

Beyond Multiculturalism: Conditions for a deliberative accommodation of cultural diversity

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Abstract

Multiculturalism has been developed as a response to the shortcomings of liberalism in accommodating cultural diversity. As a specific form of 'politics of recognition', multiculturalism has meant recognising ethnic and cultural differences on policy terms in the name of greater equality and inclusion. Yet, despite this inclusive tendency, under certain circumstances multiculturalism fails to provide a fertile ground for inclusive politics in culturally diverse societies. This paper seeks to highlight two interrelated reasons for this failure. The first is related to the notion of culture upon which multiculturalism is based. When culture is understood as given and pre-politically existent, multicultural policies might lead to a fixation and homogenisation of the identities in question. The second reason is related to the way politics of recognition is understood and implemented. A politics of recognition in the context of multiculturalism is usually confined in the formal sphere and understood as the existence of group-specific rights. It is, though, possible to sketch an alternative, a differentiated account of the politics of recognition from a perspective of deliberative democracy. This account emphasizes the "constructed" nature of culture and the 'negotiable' character of identity formation. Accordingly, a deliberative accommodation of cultural diversity requires, above all, the existence of formal rights and opportunities enabling public deliberation. However, equally important in this model is the informal types of recognition implying citizens' attitudes towards one other in the wider public sphere.

Introduction

The critique of multiculturalism is as old as the idea of multiculturalism itself. Since its first use in the late 1950s, both the idea and the politics of 'multiculturalism' have been subject to intense criticism. The reasons for its rejection vary considerably from one perspective to another. While the conservative critiques worry that multiculturalism leads to fragmentation of the society and the national identity, the progressive critiques point out the possible constraints multiculturalism might have on individuals. The most common worry progressive critiques have is that multiculturalism as a certain form of recognition leads to a fixation and homogenisation of identities. Although the politics of recognition supposed to emancipate individuals, as the critiques point out, it ends up "locking" individuals into certain features (Barry, 2001, Kukathas, 1998, Okin, 1999, Markell, 2003) I will argue that such worries are well founded and multicultural policies might indeed essentialize the cultural differences. Yet, this should not mean the rejection of multiculturalism as a category as most of the critiques do. A closer look at multiculturalism reveals that this notion manifests itself in different varieties depending on the underlying notions of culture and recognition. Accordingly, multiculturalism does not have to be associated with an essentialized conception of ethnic groups. Nor does it necessarily mean a departure from the liberal framework as some of its critiques assume (Barry, 2001). An alternative approach to multiculturalism can be suggested from a perspective of deliberative democracy. By taking the constructed notion of culture seriously, this approach offers a more differentiated account of multiculturalism as politics of recognition.

In the following I will first outline the essentialist and constructivist accounts of culture. I will argue that the way culture and identity formation are conceptualised has significant implications both for multiculturalism and democracy. Although the essentialist and constructivist approaches seem analytically distinct from each other, it is difficult to detangle them in practice. A constructivist point of departure can too have essentialist consequences, especially when it comes to the recognition of cultures on institutional terms in the name of multiculturalism. In the second part of the paper I will highlight the relationship between politics of recognition and multiculturalism. The existing literature uses these terms mostly interchangeably and thus fails to notice that multiculturalism as a politics of recognition can be institutionalised in a variety of forms. I will argue that the deliberative perspective opens up new ways of thinking about multiculturalism and politics of recognition which do not fall into the trap of essentialism.

I Two approaches to culture and identity: Essentialism vs. Constructivism

The question of whether and to what extent culture is relevant for the liberal democracies has always been a tricky and contested one. In the existing literature, this issue is usually addressed through the dichotomies created by the well-known debate between liberalism and communitarianism (Sandel, 1982). This debate is polarized around two possible strategies of accommodating cultural diversity: privatization or protection of individuals' cultural attachments. While the first strategy aims to exclude identity claims from the public sphere, the second one insists on their inclusion by granting them exceptional status on policy terms. This second strategy is known as the politics of recognition or multiculturalism. The existing literature on culture and democracy seems to oscillate between these two strategies. Even though these strategies are framed as opposite to each other, a closer examination of them reveals that they are not necessarily so. They usually depend on the same premises which take individual's cultural attachment as given, fixed and pre-politically existent and seek ways to accommodate it. They are not interested in the question of where culture comes from, when it becomes significant part of identity and under which circumstances it might be transformed. As such both strategies presuppose implicitly or explicitly, an essentialist understanding of culture and identity.

Essentialist approach claims that everything has a real essence that is unique, irreducible and unchanging (Fuss 1989:2). In the context of ethnic politics, essentialism defines culture and ethnicity as the fixed features of individuals and defines ethnic groups through "essential unity, integrity, discreteness and fixity" (Modood 1998:378). When based on the essentialist account of culture, multiculturalism tends to suppress the heterogeneity which exists in each culture and create binary oppositions between cultures. Stratton and Ang argue that the cultural diversity embodied in official multiculturalism of Australia, for example, tends to construct a binary opposition between 'ethnic communities' and Australian society, "as if the two were mutually exclusive, internally homogenous entities. Such a representation, not only constructs the latter as 'always devaluing, hierarchising, othering' the former, but also pigeonholes 'the migrant' as permanently marginalised, forever ethnicised" (Stratton and Ang, 1999). In similar lines, Modood notes that many Europeans have come to think of multiculturalism as antithetical to rather than as a reformer of national identity" (Modood 2007).

An anti-essentialist perspective on culture and identity is presented by constructivism. Constructivism refuses the existence of true essence and argues that whatever appears as 'natural' or 'given' actually emerges 'socially' and as a result of discursive practices. Identity is not fixed; it is continually renegotiated through interactive effort, via linguistic exchange and social performance (Cerulo 1997:387). As Taylor puts it "my discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. [...] My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others" (Taylor 1992:34). It is this dialogical concept of culture that seems appealing to the progressive proponents of multiculturalism (Deveaux, 2003, Festenstein, 2005, Modood, 1998, Tully, 1995, Squires, 2002, Jung, 2001). The constructivist account of culture acknowledges the *intracultural* differences and the fluidity of cultural identities. Furthermore, it draws our attention to the structural location of the ethnic groups in a given society in understanding their claims. If ethnicity is a relational category, it means that there exists no universal solution of accommodating cultural diversity.

The acknowledgment of culture and ethnicity as changeable categories has important bearings on the institutions and practice of democracy in culturally diverse societies. Constructivist approach might offer satisfactory answers to the question of where culture comes from, when it becomes a significant part of an individual identity and how it might be transformed. However, at the same time it poses several challenges when it comes to the institutionalisation of the cultural attachments on legal and political terms. If cultural identities are subject to constant change, what kind of institutions do we need to be able to capture this constant change? Would not any attempt of institutionalizing the existing differences first create those differences? These are difficult questions and it seems to be impossible to get rid of essentialism but keep constructivism. A constructivist point of departure might too have essentialist consequences depending on the underlying notion of recognition. I argue that based on a constructivist notion of culture, a deliberative perspective suggests alternative ways of recognizing differences without essentializing them. Before however going into details of this account, let me briefly outline the relationship between the politics of recognition and multiculturalism and the forms these might take.

II The relationship between politics of recognition and multiculturalism

A variety of issues have been discussed under the rubric of the politics of recognition. In many contexts the term is used interchangeably with identity politics, politics of difference or multiculturalism. On institutional terms it is usually associated with the existence of group specific rights or the existence of formal group representation. Given this, many scholars favoring liberalism regard the politics of recognition as a departure from the liberal framework (Kukathas, 1998, McBride, 2005). The existence of group specific rights, as they typically argue, would undermine the basic individual rights of the liberal system by locking individuals into certain groups. Furthermore, they have pointed out that the politics of recognition requires a 'politics of difference', whereas liberalism is about the 'politics of indifference' and thus incompatible with any form of recognition. Charles Taylor, on the other hand, at least in his influential essay "The Politics of Recognition" uses the terms 'politics of recognition' and multiculturalism as closely linked and as opposed to classical liberalism (Taylor, 1992). Others, especially Habermas regards the politics of recognition as being compatible with the liberal democratic framework. For him, it is group-specific rights that pose challenges to democracy and rule of law, not the politics of recognition *per se* (Habermas, 1996). The different usages of these terms reveal that there is no agreement on the meaning of politics of recognition and multiculturalism, and whether and to what extent these strategies challenge liberalism. As Benhabib notes, the more the term recognition covers, the less it seems to clarify (Benhabib 2002:50). Let me try to explain some of the conceptual differences between multiculturalism and the politics of recognition, and the different forms both can take.

To start with, politics of recognition and multiculturalism are not synonyms; multiculturalism is only one form the politics of recognition takes. The claims for the recognition of differences might be as many as the differences themselves. In the case of multiculturalism, the politics of recognition is about recognizing the 'cultural distinctiveness' of the individual *or* group from everyone else (Taylor 1992:38). Kymlicka defines the politics of recognition as "the rights of immigrants to express their own culture without fear of prejudice and discrimination"(Kymlicka 1995:198). This is a relatively broad definition of the politics of recognition which does not specify the scope of the respective rights. However, when applied in the context of multiculturalism, it is mostly understood as the recognition of cultural distinctiveness of ethnic groups on *legal and policy terms*. When defined only within the confines of the formal sphere on policy terms, multiculturalism implies a kind of social contract between state and the

prevailing ethnic groups. Many scholars insist on this narrow definition of multiculturalism. They note that multiculturalism implies the existence of a respective official policy and not the demographic description of a culturally diverse society. While the description of a society as 'multicultural' is a demographic fact, 'multiculturalism' is a political term necessarily associated with government policy (Parekh, 2000, Kivisto, 2002). As such it is not present in societies that are described as *de facto* multicultural.

Here, the first point that requires correction is the following. While criticizing multiculturalism, the existing literature tends to understand this narrow definition of multiculturalism as the existence of group specific rights and/or formal group representation. It is important to note that the formal types of recognition do not have to be associated with the existence of group-specific rights. Multicultural policies might have either individualistic or collectivist points of departure. Accordingly, there exists a spectrum of institutional possibilities between individual rights and group-specific rights, each suggesting different forms of multiculturalism. For example, compared to the Australian multiculturalism, Canadian experience of multiculturalism presents a group-based form of multiculturalism by acknowledging corporate group rights like the Quebec language laws. Given the wide spectrum of institutional possibilities, multiculturalism does not and should not necessarily mean a departure from the liberal framework. In her influential book *Tolerance as Recognition*, Galeotti suggests a differentiated overview of the forms that a politics of recognition can take on policy terms. The spectrum of the institutional measures she suggests reveal that cultural rights introduced under the politics of recognition must not be understood as the group-based collectivist rights (Galeotti, 2002, Seglow, 2003).

The second point that the existing literature fails to notice is the informal forms of recognition and multiculturalism. The narrow definition of multiculturalism as an official state policy might be useful in comparing the institutional forms of recognition in culturally diverse societies. Yet, it overlooks the informal types of recognition which implies citizens' attitudes towards one another. In this context, while the formal types of recognition can be seen as a vertical relationship between immigrants and the state, and the informal type of recognition implies the horizontal relationship among citizens. The form multiculturalism takes depends very much on the interplay between the formal and informal types of recognition. This suggests that the institutions or policies alone do not shape the form the politics of recognition takes. Similar institutional measures might have different affects in different contexts depending on the ways

citizens interact with each other as well as depending on the prevailing discourses of cultural diversity in a given society.

Informal form of recognition implies the existing values and attitudes that citizens of a culturally diverse society evince one another in their daily interactions. This type of recognition is being shaped as a result of the existing discourses of cultural diversity employed by politicians, in media or literature. Informal recognition does not require the affirmation of minority identities in legal and political terms. As Seglow puts it, here “the majority need only affirm that the minority identity is different from their own, is valuable at least on its own terms” (Seglow 2003:84). I believe that this form of recognition is more difficult to reach than recognition on legal and political terms.

III Deliberative conditions of accommodating cultural diversity

I argued at the beginning of this paper that the way culture and identity formation is conceptualised has significant implications both for multiculturalism and democracy. If culture and identity are dialogically constructed, their recognition requires a particular model of democracy which should be sensitive towards intra-cultural differences. As also pointed out by the recent United Nations report on gender justice, “the history of internal contestation reinforces what should be the starting point for thinking about issues of multiculturalism and rights: that cultures are not monolithic, are always in the process of interpretation and re-interpretation, and never immune to change”.¹ It is not difficult to agree with this statement; yet it is difficult to find satisfactory ways for the political implementation of this idea. The required institutional arrangements should provide the conditions under which the “value of culture” should perpetually be re-formulated and re-negotiated according to cultural members’ changing perceptions (Festenstein, 2005).

Given this, the sought model of democracy must meet at least two tests: it must not only recognize cultural differences, but must also provide the conditions to facilitate the interaction and transformation of those differences. It should take seriously that cultural and ethnic identities and groups are not fixed but rather fluid and open to change. Only this way, an anti-

¹ “Gender, Justice, Development and Rights” Report of the United Nations Research Institute of Social Development Workshop) cited in Deveaux 2003:794

essentialist account of multiculturalism can be achieved. I argue that the deliberative theory offers a dynamic notion of recognition by acknowledging that culture and identity are dialogically constructed and their construction requires an intersubjective effort. It suggests a suitable framework to accommodate a constructed notion of culture by at the same time taking informal forms of recognition seriously. As a result, multiculturalism understood from a perspective of deliberative democracy goes beyond the traditional notion of multiculturalism.

Let me briefly define the core features of this participatory approach. Deliberative democracy is designed as a response to the legitimation problems liberal democracies have been facing. Its aim is to enhance the legitimacy of collective decisions by means of fair public deliberation among free and equal parties. On this account, the collective decision-making is not understood in a limited sense as the aggregation of the preferences, but rather it is conceptualised on broader terms as series of interaction both in the formal and informal spheres. Given this, deliberative democracy suggests more than a theory of decision-making. This approach is also concerned about the conditions facilitating 'social learning' (Dryzek, 2000, Kanra, 2005), 'mutual understanding' (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004) and cooperation among deliberating individuals (Bohman 1996). Given these features, deliberative democracy seems to be particularly suited for culturally diverse societies (James, 2003, Vadez, 2001, Benhabib, 2002).

The question of what constitutes deliberative democracy in culturally diverse societies is a contested one. However, for the sake of brevity here I will emphasise four key characteristics of this approach. These characteristics help us to conceptualize a deliberative notion of recognition and a more dynamic account of multiculturalism. These are: (i) dialogical and intersubjective mutuality; (ii) transformative potential of public deliberation; (iii) revisability of the decisions and (iv) the importance of the informal public sphere. These four features deserve particular attention in the face of cultural diversity; especially when it comes to accommodation of cultural identities that are subject to constant change. Let me clarify these features briefly by underlining their relevance within the context of this paper.

i) Dialogical and intersubjective mutuality

The deliberative approach emphasizes 'the intersubjective formation of individual identities through confrontation and interaction with other(s).' (Benhabib 2002: 50) As such it distances itself from the liberal presuppositions of identity which are based on an *a priori* concept of

human nature. The social contract tradition of liberalism assumes an ahistorical account of human nature. On liberal understanding, "human beings begin their history endowed with a certain set of properties" (Parekh 2000:118).

The deliberative theory puts emphasis on the intersubjective constitution of the self through dialogical practices. If the cultural differences are not the reflection of pre-given ethnic identities but the results of the interactive efforts, the dialogical feature of deliberative democracy gains particular significance. Rather than beginning with a notion of pre-existing 'subject' and then trying to explain how that subject relates to others, a deliberative approach begins from a notion of interrelationship and its significance for identity building. Here the notion of recognition is embedded in the very process of identity constitution. As such it requires '*mutuality*' which goes far beyond the familiar plea for toleration. The dialogical notion of recognition requires the necessity of "reciprocal action".

ii) Transformative potential

The deliberative approach is claimed to be 'transformative', as it requires the engagement in public dialogue, which subsequently leads to change in the judgements, preferences and attitudes of the deliberating individuals (Dryzek, 2000, Saward, 2000, Young, 2000). In the existing literature of deliberative democracy, the transformative potential of this participatory approach is mostly conceptualised in terms of preference transformation, whereas its potential in transforming individual identities receives little attention. Deliberative democracy provides the necessary conditions for identity transformation through mutual, dialogical and intersubjective interaction. Some scholars argue that deliberative approach can suggest a suitable framework for a politics of negotiation even over the very content of the national culture and identity. With the help of collective deliberation, the national identity can be transformed in a way that reflects the cultural plurality in a given society (Kirloskar-Steinbach, 2004).

iii) Revisability: recognition as an open ended struggle

Given the plurality and incommensurability of fundamental values in culturally diverse societies, there can be no resolution that is definitive. From a deliberative perspective every resolution must be open to further democratic dissent and renegotiation. Ideally, any proposed resolution should rest as much as possible on the discussion and agreement of those affected by it. The proposed resolutions should be seen as ongoing provisional agreements open to revision and correction.

In the context of multiculturalism, the deliberative notion of recognition can be characterized as an ongoing struggle of identities that does not necessarily lead to a final state of harmony. Recognition of cultural identities should not be seen as an end state, but rather as a provisional and continuous process of democratic activity. Given this, the aim of democratic politics should not be “to discover and constitutionalize *the* just and definitive form of recognition..., but to ensure that ineliminable, agonistic democratic games over recognition” (Tully, 2000). In this sense, an anti-essentialist account of recognition and multiculturalism requires above all the existence of dialogical mechanisms facilitating open-ended transformation.

iv) Informal public sphere

Deliberative democrats suggest various strategies to expand democratic inclusion in culturally diverse societies. One form of achieving inclusiveness, as claimed by scholars such as Habermas, Benhabib, Dryzek and Deveaux, is expanding the spaces of democratic political activity to the informal public sphere. Benhabib argues that “heterogeneity, otherness, and difference can find expression in multiple associations, networks, and citizens’ forums” within the informal public spheres (Benhabib, 1996:84).

The formal/legal forms of recognition and inclusion are necessary but not sufficient conditions for a deliberative accommodation of cultural diversity. The liberal understanding of inclusion requires solely the extension of equal rights and opportunities to individuals who do not have them. A deliberative notion of inclusion should go beyond this form of inclusion by ensuring the necessary conditions of social inclusion. This is where the informal forms of recognition and the existing discourses of cultural diversity in the wider public sphere gain importance. Eventually, it is difficult to make sense of legal opportunities that are open to one, if one is publicly disregarded.

Concluding Remarks

The traditional understanding of recognition and multiculturalism are closely linked to the concept of a fixed, authentic, or autonomous identity. It runs as such the risk of essentializing ethnic identities. In this paper, I argued that the way culture and recognition is conceptualised has important implications both for multiculturalism and democracy. Based on the constructivist approach of culture and identity constitution, the paper highlights the core features of the

deliberative democracy. This approach opens up new ways of thinking about multiculturalism and politics of recognition which do not fall into the trap of essentialism. The deliberative perspective presented here reveals that the politics of recognition is not an all or nothing affair; and the much alleged group-specific policies are just one form of implementing the politics of recognition. As argued above, recognition and multiculturalism manifest themselves in variety of ways. The deliberative accommodation of cultural diversity requires us to focus on the informal forms of recognition which give formal rights their meaning. It requires the existence of an inclusive informal public sphere in addition to the formal rights enabling public deliberation. These conditions should ensure the existence of ongoing and open-ended struggles of recognition in which identities are constantly and dialogically re-negotiated.

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