

Cultural Negotiations: Examining Multiculturalism and the Limits of Anti-Essentialism

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In recent political thought, Will Kymlicka's work on multicultural citizenship (1995) has been vital in situating liberal multiculturalism as the dominant discourse for theorizing the normative significance of culture. The effect of this has been considerable in positioning the problem of identity and difference as central to mainstream political theory. It is not without a bit of irony, then, that the liberal multiculturalism endorsed by Kymlicka has recently come under fire for failing to fully think through the cultural identity/difference problem. Indeed, there is a growing consensus in the literature that the liberal multiculturalism paradigm rests on a mistaken 'essentialist' conception of culture, and that this theoretical incoherence leads to a number of illiberal and undemocratic consequences (see Appiah 2005; Gutmann 2003; Phillips 2007; Song 2005). Whereas proponents of liberal multiculturalism tend to treat culture as constituted by an essential, homogeneous unity and fixity, bounded off from the influence of other cultures, these 'post-multiculturalist' critics point to processes of globalization, liberalization, and immigration as facilitating interaction and exchange both between and within different cultures. This confrontation to and engagement with alternate ways of life are rapidly diversifying the internal particularities of cultural groups, promoting members of culture to question and contest cultural traditions and, in many cases, demand greater equality and autonomy within their particular cultural context. On this view, the multiculturalist project of preserving or protecting cultural distinctiveness has the unintended effect of imposing an artificial identity on group members, downplaying individual agency, and oppressing intracultural difference and dissent.

To my mind, Seyla Benhabib (2002) has put forth perhaps the most developed account of a multiculturalist theory based on an anti-essentialist understanding of identity and difference. In this paper, I critically assess Benhabib's own theoretical approach to multiculturalism and her proposed political strategies for addressing the claims of culture. While acknowledging that the anti-essentialist critique provides persuasive objections to common conceptions and uses of culture in normative theory, I argue that the alternative approach to the challenges of cultural pluralism offered by Benhabib is underdeveloped at best, and counterproductive at worst. I argue that her proposal over-emphasizes the emancipatory potential of non-essentialist discourses by ignoring the ways by which unequal power relations between minority and majority groups may preclude effective intercultural dialogue. Her approach makes no distinction between cultural change brought about by the autonomous acts of its members, and change imposed on its members from external pressures due to inequalities between groups. An anti-essentialist political discourse that otherwise overlooks these inequalities can only be expected to address the former kind of change, at the risk of allowing the latter to undermine the viability of a culture. Furthermore, I claim that by attempting to divorce minority claims from questions of cultural identity, her model is ill-suited for identifying how and why

the claim has meaning and value for its claimants, which precludes much of the deep intercultural dialogue and understanding necessary for doing justice to cultural claims-making. Focusing primarily on the issue of national minorities, I conclude by reflecting on the potential for reconciling the crucial insights offered by social constructivism and liberal multiculturalism.

Liberal Multiculturalism and the Social Constructivist Critique

In an effort to clear the analytical murkiness associated with the term ‘culture’, Kymlicka proposes that we focus on his now well-known concept of ‘societal culture’, which he defines as a culture that “provides its members with meaningful ways of life, across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres. These cultures tend to be territorially concentrated, and based on a shared language” (Kymlicka 1995, 76). It provides its members with a framework of institutions, values, and beliefs that together enable them its members make a wide range of meaningful choices. It is only within a particular societal culture that individuals have the range of meaningful options that they require in order to engage with life autonomously. If an individual has no set of options then they have nothing from which to choose, and one cannot be autonomous without choice.

In addition to providing a certain set of options for its members, Kymlicka stresses that societal cultures also provides the framework that makes these options *meaningful*. All individuals inherit the particular language, history, and traditions of the culture in which they are raised, and make evaluations and form beliefs within the context of that shared cultural background. Membership within a particular societal culture is a “precondition of making intelligent judgments about how to lead our lives” (Ibid., 83). For Kymlicka, therefore, it is crucial that the cultural context within which its members are brought up remains relatively stable. If the viability of a societal culture becomes threatened due to increasing sociopolitical marginalization or discrimination, the context of choice open to its members will become restricted. Given that individuals can only develop self-identities and meaningful life-plans within the context of a common societal culture, Kymlicka concludes that liberals ought to endorse policies of accommodation to effectively protect that context of choice, including indigenous land rights and self-government, regional autonomy and official language rights for national minorities, and accommodation rights for immigrant groups.

Benhabib’s primary challenge to liberal multiculturalism is to problematize Kymlicka’s notion of societal culture. She argues, for instance, that Kymlicka has “conflated institutionalized forms of collective public identities with the concept of culture. There are British, French, and Algerian nations and societies that are organized as states; but there are no British, French, or Algerian ‘societal cultures’ in Kymlicka’s sense” (Benhabib 2002, 60). From her favoured perspective of ‘social constructivism’, culture is composed of multiple competing narratives and contested meanings and values, and it overlaps with other cultures and evolves through intercultural interaction. There is “never a single culture, one coherent system of beliefs, significations, symbolizations, and practices, that would extend ‘across the full range of human activities’” in the way that Kymlicka suggests (Ibid.). Consequently, if the anti-essentialism of the social constructivist reveals cultures to be radically contested, unbounded, and hybrid, then to

what extent does it make sense to speak of protecting distinct societal cultures? On the social constructivist view, any culture would lack the coherence and uniformity that the liberal multiculturalist requires for it to be the subject of multicultural justice, and to insist on this view of culture puts pressure on claimants to adhere to a false image of their cultural identity. Benhabib concludes that multiculturalists like Kymlicka share conceptual difficulties in terms of accounting for cultural discontinuity, especially in terms of internal differentiation and dissent, and implicitly subordinate the normative importance of these expressions of individual agency to that of cultural protection and preservation. Cultures tend to be treated as ‘given’ as opposed to dialogical and mutually constitutive, with the effect of placing the dominant vision of the identity of a particular culture virtually beyond critical reflection, which has “grave normative political consequences for how we think injustices among groups should be redressed and how we think human diversity and pluralism should be furthered” (Ibid., 4-5).

Benhabib’s anti-essentialism strives towards recognizing and celebrating the “the radical hybridity and polyvocality of all cultures,” which represent “multilayered, decentered, and fractured systems of action and signification” (Ibid., 26). Cultures are complex and ever-changing horizons without clear boundaries, and although they may be experienced as complete wholes from within by their participants, Benhabib argues that it is the external observer who, through attempts to understand and control cultures, actively *constructs* a sense of unity and completeness:

The social observer...is the one who imposes, together with local elites, unity and coherence on cultures as observed entities...Participants in the culture, by contrast, experience their traditions, stories, rituals and symbols, tools, and material living conditions through shared, albeit contested and contestable, narrative account. From within, a culture need not appear as a whole; rather, it forms a horizon that recedes each time one approaches it (Ibid., 5).

On the social constructivist model, culture is continually recreated through social processes of signification and evaluation, which occurs through “complex dialogues and interaction with other cultures” (Ibid., 184). Cultures are to be conceived as narratives, which represent the meaning- and value-giving function of culture that enables its members to make sense of the world and to act in meaningful ways. However, just as narratives change according to new interpretations and imaginings, so too do cultures as their members continue to reinterpret and resignify the meaning and value of human actions and relations in light of new experiences and understandings.

Moving from the empirical fact of cultural fluidity and contestability, Benhabib attempts to ‘open up’ culture to democratic deliberation and institutions, whereby culture can be contested openly and effectively by free and equal citizens. In contrast to ‘strong’ multiculturalism, she argues, “intercultural justice between human groups should be defended in the name of justice and freedom and not of an elusive preservation of cultures” (Ibid., 8). To achieve this ‘democratization of culture’, Benhabib’s goal is twofold: first, to present a philosophically sound, social-scientifically informed account of culture; second, to develop a strategy of complex multicultural dialogue through which

the claims of cultural groups may be addressed within the theory and practice of liberal democracies.

Cultural Recognition and Democracy

Benhabib claims “the task of *democratic equality* is to create impartial institutions in the public sphere and civil society where this struggle for the recognition of cultural differences and the contestation for cultural narratives can take place without domination” (Benhabib 2002, 8). Unlike Kymlicka, her idea of social justice does not stress preserving the autonomy of cultures, but rather expanding democratic dialogue by including previously marginalized groups, and denouncing “the exclusivity and hierarchy of existing cultural arrangements” (Ibid., ix). Influenced by the work of Jürgen Habermas, Benhabib’s model of deliberative democracy is premised upon the political dimension of individual autonomy, which requires the creation of public dialogues in which all those affected can participate in deliberation of controversial normative issues. This is because it is “fundamental to autonomy that the collective practices in which we participate may be seen as the outcome of our legitimate processes of deliberation” (Ibid., 114). Her model of multicultural deliberative democracy accepts legal regulation and intervention via direct and indirect state methods in multicultural disputes, and it views normative dialogue and contestation in the public sphere as essential for a multicultural democracies. Benhabib’s model of deliberative democracy is ‘dual track’ in the sense that it encourages “maximum cultural contestation within the public sphere” as well as “in and through the institutions and associations of civil society” (Ibid., ix).

To ensure that societies with strong cultural cleavages are conducive to narrative self-determination in cultural terms, Benhabib proposes three normative conditions upon which any democratic institution must be based and to which any member of a minority must adhere when making a claim for cultural accommodation: (1) *egalitarian reciprocity*: individuals must not, in virtue of their membership status in a cultural minority, be entitled to lesser degrees of political, economic, and cultural rights than the majority; (2) *voluntary self-ascription*: the state should not simply grant the right to define and control membership to the group at the expense of the individual; (3) *freedom of exit and association*: the freedom of the individual to exit the group must be unrestricted, although exit may be accompanied by the loss of certain kinds of formal and informal privileges (Ibid., 19-20).

Benhabib readily admits that “cultural groups may not be able to survive as distinct entities under these conditions;” however, these conditions are “necessary if legal pluralism in liberal-democratic states is to achieve the goals of cultural diversity as well as democratic equality” (Ibid., 20). As long as demands for public cultural recognition are in line with these three imperatives and do not deny the fluidity of cultural identity – that is, that they do not rest on ‘culturalist premises’ or ‘preservationist impulses’ – then the emancipatory potential of democratic multicultural politics may be properly realized, and “new modalities of pluralist cultural coexistence can be reimagined” (Ibid., 184). The apparent strength, then, of a social constructivist approach to culture is that it subjects cultural concepts to critical scrutiny and, by institutionalizing this critical stance within the institutions of democracy through complex intercultural dialogue, individuals are in a better position to express and assess the complexity of their identities without recourse to

essentialist presuppositions of existing cultural arrangements. But are the empirical bases and normative implications of social constructivism as clear-cut as Benhabib supposes?

Limits of Social Constructivism

Although social constructivism goes a long way in terms of promoting greater critical reflection on the complexities of cultural identity, it is important to recognize its limits as a critical tool in multicultural political discourse. Social constructivism risks grossly overstating its case when it all too uncritically celebrates the radical hybridity and fluidity of *all* cultures, as if all cultures could be accurately categorized as equally hybrid, permeated, and contested. Just as the anti-essentialist interrogates the ways by which essentialist concepts of cultures get established and reified through a specific discourse, David Scott applies a similar logic against cultural anti-essentialism itself:

For whom is culture partial, unbounded, heterogeneous, hybrid, and so on, the anthropologist or the native? Whose claim is this, theory's or that of the discourse into which the theory is inquiring? For surely on the very antifoundationalist grounds established by the new theory itself, the unboundedness or otherwise of culture cannot be something given but must, rather, be something that *gets established* in forms of authoritative discourse (Scott 2003, 101).

Scott thus reverses the participant/observer logic to which Benhabib rather uncritically appeals: the social constructivist conception of culture, much like its 'culturalist' counterpart, is itself an artifact of anthropology and sociological theory, evolving through particular discourses that are themselves reactions to particular historical contexts and problems. The social constructivist concept of 'culture', therefore, far from having an "unproblematic" and "natural" history, is in its own way a new means by which to theorize the "otherness of the West's Others" (Ibid., 102; 111).

Of course, this is not to deny the key critical insights of anti-essentialism: that cultures are by their very nature internally contestable and externally dialogical. What it does suggest, however, is that claims asserting the radical hybridity or fluidity of a group should be met with a certain caution. It certainly does not follow that all cultures should be considered *a priori* as necessarily and equally hybrid and permeated, for this would only reproduce the same problems engendered by cultural essentialism – namely, painting cultures with broad-stroked generalities that glosses over the internal and external specificities of any culture. To take an extreme example, it would be a mistake, to conflate the culture of Mennonites in Canada with the culture of the Quebecois as identically contested and hybrid. While the culture of each group is certainly *contestable*, the Quebecois clearly experience a greater degree of internal differentiation as a result of its citizens increasingly engaging with English Canada, not to mention the rest of the world, while the Mennonites live in relative (though surely not complete) isolation. The social, political, and economic context in which the members of a group are situated will differ from one group to another, as will the internal power dynamics within a group (such as class divisions and gender roles) and the external relations between different

groups (how typical it is for the members of one group to interact with those from another culture; whether there is a history of violent conflict between neighbouring groups).

A critical stance towards social constructivism asks us to limit the extent to which we conceive of groups as *inherently* hybrid, for treating all cultures in this uniform manner risks ascribing a group a radical hybridity when it is *as a matter of fact* not so hybrid and not so contested. Moreover, insisting on the radical hybridity of culture may blind us to the actual differences between and internal coherences within cultures that manifest themselves most explicitly in cases of conflict between cultures. This is not to suggest that groups do not overlap or are not constitutively interrelated, but rather that the fact of hybridity must not be taken to imply that there are no important cleavages, including language and religious values, that factually divide cultural groups in public life. Indeed, ignoring these differences under the false pretense of radical hybridity may be tantamount to grave injustice. By institutionalizing a distorted picture of a cultural group, multicultural politics will only misidentify the real needs and aspirations of their members, thereby failing to implement the appropriate measures necessary for redressing their particular social, political, and economic concerns.

Social Constructivism in Context: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Relations in Canada

For a more concrete example of the limited emancipatory potential of social constructivist approaches to multiculturalism, consider the following case study. Avigail Eisenberg (1998) argues that the discourses specific to the relations between Canadian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal in both political theory and public policy are plagued by faulty cultural assumptions concerning the apparent incompatible cultural and political values between each group. She argues that such discourses, and the policies resulting from them, are driven by the assumptions that non-Aboriginal culture – that is, English Canadian culture – is ‘individualist,’ while Aboriginal culture is explicitly ‘collectivist.’ English-Canadians are individualists, according to popular characterizations, for they share strictly liberal values based on the interests of the individual, as opposed to those of particular groups, cultures, religions, or classes. On the other hand, Aboriginal peoples are seen as collectivists, for they conceive of crucial social bonds within their cultural communities and rely on their community for the formation of personal identity and ‘spiritual well-being’ (Ibid., 38-39).

Eisenberg argues that a focus on the apparent conflict between two opposed ideologies has obscured rather than revealed the specific experience and needs of Aboriginal peoples. First, it has been disruptive to the project of protecting interests that are necessary for individual well-being *irrespective* of whether those interests are individualist or collectivist. Second, it ignores the pluralism *within* Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures by essentializing each culture as wholly collectivist and individualist, respectively, which supports an illusion that the cultures are more opposed than they truly are. Third, it gives the false impression that the political values of Canadian institutions and practices are thoroughly individualist and culturally neutral, when in fact they are constituted by a number of collectivist practices, and have historically discriminated against Aboriginal peoples and engaged in assimilation through culturally biased policies (Ibid., 40-44).

How might Benhabib’s model of intercultural democratic deliberation address these issues? This appears to be a perfect example of the problem of ‘culturalist’ multicultural

discourses: the members of a minority group are viewed as sharing a single, uniform, ‘collective’ identity, and thus the rights discourse in which the minority is to make its claims is *from the start* contaminated with misleading assumptions concerning their identity and needs. The problem becomes institutionalized because the minority has no choice but to express its claims within this framework in order to receive the rights necessary for the survival of their way of life. Benhabib’s model would serve us well here in terms of ensuring Aboriginal groups the discursive space within democratic institutions necessary for articulating their claims on their own terms. Democratic deliberation proper cannot treat Aboriginal groups as necessarily ‘collectivist’, for that would jeopardize the critical stance towards cultural identity required by emancipatory democratic politics. Here the emphasis of minority claims-making is on the *participants’* own cultural self-understanding, rather than the presuppositions of their interlocutors.

However, Benhabib’s approach is problematic on another, equally crucial front. Benhabib’s model simply assumes the state as a legitimate forum in which to assess the claims of Aboriginal groups. She claims, “these peoples are seeking not to preserve their language, customs, and culture alone but to attain the integrity of ways of life greatly at odds with modernity” (Benhabib 2002, 185). She adds that these non-modern ways of life, however, are only to be negotiated within the democratic institutions of the state:

from the standpoint of deliberative democracy, we need to create institutions through which members of these communities can negotiate and debate the future of their own existence...If self-determination is viewed not simply as the right to be left alone in governing one’s affairs but is also understood as the right to participate in the larger community, then the negotiation of these ways of life to accommodate more egalitarian gender norms becomes possible (Ibid.).

Yet this completely overlooks the multiculturalists’ emphasis on the importance of recognizing historical processes of ‘nation-building’ and their consequences for national minorities. While dialogue between the national majority and national minority may be a necessary part of peaceful co-existence, Benhabib pushes the argument one step further by restricting justice for Aboriginal groups to inclusion within the institutions of the dominant group, precluding any potential right to self-government in the strictest sense. But here Benhabib simply presupposes the legitimacy of the colonial state, and thus seems to ignore the normative implications of the long history of assimilation, discrimination, and social and economic marginalization of Aboriginal groups committed in the name of Canadian nation-building. The state cannot be considered a neutral arbiter between many different nations; rather, any state will naturally reflect the culture of the dominant group within its institutions through the use of a particular language, symbols, and values (Kymlicka 2001). Given the unequal positions of majority and minority cultures, there is something deeply suspicious about Benhabib’s claim that “the political incorporation of new groups into established societies will result most likely in the hybridization of cultural legacies on both sides” (Benhabib 2002, x). Because Benhabib ignores the disadvantages faced by national minorities when trying to make their claims against a background of colonialism or otherwise under conditions of political and economic disparity, she effectively leaves intact the underlying unequal power relations

inherent to dialogue between national groups, which begs the question as to whether the ‘hybridization’ engendered by political incorporation will truly be reciprocal and equal to both parties, rather than a further act of pressured assimilation.

For an illustration of these kinds of injustices faced by minorities, Melissa Williams (1998) refers to the debilitating effect that the ‘memory’ of historical injustice has on many minority groups today. According to Williams, this memory demonstrates the subjective aspect of historical injustice, which describes the meaning that the past has for members of groups who were the subject of a history of discrimination (Ibid., 177). The connection between past and present discrimination is located in the group members’ internalization of those damaging social meanings – for instance, members of Aboriginal groups sharing a sense of not belonging within the majority culture due to a long history of social and cultural segregation as well as the horrific nation-building programs of assimilation and cultural destruction. From this shared historical memory, individuals of a minority group today may lack a sense of self-esteem and affirmation as a result of generations of prejudiced practices and derogatory social stigmas attached to them. The imprints of past injustices persist in the negative social meanings that the dominant culture and institutions ascribes to those that are different, thereby legitimating their subordination and marginalization. As Williams puts it, “time does not heal the wounds of injustice when it leaves in place the institutions and practices that embody that injustice” (Ibid., 197). It is therefore neither uncommon nor unwarranted that Aboriginal groups and other national minorities may be inclined to view the institutions of the dominant culture with a certain sense of suspicion or distrust. They may be less willing participate in the political and legal institutions of the dominant group, for participation here implies recognizing and affirming the legitimacy of these institutions.

To be sure, this problem has greater relevance in certain contexts than others. It better describes the situation of previously self-governing peoples forcibly and violently incorporated into settler societies. Other ethnonationalist minorities such as the Quebecois and the Scots in Britain tend to feature sociopolitical and economic forms of life not that distinct from the dominant culture in which they are situated, and their cultural survival may depend less on territorial sovereignty and autonomous control of natural resources but rather the institutional embodiment of their cultural history and heritage. Benhabib has little to say about the differences between these contexts, yet the differences between them suggest markedly different approaches to questions of democratic inclusion and political self-determination. Assuming from the start that the colonial state offers a neutral site within which to assess the claims of Indigenous groups may have the unintended effect of reifying the structure of subordination and marginalization that has for so long undermined the legitimacy of the nation-state, to the detriment of members of national minority groups.

Group Inequality in Perspective: The Problem of Cultural Change

It is surely the case that all cultural norms and values are in principle contestable, as this explains why cultures do in fact change. The key insight to draw from the multiculturalist position is that the various features of a culture, which make up the necessary context in which individuals make meaningful and valuable choices in the first place, must be ‘free’ to undergo change; that is, cultural change is legitimate *only in the absence of structural inequality between cultural groups*. However, cultural change for

minority groups is not always facilitated by what might be considered normatively-benign processes of globalization and intercultural dialogue; rather, a great deal of cultural change is in effect *imposed* on minority groups through processes of assimilation and increasing marginalization engendered by existing structural inequalities between majority and minority cultures. By labeling all movements for cultural protection as equivalent to maintaining cultural ‘purity’, Benhabib seems to completely overlook the normative significance of these inequalities.

It is important to distinguish between cultural change that is in fact an expression of the autonomy its members and the consequence of free interaction between groups, on the one hand, and cultural change that is caused by significant social, political, and economic pressure imposed on the group from external sources, on the other. The former is, of course, an important part of social agency and cultural co-existence. The latter kind of change, however, threatens the viability of a culture ‘from the outside’, which carries strong normative implications of which cannot be reduced to mere attempts at cultural preservation and ‘freezing’. Rather, it must be assumed that under conditions of modernity many cultures are much more vulnerable than others, for reasons that are not reducible to whether or not its members are adequately ‘motivated’ to maintain their culture. For a culture’s members may be less motivated to maintain their culture *because* of external pressures to abandon it. Normatively speaking, it may be said that these cultures have a right to survival because they fail to maintain their viability for reasons that are themselves illegitimate. So we have two distinct kinds of change, one compatible with individual autonomy and social agency, and the other highly questionable from a normative point of view. An anti-essentialist discourse that otherwise leaves intact structural and socioeconomic inequality between groups can only be expected to address the former kind of change, at the risk of allowing the latter to run rampant. Indeed, there is a remarkable lack of discussion on Benhabib’s part of the prevalence of socioeconomic disparities between groups, and *these* disparities are equally the cause of injustices within multicultural politics as essentialist discourses.

Assessing the Claims of Cultures

Since Benhabib rejects viewing cultures as discrete entities, she rejects arguments that assert the equality of cultures as wholes or otherwise judge them as individuated, collective totalities:

we can certainly observe, analyze, and isolate certain practices as central to a certain culture, and these we can certainly judge to be just or unjust, hierarchical or egalitarian, solidaristic or selfish...But it is an analytical error – the logical mistake of the *pars pro toto*, ‘substituting the part for the whole’ – to want to judge culture as wholes (Benhabib 2002, 58).

Since culture have ‘propositional content’, in that they express beliefs with truth and validity claims about the world, it makes little sense to judge cultures as wholes without examining their beliefs and practices in terms of the propositional content of their truth and validity claims. What we ought to do in properly judging cultures is individuate the specific values and practices that are associated with that culture and subject them to critical scrutiny. The argument here is that a factual claim asserting a given value or

practice to be part of a culture does not itself carry any normative weight. I do not object to this conclusion, as claims cannot be considered legitimate *simply* by virtue of their being a part of one's culture, which reduces cultural claims making to mere appeals to authority or tradition. Nor should cultures be assumed to be equal as wholes. Most cultures feature a mix of highly respectable and strongly reprehensible values and practices, and we fail to do justice to their members when we gloss over these differences by simply presuming equality between cultures.

My worry concerning these kinds of moves, however, is twofold. First, this way of framing the claims of cultures seems to grossly oversimplify the reasons *why* and under *what circumstances* cultural minorities make the claims they do. As I have suggested, cultural claims are often made against a background of colonialism, oppression, discrimination, and/or social, political, and economic marginalization. It is unfortunate that some claimants may articulate their claims in such a way that implies 'This is part of my culture and *therefore* deserves accommodation', but this should not be taken as the primary normative thrust of the argument. Rather, the normative significance of cultural claims derives from the fact that individuals are subjected to negative pressures and damaging experiences simply by virtue of their membership to groups that happen to be in the minority, which pose a significant obstacle to freely pursuing their own conceptions of the good as well as participating within the social and political institutions of society at large. It is crucial to remember that by having to justify their values and practices to majority groups, both immigrant groups and national minorities are faced with a justificatory burden not shared by members of the majority, who for the most part enjoy their ways of life as a social and political given. So the normative relevance of cultural claims is not wholly reducible to their propositional content alone. Again, this is not to imply that all cultural claims ought to be treated as equally legitimate or of equal normative importance. As Joe Carens puts it,

Now being fair does not mean that every cultural claim and identity will be given equal weight but rather that each will be given appropriate weight under the circumstances within the framework of a commitment to equal respect for all. History matters, numbers matter, the relative importance of the claims to the claimants matters, and so do many other considerations (Carens 2000, 12).

Any evaluation of cultural claims has to be supplemented with an equal consideration of the particular social, political, and economic context in which the group is situated, and the hardships they face in virtue of their group membership.

My second point of contention to this way of framing 'cultural assessment' concerns its implications regarding the methodology of analyzing and assessing cultural claims. When we 'take apart' and 'isolate' cultural claims and neatly reduce them to a single value or practice, and examine and evaluate them without any attempt to understand the context in which the claim is made, we end up failing to take seriously the meaning and significance of cultural claims. If individuals are indeed constitutively embedded within a particular cultural context that not only provides options, but also the framework through which one derives meaning and value about the world (a view shared by both multiculturalists and social constructivists alike), then we cannot treat the values

and practices of a culture as independent and cleanly separable. Cultures are not simply random collections of otherwise free-standing values; rather, symbols and practices develop within loose webs of meaning, signification, and evaluation – in short, they take shape through culture.

With any interpretation of the claims of cultures, there seems to be a kind of ‘hermeneutic circle’ involved, by which an adequate understanding of the individual parts of a culture can only be achieved through reference to the whole culture, and vice versa. Neither the whole cultural context nor any individual feature can be properly understood without reference to each other. Of course, this is not to deny the possibility of adequately interpreting a particular feature of a culture, but rather to suggest that its meaning and significance can only be found within its actual historical and sociopolitical context. Nor does this suggest an essentialist notion of cultures as organic wholes constituted by a rigid, determinate set of values and practices. A culture does not cease to exist if one particular practice was abandoned or if the meaning or value attached to it changes. If nothing else, culture provides an explanatory – though not necessarily *justificatory* – function that is vital to examining and evaluating its values and practices. To properly understand a given cultural practice requires asking questions of *how* and *why* it is meaningful and valuable for its members, and this cannot be established without reference to how a practice ‘hangs together’ with other values and practices within the history and context of their culture. By failing to do ask these questions, political interlocutors may end up hastily rejecting (or accommodating) a claim by failing to understand why particular values and practices share the value that they do within their own cultural context.

This problem becomes most explicit when Benhabib argues that in evaluating the claims of cultures “our focus should be less on what the group *is* but more on what the political leaders of such groups *demand* in the public sphere” (Benhabib 2002, 16). It is difficult to know what to make of this assertion, as it suggests that the claim of a group can be adequately assessed in the *absence* of understanding the very cultural background that provides meaning and value for that claim. As Benhabib herself notes, just because cultures are ‘narrative discourses’ does not imply that they are merely fictional or unreal, nor that individuals can be treated as radically detached from the ‘webs of interlocution’ provided by culture. On the contrary, social constructivism stresses an important historical quality in that over time, culture tends to become reified or materialized as a social ‘reality’ for their members – internalized by individuals embedded in social patterns and roles, and embodied by the institutions of society (Jenkins 2000). So while the social categories engendered by ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ are not discrete entities ‘out there’, existing prior to and independent from social processes of signification and evaluation, they are, from a phenomenological perspective, taken to be ‘real’, a horizon of intelligibility through which one understands and acts within the world. They become part and parcel of how one views oneself and how one intelligibly defines what is of importance.

If it is indeed the case that a cultural background – however fluid – is a necessary condition for understanding and coping with the world, then it is imperative that when assessing a claim one refrains from bracketing the identity of the claimant or the culture to which one identifies, otherwise one will be in no position to fully grasp how the claimants value the practice of which they are seeking accommodation, or to anticipate

the potential effects that accommodation might have on the culture's members. How can one expect to adequately account for the needs of cultural minorities if they are denied expressing their plight in their own cultural terms? And how could this approach, as Benhabib describes it, plausibly amount to 'complex intercultural dialogue'? It makes little sense to take cultural claims at face value, wholly divorced from both the identity of the claimants as well as the cultural and political context within which it is made, for by doing so we fail to adequately appreciate how and why certain claims are important within their proper cultural context.

Benhabib distinguishes herself, the "democratic theorist," as "concerned with the public manifestation of cultural identities in civic spaces," from "the multiculturalist," who is "interested in classifying and naming groups and then in developing a normative theory on the basis of classificatory taxonomies" (Benhabib 2002, 18). But I would argue that the two projects must not be treated as mutually exclusive; rather, the claims for justice by cultural groups in civic spaces depend on *some* forms of group classification or identification. Otherwise, we lose a great deal of perspective when trying to evaluate cultural claims, which may preemptively weaken minority claims to justice. However, as Benhabib suggests, any such cultural identification must be established through democratic dialogue with the claimants on their own terms, rather than requiring group members to adopt any predefined cultural category or 'script'.

The Politics of Liberal Multiculturalism and Social Constructivism: Potential for Consensus?

Perhaps, then, the social constructivist case for the primacy of individual rights and autonomy need not be so opposed to the liberal multiculturalist emphasis on the necessity of group rights for cultural protection. That social constructivism reveals all cultural practices and values to be subject to contestation suggests that multicultural politics become better attuned to the context in which cultural claims are made, in order to be in a better position to determine how the claimants value the practices of which they are seeking accommodation, and to anticipate the potential effects that accommodation might have on the culture's members. In some cases it may well be that 'culturalist' measures are more effective in securing the viability of individual autonomy, namely by ensuring that structural inequalities between groups do not infringe on the ability of the members of a minority group to engage with their culture without undue pressure to assimilate into another. It is precisely this issue that Kymlicka's distinction between internal restrictions and external protections is intended to solve, and in many cases this distinction is enormously helpful in thinking about group rights.

However, there still remains two problems posed by anti-essentialism in regards to the potential overlapping effects of these kinds of measures: (a) many external protections such as language laws will inevitably place some limitations on the internal dynamics within the group (for instance, restricting the capacity for individuals to make use of different languages), and (b) that external protections must be designed in such a way as to not prevent the natural flow of mutual interaction and mobility between groups. Any rich theory of liberty and equality must recognize that cultural rights do not guarantee liberty when individuals cannot autonomously choose their communities and commitments without fear of discrimination justified in the name of culture. Likewise, a right to equality must recognize that individuals demand equality in context, and that

there is no equality if individuals are unable to effectively challenge culture. This will necessarily entail a tension between individual rights and group rights, and this tension must be balanced in such a way that neither collective autonomy nor individual autonomy is considered absolute in all contexts. To ignore the necessity of this balance is to ignore the normative implications of existing group inequalities.

The social constructivist critique of multiculturalism goes too far when it hastily discounts the ways by which individuals, despite being bearers of individual democratic rights, often cannot actually develop and exercise their rights until they become active members of a group that struggles toward some collective goods shared by most of its members. In countless cases, it is precisely the ‘protectionist’ rights won by minorities that enabled them to effectively contribute to political dialogue as individual democratic activists. Group specific rights, which necessarily have to take a stand on *who* and *what* a cultural group is, are part and parcel of realizing the ideals of liberal democracy. The conclusions to draw from social constructivism, then, are not that identity claims are inherently counterproductive for inclusive democratic dialogue; instead, I would argue that social constructivism is better understood as *complementary* to liberal multiculturalism rather than its contrary – a critical tool that provides a set of standards against which actual processes of democratic deliberation and policies are to be evaluated. In democratic deliberation, individuals must be free to express their identities and claims on their own terms, and thus there can be no pressure for individuals to involuntarily accept rigid cultural categories or to adopt a predefined script simply for strategic reasons. In terms of policy-making, multicultural policies must refrain from treating cultures as bounded wholes by rejecting measures that prevent intercultural exchange for the sake of preserving cultural distinctness. Although public policies must always take a stand on what a group is in order to design the appropriate measures for accommodation, they must remain open to reevaluation in light of changing group dynamics. Insofar as public policies do require certain forms of categorization, it is precisely the purpose of intercultural democratic dialogue to contest these categories so that they may better reflect an ever-changing social reality.

However, it must be stressed that in principle none of these standards exceed the framework of or provide an alternative to liberal multiculturalism. Rather, they imply the enhancement of liberal multiculturalist public policies in ways that render them less susceptible to cultural essentialism, by paying closer attention to the social realities of citizens in terms of the interactive dynamics both between and within cultures. This calls for greater scrutiny of how policies intended to preserve the institutions of a culture might restrict its members’ ability to contest the culture upon which those institutions are based and designed to protect. A more social-scientifically informed liberal multiculturalism recognizes the cultural embeddedness of individuals while appreciating that the context in which they are embedded is ever-expanding and changing. While institutional cultural recognition and inclusiveness are essential to the flourishing of cultural communities as well as individual autonomy and well-being, public institutions must recognize and affirm individuals’ evolving identities and encourage an interconnected ‘community of communities’.

In the context of multinational states, federal politics must be better equipped for addressing the concerns of citizens whose identities resist simple categories or monocultural ascriptions. Whereas liberal multiculturalists often emphasize the

distinctness of societal cultures at the expense of the similarities and points of overlap between them, the public policies of a multinational state must be able to account for individuals who identify with and share allegiances to more than one nation, rather than effectively force them to choose between dichotomous identities. Kymlicka is correct to emphasize the context of choice provided by culture as a precondition of autonomy, but insofar as this context is viewed in terms of a single or monoculturally structured societal culture, the applicability of this model might in many cases be quite limited.

Although it is a fact of life that political boundaries must be drawn, a multinational state with a more pluralist perspective intends to “respect and foster the construction of shared choice contexts, so that several national groups, while enjoying the right to receive cultural protection and recognition in the public sphere, can co-govern one and the same societal context,” and to “eradicate...those instances of policies or institutions that intend to remove the cracks in the bastion of the nation-state assumption” (De Shutter 2007, 54; 51). Where cultural hybridity and overlap is prevalent in a multinational state, then a federal system of power sharing, and official recognition of bi- and multilingualism in schools and public life, for instance, is likely a much more promising avenue in terms of accommodating the interests of those with diverse identities than outright secession or the redrawing of rigid political boundaries in line with cultural enclavism (see Bauböck 2000).

Of course, questions concerning the legitimacy and viability of national group secession or integration are extremely complex, and the solutions depend on history and the actual experiences and needs of the majority and minority group members. But while states cannot avoid engaging in nation-building, it is important to recognize that this in no way precludes the possibility that the state engage in *multination*-building, by instead attempting to develop and diffuse a shared multinational identity in the public realm. To some extent the Canadian government has sought to achieve this through official recognition of national bilingualism, and studies indicate that multination-building in Canada has helped Quebecers develop a sense of allegiance to a broader Canadian identity without weakening their ties to their sub-state national identity (Mendelsohn 2002). How multination-building might be achieved will vary from context to context, but such projects seem essential for accounting for and accommodating diverse citizens with overlapping or hybrid identities.

What remains clear is that no matter how hybrid identities may be, individuals are still culturally embedded beings, though their cultural context is complex, and may exceed a single comprehensive societal culture. Individuals need a secure context in which they may express their autonomy, and group specific rights remain crucial to addressing the democratic deficit. And we still need to engage deeply and sincerely with the other’s culture so as to adequately and justly evaluate their claims. What anti-essentialism demands of liberal multiculturalist politics is that it takes a more critical stance towards cultures and their claimants, to problematize any proposed ‘authentic’ voice of a culture as well as assertions of radical distinctness by seeking out competing narratives and dissenters, and to anticipate the potential effects that accommodation might have on the culture’s members. These imperatives seem missing or under-emphasized when we are primarily focused on identifying societal cultures and the means necessary for their preservation.

The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate the importance and value of the anti-

essentialist critique of liberal multiculturalism while exposing its limits and challenges moving forward. An important task that normative political theory must undertake is to subtly negotiate a middle road between cultural preservation and the radical democratization of culture, and I have briefly suggested some ways by which a politics of multiculturalism may be better attuned to the needs of diverse citizens and their critical standpoints. These are complicated issues, the solutions to which will surely differ from context to context; however, such an approach is essential for achieving justice in diverse societies.

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