

**‘More multi, less culturalism: the anthropology of cultural complexity and the new politics of pluralism’**

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**Abstract**

Since the second World War anthropology has maintained a rather conventional view of ethnic and political pluralism based on colonial or post-colonial models. Now, however, anthropology needs to engage in new interchanges with political theories of pluralism. This is arguably because the meaning of pluralism has itself changed in recent years.

A so-called ‘new pluralism’ has arisen in recent years. Associated with multiculturalism in Western industrial societies, it is also described, among other ways, as ‘the politics of difference’ or ‘the politics of recognition.’ A key feature of this purported new mode of politics is its call for public recognition of the multiplicity of identities represented by any individual.

In this article, some approaches within what can be seen as a contemporary anthropology of cultural complexity (drawing upon ideas of Hannerz, Barth, Geertz and Needham) are suggested by way of the discipline’s potential engagement of multiculturalism and the ‘new pluralism.’

**KEYWORDS:** pluralism, cultural complexity, multiculturalism, diversity, ethnic minorities, identity

**‘More multi, less culturalism:**

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Since before the Second World War and up until relatively recent years, anthropology maintained a rather traditional relationship to theories of ethnic and political pluralism. When anthropologists focused on this field of theory during this period, it was usually with reference to colonial -- and eventually post-colonial or ‘Third World’ -- contexts marked by severe ethnic competition and confrontation. This was where, and what, anthropologists conventionally researched. Drawing upon the works of J.S. Furnivall (1939, 1948) regarding the colonial Dutch East Indies, some key works on ethnic and political pluralism by anthropologists have in this way included *The Plural Society in the British West Indies* by M.G. Smith (1965), *Cultural Pluralism and Nationalist Politics in British Guiana* by Leo Despres (1967), and the large volume edited by M.G. Smith and Leo Kuper (1969) entitled *Pluralism in Africa*. Now, however, anthropology needs to engage in new interchanges with political theories of pluralism. This is arguably because the meaning of pluralism has itself changed in recent years.

The distinguished historian William MacNeill (1985) has described how polyethnicity or cultural diversity within a single social and political context has been a norm throughout world history (cf. Smith 1994). In contemporary times two paradoxical trends have emerged to shift this norm considerably. Over the last two centuries a set of processes tied inherently to nationalism (some say, to modernity itself) have surrounded the emergence of a model of society based on imagined forms of cultural homogeneity. In each context where this model holds sway, spokespersons for groups whose pattern of collective values and practices differ from the homogeneous image have had to mobilize in new ways in order to resist oppression. More recently, processes of globalization and discourses of postmodernism have instilled a widespread new

awareness of fluid, fragmentary, relativist and cross-cutting phenomena surrounding ideas of culture and identity.

Some of the foremost questions about the contemporary nature of cultural diversity arise with new discourses concerning multiculturalism and the 'politics of difference' (also called the 'politics of identity' or 'politics of recognition'). Anthropology as a whole has been conspicuously absent from the ensuing debates surrounding this emergent new politics of pluralism. Yet Terence Turner (1993: 413), for one, has called for anthropology's engagement with these discourses in order to stimulate a renewed, 'critical' multiculturalism necessary for 'challenging, revising, and relativizing basic notions and principles common to dominant and minority cultures alike, so as to construct a more vital, open, and democratic common culture.'

The following essay explores some possible ways in which certain features of current anthropological theory (here, regarding notions of cultural complexity) relate to some key ideas in what we can discern as a new politics of pluralism.

### **Culturalism-in-Multiculturalism**

Despite the term's ubiquity across the globe and in numerous spheres (such as local and national government, education and professional training, human resource management, and media), the many meanings of 'multiculturalism' are open to considerable variation (see Vertovec 1998). Ella Shohat & Robert Stam (1994: 47) note that currently the term is 'polysemotically open to various interpretations and subject to diverse political force-fields' (also see Goldberg 1994; Schierup 1995; Vertovec 1996a). Nevertheless, numerous observers have posited that most of the uses of 'multiculturalism' betray a common, implicit understanding of culture. This view of 'culture' (particularly that attributed to ethnic minorities) is one often deemed 'culturalism.'

The 'culturalist' assumptions within multicultural ideologies and policies in a variety of contexts have been subject to much criticism (see, for instance, Dirlik 1990; Ålund & Schierup

1991; Schierup 1992; T. Turner 1993; Vertovec 1996a). For the sake of brevity here, these criticisms are encapsulated in a set of implicit meanings of 'culture.'<sup>1</sup> In the culturalism embedded in much thinking around multiculturalism, 'culture' is often considered as:

- a discrete, bounded and integrated 'package' of traits, values and practices;
- tied historically to one place;
- mysteriously, almost genetically, transmitted between generations (hence leading to confluences with 'race');
- static, that is, unaffected by history or context;
- deterministic of behaviour -- indeed, sometimes considered almost pathologically so;
- totalizing and, that is, people are considered not as individuals, but as readily characterised collectives;
- essentializing in that it is assumed that its elements are shared by all its 'members';
- and, since it is assumed to be 'had' by its 'members' -- who therefore constitute a 'community' -- it is assumed that the interests of a (minority) culture/community can be represented by a 'leader.'

With regard specifically to the political ramifications of such culturalism, Frank-Olaf Radtke (1994: 37) has been critical of the ways in which, through public authorities' encouragement of representative 'self-ethnicisation' among excluded members of a population, 'Multi-culturalism translates the concept of a plurality of interests into a concept of a plurality of descents.' Radtke (Ibid.) suggests that:

Multi-culturalism appears as a form of 'Communitarism' promising the solution for the post-modern decay of the society. This might be a serious fallacy. The functioning of

pluralism depends on bargaining processes concerning conflicting interests with common rules and shared values. Particularistic communities based on ethnic self-definition or external labelling are not able to guarantee the minimum consensus that is essential for pluralism because the principle of their organisation is exclusiveness. When it comes to the questions of cultural identity, religious norms, etc. differences become irreconcilable and compromises are reduced.

Such a model of a plural society, however undesirable for some, can and in some places does, 'work.' This is the model of Furnivall's pluralism, a society of communities keeping wholly to themselves except for interactions wrought by economic necessity. It is a model characterized by Richard Rorty (1986: 534) as 'an intricately-textured collage of private narcissism and public pragmatism.'

Clearly more fruitful models of cultural diversity, and political structures relevant to them, can be offered. One way of doing this is to minimize simplistic or essentialist understandings of culture and representation, and conversely, to propose nonessentialist, multiple or more complex ones. Jeffrey Escoffier (1991: 62) has advocated such an approach, suggesting that 'the multicultural project offers only a limited possibility of providing representation as long as it is unable to create a framework that allows for the emergence of new, more multifaceted political identities and new forms of dialogue.'

In other words, in re-thinking diversity or multiculturalism, we need less emphasis on the 'culturalism' and more on the 'multi.' This general proposition is simultaneously being heard within anthropology (especially in the anthropology of cultural complexity) and political science (in what we are terming the new politics of pluralism).

### **The New Politics of Pluralism**

While a 'conventional' notion of pluralism -- based largely on idealized images of vocal, organized citizen interest groups -- long held sway in the study of politics, Gregor McLennan (1995) has explored the relatively recent ascendancy of what purports to be 'the new pluralism.' Sharing many understandings of a postmodern approach to contemporary phenomena (social, political, cultural and literary), this new pluralism is concerned with matters such as methodological diversity, the endorsement of different ways of knowing and being, the recognition of multi-focal political allegiances, and a view that political and social identities are chosen rather than inherited. Although McLennan concludes that the new pluralism actually entails a 'recycling' of many of the tenets of conventional pluralism, he nonetheless sees theoretical value in its renewed stimulation of ideas.

The stimulus for a renewed interest in pluralism among political scientists of course does not arise only with consideration of the kind of diversity associated with the presence of ethnic minorities. Jürgen Habermas (1994: 31), for instance, describes an array of conditions contributing to a generalized increase in social plurality:

In a functionally ever more differentiated society an ever greater number of persons acquire an ever larger number of rights of access to and participation in an ever greater number of subsystems, be these markets, factories and places of work, government offices, courts and standing armies, schools and hospitals, theatres and museums, insurance, public services and goods, political associations and public communities, media, political parties, or parliaments. For each individual the number of memberships in organizations therefore multiplies, and the range of options expands.

Indeed, some argue, such a multiplication of possible actions, associations and services produces a kind of 'selective overload' and even stimulates a desire to 'reduce the complexity' (Zolo 1992: 6).

Indeed, McLennan (1995: 90) points out, the increasing feelings of dislocation wrought by conditions of pluralism and complexity often turn people toward essentialism as a political strategy.

Consequently, new socio-economic conditions and political concerns which have arisen by way of pluralism (also characterised by ever more effective and organised articulations of group concerns) have recently stimulated much rethinking with regard to the concept of citizenship and the idea of a democratic society (see Kymlicka & Norman 1994). This is evident, for instance, with Ralf Dahrendorf's (1994:17) statement that 'The true test of the strength of citizenship rights is heterogeneity', the proposition by H. van Gunsteren (1994: 45) that 'the task of the republic is to organise plurality', and the view of Habermas (1994: 27) that 'the political culture must serve as the common denominator for a constitutional patriotism which simultaneously sharpens an awareness of the multiplicity and integrity of the different forms of life which coexist in a multicultural society.'

As part of trend over the past few years, numerous new publications have been produced concerning questions regarding immigrants, ethnic and national minorities. In these, new concepts of citizenship are proposed as a way of working through questions posed by contemporary forms of pluralism and related modes of exclusion affecting these groups (see Kymlicka & Norman 1994). Among such new concepts are 'transnational citizenship' (Bauböck 1994), 'multicultural citizenship' (Kymlicka 1995b), 'differentiated citizenship' (Young 1989), 'neo-republican citizenship' (van Gunsteren 1994), 'cultural citizenship' (B.Turner 1994), and 'postnational membership' (Soysal 1994). Most of these conceptual re-workings seek to extend T.H Marshall's classic ideas surrounding 'social citizenship' and to explore new meanings of 'membership' and, especially, of 'participation.' In one important sense, each of these contributes to a 'multi' approach to political activity and representation in that they call for adjustments to legal status and representative frameworks which recognise that immigrants, ethnic and national minorities simultaneously can be members of more than one kind of socio-political entity.

Iris Marion Young (1990) advocates a parallel approach to representation with regard to a wide range of excluded groups. Despite constitutional and electoral frameworks purporting to safeguard a degree of equality and justice, Young points to all sorts of conditions reproducing exclusion, disadvantage, oppression and injustice. Therefore, she broadly questions the whole idea of 'the common good.' In place of the traditional political structures which aim to create a homogeneous public, she sees the need for a participatory democracy based on the idea of 'a heterogeneous public.' 'Instead of a fictional contract,' Young (Ibid.: 116) writes, 'we require participatory structures in which actual people, with their geographical, ethnic, gender and occupational differences, assert their perspectives on social issues within institutions that encourage the representation of their distinct voices.' Yet Young does not wish for wholly 'group' differentiated representation since she recognizes that all persons have multiple group identifications. '[I]ndividual persons,' she (Ibid.: 48) observes, 'as constituted partly by their group affinities and relations, cannot be unified, themselves are heterogeneous and not necessarily constant.'

This latter perspective is argued persuasively by Stuart Hall (1991: 57) in his call for a politics of 'living identity through difference.' Hall (Ibid.) bases such a politics on a recognition that 'all of us are composed of multiple social identities, not one. That we are all complexly constructed through different categories, of different antagonisms, and these may have the effect of locating us socially in multiple positions of marginality and subordination, but which do not operate on us in exactly the same way.' Indeed, Hall concludes, a politics which is able to address people through multiple identities 'is the only political game that the locals have left' (Ibid.: 59).

The views of pluralism in current political science appear a long way from the 'citizen interest group' kind long described in conventional political theory, as well as from the 'ethnic group competition' kind which was for years associated with colonial and post-colonial politics.

There has been an increasing stress on 'multi' in this field, we might say. This has been paralleled by an emphasis on a very related kind of 'multi' in anthropology as well.

### **The Anthropology of Cultural Complexity**

In the following section I selectively refer to some anthropologists' reflections on issues and phenomena germane, I will suggest, to displacing the culturalism-of-multiculturalism with understandings which can bear transformatively on the new politics of pluralism.<sup>2</sup>

Although usually addressing different societies and, perhaps, levels of analysis, a number of theoretical explorations of what can be called 'the anthropology of cultural complexity' share a set of assertions (which are by no means original or limited to this field of study). Most clearly set out in Fredrik Barth's (1989) article on 'The analysis of culture in complex societies' and Ulf Hannerz's (1992) book entitled *Cultural Complexity*, these include the realizations that:

- although, as Hannerz (1992: 6) observes, the term 'complex' may be 'messy,' 'one of its virtues in this context is precisely its sober insistence that we should think twice before accepting any simple characterization of the cultures in question in terms of some single essence.'
- cultural phenomena are socially and historically constructed, not enshrined;
- meaning is based in, and reproduced by, social relationships;
- elements of culture (values, patterns of behaviour) are unevenly distributed in a population: some are widely shared, others not;
- the uneven distribution of cultural elements is related to the fact that actors are positioned vis-à-vis each other;

If any assumed single culture is characterized by such openness, unevenness and malleability, it follows that in a social field where individuals who practice cultural patterns from different historical trajectories or 'streams' (Barth 1989) interact, there will arise even more complex forms.

In his cleverly written essay 'The uses of diversity,' Clifford Geertz (1986) underscores his long-standing approach to culture-as-symbol-system by premising his argument on the same kind of interactionist understanding of the relation between meaning and social relations:

Meaning, in the form of interpretable signs -- sounds, images, feelings, artefacts, gestures -- comes to exist only within language games, communities of discourse, intersubjective systems of reference, ways of worldmaking;... it arises within the frame of concrete social interaction in which something is something for a you and a me, and not in some secret grotto in the head; and .....it is through and through historical, hammered out in the flow of events. (Ibid.: 112-13)

The coming together of people enacting different cultures/symbol systems facilitates, therefore, 'not a convergence of views, but a mingling of them' leading to 'the possibility of quite literally changing our minds' (Ibid.: 114). The history of each person, of all peoples, has been one of gradually changing minds in this manner. Such an open-ended, syncretic or dialectical view of culture, Geertz suggests, is an 'enemy' to the propensity (what has been called culturalism) of 'confining people to cultural planets where the only ideas they need to conjure with are "those around here"' (Ibid.: 119).

Barth (1989:124) conveys a similar perspective. He usefully discusses the nature of living in complex societies and complex cultural configurations by asserting that such a way of being entails 'a multiplicity, inconsistency and contentiousness that deflects any critical attempt at

characterization.’ In such contexts, ‘People participate in multiple, more or less discrepant, universes of discourse,’ Barth (Ibid.: 130) explains, and ‘they construct different, partial and simultaneous worlds in which they move; their cultural construction of reality springs not from one source and is not of one place.’ Cultural complexity brings about the potential, in every person, for multiplicity of worldviews and ways of being.

Although not immediately concerned with cultural diversity and complex societies, certain aspects of the ‘practice’ theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990), I suggest, can provide us with some tools for understanding mechanisms which allow for the kinds of ‘mingling’ and ‘multiplicity’ described by Geertz and Barth. Here I refer to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus: that non-conscious set of dispositions and classificatory schemes that people gain through experience, which provides a kind of repertoire for situationally competent action, improvisation and the generation of new practices. Similar to the assertions surrounding cultural complexity, Bourdieu approaches habitus as something historically patterned yet open to adjustment in relation to the changing conditions of the social field.

In social fields characterized by cultural diversity--we might say, characterized by Geertz’s different ‘intersubjective systems of reference’ and by Barth’s ‘participation in multiple, discrepant universes of discourse’ -- the habitus of individuals appropriates, inculcates and embodies a wider repertoire of dispositions and classifications. This is because the conditions of their social field have been modified. People are enabled with a wider range of cultural competence (however ‘partial and simultaneous,’ in Barth’s phrase), indeed, many exhibit a multiple cultural competence.

Another anthropological approach which I wish to suggest by way of thinking about cultural complexity is drawn from Rodney Needham (1975). Particularly in his comparative analysis of kinship systems, Needham found much worth in incorporating Vygotsky’s theories of ‘complex thinking,’ Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘family resemblances’ and the concept of ‘polythetic [multiple arrangement] classification’ utilized in contemporary biological taxonomy. These

approaches to thinking about a set of information calls for greater attention to the 'complex network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' (Ibid.: 350). With regard to social and cultural phenomena, Needham (Ibid.: 360) concludes that, while all taxonomies (or, we might say, typologies) are artificial, ones based on monothetic (or single common trait) criteria can only exhibit 'irremediable weakness.'

This approach can be interpreted and applied (admittedly quite loosely and liberally), I suggest, to understandings of cultural diversity. A culturalist understanding of multiculturalism is equatable to a weak, monothetic view of society in that it posits a single common trait -- an essentialized, discrete and static set of criteria marking a differentiated 'culture' -- to classify social 'communities.' The Multicultural Society is, in this way, seen as a pool of bounded uni-cultures (often popularly described as a 'mosaic'). A 'polythetic' view, conversely, recognizes an overlap, criss-crossing and multiple nature of traits characterizing a complex society. Rather than a mosaic of unicultures, the closest schematic representation here might be a huge Venn diagram.

In such ways, the 'multi' in the anthropology of cultural complexity can be seen to complement the 'multi' of the new politics of pluralism.

### **Recognizing and Representing Multiplicity**

As described above with reference to certain ideas of Iris Marion Young and Stuart Hall, the 'politics of multiple identities' is one of the key new ideas in political theory (however remote it still remains from concrete policy; cf. Kymlicka & Norman 1994). Various considerations of multiplicity currently engage anthropologists as well.

Given such an increasing orientation to personal as well as socio-cultural and political pluralism, McLennan (1995: 83) points to the potential danger that 'The principle of difference of multiplicity turns into just another ontological or methodological "absolute," a new all-purpose privileged abstraction' whereby everything is necessarily assumed to be multiple, separate and

differentiated. It becomes impossible to get a 'fix' on anything. 'A descriptive vastness ensues,' he warns, 'a bland and thin egalitarianism of concerns, in which myriad micro-situations have a rightful claim to full representation in the sociocultural matrix.'

I suggest that one way round such a pitfall of 'multiplicity vastness' -- both in politics and anthropology -- is to recognize that not only do people individually have a variety of identificatory positions, but that (particularly in modern urban conditions) they are also increasingly involved in a wide range of multiplex social relationships and social networks of varying level of density and degree of institutionalization (see Rogers & Vertovec 1995). Such relationships and networks can be directly equated with the functional 'memberships' and 'subsystems' referred to by Habermas in the quotation earlier in this paper. These are also relevant to certain aspects of the 'heterogeneous society' perspective of Young (1990).

Recognition of this social base also opens a view toward the problem of 'self-ethnicization' posed by Radtke. When one appreciates the nature of social networks, one realizes that for many people their 'ethnic' networks carry an immediate or primary set of interests. These, like any set of interests about life opportunities and choices, should be articulated in any liberal democratic forum. But the 'ethnic' voice is not the only one most persons have, just as for most their 'ethnic network' is not the only one in which they are engaged. They are also regularly participants in other kinds of networks surrounding which there are other interests and concerns: as women, teachers, parents, co-workers, members of political parties and neighbourhood associations, football club supporters, members of local religious institutions, and so-forth (again I refer the reader to Habermas's further examples).

In this way we must understand and make public provision for the multiple interests articulated by way of the inherently related positional self-identities and overlapping social networks. Individuals should have one voice here 'as A,' another there 'as B,' yet another over there 'as C,' and so forth. Such a system can not only facilitate multiplicity, but it can move us far

beyond the 'A and ever only A' perspective unwittingly shared and articulated through culturalist assumptions among some exponents of multiculturalism, the politics of difference, and the New Right.

A politics based on multiple participation in a variety of social networks has been advocated among others by Michael Walzer (1992) as 'critical associationalism' and by P.Q. Hirst (1994) as 'associative democracy.' Such an approach -- associationalism -- is hailed by McLennan (1995: 85) as 'a refreshing and concrete recipe for achieving civic responsibility without social uniformity, and mutualism without communalism.'

Finally, these sources and avenues of political activity can be seen as contributing to the manifestation of the ideal of 'strong democracy' urged by political theorists like Benjamin Barber (1984) and John Crowley (1994). In 'strong democracy,' citizens are conceived as equals, neighbours and active co-participants in a highly decentralized system fostering debate and consensus through a hierarchy of representative bodies. This kind of multiple-network, associative politics can also facilitate 'the process of working out forms of multicultural coalition politics that do not rely solely on the existing formulas of representation' (Escoffier 1991: 69). Such forms of coalition, such as Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, point the way to further participatory modes of political pluralism (see Young 1990:188-9).

### **Conclusion: Multiplicity in the Public Sphere**

Given the ubiquity of the (albeit vague) notion of multiculturalism, culturalism-in-multiculturalism has gained a solid foothold in the public sphere. Yet this has not necessarily meant more attention to the concerns of excluded groups, nor their incorporation into the body politic (Vertovec 1996a). Often instead, Bhikhu Parekh (1991:194) discerns, multiculturalism has only amounted to the creation of 'a precarious area of diversity on the margins of a predominantly assimilationist structure.' Similarly, Carl-Ulrik Schierup (1987:131) writes that as long as certain groups find

themselves relegated to the periphery of the public sphere, “‘cultural pluralism’” will remain a question of organized adaptation to decisions which come from above.’

Political frameworks which enable ‘multi’ political representation are needed. In some places, we can see these already available to a degree (Vertovec 1994), while in other contexts possibilities for such exist by way of combined participation in political activities engaged in by excluded groups and persons through consultative structures, representative bodies, voluntary organizations, trade unions, and so forth (cf. Parekh 1994).

Beyond concrete features of representation through political structures, the generalized public sphere also entails questions of representation as image. Parekh (in Parekh and Bhabha 1989: 27) has advocated creating a public space in which excluded groups are able ‘to interact, enrich the existing culture and create a new consensual culture in which they recognise reflections of their own identity.’ Relatedly, Escoffier (1991: 67) points out that ‘While “quantitative” representation in the form of speakers, political delegates, cultural figures, and role models is a structural requirement of the new “multicultural” public sphere, the quality of representation in cultural forms is also a contested issue.’ Part of this ‘qualitative’ shift should be towards representing multiplicity, and perhaps it is here that the input of anthropology, by way of ethnographically describing actual forms and modes of multiplicity in complex societies, may be of best use in fostering new appreciations of cultural pluralism.

## **Notes**

1. To be sure, anthropologists have not been immune to such assumptions – indeed, they are prime suspects for suggesting many of these kinds of understandings in the first place! See Archer 1985; Lutz 1990; Turner 1993.

2. Due to this immediate focus, and to limitations of space, I forego discussion of several other recent areas of theoretical development in anthropology which are also relevant to topics of pluralism and complexity; these include: 'border cultures' (Wilson & Donnan 1998), 'travelling cultures' (Clifford 1992), 'diasporas' (Clifford 1994), conceptual dynamics of geographical space and identity formation (Gupta & Ferguson 1992), transnationalism (Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton 1992), identity construction among 'transethnic' youth (Ålund 1991), public culture (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1988 and the journal *Public Culture*), creolisation (Hannerz 1987), cosmopolitanism (Hannerz 1990, Vertovec 1996b), the dynamics of cultural identity and global processes (Freedman 1994) and the dynamics and disjuncture of various global 'scapes' (Appadurai 1990). Also see the Internet site for the British Economic and Social Research Council Research Programme on Transnational Communities (<http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk>).

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