

The Essentialist Critique of Multiculturalism: Theories, Policies, Ethos

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Since the late 1960s, in response to increasing restiveness and mobilization on the part of minority groups, a number of Western democracies have engaged in new experiments in the recognition and accommodation of ethnic diversity. These experiments include:

- recognizing land rights and self-government rights for indigenous peoples;
- strengthening regional autonomy and official language status for substate national groups;
- adopting more accommodationist policies for immigrant groups.

I will describe all of these as experiments in 'liberal multiculturalism'.¹

While these experiments started to emerge 40 years ago, it took awhile for political theorists to turn their attention to these developments. It was only in the early 1990s, twenty years later, that we started to get the first scholarly discussions by academic political philosophers aiming to articulate normative theories of multiculturalism, and to explore how these emerging practices relate to liberal-democratic values and principles.² So political theory has been playing catch-up to a pre-existing set of political practices. As a result, much of the theoretical debate has been informed by interpretations of the real-world cases. This is true of both defenders and critics. Defenders typically suggest that their theories of liberal multiculturalism articulate the normative logic underlying successful best practices of accommodation and recognition, while critics typically insist that the theoretical deficiencies in normative theories of multiculturalism are exemplified in various pathologies in real-world practices.

The fact that theorists have been able to draw upon 20 years of pre-existing practices has, I believe, helped to improve the sophistication and fruitfulness of the debate. However, I am increasingly puzzled about the ways in which theories and practices are being invoked in the multiculturalism debate. I think many of the theoretical arguments have lost touch with the realworld policy issues, and conversely that many of the practical examples focused on do not actually illustrate the theoretical issues.

1 The term 'multiculturalism' means different things in different countries: in Canada and Australia, it is used almost exclusively to refer to immigrant groups, not to indigenous groups. In Latin America, by contrast, it is used almost exclusively to refer to indigenous groups and not to immigrant groups. And in some countries, it is used, as I am using it here, as an umbrella term to cover all forms of ethnocultural diversity. But nothing rests on the label. I could have equally called it "experiments in the liberal-democratic accommodation of diversity".

2 Some of these 'first-wave' theories of multiculturalism in the early 1990s focused exclusively on types of diversity – developing theories of how liberal-democracies should address indigenous rights, substate nationalism, and of immigration – others attempted to develop more systematic theories that explored the inter-relationships amongst these different forms of multiculturalism. For some of the key texts, see Taylor 1992, Spinner 1994, Kymlicka 1989; Young 1989, Raz 1994; Tamir 1993; Tully 1995; Baubock 1994.

In this paper, I will examine the growing debate on “essentialism” as an example of this tendency. According to many critics, liberal multiculturalism involves essentializing the identities and practices of minority groups. To quote Anne Phillips, multiculturalism

exaggerates the internal unity of cultures, solidifies differences that are currently more fluid, and makes people from other cultures seem more exotic and distinct than they really are. Multiculturalism then appears not as a cultural liberator but as a cultural straitjacket, forcing those described as members of a minority cultural group into a regime of authenticity, denying them the chance to cross cultural borders, borrow cultural influences, define and redefine themselves. (Phillips 2007: 14)

This is a widespread concern – I will cite several similar statements from Appiah, Benhabib, Fraser and Scheffler below - even amongst those (like Phillips herself) who have earlier expressed sympathy for multiculturalism.

There is an important issue here, but I will argue that the debate around essentialism has largely been misdirected, primarily because the essential critique of multiculturalism conflates different potential targets, jumping from critiques of academic theories of liberal multiculturalism to critiques of government policies of multiculturalism to critiques of everyday street-level discourses or enactments of ethnic difference. I believe that we need to carefully distinguish these different targets, and that once we do, we may find that they are less damning to liberal multiculturalism than initially supposed. Indeed, we may even find that the theories and practices of liberal multiculturalism, far from being the cause of essentialism, are the best remedy to them. But in any event, we can't make progress on this issue without being more cautious and reflective about the relationship between theories and practices.

I will start by explaining what I mean by liberal multiculturalism, and how it operates in both theory and practice. I will then consider the essentialist critique, and explore how it relates theory and practice.

1. Liberal Multiculturalism: An Overview

Much of my work over the past twenty years has been motivated by the hope and belief that there is such a thing as a distinctly liberal multiculturalism (hereafter LMC). So I should start by clarifying what I mean by 'liberal multiculturalism', and the different senses in which I think it is worth defending.

Both halves of that compound term are important. On the one hand, LMC is a distinctly liberal-democratic form of multiculturalism, grounded in core liberal values of freedom, equality and democracy, and to be evaluated for its effects on these values. It therefore differs from nonliberal or illiberal forms of multiculturalism, of which there are many historic examples, in which groups agree to terms of peaceful co-existence while remaining indifferent to the freedoms or democratic rights of individuals.

On the other hand, LMC is a distinctly multicultural form of liberal democracy, going beyond the familiar list of basic liberties contained in all liberal-democratic theories and constitutions to also include laws and policies that recognize and accommodate ethnocultural minorities. Many features of a liberal democracy

provide important protections to ethnocultural minorities – particularly guarantees of non-discrimination and guarantees of individual civil liberties (freedom of speech, association, religion etc). But a multicultural liberalism differs from other forms of liberal democracy by going beyond these generic guarantees to also adopt group-differentiated laws and policies that recognize and accommodate various types of diversity, including the three patterns I mentioned earlier: (i) indigenous land rights and self-government; (ii) regional autonomy and official language rights for national minorities; and (iii) accommodation rights for immigrant groups.³

I have tried to defend LMC at three different levels:

Philosophical: I believe that if we start from the core premises of liberal political philosophy, as articulated by say Mill or Rawls, including their accounts of autonomy and justice, we can show that there is no logical or conceptual inconsistency in also endorsing various multicultural laws and policies. Indeed, we can construct arguments or scenarios in which LMC enhances, strengthens or deepens these liberal premises – eg., it enhances the ability of individuals to exercise Rawls’s ‘two moral powers’, by securing one or more of the conditions needed for personal and political autonomy; and/or enhances society’s compliance with Rawls’ difference principle, by diminishing one or more forms of arbitrary disadvantage in life-chances. In particular, I have suggested that a liberal concern for autonomy requires a concern for people’s cultural “context of choice”, and that this can generate a liberal argument for the adoption of minority rights that enable substate national groups to sustain their “societal cultures”, and that enable immigrant groups to have their identities fairly accommodated (Kymlicka 1995).

Policy Goal: This philosophical argument, if valid, shows that LMC is a theoretical possibility – ie., one could imagine a hypothetical ideal world containing a version of multiculturalism that fits comfortably with liberal-democratic values. Some people might accept that, but insist that this has no connection to the actually-existing forms of multiculturalism, which are grounded in different sorts of values that conflict with liberal democracy. Real-world multiculturalism, on this view, is grounded in decidedly illiberal views, and indeed is best understood as being inherently “anti-universalistic in their thrust” (Barry 2001: 5), “in its essence anti-European” (Huntington 2004: 171) or even a “war against the West” (Kristol 1991: 15).

I have argued, however, that LMC is not just a theoretical possibility. Rather, it exists as a real-world practice. Indeed, I believe that most of the real-world experiments in recognition and accommodation adopted in the Western democracies over the past 40 years have been inspired and guided by a belief that they contribute to processes of liberalization and democratization.⁴ These laws and policies have been framed to fit with liberal-democratic values, and their goals and principles have been interpreted (eg., by bureaucrats and courts) to preserve that fit.

³ For a more comprehensive account of the range of group-differentiated policies to accommodate these three types of diversity, see Kymlicka 2007, where I distinguish nine characteristic types of multiculturalism policies for indigenous peoples; six characteristic multiculturalism policies adopted in relation to national minorities; and nine such policies in relation to immigrant groups.

⁴ To be sure, the motivations for adopting laws and policies are complex, including the desire to win ethnic votes, or as the result of amoral bargaining amongst self-interested groups. But the policies adopted for these complex reasons are policies framed/interpreted to fit with liberal-democratic values.

More specifically, multiculturalism can be seen as part of a larger “human rights revolution” in relation to ethnic and racial diversity. Prior to World War II, ethnocultural and religious diversity in the West was characterized by a range of illiberal and undemocratic relations – including relations of conqueror and conquered; colonizer and colonized; master and slave; settler and indigenous; racialized and unmarked; normalized and deviant; orthodox and heretic; civilized and primitive; ally and enemy. These relationships of hierarchy were justified by racist ideologies that explicitly propounded the superiority of some peoples and cultures, and their right to rule over others. These ideologies were widely accepted throughout the Western world, and underpinned both domestic laws (eg., racially-biased immigration and citizenship policies) and foreign policies (eg., in relation to overseas colonies). After WWII, however, the world recoiled against Hitler’s fanatical and murderous use of such ideologies, and the UN decisively repudiated them in favour of a new ideology of the equality of races and peoples. And this new assumption of human equality has generated a series of political movements designed to contest the lingering presence or enduring effects of older hierarchies. We can distinguish three “waves” of such movements: (a) the struggle for decolonization, concentrated in the period 1948 to 1965; (b) the struggle against racial segregation and discrimination, initiated and exemplified by the African-American civil rights movement from 1955 to 1965; and (c) the struggle for multiculturalism and minority rights, which has emerged from the late 1960s.

Each of these movements draws upon the human rights revolution, and its foundational ideology of the equality of races and peoples, to challenge the legacies of earlier ethnic and racial hierarchies. Indeed, the human rights revolution plays a double role here: not just as the inspiration for struggle, but also as a constraint on the permissible goals and means of that struggle. Insofar as historically excluded or stigmatized groups struggle against earlier hierarchies in the name of equality, they too have to renounce their own traditions of exclusion or oppression in the treatment of, say, women, gays, people of mixed race, religious dissenters, and so on. The framework of human rights, and of liberal-democratic constitutionalism more generally, provides the overarching framework within which these struggles are debated and addressed. In my view, we cannot understand the rise of LMC in the West – we cannot understand when, where and why these experiments arose, or how they have been formulated - except as part of this larger human rights revolution (Kymlicka 2007).

Outcomes: One could accept this claim about the liberal inspiration for multicultural experiments, and yet still think that they have failed in practice. Laws and policies often have perverse effects, and so LMC may have operated in practice to reduce autonomy, limit democratic participation, and/or exacerbate inequalities. As Ruud Koopmans puts it, while there are “legitimate normative reasons” for multiculturalism, “we cannot simply assume that what is normatively justifiable will also be practically efficient” (Koopmans 2006: 5), and indeed he argues that it has been counter-productive.

Yet here again I want to argue that LMC has often worked as intended to enhance liberal values. The evidence on outcomes is not easy to locate: very few multiculturalism policies have been systematically studied, as the World Bank has noted (Marc 2005). So any conclusions in this field will need to be tentative and provisional. And yet, insofar as we have preliminary and incomplete evidence, I think it broadly suggests that most real-world experiments in liberal multiculturalism within the Western democracies have indeed had beneficial effects on liberal values. Let me briefly review the three main cases:

- Substate national groups: the evidence is perhaps clearest and strongest in relation to substate national groups, where the shift to regional autonomy and (where relevant) official language status has enhanced the economic, political and social equality of national minorities, and done so in ways that fully protect individual civil and political rights. Indeed, in many cases (and not just Quebec), these substate national societies have used their autonomy to adopt more liberal and progressive policies than in the larger society. So this particular form of liberal multiculturalism is broadly uncontested in the scholarly literature: it is difficult to find anyone who thinks, for example, that it was a mistake for Spain to federalize to accommodate Catalan and Basque nationalism, or that Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, Finland or the UK should revoke their existing systems of autonomy or bilingualism.⁵

- Indigenous peoples: the evidence regarding indigenous peoples is less clear, since they continue to be the most disadvantaged members of society, and so the adoption of liberal multiculturalist models has clearly not been “successful” in the usual sense of that term. Yet here again, the evidence suggests that if we compare indigenous peoples across the Western democracies, or indeed within individual countries, those with stronger selfgovernment rights are doing better than those without (Kaufmann 2004; Chandler and Lalonde 1998; Cornell and Kalt 2000). And here again there is a very broad consensus in support of this approach amongst scholars and international organizations.

- Immigrant groups: The most contested case concerns immigrant groups, where there clearly is both greater political contestation and scholarly disagreement about the effects of multiculturalism policies. While many scholars celebrate the benefits of multiculturalism in this or that country, an equal number of scholars have declared it to be a failure. For example, in an influential recent book, Paul Sniderman and Luuk Hagendoorn (2007) blame multiculturalism for the high levels of ethnic stereotyping between native Dutch and Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands. But of course ethnic stereotyping is a pervasive problem throughout history and around the world, whether or not multiculturalism policies exist, and they provide no evidence that this stereotyping became worse in the Netherlands after the adoption of multiculturalism than before; or that it is worse in the Netherlands than in countries that haven’t adopt multiculturalism. In short, they make no effort to identify the differential effect that multiculturalism has on pre-existing dynamics of stereotyping. This is typical of work in the field, which generally lacks either longitudinal or comparative data needed to determine the differential effect of adopting multiculturalism. However, if we look at those few studies that do have a comparative or longitudinal dimension, and hence that attempt to isolate the differential effect of having multiculturalism policies, they generally suggest that multiculturalism has been beneficial in terms of political participation (Bloemraad 2007; Adams 2007

⁵ I discuss the evidence in Kymlicka 2007: chap. 5, but amongst the many studies endorsing the merits of this general approach, see eg., Guibernau, Keating, Gagnon, Requejo, etc

social capital (Kesler and Bloemraad 2008), prejudice (Weldon 2006), psychological well-being (Berry et al 2006), and educational attainment (OECD 2006).⁶

So this is a sketch of the sort of evidence and argumentation that can be invoked to defend LMC at these three different levels. I don't pretend that any of this constitutes conclusive evidence or irrefutable proof of the merits of LMC, but I do think it warns us against a premature or cavalier dismissal of the phenomenon. There is a regrettable tendency in some quarters to dismiss LMC as an intellectual fad or fashion, as if it emerged as a byproduct of postmodernist trends in American literature departments, or as the product of a handful of Canadian political philosophers. But as we've seen, there were practices of LMC twenty years before there were academic theorists of multiculturalism, and I believe that the only plausible explanation for the emergence of these practices across a wide range of Western democracies starting in the 1960s is

⁶ I discuss these in more depth in Kymlicka 2007. For what it's worth, this evidence shows, contra Sniderman and Hagendoorn, that prejudice diminished rather than increased in the Netherlands after the adoption of multiculturalism, and that it is lower in the Netherlands than in countries without multiculturalism. See my review in *Perspectives in Politics* (2009). To my knowledge, there is only one comparative study that reaches a more ambivalent conclusion about immigrant multiculturalism: a recent study of five European countries concludes that multiculturalism policies have a 'curvilinear' effect—that is, a modest level of such policies is beneficial for immigrant integration, but that strong multiculturalism policies are harmful (Koopmans et al 2005: 240). This conclusion is based on the interpretation of a single case: namely, the Netherlands. According to the authors, the Netherlands has done less well than other European countries such as the UK or Germany in integrating immigrants, and it has done so precisely because it has the strongest multiculturalism policies of the five countries. If this were correct, we would expect other countries with strong multiculturalism policies, such as Canada or Australia, to also fare badly in comparison with the UK or Germany. Yet the opposite is true: they do better. If we broaden the sample, the Netherlands appears to be an exception, not the rule, regarding the relative success of countries with strong multiculturalism policies. And there is an obvious explanation for the Dutch exception: as the authors themselves note, the original Dutch policy was not in fact designed to assist in immigrant integration and citizenship. Rather, it was initially designed to encourage immigrants to return home to their country of origin. This 'returnist' approach to immigrants is the very opposite of a liberal multiculturalism policy. And when the Dutch government did finally accept that immigrants were permanent residents and future citizens, it then employed a version of the existing 'pillarization' model designed originally to deal with religious divisions within the ethnic Dutch population (e.g. separate institutional 'pillars' for Protestants and Catholics). This pillarization model was not designed for, and does not address the needs of, ethnically and linguistically distinct newcomers. In short, the Netherlands started with a returnist approach and shifted to a pillarization model, neither of which is a model designed with the needs and aspirations of immigrant citizens in mind. Koopman and his colleagues note these 'paradoxes' of the Dutch approach to multiculturalism, but don't consider the implications of these facts for their general conclusion about the 'curvilinear' impact of multiculturalism policies. What distinguishes the Dutch case is not the strength of its multiculturalism policies, but the idiosyncratic form of these policies, rooted in returnism (designed for temporary migrants) and pillarization (designed for historic minorities). If we want to draw general conclusions about the impact of strong multiculturalism policies, and to determine whether the Dutch case is the exception or the rule for such countries, we need to broaden the sample, and look at other countries that have adopted strong multiculturalism policies designed for immigrant citizens, such as Australia and Canada. And the few broad crossnational studies that we have do not support the curvilinear interpretation.

that they were part of a larger human rights revolution aimed at addressing the lingering effects of inherited racial and ethnic hierarchies, and thereby contributing to processes of liberalization and democratization.

And while these hopes may have been naïve or misguided, there is no evidence I can see that these experiments have generally or systematically eroded liberal democratic values. On the contrary, there is at least some provisional evidence for their beneficial effects.

And yet it is equally obvious that any such benefits are very uneven across different countries and different minorities. Western societies remain scarred by ethnic and racial hierarchies, by feelings of distrust across ethnic and religious lines, and by anxieties about the future direction of these relationships. Even if on average these policies have had beneficial rather than pernicious effects, they clearly have not achieved the highest hopes of their defenders, and in at least a few high-profile cases, they seem not to have worked at all. Indeed, in my recent book, I have argued that there are some situations where they cannot work. Successful models of LMC have preconditions that are not always present, particularly outside the context of consolidated democracies, and efforts by international organizations to diffuse models of liberal multiculturalism have had very mixed and uneven results (Kymlicka 2007).

I believe that a central task is to try to explain the deeply uneven nature of multiculturalism's effects, to look honestly at the failures and limitations, as well as the successes. In this respect, the current wave of 'sober second thoughts' about multiculturalism, represented in particular by the growing "post-multiculturalist" literature, is welcome and necessary. Like other authors, I distinguish the post-multiculturalist critique from the more radically "anti-multiculturalist" critique of people like Brian Barry or Samuel Huntington.⁷ The anti-multiculturalists say that multiculturalist ideas are inherently illiberal – ie., that multiculturalism is based on a repudiation of Enlightenment values of individual freedom, democratic citizenship and human rights, and it is precisely this repudiation of core Enlightenment principles which explains the multiculturalist opposition to unitary and republican models of citizenship. As I've suggested above, I think this is simply an inaccurate account of the origins and motivations of real-world multiculturalism.

By contrast, the post-multiculturalist thinkers accept that multiculturalism has often been inspired by these Enlightenment values, and that the multiculturalist critique of republican/unitary models of national citizenship is precisely that they create and perpetuate unjust exclusions that deny full equality, freedom and citizenship to minorities. So the postmulticulturalists endorse the original motivations behind multiculturalism, and accept that it is inspired by emancipatory goals. They are concerned, however, that the multiculturalist remedies have either failed to solve the original problem or inadvertently created new ones, in part because of their tendencies towards essentialism. Hence we need new, better concepts and policies to avoid the tendency for multiculturalism to become (in Phillips' words) a "cultural straitjacket" rather than a "cultural liberator"

While this post-multiculturalist critique is welcome and necessary, I do not believe that it is actually helping us to better diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of LMC. Indeed, I think that much of the debate around essentialism is leading us astray, in large part because of a lack of clarity about the level of analysis, and about the linkage between empirical examples and theoretical claims. . It's unclear whether the post-

⁷ For references to "post-multiculturalism" by progressive intellectuals and academics, who distinguish it from "anti-multiculturalism", see Alibhai-Brown 2000, 2004; Vertovec 2005 (re the UK); Jupp 2007 (re Australia); King 2004; Hollinger 2006 (re the US); Ley 2005; Wong et al 2005 (re Canada).

multiculturalist critique of essentialism is primarily aimed at academic theories of multiculturalism, or at official state policies of multiculturalism, or at a more diffuse set of discourses and practices that circulate in the media or in everyday social interactions. In many cases, as we'll see, these are simply run together in ways that leave us unable to diagnose the real dangers, or to identify effective remedies.

2. The Post-Multiculturalist Critique of Essentialism

According to the post-multiculturalist critique, the emancipatory impulse underlying multiculturalism is being subverted by the "essentialist" way that cultures or identities are understood. Let me quote a few characteristic examples of this concern:

- Nancy Fraser: "[By] enjoining the elaboration and display of authentic, self-affirming and self-generated collective identities, it [the identity model] puts moral pressure on individual members to conform to group culture. The result is often to impose a single, drastically simplified group identity, which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations (Fraser 2001: 24).
- Anne Phillips: Multiculturalism 'exaggerates the internal unity of cultures, solidifies differences that are currently more fluid, and makes people from other cultures seem more exotic and distinct than they really are. Multiculturalism then appears not as a cultural liberator but as a cultural straitjacket, forcing those described as members of a minority cultural group into a regime of authenticity, denying them the chance to cross cultural borders, borrow cultural influences, define and redefine themselves' (Phillips 2007: 14)
- Seyla Benhabib: Multiculturalism involves a 'reductive sociology of culture' that 'risks essentializing the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group or race, it risks reifying cultures as separate entities by overemphasizing the internal homogeneity of cultures in terms that potentially legitimise repressive demands for cultural conformity; and by treating cultures as badges of group identity, it tends to fetishize them in ways that put them beyond the reach of critical analysis'.... 'The culture-based approach 'yields illiberal consequences' including 'acceptance of the need to 'police' these [group] boundaries to regulate internal membership and 'authentic' life forms' (Benhabib 2002: 4, 68)
- Jane Cowan: 'concerned with the ethical ambiguities of a discourse which may constrain, as much as enable, many of those it is meant to empower, by forcing their expressions of difference into a dichotomous interpretive frame that misrepresents their complex identities'... 'This is the central ambiguity of a minority rights discourse; that it must deny ambiguity and fix difference in the realms of identity, or cultural practice, in defense of distinct cultures...even when meant to contest claims of national homogeneity, it locks us ever more tightly into precisely the same national logic of purity, authenticity and fixity' (Cowan 2001: 154, 171)
- Kwame Anthony Appiah: 'We know that acts of recognition, and the civil apparatus of such recognition, can sometimes ossify the identities that are their object ('if pursued with excessive zeal')... 'upholding differences among groups may entail imposing uniformity within them... Indeed, when multiculturalists like Kymlicka say that there are so many 'cultures' in this or that country, what drops out of the picture is that every 'culture' represents not only difference but the

elimination of difference: the groups represents a clump of relative homogeneity, and that homogeneity is perpetuated and enforced by regulative mechanisms designed to marginalize and silence dissent from its basic norms and mores' (Appiah 2005: 110, 151-2)

- Samuel Scheffler: talk of multiculturalism 'provides an invitation to mischief both by encouraging us to think in sustainable strong-preservationist terms and by promoting a distorted and potentially oppressive conception of the relations between individuals and cultures' (Scheffler 2007: 124)

This is of course just a sample – one can find virtually identical statements in a range of theorists from Patchen Markell, David Hollinger, Wendy Brown, amongst many others.⁸ And the general conclusion, shared by all, is that we need a “radical overhaul” of multiculturalism (Phillips 2007: 16).

What is striking about this list of authors is that it includes many people who have devoted their careers to exposing the false universalism or false neutrality underlying traditional republican or unitary models of difference-blind citizenship, and who therefore might be expected to be sympathetic to multiculturalism. These are not the anti-multiculturalists who are ideologically opposed to any particularist corruption of the purity or sanctity of republican citizenship. Nor are they conservatives who are nostalgic for the good old days of homogenous nationhood or unreflective patriotism. Rather, these are progressive theorists who take seriously the multiculturalist premise that traditional models of citizenship have been unjust and exclusionary, who support struggles for the emancipation of historically excluded groups, and who are committed to listening to their voices.

So, unlike many anti-multiculturalists, these theorists are not out simply to score points against multiculturalism, or to ridicule it, or to caricature it. As I said, in many ways their instincts are to sympathize with multiculturalist struggles. And yet they have all come to the conclusion that multiculturalism needs a radical overhaul, and in particular a radical overhaul of its essentialist tendencies.

If so many scholars who are committed to the inclusion and empowerment of minorities have come to this conclusion, then it must be true.⁹ But in what sense it is true? Or rather, in what contexts it is true? For example, when Scheffler says that multiculturalism “encourages” people to think in preservationist terms, or that it “promotes” an oppressive relationship between individuals and cultures, who or what is doing this encouraging and promoting, in what contexts? Is it philosophical theories of multiculturalism that are encouraging essentialism, perhaps because of the way they conceptualize culture and identity? Is it official public policies of multiculturalism that are encouraging essentialism, perhaps because of the way they define access to rights and entitlements? Or is it rather a more diffuse public ethos or discourse of multiculturalism that encourages essentialism, perhaps by reinforcing or legitimating pre-existing tendencies towards stereotyping?

⁸ See also Jurgen Habermas's complaint that multiculturalism amounts to “false classifications” that “lead to ‘normalizing’ interventions into the way people lead their lives with the result that the intended compensations turn into new forms of discrimination and instead of liberties being guaranteed people are deprived of freedom” (Habermas 1994: 115).

⁹ Of course, by now this anti-essentialist critique has become so pervasive that many people simply ritually repeat it in order to show that they are au courant, and not because they have actually thought through the issue on their own. But I am focusing on authors who have, in the course of their own research, come to believe that multiculturalism's emancipatory impulse has been subverted by its essentialist tendencies.

In order to know how to radically overhaul liberal multiculturalism, we need to pin down the source of the problem more specifically. As it turns out, despite the apparent similarity in their phrasing, these writers have different targets in mind. Indeed, they actually give contradictory accounts of where the problem lies, in ways that generate very different potential remedies. And, I will argue, once we distinguish these different targets and remedies, what appears to be an overwhelming argumentative consensus on LMC's essentialist flaws starts to dissolve into a more disparate and disjointed series of largely unsupported speculations and assertions.

(a) Critiques of Multiculturalist Theories

In some cases, the target of the essentialist critique is primarily philosophical theories of liberal multiculturalism. I will start with these, before moving to those who focus more on public policies or public ethos.

The two writers who most clearly target philosophical theories of multiculturalism are Benhabib and Appiah, who both have extended discussions of the ideas of culture and identity developed either in my work or that of Charles Taylor. Indeed the quotes listed above from Appiah and Benhabib follow directly on from their discussions of my ideas of 'societal culture'. It is my concept of societal culture, Benhabib claims, that "potentially legitimises repressive demands for cultural conformity", that puts cultures "beyond the reach of critical analysis", and that entails "acceptance of the need to 'police' [group] boundaries to regulate internal membership and 'authentic' life forms". Similarly, Appiah argues that my concept of societal culture "may entail imposing uniformity" within groups, because "when multiculturalists like Kymlicka say that there are so many 'cultures' in this or that country, what drops out of the picture is that every 'culture' represents not only difference but the elimination of difference: the group represents a clump of relative homogeneity, and that homogeneity is perpetuated and enforced by regulative mechanisms designed to marginalize and silence dissent from its basic norms and mores' (Appiah 2005: 151-2).

Unsurprisingly, I think these are misinterpretations of my theory, but I don't want to go into that debate here. I do however need to say something quickly about my idea of societal culture, not to defend it, but rather to help us sort out what follows from their critique of it. As they both note, my account of societal culture was intended to explain and evaluate the claims of substate national groups, and even more specifically the Quebecois, to autonomy and official language rights. In my view, the case of Quebecois nationalism clearly exemplifies the goals of liberal multiculturalism, and I was looking for a way to make sense of this conceptually.

In the 1960s Quebec went through what is called the 'Quiet Revolution', which involved a double transformation. Firstly, it involved a process of internal liberalization within FrenchCanadian society, particularly in the form of secularization, civil rights, and gender equality. This is one of the most dramatic examples of liberalization I know of, resulting in a society that is today the most liberal society in North America, more so than the rest of Canada or the United States. Secondly, it involved a process of increasing nationalist mobilization in relation to the rest of Canada, fighting for greater minority rights, particularly self-government and language right. The result of this nationalist mobilization has been a significant reduction in inequalities between anglophones and francophones in Canada, whether measured in terms of average incomes, government employment, or democratic participation.

So here, it seems to me, is a paradigm case of liberal multiculturalism in action, resulting in greater freedom within groups, and greater equality between groups. And while we can see this analytically as two separate processes, it was seen by the key actors involved as two sides of the same process – namely, building a more

free, democratic and prosperous Quebecois nation. It wasn't as if there was one group of liberal elites fighting for liberalization, and another group of nationalist elites fighting for nationalism. It was the same elite involved in both struggles – an elite committed to liberal nationalism.

How are we to make theoretical sense of such a case? It is not explicable in the terms of traditional liberal theory, with its implicit assumptions about unitary and undifferentiated citizenship. We need new concepts to explain how these minority rights can enhance these liberal values. And so my suggestion was that self-government and language rights enabled the consolidation and prosperity of a francophone “societal culture” in Quebec. This societal culture provides a “context of choice” for its members – that is, it provides the adequate range of options from which individuals are able to rationally and reflectively choose, as required by the liberal commitment to autonomy. Of course, this strategy of empowering Quebec to protect a francophone societal culture carries risks: these very same rights and powers could be used to suppress individual freedom in the name of upholding some vision of an “authentic” or “traditional” Quebecois culture. To avoid this risk, we need to understand these rights as “external protections” not “internal restrictions”. That is, these rights are intended to diminish the extent to which members of a minority are vulnerable to the external decisions of the larger society, and are not intended to allow the minority to suppress the basic civil and political freedoms internally. This principle is reflected in the requirement that a minority's powers of self-government are constrained by the same constitutional requirement to respect human rights as all other levels of government. Since minority rights, on this view, are understood as external protections whose aim is to ensure the flourishing of a societal culture as a context of choice, they provide no justification for exemptions from or limitations on the basic liberties. Of course, once we rule out internal restrictions, this means that individual members will be free to question inherited beliefs and practices, and to adapt, revise or even reject them, as indeed happened during Quebec's Quiet Revolution, with its dramatic collapse of traditional (Catholic, patriarchal) ways of life. It is important, therefore, to distinguish the flourishing of a societal culture from changes to the “character” of that culture. Minority rights for the Quebec ensured the former, but allowed dramatic change to the latter in response to the exercise of individual autonomy.

So that was my way of trying to make theoretical sense of the Quebec case, using a handful of new concepts - “societal culture” as a context of choice, external protections vs internal restrictions, and so on. And as I hope this makes clear, the whole point of the concept of societal culture was that it did not provide a justification for imposing “authentic life forms” (Benhabib) or for “marginalizing and silencing dissent” (Appiah). It was intended precisely to explain how it was possible for a minority society to seek minority rights while disavowing any desire to enforce traditional lifestyles, and instead to dramatically liberalize and transform itself through the exercise of individual autonomy.

So, predictably, I think that Benhabib and Appiah's interpretations are uncharitable. Both authors claim that my use of the term `societal culture' somehow legitimates denying individuals the right to rationally revise their inherited ways of life, but so far as I can tell, they simply assert rather than argue for this. However, I'm not a neutral observer in this debate, and others have found their critiques compelling. And in any event, that's not my main interest in this paper.

So let's assume they are indeed right, and that my concept of societal culture has these flaws. What implications does this have for the real-world practice of liberal multiculturalism? After all, they both insist that their anxiety is not just about essentialism within the halls of academic philosophy departments. They believe that essentialism is a problem with multiculturalism as a political project, which therefore needs a “radical overhaul”. But what would this mean in cases of substate nationalism like Quebec? Recall that my

concept of societal culture was developed to justify and explain claims for official language status and regional autonomy of such groups. Should we radically overhaul the way liberal-democratic states deal with such groups? Should we reject their claims to official language status and regional autonomy?

And here, things start to get murky. Benhabib and Appiah fudge their bets. Both immediately deny that they are necessarily opposed to the language and autonomy rights accorded to Quebec. As Appiah says about Quebec's language policy, "let me be clear that my target is not the particulars of the policy, but its rationale...I'm happy to put myself in the position of the proverbial philosopher who demands 'that's all very well in practice, but will it work in theory?'" (Appiah 2005: 123, 101). The policy may work "very well in practice", but he thinks that talk about preserving societal cultures misidentifies why it can be a legitimate part of liberal-democratic practice. Similarly, Benhabib says that she "welcomes and supports" movements for "intercultural justice", including many struggles for regional autonomy, but she too thinks that they can be legitimate precisely because, and insofar as, they are not about preserving cultures (Benhabib 2002: ix, 65).

So both accept that this model of real-world liberal multiculturalism – regional autonomy and official language rights for substate national minorities – can work well in practice, and may not be in need of a radical overhaul, so long as they are not based on "culturalist premises" (Benhabib 2002: 65). So what, on their view, does provide the legitimating basis for struggles by substate national groups for autonomy and language rights?

In both cases, they respond that the basis for evaluating such movements should be "political" not "cultural". In Benhabib's words, "intercultural justice between human groups should be defended in the name of justice and freedom and not an elusive preservation of cultures". Struggles for recognition and identity/difference should be supported "to the degree to which they are movements for democratic inclusion, greater social and political justice, and cultural fluidity. But movements for maintaining the purity or distinctiveness of cultures seem to me to be irreconcilable with both democratic and more basic epistemological considerations". In short, movements of minority groups can be progressive "to the degree that they are motivated by other than conservationist impulses" (Benhabib 2002: ix). And so, in the particular case of Quebec or other movements for autonomy, she says: "If asked how to evaluate claim for regional autonomy, I would say, 'Study their demands and their platform first!'" For example, we should ask how they propose to treat women, immigrants, democracy, foreign policy. And she insists that this 'political' approach is very different from my argument which is "based on culturalist premises rather than political evaluations of movements and their goals" (Benhabib 2002: 65).

Similarly, Appiah says Quebec's language policy can be understood and justified not in terms of maintaining a francophone societal culture, but as "equality of citizenship in a francophone state" (Appiah 2004: 103). Quebecers have a democratic right to make French "the political language", and once they have done so, it is appropriate to ensure that all citizens have equal access to it. This citizenship-based argument, he says, is different from a right to maintain a francophone societal culture, since it operates within a framework of equal citizenship and individual autonomy not cultural preservation (Appiah 2004: 104).

I confess I have no idea how to understand or apply this distinction between "political" and "culturalist". The whole point about the Quebec case, as I mentioned earlier, is that these two motivations were fused and intertwined. Elites during the Quiet Revolution wanted to consolidate their societal culture (vis-à-vis the larger society) while simultaneously liberalizing and democratizing their society internally, improving its treatment of gays, women, immigrants, religious minorities and so on. These were two dimensions of the

same underlying motivation – namely, to build a prosperous and democratic francophone society within Canada. They were committed to liberal-democratic values, but they were not indifferent to the scale or unit within which those values were operationalized. They wanted to implement those liberal-democratic values within the province of Quebec as an autonomous francophone society. And while they were strongly committed to nationalist values, but they were not indifferent to the form that nationhood took: they wanted a liberal-democratic form of nationalism.

This is not unique to Quebec. It is a characteristic feature of substate nationalist movements across the Western democracies since the 1960s. They are simultaneously and intensely both “political” and “cultural”. If it’s to be useful, any normative political theory of (post)-multiculturalism has to say something about this combination. And yet, so far as I can tell, both Benhabib and Appiah fail in this task.

Indeed, their positions are full of ambiguities. On one interpretation, Benhabib and Appiah are saying that certain political criteria operate as a constraint on culturalist political projects. On this view, struggles for minority rights are legitimate so long as human rights norms and individual civil rights are respected. Regional autonomies must, for example, comply with constitutional protections of individual rights, and with international human rights norms. If so, then of course I fully agree, and this simply restates an essential part of any liberal multiculturalist position (and of international norms of minority rights).

But their comments suggest a more radical interpretation, which is that movements for regional autonomy are illegitimate insofar as they have any “culturalist premises” or “conservationist impulses”. These movements are illegitimate if ideas of maintaining cultural distinctiveness play any role in their motivations. On this view, it’s not enough that minority groups comply with the constraints of liberal norms, they must be solely and exclusively motivated by these norms. They must, in short, be indifferent to the scale or unit of liberal-democracy, and have no intrinsic preference for exercising liberal-democracy in, say, a predominantly francophone Quebec rather than a predominantly anglophone Canada.

If this is indeed their position, then it is truly radical. It would involve rejecting all real-world substate nationalist movements, since they clearly are not indifferent to the scale or societal/linguistic context within which liberal-democracy operates. It would therefore seem to entail abolishing autonomy for Catalonia, Quebec, Flanders, Puerto Rico, South Tyrol, all of which emerged from what, on this view, would be illegitimate political movements.

If this is indeed their view, then I think it is wholly implausible. It would involve rejecting what are almost-universally viewed as successful forms of accommodation, and would do so on the basis of a fetishistic dislike of ‘culturalist’ motivations. It is also, I think, deeply hypocritical, since it’s clear that majorities also operate on these culturalist motivations, and yet Appiah and Benhabib do not suggest that the majority’s claims to self-government and language rights should be rejected. Members of dominant groups in England, Spain or Canada are not indifferent to the scale or linguistic context of liberal-democratic political life: they want to engage in liberal-democratic politics in contexts where they form a majority, and which use their language. Yet Appiah and Benhabib do not suggest that these states should lose their independence because of these culturalist premises. No one thinks that Denmark or the Czech Republic should give up their independence and join a larger German-speaking political unit, on the grounds that their commitment to national independence has “culturalist premises”. So why should Catalonia or Quebec give up their pursuit of autonomy on the grounds that it involves culturalist premises?

In fact, both Appiah and Benhabib realize that this radical interpretation is untenable, and so quickly back off it. Appiah, for example, says that while Quebec's language law is only permissible if it is motivated by equal citizenship values not cultural survival values, he then acknowledges that these two motivations are not really separable. He acknowledges that sustaining a francophone societal culture is aided by the choice of French as the "political language" for Quebec, and indeed he accepts that this is why that particular language was democratically chosen. Moreover, he says, "such an aim is a perfectly acceptable consideration in democratic politics", so long as it is pursued within a framework of equal citizenship and personal autonomy (Appiah 2004: 103-4). But now we're back to the more modest position that liberal-democratic norms constrain the pursuit of culturalist projects – a position that simply restates the liberal multiculturalism he claimed to be criticizing.

Similarly, Benhabib says that being motivated by cultural allegiances is after all perfectly legitimate, so long as "the goal of a public policy for the preservation of cultures must be the empowerment of the members of cultural groups to appropriate, enrich, and even subvert the terms of their own cultures as they may decide" (Benhabib 2002: 66-67). In short, culturalist projects are legitimate so long as they do not impose internal restrictions. But here again, this is simply a restatement of the liberal multiculturalism she claims to be critiquing. Benhabib claims that her account of "complex cultural dialogue" differs from mine in that it allows "democratic dissent, debate, contestation and challenge to be at the centre of practices through which cultures are appropriated". But any liberal conception of multiculturalism, including mine, affirms rights of democratic contestation and individual rational revisability. So far as I can tell, neither Benhabib nor Appiah provide any conceptual tools or political recommendations that go beyond what is already built into the theory and practice of liberal multiculturalism.

In any event, this is one version of the post-multiculturalist critique. It starts with the claim that academic theories of liberal multiculturalism contain essentialist premises, and while it is implied that these flaws have implications for real-world political practices, these implications are left indeterminate or ambiguous. Interpreted radically as rejecting any political claims that are even partly motivated by culturalist aspirations, it would require rejecting all real-world experiments in liberal multiculturalism, regardless of the evidence of their benefits from a liberal-democratic point of view. Interpreted more moderately as simply requiring that liberal-democratic constitutional norms be respected, it leaves all real-world practices of liberal multiculturalism untouched. Neither interpretation, it seems to me, adds to our understanding of the uneven successes and failures of liberal multiculturalism.

(b) Critiques of Multiculturalist Policies

Let me turn now to a second version of the post-multiculturalist critique, exemplified by Anne Phillips' work.¹⁰ Recall her central claim that multiculturalism

¹⁰ I should note that Phillips herself, unlike most of the other authors being discussed, does not suggest abandoning the term 'multiculturalism', and hence does not describe herself as a 'post'-multiculturalist. However, as her book title indicates – namely, "Multiculturalism without Culture" – she seeks a post-culturalist multiculturalism, and this is relevantly similar to the other authors.

exaggerates the internal unity of cultures, solidifies differences that are currently more fluid, and makes people from other cultures seem more exotic and distinct than they really are. Multiculturalism then appears not as a cultural liberator but as a cultural straitjacket, forcing those described as members of a minority cultural group into a regime of authenticity, denying them the chance to cross cultural borders, borrow cultural influences, define and redefine themselves (Phillips 2007: 14)

While this sounds similar to Benhabib and Appiah, she explicitly states that her target is not academic theories of liberal multiculturalism. Indeed, she says “it would be absurd” to blame theorists for these essentializing effects (23). She acknowledges that political theorists of multiculturalism often have relatively sophisticated understandings of cultural activities and identifications, and it would be a case of “mistaken identity” (76) or even “polemical diatribe” (73) to accuse theorists of embracing these crude and simplistic notions.

Her concern, rather, is with the practice of multiculturalism, and with the more simplified understandings of culture and identity that inform laws, policies and public discourses. For example, she says that “one of the biggest problems” with multiculturalism is “the selective way culture is employed to explain behaviour in non-Western societies or individuals from racialised minority groups, and the implied contrast with rational, autonomous (Western) individuals, whose actions are presumed to reflect moral judgements” (Phillips 2007: 9). Yet as she notes, this is not a problem with the academic theories of liberal multiculturalism. They do not distinguish (non-Western) “culture” from (Western) “reason/judgement”, but rather attempt to show how liberal autonomy itself has cultural preconditions. This problem of selectivity, then, arises at a different level, in the way multiculturalist ideas get translated into political practices.

So if Appiah says “that’s all very well in practice, but will it work in theory?”, Phillips’ approach could be phrased as “that may work in theory, but will it work in practice?”. This is obviously a different target of the essentialist critique, and it requires different sorts of evidence and argumentation, and also leads to different conclusions about the sort of “radical overhaul” that might be required.

So what does Phillips mean by the practice of liberal multiculturalism, and how do we judge whether it is having these essentializing effects, and how would we fix the problem? At first glance, it seems that her concern is with formal laws and policies. The book is essentially a review of a series of British cases in which public officials have had to deal with issues of immigrant diversity, including forced marriages, the cultural defense, dress-code exemptions, etc. And so when she says that multiculturalism “appears as a cultural straitjacket...forcing those described as members of a minority cultural group into a regime of authenticity”, it seems to be public officials, acting upon multiculturalist laws and policies, who are doing this exaggerating, forcing and denying.

And yet, as her book proceeds, it becomes clear that this is not in fact her target. On the contrary, she repeatedly observes that British public officials – whether educators, social service workers, police and judges – often have a fairly sophisticated understanding of the issues. For example, the courts have rejected the view of culture as a straitjacket (Phillips 2007: 112), and have dealt sensitively with the complexity of rights of exit (Phillips 2007: 144). This sensitivity is due in part to the fact that public officials typically receive training in handling these issues – training that is itself part and parcel of the multiculturalism policies, and that explicitly disavows and warns against simplistic and essentializing ideas of culture.

And so, by the end of the book, her overall conclusion seems to be that the formal laws and bureaucratic regulations and procedures are actually more or less appropriate, and are not themselves in need of a

radical overhaul. She says that on these basic policy questions “I reach much the same policy conclusions” as liberal multiculturalists (Phillips 2007: 113), and it’s not clear in what ways, if any, she would change the current laws, regulations, jurisprudence, handbooks, codes of conduct etc that are used by public officials to address issues of multiculturalism.

So what then is the problem of essentialism, on her view? If the problem doesn’t lie with academic theories of multiculturalism or with the public policies, who or what is encouraging essentialism? If we dig a little deeper, it seems to me that her ultimate concern is with a more diffuse phenomenon, which she sometimes calls a “public discourse” or “public ethos” of multiculturalism. For example, she says that even if no formal law or policy endorses or fosters an essentialist view, “a strongly multicultural public ethos is likely to have some of the suggested effects” (76). A multiculturalist “public discourse” or “public ethos”, she fears, is likely to reproduce pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices, such as the assumption that non-Europeans act blindly from cultural compulsion, whereas whites act from reason and moral judgement.

In short, the problem seems to be with the “the way we talk” about multiculturalism in public life, and it is this that needs a radical overhaul, not multiculturalist policies per se or academic multiculturalist theories. Her concern seems to be with the way multiculturalism is talked about in the media, in the associational life of civil society, or even amongst friends and families.

This is an interesting claim, but it obviously requires unpacking. What exactly is a public ethos of multiculturalism, and how do we test whether it is or is not having essentializing effects? Her book contains many examples of everyday public discourse which exhibits essentializing assumptions – a phenomenon well-captured in Gerd Baumann’s famous study of street-level discourses on ethnic difference in Southall (Baumann 1996). But as Tariq Modood notes, it may be a mistake to read too much into these statements:

a successful politics of difference-recognition may (or may not) be accompanied by crude, confused unreflective notions of culture, but for theorists to latch on to the reification in the confused or crude accounts that agents give of their activities and beliefs is actually to overhomogenize and essentialize the beliefs that people have...The charge of essentialism is itself essentialist. It rightly identifies some elements of essentialism in the political discourses of identity and culture but attributes a false importance to them. It gives them the status of being THE beliefs that constitute the understanding of culture, identity and so on in multiculturalism, when in fact multiculturalist discourses may be, indeed invariably are, based on a variety of beliefs and assertions about culture. (Modood 2007: 97-8)

So there are interesting complexities here about how to describe or measure the extent to which a ‘public ethos’ does or does not embody or perpetuate essentialist assumptions.

However, for my purposes, the more pressing question is how we would we go about fixing the problem of an essentializing public ethos. Some commentators might think that the best way to change this public ethos is to reject formal policies of multiculturalism. But that is not Phillips’ proposal. As she notes, there is no evidence that the public policies are generating the essentializing tendencies in the public ethos. On the contrary, as I noted earlier, insofar as we have comparative data, it seems that the problem of ethnic stereotyping is lower in countries with multiculturalism policies (Weldon 2006). So it would be another case of ‘mistaken identity’ to blame multicultural public policies for an essentializing public ethos.

Indeed, it may be that strengthening these policies is the best remedy. It may be that the best way for public authorities to combat an essentializing public ethos is precisely to more actively diffuse the more complex

and sophisticated understandings about multiculturalism that are currently given to the public officials tasked to implement these policies. This indeed is more or less what Phillips proposes, such as new programs of community outreach and education. While she describes her book as a call for a 'radical overhaul' of multiculturalism, these suggestions seem to me to be firmly within the family of liberal multiculturalism, as is it already exists in countries like Canada, Australia and indeed the UK. Her recommendations seem largely to be a call for strengthening these policies. In short, the answer to the essentializing risks of a 'strongly multiculturalist public ethos' is not to abandon multiculturalist public policies, but to re-commit to them.

(c) Critiques of Multiculturalist Activists

Finally, let me turn to a third version of the post-multiculturalist critique, which is also in a sense about a 'public ethos' of multiculturalism, but which locates the problem in a slightly different place. A good example is Jane Cowan's work on the essentializing effects of the political mobilization for minority rights amongst the Macedonian minority in Greece. She shows how, in order to justify their claims for Macedonian language rights, ethnic activists are encouraging people of Macedonian origin to self-identify in public as "Macedonian", and not to identify themselves as "Greek". This has been an uphill battle, in part because for many decades anyone who self-identified in this way was discriminated against by Greek public officials. But it is also an uphill battle because many ethnic Macedonians have, over the years, come to identify with the Greek language, literature and culture, and indeed to take pride in it. Whereas ethnic activists promote a discourse in which "they" (the Greeks) have a long history of persecuting "us" (the Macedonians), most ethnic Macedonians themselves do not share this simple us vs them identity. In some contexts, they too feel Greek, and not just in the sense of being a citizen of the state of Greece, but also in the sense of participating in a Greek-language culture, even as they still retain a sense of Macedonian identity, and an attachment to their ancestral language. Whereas activists seek to impose a particular narrative or script in which one must choose between being Greek or Macedonian - a proud Macedonian is someone who resents and rejects what 'they' the Greeks have done to 'us' and our language - most ethnic Macedonians resent having to make this sort of choice amongst their multiple identities.

Not surprisingly, Cowan finds this sort of discourse by minority activists to be disturbing. Recall her central claim, quoted earlier: she is

concerned with the ethical ambiguities of a discourse which may constrain, as much as enable, many of those it is meant to empower, by forcing their expressions of difference into a dichotomous interpretive frame that misrepresents their complex identities ... This is the central ambiguity of a minority rights discourse; that it must deny ambiguity and fix difference in the realms of identity, or cultural practice, in defense of distinct cultures...even when meant to contest claims of national homogeneity, it locks us ever more tightly into precisely the same national logic of purity, authenticity and fixity (Cowan 2001: 154, 171).

This is a compelling case study, and it is clearly not unique to that particular country or minority. It echoes fears expressed by Fraser and Appiah about minority activist discourses in the United States. Fraser worries that these minority scripts "put moral pressure on individual members to conform to group culture. The result is often to impose a single, drastically simplified group identity, which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations (Fraser 2001: 24). Similarly, Appiah has famously argued that minority scripts exaggerate group homogeneity, and

seek to enforce this homogeneity “by regulative mechanisms designed to marginalize and silence dissent from its basic norms and mores” (Appiah 2004: 151-2).

Here again we have a very real and important issue, but it is a somewhat different issue. Phillips’ concern (as I’ve interpreted it) is primarily with how a ‘multiculturalist public ethos’ can inculcate essentializing assumptions about minority groups within the dominant group – that is, how multiculturalism encourages members of the mainstream to treat members of minority groups as prisoners of their exotic cultures, thereby reinforcing their already-existing prejudices. Cowan, by contrast, is primarily concerned with how members of the minority group itself, particularly its self-appointed activist leaders, seek to impose a particular script on co-members. Her focus is on intra-group processes of essentialization, not inter-group essentialization.¹¹

I take it as a given that such processes of intra-group essentialization exist. But what does this have to do with liberal multiculturalism? After all, we can find examples of self-appointed leaders of ethnic and religious groups trying to impose “purity, authenticity and fixity” on their members throughout history and around the world, long before the rise of multiculturalism. This is as old as the Bible – indeed, we might say it is an eternal feature of ethnic and religious life. There are always some people within any given group who are telling other members that they need to return to a more original, authentic or pure form of their culture or creed (just as there are always revisers and reformers who are pushing for more open and pluralistic understandings of identity and culture). This is the stuff of great novels and literature around the world for centuries. It would be bizarre to imply that this phenomenon only emerged when liberal multiculturalism arose in the 1960s.

Indeed, it’s particularly bizarre to blame multiculturalism for the essentializing discourses of minority activists in Greece, since of course Greece has no multiculturalism policy! It is one of the countries in Europe (along with France and Turkey) that has most resolutely opposed any ideology of multiculturalism. Indeed, we might say that this is precisely the problem: Greece has no legal principles or political culture of liberal multiculturalism, and hence has no established traditions within either the minority or majority for accepting ideas of multiple and complementary loyalties and identities. The Greek government has operated on the premise that ethnic identities are zero-sum and inherently antagonistic, and the minority activists simply replicate this assumption. The solution to this, one might argue, is precisely a good dose of liberal multiculturalism, both in terms of legislation and political culture. Indeed, this is precisely one of the findings of cross-national research on multiculturalism I cited earlier. By ensuring respect and recognition for a minority’s identity, multiculturalism policies facilitate minority members adopting dual and complementary identities that bridge to the larger society, thereby enabling better psychological well-being and educational outcomes (Berry et al 2006). Multiculturalism policies can help turn what we see as zero-sum identities into multiple and complementary identities.

¹¹ While these authors differ in their primary focus, I should note that Phillips also expresses concern about intragroup essentialization, and Appiah/Cowan/Fraser express concerns about inter-group processes. Indeed, we can find all of these different targets in all of the post-multiculturalist writers, often lumped together in a way that makes it difficult to identify what precisely is the real target.

Cowan (sometimes) acknowledges that this tendency towards essentialization predates multiculturalism, but she nonetheless worries that multiculturalism might exacerbate it. Multiculturalism might, for example, empower activists to force this essentializing script on unwilling group members. This recalls Appiah's concern that the "civil apparatus" of group recognition can be used to "marginalize and silence dissent" within a group, or Fraser's concern that multiculturalism can be used to "impose a single drastically simplified group identity".

But does multiculturalism really allow activists to "force" or "impose" identities, or to "silence: dissent? How are we to interpret these dramatic claims of "forcing", "imposing", "suppressing", "policing", and "silencing"? If it is meant literally – ie., that multiculturalism policies would legally empower minority activists to "force" members to accept a simplified identity – then it is simply false. In the Macedonian case, minority activists have no legal power whatsoever to compel group members to identify as exclusively Macedonian, and nor would they somehow gain this power if Greece suddenly adopted stronger minority language rights. On the contrary, the right of individuals not to be forced to declare a minority identity is a fundamental principle of both European and international human rights law, which is precisely the law that minority activists are appealing to. It is no part of their agenda – and no part of any possible multiculturalist outcome – that they would gain the power to legally compel people of Macedonian origin to adopt or declare a Macedonian identity.

Of course, one could imagine scenarios in which minority activists would use non-legal coercion or intimidation to force individuals to accept their script. Activists might threaten to assault people, or to burn down their houses, if they do not declare an exclusive Macedonian identity. This surely happens in many cases around the world. But this is not what Cowan has in mind. She gives no evidence that activists use extra-legal coercion against group members. As she tells the story, activists operate fully within the law. Similarly Appiah and Fraser are not recounting acts of physical threat or intimidation by minority activists.

So in what sense then do minority activists "impose" or "force" their script on unwilling members? To my mind, this is the crucial question for any liberal-democratic theory, yet it is almost entirely sidestepped by all of these authors. After all, it is a foundational right within any democratic society that people can freely state their opinion that (for example) a good proud Macedonian should speak Macedonian wherever possible, and should resist the corrupting influences of Greek culture. In a democratic society, people must be free to state this sort of opinion, and to seek to persuade others of it.

In principle, one could imagine attempting to forbid anyone expressing this sort of opinion, but this could only be done by violating fundamental civil liberties. Surely no one thinks that Jewish activists should be prohibited from saying that a good Jew will marry within the faith and avoid the corrupting influences of Christian culture (eg., celebrating Christmas), even if this reproduces (in Cowan's words) a dichotomous "logic of purity, authenticity and fixity".

So far as I know, none of these post-multiculturalists would endorse the radical solution of banning speech that involves this sort of essentialist logic. But what then exactly is the problem, and how do we fix it? What is the nature of this "forcing" and "imposing" an identity on someone, and how do we distinguish it from, say, "democratically persuading" someone to adopt an identity? Fraser says that multiculturalism enables group leaders to exercise "moral pressure" on group members, and that this is how identities are "imposed". But what distinguishes moral pressure from moral persuasion? What criteria do we use to distinguish legitimate forms of argumentation and mobilization from illegitimate "moral pressure", "force"

and “imposition”, and how can we address these latter problems without restricting basic civil and political liberties?

So far as I can tell, the post-multiculturalists have no answer to this question, and as a result, they offer no clear guidelines for how to revise the practice of multiculturalism.¹² If the problem is “moral pressure” within a group, rather than legal compulsion or extra-legal coercion, what can and should a liberal democracy do, other than firmly insisting on the right of other citizens inside and outside the group to freely and democratically contest that particular script? Postmulticulturalists often conclude by emphasizing the necessity of enabling democratic contestation of scripts, but of course that simply restates a core part of any liberal multiculturalism.

The right to democratic contestation is crucial, but it’s worth noting that there was nothing in the Macedonian case that precluded such democratic contestation by those with alternate understandings of Macedonian and Greek identity. Indeed, this is clear from Cowan’s own story: the reality is that the Macedonian activists have largely been unsuccessful in persuading people to adopt an exclusive Macedonian identity, precisely because they are not in a position to “force” or “impose” this identity on anyone. Minority activists are trying to peacefully and democratically persuade their co-ethnics to adopt a certain script about who they are as a group, but their’s is just one voice and one narrative in an ongoing democratic process of deliberation and contestation and persuasion. It’s not clear what, if anything, Cowan would propose to change in this scenario.

So it’s unclear what implications this version of the post-multiculturalist critique has for the realworld practice of multiculturalism. And so, unsurprisingly, Cowan too ends up hedging on what, if any, changes follow from her analysis.¹³ She concludes by saying that “the only tenable position for the engaged scholar [is] a paradoxical one: to support the demands for recognition of the Macedonian minority, but as a category that is chosen rather than imposed (whether explicitly or de facto), yet at the same time, to problematize rather than celebrate its project, and to query its emancipatory aura, examining the exclusions and cultural disenfranchisement it creates from within’ (Cowan 2001: 171). She presents this as a critique of liberal multiculturalism, but, so far as I can tell, it is simply a restatement of liberal multiculturalism, both as it is theorized and as it is embodied in public policies and international law.

12 One could argue that this version of the post-multiculturalist critique in fact reproduces the very paternalistic logic that Phillips was objecting to – ie., it assumes that while members of the white majority can safely be trusted to engage in democratic persuasion and deliberation about their identities and cultures, members of minority groups are trapped in cultural scripts that pre-empt or override their capacity for autonomy.

13 For another example of this hedging, see Scheffler’s statement that the implication of his postmulticulturalist critique ‘is not that all of the political claims advanced under the heading of cultural rights or cultural preservation should automatically be dismissed but rather that those claim should be redescribed in such a way as to make clear the values, ideals and principles that are at stake’ (Scheffler 2007: 124). One wishes that at least one of these post-multiculturalists would take the plunge and actually identify one real-world claim that liberal multiculturalists would support and that they would reject.

Liberal multiculturalism, like Cowan, supports demands for recognition within liberal-democratic constraints that do not allow for the involuntary ascription of ethnic categories or for the undemocratic imposition of cultural scripts. So far as I can tell, like all of these postmulticulturalist authors, she offers no tangible recommendations or principles for reform that differ from, or go beyond, a liberal multiculturalist framework.¹⁴

3. Conclusion:

In this paper, I have explored what appears to be a nearly-unanimous consensus amongst recent writers that multiculturalism is guilty of essentialism, and that addressing this problem requires a radical overhaul of the multiculturalist project. I have suggested that, despite this seeming consensus, the implications of this critique are in fact indeterminate, in large part because the critics fail to make clear their target, and hence the required remedy. While the different versions of this critique all point to legitimate issues – and I have repeatedly acknowledged that essentializing tendencies exist out there in the world - it's not clear in what ways liberal multiculturalism is contributing to these tendencies, and hence in what ways multiculturalism might need to be reformed. So while all of the authors begin with a strong rhetorical commitment to a radical overhaul of multiculturalism, by the end of their analysis, they have all backed away from making any radical proposals for change. Indeed, so far as I can tell, they do not cite a single example of a group-differentiated right that liberal multiculturalists endorse that they would reject on essentialist (or other) grounds.

Ironically, I believe that this post-multiculturalist critique of essentialism is itself guilty of reification. According to critics, multiculturalism reifies ethnic groups as unified agents who speak and act with one unified voice. I would argue that this critique itself involves a reification of multiculturalism, treating it as if it is a single unified force that walks and talks out there in the world. According to critics, multiculturalism is actively “encouraging” people to think in essentialist terms, “pressuring” people to act in essentialist ways, even “forcing” and “imposing” essentialist identities and practices on people. But all of this talk of multiculturalism doing things out there in the world is hopelessly reified. Multiculturalism isn't a single actor or force that speaks with a single voice. It operates at different levels: theorists of multiculturalism say one set of things; laws, bureaucratic regulations and court decisions tell us another set of things; the media tell us yet another; and activists have their own message. We can't hope to figure out how to improve multiculturalism – or how to build a better post-multiculturalism, if you prefer – without pinning down which actors at which levels are responsible for which effects.

At the end of her book, Anne Phillips pleads for a new version of multiculturalism that puts agency at the centre of the project. I agree with this commitment to agency – as I noted earlier, autonomy is the foundational premise of my approach – but I would say that we need to put agency at the centre of any useful critique of multiculturalism. The post-multiculturalist literature is full of agentless processes. According to post-multiculturalists, there is this thing called multiculturalism that is telling people, encouraging people, pressuring people, forcing people – but it is never specified who is doing this talking, encouraging, pressuring or forcing. Is it theorists, legislators, bureaucrats, judges, social workers, educators, activists, media commentators? I believe that if we start to specify the actors, and hence the causal processes, it might turn out that liberal multiculturalism is not after all in need of a radical overhaul.

¹⁴ Nor do I understand why she thinks of this as particularly “paradoxical” – supporting minority rights within liberal-democratic constraints seems a wholly consistent, unparadoxical position.

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