

Interculturalism: The new era of cohesion and diversity

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Book Review: *Interculturalism: The new era of cohesion and diversity* (Ted Cante, Palgrave, £19.99)

Reviewed by Steve Sparrow

Who are you? Ask me to describe myself and I may give you five hundred words. Often though, we're happy to identify people different than us with just a single label. In *Interculturalism*, Ted Cante argues that multiculturalism, while seeking to protect minority communities and cultures, has led to a society of plural mono-cultures living alongside each other, where groups different than oneself are identified solely by their most visible characteristics.

He argues persuasively for a more multi-faceted approach to identity; preserving and sharing cultural nuance while recognising in all of us as individuals multi-faceted identities and shared values which stretch beyond the flawed idea of 'race', nationality or faith as a single mark of self. In fact he argues, with global population movements changing our demographic make-up faster than our current systems can cope, we have little choice but to find a new approach.

In 2003 Cante introduced the idea of community cohesion. Following this model we brought together different faith communities in the hope that people would find commonalities and celebrate the differences that we perceived between their identities. Instead we found fruit where people saw beyond the single label identifiers we had placed on each other, and found a real multi-faceted person beyond the labels we had constructed between us. We'd moved beyond the 'multi', faith and culture, to real, complex, people, and yet their communities remained identified by that which we saw as separating them.

Our identities are now shaped in a global society says Cante, not fixed as they once were perceived to be. Primary identity could be gay, straight, Christian, agnostic, runner, activist, community member etc, combined and hyphenated as we choose. In an era of super-diversity where 20 world cities now have foreign born populations of over 1 million, and Christian Aid predicts one billion people homeless globally in the next fifty years, nation state and majority/minority boundaries are no longer a key driver for young people growing up.

In the middle of this shift though, the debate on multiculturalism has tended to focus on the discredited idea of 'race' and on visible differences between communities, with identities discussed as if they are fixed and given, rather than chosen and transitory. Cante quotes Younge in one example:

'The government continues to approach Muslims as if their religion defines them. It rarely speaks to them as tenants, parents, students or workers'... 'It summons them as Muslims, talks to them as Muslims, and refers to them as Muslims, as though they could not possibly be understood as anyone else'.

All of our communities in reality says Cantle, are increasingly 'more diverse, more global, more inter-state and inter-cultural than we have ever imagined'. Change is with us, and we are in shock.

Interculturalism, as seen by Cantle, becomes a 'development model for identity across communities' in an ever-changing globalised society, enabling the bridging of mutually entrenched communities, through creating a culture of openness and shared values, and challenging identity and race politics which emphasise a multi-cultural conception of primordial and 'natural' distinctiveness and cultural fixity.

Reading the book provides not so much a measure of what interculturalism is, but what it could be. The opportunity to explore a different way to understand ourselves as a society, with next steps for leaders, governments, and the development of intercultural competencies for people like me on the ground. Whatever your view of the solution, Cantle clearly outlines the vacuity of our current functional understanding of individual and group identity in the face of changing demographics and the challenge of globalisation. Cantle's last book shaped the debate. This could change it.

Ted Cantle will be talking about his latest book at the National Secular Society Secularism 2012 conference. Tickets have now sold out.

Steve Sparrow, is a development worker and consultant working with diverse communities in Liverpool, owner of Polemi.org.uk. He can be found on twitter at @notazengarden. This review was originally published in [New Start magazine](#).

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