Anti-Essentialism in Multicultural Societies: Facilitating Multicultural Discourse through Tolerance of Cultural Pluralism

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Introduction

Essentialism suggests existence of pre-political public goods and foundational conceptual assumptions that are presumed universally applicable irrespective of the location and historical and cultural contexts. It implies subsistence of material and conceptual realities that are objectively present, knowable and fundamental rather than being politically constructed in social milieus.

Within the ideological paradigm of the modern capitalist society such conceptualizations as democracy, liberty, equality, free-market, individualism, rule of law, will of the people, are presumed foundational to the modern society disregarding the necessary political contextualization of such ideographic symbolisms in specific localities (Miller, 2002; Staniševski, 2005). I am not arguing that these conceptual assumptions are not indeed of importance for the persistence of modern capitalist societies. What I am suggesting in this paper is that their particular existence is a matter of political contestations and constant reinterpretations within specific historical and social contexts. What is considered as democratic or equitable differs significantly between different localities and at different points of historical development of particular societies.

Insistence on universal Truths undermines the value of understanding local contexts as grounds for social institutionalization of cultural practices and presents itself as an obstacle to tolerance of cultural differences. In times when the globe is engulfed in violent inter-cultural confrontations and neo-tribalism (Miller and Fox, 2006) perhaps it is more important to contextualize would-be universal propositions (Miller, 2002) rather than to envision the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992). It is perhaps necessary to question
conceptual essentialism itself, knowing that it is not likely that there ever will be an actual end of universals and essentialist propositions (Miller, 2002, p. 87). The postmodern thought in public administration has already presented numerous comprehensive critiques of essentialism, foundationalism and rationalism (Fox and Miller, 1995; Miller, 2002; Miller and Fox, 2006; McSwite, 2002; Stone, 1998; Spicer, 2001; Farmer, 1995, 2005). Approaching the topic from the perspective of multiculturalism in this paper I hope to build on this work.

Anti-essentialism, approached in here through discourse theories, implies that specific comprehensions of public goods are socially constructed interpretations developed in political processes of communicative interactions. Acknowledgement of pluralism of culturally grounded perspectives is as a double-edged sword. On one side it opens the possibility for marginal adjustments in cultural practices through multicultural policy deliberations, but it also increases the opportunity for emergence of conflicts that may result from incommensurability of cultural values.

In this paper I examine the value of tolerance for cultural differences in connecting culturally distinct social narratives. Tolerance of cultural differences safeguards against fundamentalist views (Habermas, 1994) and it may allow for a potential of facilitation of multicultural discourses, but it is not an essence in itself. Facilitation of multicultural discourses in particular situations may result in building multicultural understandings through connecting those portions of social experiences that are commonly shared in specific local and historic contexts (Pellizzoni, 2001). However, in other situations building-agreements may not be possible and initiation of multicultural deliberations itself may be all that can be achieved (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996).
While arguing for appreciation of potential practical importance of cultural tolerance and facilitation of public deliberations in multicultural societies I make a conscious effort, the success of which will be judged by others, not to reify cultural tolerance or deliberative engagement as grand narratives clothed in humanist robes.

In late modern society where cultural clashes are gradually replacing class conflicts as dominant political contestations it is perhaps increasingly important to seek discursive approaches to relieving tensions in multicultural interactions. Rejecting value essentialism and cultural fundamentalism may be vital in connecting conflicting cultural narratives in the processes of multicultural policy discourses.
Anti-Essentialism in Multicultural Societies: (In)commensurability of cultural narratives

The paradox of ideographic pluralism in the late modern capitalist society is that the same process of development of new technologies for communication and transportation that brought diverse cultures in much closer interaction also influences the tendency for furthered fragmentation of cultural identities (Staniševski, 2005). Miller and Fox (2006) and Staniševski and Miller (forthcoming) refer to this tendency as neo-tribalism. Neo-tribalism indicates a tendency for development of thicker, more robust communities of discourse, but only in enclaves or subcultures (Miller and Fox, 2006, p. 126). The fragmentation of subcultural identities into neo-tribal enclaves is paralleled with thinning of reality on macro level or development of hyperreality.

In the age of 24-hours “reality” news shows that entertain more than inform, Internet blogging, televised warfare, reduction of political discourse to catch phrases and simulated, symbolic politics, “reality” becomes virtual, simulated hyperreality (Miller and Fox, 2006; Baudrillard, 1993, 1994). In Miller and Fox’s (2006) terms symbols and words increasingly lose their capacity to signify and become self-referential, that is, meaningful only in a narrow context that is either not shared by everyone or fleeting in the sense that there is nothing beyond the moment to digest (p. 126). The problem is that in the age of globalization these fragmented, self-referential cultural narratives are not isolated from each other, but are in constant interaction and frequently in conflict. The question remains whether in the environment of neo-tribalism and increasing cultural fragmentation is possible to resolve the inevitable conflicts that emerge through engagement in multicultural deliberations or these fragmented cultural narratives are
simply incommensurable? Further, if there is some possibility for discursive engagement what is the role of public administration in this process? I attempt to provide a perspective on these dilemmas and relate it to the potential importance of tolerance for facilitation of multicultural discourses.

I have elsewhere elaborated in more depth my perception of multicultural discourse and the value of facilitating multicultural discourses (Staniševski, 2006; Staniševski and Miller, forthcoming). In here it is important to notice the anti-essentialism of discursive models of democracy. Discursive theories and deliberative models of democracy are anti-essentialist in the sense that they do not envision existence of pre-political common goods (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005). The anti-essentialist disposition of deliberative models of democracy makes them particularly relevant in multicultural societies. As Valadez (2001) has noticed “deliberative democracy is particularly suited for multicultural societies because of the existence of deep and enduring differences in conceptions of the good in these societies” (p. 6). In discursive models, the conception of common good is established through processes of political deliberations in the communities thus allowing for potentially connecting fragmented cultural narratives but only on specific issues and in specific contexts. The conceptions of common good that may potentially emerge are local and temporary rather than universal and fixed. The perceptions of truth that may emerge are perspectival small “t” truths rather than universalizing grand narratives (Miller, 2002).

Furthermore, the process of multicultural deliberations is a gradual and evolutionary process that lacks any pre-determined and pre-political telos or common purpose that needs to be achieved. Shared purposes may emerge in the process of public
deliberations, but reaching shared understandings is not always possible and it is not per-
se a teleos of discursive engagement. As Gutmann and Thompson (1996) have noticed in
certain situations the value of public discourse may be simply in initiating discussions
and engaging the residents in public discourses rather than anticipating agreements to be
necessarily developed. The outcome of deliberative interactions is not a priori known.

In many other situations engaging diverse and often incommensurable cultural
narratives simply may not be possible. The reluctance to engagement in multicultural
deliberations may be a result of the distinct “otherness” of the conflicting cultural
narratives, but also may be influenced by the specific disposition of power relationships.
Engagement in public deliberations may be more likely in situations of power impasses
(Miller and Fox, 2006, p. 114) in which no one culturally ideographic narrative can
clearly dominate others and the consequences of prolonged violent conflict may be
perceived to outweigh the reluctance to engage the distant Other.

Power relationships are also certainly present within the processes of public
discourse. Yet, the particular constellations of power relationships are not static or unified
in their dispositions. Since discourse theories are anti-essentialist, power relationships are
considered in constant circular process of reformulation and realignment in the political
contestations in policy deliberations. Exercises of power are directed towards forming
social relationships that structure the way we perceive reality (Mills, 2003, p. 55). But,
since power is not unitary and it always offers potential for resistance (Foucault, 1980),
dominant social worldviews are always in process of adjustment. Public deliberations are
forms of social interactions through which dominant views may be formed and potential
adjustments of social perceptions may occur. The discursive adjustments of social conceptions of reality result from social exercise of power, and not in absence of it.

The potential for resistance to which Foucault (1979, 1980) directs us, in deliberative models of democracy translates to a potential for conflicts and agonistic contestations. A stream of discursive theories of democracy argues for agonism in the processes of discursive conflict resolution (Arendt, 1963; Fox and Miller, 1995; Sørensen and Torfing, 2005; Connolly, 1991; Mouffe, 1993). An agonistic perspective points to the presence of political competition of perspectives and pluralism of understandings in the process of communicative involvement. Engaging in conflicting contestations offers a possibility for marginal positive adjustments in cultural perceptions on policy issues, but also potentially for escalation of cultural divisions. The end result of engagement in agonistic policy deliberations is contextual to particular situations and policy issues and is determined through the process of discourse itself.

Conflicts are inevitable in the process of communicative involvement in the public sphere and so are power influences. Indeed, to assume absence of power relationships in the process of social interaction, including in the communicative process, is to assume absence of dominant worldviews in the society (Foucault, 1979). This assumption minimizes the importance of the conception of individuals as socially grounded in their cultural and linguistic narratives, which often are conflicting and incommensurable to each other.

Incommensurability of linguistic narratives is not absolute, but commensurability often may not be possible (Pellizzoni, 2001). Incommensurability of cultural narratives would be absolute if cultural narratives are completely autonomous and unrelated to each
other lacking any shared language (Pellizzoni, 2001; Bernstein, 1983). This however is rarely the case. In pluralist, multicultural societies it is unlikely that individuals are exposed only to monist influences of single cultures. Amy Gutmann (2003) therefore notices that individuals have “overlapping cultural identities”. Individuals have separate ethnic, racial, gender, linguistic, religious memberships as well as different preferences for cultural manifestations, symbolisms, and political and social ideologies that intensively overlap. The range of choices is dependent on particular cultural and historical contexts.

If incommensurability is not absolute entailing total non-comparability of options, comparability should be searched in connecting those portions of experiences that are commonly shared (Pellizzoni 2001, p. 81). Pellizzoni (2001) clarifies noticing that commensurability “consists in the similarity, discernible in the context of the discussion, among portions of experience” (Pellizzoni, 2001, pp. 80-81). It consists in connecting culturally different worldviews through those portions of experiences that are similar in order to potentially gradually build understandings on conflicting differences.

Connecting fragmented neo-tribal cultural narratives through public deliberations is indeed not simple and as I already noticed often may not be possible. By engaging in political and conflictual multicultural deliberations participants are not likely to leave behind their reified cultural perceptions, stereotypes and biases. In practice, essentialist grand narratives are likely to be used as rhetorical tools in political contestations but what may be required is some degree of tolerance of cultural differences (Rorty, 1998; see also, Miller, 2002, p. 90). A degree of tolerance does not imply absence of politics or conflicts neither it suggests acceptance of other perceptions. It entails openness to
expression of culturally different perceptions and potentially may suggest willingness to
listen to culturally different expressions.
Cultural Tolerance and Value Pluralism

The philosophical debates on the topic of tolerance are extensive (Locke, 1979 [1689]; Hobbes, 1974 [1660]; Spinoza, 1951 [1670]; Marcuse, 1969; Walzer, 1997; Maneli, 1984; Mendus and Edwards, 1987; Horton and Mendus, 1999; Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998; Galeotti, 2002; Tinder, 1975; Gioseffi, 1993; Deveaux, 2000; Young, 1999; Katz, 1961; Sullivan, Pierson, and Marcus, 1982; Rorty, 1998). The conception of tolerance that I emphasize in this paper is close to Walzer’s (1997) understanding of toleration as openness to others, curiosity and willingness to listen and learn of practices of others, and to Fox and Miller’s (1995) emphasis on willingness to listen of difference of others.

Walzer (1997) develops a continuum of possibilities of toleration that ranges from the least accepting to more substantive acceptances of cultural differences. The points on his continuum of toleration are (1) resignation, (2) indifference, (3) stoical acceptance, (4) curiosity, and (5) enthusiasm (Walzer, 1997, p. 12). The first possibility, resignation, refers to a resigned acceptance of differences for the sake of peace that emerges after years of bloodshed and as a result of exhaustion. The second possibility is a passive indifference to cultural diversity. Third possibility describes a kind of moral stoicism as a principled acknowledgement that others have rights (i.e. individual rights) even if they exercise them in unattractive ways. Fourth possibility, closest to my liking, is openness to the differences of others characterized with a willingness to listen and learn of their differences, without a necessary endorsement of those cultural differences. Furthest along the continuum, is an enthusiastic endorsement of difference (Walzer, 1997, pp. 10-11).
Walzer (1997) is correct in noticing that the last possibility on the continuum, endorsement of differences, probably fails outside the subject of tolerance asking: “…how can I be said to tolerate what I in fact endorse?” (p. 11). In almost any plural society it is likely that there will be practices that are deplorable to one’s personal preferences. The requirement of tolerance does not require one to endorse these practices but potentially to have a degree of openness to their inclusion in the public discourse and willingness to listen to their cultural expressions. Understanding of tolerance as openness to others and willingness to listen and learn of differences of others acknowledges that individual perceptions are culturally grounded, hence there is a potential need to be open to learning about cultural practices that ground individual perceptions of others. This does not imply any endorsement of the value of those practices.

While, in this paper I am inclined towards the definition of tolerance as openness to others, curiosity and willingness to listen to differences of others, I do not claim this conceptualization to be the only existing possibility neither that this possibility is universally applicable in all situations. In certain local and historical contexts other possibilities may be more plausible (Walzer, 1997). Also, the specific interpretation of what is considered as openness to others or willingness to listen to others is likely to vary between cultures. For example, what is considered as openness to others in some Asian cultures may be completely different from what is considered as openness to others in Southern European cultures.

Furthermore, I do not argue tolerance to be an absolute good and teleological purpose in itself¹. Toleration of differences may be an important practice in facilitation of multicultural discourses and in resolution of multicultural conflicts, but it is not an
absolute goal in itself. Tolerance is to be conceived more as a potentially useful practice, rather than an ideal. As Walzer (1997) noticed: “Toleration makes difference possible; difference makes toleration necessary” (p. xii). A defense of toleration does not always have to be a defense of difference; often it is nothing more than an argument from necessity (Walzer, 1997, p. xii). Toleration of differences of others could allow for public expression of cultural differences. Yet, engagement of culturally different perspectives may be a result not of desire for justice but of potentially perceived necessity for resolution of existing conflicts in the society. Engaging in multicultural interactions may lead to conflict resolution on particular issues, or may further surface out latent cultural conflicts and possibly intensify the level of these multicultural conflicts making the necessity of continuing tolerance of cultural differences even more important.

One can speak of different degrees of tolerance, as Walzer (1997) has done, or one can argue about different levels of acceptance of tolerance in the society. Walzer (1997) stresses out that toleration is not a formula for harmony, but also notices that engagement and individual participation in cross-cultural interactions is the best protection against parochialism and intolerance (p. 107). The level of tolerance in society may increase as a result of multicultural engagements of individual citizens, but in an absolute sense tolerance is not likely to be fully achieved. This is the case not only because it is likely that there always will be some intolerant people in society, but also because the interpretations of tolerant or acceptable behaviors are likely to vary within pluralist societies and on different policy issues. Cultural identities and practices evolve over time and with them the interpretations of tolerance are also likely to change with the historic evolution of society. Therefore, we should not think of tolerance as an ideal to be
achieved, but as a potentially important and continuously changing practice in the processes of discursive interactions.

Indeed, there are limitations to tolerance. Historically, the philosophical differences in the conception of tolerance often are focused on which practices need not to be tolerated. For example, John Locke (1979 [1689]) argues for religious tolerance, but for him tolerance does not extend to those who are intolerant of all others in matters of mere religion or declare all others who are not of their religion to be heretics (p. 211), to those who “deny the being of God” or the atheists (p. 212), or to those religious organizations that deliver themselves to protection and service of another prince (p. 212). Marcuse (1969), on the other side, argues that the realization of the objective of tolerance requires intolerance toward prevailing policies, attitudes, opinions, and the extensions of tolerance to policies, attitudes, and opinions, which are outlawed or suppressed. For him, the teleos of tolerance is truth, which can be objectively determined and ascertained only in learning and comprehending that which is and that which can be and ought to be done for the sake of improving the lot of mankind. According to Marcuse (1969) those who are opposed to what arguably is determined as beneficial for improving the sake of humanity such as social legislation to the poor, weak, and disabled are not to be tolerated (pp. 95-137). In contrast, Hayek (1987), following Hume’s argument, notices that there must be limits to tolerance exactly because our codes of morals and cultural practices are not the conclusion of our reason, but a consequence of social traditions (pp. 40-41).

Indeed, it is quite difficult to argue for any limitation to tolerance without falling back in the trap of essentialism. One could argue that a reasonable expectation would be that those cultural expressions that are socially interpreted as violent in character or
openly promoting violence could be excluded without diminishing the legitimacy of the discursive process. Acts of terrorism or violent rioting appear to me as clear examples. Yet, what is considered violent also differs within diverse social and historical contexts. Furthermore, violence in certain contexts may be a socially acceptable form of expression or a form of social resistance. What is socially acceptable limitation of tolerance is determined in specific social and historic situation, but cultural fragmentation and escalation of inter-cultural confrontations may necessitate broadening the scope of inclusion of differentiated social voices in public deliberations.

Some level of exclusion is always present in all forms of social interaction. Inclusion of alternative forms of discourse such as stories, greetings or silence (Young, 2000; Patterson, 2000) may widen the scope of inclusion but in itself does not guarantee absence of exclusion in deliberations. Dryzek (2000) correctly points out, that exclusion within the process of public discourse can also be based on what stories or narratives or what greetings are to be excluded even if narratives and greetings are considered as an acceptable form of expression in public discourse. The level of exclusion and inclusion ultimately depends on the particular constellation of power relationships that are being established within the political process of public deliberations. Marcuse (1969) notices that in modern capitalist societies inclusion of marginalized voices is restricted as a result of control of resources and public forums and media by dominant power elements. Nonetheless, higher level of inclusion of socially marginalized voices does not need to be achieved through intolerance of dominant cultural practices as Marcuse (1969) argued. Intolerance towards the practices and perceptions of the majority will likely only lead to unwillingness of the majority to listen and interact with the members of the minority
cultures, and can further deepen the divisions in the society given that social perceptions, including perceptions of the majority, are culturally grounded. Instead, I agree with Young (2000) that higher level of inclusion of marginalized voices in public discourses can be achieved through public recognition of cultures. Tolerance itself can be one symbolic form of culture recognition (Galeotti, 2002). Politics of culture recognition is further examined in the next section.
Public Recognition of Cultural Differences

The politics of recognition of cultural specificities refers to the conscious effort, primarily by the government but also by the civil society in general, to include and recognize the cultural particularities of members of diverse cultural groups in the public sphere (Taylor, 1994; Gutmann, 1994). As an example of politics of recognition of cultural specificities Gutmann (1994) notices inclusion of African-American or Native-American cultural histories and narratives in the curriculum in the public schools as practices that are part of the cultural identity of members of those specific cultural groups (pp.7-8). Taylor (1994) in the context of Quebec points out French language as a distinct cultural characteristic that requires public recognition.

Fraser and Honneth (2003) trace the genealogy of the concept to Hegel’s figure of “struggle for recognition“(p. 1). Recognition relates in this conception to establishing a reciprocal relationship between subjects who perceive each other as equal yet separate and different from each other\(^2\). Related is Gutmann and Thompson’s (1996) notion of reciprocity in process of public discourses. It is at odds with the liberal conceptions of autonomy of individual because it perceives social relations and intersubjectivity to be prior to any conceptions of subjectivity (Fraser, 2003, p. 10).

McBride (2005) differentiates between two possibilities for public recognition: symbolic recognition and recognition as enhancement of political autonomy of cultural groups in policy formation processes. His preference is for the latter form of recognition. Yet, “autonomy” understood as ability for an independent self-determination is an illusion in multicultural societies in which cross-cultural interactions are in common
existence. Enhancement of cultural “autonomy” of certain cultural groups can be reinterpreted as an enhancement of power position and prevalence of certain cultural practices in societies (Valadez, 2001). Young (2000) through her feminist critique of the idea of cultural independence argues instead for “relational autonomy” that focuses on autonomy in the context of interdependent relations among peoples (p. 258). In my reading McBride (2005) is not far from this thinking himself. One weakness of McBride’s (2005) analysis is that he downplays the importance of symbolic recognition for inclusion in the process of deliberation. Indeed, political confrontations often are over particular contextualizations of symbolic interpretations (Edelman, 1971; Baudrillard, 1993, 1994) hence the potential significance of symbolic recognition of cultural differences in the political process of deliberations needs to be considered.

Young (2000) recognizes the importance of symbolic recognition of cultural differences for inclusion in multicultural deliberations by asserting the value of gestures of greetings. “Greeting names those communicative political gestures through which participants in democratic discussion recognize other specific groups as included in the discussion that will issue in decisions” (Young, 2000, p. 61). By acknowledging the cultural differences of others the participants in discourse commit themselves to listening to their perceptions and taking them seriously. Public recognition of cultural differences in this perception is understood as a condition for discourse. Young’s (2000) understanding is different from Taylor’s (1994) normative conception of politics of authentic recognition that perceives recognition of cultural differences as a fulfillment of the ideal of justice. Recognition as a symbolic gesture does not require endorsement of particular identities regardless of misgivings that we may have about them as Taylor
(1994) argues (in McBr...point for political interaction and contest, rather than its end” (p. 61). I do not see a potential necessity of conceiving culture recognition as a teleos, a goal in itself, or another grand narrative developed in the name of social justice.

Galeotti (2002) notices that tolerance, understood as a positive openness to others, in itself can be a form of culture recognition. According to her, tolerance of differences has symbolic meanings and if properly grounded signifies recognition of those differences. It symbolically legitimizes the presence of individuals of particular cultures in the public sphere on the same footing as those whose practices and behaviors are considered “normal” (Galeotti, 2002, pp. 100-101). For example, government tolerance of wearing of Islamic veil in public schools in France would give a symbolic recognition of this cultural practice in the public sphere (Galeotti, 2002, pp.115-137). Tolerance of Islamic veils in public schools symbolizes recognition that can lead to higher inclusion in the public sphere, but it is not an endorsement of this cultural practice. It is up to the individuals to wear the veil or not. Tolerance interpreted as recognition of cultural differences of others allows for pluralist confrontation in the process of deliberation without reifying cultures as entities.

Is it possible however to expect that in deeply divided societies members of opposing cultural groups will have the capacity for tolerance towards the cultural differences of the others? Gilliatt (2002) asserts that cultural identity in deeply divided societies is often created exactly based on hostile opposition to other cultural groups. “The integrity of one group, therefore, exists only at the expense of the other” (Gilliatt,
Confrontation and denial of cultural practices of one cultural group serves as a force for reification of practices of other cultural groups. *Modus vivendi* becomes unattainable. “Any deeper compromise arranged by amenable leaders will not work in the long run because of the lack of indifference by their constituencies to the sacrifice of symbols of cultural pride that may have to be made” (Gilliatt, 2002, p. 26). Government’s symbolic recognition of marginalized cultural practices, which may be in form of symbolic expression of tolerance, is crucial for opening the possibility for a higher level of social tolerance of cultural differences in multicultural discourse. It does not automatically follow that if government shows a degree of tolerance and recognition of certain cultural differences that social stigmas and tolerance will immediately be shown for marginalized cultural differences in the rest of the society. The challenge for government in facilitation of multicultural discourse is exactly in changing the terms of discourse and providing possibilities for tolerance of cultural differences in the society, which may be potentially important for discursive conflict resolution. It requires gradually adjusting social worldviews that ground the cultural practices.

This might not be possible in every deeply divided society and may require social realization of the necessity for coexistence of different cultural groups in the society or an ideographic impasse of which Miller and Fox speak (2006). Public discourse is a gradual process that may not be possible in every context and on every social issue. In certain circumstances cultural narratives may be incommensurable, but deliberative democracy model assumes the possibility for deliberation across cultural differences in specific local communities. Government’s public recognition of differences of others may be one way for developing conditions for higher inclusion and social tolerance of cultural differences.
Conclusion

In the age of neo-tribalism and cultural fragmentation conflicts, often violent, between distinct cultural “Others” are becoming regular occurrence. One need not speak of “clashes of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996) to notice the frequency of inter-cultural conflicts throughout the globe. Self-referential cultural narratives are commonly incommensurable, but rarely in an absolute sense. The overlapping of cultural experiences that ground the formation of cultural identities allow for a possibility for discursive engagement of culturally distinct narratives. Multicultural discursive engagement may not be possible in every situation, but in situations where it may be viable the importance of tolerance for cultural differences may be critical. Indeed, what may be needed is questioning conceptual essentialism itself. This does not imply that universal grand-narratives and essentialist propositions will not continue to be used in political contestations, but it may suggest assuming some appreciation for the value of expression of culturally different perspectives on specific policies and in specific localities.

One potential role for governments in multicultural societies may be in providing visible forms of public recognition of cultural practices and in developing conditions for building tolerance for cultural differences in the multicultural discourse in the society. Changing the terms of discourse in divided multicultural societies is a process that may require the engagement of government as a symbol of public authority in the society. Unwillingness of government to publicly recognize and listen to culturally grounded
expressions of recursive practices of members of other cultural groups could place in
doubt the feasibility of the process of multicultural discourse.

Tolerance of cultural differences arguably safeguards against fundamentalist
views (Habermas, 1994). Adherence to fundamentalist views potentially makes reaching
mutual understandings for common differences impossible. The value of public
recognition and tolerance of cultural differences is exactly in providing the initial
conditions for inclusion in the process of political contestations of members of different
cultural groups in social situations where that is contextually determined as necessary
(Young, 2000). Nonetheless, toleration of often-incommensurable cultural narratives by
no means ensures conflict resolution and social agreement building. But, in certain
situations deliberative engagement of distant cultural narratives may be considered as a
more viable option than escalation of violence and warfare.

The possibility for building mutual understandings in the process of multicultural
deliberations depends on the practical situation in particular local contexts and cannot be
a priori assumed. In fact, often incommensurability of cultural perspectives is so large
that building of multicultural understandings may not be possible. This potential for
incommensurability reduces the possibility for consensual decision making but also
provides a possibility for conflictual engagement in a discursive process through which
potentially cultural practices may evolve in a direction that is not a priori foreseeable.
Notes

1 I thank Professor Michael W. Spicer for his contribution in conceptualization of my thinking on this point.

2 Fraser (2003) contraposes the requirement for public recognition of cultural differences with a necessity for redistribution of social wealth. She asserts that recognition without substantive social redistribution of wealth is insufficient and it would lead to exclusion in the process of public deliberation. Young (2003) has voiced similar perception arguing that longstanding social inequalities are likely to lead to exclusion and formation of hegemonic discourses (p. 116). Honneth (2003) provides a different perspective, arguing that struggles for recognition are more comprehensive than legalistic and symbolic forms of public recognition, which he relates to Taylor (1994). For him, redistribution itself is a form of recognition in the public sphere.

References


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