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Provisional Multiculturalism

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Intellectuals generally, and in the West especially, now exhibit considerable sophistication about diversity, difference, and discrimination. These concerns have driven voluminous debate in recent decades, the focus becoming paradoxically more evasive as the issues become more pressing. Nevertheless, there remains a deep-seated if largely silent presumption that modern states were prevailingly fashioned out of discrete nations. At the heart of this widespread assumption is an even deeper tacit idea, namely, that nations were necessarily constituted by and of homogenous, self-contained, and largely self-reproducing population groups. After all, what is a nation if not born of the like-spirited and like-bodied? Things familiar and things familial run together in deeply etched ways. Replication, cultural as much as biological, is the ground of nation-making thus conceived. Call this the *cloning* conception of nation-states, in short, the *biopolis*. If, per concession, we make ourselves through others, those others must be largely just like us to be who we really are collectively, nationally. Examples abound, ranging from the abstract to the concrete. They include the hegemonic assumption that rationality is singular and singularly imperative, for instance in the claims of social contract political theory that prisoner-dilemma decision-making represents all there is to—or the highest order of—rationality. And the exhortation to “patriotic” character and conduct in the face of cultural clash or national crisis, like the charge of unpatriotic feelings, concretizes the logic of biopolitical and socio-cultural replication.

The latter conceptualization of the biopolis reveals just how deeply runs not only the descriptive thrust of such a view but also the normative constraints necessary to enforce its mythological hold on the social imaginary. According to this view, multiculturalism at best does no more than describe, and that begrudgingly, the increasing heterogeneity of modern, and especially late modern, society. Descriptive multiculturalism signals simply the undeniable population diversifications in most societies after World War II, exacerbated by a global political economy. If US “civil society” was made a bit more diverse after slavery’s abolition in 1863 and then with the gathering migrations of the later nineteenth century, western societies like Britain, France, the Netherlands, and even Canada became truly multicultural societies only with the rapid migrations following the demise of formal colonial regimes. Normative multiculturalism, by contrast, insists on the values of cultural diversity, of normative proliferation, even of value relativism at the expense of national cohesion and normative commonality. Or so the standard story goes.

But what might “the multicultural” mean in this scheme of things? It has meant an acknowledgment, occasionally even celebration, of descriptive diversity on the ethnoracial register. Alongside this descriptive register has appeared a slower admission, more deeply resentful and increasingly resistant, of cultural transformation in social formations marked by the description. “The multicultural” became the contesting and contested values invading a presumed homogeneity, invading those values considered long settled. The scope of multiculturalism thus remained largely delimited to the historical period after the presumptive purity of birth, of homogeneous kinship and the familial nature taken to have grown out of it. The stuff of histories racially conceived. Consider the longstanding requirement, only now eroding, that eligibility for German citizenship be restricted to those with “German blood,” or the purging of those deemed non-white from *apartheid* South Africa by restricting them to “homelands” or relocating them from urban to segregated residential spaces to maintain the fantasy of “original white” space. The biopolis as replicating monogenesis and also, simultaneously, its product.

The actual historical experiences of the United States and South Africa are, on the one hand, ~~like~~ like every other society, but, on the other hand, these specific experiences more clearly and deeply belie both the founding assumptions and elaboration, both the form and the palette, of this picture. Their respective historical landscapes have always been far more heterogeneous than the prevailing presumption allows, even preceding European settlement. The descriptive multicultural of South Africa's history and heritage is well known, if only recently celebrated: almost a dozen linguistic groups, depending how you count them, tied to varying kinship legacies; migrations from elsewhere and within; multivalent social and sexual intercourse; indigenous peoples, almost eviscerated, entangled with migrating African populations stretching back nearly two millennia and with more recent—more “modern”—migrations from multiple Euro-originating sources, but also from Malaysia, India, and China. Purity—kinship or lineage, subspecies or stereotypical, cultural or ethnonational—can't even get off the ground. Monocultural histories are always fabrications, all the way down.

This, with relevant qualifications, comes pretty close to an accurate characterization of the US historical experience as well. Multicultural diversity marks the history as much within as across groups. American Indians never conceived of themselves coherently until forced to do so under European imposition. Nor should they have: they shared some things, but far from all. American Indian groups of the Northwest resemble those from the Great Plains, Southwest, and Florida, or from the Northeast only from the outside; they are as much threatened as seen as threatening. Boundaries between the United States and Canada or Mexico are planted only with “modern” state formation. European arrival, itself hardly homogeneous, led first to slave importation both from Africa and the Caribbean, and in the wake of abolition also to significant Asian and Latin American presence, especially in the South and West.

These regional distinctions, in South Africa as much as in the US, suggest landscapes of homogeneity and heterogeneity. *Apartheid* self-consciously exacerbated the spatial imposition of homogeneity it inherited from the history of colonial rule and prevailing demographic patterns in the region, formalizing it into a devastating logic of biopolitical and biospatial governmentality. 80 percent of the landmass of *apartheid* South Africa was reserved for 20 percent of the population. Whites insisted on the most arable land, the most beautiful and most environmentally-safe residential space, forcing all those deemed not white into contained, relatively debilitated and distant areas. A similar spatial logic marks American racial rule. In the 1880s, 90 percent of whites lived in the urban north, a similar proportion of blacks living in the rural south. (Interestingly enough, those of German descent remain the largest European ethnic subgroup among white Americans, suggesting what Balibar has characterized as the supranational, universalistic resonances of the racial.) By the 1940s most black Americans had moved off the land largely into segregated urban ghettos. Segregation became predicated on the level of the neighborhood. Since the 1980s, as a result of rapid white suburbanization, blacks and Latinos have tended literally to live in different cities from whites. Segregation has become predominantly urban. At the same time, the prison population has spiraled, rising from 200,000 in 1970 to over two million today. Blacks, just 12 percent of the national population, make up roughly 50 percent of America's prison population, whites less than 25 percent. One third of black men between 19 and 39 have a criminal record, and an overlapping one third are HIV positive. The prison population is overwhelmingly illiterate, and was very largely unemployed and/or earning less than \$10,000 per year at the time of arrest. Until the most recent US Presidential election ~~There is~~ there was not a single African-American U.S. senator (that ~~will~~ changed one Tuesday, November 2, 2004, with the election of Barack Obama in Illinois; —

in any case, though, there have been but four [black senators](#) since 1790). Du Bois's two nations remain as much (if on varied registers) the case today as a century ago.

The formalism of spatial shaping has given way recently in both societies to a more informally driven replication of spatialized landscapes of homogenization, interlacing race with class, reproduced less by formal policy than by the "neutral" modalities of individual preference schemes and privatized choices. A humorous if telling anecdote reveals the awkward and ambiguous play of theory, presumption, and personal practice often at work here in producing these patterns of "chosen" outcomes. I recently hosted a workshop on institutionalizing critical race studies on campus. A very noted scholar of critical race studies (who I leave unnamed), in the course of making a presentation on race and pedagogy, and in the context of a point about the ambiguities, messiness, and shifting qualities of racial ascription and characterization, blurted out in a somewhat accusatory tone to the twenty or so folks around the table that there were no Latinos in the room. He was quickly corrected (without revealing who or how many Latinos actually were present). In the break immediately following the presentation, our courageous colleague approached the person he took on appearances to be the most Latino-like (or likely Latina) to apologize to her. Chuckling, she delighted in correcting him that this was the first time she had ever been mistaken for non-German (which she in fact is). Not five minutes later, upon hearing a conversation in Spanish among three other participants (actually bemoaning his insensitivities), Professor Critical Race Theory picked out, once again, the person he considered he had most likely offended, this time the only Anglo among the threesome (the other two included a Japanese-Latina working on American Indian legal studies, not the only Latina present, and a Congolese-Belgian working on Ecuador; the Anglo-American works on Zimbabwe, as it turns out). The terrors of hybridity: beware your presumptions about colleagues and neighbors alike. In the post-*apartheid* and post-segregation era, whites and blacks, especially in the US but also in South Africa, tend to live not just in separate spaces but also equally in separate worlds (you might say Professor Critical Race Theory lives in his own segregating theoretical space). In the newly emergent, post-racial (but pointedly not post-racist) biopolis, the formalism of racial apartheid and segregation have given way increasingly to the comparable devastations of class apartheid in both societies, racially structured. (One can perhaps make comparable, if less starkly black and white ethn racial characterizations regarding Germany's surge to the multicultural, I would think.)

The birth pangs of the modern state accordingly are at once descriptively multicultural and normatively (or normativizingly) monotone. National homogeneity is purchased only with the coin of repression, of denying, excising, and in the extreme killing off the different and distinct. Monoculturalism is the repressive and repressing artifice, all the way down, as much under US segregation and later color-blinding denial as under South African *apartheid*. Think of the trajectory from Mathew Arnold's insistence on the best that has been thought and written to E.D. Hirsch's monocultural content of what counts as cultural literacy and Dinesh D'Souza's emphasis on a singular conception of rationality, in logic and substance. The University of California is the state university system in what is by far the most diverse state in the Union, with no single group claiming more than 50 percent of the population. The faculty housing "suburb" of UC Irvine (ironically characterized as the "academic ghetto"), a campus with an undergraduate population nearly 60 percent Asian American, has named its streets virtually exclusively after Anglo-European male intellectuals (Einstein, James, Harvey, Owen, Virgil, etc, not to mention "Theory" and "Technology"). At the same time, the history of census-taking reveals just how demographically diverse both the US and South Africa have always been (and

how politicized are the categories of census collection and policy implication). Overlaid upon descriptive heterogeneity, then, has been repressive insistence upon normative national sameness and its attendant exclusions, upon value homogeneity and cultural identity. Yesterday's insistence on assimilation is today's assertion of racelessness; Euro-superiority of yore in the US, for example, manifests ~~now~~ as demands for English-only bureaucracy and schools or "We the People" nativist histories~~demands now~~. The call for color-blind racelessness and universal models of culture cover up racist continuities, shifting modes of exclusion, and moral panics concerning the uncontainability of multiculturalism.

Here too modern Germany is far from exceptional, if "colored" in its own hues. Think of the various historical ethnoracial and straightforwardly cultural seepages that have made modern Germany: the elasticity of borderlands with Poland, the flows—in and out—of Russians, northern Europeans, Italians, French, Sudetenland Czechs and Slovaks, etc., the wanderings of Jews, the histories that produced Afro-Germans, and so on even before the dramas of the post-1960s.

States, as Valentin Mudime, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, and Benedict Anderson among others have remarked, produce nations after the fact, not the other way around. States seek to fashion the artifice of homogeneity as the fabric of a coherent society. National self-determination is the synthetic fuel of state formation ideologically foretold. Modern states take themselves to have needed the artifice of national sameness across the population as the cement of cohesive decision-making, common culture, and the lure of familial belonging. National elections are predicated upon the presumption of a sort of natural selection, to use Balibar's recent terms: who belongs in the biopolis and who does not, who is healthy and who too sick or polluting to count; who can decide the nation-state's fate and who must be prevented at all costs from so doing; who should die defending or offending the state and who can or should be making those decisions. Who is *in* the state, governed by it, in this view, is not necessarily *of* the state, doing the governing. Democracy *for* the damned, as we are seeing variously in the Middle East, if not closer to home, is not tantamount to democracy *by* the damned, for *them-* (or *our-*)*selves*.

The question, now quite common, concerning *the limits* of multiculturalism, collapsing the descriptive and the normative, hides another distinction: that between multiculturalism (again descriptive *and* normative), on one hand, and immigration, on the other. One sees the collapse of these distinctions in the common cry that "the country is full". Even if there is a legitimate concern about maintenance of a state's social resources for the existing population—we are far from that point in any western society (or those of the global north), I know—this has no real bearing on the question about what values should prevail, what (or whose) meanings or modes of signification ought to drive society. A country can be "full", whatever that might mean, and still have to face up to issues of cultural value: whether religious values should prevail, and if so which ones; what language(s) ought to inform, if not dominate, public culture; what principles, norms, and values are taken to articulate social commitments; what sorts of cultural products are considered to be representative of the society and its historical legacy, literary, musical, artistic, etc.

Here the question is usually posed, in the extreme case, as one about whether or not one would like to live in a repressive society, a society ruled by alien values. But this already is to beg the question of homogeneity and heterogeneity. For the choice is not between a society liberal and tolerant of others and one repressive of difference and distinction. Rather, it is about determining the broad generalized shared values by which collective life extends itself. Most everyone abhors killing, theft, repression, coercion, violence, domination, and the like, at least

when they themselves are the targets. Their delimitation then constitutes the ground rules. To deny another their cultural practices when not in violation of these base generalized principles is itself a form of (attempted) domination, etc. The rest is cultural negotiation. So the question of the multicultural is not how to limit or control, to restrict or diminish difference. The question is to what extent are we open and prepared—really open and really prepared—to live in a world of shared possibilities, transforming modes of meaning-making, challenged ways of expression, and contested ways of world-fashioning?

South Africa is now struggling with that question in interesting, if sometimes troubling, ways. South Africans are considering how to deal with the spiraling HIV/AIDS infection rate (25 percent among men), who can live where and under what conditions, *-intercourse* social and sexual, and social access and the terms of political, legal, and cultural representation. In short, South Africans are considering the quality of life and death, both in the biopolis and subject to the regimes of biocapital. Europe is dancing around the questions of the multicultural in troubled, and more than occasionally awkward ways. The US, not uncharacteristically, seems largely to be seeking to skirt the issues altogether.

I have already pointed out the relation between the spatial and political in reproducing racial discipline. From the end of the nineteenth century, following slave abolition globally, racial arrangements were accounted for increasingly in terms of shifting urban demographics. But increasingly diverse cities with vibrant cultural and commercial intercourse have represented the potential for undermining racial repression and restriction. Larger cities tend to be more diverse demographically and culturally than smaller ones, suburbs, or rural areas. Cities in which residents live where they work and work within easy public transport of where they live tend to have far more progressive political traditions than those where people live afar and commute to work in different urban locations, usually on suburban trains or in isolated and cocooning automobiles. There is something about rubbing shoulders with, pressing bodies against, and being thrown together in unexpected ways with the different. The (bio)politics may get loud, even disturbing, occasionally violent, but it beats never having to take notice, turning away all too easily, ignoring the plight of those about you save from the safe distance of automobile or televisual prophylaxis. The space of the multicultural is simultaneously the politics of space.

Now for the concluding counter-line. A multiculturalism predicated on presuppositions of heterogeneities historically all the way down would forego the need for multicultural insistence, let alone resistance. The multicultural, normative as much as descriptive, I am suggesting, is no more than *provisional*. We would have no need for multicultural insistence were we to take seriously the descriptive realities of heterogeneities and the normative complexities and transformations to which they point. Taking historical heterogeneities seriously, descriptively, and especially axiologically, historically, and spatially, would forego the need for multicultural insistence. Until we do, multiculturalism can serve usefully as a bridge, to highlight the exclusions and exclusivities propagated in the presumptive name of purity, biological and social, political and cultural, economic and legal, and to point us towards more productive possibilities. So multiculturalism provisionally or (I am tempted to suggest, if not insist, that we not reify multicultural provisionality in terms of an *-ism* or *-ismic* formulation), until we come to terms with heterogeneities, relationally conceived, then and now, here and there, and all that this entails.