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BOOK REVIEW

OUT OF THE MELTING POT, INTO THE FIRE

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Some people, who tend to see the glass half full, might think that in the modern globalized world, where words like “diversity,” and “inclusivity” are used more commonly in the public discourse, ethnic conflicts are soon to become a notion from the past. The opponents, those who usually see the glass half empty, forecast the demise of human civilization, seeing all the challenges the world faces now such as growing migration rates and ethnic tensions. It is probably best to try and find the Goldilocks perspective – if ethnic (or any other societal) conflicts were to extinguish soon, why would we still need to emphasize the importance of inclusivity? Wouldn’t we all be integrated and inclusive already? On the other side, high rates of migration and facing “challenging times” are nothing new to human civilization. Of course, times change, and various conditions and factors are different now than they were before; however, there still are some similarities and references to be noticed. We can learn from history and make conclusions from somewhat analogical situations. This is one of the important things Jens Kurt Heycke tells his readers – if not the core of the book. He also proposes to rethink the current model of dealing with multicultural, multiethnic reality in the US, with some points that may seem controversial. Nevertheless, his call to take a more thorough look into the current approach and its effects, backed by his deep concern for unity in society while taking history into consideration and trying to learn from it, constitutes a valid point in intercultural studies.

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The monograph “Out of the Melting Pot, Into the Fire: Multiculturalism in the World’s Past and America’s Future” is the author’s book debut, for which he conducted field research in over forty countries. Jens Heycke has an academic background in Economics and Middle Eastern Studies, a passion which shows in the book – it contains a chapter on the economic effects of ethnic fractionalization, a selection of statistics, and a self-made translation of the Constitution of Medina from Arabic.

The title “Out of the Melting Pot, into the Fire: Multiculturalism in the World’s Past and America’s Future” suggests the focus of the book. The author shows us the shift from the melting pot model to the multiculturalist model of managing ethnically diverse societies, visibly opting for the former. The author presents various multiethnic societies over the centuries, as well as the transition from the melting pot model to multiculturalism (and possibly vice versa) to be able to draw lessons from history that can be useful to us today.

Before going deeper into the provided examples and effects of his field research, Heycke clarifies how the term “multiculturalism” will be understood in the book. The author rightfully mentions it’s a broad term and can be interpreted in contradictory ways, thus the necessity of agreeing on one way of defining it – “multiculturalism” in the book is used in a sense of “hard multiculturalism,” understood as “the doctrine that public policies and institutions should recognize and maintain the ethnic boundaries and distinct cultural practices of multiple ethnic groups within a country” (Heycke 2023, xi). In Heycke’s definition, multiculturalism supports preferential treatment when talking about past and current injustices. In his interpretation of the term, a shared identity is rather undesirable or impossible to achieve. He also underlines the importance of distinguishing this understanding of “multiculturalism” from “soft multiculturalism,” which values the unique contributions of diverse cultures within a society; and that is critical to his interpretation of melting pot.

While providing his definitions, Heycke doesn’t reference any other scholar. It is worth mentioning that it is rather the “soft multiculturalism” that is widely known, and the leading ideas on multiculturalism in the subject research also fall into the “soft multiculturalism” category proposed by Heycke. One of the most prominent scholars about multiculturalism, Will Kymlicka, does indeed claim that distinct cultural identities should be promoted and protected, but it should result in social cohesion. He also underlines the importance of preserving one’s own language as an essential

part of a person's identity (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2010). In his reflections on intercultural relations and multiculturalism, Charles Taylor also points to the essence of universal, equal dignity, and a shared identity (Taylor 1994, 37–42).

In the chapter about the term “melting pot,” the etymology is reiterated. It comes from a play under the same title, now a bit forgotten, which exhorts to abandon ethnic and racial prejudices, and to create a new American identity, based not on ethnicity, but on adherence to shared values – like freedom. Heycke admits, however, that this notion of the melting pot was quite utopic and never fully realized; he points out the exclusion of Black people and mentions periods of discrimination against other groups in America. Heycke describes the melting pot as an effect of the integration of diverse cultures. However, integration can be, and usually is, understood as something different than assimilation, and it seems the author sometimes uses these terms interchangeably, which can be a bit confusing or misleading.

Integration and assimilation lie on opposite sides of Berry's acculturation model (Berry 2005, 697–712). Integration in the social studies context, contrary to assimilation, allows the members of a bigger group to keep their own minority culture while being in relationships with members of other groups; it means incorporating the values and adopting the norms of the dominant group into their own, while not compromising their own culture. In assimilation, a minority group loses its own culture to the culture of the dominant group. Oftentimes the author uses these terms interchangeably, and the given examples don't focus on the loss of the minority culture, that might happen with the melting pot approach, presented in the book.

The next chapters tackle historical events from different eras from a sociological point of view. From ancient Byzantium and Rome to the Aztec Empire, through the medieval Islamic Caliphate, to modern times – the Balkan states, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Botswana, the author takes us through an interesting journey through the rise and fall of these regions. As this publication falls rather into a popular science category and its focus is also not strictly history, at some instances, it may give an impression of generalization; but on the other hand, the book doesn't aim at being a very detailed historical analysis; rather, it's trying to show some analogies to recent times. This is achieved by a range of interesting facts, oftentimes from social history, which also makes the book easy and pleasant to read.

One of the most important notions mentioned in these chapters is a shared identity, in the book most called, after one of the most prominent medieval philosophers of the Islamic world – Ibn Khaldun – *asabiyah*. It is easy to notice a resemblance of this idea to the basis of the idea of the melting pot used in the book. *Asabiyah*, and its other versions – earlier *Romanitas* in ancient Rome, or *botho* in Botswana, refer to an umbrella identity of group members. There should be a shared trait, maybe a value, that connects people. A sense of belonging, equality, and a shared identity. That also overlaps with Taylor’s thought of common citizenship. Sometimes, the way it is portrayed in the monograph, it seems again as if the shared identity is a result of losing the minority identity, of forced assimilation.

One chapter tackles the topic of colorblindness. Heycke describes modern Botswana as a good example of the “colorblindness-went-right” approach. He emphasizes the difficult colonial history of the country, lined with racism and “color bans”; a history Botswana unfortunately shares with so many other African countries. What makes Botswana stand out, however, is the story of the interracial marriage of their leader – Seretse Khama and his white English wife, Ruth. Even though the couple faced tremendous difficulties and critique at the beginning, they stayed together and won over the hearts of the people of Botswana. This couple’s example is given by Heycke as one of the main factors in Botswanian “colorblindness.” The country has strived to eliminate any kind of discrimination (also the “positive” one – preferential treatments or affirmative actions, also stated in the constitution [Botswana’s Constitution of 1966, Article 15]), to the point that any official statistics regarding race or ethnicity are forbidden – since 1971 any official census would not ask these questions, and thus ever since the ethnical composition of the country is officially not known. Heycke argues that this colorblindness, or “ethnic-blindness,” results in a very well-integrated society.

The author is however one-sided in his assessment. This policy is not flawless or controversy-less. There have been attempts to introduce marginalized indigenous languages in schools; these ideas have been strongly opposed by the ruling party – the same one which was the ruling party when Botswana regained its independence – out of fear of tribal fractionalization (Makgala 2019, 146). Failure to nurture indigenous cultures may indicate forced assimilation under the guise of integration.

It is also worth mentioning that colorblindness at face value promotes equality, treating people without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity, and

might be seen as a relatively simple way to manage societal issues. However, it poses a risk to deny the experiences of people of color or ignore the problems of racism whatsoever. Many researchers claim that multiculturalism is the answer – differences can be openly discussed (Apfelbaum, Norton & Sommer 2012, 207). As Heycke has noticed though, highlighting the differences in this approach is not without its flaws; he sees it rather as the source of the problems.

“Out of the melting Pot, into the fire” is a well-thought-out and cohesive popular science book. Some ideas might be controversial and arguments one-sided, however, it is visible that the author is coming from a place of deep concern about unity in his country and beyond, as well as curiosity to learn different points of view, proven in his field trip reports. Heycke provides examples not only from the countries he writes his whole chapters about, but also compares the more in-detail presented situations to other countries, not tackled in the book. A reader can also delve into given statistics, which show the connections between ethnic fractionalization and economic wealth of countries, rates of corruption, and more. Thanks to the given examples, multicultural policies can lead to tensions; it is also worth noticing, however, that forcing assimilation is neither peaceful nor unifying. It is also a loss of cultural identity, not only for individuals or families, but sometimes the identity and the whole culture of a group can vanish. That’s often the case for minority groups, also the indigenous ones, not only migrant groups.

Facing disillusionment with multiculturalism policies in many countries, it is important to try to look for other ways of dealing with modern challenges and propose different solutions. The discussion on the topic is clearly needed as we can see in many countries that the efforts undertaken are not necessarily leading to the unfolding of social tension.

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