

Addressing Persistent Forms of Oppression in a Liberal Democracy: A Cultural Approach to Multiculturalism

Nisha Gupta
Syracuse University

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will discuss the liberal democratic perspective on multiculturalism. I will first delineate some common elements of the liberal democratic discourse, represented by Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka. Next, I will point to a significant limitation of this approach. Finally, I will suggest some alternatives that may address this limitation.

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE

The liberal democratic discourse is primarily concerned with identifying political values and institutions that can be commonly shared by the diverse members of a multicultural society. This discourse emphasizes how individual rights can be maintained in a society that properly recognizes diversity. Values such as liberty, equality, and freedom guide the underlying arguments of this discourse.

Minority group rights, in terms of cultural groups particularly, are an important element of liberal multiculturalism discussions, but only so far as minority rights are “consistent with individual freedom” and promote it.¹ James Ceasar notes,

The national ideal of American liberal democracy...has been one that involved formally recognizing individuals, not cultural groups, as the core of the compact of society. The highest principle was that of all persons being created equal, with the rights and privileges attaching in the first instance to individuals. Cultural groups, in this view, are seen mostly as associations of individuals, having secondary status.²

Liberalism is concerned with protecting the rights of individuals, regardless of their membership in minority groups. For example, freedom of speech is guaranteed equally for individuals in religious groups such as the Nation of Islam, as well as those in “politically radical” groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). These rights are extended to individuals in these groups because they live in a liberal democratic state, not necessarily because of their group membership.

There are some significant issues for minority groups in relation to individual rights. One issue concerns the need for minority group *identity* to be recognized. As suggested by the above quotation, minority groups traditionally have not received the sort of protection of the state that individuals have enjoyed. In order to protect and ensure equal treatment to all individuals, the political state has promoted a “color-blind” approach in its treatment of individuals, which disregards group memberships in favor of a sort of “neutrality.”³ The political idea of equal treatment under the law extends to individuals, regardless of their group identities. Acknowledging one’s group identity is incompatible with the effort to ensure equal treatment of all individuals. The former celebrates “difference” as a source of “identity,” while the latter must minimize difference in order to preserve “equal treatment.”

The claim of minority group identity is based in the premise that an individual's identity, that which is fundamentally at the core of who she is, is constituted in and of her belonging to particular "identity" groups. The meaning of individuality is tied up in one's self-identification with membership groups. If this "identity group" is thought to be inferior, one may suffer have a distorted impression of one's group, leading to internalized oppression and low self-esteem.⁴ Thus, the multicultural issue which liberalism faces concerns how the political state can promote and guarantee that one's identity groups are recognized positively while also ensuring that all individuals receive equal treatment.⁵

TAYLOR'S POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

Taylor addresses the issue of group identity in a liberal state in his essay "The Politics of Recognition."⁶ He distinguishes the liberal ideal of equal treatment of all persons as humans, a "politics of universalism," from a "politics of difference," which requires acknowledgement of the distinctive differences among individuals and their identity groups (*PR*, 37-39). The two are seemingly incommensurable because a politics of universalism is focused on treating every individual the same, regardless of differences, based on what they all have in common, namely that they are humans. This "color blind" treatment conflicts with the "politics of difference," which demands the acknowledgement of one's "particularity" (*PR*, 43).

Taylor argues that the politics of difference requires not only the political state's commitment to the equal recognition of different groups, but also the promotion of the *survival* of different groups. The survival of the different groups means that the political order ensures the continuity, over time, of these specific, minority cultural groups (*PR*, 58). There is an "inhospitable" tension between equal treatment of all individuals and recognition of difference. Taylor explains:

There is a form of the politics of equal respect, as enshrined in a liberalism of rights, that is inhospitable to difference, because (a) it insists on uniform application of the rules defining these rights, without exception, and (b) it is suspicious of collective goals...I call it inhospitable to difference because it can't accommodate what the members of distinct societies really aspire to, which is survival. This is (b) a collective goal, which (a) almost inevitably will call for some variations in the kinds of law we deem permissible from one cultural context to another (*PR*, 60-61).

There are two forms of liberalism that Taylor describes in his account of multiculturalism. The first form basically specifies that we treat individual rights as the first and foremost concern of the state. The resulting political discussion is framed very much in terms of neutrality (neutral in the sense that no one group is preferred over another). The neutral state guarantees that we can attend to the personal freedom and welfare of all citizens without preferring any particular cultural or religious group.

The second form of liberalism allows some difference in treatment of individuals (though not in basic rights) in the interest of promoting the integrity of distinct cultural groups. In order to foster the survival of groups, this second form of liberalism must operate not only in terms of recognizing different groups, but also demonstrating the "worth" of these groups, which may require some instances of preferential treatment (*PR*, 62-64). Taylor offers the example of Quebec language

laws that require signage in French to promote the survival of French culture, perhaps at the expense of English-speaking Quebeckers (*PR*, 62-64).

Another example of this form of liberalism is deaf culture politics. Deaf culture groups seek the positive affirmation of their methods of communicating, such as American Sign Language, within public institutions and the media in order to promote a positive impression of what it means to be “deaf.”⁷ Their argument holds that “speaking” and “hearing” sentence structure are given preference in our culture. This preference promotes a negative message that being deaf means one is afflicted or one’s means of communication is based upon “simple gestures with no internal structure.”⁸ By state affirmation of American Sign Language, individuals who are deaf will be less likely to “misrecognize” their deafness as a negative characteristic. Rather, they come to understand their deafness as a source of identity, such as the color of their skin or their sexual orientation.

KYMLICKA’S EXTERNAL PROTECTIONS

Kymlicka takes up the issue of protecting minority rights in his book, *Multicultural Citizenship*. His analysis distinguishes *inter* group rights, “the preservation of a group against society at large” from *intra* group rights, which concerns individuals within a group and their right to dissent, what he calls, “internal restrictions.”⁹ External protections are similar to Taylor’s survival rights of minority groups. Internal restrictions, on the other hand, are about restrictions placed on members of a particular minority group that might be restrictive of their “basic civil and political liberties,” such as requiring members to practice traditional gender roles or to attend a particular church.¹⁰ Internal restrictions are more typically considered when individual freedom and/or choice seem to be in question *within* a specific group.

Kymlicka favors a form of liberalism that supports external protection rights. External protections consider the importance of positive identity development among members of these groups. As discussed above, one’s identity develops in one’s specific, local cultural group. The degree of “respect” that is extended to that group strongly influences identity development. “Cultural identity provides an anchor for people’s self-identification...This in turn means that people’s self-respect is bound up with the esteem in which their [racial or ethnic] group is held.”¹¹ The esteem or “respect” afforded to one’s identity group by those external to the group directly influences the degree to which one’s own self identification is positive.

Kymlicka differentiates this sense of identity from a defused sense of “national identity,” which is often assumed to be “neutral” in relation to difference. Kymlicka contends that the public world, the political state, cannot ever be “neutral.”

Government decisions on languages, internal boundaries, public holidays, and state symbols unavoidably involve recognizing, accommodating, and supporting the needs and identities of particular ethnic and national groups. The state unavoidably promotes certain cultural identities, and thereby disadvantages others.¹²

Even if the political order believes itself to be neutral or “benign,” some particular traditions are projected. In implementing a seemingly neutral policy, as in the

Canadian case of an “official language,” the state disparages another language. By consciously putting minority rights up front, the political state offers a better chance of engaging cultural group needs, as in survival, without ending up with prejudicial policies that are concealed under the guise of “neutrality.” Kymlicka suggests that taking minority rights seriously will foster a greater degree of equal respect among all citizens. In the case of deaf culture, Kymlicka would support different modes of communication in public institutions, in the interest not only of deaf individuals, but also the state as a whole.

THE LIMITATION OF THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE AND ITS SOURCE

As I have indicated, the aim of liberal democratic discourse is to address the tension between equal treatment for all individuals regardless of their differences and the recognition of cultural identity groups as possessing some “worth” that needs to be supported. To some extent, Taylor and Kymlicka reconcile this tension, yet there are two critical points about both Taylor’s politics of recognition and Kymlicka’s external protections that are problematic. The first concerns who is doing the “recognizing,” and the second relates to the nature of recognition.

As Kymlicka notes, there is a particular group that defines and does the acknowledging of difference. The dominant group holds the power to determine what gets recognized and what gets repressed. This group also defines what counts as the norm, maybe even naming it “neutral,” and has the power to construct and disguise the “neutral” through the discourse of unity and the “common.” The upshot is that some groups end up being labeled “abnormal” and are devalued. The danger of this “recognition” is that dominant group ideologies get normalized into institutions and practices. Deaf culture proponents who seek to form a separate, exclusionary community where individuals can self identify with others without the negative stigma cite this sort of danger to their survival.

The second equally critical point about recognition concerns self-other formation. The self cannot be named a self without there being an “other.” So, we are dependent on others to recognize us. We *need* others in order to have a sense of self. Taylor says, “my discovering my own identity isn’t worked out in isolation....I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others” (*PR*, 34). This dimension of recognition means that in order to be an individual, one must be in a social setting *with* others.

Iris Young notes the ways that recognition processes arise through a discourse that is seemingly open and based on individual freedom for all, but actually *mis*recognizes groups in ways that have led to self defeating and destructive cultural practices.¹³ Within the rhetoric of “a shared community,” conformity operates as a controlling tool that perpetuates existing systems of power.¹⁴ These practices “mark out the ‘Other’” while the dominant group projects their subjective experiences as the norm.¹⁵ Differences from the dominant group are recognized; however, the differences are labeled as “deviant,” or “abnormal.” In a series of exclusionary constructions, the “other” becomes that which exists outside the boundaries of the norm.¹⁶ As in the case of deaf culture, the deaf individual is constructed as one of the “children of a lesser God,” because she does not speak in the “normal” way. This

stigmatizing may occur even if American Sign Language receives legal recognition as an official language.

Young argues that these practices are rooted in an ideology of cultural imperialism. Young says,

Those living under cultural imperialism find themselves defined from the outside, positioned, placed, by a network of dominant meanings they experience as arising from elsewhere, from those with whom they do not identify and who do not identify with them.¹⁷

These “dominant” meanings arise in the political process and in the daily practices and habits of the social order. The dominant view defines the deaf individual as the person who lacks hearing.¹⁸

The reality of persistent injustice and oppression, despite the liberal discourse of ensuring individual and group rights, signals that the discourse about equality and freedom is not enough to protect the “survival” of minority groups, nor to prevent misrecognition. I suggest that this limitation persists because the liberal democratic discourse is predominantly a political account. Political accounts provide fruitful theoretical frames and extensively influence the formulation and processes of public institutions. However, they are not able to account for cultural influences and the persistence of the “structures of feeling” that keep racist and sexist practices and beliefs alive. I am using the term, “structures of feeling,” in relation to Cultural Studies theorist Raymond Williams’s work.¹⁹

Williams’s conception of the “structure of feeling” concerns the emotional meanings that we generate through the social values and practices shared by our specific group, class, or culture. He says:

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a “structure:” as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension.²⁰

His formulation of “structures of feeling” attempts to capture the ways that lived experience constantly changes within a mostly unacknowledged historical context. There is a dynamic and emotive dimension to culture that does not regularly get interrogated.

For example, Taylor and Kymlicka frame their arguments in relation to the ways that self esteem is fostered within a specific, minority identity group. In order for individuals to have a sense of equal worth, a “genuine expression of respect” from those external to the group is needed for individuals to form their identity with celebration instead of self hatred (*PR*, 69-70).²¹ The degree of respect, or recognition generates an emotional feeling of “pride” in being a member of that group.

I want to consider more closely the development of this sense of pride. I believe that liberal democratic discourse does not adequately take into account the dominant cultural influences and persistence of the social realities of unearned privilege, oppression, racism, and intolerance. Differences can be recognized easily in the political state. But this recognition tends to be articulated in a vacuum apart from the historical problems of oppression, violence, and discrimination. The focus is on

“prejudice reduction” and tolerance of differences among *individuals*, rather than on how oppression is manifested against cultural groups. As Lawrence Blum astutely points out, “we tolerate what we do not like or do not feel comfortable with.”²² In liberal democratic discourse, the primary issues are freedom, equality, and liberty, among and between individuals and groups. With the focus on individual responsibility to tolerate others as individuals or identity groups, systemic problems go unexamined. Questions of history, collective oppressions, and structural inequalities cannot be wholly resolved in this political discourse. Instead of thinking solely in terms of political rights, multicultural discourse needs theorizing about culture as well.

A CULTURAL APPROACH TO MULTICULTURALISM

Addressing persistent discrimination and oppression in our culture requires attention to the following. First, there is a need to make visible the ways in which racism (and sexism) persist as institutional, systematic cultural realities. Second, there is a need to assess how individuals in cultural groups self identify in ways that lead to debilitating and internalized forms of self hatred.

Addressing both of these points demands an effort to educate individuals to see the potentially contradictory ways that justice works with and against the ideas of individual freedom and equality. This “awareness” education requires a radical critical consciousness, particularly in articulating the ways that “unity” is privileged at the cost of perpetuating injustices.

This formulation takes into account existing forms of oppression and addresses the ways in which all people are complicit in these processes. Blum believes we can accomplish this through attention to justice and appeals to a sense of shared community. He explains:

We want racial groups not only to tolerate each other — to take a live and let live attitude — and to lack prejudice against one another, but to care about understanding one another, to appreciate the race-based differences to one another’s experiences, to live out our sense of common humanity.²³

This approach toward a “living out of a common humanity” appeals to a much deeper level of awareness than can be reached through “tolerance.”

In relation to those individuals who self identify with the dominant group, this education reveals the invisibility of unearned privilege. The theoretical discussion in pedagogy of whiteness holds promise in addressing the issue of racism by directly confronting the issue of unearned privilege. In this work, individuals critically confront the sources of unearned privilege, the offspring of systemic oppression. By naming the issues of racism and whiteness, it is easier to keep the discussion of past oppression and institutional/systematic injustice up front.

This interrogation of the ways in which some groups benefit from systemic oppression serves to promote cultural change in ways that the idea of “recognition” and group “survival” rights cannot. In the case of deaf culture, when the “norm” of speaking and hearing is truly interrogated as a dominant ideology, we can more easily celebrate a richly multiple conception of communication. Legal recognition of American Sign Language, while important, does not in itself generate this outcome.

While awareness of White privilege (and other forms of privilege) is important in fostering a sense of shared community that is deeper than “tolerance,” this remains a “Pedagogy of the Oppressor.” There is also an important component for the “oppressed.” This pedagogy concerns the ways that systemic forms of oppression have generated a sense of cultural alienation and self hatred among individual members of marginalized groups. The issue of self hatred concerns the internalized oppression that people feel when they are constantly faced with a social order that degrades their status as a minority or as “different.”²⁴

Black women, for instance, face regular contradictions about themselves as “equal citizens” while also receiving negative messages via the media, social interactions or even in public discourse, about being black and being a woman. A Black woman may resolve this contradiction by devaluing her identity of being black and valorizing being able to “pass” as a white woman. In appealing to “whiteness” as the more valued social position, black women have a form of “self hatred” every time they look in the mirror. They deny their own social positions in order to reconcile the contradiction.²⁵

Incorporating some practices and educational efforts which focus on cultural groups provide ways to acknowledge this problem and to radically interrupt this debilitating form of assimilation. One example is ethnic studies’ fostering a sense of collective group identity through appeals to a shared history around a particular cultural heritage. As Molefi K. Asante says, “without any substantive infusion of African American content [in the curriculum] the African American child will continue to be lost in the Eurocentric framework of education.”²⁶ Asante calls for an Afrocentric curriculum not to be “anti white” but to correct the “distorted knowledge” that generates the self hatred described above.²⁷ Ethnic studies aims to do this through an “uplifting of the race” in the eyes of all members of the social order, but particularly to engender a stronger sense of self esteem for those who have previously been denigrated and have internalized this oppression.

These educational efforts involve a truly transformative commitment to addressing the social realities of injustice and persistent cultural practices of discrimination and intolerance. Multiculturalism should be a place where we can truly, deeply celebrate difference. I believe the cultural discourse of multiculturalism that I have outlined provides a fruitful theoretical framework in that spirit.

I am optimistic that discourses of multiculturalism are moving toward theories that do not foster a simple, homogenous political “unity.” Rather, the promise lies in the multiplicity of their response. The future work of multicultural education hinges on being able to incorporate elements that address both structural injustice and low self-esteem. The political discourse is important; this defines the commitment to anti-assimilation through “valuing diversity.” But we need to fortify this discourse with attention to the cultural dimension.

1. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory for Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 75.

2. James Ceasar, "Multiculturalism and American Liberal Democracy," in *Multiculturalism and American Democracy*, ed. Arthur Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 152-53.
3. *Ibid.*, 153.
4. Iris M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 59-60.
5. *Ibid.*, 157.
6. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). This book will be cited as *PR* for all subsequent references.
7. Carol Padden and Tom Humfries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.
8. *Ibid.*, 17, 39-44.
9. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 35.
10. *Ibid.*, 3.
11. *Ibid.*, 89.
12. *Ibid.*, 108.
13. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 60.
14. Iris M. Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 300-23.
15. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 59.
16. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference," in *Making Face, Making Soul Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco, Aunt Lute, 1990), 371-73.
17. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 59.
18. Harlin Lane, "Construction of Deafness," *The Disabilities Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997) 153-71.
19. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). See particularly part 2, chap. 9.
20. *Ibid.*, 132.
21. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 89.
22. Lawrence Blum. "Shared Values and Particular Identities in Anti-Racist Education," in *Philosophy of Education 1999*, ed. Randall Curren (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 2000), 71.
23. *Ibid.*
24. According to the literature on the history of ethnic studies, Carter Woodson first articulated the idea of internalized oppression in 1933, when he originally published *The Mis-education of the Negro*.
25. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 93.
26. Molefi K. Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea of Education," *Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 2 (1991): 170-80.
27. *Ibid.*, 172-73.