

# HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY MULTICULTURALISM IN MALTA

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# What is 'multiculturalism'?

It seems there are as many definitions of multiculturalism as there are columnists, experts and intellectuals prepared to weigh into the debate.

The [Oxford English Dictionary](#) offers a broad definition of multiculturalism as the "characteristics of a multicultural society" and "the policy or process whereby the distinctive identities of the cultural groups within such a society are maintained or supported."

# “Culture ...”

## Raymond Williams *Keywords*:

- “**Culture** is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English Language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought.
- The fw is *cultura*, L, from rw *colere* ...had a range of meanings: inhabit; cultivate, protect, honour with worship ... Came to be used in the plural – ‘cultures’ in 19<sup>th</sup> century, folk cultures as opposed to **civilization**. Material culture – anthropology / cultural theory – mainly symbolizing or signifying practices.

# SUCCESSFUL?

Has multiculturalism been successful  
... as a policy? an attitude? a fact of  
life?

How can we assess its success?

In 2004 Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality - now the Equality and Human Rights Commission (UK) - told *The Times* that multiculturalism was out of date because it "suggests separateness" and should be replaced with policies which promote integration.

David Cameron stated in 2011 that the policy of multiculturalism in Britain failed because:

"the doctrine of state multiculturalism has encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream".

# And here ...?

- INTERCUTURAL or MULTICULTURAL MALTA?
  - YESTERDAY
    - TODAY
- MULTILINGUAL MALTA
  - TRACES

# A Linguistic History of Malta

The linguistic history of Malta can be divided into two parts: before and after 870. Malta was uninhabited for some years before that date [Godfrey Wettinger] which creates a definite divide with the languages that came before – Phoenician, Latin, Byzantine Greek and any other. There is no linguistic continuity from this period.

The people who came to Malta via Sicily in 870 spoke Arabic – and we can follow the development of the language from that point in history.

The “forging” of Maltese “has come about thanks to its contact with other languages”. [Joseph Brincat, *Maltese and other languages*]



# Malta in the past:

There is linguistic evidence of 'successful'  
multiculturalism in Malta

if we consider the blending and merging of  
people and their languages as a sign of  
success

as opposed to 'separateness' which is  
considered failure.

# Being Valletta, being Malta.

Particular, unique, significantly placed now on the border of Europe, previously in the centre stage of Mediterranean culture, trade, war and the movement of people and languages. If our identity is in our language then it is also interesting to see that language here was never singular. Ours is a linguistic history of multilingualism not only in that more than one language was/is spoken at any time, but also that our own language is itself a **palimpsest** of the languages that have been encountered by this island in its history, its story of change, transformation and translation.

# Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*

Europe was thus born from its vulgar tongues. European critical culture begins with the reaction, often alarmed, to the eruption of these tongues. Europe was forced at the very moment of its birth to confront the drama of linguistic fragmentation, and European culture arose as a reflection on the destiny of a multilingual civilization.

## Umberto Eco: p.18:

- “Yet before this confusion (*confusio linguarum*) there was no European culture, and hence, no Europe. What is Europe anyway? [...] How are we going to establish the date when the history of Europe begins? The dates of great political events and battles will not do; the dates of linguistic events must serve in their stead. In front of the massive unitary of the Roman Empire (which took in parts of Africa and Asia), Europe first appears as a Babel of new languages. Only afterwards was it a mosaic of nations.”

# Multicultural / Multilingual Europe

- Europe is in need of a common language. While remaining true to its cultural heritage as a “continent of different languages, each of which, even the most peripheral, remains the medium through which the genius of a particular ethnic group expresses itself, witness and vehicle of a millennial tradition.”
- Eco asks:  
“Is it possible to reconcile the need for a common language and the need to defend linguistic heritages?”

# MULTILINGUALISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

- Maltese Culture is based on multilingualism and multi-ethnicity.
- These are the forces that have brought people to Malta throughout history.
- Trade, wars, migration, economics, marriage, slavery, ....
- Change is paradoxically the only constant

# STATIC IDENTITY VS IDENTITY AS PROCESS

- Opposition to change
- Perception of Maltese Identity as static
- Jacques Lacan: identity of the individual as something that is constantly evolving.
- Julia Kristeva: identity in process

# IDENTITY and CHANGE

We tend to think of identity as singular and unique, perhaps even unchanging. Malta's narrative in search of its own identity as a nation, a young nation born in 1964 with a linguistic memory going back several centuries, and a material and stone memory going back a few thousand years makes Malta both extremely old and extremely young at the same time.



“TRANSLATION  
AS  
NEGOTIATION”

The title of Umberto Eco's book on translation

# DG FOR MULTILINGUALISM

**In 2008 the (then) Commissioner for Multilingualism, Leonard Orban:**

**“I see translation as one of the expressions of Multilingualism. Translation is indeed a constant negotiation between the author, the translator and the reader. In Europe, we know this only too well, negotiation being the very essence of our staying together.”**

Negotiating Inter-culturalism  
through the principle of  
translatability – seeking what  
is common, while preserving  
the unique and the  
individual.