

Land, Empire and Multiculturalism

Herman Schwartz is an American political economist and professor of politics at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *States vs. Markets: Globalisation and the International Economy* and *Subprime Nation: American Power, Global Finance and the Housing Bubble*, an insightful analysis of the 2008 financial crisis. He spoke to Jamie Stern-Weiner about the political economy of multiculturalism.

Multicultural empire

Is there a logic linking empire with the development of multicultural societies?

I wrote a paper—whose argument, I should say, I'm not certain about—arguing that ancient empires were multicultural by default, because they didn't have good, easy ways to homogenise their subject populations. And moreover they had reasons, in dealing with the mass of the population, to want them to remain fragmented: the great fear for ancient empires was mass peasant rebellion, and the more peasants are split up, the harder it is for them to rebel.

When you get the transition into modern empires, in particular the British and Dutch, opening up new land for production, you get the kind of multiculturalism that—as discussed further below—was evident in Anglo-American settler societies. That is, as new lands were opened up for production, new bodies were brought in to serve as a labour force to work those lands, and this process created ethnically sedimented societies

But unlike the US, where there are these days hundreds of ethnic groups, and where even in the nineteenth century there were scores of them, in these other lands it was usually only a handful. The result was what the great civil servant-turned-professor Joseph Furnivall called 'plural societies': a local population forged its own identity in opposition to new waves of immigrants arriving to work in industrial agriculture, industry or the urban sector that serviced export industry. These identities were often formed, in particular, against the moneylenders, who were also typically from the outside. This process produced sedimented societies like Burma, where you have a Burmese peasant population, and on top of that an Indian population, largely urban but also some small-holders and plantation workers, and on top of that *Chettians* and some Chinese moneylenders.

So there is a political economy of multiculturalism there, and as you move into modernity these conflicts became sharper because modern states are built around national identities.

To what extent was this ethnic sedimentation a side-effect of policies pursued for other reasons, rather than being consciously encouraged or discouraged by ruling groups?

Two things. First, the imperial powers brought in what, from the point of view of locals, looked like foreign labour forces, and that was definitely deliberate. It wasn't, however, part of a conscious divide-and-conquer strategy. Instead it was intended primarily to avoid provoking uprisings among peasant populations. It was a 'second best': the thinking was, 'we don't want to cause the peasants to rebel, but we *do* want to open up these new lands, so we'll bring in labourers from elsewhere'.

The last thing the British wanted to do in Peninsular Malaya, for example, was to force peasants into the commercial economy and in so doing cause rebellions. It was a lot easier to recruit landless labourers from India as a labour force for the new plantation economies. And actually pretty much everywhere where you see plantation economies emerging in the 19th century—in the highlands in Kenya; in the Indian highlands in Assam and Darjeeling; in the highlands in what was then Ceylon (now Sri Lanka); in Borneo and Sumatra; Malaya, Burma; and in what the French called Cochinchina (southern Vietnam around the Mekong Delta)—production was started up by in-migrating groups. The reason is that the imperial powers that controlled these places didn't want to provoke peasant rebellions, and found it politically easier to bring in people from the outside.

This also then gave imperial administrators greater control over that in-migrating labour force, because if necessary they could always expel the troublemakers, and when they did so they were not expelling them back into the native population where they could have made trouble.

So Step 1 was deliberate. But then comes Step 2: once these ethnically sedimented populations were in place, one of two things happened. Either no women came along as part of the in-migrating group, in which case you had a lot of reverse migration, as men cycled in to the plantation labour force to earn money to be able to pay back debts in the home country or to buy a piece of land, and then cycled back out. In this scenario you ended up with relatively small populations of in-migrants. In Burma, for instance, there was a huge flow of Indians in and a huge flow of Indians out, because the proportion of women coming over was small. The numbers are quite revealing: about 60% of Indians who migrated in the nineteenth century for work went to Burma, but today nothing like 60% of the offshore Indian population is located in Burma, and nor was it located there right before the Second World War. Most were sojourners: they came, made some money, and returned home.

Alternatively, women *did* come over, in which case in-migrant populations became stable and reproduced themselves. In southern Vietnam ('Cochinchina'), for instance, you had lots of Chinese and Vietnamese from northern Vietnam coming in, including women, and they settled and became a large percentage of the population. The same thing happened in Malaya with Indians, and in Manchuria, which again produced settled populations that persisted.

Where in-migrant populations stayed and reproduced themselves, it resulted in ethnically divided societies and often quite sharp ethnic conflicts. Malaysia not so much, because the ruling party has tried to manage that ethnic conflict. But in Fiji you've had conflict between the native Fijians and Indian in-migrants; in Guyana between what became the native population—the freed slaves after manumission in the 1800s—and the in-migrant Indian indentured labourers; in Surinam... etc.

Capitalist multiculturalism

How did industrial capitalism impact the development of multicultural societies?

I'm not sure I understand or believe the answer I gave in a recent paper. In it I argued that ancient empires were multicultural *across* the society but not *within* production units, whereas modern society is multicultural within production units (and also sometimes across society). That is, in ancient empires villages were ethnically homogeneous, and if you looked at merchant groups you would typically see mercantile activity organised by distinct ethnic or religious group. So we could ask: who controls the flow of rice? Maybe Chinese merchants. Who controls the flow of textiles? Maybe that's Hadhrami Arab Yemeni merchants. Who's producing coffee for export? Maybe Javanese peasants.

So ethnic distinctions mapped on to divisions of labour.

Right. And you see some of the same thing in modern industrial society, but it's much more highly fractionated. Moreover in America at least this process often produced multiculturalism *inside* the production process. The reason for this was, essentially, divide and conquer. American employers would assign different kinds of tasks to different ethnic groups and thereby divide the labour force up on ethnic lines. So they would tend to use either German immigrants or second-generation German settlers as skilled labour inside the factory, Poles or other Eastern Europeans for unskilled labour, and African Americans for cleaning. This divided the labour force up inside the production unit.

If you look at the agricultural population in the US, again what you see are ethnically sedimented groups in different geographic locations. Wheat farming is done by a lot of people in a lot of different places, but as the wheat frontier moved out different groups populated it: first it was primarily German Catholic immigrants from what is now the

Western part of Germany; then it was more Protestant German immigrants from the central and eastern parts of modern Germany; then came Scandinavians in the nineteenth century. And if you think about the wheat frontier in North America as including not just the U.S. but also Canada, it was Ukrainians and ethnically Russian Russians in the last phase of expansion of the wheat economy. So even though you can say 'here's a whole bunch of wheat exporters' - the production unit - it's also multicultural, albeit in different places.

However I'm not sure I believe this argument completely. All this stuff on multiculturalism for me is secondary to my main work, so I feel a lot less certain about what I'm claiming.

Anglo-American multiculturalism

You've identified a distinctive Anglo-American political economy that, you argue, has an in-built tendency towards generating multicultural societies. What is 'Anglo-America' and why does it tend to generate multiculturalism?

This I'm more sure about. There was a process of immigration in the global suburbia of America and the 'White Dominions' part of the British Empire that sedimented different ethnic groups on top on one another, as demands for labour brought in new waves of migrants from different parts of the world.

The political economy of Anglo-America— the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and in some ways Argentina (not so much Britain, because it's a settled society not a settler society—the logic I'm describing applies to the latter)—looked like this: there was a lot of land that had no value, because nothing was going on on top of it. Land only has value in a market to the extent that it produces revenue, and the only way to get revenue on land is to have production on top of it. And here is where a multicultural logic emerges.

The only way to get production started was to put in the infrastructure to make the land productive (transportation links) and get a labour force for that land. So the political economy was one in which potential producers borrowed money, by mortgaging land that had no value, and then brought labour in to build the infrastructure that opened the land up for production and became the workforce for it.

This was a very different political economy from that in Europe, which had already-established populations and already-existing production. Europe was funding its expansion out of its existing flow of income, whereas Anglo-America was funding its expansion out of the creation of credit extended against future promises of production. The paradigmatic example of this was the American South, where (to simplify) planters

would create banks that would then lend themselves money to buy land and slaves, and the slaves would build both the infrastructure and be the labour force required to make that land productive. So they borrowed money against a pure promise to pay it back in the future—there was nothing going on at the time they borrowed the money. To make a metaphor that's not quite right, it's like Anglo-America was built on student loans (because it was based on borrowing against future income), whereas Europe was built out on actual existing flows of income.

Anglo-American economies were therefore much more speculative, and required a constant new inflow of immigrants to populate the land and bring more land into production. The extreme example of this was the U.S. There you had relatively free migration and the building out of a continental economy. New slices of land came into production pretty predictably every 15-20 years, and thereby brought in successive waves of migrants either to build the railroads that opened up the land, or to farm it, or to work in the urban service economies that handled the export streams that these new lands were creating.

So the process of bringing new land into production generated multiculturalism because-

It kept pulling labour in. And in the case of the U.S. it pulled in many different ethnic groups. This sedimentation matters because each new group that arrives establishes itself in opposition to already existing groups of immigrants. So you get these periodic waves of anti-immigrant feeling in America that go all the way back to before the Revolution, in which the prior wave of immigrants looks at the new wave and says 'they're dumber, they're darker, they take lower wages, they don't understand civilisation, we'll never be able to assimilate them'. Then the new wave of immigrants establishes itself and finds work, at which point another wave of immigrants arrives that's even 'dumber, darker, less civilised' than the second wave, at which point the second wave sides with the first one against the third, and so on. So with each new wave of immigrants we also get periodic waves of anti-immigrant fervour, which then fade away.

A contrast might be New Zealand, where settlers were, very deliberately, mostly Protestant English and Scottish—'deliberately', because the English state had learned from the American Revolution that a multicultural society was hard to control. So New Zealand ended up with a different kind of multiculturalism, which was until recently *Pākehā* (Anglo settlers) vs. Māori, and a much more homogeneous society. In 1950 there was a great debate in New Zealand about taking in displaced people from Europe, over whether New Zealand could absorb these people or whether they would remain culturally distinct. The people they were afraid of taking in, because they

were *so* culturally different, were five thousand Dutch refugees. To our ears that sounds completely ridiculous, but to them it looked like a huge cultural gulf because New Zealand was such a homogeneous society.

Does that dynamic, in which land settlement and development sucks in waves of immigrant labour, only last while there is a frontier—i.e. while there is still a process of territorial expansionism going on?

Certainly that particular dynamic changes over time and we don't have the same process to the same extent now. But America's economy is still very suburban—or at least it was until the crash—in the sense that a lot of money is made on land development. When you look at the post-WWII American economy, the great population movements south and west created endless opportunities to bring land into production. In 1950 one in every 20 Americans lived in New York City; now, about three percent of the population lives in Metropolitan New York (which is a bit larger than NYC). Why the decline? Because so many people have moved to the southern and western states, where huge money has been made on land development.

Most of that population flow is internal to the US, so it doesn't create the same kind of multiculturalism as that we've been discussing. But take the city where I live right now, Charlottesville—the 300th largest city in the U.S. with a population in its metropolitan area of about 200,000 people. The original inhabitants talk about it having become a 'northern' city because so many people have moved south. They talk about the northern part of Virginia near Washington, which used to be basically empty farmland, by its initials: N.O.V.A., which stands for Northern Virginia, but the joke is that it stands for Northern Occupied Virginia. This is not the same kind of ethnic difference as that between Protestant Scandinavians and German Catholics in Minnesota, but it *is* felt as a difference.

Also much of the inflow of Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. has been to the south and west, not just because of proximity but because the building out of housing and the mechanisation of agriculture in those areas drew in Mexican and Hispanic immigrant labourers. So the old dynamic is still there, but it's muted: you don't have these huge inflows of migrants the way you did in the nineteenth century.

What light does this shed on 'identity politics'? In one of your essays you write: "Anglo-American multiculturalism is as much about mutual tolerance in the shared pursuit of goods as it is about moving past enmity to some notionally truly shared identity".

That's really about America, but I would say that definition maybe also applies to Canada and Australia. In America, people still have relatively strongly felt ethnic identities, although there is a lot of blurring because there's been a huge amount of intermarriage. It's not like everybody says, 'oh I'm just an American'—indeed the

people who say 'I'm just an American' tend to be those who hate immigrants the most. What unites people, rather, is the idea that America is a society in which you will be left alone to accumulate as much property as you are able to. So when things are going well economically nobody really cares whether the neighbours are the new immigrants or the old immigrants—all they care about is, do you cut your lawn and keep your house up so that you don't drive down property values of your neighbours? The shared pursuit of income is the common identity that glues everything together. In that sense America is a fully modern, or commoditised, society.

*Jamie Stern-Weiner co-edits *New Left Project*.*

Fuente: New Left Project (en línea)

http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/land_empire_and_multiculturalism