To What Extent Is Belonging to the Body Politic Plausible Without Censoring Minority Identities?

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Trans-Individuality or the Plural Paradox of Singular Cultures

As a concept, multiculturalism has an existentially plural content. It is plural not only in the obvious sense of the coexistence of many cultures in a given society, but also in the sense of the coexistence of many cultures in one. In that sense, despite subjective perceptions of unique and particular identities, a singular culture is plural since it represents a meeting point of other cultures, the convergence of which gives birth to a new one. The new culture, resulting from a synthesis of plural elements, does not necessarily recognize that it is a mongrel creation. It generally prefers to regard itself as an original product. Yet reality goes otherwise.

This is what trans-individuality is about. It has the capacity to engender a new understanding of social relations, a rethinking of the individual and collective as relations and processes of individuation rather than as essences. Individuals are members of the collective, of particular social relations and structures, just as collectives are nothing other than a reflection of the individuals who constitute them. Trans-individuality is not the relation between two constituted terms, between the individual and society, but a relation of relations, encompassing the individual’s relation to itself, the process of his or her individuation, as well as the relation amongst individuals, and last but not least, the relation between different collectivities.

People are not happy when they come tête-à-tête with their trans-individual nature, when they face a reality that reveals that what they are is an amalgam of different cultures. This is mostly because identities are not based on mere facts, but on myths and facts. Many facts are created by myths. What distinguishes a myth from a lie is that the myth has a normative dynamic: it not only says what happened but also implies what must have happened. Therefore, the myth, unlike the simple lie, systematically mobilizes human behavior, unites and divides since it convinces. Religious assumptions are par excellence such myths.

Consequently, the negation of a myth and the revelation of the plurality of a singular culture can turn out to be a traumatic experience. Traumas hurt and individuals prefer to be immune, or at least protected from pain. That is why people tend to believe in myths: a good myth is like a good tale. The more you believe in it, the happier you are, more confident to face others and of course, much more secure about your identity. The myth functions like the safe hug of a mother after a nice tale, when you are ready to close your eyes and sleep in peace. Myths allow us to sleep in peace.

Scratching under the surface of a mythical identity might bring in the air sad stories, disasters, stories that have been occulted and snapshots that are forgotten because, exactly the opposite of the myths, they should have been forgotten. Memory is always selective. It is partial. You remember the crimes that have been done to you. You do not want to know the crimes you committed to become who you are. What you forget is what you deny; it is the object of your denegation in Freudian terms.

Some might say that it is better so. The argument that we should remain sleeping in our myths is governed by an often unrecognizable cynicism: “we do not bother about what has happened, but what we know has happened is the only truth.” It is also controlled for an intolerable paternalism: After all, human beings are better immature rather than unsafe under the constant fear of learning what they should not. Knowing it threatens the bonds of social cohabitation. Finally, the argument is deeply conservative as it, in turn, promotes a social class based on ignorance and bias. The motto that “the truth we learn only if it does not hurt us” is an obstacle for individual or collective self-knowledge, an obstacle in the course of human thought.

On the other hand, this conservatism also has its good reasons: in times when violence often replaces rational settlement of disputes in the public domain, any order – even one based on oblivion – is not bad. Yet, there is a major problem here. In contemporary rival communities of class, national and other antagonisms, it is hard to hide something. Others will be there to remind you of your sins. We are exposed objectively to criticisms, even malicious, and to the insults of the deconstruction of our constituent myths. Against this, we cannot claim a generalized right to non-insult. As R. Dworkin writes, in a democracy no one has the right to a general non-violation of his personality. “A right not to be insulted or offended” is simply unthinkable since it leads to complete censorship and silence.

I argue that integration implies a level of censorship due to the fact that state neutrality is unthinkable. There is always the strong culture de facto or de jure. The problem is that a general “right not to be offended” leads to complete censorship, therefore segregation and potential deconstruction of the body politic: the triumph of tribalism, the return of holistic societies over individualistic ones.\(^3\)

**Integration, Exclusion and Assimilation**

Integration can be defined as a status of adequate access to the fundamental social goods and the effective possibility of exercising rights deriving from them. On the other hand, exclusion is non-access, deprivation. Among the two situations that should not be construed as static but mobile – competing and complementary at the same time – there is no vacuum, but hybrid situations of a twofold nature: situations in which integration and exclusion coexist, not necessarily in competition.

**I. Integration**
1. Via recognition
2. Via assimilation

**II. Exclusion**
1. Via expulsion – extermination
2. Via protection

This typology shows that multiculturalism and integration into a body politic are not necessarily compliant. The protection of any community – whether it is a historical minority or a migrant community – does not necessarily lead to “integration,” but might well lead to isolation and a clustering identity. As long as “protection” does not lead to emancipation, then segregation is always a vivid option. The second advantage is that it shows that at the service of the objective of social inclusion, violent policies of assimilation can be and have been implemented. Thus, the good has elements of the bad, and vice-versa.

Accordingly, the question of “multiculturalism or not” cannot be set in terms of metaphysical Manichean terms. This is because multiculturalism, both as a fact and as a political project, has latent functions that are akin to both integration and exclusion. Therefore, the prime question here is who we want and who we do not want to belong to the political community. If we agree on the classic wording that “politics is the struggle (...) to influence the distribution of power (...) among the groups within a state,”\(^4\) the political question itself is how we perceive the composition of political community and then, how we understand the implementation of this synthesis. This is what sovereignty is about.

The response to the second question – the implementation of the sovereign decision who we include and who we exclude – is necessarily related to the first question – the composition of the political body. Dissociating the two – the composition of the body politic and the means to achieve it – leads to naive moralist rhetoric which is offered for free, yet little food for thought and action can be given. If we agree that we do not want Nazis in our body politic, for example, we need to be ready to answer the question “how.” This is particularly so when we face them. The discussion of the means is both of a moral and of an operational value, but if it is conducted outside the historical context of the goal, then it limits its interest more to theology than to history and political theory.

**History as a Compass**

Then the practical question appears: can other mechanisms be put in place to build the political community from those historically forged and used? To what extent are we prisoners of our history? To what extent does the past dictate immobile inclusion or

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exclusion recipes? Is it that “the past does not die, it is not even past,” as an American writer said? No! History sets the scene, not the scenario. We choose the scenario. History does not impose every idea or practice and even if sometimes it tends to, we have the right to question it.

In this sense, it is unrealistic to believe that Greece can become Canada in the way of dealing with diversity. On the other hand, it is equally unrealistic to believe that history captures to such an extent that it is repeated. The risk of transforming the tragedy into a farce is well known. If any country wanted to follow the integration or exclusion recipe it used a century ago, it simply could not. We cannot get rid of the past, yet we cannot stick to it either.

As Marx put it, “History does nothing, it ‘possesses no immense wealth,’ it ‘wages no battles.’ It is man, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; (...) history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.”

Let us not use history as a pretext for hiding or finding our aims.

Assimilation is not a process of incorporating the weak into the strong culture, but in one way or another has a potential to alienate the strong culture that gradually changes. The effort of migrant populations to show high social adaptability indicators is found in almost all migrant host countries: incentives are common. The results differ. This effort intensifies as much as the strong culture offers a plausible promise of class mobility.

In other words, the only safe recipe for integration should be via assimilation or recognition or both (which is most often the scenario), without breaking the promise of class mobility. This is true from one end of the Pacific to the other end of the Mediterranean. The “blocked and at the same time unblocked” scheme for communities is key to decrypting the complex reality of multiculturalism. The conclusion is that therefore, assimilation can never be linear or certain.

No one can guarantee today that the one-way course of assimilation putting a part – even the largest – of the immigrant population on the integration path will not lead to ostracism and ghettoization of another. Actually, this is what mainly happens. The major problem with assimilation is that it asks too much from the people. In fact, this “traditional” assimilation is all-inclusive, requiring the “full packet:” language, habits, morality, often religion, etc. In return, it generously promises class mobility. In other words, the traditional assimilation model does not simply involve redistribution of moral authority, but also resources: real financial wealth. If it does not, assimilation sells false promises that cannot be kept. Then, the problem starts.

It is not a historical accident that the European North in the crucial post-World War II years successfully supported its growth with migratory hands that, to a large extent, managed to integrate by assimilating in the dominant culture because of the magical European word and institution: “social state.” Without it, assimilation only with reference to national myths and narratives is not possible. Myths – as exciting as they may be – are never enough: myths might create material, but they are not material. Assimilation free of “welfare state” distribution mechanisms ends up as an authoritarian caricature of coercion and violence that ultimately leads the target group out of the game. Ghettos are merely the result of the frustration deriving from the cancellation of social aspirations. Religious radicalization in the West has much to do with it. Combine the nationalist rhetoric along with the neo-liberal recipe of the dissolution of the social state, and then you see why Europe has no reason to be optimistic today, should it continue this way.

Concluding that, we can easily agree that a minimal “dose” of assimilation is inevitable even in the most tolerant state, because state cultural neutrality is hard to fathom. Yet, it is not free. It costs, sometimes, too much. But regularly, it pays back.

The answer here could be what Balibar calls “Civility:” he proposes that countenancing violence demands something more than a moral discourse of nonviolence that disavows the prevalence of state, structural, and identitarian violence in the contemporary world. It demands novel strategies of “civility,” or what he calls “antiviolence.”

Civility in this sense is certainly not a policy that eradicates all violence, but it removes its extremes, leaving room for politics. A democracy that, far from metapolitical (metaphysical I submit) visions, is constantly struggling to settle the inherent conflicts within its body. If otherness is erased and equality does not appear, then the world is not happy with the political community and has reasons to revolt. If there is nothing to return to people who give up their identities, then the model is not convincing at

all and urgently needs revision.

This means more “prudent” assimilation, that is, weak, “thin” assimilation, less coercion. However, the fact that we conclude to minimize the volume of assimilation does not mean that the state is abandoning the political project for an equal membership. Therefore, a certain dose of censorship, particularly self-censorship, is unavoidable for every integration model.

In effect, self-censorship is innate to every human coexistence. As stated, state cultural neutrality is inconceivable. Yet, there are different levels of state cultural partiality. Maximizing partiality creates addiction to censorship by the dominant culture that might potentially explode the body politic and cause irreparable damage both to human rights and social cohesion. This is the challenge for individual dignity and collective security.

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