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MULTICULTURALISM AND GROUPS

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My book is entitled *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* and so what I mean by multiculturalism is multicultural citizenship. The ideal of multicultural citizenship is a critique of the cultural assimilation traditionally demanded by nation-states of migrants and minorities, as well as of that liberal individualism that has no space for groups. Nevertheless, it is clearly grounded in, and is a development out of, the ideas of individual equality and democratic citizenship. It seeks to pluralize, and hence adapt not undermine, the unity and equality of citizenship and national identity. For multicultural citizenship is based on the idea that citizens have individual rights, but citizens are not uniform and their citizenship contours itself around the varied identities of citizens. In other words, citizenship is not a monistic identity that is completely apart from or transcends other identities important to citizens. These group identities are ever present and each group has a right to be a part of the civic whole and to speak up for itself and for its vision of the whole.

The core ideas of citizenship are membership and equality. Equality has to be understood as a double-concept: inclusion through what people have in common and so in a gender-blind, colour-blind, etc. way as well as an understanding that difference is also important in conceptualizing and institutionalizing equal relations between individuals. Hence the idea of respect for the group self-identities that citizens value is central to citizenship. Moreover, seeing citizenship as a work in progress and as partly constituted, and certainly extended, by contestatory dialogues and novel demands for identity recognition, as circumstances shift, means that citizenship can be understood as conversations and re-negotiations, not just about who is to be recognized but about what is recognition, about the terms of citizenship itself. At one point it is the injuries of class that demand civic attention; at another there is a plea for dropping a self-deluding 'colour-blindness' and of addressing racialized statuses through citizenship. To be a citizen from the moment of becoming a citizen, is to have a right not just to be recognized but to debate the terms of recognition. Multicultural citizenship is to make citizenship-inclusion or

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integration possible on terms that respect all and in particular those who are racially excluded, culturally stigmatized and whose subjectivities are marginalized or dismissed in similar ways.

THEORY WITHOUT GROUPS?

Anne Phillips and I both agree on the need to defend multiculturalism that is grounded in a concept of equal citizenship. This can mean, for example, the funding of ethno-religious community centres or increasing the number of persons from identifiable population groups in legislatures, governing bodies, consultative committees, and so on. We both think that 'multiculture' and 'cosmopolitanism' are not enough but we have an appreciation that 'culture' or groups are not holistic or closed, that multiculturalism must be built upon anti-essentialism. We go on to discuss multiculturalism in relation to some specific concerns, notably tensions in relation to gender equality (Phillips, 2007), and tensions between differential equality, especially religious equality, and the civic, secular and the national in my case. On most of these matters our positions are complementary, or differ only in emphasis. We do, however, have a deep theoretical disagreement.

As Thompson appreciates, I am even less interested in culture than Phillips and prefer to talk of 'difference' and 'identity', though I am more committed to groups, or at least an internally differentiated 'groupness' than he suggests. As I have indicated, Phillips makes political references to groups but in her determination not to give power to groups (Phillips, 2007: 118) and to oppose accommodation (2007: 163–4) she adopts an anti-group vocabulary: 'recognition' does not even feature in the index, and, as Squires notes, she sees her political project as enhancing individual agency. However, Squires seems to understand agency in individualistic terms and so fails to note that I want to create space for collective agency. Phillips seems politically to need, however attenuated, a concept of group, but theoretically she makes no effort to provide one and simply notes the difficulties that conceptions of groups face when they are connected to a reification of culture. I, on the other hand, maintain that accommodation and recognition are what multiculturalism is about. So the very things that Phillips wants to disallow I want to argue are the core of multiculturalism. On my reading, either there is a significant hole in the middle of her theory or it is not really multiculturalist. It's not just Multiculturalism without Culture, but also without 'Multi', without groups, accommodation and recognition. I take Thompson's point that 'multi' in multiculturalism often refers to discrete groups but I think I work quite hard to put forward a distinctive view of 'multi' and 'groups' which overcomes exactly that deficient reading by emphasizing that 'group' is not a univocal term, that there can be many different kinds of groups, more or less discrete, and that the theoretical conceptualization for this can be found in Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblance' (Modood, 2007: 43–6, 87–121).

Moreover, I need groups not just in relation to politics but also in social science, where for me ethnicity is an important feature of non-reductionist,

multi-dimensional rather than materialist explanations. For I consider materialist explanations to be as much a threat to denial of agency in social science as are appeals to culture and ethnicity. This is certainly the case in sociology, where I suggest that the dominant explanatory perspectives, while 'problematizing' or 'deconstructing' culture and identity, are underpinned by references to economy or power; hence, as I say in the book, we should avoid arrogant deconstructionism or sociological reductionism (2007: 59–60, 101, 115).

POLITICS WITHOUT GROUPS?

Phillips wants to empower individual members of disadvantaged/minority groups, by means of including the funding of ethnocultural associations and special measures to raise political representation. But she argues this cannot be described as distributing power to cultural *groups*. Moreover, she is opposed to enhancing the regulatory authority of a group, i.e. of some of its members over others. Politically, the difference between Phillips and me may be one of emphasis. For instance, she has a sensitive and sensible discussion of how some Muslim women in Europe appeal to shariah councils in order to get religiously validated divorces (Phillips, 2007: 175–6). She rightly criticizes the position of the Norwegian Human Rights Service which encourages Muslim women to use a shariah council in London but is opposed to the setting up of religious courts or councils in Norway. She concludes that:

Faced with this problem, it seems disingenuous to rely on my distinction between recognising the rights and needs of individuals (good) and distributing powers and resources to groups (bad) as if that resolves all issues. We can aim at a multiculturalism without reified understandings of culture, but it would be unrealistic to think this will deliver us a multiculturalism without groups. And wherever there are groups, there's always the potential for coercion. (Phillips, 2007)

I would endorse Phillips here: if a Muslim woman wants a *religious* divorce, then surely the state should empower her individual agency. Yet it's not possible for the state to allow her to have a religiously authoritative divorce without recognizing the authority of religious institutions and office-holders. If we have reasons to worry about the potential for coercion – again, a concern which I share with Phillips – surely it is better to regulate and therefore make transparent such councils, bring them within the law and so seek to safeguard the rights of the vulnerable, especially women and children, rather than let them flourish unregulated by law and unscrutinized by rights activists and public agencies.

Our difference is not in the pragmatics of such cases but in what I consider to be Phillips' failure fully to appreciate that the implications of her sensitivity to such dilemmas robs her of her theoretical distinction. Squires uncritically presents this distinction as the funding of ethnocultural associations on the one hand and enhancing the regulatory authority of a group on the other. But as the above example shows, this will often be a distinction without

content. Take another simple case, suppose some funding is made available to a Muslim cultural centre: such measures enhance individual agency, for example, they may enable individuals to attend mosque classes or sessions in calligraphy, but at the same time they will clearly enhance the authority of the teachers and the religious organization. The theoretical incoherence I am pointing to seems to be part of the larger problem of the absence of any theory of group or groupness, yet it should be obvious that these concepts are being asked to do critical political work.

As Squires notes, I am willing to endorse forms of group representation, including grudgingly and if necessary in some broader democratic and multicultural contexts, corporate representation. It is only one item in the toolbox, and not a preferred one. The central issue for me is to allow group identity politics and within that to include religious identity politics when it is a means of empowerment of the excluded. I put as much if not more emphasis on discursive contestation, including across various civil society sites, as upon formal political processes and organization. Turning negative identities into positive ones requires challenging stereotypes and structural biases through group mobilization, dialogue, mutual learning, negotiations, accommodation, structural reform, and so on. The dynamic, without *a priori* and fixed identities, will consist in and develop through political struggle, participation, interaction and adjustments, and so clearly involves collective and not just individual agency.

In this respect Thompson poses an interesting question in asking if this should be called 'multiculturalism'. It's a question I asked myself (2007: 156, note 11), especially as the term is so politically damaged and one of the principal goals of the book is to rally back the lost support for multiculturalism among the centre-left. Nevertheless I could not think of an alternative term and thought it only appropriate to signal my indebtedness to the relevant works of Bhikhu Parekh, Charles Taylor, Iris Young, Will Kymlicka and others which come under the banner of the term 'multiculturalism'.

Finally, I think Thompson has importantly identified a dilemma in respecting (essentialist) actors. He notes that for Phillips and for me one of the values of multiculturalism is to respect the meanings and norms of agents; yet as we both believe that some of these subjectivities and appropriate emancipatory politics are essentialist, and that essentialism is a theoretical error, then what should our attitude as theorists be to these errors of the agents that we want to champion? Thompson is unable to resolve the dilemma, and nor can I for the moment, but I do want to acknowledge its importance, to which I hope to return in the future. Meanwhile, I will offer some preliminary remarks. I do believe that integral to theorizing in a respectful, multiculturalist way is to respect the self-definitions, subjectives and categorial integrity of the subjects of analysis. But this should not mean abandoning a critical posture. As Thompson notes, criticism and respect are not mutually exclusive, indeed in certain contexts (e.g., where they are mistaken), we may owe criticism to people or institutions we respect. The first step may be to explicitly recognize that there is a difference between forms of essentialism that are used to

exclude or inferiorize groups, and those used to resist that, to self-empower and to mobilize for an alternative politics. Moreover, the concept of dialogue is integral to multiculturalism and so perhaps also to the relationship between theorists and agents. Indeed, the kind of dialogue, or one kind of dialogue, that would be appropriate here is one that goes back to the earliest days of recorded Western philosophy, namely the portrayal of Plato's Socrates as a midwife. Socrates did not claim to create knowledge; he believed that the relevant knowledge was already possessed by his interlocutors albeit in contradictory and garbled ways and that what he was trying to do was to help untangle the knots and create enough coherence so that the knowledge could be born as valid knowledge. Given that in my book I acknowledge that agents' descriptions of themselves and of others, of groups, cultures, belonging, and so on is a mix of essentialist and non-essentialist elements, then helping agents, including oneself as an agent, to sort out the true from the false, rather than to dismiss their political claims as theoretically flawed, may be the right attitude.

This is just one of several points to which I know I need to give further thought and so I am grateful to my three interlocutors, Anne Phillips, Judith Squires and Simon Thompson, for giving me food for thought.

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