

Multiculturalism, Conflict and Belonging
Monday 3rd September - Thursday 6th September 2007
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Multiculturalism and group membership

I begin with three fairly general remarks. My first remark is that

- (1) In recent debates on multiculturalism, there is a general consensus about the political relevance of people's cultural backgrounds and (to an increasing extent) of people's cultural identities.

This is not to claim that there would be a general consensus about the *kinds* of policy measures that should be put forward in order to accommodate different cultures or cultural identities; that there should, for example, be culturally differentiated rights or other culturally sensitive measures. But it is to claim that even those arguing for some type of difference-blind approach to cultural difference do acknowledge that there is something about culture and about cultural identity that should be taken into consideration when thinking about the actual policy measures put forward.

My second remark is that

- (2) Those identities found to deserve specific consideration are conceived primarily as social or collective identities.

Cultures (the norms, practices, values or beliefs) or cultural identities are something that are shared by some people and not shared by others. They are attached to, what can (at least for the time being) be called a cultural group.

Which leads me to my third remark, which is that

- (3) Debates about accommodating different cultures or cultural identities have revolved much around the questions of how to treat different cultural groups or members of these groups.

My intention is to take this last remark – or, to be precise, the last part of the last remark – that is, the idea of accommodating difference by treating members of cultural groups in a certain manner, and to show – by some formulations on group membership – that, maybe the whole idea of treating people in a certain way *due* to their membership in a cultural group is flawed, and that what we should in fact be doing is to try to develop some alternative principles according to which to accommodate difference.

1. Group membership through mutual recognition

According to Joseph Raz & Avishai Margalit,

Membership in the group is, in part, a matter of mutual recognition. Typically, one belongs to such groups if, among other conditions, one is recognized by other members of the group as belonging to it. The other conditions (which may be the accident of birth or the sharing of the group culture, etc.) are normally the grounds cited as reasons for such recognition.¹

In Raz & Margalit's account, there are two ways in which membership in a cultural group is denoted: firstly, those of common characteristics (from now on referred to as *shared cultural content*), and secondly, *mutual recognition*.

Regarding shared cultural content, Raz & Margalit are committed to the view according to which a group of pervasive culture is, at least partially, characterised by its common cultural content. The prevailing cultural norms and practices are characteristic of any particular cultural group, and these characteristics also operate as clues and reasons for recognising those belonging to such groups. The sharing of some particular cultural content does not, however, suffice for a person to be considered a member of a cultural group. According to Raz & Margalit, cultures are fluid and heterogeneous and they also affect people's lives very differently. People may be socialised to the prevailing cultural norms and practices, but they may also reject such practices, or interpret them in different ways.² Furthermore, the different ways of interpreting and being affected by cultural content apply both for members and non-members alike. To make is short, it is possible to be a member of a cultural group without sharing its prevailing cultural content, as it is also possible to be a non-member, even if one shared the prevailing norms, values, beliefs and practices.

¹ Raz & Margalit 1994: 115.

² Raz & Margalit 1994: 114-115; Raz 2001: 35, fn. 20.

As an alternative criterion for denoting group membership, Raz & Margalit suggest that group membership is established primarily through mutual recognition. For a person to be a full or uncontested member of a group, other group members must recognise this person's membership. Further, group membership, and thus recognition, has a double function. Firstly, membership is conceived as important for people's self-identification and their well-being, and secondly, it is conceived as a prerequisite for people's full access to their culture. Recognition is an essential ingredient in the constitution of people's identities, but it also operates as a gatekeeper, regulating people's access to lives characterised by those identities.³

The problem in this view seems to be that it fails to capture something important regarding *the type of recognition* particularly weighty in contemporary contexts of cultural diversity. In Raz & Margalit's view, it is the group's *internal, mutual recognition* that ultimately matters in defining group membership. "Membership in them [groups of pervasive cultures] is a matter of informal acknowledgement of belonging by others generally, and *by other members specifically*." "[T]hose who [...] are yet rejected *by the group* are at best marginal or problematic members of it."⁴

However, whereas this may be the case in relatively isolated groups, in contemporary contexts of cultural diversity, the situation is different. In culturally diverse societies it is the *external recognition* – recognition of the wider political community – that plays a prominent role. As the rights of self-determination and other group-differentiated rights or allowances are granted by the larger political community, it is ultimately the recognition of others that is politically significant, not the recognition of other group members.⁵

2. What are politically relevant groups?

Granted the way in which treatment by the larger political community affects the group members' lives, many theorists have adopted views according to which – at least in matters of

³ Raz & Margalit, 1994: 118-119.

⁴ Ibid, 115, *my emphasis*.

⁵ My intention is not, of course, to say that recognition within a group would be irrelevant in the constitution of one's identity and well-being. The opportunities as well as the sense of belonging given to, say, a Muslim youngster by the recognition of the Muslim community may, indeed, be central for the well-being of this youngster. However, my claim is that, in the issues regarding multicultural policies – and I am especially referring to policies directed towards the so-called minority cultures – what matters is ultimately the recognition of the larger political community and thus, of others, as it is the larger political community that decides, for instance, whether this particular youngster is provided with certain diet in his school, or is allowed to wear certain garment in public.

cultural content – groups should be able to decide for themselves, which customs, traditions, values or beliefs they wish to adopt.⁶ This, of course, does not necessarily mean that members of such groups should be considered as having unified views about the content of their culture. It merely dictates that the group members, rather than non-members or even the larger political community as a whole, should have the principal say in deciding which ways of life, values, norms or practices they, as a group, adhere to.

The idea of letting group members themselves decide about the content of their culture, however, is more problematic than is often acknowledged. As already indicated, in culturally diverse societies, the political relevance of groups as well as the memberships of these groups is based on the *general* political recognition, of members and non-members alike. To elaborate on what are considered politically relevant groups, I am using Kwame Anthony Appiah's conception of social identities, referred to as *the social conception of a label* – in which the label – here M – is denoting this or that particular group.⁷

For a group to be called a group (in a politically relevant sense) a minimum requirement of a general consensus regarding the existence of such a group must be established. It must make sense for people to use a particular label – Muslim, black, women, gay – in order to classify people under that label. However, in order for the group to be politically relevant, there are two further considerations. Firstly, there are some people who – at least occasionally – identify themselves as, say, Muslim, and secondly, there are occasions on which some people are also treated as, say, Muslims. Identifying oneself as an M refers to the way in which a person lets his belief in being an M operate as a reason for his beliefs or behaviour (say, a person prays five times a day because he believes this to be the appropriate thing for him, *as a Muslim*, to do). Being treated as an M refers to the way in which the belief in someone being an M operates as a reason for a particular type of treatment (say, a person is not invited to the office Christmas party because the inviter believes this person, *as a Muslim*, to refuse anyway). The political relevance of the groups of certain labels thus flows, not from the mere existence of these labels, but from the expectations attached to people under these labels, as well as from the behaviour resulting from these expectations.⁸

⁶ See e.g. Parekh 2000: 177-178; Kymlicka 1995: 104-105; Raz & Margalit 1994: 124.

⁷ For Appiah's elaboration on the structure of social identities see: Appiah 2005: chapt. 3; see also: Appiah 1996; 2001.

⁸ Appiah 2005: 65-71.

3. Discrepancy in group membership

If we apply this conception of politically relevant groups to group membership, we can argue that group membership is also denoted, not in terms of shared cultural contents, but in terms of self-identification (that is, recognition of oneself as M) and external ascription (that is, recognition by others as M). In this view, there are eight different combinations in which these forms of recognition operate.⁹

Table 1.

	X	Those (others) who self-identify as M	Those (others) not identifying as M
1.	Identifies as M	Recognises X as M	Recognises X as M
2.	Identifies as M	Recognises X as M	Does not recognise X as M
3.	Identifies as M	Does not recognise X as M	Recognises X as M
4.	Identifies as M	Does not recognise X as M	Does not recognise X as M
5.	Not identifying as M	Does not recognise X as M	Does not recognise X as M
6.	Not identifying as M	Does not recognise X as M	Recognises X as M
7.	Not identifying as M	Recognises X as M	Does not recognise X as M
8.	Not identifying as M	Recognises X as M	Recognises X as M

What is important is that only lines one and five seem to give results in which the recognition of all three parties towards X coincide. On line one, X is clearly a member of the group M, and on line five X clearly is not a member of M. However, if we return to the position I started with, that is, that much of the contemporary debates on multiculturalism have revolved around questions on how to treat members of different cultural groups and to accommodate difference along the lines of cultural memberships, the rest of the table may provide us with some problems regarding who is, and also, who should be, considered a member of the group M.

4. Should cultural policies be distributed along the lines of group memberships?

I believe that the above analysis of the discrepancies in group membership has, and also should have, some impact on the discussions on multiculturalism and, especially, on the debates regarding the distribution of multicultural policies. Granted that, in contemporary

⁹ For the sake of clarity, I have divided the table to consist of a) a singular person X who either identifies or does not identify as M, b) those (others) who identify as M and recognise X in certain ways, and c) those (others) who do not identify as M and recognise X in certain ways. It should, of course, be noted that, due to the possibility – or even probability – of different responses within any particular group, the table is much of a simplification and should also be taken as such.

circumstances of cultural diversity, group membership (that is politically relevant) is denoted by lines one, three, six and eight of the above table, it should be fairly clear that cultural policies – be they group-differentiated rights, allowances or other culturally sensitive measures – come to apply to many who identify themselves as M (lines one and three), but also to many not identifying themselves as M (lines six and eight). At the same time, some, identifying as M, are left out, being rejected by the wider political community as members of M (lines two and four). Considering the aim of cultural policies as accommodating people’s cultural backgrounds or cultural identities, these discrepancies alone may question the sensibility of distributing cultural policies along the lines of group memberships.

To analyse things a bit further, let’s consider for a moment the specific nature of cultural policies as advancing certain conceptions of culture over alternative conceptions.¹⁰ At the most simple level, a cultural policy of, say, exempting Sikh men from wearing a crash helmet whilst riding a motor bike advances a conception according to which wearing a turban is an important element of Sikh culture and Sikh identity. On a more subtle level, granting a group, say, Welsh people in Wales, a right to decide about their own language policies advances a conception according to which language is an integral element of culture and identity, and may – depending on the actual policies decided – also advance a view of Welsh language as being an essential and inherent element of Welsh culture and Welsh identity.¹¹

However, if we accept the conception of cultural contents as fluid and heterogeneous and conjoin this conception with the conception of cultural policies as advancing certain conceptions of culture, the distribution of cultural policies along the lines of group memberships becomes even more problematic.

According to Raz & Margalit, cultural contents operate as reasons for recognising one a member of M.¹² To take an example of line one of the table 1 – and the most uncontroversial case of being a member of M – several combinations regarding the reasons for one’s recognition unfold.

¹⁰ See e.g. Festenstein 2005: 81-82.

¹¹ Cf. Ibid.

¹² Raz & Margalit 1994: 115.

Table 2

	X	Those (others) who self-identify as M	Those (others) not identifying as M
1a	Identifies as M, because of a	Recognises X as M, because of a	Recognises X as M, because of a
1b	Identifies as M, because of a	Recognises X as M, because of b	Recognises X as M, because of c
1c	Identifies as M, because of a	Recognises X as M, because of a1 (contradicting a)	Recognises X as M, because of a2 (contradicting a and a1)

On line 1a, X is identified as a member of M, say, because X follows a certain practice of prayer, and this operates as a reason for everyone’s recognition of X as a member of M. On line 1b, however, X identifies as M because of his praying practices, but this is not a reason for anyone else’s recognition of X as M. The other self-identifying Ms recognise X as a member, not because of his praying practices, but, say, because he follows a certain type of diet. For non-identifiers, however, X’s praying or eating practices do not operate as reasons for recognition, but X is recognised as M because he wears certain types of garments. On this account, all parties have different conceptions of the relevant cultural content of the group M, although they all agree on X’s membership.

On line 1c, however, the conceptions of cultural content and, thus, reasons for recognition are, not only different, but also contradictory. For X, the self-identification is still based on him following a certain practice of prayer, but for other self-identifiers the reason may be that they believe X to follow a different practice of prayer, contradictory to the practice X actually follows. Further, for non-identifiers, the reason for recognising X a member may be a belief contradicting both X’s actual practice as well as the practice other self-identifiers believe X to follow.

Granted that the actual cultural policy measures are decided and distributed by the wider political community, it is worth asking which cultural backgrounds and identities are cultural policies actually accommodating. Following line 1a, a cultural policy of granting all Ms a right to, say, follow a certain practice of prayer during working hours, benefits those self-identifying Ms to whom following this particular practice is an essential ingredient of their culture and identity. However, if cultural policies are distributed along the lines of group memberships, these benefits are available only to those who are also recognised by the larger political community as Ms.

In cases analogous to line 1c, however, the same right serves no such purpose as some Ms do not wish to see such practice as essential for their self-identification as M. On the contrary, the right may even be detrimental, as some self-identifiers may feel pressurised or even obliged to take advantage of such right, just to guarantee their position as being recognised as M. At the same time, distributing cultural policies along the lines of group memberships renders some, not identifying as M, to a rather awkward position. For them, following a certain practice of prayer – perhaps integral for their identification, not as M, but as Q – depends on the fact of whether the larger political community recognises them as members of M, even if they do not wish to be thus recognised.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, I started from a fairly general remark about the ways in which contemporary debates on multiculturalism have revolved much around questions of how to treat different cultural groups or members of these groups. By conceptualising group membership in terms of recognition, I have shown that it is not only cultural content that should be conceived as heterogeneous and contested, but that membership in a cultural group should also be critically examined. Moreover, I have argued that recognising the heterogeneity and contestability of group membership and the reasons for recognising someone a member puts pressure on qualifying the criteria according to which cultural policies should be distributed. As cultural policies always advance certain conceptions of culture over others, being a member of a cultural group cannot justifiably operate as the criterion according to which cultural policies are distributed.¹³

¹³ Earlier version of this paper was presented at IVR World Congress of Law and Social Philosophy; Krakow, 2007. I am grateful to the participants for their useful comments. I also wish to thank Heta Gylling, Johanna Karhumäki and Pilvi Toppinen for discussions and critical remarks on the earlier versions of this paper.

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