Title: Recognition and Multiculturalism

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Abstract: The article begins by noting some internal links between the concept of recognition and multiculturalism. It then looks at how the idea of multiculturalism features in three of the main contemporary theories of recognition, those proposed by Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth. It identifies some common misinterpretations of these theories in relation to their claims about multiculturalism and it mentions some other ways in which theories of recognition are relevant to multiculturalism.

1. Introduction

We can distinguish two ways in which multiculturalism draws on a concept of recognition. First, multiculturalism involves a demand for the acknowledgement of something that already exists: the many cultures that contribute to the character of a particular society. It is important to see that the mere co-existence of many cultures in a society does not suffice to make that society multicultural: the society becomes multicultural only once it *takes itself* to be multi-cultured, that is, acknowledges that it is made up of many cultures, not just one. The acknowledgement of matter of fact cultural multiplicity in modern Western countries was one of the first demands of the multicultural movement, and it is likely that such 'demands for recognition' will continue to spring up wherever societies or practices that are in fact many-cultured do not take themselves to be. This is one way in which multiculturalism is tied to a concept of recognition.

Another way arises from demands that have to do with the affirmation, perhaps by making more publicly visible, something's or someone's worth. Recognition in this sense implies a *positive estimation* or attitude, and not just an acknowledgement that something is

the case. This concept of recognition feeds into a stronger, more controversial idea of multiculturalism than the one requiring recognition as acknowledgement, because it implies that cultural multiplicity, and the distinct cultures and identities that make up a many-cultured practice, be positively valued, endorsed and perhaps publicly supported. Acknowledgement of cultural multiplicity is necessary but not sufficient for multiculturalism, on this model, for what is also required is affirmation of the distinct cultures involved and of the people whose identities are tied up with those cultures. The affirmation of the identities of distinct cultural groups, be it through law or public policy, through symbolic measures or the redistribution of resources, is another way in which 'demands for recognition' are made in the name of multiculturalism. And it is difficult to imagine what multiculturalism would amount to today without something like such demands for recognition.

Given the close conceptual connection between multiculturalism and the acknowledgement of cultural multiplicity on the one hand, and the affirmation of the worth of distinct cultural groups on the other, it is no surprise that the emergence of multiculturalism as a practice and set of ideas in the past quarter of a century should coincide with the resurgence of interest in philosophical theories of recognition. However, the main protagonists in the philosophical and political debate around recognition – Taylor, Fraser and Honneth in particular – do not address themselves first and foremost to defenders or critics of multiculturalism as such. This is an important point to bear in mind when thinking about the relationship between recognition and multiculturalism. For the close conceptual relationship between multiculturalism and recognition just outlined has lead some to the conclusion that the main accounts of recognition are *multiculturalist* accounts – accounts that express a multiculturalist standpoint and more or less explicitly advocate for multiculturalism. That this is a mistaken interpretation of the motivation behind recognition theory should become apparent as we proceed.

That is not to say, however, that the theories of recognition advanced by Taylor, Fraser and Honneth have nothing to do with multiculturalism, or have nothing interesting to say about it. I will confine myself in what follows to a consideration of how the idea of multiculturalism features in these theories.

2. Taylor, multiculturalism and the politics of recognition

In 'The Politics of Recognition' (Taylor 1992), Taylor argues that a healthy liberal multicultural society at once recognizes the equal dignity of its members by protecting their basic freedoms (this is what makes it liberal) and has mechanisms in place for ensuring the on-going survival of minority cultures (the feature that makes them multicultural). But there is no need to suppose that the mechanisms for ensuring cultural survival are justified by the equal worth of the different constituent cultures themselves.

When it comes to the *study* of cultures, Taylor is sympathetic to the idea that we should start from a 'presumption' of equal worth (Taylor 1992: 66). How much there is to learn from the study, and in that sense the study-worthiness of the culture, can only be known by actually engaging with it. Taylor is critical of the well-intentioned but ultimately 'half-baked' relativism sometimes invoked to support multiculturalist educational reform, according to which the equal worth of cultures, known a priori, itself makes minority or 'alien' cultures equally entitled to membership of the curriculum, so to speak, as majority or 'home' ones. The point was tangential to the main argument of 'The Politics of Recognition' but it came to dominate the critical reception of the essay. For Taylor was read as claiming that only those cultures that either can be 'presumed' to have worth on account of being long-lasting or that prove their worth through some kind of cross-cultural comparison deserve the public support that would ensure their on-going survival. But as several critics noted, neither

of these alternatives provides the right kind of normative justification for a liberal multicultural society (Habermas 1993, 1998; Jones 2006).

Taylor's defence of policies aimed at ensuring the ongoing survival of minority cultures (he uses the case of Quebec language laws) was also criticized for falsely essentializing group identity, as if demands for the authentic self-expression of cultural groups (such as the French Quebeckers) could legitimately trump individual autonomy claims (Benhabib 2002). Indeed, the very idea of an authentic self-expression of a cultural group apt for recognition was seen by many critics as objectionable, since it implies the oppressive falsehood that there is something natural, pre-given or fixed in advance for a group identity to be authentic to (Cooke 1997, 2009; Markell 2000; Tully 2000). But the expressivist account of freedom Taylor uses to analyze the politics of recognition by no means entails commitment to a problematically homogeneous or totalizing notion of authenticity. In assessing this objection, it is important to bear in mind that Taylor's main argument is with procedural liberalism, which makes it appear that autonomy and authenticity are incompatible ideals by insisting on the uniform application of rights irrespective of cultural context and the historically indexed aspirations of specific groups, thus enforcing a false choice between individualism and collectivism. Tariq Modood has rightly drawn attention to the universalist thrust of both the principles of autonomy and authenticity, which seen aright are both essential to multiculturalism (Modood 2007).

Taylor's concern in 'The Politics of Recognition' is whether and how the normative thrust of autonomy and authenticity can be integrated in a liberal multiculturalist framework. His argument is addressed first and foremost to those who consider there to be only one legitimate way of securing the basic individual freedoms that characterise modern liberal democracies. The doctrine that espouses this ideal is, in Taylor's mind, procedural liberalism, and the society that approximates most closely to it is the United States. The onus of Taylor's

argument is to replace this picture with one in which there are many liberalisms giving expression to multiple, equally legitimate variations of the liberal ideal. Taylor wants us to countenance not just multiplicity by way of conceptions of good or cultural identity, within a liberal framework that enables their peaceful coexistence, but multiplicity of the framework itself – a kind of second order pluralism, a pluralism of accommodating pluralism. 'The Politics of Recognition' can thus rightfully be read as a multiculturalist manifesto only in the specific sense that it advocates multiculturalism *about* liberalism – a 'multi-liberalism', so to speak. In other writings (Taylor 2004, 2007), Taylor has sketched a sociological theory of 'multiple modernities' to complement this position. Rather than viewing modernity as the inevitable outcome of processes of rationalisation, secularisation, or 'enlightenment', he proposes a model of social change undergirded by culturally contingent realizations of increasingly universalistic norms. If the theory is right, the politics of recognition would be playing itself out throughout the modern world, and certainly not just in Canada and the U.S., in ways that western modernity has potentially much to learn from.

3. Fraser, dual perspectivism and critical multiculturalism

In her intervention in the recognition debate, Nancy Fraser embraces the emancipatory potential of the politics of recognition and she considers the recognition of cultural difference as in certain circumstances a requirement of justice. Both these commitments are congenial to the multiculturalist, but in Fraser's theory they come with two important provisos. First, the politics of recognition has a progressive character only insofar as it addresses 'status subordination' as measured against the deontic norm of 'parity of participation' (Fraser 2003). It does not extend to the affirmation of cultural identity. The appropriate stance to take towards cultural identity is to be 'deconstructivist' rather than 'essentialist' about it (Fraser 1997). Second, the politics of recognition, restricted now to issues of status subordination,

must be considered as but one of at least two distinct loci of struggle against injustice. In addition to struggles aimed at the elimination of status subordination there are also 'class' conflicts aimed at a just redistribution of resources. We thus need a 'dual perspective' approach that takes into account maldistribution injustices arising from the capitalist economic order as well as misrecognition injustices arising from the cultural order.

These two provisos inform Fraser's critical stance on what she calls 'mainstream multiculturalism' (Fraser 1997, 2003). Whereas she detects in mainstream multiculturalism a tendency to 'reify' identity, to uncritically accept the value of actually existing identities and the cultural values they are based upon, her own 'transformative' approach would deconstruct 'the symbolic oppositions that underlie currently institutionalised patterns of cultural value' and thus 'change *everyone's* self-identity' (Fraser 2003: 75). And whereas multiculturalism, like all forms of 'culturalism', tends to 'displace' redistributive struggles by focusing narrowly on the politics of recognition (Fraser 2000: 108), her own approach would attend equally to the root causes of economic (as well as cultural) disadvantage. Fraser has pointed to the possibility of an alternative to mainstream multiculturalism - a so-called 'critical multiculturalism'- that would meet these two provisos (Fraser 1997: 36; 2003: 106), but this idea has not been systematically elaborated.

A critical multiculturalism understood along such 'dual perspective' lines would not be without its own difficulties. A deconstructive identity of the kind proposed would be very demanding to maintain, and surely no less demanding than the ideal of authenticity it is supposed to replace. Fraser is reluctant to mortgage her theory, as she sees it, to questionable psychological assumptions or merely subjectively valid conceptions of the good, but without some account of how we are able to develop, maintain, and indeed intensify the kind of reflexivity that the deconstructive stance requires, we are left with an apparently ungrounded hope that this is what progressive politics will make of us. As for the attempt to correct

mainstream multiculturalism's culturalist one-sidedness by providing a supplementary 'economic' perspective, there is the mirror-image danger to the one she seeks to avoid of reifying the 'economy' by taking it as something with a wholly different 'logic' to culture, as an object-domain best viewed from a culture-neutral standpoint.

Fraser ponts to pragmatic reasons why those engaged in progressive politics and social criticism should adopt these perspectives. It serves the purposes of progressives such as critical multiculturalists, Fraser would say, to keep a critical perspective on both cultural and economic sources of injustice, and to engage in a common fight against misrecognition and maldistribution. Fraser's theory provides a framework within which these struggles can be seen as complementary rather than antagonistic and this is perhaps its greatest strength. But the distinction between recognition and redistribution has problematic implications even from the point of view of its usefulness for social criticism. Is the full – or even the most salient - moral content of contemporary modes of social suffering experienced by cultural minorities captured by this norm? Is the norm of parity of participation rich enough to encompass the gamut of moral injuries that motivated multiculturalism in the first place? These are just some of the questions that a more fully fleshed out idea of critical multiculturalism would have to address.

4. Culturalism and multiculturalism in Honneth's theory

Honneth's theory of recognition provides a critical perspective on the exclusion of individuals from the legal protections to which they are entitled as persons (whatever their group membership or cultural background) on the one hand, and the moral injury suffered by individuals who are not able to have their talents and abilities recognised on account of belonging to a stigmatised or denigrated group on the other. It also seeks to explain how such experiences of moral injury can give rise to conflicts with the potential for bringing about

progressive social change. Struggles aimed at the proper appreciation of the 'value' of certain traits and abilities - such as those traditionally associated with women - have this role. The theory also puts us in a position to criticise arbitrary exclusions from the process of the social interpretation of worth, as well as one-sided or distorted prevailing interpretations of the achievement principle. It locates the progressive character of such struggles in the contribution they make to widening the 'inclusion of subjects into the circle of full members of society', and to increasing the possibilities individuals have to express all aspects of their personality without fear of denigration (Honneth 2003: 184-5).

Does this make Honneth's theory of recognition problematically 'culturalist'? (Fraser and Honneth 2003). If we begin by stipulating a distinction between 'identity politics' aimed at cultural recognition and 'class politics' aimed at economic redistribution - or as it has been put in regard to Fraser's notion of recognition, confine ourselves to a 'restricted' rather than 'general' notion (Owen and Tully: 268) - that is how things will look. But for Honneth it is just this initial move that puts us on the wrong foot. The motivation for the struggles for recognition Honneth is concerned with arise out of experiences of disrespect for individuals or forms of life as measured against expectations of equality or due recognition of achievement. Nothing in Honneth's account hinges on the notion of inter-cultural recognition or recognition between cultures, and there is no place in it for recognition of cultural identity *simpliciter*. The criticism that Honneth's theory is problematically culturalist, like the criticisms that it idealistically misconstrues the motivation behind many progressive political conflicts and is naively uncritical of the totalizing urge at play in the desire for recognition of one group by another (Markell 2003; McNay 2008), only makes sense if, *contra* Honneth's intention, the problems of multiculturalism are read into the theory from the start.

Indeed, if anything it is the very absence of any sustained reflection on culture and the problems of multiculturalism that is striking about Honneth's writings on recognition

(Honneth 1995, 2007). It is clear from the brief discussion of multiculturalism in Honneth's exchange with Fraser that Honneth considers the normative core of multiculturalism to be encompassed by the principle of equal respect (Honneth 2003: 161-170). When he writes that 'the moral grammar of the conflicts now being conducted around 'identity-political' questions in liberal-democratic states is essentially determined by the recognition principle of legal equality' (Honneth 2003, 169), he is no more than endorsing Habermas's original critique of Taylor's claim that the norm of autonomy is insufficient for grounding the politics of recognition (Habermas 1993, 1998). Whether a conflict is triggered by discrimination based on group or cultural membership, or if it is aimed at defending an endangered way of life or promoting the well-being of some group, the *moral* content of the motivation can be explicated in terms of the equal respect due to each person under the law. In Honneth's view, only those demands for cultural recognition that are backed up by either the principle of equal respect or the merit principle have a genuine moral claim on us. For Honneth, then, it is the new semantic reach of these old principles, rather than a new principle of cultural recognition, that is really at issue in the debate about multiculturalism.

Honneth's recognition paradigm does have other resources for coming to grips with the problems of multiculturalism. One is its focus on actual experiences of disrespect and humiliation endured by people in everyday life contexts. Such experiences of injustice at the same time reveal counterfactual expectations of what *would* amount to proper recognition. It is the disappointment of these expectations - the lack of recognition or withdrawal of it - that is experienced as a moral injury. The primary 'multicultural' problematic from a recognition-theoretic perspective, accordingly, is how the co-existence of people from many cultures provides a context in which such withdrawals of recognition and denied recognition can occur. On the basis of empirical investigation of such contexts, normative models may open

up regarding how *fulfilled* expectations of recognition are mediated through experiences of cultural difference. But this is an area still to be explored.

5. Conclusion

We began by noting an inner connection between multiculturalism and the concept of recognition. The multiculturalist movement makes demands for recogntion insofar as it seeks acknowledgement of the fact of many cultures as well as affirmation of the value of minority cultures. This internal link between multiculturalism and recognition can make it seem as if theories of recognition are internally motivated to defend multiculturalism and are addressed primarily at multiculturalist issues. We then saw that this is not the case and the assumption that it is has led to misinterpretations of the main theories of recognition and misplaced criticisms of their central claims. But while neither Taylor's nor Honneth's theories of recognition are centrally concerned with multiculturalism, they do provide resources for thinking about what might be at stake in the multiculturalist challenge. Taylor's notions of second order pluralism and multiple modernities are one such resource and Honneth's focus on expectations of recognition embedded in everyday experience which may be mediated by cultural difference is another. Fraser's notion of a critical multiculturalism also holds promise. But all these approaches stand in need of further development.

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