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A conceptualisation of the political for contemporary Europe

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Introduction

One of the most debated questions in political theory in recent years has been whether states should grant independent jurisdictions to cultural groups. Answers to the positive have primarily advocated full accommodation of cultural practices in a *laissez-faire* fashion. Such theorizations have by and large been reacting to the purportedly assimilationist measures on the part of the nation-state. However, the arguments developed were often somewhat under-theorized. Having the absolute goal of public recognition of cultural groups, they tended to instrumentally depict the state as an assimilationist tyrant. Equally under-theorized were the frequent attempts to deny the allocation of jurisdictions to cultural groups. Having the absolute goal of the primacy of the liberal state, some authors tended to instrumentally depict cultural groups as backward-looking sects. Such schematic approaches constructed black-and-white plays which did not adequately reflect the social and political complexity of multiculturalism. By 'multiculturalism', I do not allude to the mere existence of diversity in contemporary societies, but rather I mean the whole of the discourses and policies that aim to politically deal with such diversity. It is the thesis of this paper that a rethinking of the very notion of the political is needed in the complex contemporary context of social and cultural diversity. The conceptualisation defended here envisions a dialogical articulation which would allow to create a cohesive and yet inclusive whole.

The theoretical nature of this paper sets out the natural limitation of its contribution, which is a discussion not as much of the practical questions of the distribution of power among groups or individuals - though I will touch upon some of these issues toward the end of the paper - but rather of the conceptual framework of integration.

Multiculturalism

The theory of multiculturalism has originated from a quest for social justice, namely in response to the liberal state's alleged failure to guarantee equality. From Iris Marion Young's critique of the uneven distribution of power among groups (Young, 1989), to Charles Taylor's argument about the lack of self-respect that discrimination implied for cultural minorities as such (Taylor, 1992), to Will Kymlicka's defence of multiculturalism on the grounds of the notion of individual autonomy (Kymlicka, 1995),

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strong criticisms have been directed against a liberal state which was deemed to be concealing the cultural imperialism of dominant groups.

These were powerful normative arguments which helped rethink and adjust an unfair societal arrangement. What one should not be too quick to do, however, is to equate the notion of integration as such with an idea of uneven distribution of power, lack of respect and individual discrimination. I take integration to be a twofold process involving both a component of assimilation and a component of accommodation (see Nones forthcoming). Multicultural critics have rightly thrown light on the element of assimilation which in certain cases has indeed prevailed in the policies of integration. But some of them seem to suggest that the only meaningful arrangement entails granting autonomy to groups. Instead of simply focusing on the need to reinforce the accommodation component of integration, they have opted for splitting jurisdictions.

Although such policies arguably do justice to groups, it is no surprise that they create a number of problems. First of all, multicultural policies are likely to reiterate at the group level the problems experienced at the state level. That is to say, if the exclusive dominion of the majority culture in the state causes injustice for minorities, allocating jurisdiction to minorities very likely causes injustice for sub-sections within minorities. Theorists like Michael McDonald (McDonald, 1991) and Chandran Kukathas (Kukathas, 1992) countered—from a communitarian and a libertarian standpoint respectively—that individual discrimination is a necessary side effect of toleration and in any case individuals are not forced to remain in the groups. Others—most notably Susan Moller Okin (Okin, 1997)—took the problem of intra-group discrimination more seriously and argued that the state should in any case protect individuals from actual or potential oppression and discrimination by groups. However, defenders of individual rights have often been perceived as conceiving of integration as a process, the yardstick of which must be liberalism, and hence also seen as neglecting the concern for the equality of both minority groups and the individual members who belong to them
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What is more striking is that it was not only advocates of the primacy of the liberal state who seemed to give very little credit to a fully-fledged accommodation of diversity: advocates of cultural jurisdictions also gave little credit to the idea. In fact, once groups were successful in their demands for autonomous jurisdiction, they often started to behave as assimilationist states; that is, their original stress on accommodation translated into the legal provision that internal practices be shaped according to the centrality of sacrosanct cultural practices, which very closely recalls assimilation. The general assumption for both defenders of the liberal state and advocates of cultural rights was that the actual equation of integration with assimilation was indeed a natural process in all social lives. What some multiculturalists specifically argued for was that, as a form of independent integration/ assimilation into a majority culture was taking place at the state level, so a similar form of independent integration/ assimilation into the minority culture had to take place at the group level. The choice therefore became an almost ideological one, between a liberal state which assimilates its members into a liberal cultural system or cultural groups which assimilate their members into particular cultural systems.

Ayelet Shachar was one of the first who tried to address this conundrum. She proposed a model of accommodation which conceives of conditions upon group jurisdiction as 'a

catalyst for internal change' (Shachar, 2001, p 118). According to Shachar's model, individuals should be enabled to opt out of a jurisdiction through a more credible mechanism than Kukathas's formal right of exit: 'reversal points' should be established 'through negotiation between the state and the group as a precondition for establishing a joint governance regime in the first place' (p 124). This is a crucial passage in Shachar's argument, often neglected by commentators. It is a sort of preliminary contract between the state and the groups, which induces both states and groups to seriously take into consideration the third actors at play, that is, the individuals. Such kind of negotiation 'relieves the vulnerable insider from the need to negotiate individually' (p 125).

The balance between the influence of the state, the groups and the individuals is the thrust of my research question in this paper. I have conceptualised it, quite simply, in the form of *integration*, which—as anticipated—I define as a two-fold process entailing both a degree of accommodation (*i.e.*, the recognition of difference), and a degree of assimilation (*i.e.*, the making of similarity). If one looks it up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is quite clear that integration cannot be flattened on accommodation or assimilation only. In its most general sense, integration is the 'composition of a whole by adding together or combining the separate parts or elements; combination into an integral whole: a making whole or entire'. This definition does not entail that the various parts be forced to look alike. What it does suggest is that some level of combination has to be reached in order for the composition to become 'an integral whole'. Integration is made of two different, and to some extent divergent forces, which it aims to balance in relation to a specific arrangement of the relationship between the state, the groups and the individuals. What has to be discussed is on which grounds this balance and this arrangement can be articulated.

The political

Although Shachar interestingly suggests that the reconciliation between liberal state assimilation and cultural group accommodation could occur at the level of negotiation between the groups and the state, she dedicates very few pages to this point, focusing most of her discussion on the institutional arrangement which would take place after the negotiation. For this reason I believe she too makes the mistake of emphasizing once more the allocation of independent jurisdictions. That is, she still conceives of levels of authority, perhaps 'joint', but still distinct. The jurisdictions she advocates are not really 'multicultural' in any profound sense, as they are separate entities for regulating the internal affairs of separate groups. I maintain that a reflection is needed about the modalities in which a reconciliation between liberal state assimilation and cultural group accommodation can (or cannot) occur. My contention is that the key to such a reflection is a new engagement with the very concept of the political, in terms of a problematisation of the political in the context of contemporary multicultural societies. Of course, I cannot exhaust such a theoretical task in this essay. What I can do here is to suggest a (rather schematic) framework, which in the next section I will further qualify.

The concept of the political is apparently straightforward, as we all think we know what the political is; but actually it is rather ambiguous. Notoriously the term derives from the Greek *polis*, the city-state, where the political was acted by a relatively small and very homogenous body of citizens, often with strong bonds of kinship, which more or less is

still at the root of the notion of citizenship as exclusive privilege for a certain group of people. But at the same time the modern characterisation of the 'political' is based—at least theoretically—on principles such as equality and participation. Along the lines of this preliminary remark, I would like to suggest that two quite distant accounts delimit the definitional continuum of the political.

On one extreme, one finds the work on the concept of the political by Carl Schmitt. Arguing that in order to define the political one has to discover the categories that provide its ground, Schmitt noted that whereas morality has as its founding categories the good and the bad, and aesthetics has the beautiful and the ugly, and economics has the profitable and the unprofitable, the political is founded on the distinction between friend and enemy, where the enemy is 'the other, the stranger… existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible' (Schmitt, 1996, p 27). According to Schmitt, the political categories are manifested in the constant possibility of the exceptional case of war, where friends, enemies and their reciprocal leaders neatly emerge. The distinction friend/enemy—which is quite bluntly the opposition on the basis of which 'men could be required to sacrifice life, authorized to shed blood, and kill other human beings' (*ivi*, p 35)—would water down in the absence of war, to the point that in such a wholly pacified world the political would simply cease to exist.

In its crude wording, Schmitt's analysis is rather shocking. However, I maintain it underpins the majority of the contemporary approaches to politics. In my reading, both the assimilationist and the accommodationist models loosely rest on just such a conceptualisation. To start with the assimilationist model, one can note that the state refers to a number of citizens who are (often coercively made) similar among themselves (friends), and opposed to other states (enemies), as well as to those internal groups and individuals (again, enemies) who do not want to assimilate into the dominant group. Rather similarly, radical multiculturalists argue for the fragmentation of the state through the accommodation of independent groups, once again composed of individuals similar among themselves (friends), and in opposition to others (external or internal enemies). What changes is basically the size of the bodies of individuals considered, as well as the institutional arrangement that follows from the fragmentation.

On the other definitional extreme of the political one finds a broadly liberal tradition of political thought which conceives of the political as antithetic to both the reality and even the possibility of war. Hannah Arendt, for one, does not insist on any founding categories of the political but rather, more loosely, on the general 'condition…of the political', which in her view is the human 'plurality' (Arendt, 1964, p 14, my translation). Such a plurality does not consist of friends and enemies but of a whole of unique individuals, whose characteristic is that they can express their uniqueness through language and discourse. Arendt stresses that the principal quality of discourse is that it arises 'not in favour, nor against others, but simply in their being together' (p 190, my translation). She maintains that this 'human cohesion' breaks down when persons are just in favour or against one-another, that is--in Schmittian terms—when they form groups of friends and enemies. Arendt holds that in such occasions, 'like for example the modern state of war' (p 191, my translation), the authentic discourse about who one is

ceases to exist and gives way to deception and propaganda, out of any morally constrained connection of thought and discourse.

This is not the place to mount a detailed critique of either the Schmittian or the Arendtian account. But it seems to me that foundations *à la* Schmitt pertain to some sort of overly realistic *pre*-political, whereas conditions *à la* Arendt pertain to some sort of overly idealistic *post*-political, focussing respectively on an overly regressive (or pessimistic) case (or possibility) of war, and an overly progressive (or optimistic) case (or possibility) of peace. My suggestion is that the relationship between state, groups and individuals in a contemporary diverse society, as well as the balancing of accommodation and assimilation, is best understood when related to a more median terrain.

Political multiculturalism

My alternative way of conceptualising the political shares many aspects with theories *à la* Schmitt, but moves a few steps beyond sheer opposition; it also shares many aspects with theories *à la* Arendt, but stops a few steps before sheer cohesion. Along the continuum between war and peace (the extreme cases or possibilities), it lies somewhere around the centre (the normal case or possibility). According to a framework discussion that originates from Aristotle, the *politikē koinōnia*, the political association 'consists not merely of a plurality of men, but of men of different *kinds*' (Aristotle, 1992, p 104, *1261a10*). It follows that in human social affairs the normal case (or possibility) is usually neither war between friends and enemies, nor peace among friends. Rather, it is a condition of *conflict* between people who have 'different interests' (Crick, 1962, pp 16-17) and 'opposing comprehensive doctrines' (Rawls, 1993, p 134).

To define the political as the process by which to reconcile conflicts among people with different interests and different worldviews is a good match to definition of integration which I previously proposd, as a process of the combination of distinguishable units into an harmonious unity. What the political is aimed at is to reconcile conflict in such a way that harmonious unity (*i.e.*, some sort of assimilation into society) can be accomplished, although the units maintain their distinguishability (*i.e.*, some sort of accommodation of diversity). In this sense, the political is the process by which to attain integration.

The emphasis on the concept of integration here is crucial in the following sense. In the context of a diverse society, one is confronted by two main alternative states of affairs. According to one, dialogue occurs mainly *within* the distinct groupings of friends and enemies. What I want to convey with my analysis of the concept of integration is an alternative option: that the relationship between the state, groups and individuals, and the specific combination of accommodation and assimilation, should be shaped through dialogue *among all* the different actors at play. The point I am trying to make is that the reconciliation of different and often conflicting interests is possible only as long as individuals, group leaders and state representatives gather together and together go about making decisions for the larger community. They ought not to retreat to what Shachar calls '*nomoi* groups', *i.e.*, groups endowed with a rule of their own; for, if they do so, society is sub-divided and each sub-unit is likely to govern its internal affairs

irrespective of the others' practical interests and moral conceptions, hence increasing the polarisation friend/enemy and hence the possibility of the extreme case of war.

Now, the political is about collective decision-making and effective politics requires obedience, because decisions that are not obeyed are useless. In democratic societies obedience can be required from people only if the political decisions to which they are subjected are legitimate. Unless different cultural voices (and, for that matter, also different social perspectives) are seriously taken into account, the connection between decision-making and obligation is very controversial. Monique Deveaux suggests that in a multicultural society 'the presence of real opportunities for all citizens to participate in debate and decision-making' (Deveaux, 2005, p 350) is critical in two main senses. On the one hand, participation requires the actual involvement in the deliberative process of decision-making; on the other hand, it also requires a more pervasive involvement in the public sphere, *i.e.*, the public debates which precede and influence the process of negotiation that constitutes decision-making itself (see also Bellamy, 1999, and Bohman, 2000).

However, a fundamental problem arises from this stress on the importance of the inclusion of different voices in the realm of the political. It is the question of power. At one level, in order to resolve conflicts of interests to one's advantage, power is crucial—not only in the form of economic means, but also intellectual capacities, such as legal expertise, moral influence in the public discourse, communication ability, etc. At another level, power is critical because once a group has secured it, it tends to use it not only to resolve economic and moral conflicts, but also to shape the framework of interests and worldviews in the first place, which translates into hegemonic power for some and oppression for others. The outcome of this linkage between power and politics is that—whenever unconstrained—the political risks become a highly cynical game. On the one hand, the very notion of negotiation around which the political is centred somehow resonates with the world of bargaining, which evokes the idea of one of the parties being made fool by the other, and as a result, in the long term, being oppressed. On the other hand, the political risks being cynical in that—according to a certain vision of democracy—it may flatten to a matter of numbers, namely a majority which quite simply imposes its decisions over various minorities.

In a recent discussion of multiculturalism, Daniel Weinstock addresses similar questions in a very persuasive way. As for what he terms the 'problem of history', he argues for the importance of 'measures whereby majority groups recognize, openly and explicitly, the legacy of historical injustice and oppression upon which present societies are built … [a]ccompanied by a commitment not only to recognize past ills, but also to do justice in the here and now' (Weinstock, 2005, p 242). I would only add that to my mind the reference to 'history' is somehow misleading, as there might be cases where national minorities have been historically very well protected (like for instance in the Italian constitutional arrangement), and the problem is instead with categories of people like women or immigrants that might be neglected if the emphasis were on historical wrongs. I would thus suggest that the status of 'epistemic standing' (*ibid.*)—which Weinstock advocates for minority groups historically discriminated against—should be extended to oppressed groups more in general, in the framework of strong affirmative action policies. As for what Weinstock terms the 'problem of number' (*ibid.*), *i.e.*, '[t]he often massive

numerical disadvantage that minority groups find themselves in', he has 'two suggestions. First, liberal states possessing large cultural, religious or linguistic majorities should focus to a greater degree than they presently do on ways in which the institutions, laws, practices and symbols of the state bespeak the assumption that the state actually "belongs" to the members of the majority' (*ibid.*). The other problem that Weinstock highlights is that '[c]ertain forms of democratic decision-making can exacerbate the "tyranny of the majority" by creating *permanent* majorities and minorities' (*ivi*, p 243). To counter this side effect of democracy Weinstock recommends 'changes to political institutions' (*ivi*, p 244) in the form of both 'greater proportionality' and, less formally, an increase in the practice of appointing 'non-elected consultative bodies' (*ibid.*).

I would like to conclude this paper with a concrete example of such informal measures aimed at what I have loosely termed here "political multiculturalism", by which I allude to measures aimed at the political inclusion and social integration of all cultural actors in a single larger community. On 10 September 2005 the Italian Minister of Home Affairs, Giuseppe Pisanu, appointed a *Consulta per l'Islam italiano* [Council for Italian Islam], in the European framework of the Declaration on the importance of dialogue between religions for social cohesion in Europe and peace in the Mediterranean region, adopted by the Ministers of Home Affairs in the EU and signed by the Heads of States and Governments during the Italian presidency at the European Council of Brussels, 12 December 2003. Independently on the formal democratic electoral system, such consultative body has been created in order to undertake research, give opinions and proposals with the final aim of creating an 'Italian Islam', that is, an Islamic community that is able to foster its identity but peacefully and fully integrated in the larger Italian society, according to a balance between individual rights, groups rights, and social and political unity. The Consulta is composed of sixteen members, four of whom are women. They represent twelve different national origins, which is meant to reflect the diversity of the Muslim population in Italy. In order not to permanently exclude sub-units of Islam and to reflect its internal variety of attitudes, the Consulta is comprised of representatives of both moderate and more militant groups, such as one member from the Ucoii, an organization which is deemed to be fundamentalist. But at the same time, the Consulta includes not only religious members, whose long-term objective is basically to have their religion publicly recognised, but also secular ones, whose objective is to represent a cultural and social voice of Islam which according to many should become an integral part of the Italian culture and should also be considered in the public education curriculum. In sum, the Consulta is an example of the informal means by which the pluralism that is present within cultural groups can be taken into account—irrespective of positions of power and numbers of vote—in the context of a social and political inclusion.

Conclusion

The paper has discussed the two main ways of shaping the relationship between the state, cultural groups and single individuals: a policy of assimilation into the state and a policy of accommodation of cultural groups. Although apparently opposite, both policies are in fact centred around the same two-fold principle: assimilation within the community, be they small or large (to the point of being as large as the state itself); and

opposition among the communit*ies*, in a logic of groups of friends opposed to enemies. The paper has proposed an alternative conceptualisation, which rests on a rethinking of the political in terms that are not oppositional but inclusive. The underlying idea is that of a single community, which should be shaped not around a full dimension of cultural homogeneity, but rather around a minimal dimension of the unity which is common to members that have different interests and different worldviews. Such an uncommon multiple is the only conceptualisation of the political that is appropriate for contemporary multicultural societies.

In no way has this short paper aimed to craft some comprehensively new theory of political and societal arrangements. Further work is needed in order to better articulate matters of distribution of power and means of representation. What the paper has presented is an argument about the need to articulate such matters neither along the lines of independent sub-units of society, as some multicultural theorists have proposed, nor along the lines of the restatement of an all-encompassing unitary state, as some liberal theorists do. Rather, it has suggested a different articulation in the framework of a notion of integration conceived as the balance of accommodation and assimilation within a single, but shared, community.

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