As Westerners, and whether we like it or not, we are henceforth, as Nathan Glazer has stated, all multicultural, a point we must surely acknowledge. The multicultural nature of Europe’s national communities is a recent phenomenon connected with the sedentarization of those waves of immigrants who settled in Europe following the World War II, and which all shared the common characteristic of coming from non-European, mainly Islamic, cultures. In the United States, the issue of cultural differences and their political management has not been associated with the integration of different immigrant groups, but rather with the black community’s progress toward emancipation. Indeed, it should be remembered that until the 1960s, the United States were dominated by a logic of immigrant assimilation and a further logic of racial segregation of blacks descended from slaves. The civil emancipation of blacks from the 1960s onward caused a radical shift in this situation, clearing the way for recognition of all forms of cultural, ethnic, and sexual differences.

Both groups (postcolonial immigrants in Europe, blacks in the United States) live on the fringes of their respective societies, victims of racism and discrimination. For those who oppose it, multiculturalism intends merely to excuse the fact that integration has failed, and, at the same time, the fact that the principle of equality has been defeated. Opponents of multiculturalism are keen to point out that “praise of difference” is at the heart of racist discourse. On both sides of the Atlantic, debate is far from over between the following two viewpoints: a first position states that policies on multiculturalism function to sustain social inequality; a second holds that such policies promote change within the norms and values that are the very
foundations of democracies by incorporating certain elements of the immigrants’ cultures.

Both positions possess some truth. For a critical perspective on multiculturalism, we must note that the majority of policies that are put into action are based on confusion between race and culture, a fact explained by their direct link with the settling of immigrants “of color.” Those European countries such as the United Kingdom or the Netherlands that are often held up as examples actually became multicultural through a reactive process. Such reactive multiculturalism is a response to the economic and social difficulties generated by the sedentarization of immigrants of color in traditionally assimilationist countries, even though such countries may not have been ethnically homogeneous. This has been the most predominant situation in Europe since World War II, where immigrants could no longer be so effortlessly assimilated given that the material potential for integration had been eroded. At the same time, the shock waves sent out by the war and decolonization weakened the notion of a dominant culture. In this respect, it is revealing that, in countries where regional differences have been preserved, such as is the case in the United Kingdom, Belgium, and the Netherlands, systems put into place to help new immigrants adapt are specific to each situation, borrowing very little from the historically acquired wisdom on the incorporation of ethnic groups with cultural and linguistic differences, to such a degree that “ethnic minority” terminology is often made to be synonymous with “immigrant group.” Britain, for example, never fully completed cultural integration—meaning that British culture is far from being homogeneous, despite the fact that political narratives still orchestrate a sense of Britishness. However, the settlement of immigrants in no way benefited from this history of diversity management. As early as 1958, with the riots of Nottingham and Notting Hill that involved immigrants, the illusion of a tolerant British society was quickly shattered. Unemployment was almost nonexistent at the time and consequently explanations put forward immediately evoked immigrants’ skin color and the problems of racial conflict. The multicultural structures and systems introduced since 1968 have primarily been a response to a need to create conditions that will usher in interracial harmony.

A more positive perception of multiculturalism emerges when we consider countries that receive larger numbers of immigrants, such as Canada and Australia. Such countries are defined as actively multicultural since the integration of new immigrants within the nation is organized by means of a celebration of differences. Cultural diversity is inscribed at the heart of the nation’s blueprint, and the existing multicultural systems and structures have as their objective the integration of different immigrant groups, both old and new, by creating a symbolic space where all forms of cultural expression are welcomed on an equal footing.