STRANGERS AND LIBERALS

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C HARLES TAYLOR'S *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"** is a meditation on the rise of the modern demand for recognition, which he suggests is at the root of contemporary calls for the protection and elevation of specific minority cultures in majority societies. He connects the rise of this demand to the collapse of social hierarchies and the persistence of the desire for honor that such hierarchies once fulfilled. In a democratic era, we seek equal recognition and equal dignity. Both of these quests are fundamentally associated with the intensification of a desire to achieve individual identity and the ideal of authenticity to which it has given rise.

For Taylor, the difficulty with authenticity as an ideal is that it undermines the realization that a "crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally *dialogical* character" (p. 32). Relying on the insights of Bakhtin, he contrasts the dialogical character of life with what he calls the monological ideal. The monological ideal seeks to limit the role of dialogue to the genesis of identity in language and self-understanding and not give dialogue a role in the rest of social life. In his reading, the monological ideal is expressed, not as an overt denial of the dialogical character of identity formation and its continued expression throughout life, but, paradoxically, as a response to the lack of recognition accorded individuals in modern life, a consequence of the persistence of the demand for dignity in a democratic age.

Taylor writes, "The politics of difference grows organically out of the politics of universal dignity through one of those shifts with which we are long familiar, where a new understanding of the human social condition imparts a radically new meaning to an old principle" (p. 39). The issue of

dignity comes to be framed in terms that are most sensibly addressed by the deployment of state power. Problems associated with citizenship and its vicissitudes, the economic distribution of social goods, and discrimination against particular groups of people have grown out of the original demand for equal dignity and present solutions that in themselves seem to go against the quest for equal dignity—meeting the demands of minorities to exclude majorities, to take Taylor's most prominent example.

These solutions reflect a paradox at the heart of liberalism. Neutrality itself is called into question as a value because the politics of equal dignity are pressed upon minorities in the context of a hegemonic culture to which they must conform. Seemingly, Taylor writes, liberalism has to assume the existence of some universal, difference-blind principles, but those very principles stand in the way of a robust realization of the core values that liberals espouse.

How, then, might people negotiate through the thicket of issues presented by this paradox? Taylor uses the example of the Quebeckers of Canada to explore what he considers to be some of the most important issues raised by the quest for recognition. He examines the collective goals of Quebeckers to design policies that would enable their cultural survival within the larger context of Canadian society, especially policies that implement French as the official language of Quebec. "Policies aimed at survival," he writes, "actively seek to *create* members of the community, for instance, in their assuring that future generations continue to identify as French-speakers" (pp. 58-59). He distinguishes between fundamental liberties that should never be infringed upon, on the one hand, and privileges and immunities, on the other. Seeking to preserve a right of "survivance" within a liberal polity, he endorses policies that might in a certain light be seen as infringements upon liberal rights but which might better be seen as strong privileges and immunities, capable of bending if strict adherence to them fails to accommodate the survival of group identities. In that case, they would damage the collective goods ultimately expressive of the deepest moral sentiments of liberalism. Judgments concerning the integrity of a culture would have an important place in debates concerning the application of rules regarding rights.

This nonprocedural liberalism, as Taylor calls it, elicits judgments grounded in comparisons of the relative value of different identities and cultures. It is at this point that his argument seems to flounder. He disengages from the putative concerns raised by the existence of multicultural conflict by issuing a covering statement concerning the cultures worthy of attention and support. While suggesting that there is a good sense in the presumption that all cultures are approximately of equal worth, he also writes,

I would like to maintain that there is something valid in this presumption, but that the
presumption is by no means unproblematic, and involves something like an act of faith.
As a presumption, the claim is that all human cultures that have animated whole societies
over some considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human
beings. I have worded it this way to exclude partial cultural milieux within a society, as
well as short phases of a major culture. There is no reason to believe that, for instance,
the different art forms of a given culture should all be of equal, or even considerable,
value; and every culture can go through phases of decadence. (P. 66)

This comment leads in an unfortunate direction, as Susan Wolf notes in her
response to Taylor: "At least one of the serious harms that a failure of
recognition perpetuates has little to do with the question of whether the
person or the culture who goes unrecognized has anything important to say
to all human beings. The need to correct these harms, therefore, does not
depend on the presumption or the confirmation of the presumption that a
particular culture is distinctively valuable to people outside the culture"
(p. 79). One might add, as Wolf notes, that by framing his argument at the
macro level of culture Taylor evades the nub of political conflict and quarrel,
which in his description originates precisely at the individual level of
interpersonal conflict and consensus.

There is also a puzzle in Taylor's formulation concerning the valorization
of that which has persisted over that which is new. Can change itself ever be
endorsed as a value if the only legitimate cultures are those that are already
quasi-permanent? What political and cultural arrangements might enable the
existence of "partial milieux," of an avant garde, or more generally of the
possibility of anything new under the sun? Why are not such temporary,
ephemeral, evasive, mysterious, and yet exciting and wondrous elements of
human existence not highly valued?

Here, Taylor's overt hostility to "subjectivist, half-baked neo-Nietzschean
theories" (p. 70)—presumably advanced by contemporary poststructuralists
and their American counterparts—disguises a covert anxiety about the more
general course that modern life has taken. One might dismiss these new
Nietzscheans (and for the sake of full disclosure, I must confess that I have
been identified as one of them), as Taylor does, to secure one's own world
view. But from another vantage point, far from the reductionist vision of
power that Taylor accuses these thinkers of promulgating (rather than ana-
lyzing), their antiessentialist investigations of the partial character of cultures
and the situations of those beings inhabiting them can be seen as enabling
them to make a substantial contribution to the debate on multiculturalism.
From this perspective, they do not, despite Taylor's assertion, reduce every-
thing to a nihilistic incoherence. Instead, they analyze the contingent, plot
the ambiguities of meaning that accompany all attempts to impose identities,

and attempt to develop ethical ways of addressing the incoherence inscribed in life itself.

It is a major flaw of this volume that Taylor's dismissal of the work of those inspired by poststructuralism is uncritically adopted by most of the other contributors. Not surprisingly, none of them supports his or her accusations with citation or close analysis of poststructuralist texts or arguments, even though for at least one of them—Amy Gutmann, in her introduction (the second longest essay in the book)—the bashing of "deconstructionists" is a major element of the critique of multiculturalism.

Gutmann's polemic illustrates a problem endemic among academic liberals these days. Thoughtful "deconstructionists"—of course, there are thoughtless ones, just like there are thoughtless liberals and communitarians—do not, contra Gutmann's suggestion, call the development of shared standards "masks for the will to political power of dominant, hegemonic groups" (p. 19). From the perspective to which I think she is referring, shared standards are the devices we use for the construction of meaning, but they remain constructs nonetheless. Indeed, her use of the phrase "will to political power" indicates a puzzling misunderstanding. The will to power is not particularly focused on how one is presented to state power but is deeply rooted in the circumstances that we share as humans. It is a starting point for analyses that explore some of the problematic differentiations inscribed upon our politics, insistent calls of nationalistic allegiances, gendered loyalties, racial dogmas, and religious fervors, to name a few of our diseases. Claims of identity, then, are based not only on a desire for recognition but also on the fears and hatreds associated with deep insecurities and resentments against others. The will to power, as read by neo-Nietzscheans like Gilles Deleuze, while related to the external expression of power through force, is not identical to it. Instead, it is the internal element which directs all attempts to organize power, whether addressed to the state or not.[1]

Indeed, Nietzsche came to characterize attempts to addesss the state, to engage in what is typically called "politics," as a sign of weakness. This is an antifascist insight. Working in the opposite direction, Gutmann's presumption that the will to power is already a will to "political power" inadvertently suggests that "deconstructionists" are engaged in an archaic politics akin to that of the Nazis. Surely Gutmann does not mean what she seems to be saying by the use of the phrase.

Or maybe, in a sense, she does. For many contemporary liberals, it seems as though all politics must by definition be a politics that addresses the state. This perspective on power, which reduces it to state power, informs the recent détente between the followers of Habermas and Rawls. Advocates of procedures that would somehow ensure communicative action and their counter-

parts who embrace a liberalism of fear recently have found a common ground in the slogan "procedural democracy." That form of democracy has as its exclusive site of struggle the contemporary state. Moreover, it is a state that is itself understood to be largely devoid of struggle and is presented as a place where through adequate procedures, all differences might be successfully negotiated.

But the descriptions of procedures advanced by these advocates only rarely address the substantive issues raised by such phenomena as multicultural conflict. And when one places these procedures in the context of the reactive retreat to the narrow middle ground that Taylor occupies between the unauthentic and the ethnocentric, reasonable people might well begin to think that there might be better ways of conceptualizing the problem, or at least supplements that would deal with the messy remainders. In other words, simply specifying which groups are worthy and which are not—Taylor's solution to the problem of the Quebeckers—might not be the best way to proceed. Instead, the continued deconstruction and reconstruction of the politics of identity, dangerous as it is, might also give shape to creative ways in which we might rethink political action, a virtual (reality) re-inhabiting of the *agon*.

That Taylor evades the alternative perspectives emerging from the new Nietzscheans is not completely surprising, given his deep commitment to the idea of dialogism and his relative neglect of perspectives that would acknowledge other sources of discord. (In *Sources of the Self*, however, he treated Nietzsche with much more respectful consideration than he does Nietzscheans in this volume.[2]) Moreover, he may be too committed to his ontology of harmony at this point to reassess and reevaluate the positions he has held for so long regarding the role of conflict in the constitution of political reality. Perhaps he has earned his resting place. But why does he name-call? Could his certitude, his rigidity and closure, be a symptom of a more general fear of the specter of "post"ness?

Taylor is followed too easily by some of the other contributors to this volume. Gutmann's introduction, in its discussion of multiculturalism on campus, distinguishes between tolerating and respecting differences but fails to acknowledge that in the social context of places like Princeton University and Amherst College such a distinction usually serves as a tactical deployment of the very intolerance of which Taylor himself warns. It is easy to destroy a position one disagrees with by ignoring it when you are in a position of power over the flow of what is to be labeled intellectually legitimate information. But toleration of other viewpoints in an intellectual setting means taking seriously and sympathetically the positions you oppose. It requires familiarity or acquaintance with the ideas of the other, a recognition

of the bias of your own position, especially your position of neutrality, and some reasoned explanation for your ultimate opposition to a position. That is what it means to *controvert*. Such work should not be confused with dismissal. Unfortunately, dismissal is the rhetorical tactic that dominates Gutmann's discussion of the "deconstructionist" position when she refers to it as being simply antireasonable and reductionist. She writes, "The threat of deconstructionism to intellectual life in the academy is two-fold: (1) It denies *a priori* that there are any reasonable answers to fundamental questions, and (2) it reduces every answer to an exercise of political power." But in a strange twist she continues by arguing that deconstructionism is particularly danger- ous in universities "because it can create its own reality, converting univer- sities into political battlefields rather than mutually respectful communities of substantial, sometimes even fundamental, intellectual disagreement" (p. 20). But universities, churches of reason, should be especially invulnerable to unreason and flagrant politicization. If Gutmann is willing to assert the alternative, that reality (even within universities) is a radical social construc- tion, to the extent that deconstructionists can *create* it, then it would behoove her to learn what deconstruction is. For surely she would need to employ the critical methods of Derrida to do battle with   Derrida, I presume. But she doesn't once demonstrate even a passing familiarity with the writings of those whom she putatively opposes, either through selectively quoting from their works, or engaging in a sustained critical analysis of a single text.

Nor, for that matter, are any of the works of contemporary acholars associated with multiculturalism in the academy addressed, by Gutmann, or by any other author included here. One would search in vain for reference to James Clifford, George Marcus, Michael Fischer, Julie Taylor, Donna Haraway, or Michael Taussig, people known loosely as the school of postmodern anthropology. Homi Bhabha, Anthony Appiah, Trinh T. Minh- Ha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, all of whom might be associated with the field of subaltern studies and who individually represent a wide variety of views, are never mentioned in this book. Within the context of the problems of multiculturalism beyond the academy in the United States, not a single essay in this volume (save Wolf's) discusses any of the issues closely associated with and constitutive of multicultural politics, such as the resur- gence of African American nationalism, the problem of street gangs and urban disintegration, gender inequality, gender identity, and queer politics, Latino identity, and the role of popular culture in the transformation and dissemination of culture. These issues are the bread and butter of such writers as George Lipsitz, Houston Baker, Patricia Williams, Mike Davis, Barbara Johnson, Robert Gooding-Williams, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Toni Morrison, Diana Fuss, Andrew Ross, Michele Wallace, Andrew Parker, bell

hooks, Sandra Cisneros, Patricia Rose, and Anne Norton. For these writers, and a vast array of others, what is at stake in the exploration of issues in multiculturalism is not only survivance but the possibility of creative engagement with others in ways that hold open the possibility of more than a mere tribal identification of like-minded people. Within discussions of multiculturalism in the academy, the only contemporary writer who is cited in this volume is the journalist Roger Kimball, author of a series of right-wing screeds against the "tenured radicals" corrupting the minds of America's youth. While Taylor suggests that Kimball is crude, he cites Kimball in basic agreement with his point, that we are choosing between "culture and barbarism" (p. 72).

Unfortunately, an engagement with the field of scholarship in the area of multicultural studies is far from the mind of any of the contributors to this volume. This absence gives the volume a strained quality, as though there is someone in the room studiously ignored. So Michael Walzer's response to Taylor does little to demonstrate anything but his agreement (p. 99), smoothing the waters over the liberal-communitarian debate in the presence of more threatening strangers. Walzer recasts Taylor's thesis slightly to accommodate his own position regarding membership, developed more fully in his *Spheres of Justice*. And while Steven Rockefeller makes a valid point concerning the problem of survivance as it applies to issues of religion, he more generally wrings his hands over the loss of "old universals" (p. 89). More generally, these writers for the most part do not reflect upon or contest any of the central claims made by Taylor concerning where and how liberalsim must "draw its lines."

Only Susan Wolf raises a note of opposition. In her response to Taylor, she points out that many of the battles concerning identity politics are not framed in geographical or language subcultural terms. Most prominently for her, issues of gender exemplify how much more complex the reconciliation of one culture to another is. How can one adapt the arguments Taylor raises for evaluating cultures to issues concerning gendered subordinations? One can't, is the short answer. More generally, her fear seems to be that Taylor lends himself to an instrumental justification for understanding others and other cultures (they might enrich "our" lives), more than he does for another justification for understanding other cultures (an appreciation of their otherness, a willingness to let otherness be in the world).

Wolf's note, in this regard, could constitute a first step in a journey that would eventually lead to Derrida's essay "Violence and Metaphysics."[3] In that essay, Derrida reflects on the possibility of there being a community of thinkers, using the work of Levinas to ask how otherness might be available to the task. Derrida's is an essay of extraordinary delicacy, in that it proceeds with an appreciation of the impossibility of acting in regard to an other

without somehow doing violence to the other one seeks to regard. Wolf's note could as well lead one to Julia Kristeva's elegant essay on cosmopolitanism, *Strangers to Ourselves*.[4] This is a study on the meaning of the foreigner, on the anxiety the foreigner gives rise to, and on the ways in which foreignness is always present. Kristeva identifies "our" foreignness, that is, the foreignness of we who inhabit one world, with Kant's longing for universal peace. Surely consideration of her formulations might have been of use to Taylor in his reflections on the rise of authenticity. In the context of North America, Wolf's note might lead one to William Connolly's study of the politics of identity and difference.[5] In that study, Connolly directly takes on the liberalism on display throughout so much of this volume.

Or,   well, the point here is not simply to fill in the blanks in scholarship in this volume but to indicate the intellectual refusals at work in its failure to engage the heterodox collection of thinkers who have taken as one of their primary objects of study the issues raised by the problem of multiculturalism. In the context of American education, this is the group—the postmodern, nihilist, fascist, communist, pederast, authoritarian, politically correct yahoos responsible for corrupting the youth of America—most studiously ignored from within the mainstream of the academy and attacked from outside the academy. In that sense, Gutmann's focus on academic politics is appropriate. But one then wonders about a political position that calls for *nonengagement* with a major group of thinkers, such as the new Nietzscheans and the entire range of students of multiculturalism I mentioned above. What does it mean to only tolerate them, as one tolerates racists and misogynists? Nonengagement, present throughout this volume, then becomes not merely poor scholarship but takes on a more ominous tone.

Taylor's choice of a "muddle ground" between homogeneity and self-immurement (p. 72) in the end remains convincing as a philosophical position only if one attends to the elegance of his formulations and ignores the messiness of the world to which those formulations might be applied. Once one looks outside one's volumes of Rousseau and Hegel and tries to study the complicated, contestable, and rarely settled issues involving struggles for identity, the flaws of this volume become pronounced. Uninformed by the nuances of contemporary scholarship in the field of multicultural studies and poststructuralism, anxiously ignoring the constructive energies of so many of their protagonists in the world outside study doors, the contributions to this volume speak to us, through their lack, of a world lost. It is a world of civility and intellectual contestation that proceeds with generosity to one's opponents. It is a world of universal peace. It is, of course, a world that has never existed, and one that hopefully never will. We are all of us, I think, saved by that fact.

NOTES

1. See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). See especially chap. 2, "Active and Reactive," especially sec. 6 (What Is the Will to Power?) and sec. 11 (Will to Power and Feeling of Power).

2. See *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1989). Taylor thinks through and with Nietzsche there, thinking about "his cruel dilemma" (p. 455), the dilemma associated with the jettisoning of benevolence. Taylor there wonders if that dilemma is the one we all must face. In this volume, I think Taylor can be said to have ceased to wonder.

3. In Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

4. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

5. William E. Connolly, *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

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