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The temporalizing of difference

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In his inaugural lecture as Professor of History at the University of Jena in 1789, Freidrich von Schiller observed that European voyages of discovery had provided his audience with

a spectacle which is as instructive as it is entertaining. They show us societies arrayed around us at various levels of development, as an adult might be surrounded by children of different ages, reminded by their example of what he himself once was and whence he started. A wise hand seems to have preserved these savage tribes until such time as we have progressed sufficiently in our own civilization to make useful application of this discovery, and from this mirror to recover the lost beginning of our race. (1972[1789]: 325)

The most striking features of this passage are, first, its suggestion that many of Schiller's contemporaries, living in distant parts of the world, were really anachronisms, people who belonged to an earlier time, and, second, its reference to children, as if to say that these people were less than fully mature, that their intellectual and moral capacities were relatively undeveloped. This developmental view of humanity was widely shared by educated Europeans of the Enlightenment era, and it has since remained remarkably influential in western social and political thought. It fosters the apprehension of at least two kinds of difference: that between and within peoples who are seen as being at roughly the same level (between and within, say, the English, French and Germans) and that between peoples who are seen as

being more and those who are seen as less mature or, as in Schiller's case, between those who are understood as belonging to the present and those who are understood as remaining at various points in the past. Difference, in this last case, is seen as a deficiency to be overcome.

This view underlies the widely observed discrepancy between the universal principles advanced by both liberal and cosmopolitan thinkers and their decidedly particularistic proposals for the government of the subject peoples in European imperial possessions. James Mill's 1825 'Essay on Government', for example, makes what seems to be a universalistic case for the claim that representative government is the only effective means of keeping the ruling elite under control (Mill, 1967[1825]). Yet a few years later, giving evidence to a Parliamentary Committee in 1831, Mill presents a radically different view, arguing that there is no reason for the people of India to play any part in their own government. So long as the business of government is well and cheaply performed, he argues, it is of little or no consequence who are the people performing it. Here, as so often in western political thought, it seems that universal principles appropriate to the government of mature peoples are not seen as appropriate to the government of their less mature contemporaries.

The relegation of whole peoples and ways of life to the status of anachronisms, so clearly displayed in Schiller's lecture and again in many western reflections on colonial rule, is of more than merely historical interest. The familiar social scientific discourse of modernity is predicated on a similar move, dividing the contemporary world into portions which are fully of our time, those which have yet to reach it and even, in some versions of the discourse, those which have moved on to a postmodern condition. Nor is the problem confined to academia. While direct colonial rule has long since been abandoned by western states, the developmental perspective which dominated much of its practice continues to inform the work of major development agencies, the human rights and other international regimes that constitute the contemporary equivalent of the older, European standard of civilization in international affairs, and other aspects of the West's interactions with the non-western world. Susan Rose-Ackerman, who has worked closely with the World Bank, observes in her *Corruption and Government* (1999) that what counts as corruption often depends on context: 'one person's bribe is another person's gift'. Yet, while not denying the reality of such cultural differences she aims to show 'as an economist . . . when the legacy of the past no longer fits modern conditions' (p. 5). Here, the development economist presumes to pass judgement over contemporary cultures and practices, dividing them into elements that belong in the modern world and those that belong in the past. An example of a different kind appears in many American perceptions of the Islamic world. Here is the *New York Times* columnist, Thomas Friedman, writing on the need for the West to win support from moderate Muslims:

America and the West have potential partners in these [Islamic] countries who are eager for us to help move the struggle to where it belongs: to a war within Islam over its spiritual message and identity, not a war with Islam . . . [but] a war between the future and the past, between development and underdevelopment, between authors of crazy conspiracy theories versus those espousing rationality . . . Only Arabs and Muslims can win this war within, but we can openly encourage the progressives. (2002)

This passage brings out another aspect of the temporalizing of difference. Not only is Islam divided into elements that belong to the present and those that belong to the past, but the latter is seen as distinctly irrational.

We argue that the temporalizing of difference also infects the government of western states themselves. Much discussion of the politics of difference starts with the claim that liberal democratic politics pays too little attention to the significance of difference. Will Kymlicka's *Multicultural Citizenship*, for example, notes that the liberal and democratic currents of modern political thought have 'operated with an idealized model of the polis in which fellow-citizens share a common descent, language and culture' (1995: 2). Similarly, Jim Tully's *Strange Multiplicity* (1995) argues that received understandings of the constitutional framework of government tend to assume that a uniform set of laws and conventions for their interpretation should apply to all members of the population. These works belong to an influential body of literature which suggests that indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities and other groups might be oppressed by precisely the equality of citizenship which the rule of uniformity seems to require, that is, by the assumption that there is, or should be, a single overarching way of life among the citizens as a whole.

We prefer a more complex view (Helliwell and Hindess, 2002). Of course, there are important contexts in which people are discriminated against because their distinctive needs and concerns are not acknowledged, but there are others in which, far from being ignored, their distinctive character is both acknowledged and stigmatized. The contemporary stigmatization of difference takes many forms, of course, but among the most pervasive are those which, like the cosmopolitan views of the European Enlightenment, associate many kinds of difference with a lack of civilization or maturity. It even appears in some versions of multiculturalism. Consider the case of Will Kymlicka, who makes a powerful liberal case for the collective rights of indigenous peoples and other minorities. His claim is not simply that participation in a culture is required to provide people with a meaningful context for individual choice, but that they must participate in a culture of a very special kind, which he calls a 'societal culture':

that is, a culture which provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, religious, recreational and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres. (1995: 76)

On the one hand, he argues that each of America's indigenous groups, at the time of their forcible incorporation into American society, 'constituted an ongoing societal culture. . . . encompassing all aspects of social life' (p. 79). At this point in his argument, there is no necessary connection between societal culture and modernity. On the other hand, he draws on Ernest Gellner's treatment of nationalism and modernity to argue that societal cultures and the individual liberty which, in his view, they alone can sustain are essentially features of modern – that is, liberal democratic – states (76–7). Here, it seems, societal culture is essentially a product of 'modernization', and the features Kymlicka attributes to societal culture are simply not to be found either in pre-modern conditions or, indeed, in many contemporary cultures, including those of indigenous minorities.

The perception that some groups are considerably less advanced than others, and consequently that the individuals who belong to them (and perhaps even their descendants in other parts of the world) may not yet be fit to govern themselves, clearly plays a significant part in the politics of all modern democracies, especially in the treatment accorded to non-western immigrants and indigenous peoples. This point allows us to suggest a more nuanced perspective on the situation of indigenous and other disadvantaged minorities in contemporary western states. While, as Tully so clearly demonstrates, their difference is effectively denied by the liberal rule of uniformity, it is at the same time powerfully affirmed by liberalism's historical and developmental perspective. Not only are these minorities subjected in important respects to the damaging rule of uniformity, but they are also treated in other respects as inferior, as not yet capable of properly managing their own affairs.

Any solution to the problem posed by the modern experience of cultural diversity must involve significantly more than a recognition and accommodation of *difference*; it must also involve a reform of attitudes towards, and practices for dealing with, the commonplace view that certain types of person and ways of life are caught in the past.

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When difference becomes an instrument of social regulation

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The histories of discrimination and exclusion of non-white migrant communities in developed countries of the West have given rise to the following demands: (a) recognition of the different groups' contributions to the respective nation's past; (b) respect for cultural differences of the different groups to be legally recognized and instituted through; (c) 'multiculturalism' as national cultural policy. All these demands can be justified within the liberal democratic promise of social equality and justice. 'Difference', especially ethnic-cultural differences, is thus a code word for the larger issue of redressing historical injustices.

The demands are often resisted. Simplistic arguments against 'multiculturalism' suggest that it undermines national unity which is, supposedly, built on 'shared' values. In reality shared values are insufficient for national unity. On the other hand, value differences between groups do not necessarily lead to national disunity. More sophisticated arguments find common ground within the liberal principle of equality of individuals. This demands that the state and its public policies be 'difference blind' to avoid