Progress reports

Geographies of identity: multiculturalism unplugged

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I Introduction

> Opposition to the relativistic, indeed ultimately solipsistic implications of epistemological insider-ism; concern over the fragmenting, in certain respects disabling consequences of identity politics; resurgent interest in forms of civic commonality; rethinking of the modalities of and rationale for affirmative action, not only on the part of its longstanding critics on the right, but on the part of its longstanding defenders on the left – these and other developments suggest that, in some respects at least, the maximally differentialist moment may have passed.
>
> Brubaker (2003, 40–41)

State-sponsored multiculturalism is in retreat. At the same time assimilation is shedding its tarnished image and regaining its stature as a key conceptual and political tool. This incipient process of change is under way in numerous countries and in both academic and political spheres. How can we understand these trends and how can human geographers contribute to a better grasp of the contemporary backlash against multiculturalism?

While the concept is used with great variation in different venues, there is currently a generalizable discourse of state-sponsored multiculturalism as ultimately failing, as 'having exhausted itself' (Brubaker, 2003: 40; see also Joppke and Morawska, 2003; Joppke, 1999; Alba and Nee, 2003). This critique comes from a variety of sources and comprises quite different analytical foci *vis-à-vis* different aspects of multicultural politics. In some quarters it encompasses identity politics or the 'differentialist moment' of the last three decades in toto. Rather than identifying the multiple points of critique however, I am interested here in exploring the general tenor of this backlash, and investigating some of its causes and effects. While most of the academic rhetoric on this score has occurred outside the field of human geography, the multicultural backlash is one that is having and will continue to have major repercussions for geographers, especially for migration scholars and for those working on racial and ethnic formations. In this progress report, therefore, I want to take the opportunity to briefly sketch out some of the convergences

between state policies on immigrant integration and minority rights and contemporary academic critiques of multiculturalism, and underline why the stakes of this particular debate have become so high.

Depending on the historical and geographical context in which it is employed, multiculturalism can have a range of different meanings. In this report I refer to multiculturalism as the philosophy and policies related to a particular mode of immigrant incorporation as well as to the rights of minority groups in society to state recognition and protection. Multiculturalism in this sense is not just about inclusion, nor is it merely an acceptance of difference; rather it actively 'achieves' diversity, it 'expands the range of imagined life experiences for the members of society's core groups' (Alexander, 2001: 246; for a discussion of the role of citizenship in this, see also Kymlicka, 2003a). Through this expansion of imagination, diverse ways of being in the world are recognized as legitimate, and the qualities of 'out-group' members are not stigmatized or relegated to the private sphere, but rather reconstitute the notion of civil competence *within* the public sphere. Thus multiculturalism effectively reworks *for everyone* the embodied cultural criteria that manifest civil competence; it is not additive but rather reconstructive.

Concepts of assimilation, by contrast, reinforce the public/private split by separating out 'difference' and relegating it to the private sphere. The civil competence necessary to be able to participate in the liberal democratic nation is shown through assimilation to established norms and values. Cultural difference is acceptable, but only in the spaces of private life. Thus assimilation does not challenge universalist assumptions or the embodied and expressive cultural qualities of core group members, and full participation in civic life, which is linked with these qualities, remains unattainable for many poor, immigrant and minority groups (see Mehta, 1999). Alexander (2001: 244) writes: 'Assimilation is historically the first and sociologically the most "natural" response to the contradiction between public civility and private particularity that has marked modern mass civil societies from their very beginnings. It is the most "natural" because incorporation can be achieved without appearing to challenge the established primordial definitions of civic competence'.

Multiculturalism is one feature of a broader trend in liberal social thought emerging in the mid-1960s in which cultural difference was acknowledged and valued and the national imperative for immigrants and minority groups to assimilate to a national ideal was greatly reduced. This 'differentialist turn', as some scholars have labelled it, resonated with epistemological critiques of foundationalism, particularly with respect to an opposition to universalist ideals. In the institutional realm of the state, the concept of multiculturalism influenced the promotion and teaching of regional and immigrant languages in Europe and the United States (Keating, 1996), the recognition of indigenous cultural groups and minority rights in Australia, the Americas and the former USSR (Kymlicka, 1995; Brøsted *et al.*, 1985) and educational curricula around the world (Parker, 2002; 2003; see also Brubaker, 2003: 40). Perhaps most important, however, was the influence of multicultural ideas on immigration policy and perceptions of effective immigrant and minority integration in liberal nation states. From a strong assimilationist ideology of immigrant absorption that was prevalent in most nations until the late 1960s, multicultural ideals of the right to difference (and to an institutional recognition of that difference) led to perceptible shifts in both the rhetoric and policy of numerous state institutions

associated with minority rights and immigrant acculturation, especially in the sectors of education and 'race relations' (for a brief history of the rise of the 'multicultural state', see Kymlicka, 2003b).

II Contemporary shifts in state policy

In recent years, however, the growth of state-sponsored multicultural programs and practises, which began in many liberal nations in the 1970s and continued through the early 1990s, has declined, and both the discourse and the practises related to minority integration are currently undergoing a process of change (Alba and Nee, 2003; Joppke and Morawska, 2003; Kymlicka, 2003a). In the United States, Australia and several European countries the active 'achievement' of diversity has been abandoned, and the promotion of assimilation – in the sense of a renewed defense of liberalism and the sharp separation of public and private realms – is widely apparent. Although these transformations clearly play out quite differently in different national settings, there is a disturbing familiarity to much of the state-based rhetoric, which increasingly emphasizes the 'choice' of individual immigrants or minorities to assimilate to the values of liberalism and hence attain civil competence, while many of the state-provided social services which had formerly aided them in doing so are simultaneously removed, subcontracted or devolved to the community level (for recent articles on the privatization and subcontracting of social services, see Mitchell, 2004; Wolch and Dinh, 2001; Larner, 2002).

Immigrant integration in the United States, for example, was greatly impacted by the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, which distinguished citizens from legal immigrants or 'resident aliens'. The latter group were then excluded from many of the federal welfare benefits and programs which had formerly been available to them (Peck, 2001; Sparke, 2005: Chapter 4). The stark separation of citizen from non-citizen in this legislation was part of a growing backlash against immigrant rights and protections that culminated most egregiously in the USA Patriot Act of 2001.

Meanwhile, a number of individual states also introduced legislation which greatly reduced state-provided assistance in multicultural integration. Proposition 227 in California, for example, reduced linguistic assistance for immigrant children. This proposition, which passed in 1998, mandated the use of English in all public schools and curtailed bilingual education programs. Waivers were granted to parents who demanded them, but federal funds such as those connected with the 'Reading First' literacy grants were tied to classrooms using state-adopted English-language materials, thus denying bilingual classrooms millions of dollars in federal funding. (This was successfully challenged by a lawsuit in 2004; see Alvarez, 2004.)

Several propositions and initiatives in the late 1990s also curtailed race-based preferences in higher education and in state hiring and contracting. Proposition 209 in California in 1996 and Initiative 200 in Washington in 1998 ended affirmative action in state university admissions.[1] In 1999 New York Republicans forced the City University of New York to greatly curtail its remedial education programs. Since that time, eight states have ended remedial education at two- and four-year state schools, and in 2003 Tennessee banned the use of state money for all remediation programs. Thirty-eight percent of colleges deem English as a Second Language

(ESL) classes 'remedial', and a disproportionate percentage of students who take these classes are black or hispanic (Cloud, 2002). The curtailment of remedial education and the anti-affirmative action climate throughout the States thus indicates the generally negative attitude towards state-sponsored programs which acknowledge group differences. This includes the differences brought about by poverty and inferior education systems in addition to differences of culture.[2]

In concert with this anti-multicultural atmosphere in the United States there have been renewed pressures towards national assimilation. This has taken many forms but is especially evident in the patriotism legislation that has passed in many states following the attacks of 11 September 2001 (see, for example, McDermott and Powers, 2002). Legislation and political pressure has encompassed everything from the daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance to the insistence on 'patriotism' being part of the everyday curriculum in public schools.[3]

In Europe there has also been a general retreat from state-sponsored multiculturalism (Joppke and Morawski, 2003). Immigration and integration policies of many European nations reflect a movement away from an official recognition and facilitation of pluralism in the public sphere, and a renewed affirmation of the core values of liberalism (Brubaker, 2003). According to Etzinger (2003: 72), the Netherlands has experienced one of the most profound shifts away from a strong official policy of multiculturalism in the past decade. After many years of promoting the value of immigrant 'difference' and of offering state recognition and providing numerous state safeguards for ethnic pluralism in the public sphere, the state's discourse and policy on minorities began to shift in the 1990s. He notes: 'In the new approach less emphasis was put on promoting and facilitating multiculturalism, while the need for integration was underlined more strongly, in particular through an increased participation in education and labor.'

Sweden's early efforts to support an official multicultural policy began in 1975 and contained efforts to protect the cultural identity of Sweden's ethnic minorities. This policy became more explicitly linked with immigrants rather than with minorities in the mid-1980s and quickly began to lose its progressive force. By the 1990s, the government began to emphasize the importance of integration, while at the same time it drew back from the social service welfarism that had long characterized the Swedish state. Immigrants were increasingly treated as individuals rather than as members of a collectivity, and were required to 'choose' to join the Swedish nation and to 'acquire the Swedish tools which can be needed to manage on one's own in Swedish society' (quoted in Soininen, 1999: 692; see also Joppke and Morawska, 2003: 14).

The recent legislation in France forbidding the wearing of veils in public schools is another clear reaffirmation of assimilation over the ideals of multicultural citizenship. Although France never adopted as active a multicultural policy line as other European countries, the recent popular and parliamentary diatribes against veil-wearing in public schools manifests a particularly strong entrenchment of the Republican ideal of *laïcité* – the separation of church and state and of the public and private spheres.[4] Despite the assurances of politicians and educators that negotiations with Muslim girls and their families would resolve most controversies, the end result of the legislation forbidding veils in public schools will be the exclusion of large numbers of Muslim girls from the public education system. Indeed, this has already occurred (see Bernard, 2003).

In numerous other European countries, and also in Australia where, after its election victory in 1996, the Liberal-National Party Coalition in Australia abolished the government's Office for Multicultural Affairs, there has been a shifting discourse away from multiculturalism and towards a more assimilationist strategy of integration (for Britain, see Back *et al.*, 2002). Although, as Joppke and Morawska (2003) point out, a kind of *de facto* or noninterventionist multiculturalism remains in place in most liberal states, the pressure towards national languages and the acceptance of the core values of liberalism reflects a new discursive frontier that may well be the precursor to even greater assimilative policies in the future. Further, the macroeconomic component of this shift is rarely discussed by immigration scholars, yet it is of crucial importance to the future of multiculturalism as a coherent philosophy of immigrant integration.

The current discourse of state-sponsored multiculturalism as failing is intertwined with ongoing geopolitical efforts to shift the responsibility for controlling and facilitating immigrant integration from the institutions of the state to the local level. A generalized state rhetoric of multicultural failure and the necessity to rethink the advantages of national assimilation accompanies the devolution of responsibility for ethnic integration to the scale of the community and the individual (cf. Back *et al.*, 2002). This is but one of many new technologies of knowledge/power under neoliberal regimes of governmentality in which individuals are constituted as atomized, free-thinking and entrepreneurial subjects who can 'choose' to assimilate or not as they wish.[5] These individuals are constituted as the new footsoldiers of a laissez-faire form of capitalism now prevalent in much of the developed and developing world.

Those who choose *not* to assimilate are represented as individuals unwilling to participate in civic life who can, as a result, be excluded from society without incurring damage to the core ideals of a universalist liberal project. This is the type of rhetoric that is currently being employed in France with respect to girls who choose to wear the veil in public schools (and thus can/must be excluded from them). The discourse of multicultural failure and the renewed state policies of assimilationism and exclusion represent a return to a recuperative national project that seeks to (re)locate a universalist notion of civil society firmly within the bounded contours of the nation state.

III   Academic backlash

Philosophies of difference have long provoked the ire of conservatives especially when applied to the 'western canon' in American educational circles or to the perception of special rights dispensed to minorities through affirmative action programs (e.g., Bloom, 1987; D'Souza, 1991; Bernstein, 1995). In France the multiculturalist '*droit à la différence*' (right to difference) rhetoric that blossomed for a short time in the early 1980s corresponded more with a greater acceptance of cultural pluralism in the civic sphere. This too, however, was bitterly attacked from its inception by those scholars wary of any conceptual framework which appeared to threaten the secular and universalist values of the French Republic (e.g., Finkielkraut, 1987; Todd, 1994). Indeed, a stolid conservative opposition to multicultural ideas and programs has remained quite consistent across nations and academic disciplines.

However, it is not this long-standing conservative opposition to the philosophies and policies associated with state-sponsored multiculturalism which interests me here. It is the contemporary backlash of the last few years, much of which has come from scholars professing an underlying sympathy with its core ideas. These critiques have emerged from the fields of migration, intellectual history, sociology, geography and political science in addition to more populist fora of social commentary. The critiques vary greatly in substance, from caveats about the links between multiculturalism and capitalism (Mitchell, 1993; Smith, 2000; Zizek, 1997; Cruz, 1996) or the inherent superficiality and cultural misunderstandings associated with state-financed multicultural programs (Kobayashi, 1993; Vertovec, 1996) to more normative warnings that multicultural demands are delaying immigrant or minority integration into society and threatening the unity and coherence of the beloved liberal nation (Huntington, 2004; Schlesinger, 1993; Miller, 1998). These latter exhortations are often couched in the language of 'post-ethnic' tolerance (Hollinger, 1997; see also Gitlin, 1995), yet they insidiously incorporate a recuperative national- ism that is ultimately exclusionary. (For critiques of the nationalist enframing of this literature, see Singh, 1998; Sparke, 2005.)

Among this large and disparate group of multicultural critics and critiques, I single out one that is particularly pertinent for human geographers. It involves the recent fiery debates in academia spurred by Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant's theoretical diatribes on the 'imperialist' conceptualization and use of terms such as multiculturalism. My aim is to show how this critique upholds a normative vision of immigrant and minority incorporation into civil society that rests on an implicit equation between civil society and the nation. Further, despite the counter- hegemonic stance of the authors, I demonstrate how this critique both reflects and helps to reproduce the contemporary political and economic shifts now occurring under neoliberalism, especially the devolution of responsibility for 'race relations' from the scale of the state to that of the individual and the community.

In 1999 Bourdieu and Wacquant published an article in *Theory, Culture and Society* in which they claimed that multiple concepts such as multiculturalism, ghettoiza- tion, exclusion and the underclass had been exported outside an American context as universal categories of knowledge, and that this process represented a form of 'cultural imperialism' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 41). The authors attacked a number of American scholars, particularly those working on issues of racial for- mation, for using particularist American concepts in their analyses of societies exist- ing outside the United States (e.g., Hanchard's work on Brazil, 1994). They also criticized European scholars – particularly French academics – for being 'transatlan- tic "carriers"' (1999: 51) importing trendy American concepts into European sites as if they were universally applicable (e.g., the work of Wievorka on racism in France, 1992). In addition to offering strong criticism of what they perceived to be polluted, Americanized terms (multiculturalism, for example, was represented as part of a 'wooly and spongy' debate),[6] Bourdieu and Wacquant also made the more serious allegation that scholarly exporters and carriers of these types of concepts were aiding in the dissemination of cultural ideas that supported contemporary economic and political systems of power, particularly the advance of American neoliberalism.

The article was highly polemical in tone and provoked an angry set of rejoinders from around the world (e.g., Wievorka, 2000; Werbner, 2000; Venn, 2000). Although there are many points of interest for geographers in this debate, I want to focus on the

ways in which their attack on multiculturalism and other so-called American concepts served to reinforce both scholarly boundaries and national borders. By railing against the polluting influence of 'universalist' transatlantic and crossborder thought, Bourdieu and Wacquant simultaneously recuperated the autonomous and clearly delineated space of French civil society and of the French public intellectual.

Bourdieu and Wacquant's critique, a self-perceived counter-hegemonic corrective to academic doxa, attacked not just 'American' discourses such as multiculturalism but also their purveyors and receivers, the French *passeurs* of these concepts. The conveyance and sharing of knowledge was thus represented as similar to the transmission of an infectious disease. Outside influences are projected as inherently noxious, insidiously penetrating the modernist, self-contained world of the radical scholar. As Hanchard (2003) notes, this hostility towards the transnational flows and crossborder constitution of politics reflects a strong French republicanism which ultimately conflates state and nation and serves to recuperate national cultural and territorial borders.

The Bourdieu and Wacquant article is part of a broader trend towards a form of disciplinary and regional academic isolationism. It also represents a backlash against creative 'mixing' of all kinds and operates as a backhanded slap against identity politics in general. Their critique ultimately returns to the notion of the enterprising (academic) individual and nation, and consorts well with the general devolution of state responsibility under neoliberalism. Despite its radical stance, the article dovetails with the growing chorus of neoconservative voices on both sides of the Atlantic now raised in renewed and reinforced opposition to the 'differentialist moment'. Indeed, the contemporary popular backlash against affirmative action, multicultural curricula in schools, immigrant linguistic and cultural programs and the cultural recognition of difference in the civic sphere is fast becoming the new cultural hegemon in many parts of the world, a conservative backlash in which Bourdieu and Wacquant are now exemplary academic participants. Their fierce denunciation of concepts such as multiculturalism (see also Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001) and their advocacy for the autonomous, unsullied 'public intellectual' betrays not just a profound misrecognition of their own intellectual steeping in the unabashedly universalist French Republican tradition, but also their unwitting participation in the very political and economic systems of neoliberal production of which they accuse their colleagues.

IV   Conclusion

The 'return of assimilation' has involved a subtle but significant change in perspective. Analytically this has involved a shift from an overwhelming focus on persisting difference – and on the mechanisms through which such cultural maintenance occurs – to a broader focus that encompasses emerging commonalities as well. Normatively, it has involved a shift from the automatic valorization of cultural differences to a renewed concern with civic integration.

Brubaker (2003: 51)

Self-perceived liberals often position themselves as fatigued defenders of an identity politics and a form of multiculturalism that has now gone too far (e.g., Toynbee, 2004). Identity politics is projected (on the left) as either undermining efforts for redistribution or impeding the struggle against a neoliberal global agenda

(e.g., Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001) or (on the right) as hindering the integration and unification of the nation (e.g., Huntington, 2004). The until recently disfavored conceptual apparatus of assimilation is then deemed acceptable once more, albeit generally stripped of its former negative associations with nationalistic processes of state formation.

Despite the best intentions of many liberal academics to dissociate assimilation from nationalism, however, the question of what immigrants are being assimilated *into* is rarely addressed. What exactly are the forms of civic commonality in which immigrants and minorities should participate, and what are their territorial or cultural boundaries? The renewed concept of assimilation harkens to a liberal desire to move beyond the nation, beyond ethnicity and all its negative fallout, beyond identity-based critiques and beyond difference. Yet, as Sparke (2005) demonstrates with reference to Hollinger's (1997) vaunted postethnic landscape, and Palumbo-Liu (2002) shows with respect to Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis (1996), it is the nation which ultimately and inevitably returns as the backstop to this liberal fantasy. Indeed, Huntington's civilizational thinking is directly linked with state-based multiculturalism, as it is the insurgent demands of differentialist thinking *inside* the nation that present, for him, the ultimate challenge for America and for global liberalism more generally. In his latest book, for example, Huntington (2004) makes it patently clear that it is the unassimilable immigrant who poses the greatest danger to the beloved nation and (by extension) the world.

Although eschewing the apocalyptic scenario presented by Huntington's domestic clash of civilizations, many liberal commentators argue that citizenship or denizenship should be equated less with status and more with *participation* in the community and the nation. If residents choose not to participate (i.e., they do not assimilate to the norms of liberalism), it is within the rights of state actors to exclude these 'individuals' from citizenship in order to protect the workings of the public sphere. This kind of logic is that of the 'new exceptionalism', the right to exclude or be an exception to ideal-type discursive systems involving the integration of difference.[7]

The new exceptionalism is just one of many contemporary assaults on philosophies of integration which hold that the recognition and acceptance of difference must be actively achieved, including via the institutions of the state. The convergence of thought around the 'failure' of multiculturalism in numerous liberal states over the past decade is increasingly paralleled by academics bemoaning the fragmenting effects of an excessive identity politics and time spent wasted on 'wooly and spongy debates.' Although like everything else differentialism can clearly be taken to unhelpful extremes, the particular timing of this academic backlash should give us all pause.

Notes

1.   However, a recent Supreme Court ruling in June 2003 allowed the continuation of Michigan Law School's admissions program in which race could be used as a factor of admissions as long as each applicant was evaluated on an individual (not points-based) basis. This vote was decided by a 5–4 margin.

2.   I should note that there is also widespread resistance to this recent backlash and many teachers, administrators, politicians and community organizers work unceasingly to mitigate the worst effects of these policies for immigrants and other minority groups.

3.   For example, Colorado Bill 02-136 was introduced into the Colorado Senate and approved in 2002. This bill was titled 'A bill for an act concerning the teaching of a unit on patriotism in each public school in the state'. See also the website of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, who sponsor a 'Defense of Civilization' Fund. One of the first projects of this fund was a publication attacking university professors for their 'un-patriotic' reaction to the 11 September assault and its aftermath. See the article by Jerry Martin and Anne Neal, 'Defending civilization: how our universities are failing America and what can be done about it?' (http://www.goacta.org/publications/Reports/defciv.pdf).

4.   The spirited defense of *laïcité* and of the separation of public and private realms in France is legendary. The Arab poet Adonis, for example, authored a special opinion piece on the veil for *Le Nouvel Observateur* titled 'Voiler les femmes, c'est voiler la vie'. He wrote: 'Le premier principe que devraient respecter les musulmans émigrés, particulièrement ceux qui ont obtenu la nationalité du pays dans lequel ils vivent, est d'établir une nette distinction entre ce qui est du domaine du public et ce qui relève du privé.' This type of sentiment reflects that of the majority of letters to the editor published in the French media in late 2003 and early 2004.

5.   My broad use of the term governmentality here draws on the work of Nikolas Rose (1999) and Dean and Hindess (1998).

6.   The authors continue their critique of multiculturalism in a later article as the 'New-LiberalSpeak . . . neo-babble' of intellectuals (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001). In their denunciation of multiculturalism, the authors manifest a profound discomfort with differentialist thinking in general, which they imply is retarding engagement with more serious issues, such as the global spread of neo-liberal ideology.

7.   The rise of the 'new exceptionalism' will be the subject of my next progress report.

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