

Cultural Recognition, Cosmopolitanism and Multicultural Education

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Much of the recent research on multicultural education supports a variety of programs designed to reinforce and sustain the survival of particular cultural identities in public schools. As Michael Olneck has argued recently, in an impressively erudite review of the recent multicultural education literature, a variety of recent programs and policies share an ideal of multicultural education that “would require that the explicit affirmation of minority identities...be permitted even within public schools.”¹ These include bilingual and heritage language education programs that seek to reinforce and encourage the flourishing of local languages, and not simply to serve as temporary, transitional “bridges” designed to help minority language children assimilate to a larger English speaking public culture. As well, it includes recent attempts to reconfigure public school practices along multicultural lines (for example curricula) so that they adequately represent the cultural values, experiences and traditions of minority cultural groups. It also includes a variety of recent demands on the part of minority national and cultural groups — for example North American Indians, the Deaf, African- Americans — for publicly funded schools designed to reinforce particular cultural, racial, gendered or other identities.

The existing literature on multicultural educational research has tended to lament what is frequently at best the very limited success of such programs in achieving their aims, and at worst a betrayal of those aims.² Such sentiments presuppose that the aims of cultural survival that supposedly underly these multicultural education programs are desirable without offering justifications for those aims, and indeed without clarifying the nature of the aims at all. In this paper I seek to challenge the notion that multicultural education programs should foster cultural survival for particular groups by developing and criticizing an influential and philosophically sophisticated conception of cultural identity that might be adduced to justify them. I then outline an alternative conception of cultural identity, which I call cosmopolitanism, that suggests an alternative and morally attractive role for multicultural education.

THE CULTURAL RECOGNITION THESIS

Charles Taylor’s recent account of multiculturalism is based on what I shall call the cultural recognition thesis, which claims that cultural recognition is an important and necessary constituent of the value of treating individuals with equal respect.³ Taylor stresses the fact that cultural identities are things we negotiate through dialogue with others. Thus, he says, cultural recognition is important because its “refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it, according to a widespread modern view...The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort or oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized.” On this view, to withhold recognition from others, or to impose misrecognition on them, “can be

a form of oppression.”⁴ For Taylor, socio-political and educational policies must evince cultural recognition because cultural misrecognition, or withholding recognition altogether, may prevent individuals from being capable of finding value in their identity. And when it does, cultural misrecognition constitutes a form of disrespect to the extent that it prevents others from being able to have a sense of self-respect. So respecting others requires that we recognize the cultural identity that constitutes them.

Significantly, Taylor thinks that genuine recognition, as opposed to misrecognition, requires an acknowledgment of the way in which another’s identity is constituted within a single, distinct group cultural structure.⁵ As Taylor says, the universal demand of equal respect “powers an acknowledgment of specificity,” where specificity refers to the distinct nature of different, specific cultural *groups* as the basis for individual identity.⁶ Of course, individuals are capable of shaping their inherited group cultural identity in unique and idiosyncratic ways.⁷ Taylor’s view is not an argument for cultural conformism or mindless devotion to ancestral traditions. He stresses the language of authenticity and creative self-formation and reformation through interaction with others and our socio-cultural environment. Nevertheless, according to Taylor’s account, respecting *me* means recognizing the way in which my identity is constituted by a specific group cultural identity. It follows from this view that a liberal society dedicated to the value of equal respect must also recognize the multiplicity of cultural sub-groups that constitute it. That is because multicultural societies are made up of a range of distinct cultural groups, whose members’ identities are constituted by the particular groups to which they belong; and thus members of each sub-group require cultural recognition.

This discussion of Taylor’s account of cultural identity is far from complete but it is sufficiently detailed to understand an important educational implication that he seeks to draw from it. According to Taylor the need for cultural recognition requires state support for multicultural education programs designed to foster cultural survival and flourishing. For example, he says that the aim of multicultural policies, including policies of multicultural education, is “to maintain and cherish distinctness, not just now but forever. After all, if we’re concerned with identity, then what is more legitimate than one’s aspiration that it never be lost.”⁸ It follows that Taylor’s version of the cultural recognition requires support for cultural survival in a particularly strong sense. It entails the conclusion that the value of equal respect requires a state to preserve not just the cultural structure that is available for existing cultural members, in the way that a group of people might wish to have their local community swimming pool maintained as a facility for themselves. Rather, Taylor says that “[p]olicies aimed at [cultural] survival actively seek to *create* members of the community, for instance, in their assuring that future generations continue to identify as French-speakers. There is no way that these policies could be seen as just providing a facility to already existing people.”⁹ Thus, according to Taylor’s view, the value of equal respect demands state support for multicultural education policies to the extent that those policies are effective and necessary means of assuring the ongoing survival of an existing group’s cultural identity.

So far, I have tried to show that Taylor's version of the cultural recognition thesis is based on two claims. First, cultural misrecognition can be a form of oppression when it causes individuals to internalize a demeaning image of their ancestral cultural identity. Second, rectification of cultural misrecognition and its demeaning effects on personal identity require educational policies aimed at ensuring the survival and flourishing of the ancestral culture. But if this is what multicultural education must do in order to evince genuine cultural recognition then what exactly are such policies supposed to "recognize" and reinforce? It cannot simply be the children's own (demeaning) self-understanding of their ancestral identity. That is the problem that requires rectification in the first place. Nor can it be some purified, untainted version of the child's ancestral culture. Affirming this identity would not constitute genuine recognition of, and respect for, the child's own identity; it would constitute the imposition of some prior version of the child's identity that the teacher, or the educational policy maker, prefers. But an education that imposes a predetermined ancestral identity upon children who inhabit minority cultural communities is no more a form of genuine cultural recognition than is an education that imposes a dominant, majority cultural tradition.

An example will help to elaborate the implications of this point. Donna Deyhle and Karen Swisher describe the case of a teacher who once tried to engage her Pomo Indian students with an ancestral story about Slug Woman. The students, according to Deyhle and Swisher, "responded with either open hostility or stone silence." Furthermore, the authors attribute this response to the fact that "the students saw the event as one more attempt to set them up for failure by superficially "admitting" a limited and static view of their culture into the classroom."¹⁰ Deyhle and Swisher portray the Slug Woman incident as a case of cultural misrecognition, although they do not elaborate on what makes it so. However, there are at least two ways in which the teacher's actions might constitute a form of cultural misrecognition. Both of these interpretations go against the cultural recognition thesis and its emphasis on the need for multicultural education practices aimed at promoting cultural integrity and survival.

First, as the massive literature on American Indian education deftly surveyed by Deyhle and Swisher shows, Indian children frequently grow up in a cultural context that may induce strongly conflicting feelings about the value of their ancestral cultural identity. For example, the story of Slug Woman might constitute a valuable part of the children's cultural inheritance because, whether the children like it or not, it is part of the identity they have inherited from those closest to them. Nonetheless, these children may find it extremely difficult to find value in this heritage in the face of a vastly more powerful, hegemonic western culture that threatens its survival. In short, the children's hostility and silence in response to the Slug Woman story may reflect an experience of deep ambivalence about their inherited ancestral culture. On the one hand, they have a strong attachment to the story of Slug Woman since they understand it as part of the cultural heritage of the people they love. On the other hand, they may be repelled and embarrassed by virtue of the fact that it represents the stigma of a failed or failing culture.¹¹

A second interpretation explains the children's hostility and silence to the Slug Woman story not as a result of feelings of ambivalence about their ancestral culture, but quite simply as a result of the fact that the story is not genuinely part of their inherited identity at all. Thus, what we (for example teachers) take to be the children's ancestral culture may simply be *irrelevant* to their cultural identity.¹² To the extent that it is irrelevant, the teacher's behavior in this case is akin to treating the children as mere artifacts of a single cultural community to which she thinks they ought to belong, but which in fact they do not in fact belong at all.

These two accounts of the Slug Woman story are, of course, speculative; nevertheless, they illustrate the dangers of generalizing too much about the ways in which multicultural education might seek to rectify the damaging psychological effects of cultural misrecognition. Taylor regards the path to rectification as one geared towards fostering cultural survival and flourishing by reinforcing children's ancestral cultural identities. But the two accounts of the Slug Woman incident illustrate the potential for such an approach to foist its own kind of potentially damaging cultural misrecognition. In both cases, a teacher's attempt to "recognize" and affirm a single, coherent group identity goes awry because it ignores the ways in which children's identities are constituted by a complex mosaic of cultural fragments, perhaps but not necessarily including fragments of their ancestral one. Genuine cultural recognition would have to acknowledge that the identity of individual Pomo children is constituted not merely by a single, cultural framework inherited from their ancestors, but by the extremely complex and perhaps varied ways in which they have come to interpret that shared inherited identity in relation to other cultures (for example "western") that surround them. In this sense, the teacher fails to understand the Pomo children as having fundamentally *multicultural* identities that may or may not include, and certainly go well beyond, their ancestral one. Once we recognize this, it's clear that rectifying the demeaning self-identity that afflicts Pomo children might require, for example, enabling them to understand and critically evaluate the enormously complex processes by which their identities have become formed by the interaction between ancestral culture and the culture of western (post-) modernity. Of course, such an educational process need not, and probably cannot, require children to reject the latter culture wholesale in favor of the former, ancestral one. Indeed, it might set children on a course that leads them to affirm certain elements of the larger, dominant western culture and to reject ancestral values and traditions. In short, the recognition of the multicultural nature of the Pomo children's identity might well lead them to forge and affirm an open-ended, evolving, complex, hybrid, cosmopolitan cultural identity which seeks to loosely weave together a variety of disparate cultural "fragments." But obviously an education designed to recognize and affirm this sort of multicultural identity cannot ensure the long-term survival, certainly not the survival "forever," of an existing cultural community as Taylor desires.

Taylor himself implies this when he avers a notion of authenticity that prizes the individual's ability to create and shape her own identity within a cultural community or through a process of intercultural reflection and examination that leads to a "fusion" of cultural horizons.¹³ But he fails to acknowledge that a multicultural

education designed to cultivate deeply “multicultural” identities at the individual level cannot also “ensure that there is a community of people here in the future that will want to avail itself of the opportunity to use the French language.”¹⁴ Nor can it seek to ensure that there will “forever” be a community of people who wish to avail themselves of the ancestral traditions of the Pomo Indians. Of course, cultural communities may persist in spite of the stresses and strains of cultural change. But an education designed to ensure the survival of existing cultures cannot also respect the fundamentally multicultural nature of individual identity.

The upshot of this discussion is that the cultural recognition approach to multicultural education does both too much and too little to uphold the value of equal respect for persons. It does too much when it seeks to foist an entire, homogenous group cultural identity upon children whose individual identities are only partially, or not at all, constituted by it. It does too little to the extent that it fails to recognize the ways in which children’s identities may be partially constituted by substantial fragments of cultural traditions that are different from, and alien to, their ancestral traditions. Clearly, the damage that cultural misrecognition inflicts on individuals must be rectified; but it does not follow that the necessary rectification involves multicultural education programs designed to reinforce the integrity of a group cultural identity as Taylor claims. Indeed, as the two interpretations of the Slug Woman incident shows, such programs might (and indeed are likely to) themselves impose forms of cultural misrecognition of the kind Taylor depletes.

Thus, we cannot assume that multicultural programs aimed at promoting cultural integrity and survival are required by the value of equal respect. As Jeremy Waldron has recently said, “We need a notion of respect for persons that is sensitive to...the fact that *each individual’s identity is multicultural* and that individuals can no longer be regarded in the modern world (if indeed they ever could be) as mere artifacts of the culture of the one community to which we think they ought to belong.”¹⁵

COSMOPOLITANISM AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

There is another view of cultural identity that offers a powerful challenge the cultural recognition thesis. I shall call this view, following Jeremy Waldron, the cosmopolitan alternative.¹⁶ Waldron argues that individual identity should not be conceived in terms of its relationship to a single, distinct cultural structure as the cultural recognition thesis assumes; rather, it should be conceived in cosmopolitan terms as a kind of “melange” of commitments, affiliations and roles that reflect disparate cultural influences.¹⁷ Although Waldron acknowledges that different roles, narratives and commitments must acquire a cultural meaning if they are to provide real options to actual flesh and blood individuals, “it does not follow that there must be one cultural framework within which each available option is assigned a meaning. Meaningful options come to us as items or fragments from a variety of cultural sources.”¹⁸ According to the cosmopolitan view articulated by Waldron, individuals typically make meaningful choices in a cultural context that is much more heterogeneous, open-ended and fragmented than something we can call “our own” cultural structure.

It is important to specify more precisely how Waldron's cosmopolitan view both converges and contrasts with the cultural recognition thesis. Significantly, both views share a commitment to the value of equal respect and both share the view that the value of equal respect is closely connected to cultural recognition. However, the supporter of cosmopolitanism simply disagrees with the cultural recognition advocate about what genuine cultural recognition entails. According to the cosmopolitan view, individuals who at first glance appear to belong to a single cultural community which confers a shared cultural identity may on closer examination turn out to have very differently constituted, transcultural identities. On this view, the value of equal respect still requires the state to recognize specific cultural identities. And it follows that morally acceptable multicultural education policies must do so as well. However, according to Waldron, the sort of recognition required by cosmopolitanism demands a much finer grained attention to the multicultural nature of each individual's identity and not to the specific group identities that allegedly constitute an individual's identity.

In order to see what Waldron has in mind here, it is useful to examine the words of Salman Rushdie. Significantly, Waldron regards Rushdie as exemplifying the kind of cultural identity that illustrates the cosmopolitan multicultural educational ideal.¹⁹ Rushdie, an accomplished novelist born in India, having lived in England for the past several decades, speaks aggressively of the value of having forged an identity out of various, disparate cultures. For example, in one passage he says:

The Indian writer, looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinted spectacles. (I am of course, once more talking about myself.) I am speaking now of those of us who emigrated...and I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all, when we seem, to ourselves, post-lapsarian men and women. We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result — as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates — we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. Or it may be that it is simply what we must think in order to do our work.²⁰

According to the cosmopolitan thesis, there is no overarching, pre-determined "cultural structure" that we can identify which gives us a "window" into what counts as treating a given individual with respect, and what counts as the basis of their sense of self-respect. These values will be constituted by the particular ways in which individuals have come to acquire their various, diverse cultural affiliations and not by some prior, favored version of a cultural structure. Thus, to treat someone like Rushdie as merely an Indian (or as merely a Muslim, or English) writer would be to misrecognize, distort and insult, not to show respect. To show respect and recognition in this case would require acknowledging the ways in which Rushdie's identity as a novelist incorporates a great diversity of cultural traditions; it would also require the recognition of the fact that his Indian identity is not "whole," but consists rather of a "fragmented" vision which leaves him "obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost."²¹ In other words, it requires a recognition that Rushdie's identity is constituted by both more and less than a "whole" Indian cultural identity.²² And multicultural education practices should be

founded on educational aims designed to show equal respect for persons that account for this complexity. For the proponent of the cosmopolitan thesis, what is true of Rushdie is presumably also true of children such as those in Pomo communities. And multicultural education practices designed to show respect for such children should recognize their cultural identity not by trying to ensure the survival of an existing cultural community, as Taylor desires, but by trying to create cultural “mongrels” such as Rushdie.²³

However, the educational implications of the cosmopolitan thesis, as in the case of the cultural recognition thesis, are somewhat elusive.²⁴ The feasibility of constructing a cosmopolitan identity *à la* Rushdie presumes that sensibilities and intellectual capacities are established—for example capacities of what the novelist Anita Desai has called, referring to Rushdie, “the unconfined imagination and dangerous fantasy.”²⁵ But the same sensibilities and capacities might be extremely difficult to establish in some children’s lives—that is children of disadvantaged communities whose very survival is threatened by outsiders such as those inhabited by the Pomo children in the example discussed earlier. For example, in the case of an artist like Rushdie, exercising an unconfined imagination frequently entails challenging established cultural traditions and orthodoxies and to establish new or revised, often conflicting, cultural meanings in their places. The “danger” here, then, might refer to the threats that “fantasy” may pose for those like the proponent of cultural recognition who wish to preserve established cultures and commitments. For the cosmopolitan artist, unlike for the guardian of cultural survival, this sense of danger is coupled with the confidence and excitement that new meaning can be found in the “melange” of cultural fragments available for examination and reflection.

But for children such as those in the Slug Woman example discussed earlier both the excitement and confidence that are supposed to go with the exercise of imagination may be decidedly lacking when the sense of value in ancestral cultural traditions is so deeply tainted from the outset. For the child trying to forge an identity in a highly volatile, unstable, disadvantaged, “failing” cultural community the value of one’s initial cultural beliefs are going to be extremely difficult to establish in the first place. Thus, educational practices that ask children to imaginatively explore these cultural values *à la* Rushdie may be akin to demanding that they contribute to the destruction of their ancestors’ culture. Here the identity of the teacher in the example, which is not clarified by Deyhle and Swisher, can be important; if the teacher is a cultural outsider then Pomo children may feel they are being asked to finish off a job of cultural destruction and degradation that is already well underway as a result of ways of life that were developed by other outsiders. In this case, what the teacher-outsider takes to be an attempt to engage in imaginative exploration and fantasy may appear more like racism when viewed from the perspective of the children.

This suggests one argument for providing state support for multicultural policies designed to affirm the identities of particular cultural groups—such as bilingual education programs and separate schools that cater to specific groups.

Developing a cosmopolitan cultural identity requires that one be capable of subjecting one's inherited cultural commitments to critical scrutiny. But this itself presupposes that one is capable of finding value in one's ancestral commitments. The problem raised above suggests that, at least in some cases, children whose ancestral cultures are threatened by ways of life developed by outsiders may have trouble developing the preconditions for a cosmopolitan identity — especially when the education that is supposed to help them form such an identity is guided by the same outsiders. A cosmopolitan identity can only flourish when children first have the opportunity to develop a sense of pride in their inherited cultural traditions. And developing this sense of pride may, at least in some cases, require separate schools or classes with teachers who share the culture of their students.²⁶ The point here is not that the educational ideal of cosmopolitan cultural identity is itself flawed or dangerous. Rather, the point is once again to point out the moral hazards of generalizing too much about the ways in which such an identity might be forged.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In this paper, I first argued that a widely influential view of cultural identity would, if persuasive, support goals of cultural survival. However, I argued that this conception of identity is not persuasive because it construes the relationship between individual and group cultural identities too closely and thus neglects the cultural complexity and diversity of individual cultural identities. Thus, the major conclusion of this part of my argument is that the cultural recognition thesis cannot provide moral grounds — based on the value of equal respect — for supporting multicultural education programs designed to foster cultural survival. Secondly, I developed and supported what I take to be a more persuasive conception of cultural identity based on the ideal of cosmopolitanism. This ideal construes individual identity as a hodgepodge of cultural fragments and parts, which provide the opportunity for an individual to imaginatively forge unique and evolving cultural identity. The upshot of this conception of identity is that multicultural programs designed affirm the cultural identity of groups may themselves be disrespectful in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, in some cases multicultural education programs designed to affirm the identity of a particular group may be necessary in order to develop the attitudes and capacities that are prerequisites for having a cosmopolitan identity. In short, while the cosmopolitan conception of cultural identity does not suggest any unifying rationale for providing state support to multicultural education programs it does help us to see that the nature of such programs, their aims, and the reasons for providing or withholding state funding are complex and various. And those who support multicultural education programs must pay attention to the complex situational factors of particular and unique cases in order to ensure that the value of equal respect is supported rather than violated by those programs.

1. Michael Olneck, "Terms of Inclusion: Has Multiculturalism Redefined Equality in American Education?" *American Journal of Education* 101 (May 1993): 244.

2. *Ibid.*, throughout.

3. In this paper I focus on Taylor's work. However, the position I attribute to Taylor and my criticisms of it also apply to such influential thinkers as Will Kymlicka, Yael Tamir, and David Miller.
4. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 36.
5. *Ibid.*, 30-1.
6. *Ibid.*, 39.
7. *Ibid.*, see especially 30-44.
8. *Ibid.*, 40.
9. *Ibid.*, 58-9.
10. Donna Deyhle and Karen Swisher, "Research in American Indian and Alaska Native Education: from Assimilation to Self-determination", *Review of Research in Education* 22 (in press), 71. The authors do not specify whether the teacher in the example is Pomo or not. The answer to this question raises important issues that do not affect my discussion here.
11. Eamonn Callan suggested something like this reading of the example to me in his comments on a longer version of this paper.
12. Or, at least substantial chunks of it may be irrelevant.
13. Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, 67.
14. Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, p. 58.
15. Jeremy Waldron, "Multiculturalism and Melange," in *Public Education in a Multicultural Society: Policy, Theory, Critique*, ed. Robert K. Fullinwider (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 114.
16. Jeremy Waldron, "Minority Cultures and the Cosmopolitan Alternative," in *The Rights of Minority Cultures*, ed. Will Kymlicka, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 93-119.
17. Waldron, "Multiculturalism and Melange"
18. *Ibid.*, 106.
19. Waldron, "Minority Cultures and the Cosmopolitan Alternative," 93.
20. Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, 15.
21. *Ibid.*, 10-11.
22. Waldron, "Multiculturalism and Melange," 113
23. The term "mongrel" in this context comes from a different passage of Rushdie's cited by Waldron in "Multiculturalism and Melange," 105.
24. Once again, I am grateful to Eamonn Callan for pointing this out to me. For much of what I say in this paragraph, I am indebted to a detailed commentary from him on an earlier version of this paper.
25. Anita Desai, "Sitting Pretty," *New York Review of Books*, 27 May 1993, 26.
26. Thus, Waldron is perhaps somewhat insensitive to the concerns about the failure of authenticity that underly Taylor's arguments for cultural survival. Nevertheless, I've argued here that someone who shares Waldron's cosmopolitan conception of identity can still take account of those concerns.