Multiculturalism Without Multiple Cultures?
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Anne Phillips's *Multiculturalism without Culture* and Tariq Modood's *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* are two very important and highly topical books. At a time when multiculturalism seems to be under assault from all sides, these sober and sophisticated defences of the multicultural political project deserve to be widely read. In this response, I would like to focus on just three themes common to both books of particular concern to me. First I consider the appropriateness of the word 'multiculturalism' to describe their positions. Then I examine their accounts of the relationship between essentialism and anti-essentialism. Finally I explore the role they give to political representation as a form of public recognition.

With regard to the issue of terminology, although there is doubtless an urgent need to restate the case for the political project that Phillips and Modood wish to defend, I nevertheless wonder if 'multiculturalism' is the right word to describe it. Let me consider each part of the word in turn.

Both reject an essentialist conception of culture – for reasons I shall discuss briefly below. Modood then goes further than Phillips. While she remains happy to refer to 'cultures' and 'cultural groups' in formulating her own position (P 8-9), Modood wants replace 'culture' and 'group' with 'identity' and 'difference'. Hence his declaration that his 'normative starting point is the politics of recognition of difference or respect for identities' (M 37). I side with Modood on this question of terminology. It seems to me that the word 'culture' is neither general nor specific enough to do useful work in this context. On the one hand, it is not general enough to be used to describe the way in which collective identities are formed by processes of differentiation. This is because it carries connotations of shared beliefs, norms, habits, etc. which may or may not apply in particular cases of identity-formation. For instance, a group may be formed by a process of racialization, where this process makes no reference to ideas of shared practices and values. On the other hand, 'culture' is not specific enough to describe the dynamics by means of which relations of inequality, exploitation and oppression are reproduced. Here a range of important identity-markers, including race, ethnicity and religion, are likely to serve much better (M 39; cf. P 55-58).

Modood is happier with the prefix 'multi' since, he suggests, it effectively alerts us to the fact that people have different identities, based on a variety of identity-markers, associated different socio-economic positions, advantages and disadvantages, histories and trajectories (44). I would argue, however, that the fundamental problem with this prefix is that it suggests these differences take a specific form – namely, that multiple cultures are entirely separate from one another and internally homogenous. In this context, consider Amartya Sen's critique of a conception of multiculturalism as a 'plural monoculturalism' (cited in M 89), and Uma Narayan's critique of a 'package picture of culture' (cited in P 27). It also follows, I would suggest, that the prefix 'multi' emphasizes what differentiates us from one another rather than what we have in common. Given that both Phillips and Modood believe that it

is important to balance the recognition of difference with a concern for integration, this matters.

I hope I have done enough to show that this is not a merely semantic issue. Even if one agrees with Nietzsche that words are 'pockets into which now this now that, now several things at once have been put' (1880: §33), it is nevertheless the case that right here and now it is expected that a certain number of things go into the multicultural pocket. And, if Phillips and Modood don't want those things there, then they should think about abandoning the word. Of course, this argument will only be persuasive if there is a word or phrase that would work better. The problem is that it is not easy to think of one, especially because 'multiculturalism' enjoys wide popular currency, and thus gives potential readers a good idea of what Phillips and Modood will be talking about. Having said this, I do wonder if something like Iris Young's idea of 'differentiated solidarity' (2000: 197-98) might serve better. To my mind, this notion has two distinct advantages over 'multiculturalism': first, it refers to difference rather than culture, and, second, it emphasizes the importance of integration. Although this alternative has no popular currency, I still think, for the reasons I have given, that it (or something very like it) is worthy of serious consideration as a replacement for 'multiculturalism'.

I now turn to an examination of the relationship between essentialism and anti-essentialism. Both Phillips and Modood contend that multiculturalism as a political project should be linked to a non-essentialist account of culture. However, it cannot be disputed that a good number of political actors endorse essentialist accounts of their own culture. Given this difference in perspective, my question is this: if anti-essentialists presume to defend multiculturalism, and to make recommendations about the form that it should take in practice, then what credence should they give to the essentialist beliefs held by (at least some of) the people to whom their recommendations would apply? Let me consider briefly two responses, neither of which feels satisfactory to me.

The anti-essentialist theorist could decide fully to respect the relevant political actors, where this includes respect for the contents of their views. The theorist says: I know some political actors have false beliefs about the character of their groups; but I understand that these beliefs are important to them and shape their sense of identity; hence I shall formulate principles and recommend policies which take these beliefs fully into account. This response seems plausible, I would suggest, since it appears to be no more than what the defender of multiculturalism does all the time: to argue that equal concern should be shown for all individuals, regardless of the contents of their beliefs (although some clearly defined limit will of course be placed on their behaviour).

In spite of the plausibility of this response, I do have serious misgivings about it. To begin with, I would suggest that, in a significant number of cases, the principles and policies advocated by anti-essentialist theorists may have the perverse effect of strengthening the essentialist beliefs of political actors. This is because those principles and policies single out certain cultural groups for

special recognition, and by doing they so may confirm to members of such groups that they have a unique and timeless identity. Furthermore, I would also suggest that the essentialist beliefs of political actors in practice threaten to undermine the multicultural project. For Phillips, holders of essentialist views may deploy them in order to reinforce stereotypes and hence to protect patterns of inequality (P 155). Modood, for his part, criticises forms of ideological thinking which dichotomise the world into starkly opposing perspectives, and thus undermine the possibility of finding 'common ground and negotiated accommodation' (M 130; cf. P 64). Since it is plausible to consider essentialism a form of ideology in this sense, Modood's critique should apply to it too. So if the multicultural project strengthens essentialist beliefs, and if the holding of such beliefs may undermine this project, then I would conclude that the anti-essentialist theorist should feel very uncomfortable about seeking to respect the essentialist views of political actors.

An alternative response to the problem I have described would be for the anti-essentialist theorist to seek radically to deconstruct the essentialist views held by political actors. In this case, the theorist says: I know some political actors have false beliefs about the character of their groups; these beliefs have damaging practical consequences for multiculturalism; part of my task therefore is to unburden them of these illusions and to convince them of the correctness of anti-essentialism. It is possible, although by no means necessary, for this response to be linked to what might be called a political project of deconstruction, such as that described by Nancy Fraser as the attempt to sustain a 'field of multiple, debinarized, fluid, ever-shifting differences' (1995: 83).

The obvious objection to this response is that it would appear to disrespect the political actors concerned. Indeed, from their perspective it may be difficult to see a difference between critiquing their essentialist views, and mocking their most deeply held beliefs. However, I am not convinced about this objection just as it stands. Indeed, I have considerable sympathy for the claim that to respect a person requires us to criticise their views when we disagree with them. Not to do so – to accept their views, no matter how bizarre and absurd we find them – is to patronise rather than to respect. Having said this, I can also see the sense in Modood's claim that '[t]here is a distinction between the public recognition and respect for identities and beliefs and the moral evaluation of the same; the former is possible without the latter' (M 66). Having failed to come to a clear conclusion on this issue, I shall just say this. Where political actors hold essentialist beliefs, and where acting on those beliefs will have adverse consequences for the multicultural project which Phillips and Modood outline, there must an attitude which the theorist can and must take to those beliefs which is neither over-respectful nor under-respectful, neither wholly uncritical nor savagely deconstructive. I have to confess, however, that I don't at present know how to delineate that attitude.

Finally, I want to look briefly at the relationship between public recognition and political representation. Both Phillips and Modood begin from a commitment to equality, the former from a 'principle of equality' which she hopes will be

able to address both cultural and gender injustices (P 2-3), the latter from a conception of 'civic equality' or 'equal citizenship' (M vii, 14). Both, as we know, think that this commitment implies that some cultural differences deserve some degree of public recognition; and both think that such public recognition will include forms of political representation. Thus Phillips is in favour of increasing 'the political representation of cultural or national groups' where appropriate (P 167), and Modood suggests that 'groups marked by difference may need modes of political and civic society representation' (M 132). For both thinkers, then, a commitment to justice as equality leads to a commitment to democracy as political representation.

I want to raise two issues about this relationship between justice and democracy. First, bearing in mind my comments about essentialism, I am concerned that the practical measures which Phillips and Modood propose to achieve political representation will confirm and strengthen the essentialist beliefs of certain people about their groups. To be sure, Phillips seeks to make clear that she supports 'an equitable representation of the diversity of identities, interests and perspectives' rather than a distribution of powers to groups (P 168). And Modood says he favours 'the inclusion of a diversity of backgrounds and sensibilities, not delegates or corporate structures' (M 82). However, when efforts are made to increase the representation of German Turks or British Muslims in their respective political institutions, it is hard to see how these fine distinctions will make a difference to them. To determine that a particular group is one deserving of special representation may confirm its essentialist self-understanding, or may encourage it to develop such a self-understanding if it presently lacks one.

Second, I have shown that, for Phillips and Modood, justice implies democracy. But what if a democratic body makes decisions which are felt to be contrary to justice? Take Young's discussion of the Oregon health plan. As part of its consultations about residents' health care priorities, the State of Oregon conducted a telephone survey about people's attitudes to disability. Young tells us that '[t]he majority of respondents said that they would rather be dead than wheelchair-bound or blind. They said that their lives would not be worth living if they became disabled' (1997: 42). As a result, funding levels for people with disabilities were slashed. Young uses this example to show how difficult it can be to understand the other. But I want to draw a different point from it. If we assume *arguendo* that the survey met adequate standards governing democratic consultation, and if we accept the plausible claim that the decision concerning people with disabilities failed to show them due recognition, then here we have a case in which a fair democratic process produces a grotesquely unjust outcome. My question is simply this: what would Phillips and Modood do in such a case? Would they accept the funding outcome since it emerged from an undeniably democratic process? Or would they reject the outcome since it failed to meet (independently defined) standards of justice? I think it should be clear to see that dangers lie either way.

References

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