Chapter 6

Beyond Multiculturalism: Identity, Intercultural Communication, and Political Culture—The Case of Switzerland

Uli Windisch

Switzerland’s multilingual and multicultural situation illustrates the impossibility of comprehending the increasing cultural diversity of European countries in dichotomous terms such as multiculturalism/citizenship; cultural relativism/assimilation; cultural differences/national unity, and so on.

In general, there is a current tendency in research to approach subjects such as cultural diversity and immigration from a purely theoretical, abstract, and universal standpoint. Every researcher has his theory and wants to impose his truth, frequently through some sort of theoretical coup d’etat. In-depth research and empirical data are frequently given secondary importance, demonstrating to what point the cultural diversity that followed mass immigration and population shifts is far from a politically neutral subject. Every observation, no matter how qualified, empirically founded or objective, is almost always automatically given political connotations and reinterpreted ideologically on the basis of partisan and ideological preconceptions. Polemical debates are guaranteed in advance and reciprocal accusations and other misdirected criticisms feed the dynamics of the discussion. In short, it is mined territory.

Our objective is not to add yet another truth or to condemn multiculturalism or communitarism or, on the contrary, to advocate integration...
or citizenship as the only viable and responsible political solution. In our opinion, the point is not to choose between multiculturalism and citizenship but to analyze real examples—empirically and thoroughly—in societies that are confronted with the problem of managing cultural diversity within a system of political unity. What kind of unity can come from diversity? How much diversity can a nation sustain without breaking apart? Is the attempt to conciliate diversity and unity an exercise in futility? Diversity is frequently perceived as a threat to unity. The obsession with unity and the concomitant fear of breaking apart are probably two of the major characteristics of every society, every state, every country, every nation. But what if diversity and even the encouragement of diversity today constituted the best evidence of a country’s unity? Our objective is to show how Switzerland tries to respond to its different challenges in everyday life in a concrete and pragmatic manner rather than through the application of predefined dogmas.

The intercommunity know-how developed by Switzerland cannot, obviously, serve as a reference for other countries. On the other hand, the Swiss experience allows us to reflect on these problems in a less theoretical and abstract manner, thereby broadening the possibilities of managing cultural cohabitation within a single country. Let us start by presenting one of the main findings of six years of research on the linguistic and cultural mosaic that is Switzerland by an interdisciplinary group composed of sociologists, anthropologists, linguists and sociolinguists, as well as political scientists. Though it does not always fulfill every condition, Switzerland demonstrates that cohabitation between different cultural and linguistic communities within the same country presupposes the simultaneous copresence of three components:

1. Cultural identity
2. Intercultural communication
3. A political culture common to all of the linguistic and cultural communities

Most studies on intercultural phenomena characteristically take into account only one of these components or at least give too much preponderance to one of them. In analyzing intercultural problems, too much emphasis is placed on language and culture while underestimating communication (or the absence of such) between the different cultures and subcultures and the importance of the political dimension. The different trends in multiculturalism overestimate the weight of language