

## WHAT'S THE CULTURE IN MULTICULTURALISM – WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE OF IDENTITIES?

### Contesting the Future of Equality, Secularism, and National Solidarity

Danish Network on Political Theory (Copenhagen)

#### General informations:

This international conference is organised by the Danish Network on Political Theory in collaboration with the Danish Research Group on Cultural Encounters, and with the institutional support of the Department of Political Science and the European Studies Section of the Department of History and Area Studies, Aarhus University. It is financially supported by the Danish Research Council for the Social Sciences and Humanities.

Date: May 22-24, 2003.

Place: Aarhus University, Copenhagen.

Deadline for proposals: March 14, 2003.

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In diagnoses of multicultural societies and prescriptions for a multicultural future it is far from clear what constitutes ›culture‹, or what makes up the ›identities‹ that require recognition? Better informed, perhaps more critical, answers to these questions are needed in order to meet the ambitions of normative political theory debates on equality, state neutrality, and the legitimisation of political integration of states. Do such debates require new culture sensitive concepts? Or should we resist the language of identity and culture altogether?

Some meet the difference paradigm enthusiastically. Others have reservations in the name of cohesiveness in the republic, liberal individualism, or a cosmopolitanism of irony and scepticism. Some wish to integrate culture with these heritages. But there is still little agreement on the phenomenology and dynamic of the *culture-and-identity currency* of group claims. If, as is likely, much depends on »which groups« and »what kind of culture and identity« (religion, ethnicity, language, customs, gender) may debates really be contained in one vocabulary, and applied as such to the theory of multicultural societies? What makes a multicultural aspiration normatively relevant at all? These questions cross boundaries of social, cultural and political theory. Addressing them is *a first ambition* of the conference.

Normative theorists now apply culture to conceptions of egalitarian justice, reflective autonomy, civic membership, group pluralism, toleration, and national identity. But this very important work arguably uses too crude notions of culture and identity. *A second main ambition* is to ask what happens to new normative debates about equality and rights, secularism and neutrality, and national solidarity, when these notions are queried systematically. Doing so may expose normative political theory/philosophy to causal and functional questions in new ways, i.e. regarding the dynamism of cultural need for formation, cultural conflict, and cultural integration. The conference aims to facilitate exchanges between analytical political theory and more phenomenological, conceptual, or causal theoretical perspectives.

*A third and final debate* here ensues about whether multiculturalism shows the inadequacies of old political concepts whose geneses were tied to the rise of Western nation states (and to notions of culture presumed by this universe). Is there a need for sustained *conceptual innovation*, aided perhaps by *conceptual history*? Or does multiculturalism demonstrate exactly the importance of classical meanings of concepts, about to get lost?

The conference invites papers that share one or more of these three ambitions, as they address four interrelated themes, provisionally envisaged as separate workshops:

#### Conceptualising ›Culture‹ and ›Identity‹ in Multiculturalism

This theme confronts competing diagnoses of the stuff that requires recognition, and of what type of relation or practice recognition is. Is it new or was it somehow there all along? Is it an inevitable feature of (post)modern subjectivity or a consequence of certain ideologies and discourses, perhaps nurtured in some national settings more than others? Is it regressive or progressive, reflective or authoritarian? Is it mobilised by elites, exploited by cultural capitalism, and facilitated by corporate welfare state structures? Or is it an authentic language of need from social margins? Importantly, is the politics of recognition primarily a question of concrete needs arising from different cultural practices and values, or is it more about emblems of identity and status? How, finally, do such questions inform dilemmas of when and how it is reasonable (and wise) for liberal states to play the identity card?

#### Difference and Equality

This theme concerns discussions of how to apply the language of egalitarian distributive justice in the context of cultural difference, bearing in mind that the question is varyingly conceptualised in relation to specific groups and different views of multiculturalism. To what extent do questions of culture bear on issues of egalitarian distribution at all? If it does, what could be the future of negotiating competing theoretical languages of equality, e.g. of recognition and redistribution, in the context of modern welfare states?

### **Secularism and State Neutrality**

A completely colour blind political theory is difficult to sustain. Even declared secular states may exercise the hegemony of national/religious majorities. But it may be reckless to dismiss the ideal of a universal, neutral state, if it means replacing abstract citizens with constitutive groups. Reifying partial membership is only welcomed by some groups (and members) and may jeopardize important general interests in plural societies. One alternative to neutrality is a sustained commitment, in schools and public life, to a cosmopolitan ethos of reflection and inclusive solidarity. Here, tensions ensue between the emphasis of constructivist and dialogical theories on irony and criticism and on the other hand the respectful maintenance of such group boundaries that constitute the multicultural impulse in the first place.

### **Political Identity and National Solidarity**

The final theme looks at the relevance of different conceptions of multi-culture to problems of solidarity in national societies. Do the politics of recognition jeopardize forms of political community which are, as often argued, necessary for the maintenance of democratic trust and willingness to redistribution, associated with liberal welfare states? Is integration through identity or culture – be it the thin versions of liberal nationalism and constitutional patriotism – necessary at all, in what many see as an increasingly cosmopolitan world culture? Which forms are normatively acceptable – and compatible with the politics of multiculturalism?

Proposals of papers (one A-4 sheet) should be forwarded by February 14, 2003, and accepted papers submitted for electronic posting on a conference website by May 9, 2003. Conference themes are also addressed by a number of distinguished keynote speakers. Professor Nancy Fraser and Professor Axel Honneth have confirmed their participation. In due course a link to the conference site, with relevant information on venues, conference fee, accommodation, key note speakers and program, will be established from the Department of Political Science site: [www.ps.au.dk](http://www.ps.au.dk).