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MULTICULTURALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM*

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RESUMEN

Este ensayo trae a colación importantes puntos, tanto teóricos como prácticos, desde la perspectiva de la teoría crítica, con referencia al multiculturalismo. Me interesa delinear lo que sería una línea programática para un multiculturalismo viable. Tomando en cuenta el contexto neoliberal actual, me interesa enfatizar el problema práctico de hacer posible un multiculturalismo que no sea exclusivamente neoliberal, problema que ha logrado instalarse en el debate público con toda su intensidad.

Palabras clave: Multiculturalismo, reconocimiento cultural, globalización corporativa, neoliberalismo.

ABSTRACT

In this discussion, my aim is to raise critical practical and theoretical questions as regards multiculturalism. I wish to end with a sketch of a program for a viable multiculturalism. The issues in this relatively new area of political and philosophical thought are not restricted to theoretical issues. They involve practical questions of how it is possible to implement multiculturalism in more than a one-sided way in the current neoliberal economic context. In view of this aspect of the issue, it has already become a topic of serious public debate.

Key words: multiculturalism, cultural recognition, corporative globalization, neoliberalism.

1. El indio permitido

I begin with a story that points up the two faces of neoliberal multiculturalism. Oscar Berger rose to the presidency of Guatemala surrounded by the hope that he could end violence and improve the economy. He made Rigoberta Menchu a goodwill ambassador and he turned the building of the former Ministry of Defense into the Academy of Mayan

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Languages. These were gestures toward multiculturalism in a nation where the indigenous people had been treated as of no significance. However, President Berger also allowed his army to evict landless indigenous peasants from the 100 farms they had occupied during the previous three years. This was a gesture toward the indigenous to remind them that their culture was one thing but that Guatemala's role in the global economy was not theirs to change. Only those who understood this could be los indios permitidos, an expression used by Charles Hale and Rosamel Millaman¹.

Here is the paradox of multiculturalism in the present epoch at least. There is a growing recognition of different cultures, which as in the Guatemalan case a state regime institutionalizes. At the same time, there is a clear affirmation of the limits on that recognition; so, the state will not allow recognition to spill over into an effort to have equality of a form that would run counter to the economic norms the regime is expected in the global context to protect.

We can compare this with the liberalism of earlier epochs, when the focus was still on individuals and had not yet turned to groups. It was then convenient to ignore class differences in order to treat the society as made up of individuals differentiated only as the citizens of one state rather than of another state. So long as individuals enjoyed the rights of citizenship, their differences as regards effective opportunity could be ignored.

We have made progress by rejecting homogenous citizenship and moving on to a differentiated form of citizenship. We are now willing to accept the idea, ably expressed in the writing of Will Kymlicka, that some citizens enjoy both rights in common with all others and rights that derive from their special group identity². The deficit of recognition for citizens with special group identities gives rise, in the neoliberal period, to rights justified by the need to gain recognition. Thus, one adopts programs to promote the acceptance of difference and of the need for the means to maintain it.

Nothing in these two traditions has yet given the problem of equality its due. Neoliberalism, like liberalism before it, still considers equality to be, as Kant had taught, equal worth or equal dignity. Nobody would deny that these are notions admitting of various interpretations³. However, in the

¹ Charles R. Hale, "Rethinking Indigenous Politics in the Era of the 'Indio Permitido'", *NACLA Report on the Americas* 38, 2 (September/October 2004): 16-21.

² On the question of such group rights, see Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), chapter 6.

³ Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", in *Multiculturalism*, edited by Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 41.

liberalism and the neoliberalism that associate closely with a positive view of the economic market, the notions of equal worth and equal dignity do not imply a right to economic equality but only a right to recognition. Here recognition implies, as noted, no more than an acceptance of others with their difference and of the task of maintaining that difference when they desire that their difference be maintained.

2. Cultures and their maintenance

About maintenance of difference, I note that groups may not wish to have their difference used to ignore them, without however desiring that their difference be maintained. The exploited do not want to be rejected because they are exploited yet they cannot be expected to want their exploitation to be maintained if there is a realistic alternative for them.

Still, oppressed and exploited peoples develop cultures that reflect both their resistance to and endurance of their subjection. Many Afro-Brazilians are forging a culture that draws on the overthrow of the Portuguese by Angolans, incorporates Bob Marley and others into a local samba-reggae, and spreads the thought of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. The identity they are asserting is not something to be cast off as they make progress in ending the long-standing neglect of blacks in Brazil. Recognition of their identity includes a willingness to maintain this culture.

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Similar remarks apply to lower class identity. The working class has a long but declining culture of solidarity. While allowing a group understanding of other cultures, neoliberalism is engaged in a massive attack on working class culture. The destruction of public goods created by working class struggles leads from collective pensions and public health care to private pension accounts and private health insurance. These counter-reforms around the world are a conscious effort to break down the solidarity that had gained institutional stability by the end of World War II. Thus recognition of the lower class merely appears not to be a cultural recognition because the upper class has made such great strides in eroding lower class culture.

This neoliberal concept of multiculturalism gives its blessing to struggles for recognition, like those for civil rights for African-Americans in the United States and those of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala for the preservation of Mayan languages. But the line is drawn there. *El indio permitido* who is a Mexican immigrant does not engage in struggles for a living wage in hotel chains in the United States. Nor does *el indio permitido* who is a Zapatista continue resistance to NAFTA due to its weakening the hold of indigenous people on the land in Chiapas. *El indio permitido* who is a black child in a US ghetto cannot go to a well-funded school, but must not participate in an militant action to demand more funding.

Some peoples have avoided the mistake of emphasizing recognition when to do so is a distraction from emphasizing the need to change inequality. Afro-Brazilians are reported to have avoided polarizing types of race-based activity in order to focus on issues of poverty. Their cultural identification through pride in the victorious national liberation struggle in Angola and through the music of Afro-descendents around the world is of course important for them. However, this identity is not used to advance a race-based remedy to discrimination and inequality. There is general acceptance of “affirmative action” measures coming from the PT Minister of Education Tarso Genro to redress racial inequalities, without the racial polarization experienced in the US over such measures⁴.

The World Bank is one of the major supporters of multiculturalism. It sees multiculturalism as a stepping-stone to the success of its policies. It wants to promote growth through its projects and expects growth to reduce poverty.

Adopting multiculturalism is a way of avoiding a more direct attack on poverty. For, if people are distracted by projects for recognition of diversity, the WB and other international institutions can rely on states and corporations to push the market and financial reforms needed for their model of growth. In this way, conflict over this model of growth is reduced. It is not surprising that we read on the WB’s web site, “Ethnicity can be a powerful tool in the creation of human and social capital, but, if politicized, ethnicity can destroy capital. ... Ethnic diversity is dysfunctional when it generates conflict”⁵.

3. The issue of equality

Why has recognition become important in political morality? It is interesting, in this regard, that Hegel, who introduced us to the topic, makes a relation of oppression the context of his discussion of recognition. The master treats the servant as an instrument for his/her purposes, and in the end, when the servant realizes that he/she is the creative source of the form of a product or service, it is the master who is reified, not as an instrument, but as a mere consumer in front of the servant. There is then a failure of recognition by either of his/her other.

Hegel then presents achieving mutual recognition as a task that calls for a new stage, one at which the limits of the master/servant relation are

⁴ Livio Sansone, “Anti-Racism in Brazil,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 38, 2 (September/October 2004): 26-31.

⁵ “Social Capital and Ethnicity”, www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/sources/ethnic2.htm#neg.

transcended by making both actors in this dialectic free⁶. Hence, recognition is valued as an indication that a relation of oppression is crumbling and that a desirable freedom is possible. The servant ceases to be an instrument of the master, while the master ceases to be a mere consumer supplied by the servant. In short, masters and servants are no longer what they were or they may even disappear altogether.

With oppression as the starting point, recognition emerges as a liberation, as the freedom of those with a certain identity to be as they are instead of being as those outside that identity want to make them. Recognition of diversity depends on detachment from an oppressive single norm to which groups must conform. Whites would no longer value blacks by standards of whiteness but would have to accept them as actors in a context of diverse groups. Notice, however, that recognition, in this view of it, is not yet equality. It is only an acceptance of difference and a willingness to help preserve it. Where then does equality enter the picture?

Groups with different identities will interact in other ways than through recognition. They will be parts of the same society and, as such, they will adopt procedures for developing a common set of institutions. By definition, so-called separatists will resist taking this step, effectively putting themselves outside a multicultural society. But here we are concerned with what happens in a multicultural society. Recognition is only a necessary condition for a successful multicultural comity.

It is at this institutional stage of forming a diverse society that inequality becomes a problem. The more powerful groups will have the advantage of being able to shape institutions in a way that favors them. They may use this advantage without intending to undercut their recognition of less powerful groups. They are willing to let the less powerful groups be as they are. Yet the common framework denies opportunities to the less powerful groups, threatening thereby the maintenance of diversity required for full recognition.

If one funds schools from taxes taken inside school districts, then black school districts, where there is more poverty than in many white school districts, will not give black children the educational advantages that white children get. Thus, without equality, or an effort to achieve it, recognition can support only limited gains. For groups in a multicultural society to flourish, one needs to go beyond Hegelian recognition to a Marxian equality.

In an interesting contribution to the problem of the relation of diverse groups to the society or state to which they in some way pertain, Amartya

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, IV, A.

Sen argues that a society such as the British one should resist being converted into a federation of diverse group⁷. Citizenship for Sen is undifferentiated and cannot reflect the diversity of groups. He bases himself on the view that Britain is a “society of persons” each of whom may or may not choose to use their freedom of choice to identify with one or more groups. For Sen, a society conceived as a “federation of cultures” might lock people into their cultures, whereas a society of persons would avoid what Anthony Appiah sees as the tyranny of identity⁸.

Sen’s target was the Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain. As chair of that commission, Bhikhu Parekh supported a more intimate integration of different cultures into the state. Representatives of the different cultures would confer regularly to acquire better understanding of each other’s culture and to try to resolve conflicts⁹. Citizenship would be differentiated by culture rather than homogenized.

26 I would prefer an alternative to both Sen’s society of persons and Parekh’s federation of cultures. My alternative would avoid both Sen’s lack of emphasis on cultural groupings, which he motivates by an interest in liberal individualism, and also Parekh’s lack of emphasis on the common projects that will stand a chance of bringing more equality to those groupings. Expanding the domain of public goods in a context of cooperation in diversity will build equality through conquests that go beyond cultural recognition.

4. Cultural and social recognition

The “politics of identity” of the 1970s held that a group did not have to strive for anything beyond internal identity and external recognition. As Nancy Fraser points out, this ignores issues of unequal distribution between identities and ultimately issues of the underlying economic structure¹⁰.

She alludes to two difficulties to which the neglect of equality leads. The first concerns the formation of an identity. Under conditions of inequality between groups, a less powerful group cannot fashion its identity democratically since there will be powerful groups intervening in its effort

⁷ Amartya Sen, “Other People,” British Academy Lecture (November 7, 2000).

⁸ K. Anthony Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” in *Multiculturalism*, edited by Amy Gutman, 149-163.

⁹ See also Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Nancy Fraser, “Multiculturalism, Antiessentialism, and Radical Democracy,” *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the ‘Postsocialist’ Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 181.

to form its identity. The second concerns the means for sustaining an identity. With inequality, a given group may not have access to the means it needs to be what it sets out to be.

In order to get a clear view of this complex terrain, it is well to distinguish at least two kinds of recognition. In talking about equal respect, equal worth, or equal recognition, there are, as hinted at above, alternative interpretations to follow. There are a narrow and a broad interpretation as well as a spectrum of interpretations in between.

The narrow one is a “cultural” view according to which when I grant respect, worth, or recognition I am not using the norm current in my group but instead will leave others to follow their norm. To make clear that I accept those others in this way, I will make some gestures of support at the level of culture. Indeed, such gestures are necessary for cultural recognition since they help maintain a culture. These gestures, though, will not involve measures that would challenge the sources of economic inequality that keep those others relatively powerless. One makes no commitment to challenge these sources of inequality. My recognition of those in other groups is expressed in those cultural gestures that indicate a wish to maintain their identities without leading to equality for them.

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The broad interpretation is a “social” one implying that those respected, granted equal worth with ourselves, and recognized by us can expect us to join them in trying to get the means they need, not just for their identities to survive, but actually to realize the goals of their group¹¹. This would doubtless involve participating in challenges to the dominant economic structure. Here giving others our recognition goes beyond cultural gestures to solidarity.

The cultural view of recognition stays within the bounds of neoliberalism. This cultural view keeps recognition and respect for some who have very little from leading to a violation of the freedom of yet others who have much. It does this by refusing to call for a redistribution of the assets of those who have much. Put in more structural terms, the cultural view does not challenge the market. However, the social view of recognition does not counterpose recognition and equality; instead, it makes equality a vital part of recognition.

Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser both emphasize the important role that recognition plays in democracy. Here we are talking about a kind of

¹¹ Martha Nussbaum argues that truly respecting others or seeing their worth as humans implies a commitment to helping get the means they need to satisfy their basic needs. Curiously, she identifies this as a liberal view. See her “The Feminist Critique of Liberalism,” in her *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 2.

democracy that differentiates citizenship by recognizing different identities. It does not homogenize citizenship by placing nationality, race, gender, and class beyond citizenship. Still, in order to guarantee that citizenship of either kind is compatible with democracy; limits have to be put on inequality. Otherwise, the openness in deliberation needed for democracy would be missing. If recognition is merely cultural, and not social, then it goes only half way toward supporting democracy.

In conclusion, social recognition will lead beyond the cultural recognition promoted by neoliberalism and its international institutions. It leads to a struggle from below for equality. This struggle engages the cooperation of each of the various components of a diverse society. The struggle becomes a common effort to establish public goods that reduce poverty and inequality. Among these public goods are health care, education, water, physical security, and justice. The oppressed groups will take the lead but, unless they win the cooperation of others, inequality and hence the absence of democracy will remain.