Rethinking Multiculturalism

Cultural Diversity and Political Theory

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Conclusion

Almost all societies today are multicultural and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future; this is our historical predicament, and we obviously need to come to terms with it. Since cultural diversity has much to be said for it, our predicament, if approached in the spirit of multiculturalism, can also become a source of great creative opportunities.

Multiculturalism as articulated in earlier chapters is best seen neither as a political doctrine with a programmatic content nor as a philosophical theory of man and the world but as a perspective on human life. Its central insights are three, each of which is sometimes misinterpreted by its advocates and needs to be carefully formulated if it is to carry conviction:

- First, human beings are culturally embedded in the sense that they grow up and live within a culturally structured world, organize their lives and social relations in terms of its system of meaning and significance, and place considerable value on their cultural identity. This does not mean that they are determined by their culture in the sense of being unable to critically evaluate its beliefs and practices and understand and sympathize with others, but rather that they are deeply shaped by it, can overcome some but not all of its influences and necessarily view the world from within a culture, be it the one they have inherited and uncritically accepted or reflectively revised or, in rare cases, consciously adopted.
- Second, different cultures represent different systems of meaning and visions of the good life. Since each realizes a limited range of human capacities and emotions and grasps only a part of the totality of human existence, it needs others to understand itself better, expand its intellectual and moral horizon, stretch its imagination

and guard it against the obvious temptation to absolutize itself. This does not mean that one cannot lead a good life within one's culture, but rather that, other things being equal, it is likely to be richer if one enjoys access to others and that a culturally self-contained life is virtually impossible for most human beings in the modern world. Nor does it mean that cultures cannot be compared and judged, that they are equally rich and deserve equal respect, that each of them is good for its members, or that all cultural differences deserve to be valued. All it means is that no culture is wholly worthless, that it deserves at least some respect because of what it means to its members and the creative energy it displays, that no culture is perfect and has a right to impose itself on others, and that cultures are generally best changed from within.

Since each culture is inherently limited, a dialogue between them is mutually beneficial. It both alerts them to their biases, a gain in itself, and enables then to reduce them and expand their horizon of thought. 'To be in a conversation ... means to be beyond oneself, to think with the other and to come back to oneself as if to another'.[1] The dialogue is possible only if each culture accepts others as equal conversational partners, who need to be taken seriously as sources of new ideas and to whom it owes the duty of explaining itself. And it realizes its objectives only if the participants enjoy a broad equality of self-confidence, economic and political power and access to public space.

- Third, all but the most primitive cultures are internally plural and represent a continuing conversation between their different traditions and strands of thought. This does not mean that they are devoid of internal coherence and identity but that their identity is plural and fluid. Cultures grow out of conscious and unconscious interaction with each other, partly define their identity in terms of what they take to be their significant other, and are at least partially multicultural in their origins and constitution. Each carries bits of the other within itself and is rarely *sui generis*. This does not mean that it has no powers of self-determination and inner impulses, but rather that it is porous and subject to external influences which it interprets and assimilates in its own autonomous way.

A culture's relation to itself shapes and is in turn shaped by its relation to others, and their internal and external pluralities presuppose and reinforce each other. A culture cannot appreciate the value of others unless it appreciates the plurality within it; the converse is

> just as true. Since a closed culture defines its identity in terms of its differences from others and jealously guards it against their influences, it feels threatened by and avoids all contacts with them. A culture cannot be at ease with its differences from them unless it is also at ease with its own internal differences. A dialogue between cultures requires that each should open itself up to the influence of and be willing to learn from others, and that in turn requires that it should be self-critical and willing and able to engage in a dialogue with itself.

What I might call a multicultural perspective is composed of the creative interplay of these three complementary insights, namely the cultural embeddedness of human beings, the inescapability and desirability of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, and the internal plurality of each culture. When we view the world from its vantage point, our attitudes to ourselves and others undergo profound changes. All claims that a particular way of thinking and living is perfect, the best, or necessitated by human nature itself appear incoherent and even bizarre, for the multicultural perspective sensitizes us to the fact that all ways of life and thought are inherently limited and cannot possibly embody the full range of the richness, complexity and grandeur of human existence. We instinctively suspect attempts to homogenize a culture, return it to its 'fundamentals' and impose a single identity on it, for we are acutely aware that every culture is internally plural and differentiated. And we remain equally sceptical of all attempts to present it as one whose origins lie within itself, for we know that all cultures are born out of interaction with others and shaped by the wider economic, political and other forces. This undercuts the very basis of Afrocentrism, Eurocentrism, Sinocentrism, Westocentrism and so on, all of which isolate the history of the culture concerned from those of others and credit it with achievements it often owes to others.

From a multicultural perspective, no political doctrine or ideology can represent the full truth of human life. Each of them, be it liberalism, conservatism, socialism or nationalism, is embedded in a particular culture, represents a particular vision of the good life, and is necessarily narrow and partial. Liberalism, for example, is an inspiring political doctrine stressing such great values as human dignity, autonomy, liberty, critical thought and equality. However, it has no monopoly of them, and they can be defined in several different ways of which its own definition is only one and not always the most coherent. It also

ignores or marginalizes such other great values as human solidarity, equal life chances, selflessness, self-effacing humility, contentment and a measure of scepticism about the pleasures and achievements of human life. And it is insufficiently sensitive to and cannot give coherent accounts of the importance of culture, tradition, community, a sense of rootedness and belonging, and so on. Other political doctrines are just as limited if not more so. Since every political doctrine has a limited grasp of the immense complexity of human existence and the problems involved in holding societies together and creating sensitive, sane and self-critical individuals, none of them including liberalism can be the sole basis of the good society.

What accounts for the relative social stability and cultural richness of most western societies is precisely the fact that they are not based on a single political doctrine or world view. Liberalism, socialism, conservatism and Marxism, and at a different level the secular and religious world views that cut across them, have constantly challenged each other, and each is the richer for the experience. Their continuing contestation and mutually regulating influences have averted the hegemony of any one of them and contained its likely excesses. Each doctrine carries bits of the others within it, and is as a result internally diverse, weakly-centred, and possesses the moral and emotional resources to understand and even respect others. This mutual fusion of ideas and sensibilities has given rise to a broadly shared cultural vocabulary, no doubt varied and messy but for that very reason capable of providing a common framework of discourse. Western societies would not remain open and capable of self-regeneration if they were to be taken over by a single doctrine, including liberalism.

Since multicultural societies represent an interplay of different cultures, they cannot be theorized or managed from within any one of them. They require a multicultural perspective of the kind sketched earlier. It alerts the political theorist to the complex and subtle ways in which his culture shapes his modes of thought and limits his powers of critical reflection, and also offers him a way to minimize these limitations. Although he has no Archimedean standpoint or a God's-eye view available to him, he has several coigns of vantage in the form of other cultures. He can set up a dialogue between them, use each to illuminate the insights and expose the limitations of others, and create for himself a vital in-between space, a kind of immanent transcendentalism, from which to arrive at a less culture-bound vision of human life and a radically critical perspective on his society.

From a multicultural perspective the good society does not commit itself to a particular political doctrine or vision of the good life and ask how much diversity to tolerate within the limits set by it, both because such a doctrine or vision might not be acceptable to some of its communities and because it forecloses its future development. Instead, it begins by accepting the reality and desirability of cultural diversity and structures its political life accordingly. It is dialogically constituted, and its constant concern is to keep the dialogue going and nurture a climate in which it can proceed effectively, stretch the boundaries of the prevailing forms of thought, and generate a body of collectively acceptable principles, institutions and policies. The dialogue requires certain institutional preconditions such as freedom of expression, agreed procedures and basic ethical norms, participatory public spaces, equal rights, a responsive and popularly accountable structure of authority, and empowerment of citizens. And it also calls for such essential political virtues as mutual respect and concern, tolerance, self-restraint, willingness to enter into unfamiliar worlds of thought, love of diversity, a mind open to new ideas and a heart open to others' needs, and the ability to persuade and live with unresolved differences. While nurturing a wide variety of views and fostering the spirit and deepening the morality of dialogue, such a society draws a line against those too dogmatic, self-righteous or impatient to participate in its conversational culture and accept its outcome.

The dialogically constituted multicultural society both retains the truth of liberalism and goes beyond it. It is committed to both liberalism and multiculturalism, privileges neither, and moderates the logic of one by that of the other. It neither confines multiculturalism within the limits set by liberalism and suppresses or marginalizes nonliberal values and cultures, nor confines liberalism within the limits of multiculturalism and emasculates its critical and emancipatory thrust. Apart from its fundamental commitment to the culture and morality of dialogue, the dialogically constituted society privileges no particular cultural perspective, be it liberal or otherwise. It sees itself both as a community of citizens and a community of communities, and hence as a community of communally embedded and attached individuals. It cherishes individuals, their basic rights and liberties and other great liberal moral and political values, all of which are integral to the culture of dialogue. It also, however, appreciates that individuals are culturally-embedded, that their cultural communities are essential to their well-being, that the communities are open and interactive and cannot be

frozen, and that public institutions and policies should recognize and cherish their evolving identities and nurture a community of communities based on the kind of plural collective culture described earlier. Unlike the standard liberal approach of the proceduralist, civic assimilationist or comprehensively assimilationist variety, which abstracts away citizens' cultural and other differences and unites them in terms of their uniformly shared economic, political and other interests, it insists that this is neither possible nor desirable and finds ways of publicly recognizing and respecting their cultural and other differences. The common good and the collective will that are vital to any political society are generated not by transcending cultural and other particularities, but through their interplay in the cut and thrust of a dialogue. The dialogically constituted multicultural society has a strong notion of common good, consisting in respect for a consensually grounded civil authority and basic rights, maintenance of justice, institutional and moral preconditions of deliberative democracy, a vibrant and plural composite culture and an expansive sense of community. And it cherishes not static and ghettoized, but interactive and dynamic, multiculturalism.

A multicultural society cannot be stable and last long without developing a common sense of belonging among its citizens.[2] The sense of belonging cannot be ethnic or based on shared cultural, ethnic and other characteristics, for a multicultural society is too diverse for that, but political in nature and based on a shared commitment to the political community. Its members do not directly belong to each other as in an ethnic group, but through their mediating membership of a shared community, and they are committed to each other because they are all in their own different ways committed to the community and bound by the ties of common interest and affection. Although they might personally loathe some of their fellow-members or find their lifestyles, views and values unacceptable, their mutual commitment and concern as members of a shared community remain unaffected.

The commitment to a political community is highly complex in nature and is easily misunderstood. It does not involve sharing common substantive goals, for its members might deeply disagree about these, nor a common view of its history which they may read differently, nor a particular economic or social system about which they might entertain different views. Decocted to its barest essentials,

commitment to the political community involves commitment to its continuing existence and well-being as defined earlier, and implies that one cares enough for it not to harm its interests and undermine its integrity (Mason, 1999; Viroli, 1995, pp. 160–87). It is a matter of degree and could take such diverse forms as a quiet concern for its well-being, deep attachment, affection, and even intense love. While different citizens would develop different emotions towards their community, all that is necessary to sustain it and can legitimately be expected of them all is a basic concern for its integrity and well-being; what one might call patriotism or political loyalty.[3] They might criticize the prevailing form of government, institutions, policies, values, ethos and dominant self-understanding in the strongest possible terms, but these should not arouse unease or provoke charges of disloyalty so long as their basic commitment to dialogue is not in doubt.

Commitment or belonging is reciprocal in nature. Citizens cannot be committed to their political community unless it is also committed to them, and they cannot belong to it unless it accepts them as belonging to it. The political community cannot therefore expect its members to develop a sense of belonging to it unless it equally values and cherishes them in all their diversity and reflects this in its structure, policies, conduct of public affairs, self-understanding and self-definition. Although equal citizenship is essential to fostering a common sense of belonging, it is not enough. Citizenship is about status and rights, belonging is about being accepted and feeling welcome. Some individuals and groups might enjoy the same rights as the rest but feel that they do not quite belong to the community, nor it to them. This feeling of being full citizens and yet outsiders is difficult to analyse and explain, but it can be deep and real and seriously damage the quality of their citizenship and their commitment to the political community. It is caused by, among other things, the narrow and exclusive manner in which wider society defines the common good, the demeaning ways in which it talks about some of its members, and the dismissive or patronizing ways in which it behaves towards them. Although such individuals are free in principle to participate in its collective life, they often stay away or ghettoize themselves for fear of rejection and ridicule or out of a deep sense of alienation.

As Charles Taylor (1994) correctly observes, social recognition is central to the individual's identity and self-worth, and misrecognition can gravely damage both. This raises the question as to how the un- or misrecognized groups can secure recognition, and here Taylor's analy-

sis falters. He seems to think that the dominant group can be rationally persuaded to change its views of them by intellectual argument and moral appeal. This is to misunderstand the dynamics of the process of recognition.

Misrecognition has both a cultural and a material basis.[4] White Americans, for example, take a demeaning view of African Americans partly under the influence of the racist culture, partly because this legitimizes the prevailing system of domination, and partly because the deeply disadvantaged blacks do sometimes exhibit some of the features that confirm white stereotypes. Misrecognition, therefore, can only be countered by both undertaking a rigorous critique of the dominant culture and radically restructuring the prevailing inequalities of economic and political power. Since the dominant group welcomes neither the radical critique nor the corresponding political praxis, the struggle for recognition involves cultural and political contestation and sometimes even violence, as Hegel (1960) highlighted in his analysis of the dialectic of recognition and which Taylor's (1994) sanitized version of it ignores. As we have seen, the politics of culture is integrally tied up with the politics of power because culture is itself institutionalized power and deeply imbricated with other systems of power. Cultural self-esteem cannot be developed and sustained in a vacuum and requires appropriate changes in all the major areas of life. No multicultural society can be stable and vibrant unless it ensures that its constituent communities receive both just recognition and a just share of economic and political power. It requires a robust form of social, economic and political democracy to underpin its commitment to multiculturalism.[5]

Multicultural societies throw up problems that have no parallel in history. They need to find ways of reconciling the legitimate demands of unity and diversity, achieving political unity without cultural uniformity, being inclusive without being assimilationist, cultivating among their citizens a common sense of belonging while respecting their legitimate cultural differences, and cherishing plural cultural identities without weakening the shared and precious identity of shared citizenship. This is a formidable political task and no multicultural society so far has succeeded in tackling it. The erstwhile Soviet Union and Yugoslavia met their violent doom; Canada lives in the shadow of Quebec's secession; India narrowly missed a second partition of the country; Indonesia shows signs of disintegration; Sudan, Nigeria and

others are torn by violent conflicts; and the sad story is endlessly repeatedly in many other parts of the world. Even such affluent, stable and politically mature democracies as the United States, Great Britain and France have so far had only limited success, and show signs of moral and emotional disorientation in the face of increasing demands for recognition and equality. Although multicultural societies are difficult to manage, they need not become a political nightmare and might even become exciting if we exuviate our long traditional preoccupation with a culturally homogeneous and tightly structured polity and allow them instead to intimate their own appropriate institutional forms, modes of governance, and moral and political virtues.