

Interpretation

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Every pluralism tries to render social life through an idea of groups and the interactions of groups. To engage such abstractions may obfuscate and is sometimes indeed intended to obfuscate. The language of religious pluralism, for example, has long been part of a strategy to blunt certain hard edges of modern political life. The latest, apparently enduring, form of democratic pluralism advances under a new designation: multiculturalism. True, “cultural pluralism” has been around since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. But multiculturalism is somehow, paradoxically, different from cultural pluralism and, moreover, cultural pluralism never had the kind of pervasive, inescapable appeal that multiculturalism has today.

H. D. Forbes offers an account of multiculturalism as it appears in Canada, the first country to make this idea official policy (in 1971) and, eventually, central to its national identity. He rightly refuses to take for granted the surface connotations of the term. “First impressions can be misleading.... Its broader meaning will be seen more clearly only after seeing through or around its simplest self-presentations” (2). Forbes offers to guide us beyond multiculturalism’s false front. The official framework of his approach is derived from a certain understanding of social science. While the book offers some policy history (chapters 2 and 3) and an appendix on the facts of the demographic diversity of Canada, its main focus is on the “values” by reference to which multiculturalism indicates its ends or aims (chapters 1, 4–8, 11). “Values...govern the choices that individuals make, and thus they have explanatory import.” Forbes’s study of multiculturalism is “‘idealistic’ and

‘interpretive,’ aiming to clarify what multiculturalism is by scrutinizing its values” (3). His effort would seem to be helped by the fact that these “are the values that have received the most attention in the foundational academic literature on multiculturalism” (20). Wrestling with Canadian political theorists (Brian Barry, Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor) who have taken up the question of multiculturalism (some to embrace it, some to criticize it) will then help us along the way.

But then do we really need another “academic” book on multiculturalism? Does not Forbes’s own survey of the academic theorists he treats demonstrate that this idea has been by now talked to death?

It turns out that Forbes’s engagement with multiculturalism is itself characterized by a surface and a deeper intention. The book initially appears to offer an explanatory account of multiculturalism’s values that proceeds in two waves. First is a dismissal of four concepts—diversity, inclusion, sensitivity, and tolerance—that to Forbes obscure multiculturalism’s more truly fundamental values. These are “like a thin varnish sprayed over its working parts” (21). He then turns in the central chapters of the book to five more important ideals that best capture or explain multiculturalism: equality, freedom, recognition, authenticity, and openness.

But things take a different turn when we encounter two chapters (chaps. 9 and 10) in which Forbes tries out a variety of thought experiments, employing an imaginative “technique” of “projection” into “some significant features of tomorrow’s Canada”—“future imaginaries,” “some realistic utopian dreaming” (200, 227, 235). Some of his futuristic musings—questioning national “sovereignty,” supplementing representative and participatory models of democracy with “social technologists,” representational schemes that favor minority groups—will seem to follow from obvious notions of multiculturalism and may already be familiar (as his footnotes attest) to anyone paying attention (see 202–10).

But his reflections along these lines soon take a turn to the irreverent. To take just one example, Forbes calls for a scheme of lower and higher “grades or classes of citizenship,” distinguishing between those who are more and less “fully committed” to the “values” of multiculturalism (210–11). “Ideally there would be a simple test...([like] the GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, and GRE), that could be used to sharpen the distinction.... It would be a test of beliefs and values, not of aptitudes or knowledge” (214). “Those who ‘passed’ could be awarded a certificate of appropriate values and opinions (CAVO) and

could perhaps be given a small badge or pin that they could wear, to mark their status, or they could be allowed to add some initials (such as CO, for Canadian opinions, or FQC, for fully qualified citizen, or AO, for authentically open) after their names” (214). “Government employment, particularly for teachers, could be reserved for those who had shown by passing the test that they were worthy of being considered good multicultural role models. Admission to post-secondary education, or at least to elite institutions like McGill and Queen’s, could be reserved for such certified citizens....Those without such certificates could be prevented from getting licenses for their firearms” (215). Forbes would not “banish” the “misfits” who “reject the creed or who are simply baffled by it”—lest they become “someone else’s refugee problem” (213–14). He goes on to contemplate extensive free-speech restrictions as well as “remedial values education in a local correctional facility of some sort”—“sensitivity training, clearer explanation of the law and human rights, equal-status contact with members of relevant minority communities, and so on”—to say almost nothing of “electrical, chemical, or surgical interventions” for “particularly obdurate cases” (232–34; 249n5; 239–41).

Confronting somewhat suddenly these and other Swiftian “modest proposals” near the end of the book, we are compelled to reconsider our initial understanding of its outline and aim. Features of it that might have seemed at first merely mildly perplexing take on new importance. Above all we must take seriously Forbes’s promise to “clarify what multiculturalism is by *scrutinizing* its values” (3, emphasis added). We notice, for example, that the last two of the five core values explored by Forbes—authenticity and openness—clearly do *not*, as he presents them, characterize multiculturalism itself as it is theorized by its academic advocates. Instead, reflection on those ideals seems intended above all to highlight some of its essential limitations or deficiencies. Openness, moreover, is presented as being a modern idea at war with itself and on a fundamental level, scientific openness (Karl Popper) challenged by “openness...as...an attitude of receptivity to the prompting of an intuitive or even mystical sense of universal connectedness and obligations” (Henri Bergson) (184; see 168–87). Presumably the form of openness Forbes himself seems to have in mind is one advanced by Allan Bloom (and quoted only in a footnote): “True openness is the accompaniment of the desire to know; hence the awareness of ignorance” (195n21).

The true or most important aim of the book thus appears to be to offer a series of dialectical engagements with multiculturalism in the context of broader reflections on the character of modern life, a liberatory rather than

a primarily explanatory aim (which is not to say that the two are mutually exclusive). What might look at first like a “scholarly monograph” surveying prominent academic treatments of multiculturalism is revealed as having a much more serious claim on our attention.

The spirit of this engagement is clearest in Forbes’s discussion of Charles Taylor’s well-known 1992 essay on multiculturalism, “The Politics of Recognition.” Forbes turns to Taylor dissatisfied with other theorists’ willingness to remain moored to the principles of the liberal tradition. Somehow we need to account for “the new situation Canadians face, the new demands and expectations associated with it, and the new policies being developed for its management” (128). This is indeed a very important question: What is it that explains the “new” situation not just of Canada but of all the modern democracies that used to take their bearings from the liberal ideal on one hand and socialism on the other? Something, since around the time Canada embarked on its experiment with multiculturalism, has been unsettling the basic contours of democratic life. Some might point to postmodernism (or relativism or other developments in our intellectual life). Others would look instead to something in our politics. Taylor takes what one might term a third path: “All this can be summed up as a demand for *recognition*” (130).

Now it is necessary to point out that this is a psychological stance, offering an explanation for or interpretation of the behavior of those engaged in the politics of multiculturalism. It is thus one step removed from what they themselves say they are doing. (They speak of respect, not recognition, of equality and thus of justice.) But Taylor’s focus on recognition has proved influential precisely because it offers to explain many related developments from a point of view that seems to transcend every narrow, particular political claim. This comes at a cost, in my opinion, but it does have one very important virtue: it permits an engagement with sometimes spirited (moral) claims in a way that may seem to remain agnostic on the question of their substance. Focusing on recognition, it must be conceded, undoubtedly captures something important about multiculturalism, whatever else it may leave out. Forbes’s most penetrating critical reflections are here and this has something to do with the fact that he too is a kind of theorist of recognition politics (his 1997 book *Ethnic Conflict: Commerce, Culture, and the Contact Hypothesis* critically engaged claims that “equal status situations” among groups, especially in the context of school desegregation debates, would or could contribute to intergroup relations).

Forbes's critical engagement with Taylor is complex and I can only summarize some of its high points. Central to it is an assessment of Taylor's account of multiculturalism as a positive ideal of "equal mutual recognition."

According to Forbes, the first difficulty with any such ideal is that recognition as such depends on, is unintelligible without, some reference to "judgement" "and therefore the implication of superiority or inferiority" that accompanies recognition grounded on judgment. It would indeed be an amazing thing if recognition for people in all their diversity somehow ended up ranking them all equal. Not to put too fine a point on it, but equal recognition is a contradiction in terms (133). At least as problematic, in practice, any politics of recognition will be "inherently and inescapably antagonistic." "Social status is a 'positional good,' and status rivalry is a 'zero sum game.'" Recognition is mainly a problem for politics and not one to be solved by "equal" recognition. "Status implies a pecking order, and it makes no sense to imagine a world in which all the chickens are on top, pecking away, with none below them being pecked" (133). Forbes holds that Taylor himself sees some of these difficulties (see 137, 151). But he shows that Taylor nevertheless "waffles" on the basic issue, unable fully either to embrace or to reject multiculturalism and the politics of equal recognition. This shows up in different ways. One problem is in his understanding of "recognition" itself. Taylor offers (from intellectual history) accounts of two related concepts: honor, rooted in clear notions of merit, "necessarily unequal and exclusive," as Forbes puts it; and dignity, "which every human being can be said to have by virtue of a '*universal human potential*'" (137–38, quoting Taylor, original emphasis). These two ideals are simple and clear and usefully illuminate one another. By contrast, "recognition," as Taylor employs it in the service of *equal* recognition, simply blurs the difference, the decisive importance of which his account of the relationship between honor and dignity has helped us to see. Taylor, like many people these days, is also revealed to be torn between the new demands of multiculturalism and those of the "old" liberal democratic tradition. On one hand, Taylor holds that the equality of cultures must not be denied. "The possibility that the Zulus...might...have come up with a culture that is less valuable than others is ruled out from the start. Even to entertain this possibility is to deny human equality" (Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 42). On the other hand, from the point of view of freedom, Taylor holds that the equality of cultures ought not be insisted upon too unqualifiedly. "Taylor also says that it makes no sense to demand recognition...as a *right*, for recognition involves a 'judgement of value' that cannot be compelled" (138, quoting Taylor, original emphasis).

These reflections are extended further in a discussion (chapter 7) of the value of “authenticity” (an ideal Taylor has explored in other writings). If equal recognition is a contradictory ideal, will citizens called upon to live according to it be able to embrace it with authenticity? Not according to Forbes: “Cultural pluralism of any kind...is inherently and necessarily committed to *inauthenticity*: it can allow all to be moderately authentic, in practice, only by insisting that all be moderately inauthentic, so as not to offend others” (161, original emphasis).

Other reflections in this vein, taking up other academic theorists as well as the history of Canadian multiculturalism, form the essential core of this study. Forbes concludes by observing that “Canadians do seem more pleased with themselves than they used to be” (260). All Canadians—and the rest of us—should read his book.