terminologies that constitute the cornerstone of our debate. The phrase “cultural chasms”

denotes the profound schisms that exist within the labyrinth of heterogeneous cultures. The emergence of these schisms can often be traced to divergences in language, values, customs, and traditions, while historical, social, and political elements frequently play a reinforcing role. Additionally, these schisms can be artificially constructed as they are cultivated in the cognitive realm of individuals who strive to uphold existing norms and societal hierarchies.

The colloquially termed “culture war,” somewhat paradoxically, bears little relation to culture itself. Rather, it is predominantly utilised within a right-leaning narrative that endeavours to propagate the perception that certain minorities and left-leaning individuals pose problems for the larger societal body. This perception, although widely circulated among specific demographics who often acquiesce to external information without critical analysis, is fundamentally erroneous. It is not intended to castigate individuals for perceived ignorance, but rather to highlight the prevalent issue of individuals opting for introspection due to its ease and their reluctance to confront challenging questions with potentially unfamiliar outcomes. Concepts of culture are inherently qualitative and subjective, their significance being attributed by individuals who interpret them through a self-serving and self-enhancing prism.

The term “integration” refers to a dynamic process where individuals retain their distinct cultural identity whilst concurrently contributing actively to the wider societal tapestry. This process cultivates a symbiotic relationship between the individual and society, fostering reciprocal respect and understanding. Integration, however, is an interactive process. It necessitates the provision of support, protection, and other safeguards by the state for minority groups who have migrated and chosen to establish their lives in these new territories, yet encounter discrimination and exclusion.

Simultaneously, as part of this societal contract, minority groups are expected to adhere to the laws established by the state, as long as these laws do not infringe upon their essential religious, cultural, or social tenets. This stipulation presents fertile ground for political manipulation and division, given that individuals can contest that certain minorities are incapable of integration due to their adherence to certain norms and values deemed outside the majority's acceptability. Others may contend that the state is insufficient in its protection against discrimination or racism, offering only nominal attention to these issues, since a more profound scrutiny would call into question the state's foundational mechanisms, a rare occurrence in practical terms.

In contrast, "assimilation" encapsulates a process wherein individuals adapt to and embrace the cultural norms of the host society, frequently forfeiting their original cultural identities. This process typically entails substantial cultural erasure and loss, as individuals experience pressure to conform to the dominant culture. Assimilation embodies the surrender of individual identity in an attempt to be absorbed into the majority society, thus becoming a part of an indistinguishable collective.

The paradigm of French society exemplifies this approach. Remarkably, France does not include ethnic categories in its census, making it impossible to quantify the vast minority populations it hosts, including a substantial Muslim population. French secularism proposes a philosophy of egalitarianism, under the premise that as long as individuals speak French and adhere to French laws, differentiation becomes unnecessary. However, this philosophy arguably denies the existence of racism within French society. Its use of secularism can be perceived as a tool wielded against religious minorities, stigmatising them with accusations of terrorism and extremism. This occurs within a larger context of a domestically

maintained postcolonial narrative and an abroad neo-colonial foreign policy, both of which continue to contribute to the French national economy.

Historically, societies have vacillated between favouring integration and assimilation, often swayed by prevailing political, social, and economic conditions. The selection between these two methodologies carries substantial implications for societal harmony, individual identity, and the collective cultural fabric of a nation.

Delving Deeper: The Theory of Integration

Integration, as a profound conceptual framework, ardently promulgates the notion that individuals are capable of preserving their distinctive cultural identities whilst simultaneously making efficacious contributions to their adoptive societies. This paradigm, frequently analogised to the concept of a ‘salad bowl’, serves as a catalyst for cultural diversity by enabling the coexistence of diverse ‘ingredients’, each sustaining their unique essence and flavour.

A salient exemplar of this approach is the nation of Canada, a country internationally acclaimed for its enthusiastic endorsement of multiculturalism. Here, diversity transcends mere acceptance to become a celebrated cornerstone of national strength. The Canadian model accentuates the merit of each culture in enriching the societal tapestry, thereby fostering a resilient and inclusive atmosphere. Although the positive recognition of immigration is undisputed, the full realisation of integration remains a task to be accomplished.

This discourse is intrinsically interwoven with the broader concepts of multiculturalism, which involve honouring diversity and pluralism as integral components of the national social and cultural matrix. This is actualised via the instruments of political and legal structures.

However, it is also susceptible to politicisation, often metamorphosing into a contentious issue exploited by disparate political factions, particularly during election periods.

Interestingly, this debate has been subjected to binary interpretations: it is perceived by right-wing factions as a machination of the left. This dichotomy aligns with the prevailing perception that the left is the prime instigator of the culture war. However, this supposition emanates from the turbulent imaginings of the right, underscored by their prejudiced assumptions regarding diversity. It is critical to remember that these conjectures are underpinned by subjective perceptions rather than objective factuality.

Contrasting Approach: The Theory of Assimilation

At the far extreme of the cultural integration continuum lies the concept of assimilation, which bears an analogy to the ‘melting pot’ paradigm, suggesting a comprehensive amalgamation of divergent cultural facets into a singular, uniform culture. Such a strategy necessitates individuals to relinquish their distinct cultural identities, leading them to assimilate into the dominant culture, thereby fostering a societal composition that is homogeneous in nature.

The United States, throughout the greater part of its history, has promulgated this ethos of assimilation, thereby fostering an ‘American way of life’ that has been eagerly adopted by immigrants. This has culminated in a cultural *mélange* that is as distinctive as it is convoluted. The compelling narrative often peddled in popular culture, literature, and film, colloquially known as the ‘rags to riches’ tale, epitomises the immigrant experience in the USA. However, this widely disseminated narrative is fundamentally flawed, evidenced by

the fact that as of the present day, a staggering 80% of American wealth is inherited rather than earned.

In the context of the population of 350 million American citizens, significant economic disparity is clearly discernible. Furthermore, this wealth and income inequality is inextricably intertwined with deep-seated racial divisions. The transition from the harrowing legacy of slavery on American soil through segregation, culminating in a Civil Rights Movement that achieved substantial progress, underscores the persistent issue that America remains a society marked by stark racial disparity and severe inequality.

In America, a chilling statistic prevails: a young African American male is twenty times more likely to experience lethal force from law enforcement than to enrol in a higher education institution. Moreover, the current social and political climate in the United States suggests that an African American male youth faces the horrifying prospect of being shot by a white law enforcement officer approximately every forty hours. These statistics reveal a stark reality about racial tensions and systemic inequality in the United States, an issue that must be addressed with the utmost urgency and determined action.

Comparative Analysis: Integration vs. Assimilation

The discourse concerning the strategies of integration and assimilation is multi-layered and intricate, with each approach bearing its unique attributes and limitations. Such complexities render this discussion markedly non-binary.

The strategy of integration provides a platform for the preservation and propagation of cultural diversity, thus endowing society with a myriad of unique viewpoints and experiences. Nevertheless, without meticulous management, integration holds the potential to catalyse

societal fragmentation, leading to the formation of cultural enclaves that might feel alienated from the broader societal canvas.

It is within this context that political figures have often unjustly attributed societal disunity to the perceived lack of effort from minority groups to assimilate. However, these assertions may tend to overlook the notable absence of substantial policies aimed at supporting the integration of these minorities—a deficiency largely driven by political convenience.

In a more severe light, political discourse has, at times, demonised refugees and asylum seekers while markedly failing to address the pressing needs of these individuals and families. These are individuals who have fled terrifying circumstances of war and conflict, often under the coercive hand of traffickers, in search of a safer existence. Many such conflicts are residual scars of colonial era misadventures that have devastated their native lands.

Conversely, assimilation propagates unity and a collective identity, fostering a sense of belonging among immigrants. However, this approach may risk compromising cultural distinctiveness, leading to a potential loss of cultural heritage and identity for those expected to divest themselves of their original culture.

What exacerbates this quandary is that, despite total surrender of cultural traits deemed undesirable or indistinct from the dominant national culture, minority groups may continue to face discrimination and exclusion. This prejudice can persist irrespective of changes in nomenclature, the colour of their skin, or even their religious affiliation.

Historical precedent exemplifies this complexity. During the 1950s, the United Kingdom experienced significant waves of migration, with the white, Christian population from Ireland preceding the arrival of

individuals from India, Pakistan, and the African Caribbean nations. It was, however, the Irish communities who, despite their racial and religious similarities with the majority, bore the brunt of racial prejudice and exclusion. This historical example underscores the complex nature of cultural assimilation and the inherent challenges faced by minority groups.

Case Study: The Netherlands: A Historical Perspective

Embarking upon an analytical journey through the tranquil tulip fields, quintessential windmills, and serene canals and waterways of the Netherlands, we delve into a complex and engrossing case study of a nation grappling with societal change. The Netherlands has traditionally been lauded for embodying the quintessence of an integrationist model, a testament to its prolonged narrative of tolerance and acceptance.

Nonetheless, the celebrated ‘Dutch Model’ of integration has not been impervious to scrutiny and has borne witness to notable shifts, particularly in the face of escalating immigration and mounting societal friction. Recent decades have marked a discernible transition towards an assimilationist stance within the Dutch socio-political landscape. Critics posit that this transition is underpinned by apprehensions concerning social cohesion and national identity, thereby catalysing policy measures designed to advance Dutch language proficiency and cultural norms within immigrant demographics.

This evolution signifies a substantial departure from the traditional Dutch ethos of celebrating diversity, alluding to an escalating emphasis on cultural homogeneity. Much of this negative shift can be attributed to the transformative events of the last two decades, with the

War on Terror ushering in a pervasive global Islamophobic discourse that has seeped into political rhetoric, media commentary, and societal norms. Islamophobia, in this context, has unfortunately become as commonplace as the Netherlands' unpredictable weather.

However, it is critical not to trivialise this multifaceted and deeply entrenched issue. Islamophobia extends beyond a mere sentiment of fear or antipathy towards Islam and Muslims; it represents an intricate constellation of structural and cultural apparatuses available to society that perpetuate and augment inequality. This potent framework instils a divisive narrative, casting doubt on the capacity for Muslims to assimilate, integrate, or participate effectively within a multicultural paradigm.

Consequently, Muslims are problematically perceived as the locus of societal issues—an enduring narrative of otherness. As such, it is argued that it falls to Western societies, perceived as the bastion of enlightened values and norms, to guide these 'other' Muslims towards 'better' behaviours—a sentiment deeply ingrained in contemporary Islamophobia.

Accompanying Islamophobia is the intensification of securitisation and vilification, particularly pertinent in discussions surrounding counter-terrorism and counter-extremism measures. It becomes all too facile for policymakers and practitioners to resort to sweeping assumptions and generalisations, lacking the rigorous, nuanced, and detailed thinking necessary to appreciate the broader picture, which extends far beyond the significant impact of the events of 9/11.

A deeper, more intricate narrative unravels when exploring the societal drivers of extremism. It posits that extremists and radicals are products of their host societies. The grievances of young individuals, willing to risk their lives in Syria or Iraq, may not be solely attributable to the allure of these war-torn regions but rather the socio-

political conditions of their birth countries—such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, or France—that fail to recognise their humanity.

The resulting desire for self-sacrifice in pursuit of a cause shaped by distinct ideological parameters is an alarming phenomenon. To truly exist, these individuals believe they must embrace mortality. Their trajectory is undoubtedly tragic, yet seldom openly contemplated due to its uncomfortable implication of issues revolving around power, privilege, and entitlement that underpin persisting inequalities. This, in turn, entrenches patterns of discrimination and racialisation, further marginalising already excluded groups.

The Netherlands: A Deeper Look into the Present

Nevertheless, the narrative concerning the Netherlands remains in a state of progressive evolution. As the calendar year turns to 2023, sources highlight the persistent struggle faced by the Dutch immigration service, otherwise known as the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), as they navigate through the escalating tidal wave of asylum petitions and a simultaneous surge in visa applications. An alarming figure of 40,000 asylum seekers currently languish in the purgatory of waiting for a decision, resulting in the IND advocating for a paradigmatic shift in migration policy to bring about durable transformation.

The government body anticipates a precipitous rise in asylum petitions, projecting that it could surpass the 70,000 mark within the same year. This voluminous influx amounts to thrice the processing capacity of the IND, signifying an immigration system teetering on the edge under the intense pressure of labyrinthine legislation and burgeoning demands for immediate resolution. In the meantime, a rapidly proliferating discourse regarding the regulations surrounding

familial reunification ripples through the social fabric. The extant policy allows for adult offspring to accompany their progenitors to the Netherlands, presenting the opportunity to initiate their individual asylum claims. This procedure, however, has elicited contentious views with a section of the populace regarding it as a potential exploitation of the legal framework.

The current trend towards stringent policies and augmented regulation seems to signify a deviation from the archetypal Dutch modus operandi of fostering integration, gravitating instead towards a more assimilationist perspective. Yet, this transformation is far from consensual and remains embroiled in controversy. It thrusts the intricate challenges concerning immigration and cultural symbiosis into the spotlight, sparking fervent debate among lawmakers, academics, and the wider citizenry. This change bears testament to the delicate balancing act that the Netherlands, like many other nations, must perform in the face of dynamic, modern socio-political landscapes.

Reflections on the Dutch Experience

The example of the Netherlands provides an illuminating illustration of the multifaceted and dynamic character of the ongoing discourse surrounding integration as opposed to assimilation. The Dutch narrative emphasises the daunting task of achieving an equilibrium that acknowledges cultural heterogeneity while simultaneously promoting social unity and an encompassing national identity.

In considering the Dutch context, it is evident that this equilibrium is not a fixed entity. Rather, it necessitates continuous negotiation and redefinition, a responsive dynamism driven by evolving societal conditions. The persistent evolution of social circumstances predicates

the necessity for the constant reconsideration of the balance between honouring cultural diversity and encouraging a cohesive, shared national ethos.

This observation powerfully attests to the complex, adaptive, and indeed, relentless, process inherent in the journey toward social harmony. It illustrates that the optimal equilibrium point between cultural plurality and national unity is not a static destination, but a shifting landscape, perennially open to renegotiation and redefinition, sculpted by the ever-evolving societal milieu.

Conclusion: Synthesising Insights

In concluding this exposition, it is crucial to underscore that the discourse between integration and assimilation does not constitute a mutually exclusive binary where one philosophy inevitably prevails over the other. Instead, it invites us to cognise societies as complex mosaics, meticulously crafted from the myriad threads of historical context, political realities, and cultural nuances.

This perspective necessitates an understanding of the subtleties embodied in these processes and their ramifications on the societal structure we inhabit and the identities we cultivate. The case study of the Netherlands provides a fertile ground for illuminating these considerations, serving as an intriguing tableau upon which to reflect.

Indeed, the case prompts us to acknowledge the fluidity of the dynamics between integration and assimilation, a dance that continues to evolve in response to shifting societal circumstances. This evolution is a delicate equilibrium, maintaining the sanctity of individual cultures while nurturing a collective sense of community. From the vibrant tulip fields to the pulsating urban landscapes, the Netherlands

exemplifies how the delicate interplay of integration and assimilation can sculpt a society.

As we persist in this discourse, it is paramount to remember that the vibrant mosaic of society is indeed a product of its constituents—the people, their cultures, their narratives, and their aspirations. In this context, the Netherlands shares parallels with other Western European nations, each bearing a similar chronicle of notions of European identity and experiences of migration, settlement, adaptation, and incorporation.

However, no European nation can lay claim to having mastered this complex interplay. Every one of the so-called “old European” countries, including France, Britain, the Netherlands, and Germany, possesses its own set of triumphs and tribulations. The emerging members of the European Union, particularly Poland and Hungary, grapple fervently with these multifaceted issues.

A significant contributing factor to these struggles lies in the historical legacy of imperialism, colonialism, racism, and exclusion, embedded within resistant class structures that are prevalent in many nations of the Global North. Any attempts at change invariably encounter hostility, resulting in further marginalisation. Although progress may appear dishearteningly sluggish, oscillating between advancement and regression, the relentless pursuit of transformative change remains the only viable course of action.

Notwithstanding, what proves noteworthy within these societal conversations about diversity is that while academics engage passionately in these themes and policymakers exploit societal cleavages to amplify racial and ethnic fissures, a large portion of the populace has managed to coexist harmoniously. The younger

generation, particularly those under thirty, have been exposed to a degree of diversity and globalisation unparalleled in human history.

Thus, the inherent dynamism of diversity presents itself as an inescapable reality, regardless of whether we seclude ourselves behind cacophonous keyboards. Ultimately, across the vast cultural divide, we discover our shared human essence—a profound testament to the greatest form of integration.

I bid you peace and express gratitude for your time and attention.

Thank you!