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More on Culture and Representation

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In their thoughtful comments, Judith Squires and Simon Thompson help clarify the different approaches to culture and multiculturalism taken in these two books. They also point unerringly to aspects of my own argument where I have felt especially vulnerable to criticism. I have some minor quibbles with their readings of my text, and will note these as I go along. But I want to organise my remarks around the two main questions they raise for me. (1) Is it theoretically coherent, or indeed politically effective, to reject essentialised and reified conceptions of culture yet continue to promote a version of multiculturalism? Might it not be better to address the inequalities currently associated with culture in the broader framework of 'differentiated solidarity' (Simon Thompson) or 'multiple inequalities' (Judith Squires)? (2) Do I leave myself adequate resources for challenging existing patterns of under-representation when I reject corporatist forms of group representation? To put this the other way round, if I continue to argue for special measures to achieve a more equitable representation, don't I thereby confirm the 'essentialist self-understanding' (Thompson) of currently under-represented groups?

(1) *Is it either coherent or useful to reject essentialised conceptions of culture yet continue to promote a version of multiculturalism?* It is symptomatic of the slipperiness of notions of culture (helped along no doubt by my own resistance to definitions that prematurely pin things down) that Squires and Thompson give such different readings of the contrast between my own conception and that

found in Tariq Modood. Both Modood and I criticise essentialised conceptions of culture. But while Squires sees Modood as more sceptical towards the essentialist challenge, and retaining a stronger conception of culture than she finds in my work, Thompson reads me as the relative moderate, with Modood more radically seeking to replace the entire language of 'culture' and 'cultural groups' by one of identity and difference. I don't think either gets it quite right.

Squires, I think, understates the continuing importance of notions of culture in my work, suggesting that my main reason for retaining *some* notion of culture is simply my recognition that people live their lives through reification, hence that refusing to talk of culture is meaningless. My reasons go deeper than this, and I'm glad to have this opportunity to make my position a bit clearer. I would say, rather, that our ways of being in the world involve universal needs and emotions (food, love, fear, for example), but culturally specific ways of interpreting and expressing these. 'Culture', in that sense, is an inescapable part of being human. Further, one of the problems to which multiculturalism was supposed to be the answer is that some of those culturally specific ways of interpreting and relating to others get hyped up as the only way to be. Where this happens, cultural difference becomes a marker of superiority or inferiority. When cultural difference is further equated with *ethnic* difference (rather than the many class or regional or occupational differences that also involve specific ways of interpreting and expressing and relating), it lends itself to ethnic reductionism and racist hierarchy. Culture therefore matters, both as a way of describing the historically shifting ways we inhabit our world, and because of its persistent role in sustaining social hierarchies. My main point is simply that this should not be conceived as culture with a capital 'C', culture as the explanation of everything we do or say, culture as *either* culture X *or* culture Y, culture as profound difference.

What does this imply about multiculturalism? Thompson makes the plausible point that the prefix *multi* already implies precisely the reified notion of culture I am trying to avoid, since it suggests the existence of multiple cultures 'entirely separate from one another and internally homogeneous'. The description is surely overstated - I doubt if anyone thinks of cultures as *entirely* separate things – but the point remains. It resonates, moreover, with my own continuing anxiety about whether it is coherent to defend a multiculturalism without 'culture'. In the book, I give two main reasons for this: my scepticism about the cosmopolitan alternative which, in most of its current forms, threatens to reinstate a hierarchy of cultures; and my perception that, in the current European context, attacks on multiculturalism represent a coded return to narrower and more exclusionary notions of national identity. The first might be considered unfair (though I'm not yet convinced that it is), while the second is very much an argument from political contingency. Given the risks Thompson notes about *any* version of multiculturalism encouraging us back into essentialised understandings of culture, is either of these arguments adequate?

Squires and Thompson both indicate possible alternatives. Squires suggests we might shift the focus from multiculturalism to multiple inequalities. This would mean taking on not just the two equality strands (race/ethnicity and gender) she rightly identifies as the central preoccupations in my book, but addressing the full six strands of current EU thinking on discrimination: sex, racial and ethnic origin, disability, age, religion, and sexual orientation. Addressing all these together could just condemn us to a politics of competing groups, but it might, more promisingly, mean embracing a 'diversity agenda in which we are all complex individuals seeking an equal opportunity to thrive in the market place' (I read Squires, perhaps wrongly, as endorsing this). Thompson favours something that draws on Iris Marion Young's notion of

differentiated solidarity, which he sees as an advance on multiculturalism because 'it refers to difference rather than culture' and 'emphasises the importance of integration'. Neither author has space to spell out the alternative in depth, but both seem to be suggesting that it would be better to place 'culture' within a continuum of different kinds of difference and different bases for inequality, and then focus on the complex relationship between these for different individuals.

I have some sympathy with this approach (which also surfaces in Modood's argument about difference), and certainly share the view that we should take 'culture' off its pedestal as the foundational source of difference. But thinking through the alternatives also makes it clearer to me why I want to hold on to the notion of multiculturalism. I don't think the inequalities, hierarchies and discriminations currently associated with perceptions of cultural difference are simply one of the many ways in which a multiplicity of differences gets tangled up with inequality. In the context of contemporary Europe, I see the differences associated with 'culture' as more specifically bound up with past and present patterns of migration, and thereby with majority/ minority relations of power. One of the points I stress in my book is that it is people identified with minority or non-Western groups who are now seen as having 'cultural practices' or 'cultural traditions', while those associated with a majority or dominant culture are either regarded as self-directing autonomous beings or else as shaped by their more vaguely described 'society' (usually presumed to be both wider and more open than 'culture'). This is a very specific discourse of culture, profoundly marked by patterns of global migration and formulations of national identity. So while my arguments about multiculturalism are indeed driven by that wider concern for equality – as is also the case for Modood – I think we risk

losing that specificity if we turn from a language of multiculturalism to one of differentiated solidarity or multiple inequalities.

(2) *Is it coherent to challenge existing patterns of under-representation yet refuse corporatist forms of group representation?*

Judith Squires correctly (in my view) identifies our attitudes towards corporatism as a major area of disagreement between myself and Modood. Modood thinks of cultures in terms of a Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblances, not as organised around definitive values and beliefs, and this makes him wary of corporatist forms of recognition that would involve the representatives of 'a' culture speaking in one voice. But he is unwilling to repudiate these entirely. I tend to think this is because he has not fully engaged with the concerns – especially strongly voiced by minority women - about groups controlling and disciplining their dissident members. From my perspective, the refusal of corporatism is the one really clear policy implication of my critique of culture.

But if I refuse corporatism, how can I nonetheless support measures to increase the political representation of people from minority cultural groups? Squires generously defends my position on this, arguing that it is indeed coherent to want to increase the representation of people sharing the markers and experiences of minority groups, while still insisting that they are not group representatives. Thompson is less convinced, arguing that any such measures risk confirming groups in a sense of themselves as separate and distinct, or even encouraging those previously more open to develop such an understanding. The difficulty, as I see it, is to steer a course between the kind of representation that

installs group representatives as the definitive voice of 'their' group, thereby masking all kinds of internal disagreements, and an overly individualised alternative in which special initiatives for women or ethnocultural minorities become little more than a way of opening up opportunities for a political career.

These arguments have been well rehearsed in relation to women, where there is by now a broad consensus about the difficulties of presuming a 'women's interest' or thinking of women politicians as qualified to speak for women as a group. But that's not to say we should regard the beneficiaries of political gender quotas as simply the lucky individuals who got their chance to compete on the political stage. Most of those who have supported special measures to improve the representation of women would feel considerable disappointment if the newly elected women politicians felt *no obligation at all* to pursue policy initiatives relating to equal pay or sexual harassment or the appalling conviction rates for rape. We cannot, that is, think of them as group representatives operating in a corporatist structure of group representation – but that is not to say they carry no responsibility towards their group.

That's broadly the route I would want to follow as regards the under-representation of people from ethnocultural minorities, and one of the points to note about it is that it does not provide us with guarantees. It is, as I've said in a different context, a shot in the dark, something that makes it considerably more likely that a wider range of interests and perspectives will enter the political arena, but 'cannot bring with it a certificate of interests addressed or even a guarantee of good intent' (Phillips 1995, 82). Simon Thompson asks what happens when a democratic body makes decisions felt to be at odds with justice. This is an issue, of course, that has much wider ramifications than the discussion about multiculturalism and political representation, but is clearly relevant to any argument that employs notions of equality or justice to justify changes in

political institutions. My main response is simply that politics does not and cannot provide guarantees. Personally, I favour human rights legislation that sets constraints on what even the most democratically constituted assembly can choose to do. But I think it entirely possible that the appointed judges interpreting a Human Rights Act might act, on occasion, less justly than the elected assembly, just as it is entirely possible that political representatives from an ethnocultural minority might be in full agreement with the orthodoxies of dominant groups. Whether we get closer to equality and justice depends ultimately on political mobilisation, which is perhaps a further way of explaining why I oppose forms of multiculturalism that cede power and authority to cultural groups.

Phillips, Anne (1995) *The Politics of Presence: the political representation of gender, ethnicity and race* Oxford University Press.