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Multiculturalism and Liberal Democracy²

ABSTRACT

The main goal of the article is to show the possible ways of thinking about the relation between multiculturalism and liberal democracy. Author of the article tries to present some troubles with reconciliation of such political culture and elements of multicultural ideology which supports rights of member of foreign (nonwestern) communities to manifest their cultural convictions freely. In his opinion that would be a little bit naïve to think that all elements of political culture connected with liberal democracy can be accepted by members of the communities in questions. That is why he articulates the thesis that some conflicts between them and people faithful to the ideas of liberal democracy are inevitable and that it cannot be found possible solution of these conflicts which can be gladly accepted by all sides. Someone will have to give up some parts of cultural heritage of a given community if we are supposed to live in peace together. Although the author of the article believes that this resignation should not be limited to only one side of the potential conflict he argues that a political culture of liberal democracy is so precious that its defenders should not abandon it for the sake of ideas of multicultural society even if this brings about some pain on the side of their interlocutors.

Keywords:

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John Rawls, in the works *Political Liberalism*³ and *The Law of Peoples*⁴, considers the situation in which there exists in a society a series of mutually incompatible so-called comprehensive doctrines, and yet a “democratic regime” is possible. This occurs due to so-called public reason and also to the fact that the political sphere, in his opinion, is different from the sphere of “comprehensive doctrines”; this permits people as citizens to accept the decisions of public reason, even if these are not always favorable to those doctrines. This sphere is in one phrase what Rawls calls that of the *overlapping consensus*, namely those parts of the comprehensive doctrines in which they are similar or indeed which they have in common. There are involved in this consensus convictions accepting (roughly understood) the autonomy of individuals as citizens in their political decisions, which according to Rawls need not imply autonomy as such. Doctrines that employ such convictions Rawls calls “reasonable,” and the pluralism that comprehends such doctrines he calls “rational pluralism.”⁵

Claiming that liberalism so understood is no longer liberalism in the spirit of comprehensive doctrines, he assumes that even those who are not in sympathy with such liberalism can accept its decisions. He notes, however, that there also exist unreasonable comprehensive doctrines, which are not going to stand for the kind of political liberalism that he has in mind. In this regard he mentions, among other cases, fundamentalism. As he writes, “Unreasonable doctrines present a threat to democratic institutions, because these can coexist with a constitutional system only thanks to a *modus vivendi*. Their existence delimits a goal, which is the full realization of a rational democratic society with its ideal of public reason and legitimated law. This fact does not testify to the imperfection or defeat of the idea of public reason, but points to the limit of what public reason can achieve.”⁶

Two points seem here to be most important. The first concerns the possibility of separating the political from what can be considered the content of a given comprehensive doctrine, and in this sense the possibility of distinguishing political liberalism from liberalism as such. The second point, which is related to the first, pertains to the possibility of separating the sphere of the autonomy of the individual from autonomy as such. It seems that political liberalism constitutes merely a weak-

³ J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press 1996.

⁴ J. Rawls, *The Law of Peoples with “The idea of Public Reason Revisited”*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1999 [In this paper I use quotations from Polish translation of his book: J. Rawls, *Prawo ludów*, Warszawa: Fundacja Aletheia 2001].

⁵ J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, op. cit., Lecture II: The Powers of Citizens and Their Representation.

⁶ J. Rawls, *Prawo ludów*, p. 254.

ened version of liberalism as such, and for its opponents, liberalism in **every one** of its forms is going to be equally unacceptable. I believe that Rawls is building his hopes here on the political realities of the United States, where through a chain of circumstances it was possible to construct a society that has so far fulfilled the ideals of “public reason” and “the rational pluralism of comprehensive doctrines.” In that society the political consensus about fundamental institutions and political values is so deep and broad that its survival is not threatened by any “unreasonable doctrine,” of which in any case there are none there at present. The case of Western Europe is similar, although possibly here the consensus is somewhat more fragile. It would be difficult to assume, however, that this implicit consensus, which Rawls in his recent works highlights, could be said to extend to other cultural or civilizational orbits. Most importantly, the possibility of separating the political sphere from the sphere of the world-view (including religion) is a distinguishing feature of Euro-American culture, closely associated with the characteristics of Christianity (“Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s”) as well as with the philosophy of the Enlightenment and of liberalism, which recapitulated the conclusions drawn from centuries of religious wars. The case is similar with the possibility of separating the autonomy of the individual as a citizen from full-blooded autonomy. One might justifiably suppose that this possibility, too, is limited to a certain type of culture. Although he deprecates this, Rawls is himself a thinker of a decidedly ethnocentric stamp, holding to be self-evident what is actually evident only within definite cultural parameters. This is particularly true in the case of a series of divisions and distinctions in which certain cultural innovations become manifest (for example, the positing of individual autonomy, cognitive scepticism, relativism, self-criticism, pluralism, tolerance, shared human reason, etc.), which are unknown in these forms elsewhere. (It would be difficult, for example, to imagine any cultural circle outside the European, in which critical scepticism regarding the truth, and its expression in politics, would be comprehensible, and yet for Rawls this constitutes one of the conditions for the existence of public reason.) We are dealing here, rather, with an approach which can only convince the convinced (and here should be understood a broad background of general agreement, upon which some particular areas of disagreement may occur).

At the same time, in the social reality of western countries we are faced with a multicultural phenomenon which we might call full-blooded multiculturalism. And along with this type of multiculturalism comes the question of the coexistence of reasonable and unreasonable doctrines within the framework of a **single** socio-political organism. Chantal Mouffe is entirely right to note that Rawls’s

project is a case of a “typical liberal illusion of a pluralism without antagonism.”⁷ Here she correctly points out that Rawls’s decision to separate out reasonable doctrines from unreasonable ones is itself based on a **political** decision to exclude from the world of liberal democracy such doctrines as do not fulfill the liberal requirements of reason, and that this decision mires Rawls’s argument in a vicious circle: “political liberalism can provide a consensus among reasonable persons who accept the principles of political liberalism.”⁸ Mouffe claims that in this fashion Rawls effectively banishes from his vision the idea of politics as a genuine struggle. I agree with her, inasmuch as by “political struggle” we understand a struggle over the rules of the game, rather than a struggle played out according to rules already laid down and accepted by all sides. I also concur with Mouffe’s assertion that “we should relinquish the very idea that there could be such a thing as a ‘rational’ political consensus – that is one that would not be based on any form of exclusion.”⁹ However, I would be inclined to view much more critically her project for a “radical and plural democracy” which “rejects the very possibility of a nonexclusive public sphere of rational argument where a noncoercive consensus could be attained.”¹⁰ I also don’t believe that a consensus can be reached that does not have an element of exclusion in it. Mouffe holds that Rawls’s formula excludes a certain area that is admissible in politics, but I am not certain that this is a cause for regret. Liberal democracy ought to be an exclusionary system, and although its forms stand to be improved, liberal democracy in itself, in its fundamental principles, ought to remain unchanged. From this perspective the basic problem would appear to be, not how to maintain tranquillity and support for parliamentary democracy in a society in which there occur mutually exclusive, but reasonable, comprehensive doctrines, but rather how to preserve tranquillity, with the hope for a gradual increase in general support for democratic solutions, in a society in which there appear alongside each other both reasonable **and** unreasonable doctrines. In a word, the most difficult question appears precisely where the applicability of Rawls’s theory ends, **beyond** the borders laid out by him. In this paper I argue in support of the thesis that there is no rational answer to this question which would extend beyond the ethnocentrically defined cultural horizon of the West. Be this latter never so elastic and open, it is not able, under threat of self-destruction,

⁷ Ch. Mouffe, *Democracy, Power, and the „Political”*, In: S. Benhabib (ed), *Democracy and Difference. Contesting Boundaries of the Political*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, p. 247.

⁸ C. Mouffe, *Democracy...*, p. 250.

⁹ Ch. Mouffe, *Democracy...*, p. 254.

¹⁰ Ch. Mouffe, *Democracy...*, p. 255.

to move in its internal evolution beyond the boundaries set by the principles of political liberalism as set out by Rawls.

But now a question arises: is the ideology of multiculturalism a “reasonable doctrine” in the Rawlsian sense or not? I think that the answer is as follows: it is reasonable in its moderate form, in which there are efforts to adhere to the principles of liberal democracy and western political culture; unreasonable however in its extreme form, in which the foregoing principles are rejected as being unjustly particular.

The worth of the ideology of multiculturalism consists on the one hand, in that it permits us to recognize the weaknesses of the traditional strategy of assimilation, that it exposes the economic and political motives associated with assimilation, and their mechanisms of oppression and coercion (I.M. Young¹¹), and on the other hand, that it emphasizes the value of community affiliation and emotions of solidarity with the destiny of a greater whole of which one feels oneself to be a part (Charles Taylor¹², Will Kymlicka¹³). Furthermore it permits us to recognize the weaknesses of our own culture, to broaden our cultural imagination, and finally, in the case of societies such as the American, possibly serves to protect society against uncontrolled outbursts of discontent.

However, it is also accompanied by numerous dangers. Indeed, its philosophical formulation alone is compassed about with grave difficulties. We might start with the fact that the concept of culture employed by multiculturalists is chronically ambiguous. I generally have the impression that its distinguishing character is thought to be a single and homogenous community of language, tradition, faith, and custom. But as many writers have pointed out, cultures so constituted either no longer exist, or are extremely rare, and in today’s world almost all cultural boundaries are frayed, the self-description of groups and individuals is changeable, and identity proves to be hybrid, diverse, and fluid. This argument may, however, be rebutted by claiming that the question what a culture is in itself is of secondary importance; what is basic is that cultures exist as real social facts in the world, even if their status is no doubt often more that of an imagined than material creation, just as the community which the culture is supposed to “serve” may likewise have a more or less imaginary status. In any case what is of first importance – it

¹¹ I.M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990, p. 41.

¹² Ch. Taylor, *Multiculturalism and „the Politics of Recognition”*, In: A. Gutmann (eds), *Multiculturalism and “the Politics of Recognition”*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992.

¹³ W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1991.

may be claimed – is the **consciousness** of belonging to a culture and the feeling of **solidarity** with it. If it is recognized that there exist certain distinct cultures (or communities), and people who are bearers of those cultures and to whom their destiny is a matter of significance, this recognition means that such cultures (or communities) are “real”, at least insofar as they serve as reference points in the process of individual identity-formation. Exceedingly important here too is the feeling of the existence of common interests, whether they be of an economic or of a political character; interests either which cannot be realized through individual endeavor, or which refer to the maintaining of some common good which cannot be reduced to a sum of individual goods. And a particularly good candidate for the position of just such a common good is the very notion of culture itself, which in its very nature can exist only as something trans-individual, as a collection of shared and mutually transmitted convictions. It may also be agreed that another such common good requiring protection or support is group identity. For there isn’t any identity among a group without there being a common culture. In a word, arguments emphasizing the phenomenality or immateriality of given cultures (communities) are beside the point, so long as in human consciousness there exists the conviction that such cultures (communities) exist and differ from one another, which permits us to describe their identity and distinctiveness.

However, there comes the question whether intercultural tolerance and recognition of other cultural values can be unlimited. My belief is that they cannot. Their acceptance into thinking must result in legal-political consequences. Susan Mendus correctly notes, “[...]the liberal] claim that the state should be neutral does not carry along with it any necessity for the state to be neutral in regard to absolutely everything that people might want, or what they might consider to be needful in realizing their conception of the good. It amounts to this only, that the state should be neutral **within limits**.”¹⁴ The liberal-democratic state is certainly the articulation of a certain concept of the good, capacious enough to include within itself a certain demarcated range of diversity, but this does not mean that **every** difference can count on recognition or even tolerance. To put it briefly, not every foreign culture, just as not every aspect of any particular foreign culture, not every form of cultural difference, is deserving of acceptance and respect from the point of view of European culture, and more importantly, from the perspective of liberal democracy, which is this culture’s most valuable creation.

If we agree with Charles Taylor, one of the most fervent defenders of multiculturalism, that liberalism itself, as the basis for political systems undertaken in

¹⁴ S. Mendus, *Liberalism and the Limits of Toleration*, London: Macmillan 1999, p. 118.

Europe and the United States, is the expression of a certain particular culture¹⁵, we must ask whether there follow from this any significant consequences for multiculturalism. The reply is that the consequences are not significant. For even if we reject as unjustified liberalism's claims to universality, we remain where we are: in a liberal democratic state. At most, the manner in which the state's institutions are legitimized will change; only to a limited extent will the institutions themselves change. If we want to remain faithful to European culture, or at any rate to that strain of it which is associated with the tradition of the Enlightenment and liberalism, there is nothing else we can do but acknowledge that it lies in the interest of the state to treat all citizens equally without regard to their ethnic background, sex, and sexual preference. In this sense we might say that to pass from an emphasis upon individual rights to support of group rights can be considered to be a significant departure from the political tradition of European liberalism. It is, however, an open question to what extent this departure threatens a loss of identity. We might agree with Will Kymlicka that such loss of identity is not threatened so long as **individual freedom overrides the rights of the group**¹⁶. Most certainly individuals must have the right to **free** construction of their group affiliation. Then liberalism may (and should) modify its understanding so as to recognize the rights of groups to self-identification and to concern for their own identity. The real problem appears at the moment when involuntary membership in a given group becomes a question of the maintenance of that group's identity; there exist at all events certain groups (e.g. religious fundamentalists) who consider the priority of individual over group rights to be a real threat to their identity. Keeping in mind that a pre-modern mentality continues to exist within European culture itself, as well as in other cultural circles, and that it has a right to so exist, we must note that to make concessions to groups that hold matters of communal identity to take priority over questions of individual rights would be to threaten the identity of liberalism as a typically modern ideology, the benefits of disseminating which are difficult to call into question (which doesn't mean that they are unquestionable!).

In the foregoing perspective it is also easy to see that Will Kymlicka's legitimate point, that cultural heritage represents a valuable context for an individual's life choices¹⁷, implicitly assumes that in every case we are dealing here with culture in the western sense. This is borne out by his assertion that the cultural heritage ought to be protected, although the character of the given culture is not specified.

¹⁵ Ch. Taylor, *Multiculturalism...*, p. 62.

¹⁶ W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism...*, p. 168.

¹⁷ W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism...*, p.175.

But if this latter does not contribute to the sustenance of liberal freedoms, then it should be negated. But how is it possible to protect the cultural heritage without protecting the concrete character of individual cultures? We have here a situation in which we are *de facto* being told: let's defend the heritage of a given culture on the condition that this culture can be reconciled with the ideals of liberalism, and thus, for example, admits freedom of religious belief and freedom of individual life choices. It is not a question here of tension along the border between the individual and the community (or its culture). The tension appears, and along with it the heart of the problem, when we want to have two things at once – on the one hand a valuable cultural heritage (valuable both for the members of certain particular communities, because it fulfills their need for identity, and for those who may not feel this need to such an extent, but are able to imagine how important it is for other individuals), but one which contradicts the ideals of liberalism; and on the other hand defense of the liberal rights of the individual. It would seem that in at least **some** cases these two things simply cannot be reconciled with each other, and in such cases, either with regret (which will result from our understanding of the importance of those needs that we ourselves might or might not possess, but which thanks to cultural anthropology, art, and our own past, we can imagine) or without regret (when it is a matter of convictions and behaviors that **radically** contradict what we deem to be right and proper principles), we must try to effect the liberalization of those cultures, which in their existing form are illiberal. This attempt must obviously lead to very serious tensions. But those supporters of multiculturalism who think it is possible to avoid such tensions are deceiving themselves. The right to undertake the liberalization of certain cultures derives from the simple fact that they occur in a liberal legal and political context, which means *de facto* in a context of political problem-solving which understands the principles of parliamentary democracy to be beyond question.

To permit full voice, within the framework of multiculturalism, only to those cultures (in Kymlicka's understanding of the term) that in some manner can be understood in a liberal context, even if only in the fact that they respect human rights, is an uncontroversial project and I would even venture to say a trivial one. Few among today's liberals doubt the value of cultural heritage, of cultural differentiation, of pluralism, etc. In this respect Nathan Glazer is quite right to say that "we are all multiculturalists now."¹⁸ The problem lies with those communities that call into question the sense of the political system accepted in European culture,

¹⁸ N. Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1998.

with democratic principles in the forefront. The process of accentuating ethnicity and group identity has its own internal dynamic, which may lead to a situation in which it will be in no one's interest to stress the shared values or links between different groups, or more – no one will find it worthwhile to stress the value of the individual as such, in abstraction from his involvement in the group or community. This state of affairs could well threaten liberal democracy, whose cornerstone is the conviction that the fundamental player in politics is the individual, who enters into voluntary association with other individuals, not on the basis of organic bonds of a group or tribe, but rather in a community of interests and values.

To abandon this view, and to adopt the thesis that the basic subject of political relations is the group, could spell the replacement of liberal democracy with a system which might in the best case be a kind of corporate democracy, and in the worst, something resembling the political system of the Ottoman Empire (*millet*), in which, it will be recalled, the law served the interests not of individuals, but only of religious communities.

John Schwarzmantel, in his book *Citizenship and Identity: Towards a New Republic*¹⁹, tries to present a conception of a political structure which would evade the need to relativize the categories of the common good and the public interest in political life. This conception is intended to constitute a remedy for the problems of liberal democracy in its current form, such a social atomization, fragmentation, political passivity, egoism, and the weakening of the spirit of citizenship. It is meant to reconcile the ideals of individual autonomy and of common interests in terms of the realization of the common good. Considering how to come up with a way to reconcile respect for diversity with a tightening of the bonds of community (where community is taken to mean the whole of the society), Schwarzmantel points towards republicanism as a system combining harmonious respect for individual freedom with an idea of citizenship which accents citizens' responsibilities, as well as active participation in the life of the community. This system seems to me also to be the best in view of the multiculturalism of today's western societies, for it permits us to take into account the interests of specific communities within the framework of a single political organism, whose norms and principles are, in turn, actively supported by those communities because they permit them to foster their cultural distinctiveness. As a historical model for this sort of solution, Schwarzmantel evokes the structure of the Hapsburg Empire and also cites the working out by the Austro-Marxists of a theory of cultural autonomy of the national

¹⁹ J. Schwarzmantel, *Citizenship and Identity: Towards a New Republic*, London: Routledge 2003.

groups within that Empire. He notes the possibility of the creation of distinct parliaments, and namely of a “chamber of group representation,” which would allow for the free representation of group interests and for their mutual agreement. In this manner citizens would gain, in his view, the possibility of double representation: as individuals within the framework of traditional mechanisms of parliamentary democracy, and again as members of various groups as a result of such democracy being extended in scope to represent group interests²⁰.

Without going into the details of Schwarzmantel’s proposals, it ought to be said that they appear not to solve the fundamental problem that we are wrestling with. For here once again it is stipulated that the groups in question shall honor the principles of democracy as such and, furthermore, the procedures of parliamentary democracy together with the accompanying political culture. In such a case, to have recourse to the possibility of group representation solves nothing; indeed, *de facto* group representation is a potential already contained within the framework of existing, “garden-variety” parliamentary democracy (one example of which is the representation of the German minority in the Polish parliament). What Schwarzmantel has neglected to consider in his proposal is the fact that the groups we must take into consideration are not at all certain to share the same predilection for democracy, individual autonomy, human rights, or the political activity implicit in the concept of citizenship. At the same time a republican political structure, though it makes for an intriguing variant on traditional liberalism, does not in any way extend beyond the horizon of western culture; for this reason too, it simply leaves us at our starting point. The political institutions that would unite a society under a republican form of government are not imported from the Moon, but taken from a concrete political culture, and it is precisely this culture that forms the subject of dispute. Moreover Schwarzmantel, like other representatives of the same school of thought, overlooks the fact that groups are often constituted in opposition to each other, that they are planned and made for struggling against one another and not for cooperation, and these struggles are waged beyond the limits defined by the civilized, European venue for political contests, namely parliamentary democracy.

I don’t believe one can say that the right lies clearly on one side alone, in the dispute between multiculturalists and their opponents. One thing seems clear, however: multiculturalism is worth accepting in its moderate form, in which it demands respect for foreign cultures, for diversity, for otherness and differences, but in which it does not attempt to reach these goals by putting society at odds with itself, by setting one group against another, or one culture against another, by

²⁰ J. Schwarzmantel, *Citizenship and...*, p. 127.

setting up new hierarchies by means of upending old ones. It is acceptable in the version in which it acknowledges the priority of the rights of the individual over the rights of the group, the inviolability of the fundamental principles of liberal democracy and also (which goes with this) the need on the part of certain religious (e.g. of a fundamentalist stamp) or ethnic groups to sacrifice at least some part of the defining elements of their identity. It is not hard to see that in this weak version multiculturalism might turn out to be less than highly attractive to minority groups that seek changes to the entire *status quo*. And it is difficult to know what to advise here. The sense of alienation of certain groups dwelling in the midst of liberal-democratic society is perhaps a necessary price to pay for this society's axiological and perspectival, as well as political, orientations. As Isaiah Berlin rightly noted, life is associated with dramatic choices between different values, and behind every choice there lies hidden some kind of loss. But it would be naive to suppose that liberal democracy could change itself to such a degree as to fulfill the needs of **all** those who find themselves within its purview. It likewise cannot realize the claims of all worthwhile values at the same time. Within the framework of liberal democracy there must come a choice between respect for peoples' values-bearing and cultural convictions, and the need to protect people against such harm as may befall them due to those convictions – but this concept of harm must be defined according to **our** criteria (including, e.g. principles of human rights) and not according to the standards of the particular culture concerned. Let us note here that the understanding of multiculturalism in its moderate form can probably be inscribed in the context of liberal democracy and serve to enrich it through the development of civil society. This comes from the conviction that **in principle** every culture is worthy of protection and recognition simply from the fact that it exists. For every culture is the expression of a unique form of life; it can teach us about the richness of the possibility of choices, and fulfill our esthetic needs for diversity and variety. This general principle of defense of other cultures ought, however, to be limited by the requirement that their members honor the political principles of a liberal-democratic society, at least when they find themselves upon the territory of its functioning.

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