

Political theory and the multicultural society

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Cultural diversity in modern societies takes many forms, of which three are most common. First, although members of society share a broadly common culture, they also entertain different beliefs and practices concerning certain significant areas of human life. This is the case with gays and lesbians, youth culture, those following unconventional lifestyles or family structures, and so on. The individuals and groups involved share and are happy with the wider culture, and are only concerned to open up appropriate spaces within it to express and live by their choices in the relevant areas of life. We shall call this subcultural diversity.

Second, some members of society are highly critical of the central principles and values of the dominant culture and seek to reconstitute it along appropriate lines. Feminists attack its deeply ingrained patriarchal bias, the religious its secular orientation, the environmentalists its anthropocentric and technocratic bias, and the blacks and others its racism. These and other groups represent neither subcultures – for they challenge the very basis of the existing culture – nor distinct cultural communities living by their values and views of the world, but distinct perspectives on how the shared culture should be reconstituted. We shall call this perspectival diversity.

Third, most modern societies also include several self-conscious and more or less well-organized communities entertaining and living by different systems of beliefs and practices. They include the newly arrived immigrants, such long-established communities as the Jews, the Amish and the Gypsies, various religious communities, and such territorially concentrated cultural groups as indigenous peoples, the Basques and the Québécois. We shall call this communal diversity.

The term ‘multicultural society’ is generally used in three corresponding senses, to refer to a society that exhibits all three and other kinds of diversity, one that displays the last two kinds of diversity, and one characterized by only the third kind of diversity.

Although all three usages have their advantages and disadvantages, the third has on balance most to be said in favour of it. The term ‘multicultural’ emerged in the 1960s to refer to this kind of society, and the usage thus has a historical basis. Most contemporary societies are culturally diverse, but only some of them are multicultural or culturally plural.

A multicultural society, then, is one which includes two or more cultural communities. It might respond to its cultural plurality in one of two ways, each of which is in turn capable of taking several forms. It might welcome and cherish the plurality, make it central to its self-understanding, and respect the claims of its cultural communities in its laws and policies; or it might seek to assimilate the diverse cultures into its mainstream culture either wholly or substantially. In the first case it is multiculturalist, and in the second monoculturalist, in its orientation and ethos. Multiculturalism refers to the fact of cultural plurality; multiculturalism to a normative response to that fact.

The failure to distinguish between a multicultural and a multiculturalist society has often led to an agonized debate about how to describe a society. In Britain the ethnic minorities, made up of several distinct cultural communities, comprise just over 6 per cent of the population. Although the country is evidently multicultural, conservative opinion has systematically resisted the description, believing that Britain has over the centuries evolved a distinct culture which is integrally tied up with its national identity and should continue to enjoy a privileged status. The ethnic minorities should assimilate into it and become an indissoluble part of British society. If they so wish, they might preserve some of their beliefs and practices provided that these do not impede their assimilation and intrude into the public realm. In the conservative view, to call Britain multicultural is to imply that its traditional culture is only one among many and should not be given a pride of place, that the minor-

ity cultures are equally central to its identity, that they should be respected and even cherished and not encouraged to disappear over time, and that the ethnic minorities consist not of individuals but of organized communities entitled to make collective claims. Since conservatives vehemently reject all this, they refuse to call Britain multicultural; by contrast many British liberals, who endorse most of these claims, have no hesitation in calling it multicultural.

Contemporary multiculturalism: the need for a theory

Multicultural societies are not new to our age, for many premodern societies also included several cultural and religious communities and coped with the problems this threw up as best they could. Three basic facts distinguish contemporary multicultural societies from their predecessors. First, contemporary multiculturalism is more defiant. In premodern societies minority communities generally accepted their subordinate status and remained confined to the social and even the geographical spaces assigned them by the dominant groups. Although Turkey under the Ottoman empire had fairly large Christian and Jewish communities and granted them far greater autonomy than do most contemporary societies, it was not and never saw itself as a multicultural society. It was basically a Muslim society which happened to include non-Muslim minorities, called *dhimmi* or protected communities. It followed Islamic ideals and was run by Muslims who alone enjoyed full rights of citizenship, the rest enjoying extensive cultural autonomy but few political rights. Contemporary multicultural societies are different. Thanks to the dynamics of the modern economy, their constituent communities cannot lead isolated lives and are caught up in a complex pattern of interaction with each other and the wider society. And, thanks to the spread of democratic ideas, they refuse to accept an inferior civic status and demand not only equal rights but also an equal opportunity to participate in and shape the collective life of the wider society. For its part, society concedes the legitimacy of some of these demands and goes at least some way towards meeting them.

Second, contemporary multicultural societies are integrally bound up with immensely complex processes of economic and cultural globalization. Technology and goods travel freely, and they are not culturally neutral. Multinationals introduce new industries and systems of management and require the societies concerned to create their cultural preconditions. World opinion

demand adherence to a minimum body of universal values embodied in the current discourse on human rights. No amount of cultural policing can protect a society against the international media. People travel for employment and as tourists, and both export and import new ideas and influences. Thanks to all this, no society can remain culturally self-contained and isolated. Indeed the external influences are often so subtle and deep that the receiving societies are not even aware of their presence and impact. The project of cultural unification on which many past societies and all modern states have relied for their stability and cohesion is no longer viable today. Contemporary multiculturalism has an air of inexorability and irresistibility about it and poses challenges rarely faced by earlier societies.

Third, contemporary multicultural societies have emerged against the background of nearly three centuries of the culturally homogenizing nation-state. In almost all premodern societies the individual's culture was deemed to be an integral part of his identity in just the same way as his body was. Cultural communities were therefore widely regarded as the bearers of rights and left free to follow their customs and practices in their autonomous cultural spaces. This was as true of the Roman as of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires.

The modern state represents a very different view of social unity. Twined with and suffused by the spirit of individualism, it is a distinctly liberal institution. Accordingly it set about dismantling long-established communities and reuniting the 'emancipated' individuals on the basis of a collectively accepted and centralized structure of authority. It recognized only the individuals as the bearers of rights, and represented a homogenous legal space made up of uniform political units subject to the same body of laws and institutions. As a territorially constituted entity, the modern state accommodated territorial but not cultural decentralization. If any of its constituent units had different needs and required different kinds of rights, the demand was deemed to violate the principle of equality, and was either rejected or conceded with the greatest reluctance. Since the state required cultural and social homogenization as its necessary basis, it has for nearly three centuries sought to mould the wider society in that direction. Thanks to this, we have become so accustomed to equating unity with homogeneity, and equality with uniformity, that unlike our premodern counterparts we feel morally and emotionally disorientated by a deep and defiant diversity.

Although contemporary multicultural societies are not unique, their historical context, cultural background, and many other features are. Not surprisingly, they raise questions that were never faced by earlier societies or at least not in their current forms, and call for either new concepts or radical redefinitions of old ones. If we are to make sense of them and deal with the problems they throw up, we need a well-considered political theory of the multicultural society. While such a theory would rightly draw on the insights of the traditional political theory, it is also bound to mark a radical departure from it in its basic assumptions, conceptual framework, and philosophical concerns.

Such a theory needs to take full account of the fact that multicultural societies vary in the kind, degree and depth of their multiculturalism, and are not all alike. Some have large cultural communities (for example, India); others have a single cultural community and only a tiny cultural minority living on its geographical and social periphery, and are multicultural in a weak sense (for example, Norway with Lapps). In the former, multiculturalism lies at the very heart of society; in the latter it is largely marginal. In some multicultural societies, differences between their cultural communities run much deeper than in others; for example, those between whites and aborigines in Australia compared to those between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. In some societies, minority communities largely wish to be left alone; in others they interact with and seek suitably to reconstitute the wider society. In some societies minority communities are territorially concentrated and consider themselves nations; in others they are either dispersed or lack nationalist consciousness or aspirations. In some societies minority communities are recent arrivals; in others they have lived for centuries; in yet others they were brought by colonial powers and retain an insider–outsider status. In some societies cultural communities are primarily religious; in others they are ethnic or linguistic in nature. Since all multicultural societies share several important features, we can legitimately aim to develop a general theory of them. Since they also differ in other important respects, the theory cannot be applied to them without appropriate modifications.

Political cultures, cultural politics

Whatever their differences, contemporary multicultural societies raise several common and novel questions relating to the cultural rights of minorities, the nature of collective rights, the rights and obligations of immigrants, the ways of accommodating dual diasporic loyalties, the variety of the level and forms of citizenship,

whether all cultures deserve equal respect, whether they should be judged in their own terms, or ours, or universal standards, how we can communicate across and resolve deep differences between cultures, and so forth. Multicultural societies also raise questions about the state's relation to culture, such as whether it is culturally embedded and is the guardian of the society's culture or whether it should be culturally neutral or at least impartial, and, if the latter, how it can legislate on such deeply cultural matters as marriage, the family, social customs and education; how it can both respect cultural diversity and ensure political unity, determine the range of permissible diversity and the kind of social cohesion it should aim at.

At a different level difficult questions arise about the very suitability of the modern state to multicultural societies. Although the mode of securing social unity represented by the modern state has much to be said for it, it is culturally specific, entails considerable moral and physical violence, and only makes sense in a society that is already or willing to become culturally and socially homogeneous. In a culturally plural society, it runs into all kinds of problems. Some groups of people might refuse to see themselves as individuals or as individuals only, and might press for communal or collective rights. Since different communities have different historical backgrounds and needs and face different kinds of threats, they might demand different kinds of rights and powers. They might also follow different customs and practices and find it difficult to agree on a common body of laws concerning such culturally significant areas of life as marriage, divorce, adoption of children and inheritance of property. Marx argued that in a class-divided society the state cannot be impartial, and represents a subtle way of institutionalizing and legitimizing the rule of the dominant class. A similar danger exists in a culturally plural society, in which the allegedly neutral state can easily become a vehicle of enshrining the domination of a particular cultural community. Such a society, especially when its diverse cultural communities are territorially concentrated, might even call for a different and asymmetrical kind of political formation to that represented by the modern state.

Multicultural societies also raise questions about the nature and task of political theory. Almost all past political theorists took the whole of humankind as their intended audience and claimed universal validity for their theories. They advocated universally valid visions of the good life, prescribed universally applicable models of political unity, advanced theories of political obligation whose central principles such



as consent, fair play and gratitude were assumed to have the same moral force in different societies and cultural traditions, and so forth. Once we appreciate that human beings are culturally embedded and that cultures differ greatly, such a view of the nature and task of political theory becomes deeply problematic.

The political theorist is culturally situated and prone to its inescapable biases, thus raising the question whether and how he or she can rise above his or her culture and, if not, what the intended audience and theoretical ambition should be. He or she cannot theorise about political life without at least some general conception of human being, raising again the question whether and how we can arrive at the latter and, if not, how theory can avoid becoming a justificatory ideology of society. Even if one decides in the light of these difficulties to confine oneself to one's own kind of society, as John Rawls has done in his later writings, one's problems do not end. The theorist is located within or likely to be deeply committed to one of his/her society's several cultures, and his/her concepts and assumptions might not carry conviction with fellow-citizens belonging to different cultural, religious or moral traditions, as Rawls's critics have shown.

A political theory of the multicultural society needs to address these and related questions. Since they are all in one form or another connected with culture, a political theory of the multicultural society cannot offer coherent answers to them without developing a well-considered theory of the nature, structure, inner dynamics and role of culture in human life. The traditional political theory either ignores this subject altogether or gives a highly misleading account of it. Broadly speaking, traditional political

theory is dominated by two major approaches to the subject – naturalism and culturalism – one making human nature and the other culture its basis. Arguing rightly that a well-considered political theory should be grounded in a philosophical anthropology or a theory of human being, and wrongly equating the latter with a theory of human nature, the naturalists based their views on the nature and structure of political life on a particular view of human nature. This is as true of the Greek and Christian political philosophers, who took a fairly 'thick' or substantive view of human nature, as of their modern successors such as Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, J.S. Mill and Kant, who took a fairly 'thin' and largely formal view of it. For all of them human nature was universally uniform, unchanging, unaffected in its essentials by culture and society, more or less transparent, accessible in its entirety to philosophical reflection, and capable of indicating what way of life was the best. Their thought left little conceptual space for culture, which was largely seen as epiphenomenal, dealing with the morally indifferent areas of customs and rituals, and making little difference to how social and political life should be organized.

Culturalism, the second strand of thought articulated by some of the Sophists, Vico, Herder and the German Romantics, made the opposite move. It argued that human beings were culturally constituted, varied from culture to culture, and shared in common only the minimal species-derived features from which nothing of moral and political significance could be deduced. Each culture was a well-knit and self-contained whole, and entailed its own distinct form of moral and political life. Although the culturalists appreciated the importance of culture, they misunder-

stood its nature. Since they took an organic view of it, they ignored its internal diversity and tensions and could not explain how it changed and why its members were able to take a critical view of it. They split up humankind into different cultural units, and could not give a coherent account of how human beings were able to communicate across and even evaluate the customs and practices of other cultures. Indeed, since they took each culture to have a distinct and unique spirit or ethos of its own, they ended up arguing that different cultures not only could not but did not need to talk to each other and even found such a dialogue threatening to their identity. In their own different ways, the culturalists naturalized culture, seeing it as an unalterable and ahistorical fact of life which so determined its members as to turn them into a distinct species.

Neither naturalism nor culturalism, then, gives a coherent account of human life. If we are to theorize multicultural societies we need to reject these mutually reinforcing and equally unsatisfactory extremes and develop a theory of human beings that does three things. First, it should appreciate the dialectical interplay of nature and culture, of shared humanity and cultural differences, and privilege neither. Second, it should acknowledge the inevitable openness, permeability and internal diversity of each culture and appreciate that all cultures are multicultural in their origins and constitution. And third, it should show how all cultures share enough in common to make dialogue possible, yet so differ in important respects as to make it necessary and desirable and occasionally impossible.

Both judge and party: monocultural liberalism

Several attempts are currently being made to construct such a theory, almost all from within a liberal framework. Although the liberal theories of multicultural societies such as those advanced by Will Kymlicka, Joseph Raz and John Rawls contain important insights, they remain inadequate. First, rather than undertake a systematic critique of the traditional concept of human nature with its inbuilt incapacity to provide an adequate conceptual space for culture, they uncritically accept the standard liberal view of human nature and seek to fit culture into it to explain the development of the human powers of autonomy and critical thought. Although individuals are not determined by their culture in the sense of being unable to take a critical view of it and to appreciate and learn from others, they are not transcendental beings contingently and externally

related to their culture. Their culture shapes them in certain ways, forms them into certain kinds of persons, and cultivates in them certain attachments, affections, moral and psychological dispositions, taboos and modes of reasoning. The capacity for autonomy is therefore never purely formal and culturally neutral. It is from its very beginning structured in a certain way, functions within flexible but determinate limits, defines and assesses options in certain ways, and so forth. Liberals cannot take a transcultural view of human powers and expect culture to play an obligingly passive and instrumental role in developing them.

Second, directly or indirectly and subtly or crudely, liberals continue to absolutize liberalism. Hence their persistent tendency to make it their central frame of reference, to assume that all individuals relate to their culture and to themselves in the same way that the liberals do, and to ignore their specificity and uniqueness. The same tendency leads them to divide all ways of life into liberal and non-liberal, to equate the latter with illiberal, and to talk of tolerating and rarely of respecting or cherishing them. The crudity of the liberal/non-liberal distinction would become clear if someone were to divide all religions into Christianity and non-Christianity and equate the latter with anti-Christianity.

Third, in their discussions of how to treat the so-called non-liberal ways of life, liberal writers have adopted one of two strategies. Some, mostly of teleological persuasion, confront non-liberals with a full-blooded liberal vision and condemn them for failing to measure up to it. Others, many but not all of whom are deontological liberals, thin down liberal principles to what they take to be their minimum content, and make tolerance of non-liberal cultures conditional upon their acceptance of it. The first strategy is incoherent, rests on circular reasoning, and has been a source of much violence and suffering. Although the second is better, it too is flawed. If the minimum that the liberal insists upon is essentially liberal in nature and cannot be shown to be morally binding on all, it cannot be demanded of non-liberals without violating their moral autonomy. If, on the other hand, it can be shown to be universally binding, then there is nothing particularly liberal about it except the contingent historical fact that liberals happened to discover or appreciate its importance. In other words, liberals need to rise to a higher level of abstraction than they have done so far, distinguish between a universal and a liberal moral minimum, and insist upon the former in all circumstances and the latter when it does not violate the universal minimum and can be shown to be central to a

society's self-understanding and historically inherited cultural character.

Liberals often argue that since modern Western society is liberal, it is entitled to ask all its members to live by the basic liberal values. Even if we accepted their premiss, deep disagreements would remain as to what these values are, and we would get caught up in an interminable and unnecessary quasi-theological controversy concerning what a 'truly' liberal society stands for, what its 'real' identity consists in, what principles it 'cannot' betray, and so on. There is no obvious reason, however, why we should accept the liberal premiss. Modern Western society includes non-liberal groups such as conservatives, socialists, communists and Marxists, religious communities, indigenous peoples, long-established ethnic communities and newly arrived immigrants, who cannot be excluded from its self-definition by an ideologically biased act of linguistic appropriation. Even liberals themselves are not and perhaps cannot be liberal in all areas of life, and entertain and live by non-liberal ideas, or a mixture of liberal and non-liberal ideas, or even by instincts, faith and habits in matters relating to intimate interpersonal relations, moral values, ethnic or national loyalties, and religious beliefs. In short, both contemporary Western society at large and the consciousness of its individual members are characterized by an interplay of different mutually regulating and historically sedimented impulses that are too complex to be neatly distinguished into liberal and non-liberal.

To call contemporary Western society liberal is not only to homogenize and oversimplify it, but also to give liberals a moral and cultural monopoly over it and to treat the rest as illegitimate and troublesome

intruders. When one then goes on to say that *since* it is liberal, it should or should not allow or follow certain practices, one is guilty of bad logic and even bad faith. One abstracts a particular, albeit an extremely important, aspect of modern society, turns it into its sole defining feature, and uses it not only to marginalize the rest but to reshape the entire society in its image. One also gives the liberal the supreme double advantage of setting non-liberals the challenging task of defending their principles to their opponents' satisfaction while more or less exempting themselves from it. Earlier writers called contemporary Western society open, free, rational, civil or humane rather than liberal. These terms are ideologically less narrow and biased, and socially more inclusive. They too, however, are not free of difficulties, and that only goes to show both the danger and the futility of bringing the whole society under a single description.

In a multicultural society, then, we need a conceptual framework, a political theory, that rises above the liberal/non-liberal divide by articulating itself at a higher level of abstraction and providing a language in terms of which liberals, non-liberals and those who are both or neither can express and resolve their differences. This is one of the most basic tasks facing a political theory of the multicultural society. It is, however, neither unusual nor impossible to meet, for traditional political philosophy at its best has always refused to remain trapped within the terms of discourse set by the contending ideologies of the marketplace and attempted to go behind and above them in its search for a more universal and less positivist theoretical framework.

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