BOOK REVIEW


Around the year 2010, the conservative leaders of three European powers (Angela Merkel, David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy) stated the failure of multiculturalism. If the question of how dealing with ‘racial and ethnic diversity’ in Europe became inescapable during the past few years, commentators disagree to date the emergence of this issue. For some of them, it surfaced with the creation of the European Union (EU), and for others it had to do with the political climate following 9/11 or the succession of home-grown terrorist acts. In her book, Rita Chin explores the evolution of this European debate through a comparative approach including Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands. The author examines both the distinct historical contexts of each country dealing with diversity and the convergence ‘into a wide discourse on multiculturalism’ (5). Chin also interrogates the growing focalisation on religion, especially Islam, seen as ‘the central marker of ethnic and racial difference’ and its relation with concerns about gender and sexuality.

The very informative introduction notes the proliferation of definitions and meanings of the word ‘multiculturalism’ (conservative, liberal, pluralist, critical, commercial, etc.) since its dissemination in the 1970s from the United States to Europe. The successful internationalisation of this American invention echoed intellectual debates on interactions between natives and immigrants. For example, the concept of ‘cultural pluralism’ associated with the American philosopher Horace Kallen stressed the ‘autonomy’ and the ‘particularity’ of each ethnic community within a broader nation enriched by its differences. In the wake of the civil rights movement, some activists even encouraged students to ‘appreciate and preserve their own unique ethnic cultures and histories’ assumed distinct from white middle-class values (13). ‘Multiculturalism’ then migrated across the Atlantic. It appeared in Britain during the early 1970s and was seriously discussed in Germany and France after the Rushdie affair in 1989. However, this concept was ‘contested’ and its ambiguity had ‘pernicious effects’. Despite this bias, Chin endorses British sociologist Stuart Hall’s perspective by recognising the ‘fundamental value of multiculturalism’s messiness’ (22).

Chapter 1 (The Birth of Multicultural Europe) reconsiders the ‘myth’ of cultural homogeneity before 1945 and highlights the ways European countries dealt with questions of immigration from the colonial era to the Oil crisis during the 1970s. This period marks the end of post-war economic prosperity and the change in the nature of migration with the growing presence of female workers, family issues or protest movements across the continent.

The second chapter (Managing Multicultural Societies) details the policies of four Western European countries towards migrant manpower. According to Chin, political leaders ‘tended to adopt procedural terms’ (such as race relations, insertion and pillarisation) ‘in order to attract as little attention as possible’ (83). The author shows that the first experiences of British multiculturalism ‘accepted a balkanized view of race relations’ (101) while Dutch pillarisation offered a ‘technocratic compromise’ associating communities’ elites in order to ‘depoliticize the issue of integration’ (110).

Chapter 3 (Race, Nation, and Multicultural Society) examines the major controversies around migrants in the 1980s, a context described as a ‘pivotal moment’ for the struggle over diversity
in Europe (138). In 1978, Margaret Thatcher declared that ordinary Britons felt ‘swamped’ by alien immigrants. Four years later, Helmut Kohl argued that Turks were ‘too different from Germans to be absorbed’. In 1986, Jacques Chirac sought to reform the nationality law questioning what it meant ‘to be French now and in the future’ (139). These growing concerns, linked to the spreading of a cultural nationalism, culminated with the Rushdie affair presented as ‘the moment when Muslim immigrants with diverse national origins merged into a single, distinctive category’ (190).

Chapter 4 (Muslim Women, Sexual Democracy, and the Defense of Freedom) opens with the French headscarf affair that occurred in Creil in 1989. For Chin, it marked the reinforcement of cultural logics concluding ‘that Islam was incompatible with Western values and incapable of adaptation’ (195). Moreover, the mode of sexual politics became one of the ‘most powerful instruments for constituting a positive national or shared European identity’ (228). The author even emphasises the role of mainstream secular Muslim women (Fadela Amara, Hirsi Ali, Necla Kelek, etc.) in fostering the ‘growing doubts about religious tolerance’ (234).

The last chapter (The ‘Failure’ of Multiculturalism), certainly the most interesting of this book, details some critiques of multicultural policies provided by intellectuals with a migrant background and a progressive perspective such as Ambalavaner Sivanandan and Kenan Malik in Britain. While Sivanandan saw multiculturalism as potentially divisive or encouraging competition among various communities, Malik pointed out that managing diversity could share a crucial assumption with the racist ideologies that understand differences among groups of people as ‘predetermined, natural, and unchanging’ (270).

Chin concludes her rich historical demonstration by writing that ‘the broader dismissal of multiculturalism has been profoundly undemocratic’ (299) and points to the responsibility of the left. According to the author, acknowledging multiculturalism seems to be a way to make European ‘democracies more robust’ (305). This assumption appears quite idealistic, or even pointless, in a context of disqualification of the representative democracy, the reformist left and European institutions. Finally, one might regret that the book doesn’t pay enough attention to the debates within various political groups created by migrant activists often linked to a working-class perspective rather than a mainstream agenda.