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Is the notion of "multiculturalism" - potentially so attractive as a political and educational concept that promotes greater understanding - nothing more than a new form of cultural imperialism? Are there not better ways to encourage specific cultural voices that secure value and meaning?

"What educates is significant experience." (Mursell, 1934)

We live in a changing world. Increasingly, countries and peoples find themselves inhabiting a new social and political dynamic. More often than not this dynamic is led by international, even global, understandings of how social and political "justice" and "freedom" shall be achieved. Worldviews as we currently understand them tend to be orientations of Western perception. One of the first possible casualties of such worldviews is that of cultural identity.

> *Our investigations and discussions have led us to the perception that community music activity is characterised by the following principles: decentralisation, accessibility, equal opportunity, and active participation in music-making. These principles are social and political ones, and there can be no doubt that community music activity is more than a purely musical one.* (Olseng, 1990, p. 84)

In the sense just described community music praxis embraces the spirit of UBUNTU, the age-old African term for humaneness. It is vital that we not only develop approaches to community music activity that encourage diversity, understanding and humanity but also that we ensure that identity, the very purpose of cultural expression and the outcome that gives meaning to the previous qualities listed, is secured in the process. To this end we must not allow ourselves to be party to sloppy liberalism and we must be rigorous in our methods if we are to achieve opportunities for the development of personal autonomy, which is the very basis of freedom, and a sense of worth, which is the foundation of justice.

All of the people all of the time?

The term "multicultural" has become very popular in recent years as a description of societies made up of varied groupings of people who, apparently, have their own cultures, and the sum total of these is the national multiculture. From this definition a concept has been generated that is "multiculturalism" and it is the impact of this concept on societies in general, those people, groups or individuals, for whom specific cultural activity has particular meaning and the implications for art, artists and educators that is the prime concern of this discussion.

A profusion of terms rain down on us in order to define tiny incremental steps in the development of the concept of "multiculturalism" - such as "intercultural", "cultural diversity", "cultural pluralism" and "cultural democracy" - but as they are effectively modifications of the same intent, and that intent has the significant weight of history and understanding behind it, in this argument I shall take them to mean effectively the same thing, which is how they are commonly interpreted. The argument will seek to explore the notion and nature of multiculturalism and to ask whether this concept has more to do with Politics, with a capital P, than with the representation or definition of the lives, achievements and social and political, with a small p, interaction of different groups of people.

To begin close to home in the report of the 1992 ISME Community Music Activity Seminar in Auckland, "Intercultural Music Education: an international perspective", a document that attempted to find common ground with difficulty as the principal author John Drummond concedes, the following definition can be found:

> *In some countries the term multicultural is used in official policy as a means to disenfranchise groups identified with that policy. In other countries it is used as a means to promote cultural preservation, participation and interaction. It is therefore a term of local variation.* (Drummond, 1992, p. 63)

This is clearly a definition that identifies the political policy function of the concept. It is policy employed as a means of manipulation and does not appear to reflect the needs or desires of individuals but emphasises the desirability of certain social outcomes. Whether you were in the first group of countries or the second group the impact of the policies would be the same; received identity, almost separate development. It is Habermas' "bourgeois public sphere" at work.

> *The communicative network of a public made up of rationally debating private citizens has collapsed: the public opinion once emergent from it has partly decomposed into the informal opinions of private citizens without a public and partly become concentrated into formal opinions of publistically effective institutions.* (Habermas 1962/1989)

Through these "publistically effective institutions", increasingly antagonistic to intellectual and individual freedom, particularly in the west, the authority to make decisions is steadily being removed from the citizen and replaced by an arbitrary moral obligation that she/he live by received rules. Just look at what "political correctness", now endemic in every institution, has achieved for the individual responsibilities and rights of the people - any people - in recent decades. The extensive range of examples in America, where it could be argued multiculturalism grew up, are graphically and effectively detailed in the recent critiques *Culture of Complaint* by Robert Hughes (1994) and *The Disuniting of America* by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (1991). Just one image, of the many acute

observations made by Hughes, reflects significantly what he feels multiculturalism has done to the meaning of quality, and therefore value, in creative activities.

> *As a maudlin reaction against excellence spreads to the arts, the idea of* **aesthetic** *discrimination is tarred with the brush of* **racial** *or* **gender** *discrimination. …The self is now the sacred cow of American culture, self-esteem is sacrosanct, and so we labour to turn arts education into a system in which no one can fail..* (Hughes, 1994i, p.6)

Whilst I might not agree with Hughes as to what we might each think excellence is I must categorically agree that it is desirable. And it is my experience and knowledge that everybody I have ever known and, particularly, worked with would think so too; whether they would admit it is, perhaps, another thing. This issue lies at the core of debates about policy and practice in community music in Britain.

In the name of diversity these policies and practices seek to promote a sense of cultural homogeneity in that they do not recognise the way in which people actually value things, culture among them. They encourage a sense of valuelessness and this has an impact way beyond any particular artefact or cultural product. Knowledge and experience are also victims here. An understanding of value is a subjective and developmental process and so cannot be received in an arbitrary way; it must be lived. Once understood, whatever that means, the individual, confident in their understanding, is able to make judgements about the value of new things and new experiences.

Does nature inform nurture?

Lawrence Stenhouse, the influential educational thinker, argued powerfully for the benefit of enquiry-based methodologies of teaching. The fundamental premise for such an approach is that students, of whatever kind in whatever situation, learn best when they inform and understand the learning process; when why and what they learn is relevant to themselves. A crucial part of that relevance is the significance of their lives and the knowledge and experience base they have already developed, their culture. This theory is informed by the thinking of the psychologist, George Kelly (1963, p.43), that recognises the act of will in human participation and the diversity of understanding and experience implicit in that process of decision-making.

> *...man comes to understand his world through an infinite series of successive approximations. Since man is always faced with constructive alternatives, which he may explore if he wishes, he need not continue indefinitely to be the absolute victim either of his past history or of his present circumstances.*

Pass the knives and the blindfold

It is now time to attempt two definitions of culture. In the first the context is the West and its ever-increasing spheres of influence. Culture as a definition of product tends to be either established art, the quality of which is recognised by its enduring nature, or the dynamic, new and exciting art and art forms that push the boundaries of taste and understanding and stretch the ties with history. The area where these definitions cross over reflect the understandings of the "culturally au fait" and, though there are ends to this spectrum, traditionally they who aspire to this status do so on common ground, the tradition of culture, embraced or rejected. The terms of reference are the same but the

interpretations, the value judgements, are different. This is not surprising given the predominance of the technical rationalist western cultural tradition, obsessed with absolutes and objectifications assumed from the Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, etc., etc., and its impact across the world.

I concede that the above description is argumentative, but then it is intended to be. I believe that this is an accurate description of the hegemonic use of culture to preserve the notion of "status quo". However, it is fair to comment that most *individuals* would acknowledge a far more diverse cultural understanding and experience.

Culture as a definition of the context of the social and political lives of people is another perspective. Even within the western tradition there were those that recognised the dynamic potential of culture that believed, and believe, that it is a form of popular expression that brings relevance to the lives of the living, an appreciation of what has happened in the past and an expectation of what might happen in the future. The thoughts of the philosopher and educationalist Matthew Arnold, written over a century ago, are particularly significant as he considers culture to be an ever contemporary popular expression that is politically and socially understood by those who identify it. A perception of individual autonomy, even if it is romantically identified as an absolute, that increasingly resonates with our interpretations of the process of community music across the world.

> *He who works for machinery, he who works for hatred, works only for confusion.*
> *Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred: culture has one great passion,*
> *the passion for sweetness and light. ...Plenty of people will try to give*
> *the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way*
> *they think proper for the actual condition of the masses...But culture works*
> *differently....It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought*
> *and known in the world current everywhere…* (Arnold, 1932, pp. 69-70)

Arnold's identification of the contemporary relevance and social and political nature of culture substantiates much of the thinking of previous CMA seminars. His concerns about machinery have also been echoed, not only by anxieties over misplaced priorities regarding the supremacy of technology - such as computers etc. - but with regard to human machines that also might constrain rather than affirm the individual - such as institutions, organisations, traditions, class structures, political systems, policies, etc. - and which come to use rather than be used if they are not watched very carefully.

This dynamic view is also reflected by another description that recognises the autonomy of the "cultural" (a more developmental and current term than "cultured"), and which also resists the potential hegemony of institutionalised technology. Lawrence Stenhouse, of whom I spoke earlier, comments,

> *"As well as being a product of social action, culture is also a determinant of it. It*
> *determines who can talk to whom about what. We talk to one another by virtue of*
> *what is common in the cultures we have learned; we are unable to talk to one*
> *another when we lack common experience."* (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 8)

These descriptions depict culture not only as dynamic but also as spontaneous, and I would like to cite one last description of the function of culture as an intrinsic and spontaneous part of contemporary life, art and society. Christopher Small (1977, p. 56-57) considered the complex music

and dance ceremonies of the Chopi of Mozambique. These ceremonies are a vital part of the life of the Chopi and express

> *…cunning mixtures of mirth and sadness, political comment and just plain gossip, outbursts of vitality which remain indissolubly linked to the concrete lives of the people from whom they arose, and yet at the same time bearing a universally human and spiritual message.*

Small goes on to describe the complexity, diversity and inventiveness of the art (music and dance), a tradition of development employing master composers, musicians and choreographers that continually creates something new and relevant out of the old through a process of devising in collaboration with the performers (the people) without any recourse to pen and paper.

> *The new work is inserted into the existing work, movement by movement as it is completed, finally replacing the old completely. The old work is then forgotten, however fine or masterly it might have been, it has served its purpose and can be let go....To these African musicians it is the process that is important; the product is relatively unimportant and can be discarded without compunction, a sign of self-confidence on the part of these richly creative artists...*

I have argued, in a very short space, two perspectives on culture that describe very different ways of looking at the same world. Both perspectives are depicted in relation to understandings of western culture because it is perceptions of the impact and dominance of that tradition and the belief, often justified, that it resists and ignores other cultural experience that gave rise to the need for some kind of action, some kind of response. This response grew to be known as multiculturalism.

"Culture and history are full of borders but they are all to some degree permeable." (Hughes, 1994 ii, p. 82-83)

Now that a definition of what culture is has been attempted some questions will need to be answered, including:

What does the term multiculturalism mean?

Multiculturalism is a specific policy designed to raise the profile of cultures that are perceived to stand outside the western tradition, that do not fit within the perceived dominant Eurocentric mindset, particularly of "the establishment", wherever they be found. As such it was intended as a policy to be employed at any level to raise the consciousness and understanding of these other cultures in order that they might be valued as part of a diverse common culture. Grimshaw (1990, p. 550) describes it as a concept *"that grew out of the policy of integration",* as interpreted by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, *"(rather than assimilation) developed with respect to minority groups. (It implies) the recognition and acceptance of social diversity".*

As the impact of the applied policy has increased a particular consequence has been that, though the cultural activity and product of minority groups has been encouraged as of equal status within the common culture, it is not believed to be appropriate to interpret the value of this activity and product by the same criteria that are applied to "the mainstream". This is a problem associated with the political and social relevance of these minority cultures and has led to calls for their status to be seen

as equal but different; in effect, separate. This issue, while undermining the intended effectiveness of the policies, is embraced by the establishment **and** the minorities because neither wish to adjust their understandings of quality to any that might be common to all. Many minority groups believe that if such common ground were to be sought, let alone found, then the unique properties and meanings of their cultures would be assimilated and they would be silenced.

"The mainstream" has another problem. Any common ground is likely to alter the understanding of quality away from the simplistic absolutes that underpin most of their cultural beliefs and institutions. The anxiety is that this shift would be towards a more complex perception that would be much harder to predict and manage.

Does the term "multiculturalism" relate to all cultures?

As a policy objective the answer is no. In the Arts Council of England's Cultural Diversity Action Plan (1998) the following note is to be found

> *"Cultural Diversity", in this Action Plan, must be taken to refer to African, Asian and Chinese Arts: a reading specified by the Council of Arts Councils in July 1994. However, it is intended that the broader principle of diversity as a whole is encompassed within this reading.* (p. 5)

Confusing, isn't it? And to add to this confusion here is Hughes (1994 ii, p. 86) again.

> *Unhappily, you do not have to listen very long to the arguments on the other side before sensing that, in quite a few of its proponents' minds, multiculturalism means something less than genuine curiosity about other cultural forms. The first casualty of this is the idea of Europe itself - for how can anyone with the slightest acquaintance with the enormous, rich, contradictory range of European literature and thought presume that it forms one solid "Eurocentric" mass..*

What is a culture when it's at home - i.e. when it is indigenous?

It is the expression of meanings and values of particular societies embracing, even if through antagonism, influences from elsewhere. These meanings and values may be different for diverse groupings, and might also be identified by race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, political belief or attitude.

What is a culture when it's not at home - i.e. when it has been transported to another place?

It is the expression of meanings and values brought from another social and political context and reconciled, to whatever degree, with the realities and demands of a different and dominant social, political and cultural context. Such a definition is only relevant to first generation immigrants. I would argue that once further generations are born in the country to which parents or grandparents have emigrated their cultural position is in direct relation to the prevailing cultural conditions in that country.

Is a multicultural society a western concept?

It is in that, as we have seen, the specific intent of the concept as applied policy is to counter the perceived imbalance of opportunity, acceptance and credibility of "other cultures" due to the understood dominance of the western tradition and the contemporary and global culture that has grown from it.

Is multiculturalism an imperialist concept?

It is in that, in its original intent, the policy was to identify and integrate a broad, but specific, range of minority cultures into the common culture and make good citizens of them all. This view is further confirmed by the current practice, arising from the perceived failure or, at least, shortcomings of the first intent, of abandoning the objective of a diverse common culture and encouraging distinction and separateness. In this sense, within a country such as Britain for instance, this approach reflects a form of indulgent imperialism - a form of sloppy liberalism - which is open to abuse and ignorance because it lacks any stimulus for the discussion of the meaning and value of cultures, let alone culture, in the social and political context of the nation.

How does the expression of a culture through art have meaning?

Cultural process and product have meaning to those who invest them with meaning. For this to occur the responsibility for the intentions and outcomes of cultural activity must be realised by those who act culturally, whether by making or participating, in the broader social and political context. That meaning is identified by each individual as the way in which they understand who they are, what they believe in, who they care about. In each case this approach potentially recognises complexity and variety in the contemporary cultural context but only if those actors can learn of the significance of other cultural acts and creations because of the relevance and value of their own to themselves.

Does the concept of multiculture disempower any social or political group in society whose own cultural processes and products have particular meaning for them?

It does as it is currently, and simplistically, applied in practice as a form of social control. If such groups, whoever they may be and from whatever side of the perceived divide they might come, are forced to recognise equal status for cultural activities and products without the opportunity to develop and value their own cultural product and negotiate understanding in a broader cultural context then knowledge and experience is increasingly diminished. Misunderstanding and antagonism is inevitable without dialogue. Dialogue is a process of developing individual understanding. In the current context, where dialogue is minimal and, as a result, respect is confused, simplistic assumptions and biases prevail, not least because the apparent argument for tolerance is to embrace the unknown without question rather than understand any meaning that can be devined from a unique individual perspective of inquiry.

This is an argument for applied intellectual inquiry that must recognise a range of different judgements and developing understandings, irrespective of who the inquirer is or where they stand. As such it is a worthy process that is likely to stimulate and encourage greater respect for cultural aspiration and endeavour because it is premised on investigating understood rather than received meaning. Of course, one of the things to be understood is, hopefully, how much meaning has already been received at the point such an inquiry begins.

"We all live in the hope that authentic meetings between human beings can still occur."
(R. D. Laing)

So, if we are working towards a world where cultural identity is to be valued and justice and freedom to be desired then educators, whether classroom teachers or community music practitioners, must ask themselves some questions as to how such idealistic objectives are to be practically considered and what understandings, or even misunderstandings, might stand in the way of that process.

1. If the argument is successfully made that multiculturalism is, indeed, a Political concept (or even policy), is its application:

* relevant?

* well-intentioned but misguided (i.e. inappropriate positive discrimination)?

* convenient?

* divisive?

* appropriate in directing, and possibly dictating, artistic and arts education endeavour and development?

* necessary?

2. Is the "common experience", described by Stenhouse, an effective means of identifying and valuing distinction?

3. Is the growing social and Political emphasis on multiculture not leading us in the opposite direction from that "common experience"?

4. Is the application of multicultural policy damaging to the identity of the individual and the value of his/her culture?

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