Dialogue and Differends:

On the Limits of Liberal Multiculturalism

Richard Day

Richard Day is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Queen's University. He has published articles on cultural, social, and political theory in journals such as Philosophy and Social Criticism, Critical Horizons, Topia: A Journal of Canadian Cultural Studies, and DeriveApprodi. His book Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity (2000) is available from University of Toronto Press.

ABSTRACT

This article presents an immanent critique of the dominant strain of state-based liberal multiculturalism found in the work of theorists such as Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka. Despite their claim to advocate and participate in free, and equal dialogical conversations, these writers have consistently avoided engaging with those who are critical of their lack of discussion on systematically structured forms of domination and exploitation such as capitalism, racism, heterosexism, and the attempt to technologically master nature. It is argued that there cannot be any hope of further advances toward justice, mutual recognition, and a truly free and equal dialogue unless all aspects of all of the critiques that have been leveled against liberal multiculturalism are addressed.

In the current context of globalizing capital and an increasingly fragile system of nation-states, two dominant political ideologies are now engaged – often violently – in what appears to be a 'zero-sum' battle over the allocation of national territories to state apparatuses: ethnic nationalism and liberal multiculturalism. Ethnic nationalism is most often taken up by those who identify with a colonized people; it uses the structural principle of the modern European nation-state (one people, one state) to challenge the current configuration of the system of states. That is, it seeks to articulate a self-identified 'people,' currently dominated by a 'foreign' state, with *its own* bureaucratic apparatus that would control *its own* particular territory. Of course, the 'ethnicity' of ethnic nationalism exists only in comparison to the 'nationality' of peoples who have already achieved a state articulation, and whose interests are therefore crucially different.[1] For their part, many established state peoples are tending to advocate modifications to the structural principle of the system of *nation*-states as a means of preserving its current configuration. That is, they are attempting to become either nations-states, in which more than one nation can share an articulation with a single state (as in official Canadian policy), or *nationless* (civic) states in which all matters of identity are supposedly cast into the 'private realm' (as in official American policy). In these ideologies, talk of domination is replaced by 'integration,' and self/other differentiation is down-played in the name of 'shared citizenship'.[2]

While multiculturalism and ethnic nationalism are commonly cast as binary opposites, they can also be seen as complementary approaches. Each, in its own way, is conservative of the system of nation(s)-states, and therefore tends to perpetuate the very problem it sets out to solve. In the case of ethnic nationalism, it is clear that any 'new' nation or nations which are set up to address a problem of diversity will themselves almost certainly fail to achieve a 'pure' territory (witness the plight of those living in the satellite regions of the former Soviet Union). In the case of state multiculturalism, as I have argued in *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity,*[3] 'recognition' of certain minority and ethnic identities tends to lead to the proliferation of problematic diversity rather than to its taming, and thus produces further dislocation (witness the plight of the perpetually fragile Canadian identity). Thus it would seem that attempts to manage problematic diversity have worked no better than attempts to eliminate it. Perhaps the problem, then, is with the conception of the problem itself, that is, with the idea that subjects somehow *need* to be assigned to nations, and that nations somehow *need* to be assigned to states. Partisans on all sides of these debates seem to forget that human beings haven't always lived this way; indeed, we haven't lived this way for very long at all.

If we want to make any headway on the question of 'ethnic strife,' I would suggest that we need to invert the fundamental assumption of multiculturalism and ethnic nationalism. Rather than believing that 'misplaced' ethnic and national identifications create problems for particular states, we need to see that *it is the system of states that creates and perpetuates the problem of ethnic and national identifications.* That is, if it were not seen as necessary to take part in a zero-sum game over the allocation of territories to identities, neither multiculturalism nor ethnic nationalism would need to exist. Of course this observation could be seen as trite, as begging a further question: why, precisely, do subjects form into identity clusters and seek control over territories? Is Charles Taylor correct in assuming that what is at stake here is a quest for individual/group

authenticity,[4] or should we, following Marx, stand Taylor on his feet and orient instead to concrete relations of power between situated subjects and identity formations? That is, should we not be looking beyond ethnic/national identities as such, to consider the links between these formations and other discourses of power/knowledge?

Little, perhaps, can be expected from ethnic nationalism in this regard, as it has fallen greatly in stature since its zenith as a European justification of the singular nation-state.[5] No self-respecting theorist of the White Male First World would make an argument in support of this kind of 'pure particularity' today. But liberal multiculturalism has bestowed itself with a profound philosophical lineage, and presents itself as a universalistic discourse capable of solving 'the problem of ethnic diversity' wherever it might be found. Hence it would not be too unfair to ask whether this discourse lives up to its own standards of justice, recognition, and dialogue. Here, unfortunately, there is a great shortcoming.

First of all, the texts of the leading proponents of liberal multiculturalism are based upon a constitutive blindness to the links between the system of nation-states and a network of interlocking axes of domination and exploitation. Never do we read of racism, sexism, homophobia, capitalist exploitation, or the domination of nature. It is as though the system of states has sprung up in a vacuum, as though, for example, one can understand the genocide of Great Turtle Island as merely an accidental and unfortunate 'failure of recognition' rather than as a concerted and conscious effort to acquire spaces and resources for the expansion of the Euro-capitalist ecumene under the sign of two new national formations: 'Canada' and 'the United States of America.' It is as though one can understand the employment of women of colour in Canadian sweatshops and upper-class family homes without reference to racist hierarchies or the logic of capitalist (re)production – when one woman leaves the home to participate in the money economy, another has to take her place.[6] While all too willing to give the often unwanted and generally meaningless gift of 'cultural recognition,' multiculturalism as liberal theory and state policy remains staunchly silent on inequalities and injustices that are intimately entwined with the system of states it so desperately wishes to preserve, and thus fails to live up to one of its own highest values.

This ideology does not fare much better in meeting its own standard regarding recognition. There is a fundamental problem in Charles Taylor's handling of the Hegelian narrative, since the recognition that he advocates is not equal, reciprocal, and freely given, but a partial and grudgingly bestowed *gift* from a canonical self group to a series of problematic others.[7] As Taylor notes, "truly recognizing difference" involves "recognizing the *equal value* of different ways of being."[8] But Taylor finds it difficult to make this move. It bothers him that those advocating a 'politics of recognition' demand that "we all *recognize* the equal value of different cultures; that we not only let them survive, but acknowledge their *worth*."[9] This reticence is based on two points which Taylor is unwilling to accept. First, while he emphasizes the positive contribution that recognition makes to identity formation, he is less willing to acknowledge the damage that can be done through its absence. Indeed, when he comes to speak about how the process of recognition can *fail,* he is always careful to put the claims in the mouths of others. This is apparent when he writes about the concept of 'misrecognition' as it is used in so-called 'identity politics.' "The demand for recognition in these… cases [minority groups, feminism, multiculturalism] is given urgency by the *supposed* links between recognition and identity…"[10] In *The Malaise of Modernity,* Taylor writes that "[e]qual recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it, *according to a widespread modern view.*"[11] Taylor goes on to acknowledge that refusal of recognition, or non-recognition, can be a "form of repression," but again he hedges by suggesting that the importance of this refusal may be "exaggerated."[12] Taylor himself claims to be one of those who believes very strongly in the 'links between recognition and identity.' So why does he degrade this link to the status of a 'widely held supposition' and 'exaggeration'? Taylor fails to inform us, and thereby fails to meet his own standard for mutual recognition.

Finally, let us consider the extent to which liberal multiculturalism has lived up to its commitment to 'dialogue.' The responses of two First Nations writers to Canadian state policy might be instructive here. Jean Morisset is unequivocal in his denunciation of the 'myth' that compels the Métis to "participate joyously as a cog in the multicultural machine."[13] Marianne Boelscher-Ignace and Ron Ignace see multiculturalism as denying the right of Aboriginal peoples to what Will Kymlicka would call their own 'societal cultures', and therefore as "simply a more subtle form of domination than the overt racist and assimilationist policies of previous decades and centuries."[14] In a similar vein, Himani Bannerji has noted that "some among us [Canadian 'immigrants,' 'ethnics,' 'visible minorities'] …demanded the end of racist capitalism – and instead we got 'multiculturalism.'"[15] These kinds of arguments have also been advanced in the global context by post-colonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha, who has expressed his suspicions regarding a "multiculturalist pluralism that dreams of a federation of 'minority' or ethnic groups stitched together in a multi-culti quilt." Such efforts "aspire towards the assimilative" and "neglect the problems of power differentials, conflicts of interest, and cultural dissonance."[16] With reference to heterosexism in the United States, Judith Butler has argued that "the struggle for rights and entitlements… is liberal in the sense that it is… not interested in radical social transformation. It is interested in getting access to existing rights. And making sure existing rights are equally distributed. And when politics becomes rights based in the US it is usually very normalizing."[17]

Even though these objections have been repeatedly voiced since at least the early 1980s, they have been utterly ignored by the leading figures of liberal multiculturalist theory.[18] The problem of the limits of the liberal conception of dialogue has been aptly diagnosed by Bikhu Parekh:

> To call contemporary western society liberal is not only to homogenize and oversimplify it but also to give liberals a moral and cultural monopoly of it and treat the rest as illegitimate and troublesome intruders.[19]

Parekh here raises the question of what J.F. Lyotard has called *differends,* cases where "the regulation of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom."[20] Nation-states, in differentially allocating the power to impose a specific – and often violent – resolution to troublesome conversations, have tended to function as differend-producing *machines.*[21] While this characterization may seem somewhat polemical, it would be difficult to deny the massive proliferation of one-sided 'conversations' within the Eurocolonial system, ranging from genocide to slavery to coercive assimilation. It also seems clear that the more universalizing a given pole of identification, the more violent, destructive, and long-lasting will be the differends it produces. Here we might consider the case of the British Empire, which has bequeathed a legacy of bitter struggle to peoples around the world, or that of the US Empire, which appears as I write to be taking this process to new heights of destruction and misery in Iraq and Afghanistan (to name only two of the most visible examples).

What can be done about these unequal relations of power? Are they not a constitutive feature of any social order? Unless one is willing to make an appeal to a transparent society, one has to concede that differends will always be with us. Yet this concession need not necessarily lead to an uncritical acceptance of the system of racist, heterosexist, capitalist nation-states, nor even to an advocacy of its slow progression towards a democracy 'to come.' Rather, I would pose the following question: if differends are always going to be with us, how might we *minimize* both their quantity and destructive potential? On the assumption that mass, universalizing identifications lead to mass differends, we would want to reduce the scope of such identifications. But this is very difficult to achieve within a system of nation(s)-states that tends rather to *maximize* and *massify* poles of identification through their articulation with a multi-leveled bureaucratic system. It is no accident, I would argue, that the style of dialogue which animates liberal multiculturalism is highly monological. The system of nation(s)-states limits the possibilities for dialogue to an us-them form played out in a context where those who possess a state articulation have an advantage over those who do not, and takes advantage of 'productive' interlocks between nation-states and racism, heterosexism, capitalism, and the domination of nature.

Thus I would suggest that multiculturalism and ethnic nationalism are both misguided – neither reforming the structural principle of the system of states nor altering its current configuration can have the effect of minimizing differends. This can only be achieved by challenging the underlying principle of articulation between subjects, nations and states; that is, by exploring new kinds of community that break away from the Hegelian recognition-theoretic, that push beyond the 'horizon' of European notions of nation and state, self and other. Only if those whom Parekh calls 'the rest' are not treated as 'illegitimate' interlocutors, only if *all* aspects of *all* of the critiques that have been leveled against liberal multiculturalism are addressed, can there be any hope of further advances toward justice, mutual recognition, and a truly open and equal dialogue. Only in this way can we begin to move from state multiculturalism as 'deep diversity'[22] – that is, as more well-managed difference within an already-instituted social space saturated by relations of domination and exploitation – to multiculturalism as radical imaginary – that which would dig so deep that it might even, with time, show the way beyond the system of racist, heterosexist, capitalist nation-states itself.

Notes

1 In the interest of readability, I will no longer place the words 'ethnicity' or 'nationality' in quotes. The reader is invited to consider these terms as under contest, along with all references to 'ethnic groups' such as 'English,' 'French,' 'Chinese'. Any 'problems' of 'diversity' such groups might 'cause' should be treated in the same way, that is, as discursive constructs which constrain and enable fields of action and signification.

2 For the purposes of my argument, I am treating civic nationalism as a variant of multiculturalism, i.e. as one way of attempting to modify the structural principle of the system of nation-states. There are of course other ways of categorizing these ideologies. The work of Jan Pieterse is particularly interesting in this regard, e.g. "Varieties of Ethnic Politics and Ethnicity Discourse." *The Politics of Difference: Ethnic Premises in a World of Power.* Eds. E. Wilmsen & P. McAllister. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

3 See Richard J.F. Day. *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.

4 Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition." *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition.* Ed. Amy Gutman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

5 I am thinking here, of course, of the line that leads to G.W.F Hegel, and 'ends' with his *Phenomenology of Spirit.*

6 On Canadian sweatshops, see Roxana Ng, *Homeworking: Home Office or Home Sweatshop? Report on Current Conditions of Homeworkers in Toronto's Garment Industry* (Toronto: UNITE, Ontario District Council, 1999. On the Canadian 'nanny industry', see Pauline Hwang, 'Racism, sexism and Canadian immigration' (http://colours.mahost.org/articles/hwang.html).

7 For a sustained critique of the multicultural gift of recognition, see Richard J.F. Day "Who is this 'we' that gives the gift? Native American political theory and 'the Western tradition,'" in *Critical Horizons* 2:2, p. 173-201.

8 Taylor, Charles. *The Malaise of Modernity.* Concord: Anansi, 1991. p. 51, emphasis in original.

9 Taylor, "Politics of Recognition," p. 64, emphases in original.

10 Taylor, "Politics of Recognition," p. 25, emphasis in original.

11 Taylor, *Malaise,* p. 49, emphasis added.

12 Taylor, *Malaise,* p. 50.

13 Morriset, Jean. "The Native Path and its Trance-Cultural Connections." *Multiculturalism in a World of Leaking Boundaries.* Ed. Dieter Haselbach. Munster: LIT, 1998. p. 106.

14 Boelscher-Ignace, Marianne & Ron Ignace. "The Old Wolf in Sheep's Clothing? Canadian Aboriginal Peoples and Multiculturalism." *Multiculturalism in a World of Leaking Boundaries.* Ed. D. Haselbach. Muenster: LIT, 1998. p. 153.

15 Bannerji, Himani. "On the Dark Side of the Nation: Politics of Multiculturalism and the State of "Canada." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 31:3 (1996), p. 105.

16 Bhabha, H. & J. Comaroff. "Speaking of Postcoloniality, in the Continuous Present: A Conversation." *Relocating Postcolonialism.* Eds. David Theo Goldberg & Ato Quayson. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. p. 17.

17 Interview with Judith Butler, 'The desire for philosophy', in *Lola* No. 2 (2001), <http://www.lolapress.org/elec2/artenglish/butl_e.htm>.

18 Indeed, postcolonial theorists and activists have been struggling since the late 1950s to bring to attention the many ways in which liberalism relies upon a very deep-rooted Eurocentrism.

19 Parekh, Bhikhu. *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory.* London: Macmillan Press, 2000. p. 112.

20 Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Differend.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988. p. 9.

21 Claude Denis' *We Are Not You* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1997) offers a compelling discussion of this feature of relations between the Canadian state and aboriginal peoples.

22 Taylor, Charles. *Hegel.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975. p. 461.