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Thinking with and beyond the Bristol school of multiculturalism

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Abstract

Since its emergence in the late 1990s, the Bristol School of Multiculturalism (BSM) has developed a complex, coherent and influential set of conceptual tools to critically and comparatively apprehend the politics of cultural and religious diversity. Animated by commitments to deep diversity, national belonging and equal citizenship, as well as to 'contextual' forms of moral reasoning, its founding figures have made significant interventions in a series of public debates around Islamophobia, anti-racism, free speech, national identity, equality law, religion, counter-terrorism, segregation and political polarisation, among others. By bringing together emerging scholars who have substantially engaged with, added to and challenged BSM ideas, this special issue sheds new light on long-standing concerns and some underexplored issues. In so doing, it underscores the enduring and wide relevance of the BSM and brings it into conversation with adjacent bodies of research in politics, sociology, philosophy and law.

Keywords

multiculturalism, political theory, diversity, racism, religion, citizenship

Multiculturalism, understood as a school of social and political thought concerned with normative debates around culture, identity and diversity, took off in the early 1990s with the publication of Charles Taylor's *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*

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(Taylor, 1994) and Will Kymlicka's *Multicultural Citizenship* (1995). Since then, it has grown into a sizeable body of work spanning the disciplines of philosophy, politics, sociology and law. While both the theory and the practice of multiculturalism emerged in Canada, they rapidly evolved into a globally influential, and controversial, political paradigm (Levey, 2025). They have found expression in Western European states such as the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK as well as in international organisations and policies, and triggered debates in Central and South America, the Middle East and North Africa, and South and Southeast Asia (see, for example, Brochmann et al., 2012; Kymlicka and He, 2005; Kymlicka and Pföstl, 2014). As multiculturalist scholarship has developed and spread, its contextual and theoretical variations have multiplied. While Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism remains the touchstone in the field, this special issue is concerned with a prominent alternative that arose in the context of Western Europe, and more specifically around the University of Bristol Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship. In 2019, Geoffrey Brahm Levey labelled it the 'Bristol School of Multiculturalism' (BSM).

Spearheaded by Centre founder Tariq Modood and his close collaborators Bhikhu Parekh, Nasar Meer and Varun Uberoi, the BSM differs from the dominant strand of multiculturalism in two fundamental and interlocking ways. The first is a decentring of the liberal tradition as a starting point to think through cultural diversity and its governance, and the second is a more assertive defence of cultural diversity's intrinsic value as a vehicle for developing a wide range of human capacities, assessing the possibilities and limitations of different ways of life, and enabling intercultural learning (Levey, 2019a). For these reasons, as Modood (following Taylor) puts it, cultural and especially national identities should not be 'thinned out' to make space for shared liberal values but rather 'thickened' by complementing them with diverse experiences and perspectives. Such 'thickening' through the institutional recognition and accommodation of cultural minorities is also defended as a way of enabling a feeling of belonging in national communities (Modood, 2019). A less fundamental difference between liberal and BSM theorists, partly rooted in the tenor of public debates in Canada and Britain, is that the former primarily deal with the claims of indigenous and national minorities, whereas the latter address those of racialised ethno-religious minorities created by post-war immigration, particularly Muslims (Modood and Sealy, 2025: 226-227).

Since its interpellation by Levey, the concept, nature and history of the BSM has been debated. Some, including leading BSM figures such as Tariq Modood, Varun Uberoi and (perhaps to a lesser extent) Nasar Meer, have endorsed it and underscored its contribution to political theory but also to political sociology and the sociology of ethnicity and racism (Uberoi and Modood, 2019; Meer, 2019). The response from those ascribed by Levey to the 'liberal' strand of multiculturalism has been more mixed. While the term was used by the three Canadian editors (including Arjun Tremblay, a contributor to this special issue) of a collective volume assessing multiculturalism in comparative perspective (Abu-Laban et al., 2022), Will Kymlicka has argued that the distinction counter-productively overstates the differences between, and similarities within, different schools (Kymlicka, 2019: 980). Seeing these differences primarily as a matter of empirical and political context, he stresses that researchers should retain the capacity to 'mix and match ideas from across the variable geometry of multicultural citizenship'. In response, Levey (2019b) has clarified that the delineation of schools was not meant to provide a rulebook for intellectual

production, let alone to prevent mixing and matching, but rather to map out a 'coalescence of interests, identity and pursuits' as well as a set of relationships or 'sociometry' between 'leading figures'.

These debates aside, the BSM has undoubtedly become influential in contemporary debates around multiculturalism and in related fields. As a result, a 'next wave' of BSM scholars has emerged, including several of Modood's former doctoral students and research associates but also others who have engaged with BSM ideas without an institutional connection to Bristol. Uberoi and Modood have characterised this 'next wave' as characterised by two features:

> The first is that their work is sociology informed by political theory or vice versa. It straddles disciplines and maintains the balance between political theory and empirical research […]. The second similarity is that the 'next-wave' […] identify omissions, silences and weaknesses […] to address and hopefully in doing so will improve and expand BSM scholarship in the years to come (Uberoi and Modood, 2019: 966).

As guest editors of this special issue, we count ourselves as part of this next wave of BSM scholars. Thomas Sealy, a former doctoral student, research associate and frequent co-author of Modood, as well as co-editor of a volume with Uberoi and Meer (Sealy et al., 2024), has explored the place of religion in BSM thought. In various publications he has argued that despite being seen as 'religion friendly', the BSM is in fact quite ambivalent on the question of religion as a result of its grounding in sociologies of ethnicity and racism. This, he suggests, has produced a series of blind spots when it comes to thinking about religious and non-religious pluralism. In his latest book, *Post-multiculturalism, Religion and Recognition* (Sealy, 2025), he develops a post-multicultural framework of recognition in response to issues such as institutional freedom, equality, pluralism, inter- and intra-group dominance, religious reason and language, freedom of speech and hate speech. Erdem Dikici, who also conducted his doctoral research at Bristol under the supervision of Modood, has built on the BSM's contextual, dialogical and realistic approach to diversity to highlight the often-overlooked importance of transnationalism and redefine integration as a three-way negotiation among migrants, host societies and transnational actors (Dikici, 2022). His book *Transnational Islam and the Integration of Turks in Great Britain* (Dikici, 2021) explores how participation in transnational networks can sometimes support rather than hinder integration. Pier-Luc Dupont, who completed his doctoral studies in Valencia (Spain) and later worked with Modood and Sealy in a research project examining the politics of cultural diversity in Europe, has tackled empirical and theoretical gaps in BSM analyses of anti-racism and human rights. Drawing on the social psychology of racism, human rights law and a case study of contemporary Britain, he has argued that two core multicultural policies, namely positive action in employment and multicultural school curricula, should be conceived as cornerstones of institutional anti-racism and as legal duties placed on public authorities by international treaties (Dupont, 2025).

The other contributors to this special issue also embody, in different ways, the developing next wave of BSM thought. Three of them have previous connections to Bristol and were supervised by Modood. Rebecca Grace Tan has explored the role of street-level bureaucrats and volunteers in the negotiation of diversity in Singapore and argued that the

city state's official multiracialism can be regarded as a case of multiculturalism that is not based on liberal and secular premises (Tan, 2024). Sam Taylor Hill has developed multiculturalist proposals around national narratives, recognition and inclusion to offer a progressive response to working class stigmatisation, alienation and rejection of cultural diversity (Hill, 2024). Drawing on interviews with the users and providers of Muslim dispute resolution services in Britain, Fouzia Azzouz (2023) has investigated the extent to which they fulfil Muslim women's needs and have been accommodated by the British legal system.

The remaining contributors have not held similar institutional connections to Bristol, but all have substantially engaged with the BSM in recent work. In addition to the volume mentioned above, Arjun Tremblay has published a comparative monograph examining the political right's impact on the evolution of multicultural policies (Tremblay, 2019) and a co-edited volume focusing on the political left (Tremblay and May, 2024). Clayton Chin has produced various articles and chapters on the multicultural concepts of belonging and recognition, including a contribution to a comprehensive handbook on multiculturalism edited by Levey (Chin, 2025). Zakaria Sajir has explored the governance of religious diversity from the perspective of post-secularism in journal articles as well as a large co-edited volume (Sajir and Ruiz Andrés, 2025).

Each of the articles assembled here simultaneously thinks 'with' and 'beyond' the BSM in order to unpack pressing social, political and theoretical challenges. Unlike multiculturalism's many critics on the right and the left, all contributors share its fundamental premises but wish to make them more explicit or systematic, or apply them to underexplored issues. In this way, they keep alive the Bristol School's tradition of inductive or 'contextual' normative reasoning, which goes hand in hand with its valuing of intercultural dialogue and has been characterised as a form of contextual political theory (Modood and Thompson, 2018) or normative sociology (Modood, 2022). From its emergence in the 1990s up to the present day, the work now associated with the BSM has evolved alongside political debates, particularly in Britain, and often sought to steer them in particular directions. One need only think about its early calls for plural rather than 'dualist' forms of antiracism (Modood, 1997); its interventions in controversies around free speech, the definition of Islamophobia (Modood, 2023; Parekh, 1990) and the rethinking of the national story (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000); its critiques of liberal and ethnocentric biases in political philosophy (Parekh, 2000); its analyses of the movement for minority faith schools (Meer, 2009); its engaged commentaries on the creation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in 2006, the passage of the Equality Act in 2010 (Meer, 2010) and the rollout of civic integration and counter-terrorism policies (O'Toole et al., 2016); its insistence that the 'interculturalist' emphasis on intergroup dialogue and contact can be reconciled, and often overlap, with multiculturalist proposals (Meer and Modood, 2012; Sealy et al., 2025); or its diagnoses of political polarisation around diversity and immigration (Modood, 2019, 2025). When taking part in these debates, and as a result of their appreciation for widely endorsed values and ways of life, BSM thinkers' progressive and pro-minority stance has often been tempered by a willingness to empathise and seek common ground with majority groups (Modood and Thompson, 2022; Uberoi, 2025). This moderation has not necessarily made it politically inert: in reactionary times when hard-won diversity policies in employment

and education, hate speech prohibitions and institutional accommodations of religious minorities are under attack, sustaining broad support for the law of the land can itself be a notable feat.

Despite its British origins and focus, the BSM has often adopted a comparative approach to normative questions, and the 'iterative' aspect of its contextualism has arguably contributed to its international reach. This is reflected in the diverse locations of our contributors, who write from Canada (Tremblay), Algeria (Azzouz, discussing the UK context), Spain (Sajir), Singapore (Tan) and Australia (Chin), as well as the UK (Hill and Dikici). Tellingly, one contributor (Tremblay) specifically examines the value of BSM theory for comparative research. Notwithstanding its intellectual fruitfulness, the BSM's iterative contextualism also comes with some risks. To discern these and thereby clarify the purpose of this special issue, it may be helpful to unpack the nature of iterative contextualism. According to Thompson and Modood (2018), this approach to political theory entails generating, refining and revising principles through the examination of various contexts. 'Contexts' here are defined broadly as 'networks of norms strongly associated with particular sets of practices', and can range from 'the legal, political or educational system of a particular state, and the culture of a specific group of people or of a particular organization within that state.' Iterative contextualism builds on simple contextualism (namely, formulating proposals for action by devising a coherent interpretation of a society's values or norms) but it goes beyond this by continuously refining and revising principles in light of new contexts. Since several norms, and interpretations of those norms, usually bear on a particular issue and set of proposals, iterative contextualists (borrowing from Ronald Dworkin's theory of law) seek to select and interpret norms in a way that reflects the context while promoting the theorist's substantive political ideal. In his *Essays on secularism and multiculturalism*, Modood notes that contextual theorising enables intellectuals to formulate specific, feasible and persuasive proposals and therefore displays elective affinities with public engagement. He also underscores that for multiculturalists, it requires an openness to minority claims and intercultural dialogue (Modood, 2019: 21).

While broadly sympathetic to contextualism in general and to the BSM's iterative version in particular, political theorist Sune Laegaard has pointed out that both can sometimes undermine 'critical distance' or the capacity to challenge existing arrangements by drawing on some external moral standard. This risk can be exacerbated if theorists take a partisan position in favour of some groups or give insufficient weight to general, cross-contextually relevant principles (Laegaard, 2019: 962, 967-968; Laegaard, 2021: 632). We submit that such drawbacks may be mitigated by retaining the general approach of iterative contextualism but examining more group- and context-specific claims and theorising them more fully. BSM founders themselves have shown the way in this respect, for example by paying greater attention – largely in response to interculturalist critiques – to majority anxieties and the value of everyday intergroup contact. In line with Uberoi and Modood's call to 'improve' and 'expand' the BSM, this special issue presses on with the vital work of generating, refining and revising principles and concepts.

Clayton Chin's opening contribution starts from the observation that, as suggested above, Western political debates on cultural diversity have gravitated from the demands of cultural minorities to majority groups' anxieties about immigration. Based on a close and

comprehensive examination of Parekh and Modood's accounts of political belonging and its cultural underpinnings, Chin demonstrates that Parekh tends to favour comparatively thin, institutional or procedural national identities, whereas Modood embraces thicker ones where minority ideas and practices are combined with those of cultural majorities. Chin further argues that both the thinning and the thickening of national identities may be necessary in certain respects to enable equal belonging in diverse societies, but that Modood's thickening-focused approach may be more promising to assuage majority concerns about cultural disruption. In this way, the article makes a convincing case for viewing the BSM as a vital resource to navigate and respond to contemporary reactionary politics. Yet Chin also contends that multicultural theory could be strengthened by integrating Parekh and Modood's insights and spelling out how and when national identities should be thinned out, thickened or indeed recreated so as to mitigate anxieties arising from cultural change among both majority and minority groups. The question has arguably been explored in greater empirical detail by other multiculturalist thinkers (Uberoi, 2008; Dupont, 2025; Levey, 2024; Taylor, 2024), and Chin's reconstruction of the theoretical disagreement helpfully brings into view the fundamental issues at stake in this area of research.

On the political left, a recurring critique of multiculturalism has been its limited engagement with socio-economic inequality and class (Kundnani, 2023; Shafi and Nagdee, 2022). While Bhikhu Parekh's *A New Politics of Identity*, citing Nancy Fraser (1995) and Iris Marion Young (1990), thoughtfully addresses the imbrication of material redistribution and cultural recognition (Parekh, 2008: 48-53), it is undeniable that the Bristol School has largely steered clear of political economy debates. Sam Taylor Hill confronts the issue head on by examining working-class decline in Britain and showing that, like the racial, ethnic and religious groups at the centre of multiculturalist theory, the working class often experiences cultural and status-based forms of exclusion and alienation. His argument implicitly challenges Fraser's (deliberately stylised) characterisation of class oppression as largely material in nature (Fraser, 1995: 75-76) and therefore offers reasons to develop cultural as well as redistributive and political responses to working-class alienation. In Hill's account, such responses should revolve around a dynamic civic life and a diverse constellation of voluntary associations where people of all backgrounds come together and cultivate a shared political culture. This is a vision inspired by the tradition of British idealism but which also echoes the interculturalist aim of expanding intergroup contact – albeit perhaps with greater emphasis on close, meaningful forms of cooperation and bonding instead of more superficial everyday interactions. Another key difference between interculturalism and Hill's idealism is that the latter does not seek to reduce the salience of national identities. Instead, Hill suggests that bringing the working class back into national culture will address legitimate identity-based grievances and therefore mitigate the appeal of nativist discourses that disingenuously blame migrants for working-class decline. In this way, Hill simultaneously expands on and puts into perspective the Bristol School's argument that allaying majority anxieties requires thickening national identities but also controlling immigration (Modood, 2025).

Like Chin and Hill, Erdem Dikici explores the meaning and political conditions of recognition and belonging, but he does so by foregrounding another aspect of social life that has received scant attention from the Bristol School, namely transnationalism. On one

level, this neglect is surprising given the Bristol School's focus on ethnic and religious minorities that have formed through recent migration (as opposed to the longer-settled indigenous and national minorities often studied by Canadian multiculturalists). Yet from a different perspective, it seems to go hand in hand with the School's endorsement of active and subjectively meaningful national citizenship (Dikici, 2022), which may appear difficult to reconcile with similarly meaningful participation in transnational organisations and networks. Building on empirical research with Muslim communities in Britain and Europe, Dikici contends that the relationship between national and transnational commitments need not be zero sum, and that transnational religious networks provide ethno-religious minorities with sources of identity and belonging that are valuable in themselves and can also support their national integration. To enable such complementarity, Dikici argues that transnational attachments and solidarities should be systematically recognised and accommodated by the state. Achieving this would not only require a rethinking of religious governance but also aspects of international relations, including policies around dual citizenship and political advocacy on behalf of co-religionists in other countries. While Hill's contribution suggests that migration control may be less necessary for cohesion and belonging than Bristol School theorists have claimed, Dikici's lends support to the view (notably developed by Joseph Carens (2013) and Chandran Kukathas (2021)) that it unduly constrains the agency of migrants and natives alike.

Zakaria Sajir's article develops two distinct critiques of the Bristol School, one largely empirical and the other primarily normative. The empirical intervention implicitly challenges Tariq Modood and Thomas Sealy's differentiation between 'moderately secular' states such as the United Kingdom, Belgium and Germany, and countries such as France that adhere to what they call 'secularist statism' (Modood and Sealy, 2024: 23-46). While the latter are conceived as excluding (or attempting to exclude) religion from the public space, Sajir shows that in Spain, exclusive conceptions of secularism are selectively applied to minority religions, whereas manifestations of the majority (Catholic) religion are protected through rebranding as 'culture' or 'heritage'. Insofar as similar patterns can be found in France and other societies that regard themselves as strictly secular, the difference between 'moderately secular' and 'secularist statist' societies may be less pronounced in practice than in theory. Sajir's normative intervention challenges the Bristol School's concept of ethno-religious recognition by highlighting that such recognition requires engagement with the cultural resources of religious minorities (as acknowledged in Bhikhu Parekh's notion of 'intercultural evaluation' (Parekh, 2000: 264-294)[1] and Thomas Sealy's 'post-multicultural multilogue' (Sealy, 2025), but also with the 'trans-cultural capital' of people whose identities straddle and scramble ethno-religious boundaries. This proposal broadly aligns with the Bristol School's insistence on the political participation of minorities holding 'hybrid' national, ethnic and religious identities, and therefore the continuous remaking of national identities, but places greater value on identity fluidity and creativity at the individual as well as the collective level. In this way, and similarly to Dikici, Sajir's piece opens up an avenue for dialogue between the Bristol School and scholars drawing on anti/post-nationalist or anti-essentialist ideas, especially in the field of race (eg Goldberg, 2002; Anderson, 2013; Bhattacharyya et al., 2021).

Fouzia Azzouz probes a different gap in the Bristol School's approach to minority religions and misrecognition. Unlike Canadian multiculturalists, who have paid sustained attention to the legal accommodation of minority cultures and religions (Shachar, 2001; Eisenberg, 2009), the Bristol School has rarely developed in-depth analyses of Muslims' relation to the legal system and specifically to family law. This is probably due to its focus on the exercise of bottom-up citizenship as opposed to institutional action, but the comparative neglect has left the School open to criticisms of insufficient nuance in its analysis of legal issues (Dupont, 2016; Kortmann, 2025). Azzouz' article provides such nuance by highlighting how the UK approach to 'inter-legality', namely Muslims' navigation of Islamic and state legal orders, has often been passive or reactive instead of respectful, dialogical and inclusive. Drawing on her own empirical research and that of other socio-legal scholars, she argues that Islamic law and the manifold authorities that seek to uphold it play an important role in the lives of Muslims, particularly Muslim women, and should be recognised and negotiated like other aspects of Muslim identity and culture. Azzouz' contribution not only provides conceptual tools to critically approach minority legal orders but also brings into relief the political and ethno-religious dimensions of family relationships. Her analysis demonstrates that disregarding these dimensions is itself a political choice, and one that often fails to respond to Muslim women's aspirations. While the regulation of family relationships may have a less immediate impact than other policies on the civic status of Muslims, the Bristol School's primary area of interest, it undoubtedly shapes their capacity to live out religious, cultural and social commitments, and arguably deserves specific theoretical attention on that basis alone.

The last two articles assembled in this special issue chiefly approach the Bristol School from a comparative perspective. Rebecca Tan's contribution contends that while the School's original focus was on Global North experiences with post-war immigration from former colonies, it offers tools to critically apprehend (and can in turn learn from) nation building in the Global South. Discussing the case of Singapore, Tan draws a parallel between the multiculturalist pursuit of national inclusivity and the 'multiracialism' developed by the city state's founding rulers to build a unified and culturally distinct nation. While multiculturalism and multiracialism both rely on the official identification, recognition/celebration and integration of cultural groups, Tan also acknowledges significant differences. Firstly, Singapore's multiracialism developed in an illiberal state that leaves little room for the active citizenship and bottom-up construction of national identities championed by the Bristol School. Secondly, the racial identities recognised by the state (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other) are patrilineally and rigidly assigned at birth rather than self-ascribed and periodically revised, going against the principle of minority agency in identity negotiation. Such differences raise important conceptual questions, such as whether the term 'multiculturalism' should be used to describe the Singaporean approach to nation building. At the same time, they provide a fruitful vantage point (or as Tan puts it, a 'cautionary tale') to identify possible gaps between the theory and the practice of multiculturalism in the Global North. For example, how much political agency do ethnic minorities in Britain really enjoy given the racialisation of socio-economic inequality (Bhopal, 2018) and the denial of political rights to many immigrants (Teo, 2021)? And how strongly do ethnic minorities identify with the broad racial categories

(such as Black or Asian) listed in UK censuses and monitoring forms, as opposed to more fine-grained ones that are not necessarily listed there (Borkowska et al., 2023)?

Turning to Canada, Arjun Tremblay argues that the Bristol School's value for comparative policy research would be significantly enhanced by translating its original normative proposals into an operational and multi-dimensional index, as Will Kymlicka and Keith Banting have done with Canadian multiculturalism (Multiculturalism Policy Index, nd). To demonstrate this, he offers a comprehensive review of Bristol School literature (including recent 'next wave' contributions) and identifies seven policies aimed at enhancing cultural or religious recognition and equal citizenship that are not adequately captured by Kymlicka and Banting's Multiculturalism Policy Index (MCP) for 'immigrant minorities'. He then investigates whether these policies have been implemented in Canada, finding greater room for improvement than MCP indicators suggest. Given its focus on ethno-religious minorities, as opposed to national, indigenous and non-religious ones, Tremblay's BSM Index appears especially promising as a tool to rigorously examine the differential inclusion of Muslim communities in the West, foregrounding a cultural perspective that is largely absent from the well-established Migrant Integration Policy Index. Beyond its core methodological purpose, Tremblay's article makes an important conceptual and analytical intervention by pinpointing concrete policy manifestations of theoretical proposals and organising them in a parsimonious, flexible and broadly applicable taxonomy.

Taken together, these articles illustrate how even a context-sensitive intellectual tradition such as the BSM can stimulate research questions and critical thinking in a wide range of socio-political settings. They also let us glimpse the directions the School may take in upcoming years as a result of academic exchanges as well as evolving political circumstances. By pursuing theoretical syntheses, refining concepts and laying the groundwork for innovative empirical research, the scholars featured here show that a vibrant school of thought is not made up of brick walls and closed rooms but of eager students able to come in and out as needed. This is a lesson that may indeed hold broader relevance for the ethnic, religious and national communities they study and engage with.

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Note

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