

Liberalism has always distinguished the political sphere from the rest of culture. John Locke's attempt in his 1689 *Second Treatise on Government* to separate the magistrate-citizen relationship from all other social relations, and his simultaneous separation of "private" salvation from "public" political matters in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, inaugurated that strategy. For only thus, liberals have ever since thought, can the public realm of political coercion be kept away from matters of nonpolitical belief. But the privacy to which nonpolitical culture was thereby banished often seemed a rather public nuisance. By the mid-nineteenth century, J. S. Mill could refer to "custom" as a "despot," cultural tradition as the source of anti-individualist conformity. Natural rights liberals sought rights not dependent on culture; utilitarians and, by the twentieth century, progressives found inherited culture the chief obstacle to social progress. Whether the goal was individual liberty or prosperity or egalitarian justice, custom stood in the way. Then fascism, the Holocaust, and the American civil rights struggle provided liberals a new lesson: *culture kills!* Cultural identity, in nationalism or racism or anti-Semitism, is the greatest of evils. Fortunately, Cold War history seemed to confirm the anachronism of cultural identity in a modernizing world whose major issues revolved around political economy. Liberal theory then evolved the view that government is to be "neutral" regarding substantive accounts of the Good. Since whatever culture is, an individual culture *cannot* be neutral with respect to what it considers good, it follows that government must be neutral with respect to culture. The pursuit of neutrality reached its apotheosis in John Rawls's *Political Liberalism* (1993) by denying any political role to "comprehensive doctrines," hence cultural narratives.

But today we can say that reports of the death of culture were greatly exaggerated. Theoretically, neutralism has been under attack since the advent of "communitarianism" in the 1980s; "perfectionist" liberals have arisen who, like Stephen Macedo and William Galston, accept that liberalism

intrinsically endorses a set of liberal “virtues” or “purposes.” Brian Barry himself, a classical rights-based opponent of multiculturalism if ever there was one, argued that liberal politics presupposes a liberal outlook, or as Dewey long ago insisted, a liberal culture (Barry 1990; Dewey 1979). And in the real world cultural membership has renewed its claim to political legitimacy. Multiculturalism and the politics of “identity,” “recognition,” or “presence” have arisen in liberal societies, condemning the “assimilationist ideal” with its “melting pot” metaphor, aspiring to *sighted*, not *blind*, justice, to recognition through, not despite, *somatic-cultural* particularity (“somatic” referring not only to racial morphology but also to gender and sexual orientation). Thus the neutralist and secular tendencies of recent liberal theory today face, not only that global religious revival that Giles Keppel calls *la revanche de Dieu*, the revenge of God, but also a broader *la revanche de la culture*.

In response, a number of liberal theorists have opened their political anthropologies to cultural membership. We may call them the new culturalists. Some include among liberal individual rights the *right to culture*. Others eschew the foundational concern with individual rights for a “postliberal” theory while still arguing for typically liberal institutions and practices. I suggest that neither adequately conceptualizes a free society’s relation to culture. Instead of weaving liberal republican values out of a culturally embedded conception of self and politics, they cut culture to fit liberal anthropology and egalitarian policy, thereby minimizing the problems culture causes liberalism. My aim will be, not to roll back the new culturalism, nor to answer the important issues attendant on a culturally informed liberalism (such as, for example, cultural rights, proportional representation, minority legal exemptions, and so on), but to address the conceptual implications of a liberal recognition of culture. Ultimately, I believe, such requires a rejection of dominant forms of liberal *theory*, although not of *liberalism*, it being fully possible to endorse many liberal institutions, practices, and values while objecting to their common justifications (Cahoone 2002a). But here we can only recognize some of the complexities raised by opening liberal theory to culture.

The New Culturalism

Not that all historical strains of liberalism have ignored or opposed cultural identity. The political theorists Yael Tamir and Will Kymlicka rightly point out that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberalism was pleasantly

disposed toward nationalism. Woodrow Wilson led the movement that in the Treaty of Versailles made national determination a watchword of liberal democracy. Recognition of the rights of culturally defined groups has long been accepted in liberal states—e.g., Native American communities in the United States and Canada. Indeed, liberalism covertly depends on nationalism and the recognition of culture, not only in the historical formation of liberal states, but in the acquisition of citizenship by birth, both of which liberals accept without comment. For Tamir and Kymlicka, only hegemonic and “particularist” nationalism, the self-determination of one people at the expense of others and of individual rights, is antiliberal.

In *Liberal Nationalism* Tamir agrees with mainstream liberals that nationalism defined by “blood and soil” is wrong and dangerous. But national identity based in *culture* is not. Echoing Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, she stipulates that “nations are communities imagined though culture” (Tamir 1993: 64). Tamir gives communitarian justifications for the primacy of national “associative obligations,” claiming that a polity requires a sense of belonging rooted in “identity and relatedness.” Liberals must recognize a right to culture, a right to live in a “meaningful environment.” This is an individual, not a group, right, and thus can fit into the liberal list of individually borne rights, to be balanced with the others. She claims, however, that culture is something we *choose*, a “constitutive choice.” We are “contextual individuals,” but every aspect of our cultural or contextual identification is subject to our free affirmation or disavowal. She cautions that since culture is a personal choice, individuals may not only switch cultures but reform their culture. Cultures have no immunity from internal critique.

Tamir rejects state prohibition of minority cultural expression. For “refusing individuals the right to express their culture in the public sphere in compliance with the ruling culture compels them to forgo their identity” (Tamir 1993: 54). Liberal equality demands that the state not favor any culture over another. Every individual deserves an equal share of governmental resources (“cultural vouchers”) for making possible his or her cultural life. If its small numbers means that a minority’s cultural activities are in market terms more expensive than others, then “we may wish to supplement the funds granted to members of the [minority] community” (Tamir 1994: 55). Since Tamir allows that what is claimed by the liberal state to be “neutral” may in fact be a covert support of its dominant culture, her position implies that all minority cultures may be actively and disproportionately supported by tax dollars.

Tamir endorses national “self-determination” with two caveats. As noted, choice, not genes, determines membership, and there are no rights to particular plots of turf. Presumably this is an anti-Zionist claim directed at least partly to her fellow Israelis. Second, the institutional form taken by self-determination rightly depends on circumstances. The right to culture is not the right to a state. Because self-determination of one culture must be compatible with the same right for others groups, a liberal nationalism renounces the strict nationalist claim of “one people, one state.” Even on prudential grounds the best way to preserve one’s culture is not always a nation-state. Tamir’s aim is to dissociate cultural expression from political self-rule; she hopes to strengthen borders between cultures while weakening those between states. For nations are only dangerous if combined with states. What is often preferable, she suggests, are regional state-like associations, like the European Union, within which self-determining cultures can have a home.

Will Kymlicka is distinctively concerned with national minorities, like Native Americans, rather than immigrant minorities. In a series of books he has argued that liberal freedom requires a “societal culture,” a meaningful cultural environment in which members can make their choices. Cultural membership is a “primary good” in the Rawlsian sense, hence must be distributed justly, like income and opportunity. Applying Ronald Dworkin’s concept of equality of resources to cultural traditions, he notes that cultural majorities in liberal states enjoy an undeserved advantage by accident of birth, while minorities must often bargain away cultural identity for success or income. Indeed, he leaves no doubt that he feels the majority has its culture secured by the state, despite liberal claims to neutrality (Kymlicka 1995a: 189). Special support is justified where a minority suffers from unequal “unchosen” circumstances, as is the case with national minorities, as opposed to suffering from the consequences of their unique choices, as do voluntary immigrants. Thus, while rejecting the proceduralist liberal notion that “the right is prior to the good,” Kymlicka employs standard egalitarian liberal redistributive arguments. This expansion of rights-based liberalism is required if liberalism is “to ensure that no one is penalized or disadvantaged by their natural or social endowment, but allow that people’s fates vary with their choices” (Kymlicka 1995a: 190).

Kymlicka occasionally implies that cultural identity is unchosen, but like Tamir he seeks to defuse the implications of his apparently communitarian notion of the self as constituted by, and inheriting values and ends from,

community or tradition. He clarifies that liberalism requires, not that the self be “prior” to its communally inculcated ends, but merely that “no end or goal is exempt from possible re-examination.” Ends, while communally bequeathed, are all “reversible” by the individual’s choice. Each can be distributively, that is, piecemeal, subjected to critical revision. Hence the liberal “desires a society that is transparently intelligible—where nothing works behind the backs of its members,” determining their actions without their self-aware approval (Kymlicka 1995a: 63). This conforms to his view, shared by Tamir, that the source of affinity among a people is culture, not ethnicity. For “descent-based approaches to national membership have obvious racial overtones, and are manifestly unjust” (Kymlicka 1995a: 23).

Kymlicka maintains individual rights for the members of minority cultures against their own cultural communities. He denies that self-ruling, democratic cultural minorities will often need to restrict the freedom of members, although he admits temporary restrictions on members’ liberty to ensure cultural survival: “If certain liberties really would undermine the very existence of the community, then we should allow what would otherwise be illiberal measures” (Kymlicka 1989: 170). Such measures may be “wrong,” but the state may not prohibit them. “Peaceful negotiation, not force,” should carry the day, even though this may involve “exempting the national minority from federal bills of rights and judicial review” (Kymlicka 1989: 167–68). But, he continues, “Obviously intervention is justified in the case of gross and systematic violation of human rights . . . just as these are grounds for intervention in foreign countries” (Kymlicka 1989: 169). Here, as elsewhere, Kymlicka models the rights of national minorities on those of sovereign states.

Other thinkers, whom we might call postliberals, are heir to a more radical approach, finding that difference cuts deeper into the fabric of liberal thought. Iris Marion Young’s influential *Justice and the Politics of Difference* is not specifically concerned with ethnic or national groups, but more broadly with social groups “differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life” (Young 1990: 43). Such groups “constitute individuals . . . [in their] sense of history, affinity and separateness, even the person’s mode of reasoning, evaluating, and expressing feeling.” Denying that group identity is chosen, she evokes a Heideggerian notion that “group affiliation has the character of . . . ‘thrownness’: one *finds oneself* as a member of a group.” The majority’s oppression of such groups inhibits group members’ “ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs,

thoughts, and feelings" (Young 1990: 40). What grounds oppression is the ascription of a "unified, orderly identity" which must "essentialize" otherness so as to deny any sameness between self and other. This reflects majoritarian fear of particularity or "specificity," or in Julia Kristeva's term, the *abject* in oneself, which is represented by the other. In contrast, the nonoppressive use of difference conceives it as relational and circumstantial, hence variable, thereby avoiding exclusion. Young writes, "Difference no longer implies that groups lie outside one another . . . that there are no overlapping experiences . . . nothing in common. Different groups are always similar in some respects" (Young 1990: 171).

Of the allegedly impartial liberal state, Young claims that "the idea of impartiality legitimates hierarchical decision making and allows the standpoint for the privileged to appear as universal" (Young 1990: 116). Against this oppressive "depoliticization," Young insists that "all aspects of institutional structure, public action, social practices and habits, and cultural meanings" are to be politicized, "potentially subject to collective discussion and decision making." A *cultural politics* that critically examines all forms of group oppression will contribute to achieving the "democratic cultural pluralism" of "city life." City dwellers do not, like rural people and suburbanites, stick to their own. Their lives are lived in public space, in the "being together of strangers" who belong to the city without unity or commonness, an "infinite . . . network" that encourages risky encounters, difference "without exclusion."

In a series of essays, culminating in his *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Lord Bhikhu Parekh has pushed the confrontation of liberal theory with culture the furthest of all (Parekh 2000). Like Young, he accepts that cultural identity is un-chosen. He explicitly qualifies liberalism with multiculturalism, endorsing group rights and refusing to grant unqualified priority to individual rights. Parekh distinguishes several models for handling cultural diversity in a modern state (Parekh 1998). "Cultural assimilation" takes the state to be underwritten by a common culture into which immigrants and minorities must be assimilated. "Proceduralism" or neutralism demands that the state have no cultural predilections. "Civic assimilation" bifurcates a common political or civic culture, to which immigrants and minorities must be assimilated, from "private" culture with respect to which the state must be neutral. The bifurcationist and neutralist approaches in the end suffer from a version of the

assimilationist model: they effectively leave the inherited civic or majority culture as an unalterable given.

The multicultural model, on the other hand, opens civic and supracivic majority culture to transformation. Minorities are to receive not only toleration but support *qua* minorities, guaranteeing a robust pluralism. The dominant culture is then liable to ongoing negotiation with minorities regarding what it means to be a member of society. Not only can the majority change the minority, the minority can change the majority. The Indian or Pakistani can change England for the better; the constitution of English identity is “negotiable.” Parekh admirably foresees a relationship of reciprocity that obligates the minority as well; thus in Britain, “minorities can hardly expect to be taken seriously and play their part unless they accept the full obligations of British citizenship . . . and sensitivity to [British society’s] values, fears and dilemmas. . . . they must master English and acquire detailed knowledge of British history” (Parekh 1991: 200). *Rethinking Multiculturalism* is a mediator’s handbook, arguing above all for intercultural dialogue within a just “community of communities.” Like Kymlicka, he accepts a differentiated or pluralistic conception of citizenship, by which individuals and groups may exhibit different ties to the state. Social unity is then to be “grounded in a multiculturally constituted public realm which both sustains, and is in turn sustained by, a multiculturally constituted private realm” (Parekh 1998: 10). Parekh writes that “a politics of citizenship which both promotes the *rights* of communities with regard to each other, as well as the *obligations* of communities to each other is an essential precondition of this pluralist vision” (Parekh 1991: 199). What is needed between minority and majority communities is “what the Romans called civic friendship.”

Culture Without Tears

These thinkers perform the needed service of opening our understanding of the politics of a free society to cultural group differences. Nevertheless, they share three problems: their conclusions differ less from the standard liberal approach than they suggest; they fail to credit the antiliberal troubles caused by the new culturalism; and they offer a conception of cultural group identity that has already been predigested by notions of liberal freedom and equality, mitigating their claimed *rapprochement* with the realities of culture.

First, a preliminary question whose homely answer will become more significant later: is what distinguishes the Quebecois or the Native American or the Israeli Palestinian from fellow citizens entirely cultural? Is “a culture” the right name for the unity of these groups? As Anthony Appiah has warned, recent critics tend to expand the application of “cultural” to what is merely “social” (Appiah 1997). Exhibiting a culture, without mutual social obligations and interactions, might not be sufficient to the kind of associational identity the new culturalists are after. The objection is not solely terminological. For the expansion of “culture” is motivated, since group identity hanging on culture seems furthest removed from descent, race, and biology generally. The move also presupposes a central feature of modern, polyethnic societies, namely, their acceptance of the distinction between society and culture, which permits social members to be culturally distinct. However attractive that feature may be, we ought not to build it into our very concept of the polity (on pain of disqualifying most states in history). I would rather say that the groupings in question are *sociocultural*; if their group identities matter, they matter in a social network of expectations, both of members and nonmembers.

Tamir’s conclusion that we can draw a line between state and nation, leaving national groups their right to cultural self-determination while avoiding *staatlich* consequences, is very important. She is surely right that in most cases cultural self-determination can and ought to be achieved without a state. All that is required to reach this conclusion is to do the math: as Ernest Gellner notes, by any reasonable count the numbers of peoples far exceeds any plausible number of states the world could accommodate. But Tamir’s approach does not actually dissociate state from nation: it multiplies the *levels of state*, associating nation with a lower or subsovereign level of state. After all, cultural self-determination must have *some* political-legal-governmental expression, some political borders and special rules. If not, if state and culture are utterly dissociated, then we have returned to the standard liberal model in which culturally distinctive groups are supposed to go unrecognized at the state level.

Likewise, the kind of polity Parekh and Young endorse cannot differ greatly from the standard liberal one. For what would the political forum of the multicultural polity, or of “city life,” sound like? If it is *a* forum, that is, an inclusive public discourse among equals that constitutes or influences power, then it must have *a* grammar, a set of rules that excludes and, in our theorists’ view, privileges none. This may not be old-style assimilation to a

supposedly neutral forum that in fact privileged the Anglo-Saxon, not a store selling only white bread. Granted, it is an eclectic supermarket in which loaves of wheat, rye, and pumpernickel, not to mention bagels, proudly sport distinctive wrappings. But such a supermarket must still have rules; customers must relate to the clerks in a linguistic or behavioral Esperanto, accepting universal if minimal standards of propriety. In other words, *this is assimilation at a higher level*. The authors remain at least second-order egalitarian liberals, revisited at that level by many of the problems they raise against liberalism.

For in the end there are only three options regarding diversity, even if these can be recursively applied. The political environment in which cultures and culturally identified individuals interact must be understood *either* as culturally neutral (as the standard liberal view claimed), or as *somebody's* culture (hence an openly proclaimed liberal nationalism or a liberally hidden assimilationism), or as a capacious and tolerant megaculture produced by the merging of cultural elements, which itself must be either noncultural or one of the cultures in question. Note that the third option empties into the first or, if neutrality is a ruse, the second. That is, any megaculture would still be derived from some cultural traditions and not others, excluding or disadvantaging minorities who either find its capaciousness limited or who are offended by capaciousness (namely, ethnic or religious purists). Tolerating every cultural identity is after all a specific way of life, one that makes *pluralism* a chief good. Parekh is right that liberal autonomy is not an inescapable or universally acclaimed virtue, but neither is the creative tension he values so highly. As such, this megaculture is still a particular culture (option two), albeit at a higher level, to which assimilation would be required. As a particular culture it bears important similarities with a way of life that encourages people publicly to disregard cultural identity as private (option one), for it would be inconceivable without rules that are up to some point neutral among members' cultures. Parekh himself argues that "from a multicultural perspective the good society does not commit itself to a particular political doctrine or vision of the good life," it "privileges no particular cultural perspective, be it liberal or otherwise" (Parekh 2000: 340). But this is just a higher neutralism.

Moving to the question of the nature of the self, liberals have been criticized by communitarians for accepting an impossible anthropology, in which the self is entirely constituted by its own free choices, rather than by community or tradition. Tamir and Kymlicka assert a middle ground: even

if the self is constituted by community, all liberalism requires is that *every element* of the self be open to piecemeal, critical self-revision. Now, they are certainly right that many, maybe most, humans can critically revise aspects of their selves. But is there any evidence that *all* people have the capacity to revise *every* aspect of self, piecemeal or otherwise? Or even to *know* every aspect? No doubt virtually all people can raise some aspects of self to critical reflection, but the vast majority seem to do a very limited job of it. Presumably the ability to critically revise oneself is, like other human capacities, variable, contingent, and limited: most have a moderate dose, a few have a lot, and a few have almost none. True, we cannot say in advance which traits of which persons are incapable of revision, or which are *a priori* beneath awareness, but that ignorance does not justify the claim that all traits are revisable, any more than the fact that I don't know *when* I will die justifies me in doubting *that* I will die. The claim of universal, even if distributive, revisability is a remnant of the metaphysics of transcendent freedom that has become anachronistic in almost every other area of contemporary philosophy.

Parekh and Young try to avoid this form of transcendence, but they retain an analogous version. For theirs is an *interculturalism*, a multiculturalism of interaction, creative tension, and personal transformation. All citizens must accept the merely partial validity of their own culture. But like other liberals, the overcoming of fate, limitation, and ethnocentricity is still their social and cultural ideal. Parekh writes that education in a multicultural society should enable individuals to "see the contingency of their culture and relate to it freely rather than as a fate or a predicament" (Parekh 2000: 167). This is an analogue of the notion of liberal freedom as the capacity to transcend any particular set of constitutive bounds. Young and Parekh thus inherit the tradition of *romantic* liberalism, albeit one with strong egalitarian commitments. They share the Socratic ideal evident in John Stuart Mill's diatribe against conformity, John Dewey's justification of democracy as endless growth, and George Kateb's evocation of the transcendental experience fostered by liberal democracy (Mill 1978; Dewey 1944; Kateb 1992). All the writers mentioned maintain the liberal commitment to self-reflection, the ideal of a life in which all self-constituents are either chosen or freely affirmed.

Self-reflection may generally be an admirable quality, but is it the best quality, or good in every case? Would Mother Theresa have lived a better life if one morning she awoke to the realization that religious service had

been foisted on her by family and church, that she had never questioned whether it suited her deepest self, and so opted instead to read philosophy in a left-bank Parisian café and let the lepers die? Were there no young Germans in the 1930s who came to Nazism via a sincere critique of their childhood acceptance of bourgeois Weimar liberalism? Is the examined life more likely to lead to a commitment to human rights than skepticism regarding such rights? My point is neither to reject nor to ridicule the Socratic ideal, but to deny that it has a necessary relation to the good life, or any obvious superiority over a number of other moral ideals. Not only is it the case that, as William Galston wrote, people have “the right to live unexamined lives,” but in some cases an unexamined life may be better than an examined one (Galston 1991). From a practical or political point of view, with the exception of professional philosophers, for whom “the examined life” *is* their practical life, it is presumably in the results, *not the examination itself*, that moral value lies.

All the thinkers in question seriously underestimate the threat of cultural identity and cultural membership to individual liberties. Regarding one putative example of intracultural conflict, Kymlicka insists, “But there needn’t be any conflict here, for the kind of commonality involved—i.e. commonality of language and history, shared membership in a cultural community—doesn’t constrain individuality. On the contrary, membership in a cultural structure is what enables individual freedom” (Kymlicka 1989: 208). Here we see the tendency to conceive ethnic culture as a language that grants ability but has no substantive, choice-restricting content. Parekh likewise defines culture at one point as a grammar. But culture is not only a *how*; it is also a *what* and a *who*. Cultures are not mere languages. We know cases of rare individuals who speak ten languages. Can anybody belong to ten cultures?

This attempt to have identity without tears leads Kymlicka to a strange distinction between membership in a cultural community and adherence to the content of its traditions. He insists that cultural identity does not require fealty to tradition. While of course cultures change, being a member of a cultural community cannot be wholly independent of inherited content. Such a community cannot even be defined without reference to inherited content, lest membership become indistinct from that of any voluntary association. Erasing the substance of cultural tradition makes being Armenian and Rotarian equal in political significance, undermining the new culturalism altogether. Similarly, Parekh accepts the inherited nature

of culture, then compensates by making it utterly flexible, insisting that “every tradition can be read in different ways, none of them definitive and final” (Parekh 2000: 175–77). His case studies make it clear that for him *virtually no* modern, liberal, egalitarian policy—such as, for example, gender equality—is incompatible with *any* cultural tradition; under his hand, every tradition has the resources to adapt to liberal and egalitarian views. If that were true, there would be little need for cultural rights in the first place.

This connects to the broader question of intercultural judgment, regarding which, ironically, multiculturalists typically find identification with one’s culture a liability. The issue was famously addressed by Amy Gutmann’s popular 1992 collection, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, featuring an essay by the philosopher Charles Taylor, which sparked much of the philosophical debate over cultural identity and liberalism. In his essay Taylor defends a moderately communitarian liberalism, arguing for liberal rights but acknowledging that identity and self-recognition crucially arise only in dialogue or communally. He accepts that attempts to protect a culture from withering away may justify some relaxation of normal liberal rules of equality, like allowing Quebec to limit the property rights of shopkeepers to prohibit the proliferation of English-language signs. At the same time, Taylor criticizes the limits on our freedom of cultural judgment that would be imposed by any stridently multicultural claim that we must recognize the “equal value” of different cultures. To grant foreign cultures the benefit of the doubt, to respect them politically, to accept the obligation to learn about them is one thing; but to deny that one culture’s literature or art or politics can be *better* than another’s would be tantamount to a critical self-lobotomy.

It is a bit unfortunate that Taylor did not extend similar recognition to American novelist Saul Bellow. Taylor reproduces a remark that Bellow is “famously quoted” as having said—although Taylor adds in a footnote that he has “no idea whether this statement was actually made in this form by Saul Bellow, or by anyone else”—to wit: “When the Zulus produce a Tolstoi, we will read him” (Gutmann 1994: 42). Taylor and another contributor to the volume differed on just how repugnant this insult was supposed to be, but here as elsewhere it came to be regarded as a paradigmatic case of ethnocentrism, or worse. The rumored insult seems to have been passed around intellectual circles for years without proper documentation. The issue became heated enough that Bellow eventually responded in a *New York Times* op-ed essay, claiming that he *had* read a Zulu novel in college

(*Chaka* by Thomas Mofolo), but had forgotten it. We now know that the actual remark, as recorded by James Atlas during a 1987 interview with Bellow, was “Who is the Zulu Tolstoy? The Proust of the Papuans? I’d be glad to read him!” (Atlas 2000: 572–76). It is odd that no one seems upset that the Papuans have been neglected in the retelling.*

Putting aside the mild nature of Bellow’s actual remark, those upset by the apocryphal comment seem to have been exercised by the presupposition that Zulu culture had not produced literature comparable to Western in quality, and by the very act of negative evaluation across cultures. Both reactions seem exaggerated. By all means such comparisons ought to be based on knowledge, not ignorance. The most knowledgeable person in the current case would be someone deeply familiar with Tolstoi and the literary world in which he has a place, and equally familiar with Zulu contemporary literature and traditions. There is probably a very good chance that, if I were a Zulu bilingual in either Russian or a West European language, I might still say that my Zulu culture has not produced a Tolstoi, if only because of the relatively short history of writing in Zulu. That judgment would not thereby declare the *wholesale* superiority of Western culture—if Tolstoi is “Western” in the first place—to Zulu culture, not only because literature is not the whole of anybody’s culture, but because the novel arguably does not have an analogous place in Southern African and European culture. A more sensible comparison with Tolstoi as creative wordsmith might be instead to some great speaker or interpreter of Zulu traditional stories, although admittedly the more different the projects are, the more tenuous such comparison becomes. All this aside, Taylor’s rejection of *de jure* cultural egalitarianism is surely right. To declare all cultures’ products of equal value would not only inhibit Western cultural judgments, but those of non-Western peoples as well. It would have been rather bizarre to demand that an Egyptian visiting Northern Europe in the second millennium B.C.E. acknowledge that, in their own way, those European mud huts and piles of manure were just as impressive as the pyramids. What does belonging to a cultural tradition mean if it does not entail the judgment that one’s culture is superior in some respects to others? One would be a rather poor Zulu if she did not regard Zulu culture as superior to Western, at least in some respects. Why expect more from Bellow, unless one already has made a tacit judgment that Westerners are supposed to “know better”?

*I thank Dr. Christopher Walsh for his research on this matter.

In this connection, Anthony K. Appiah cites the marvelous example of the selection committee for a New York exhibit of African art, whose curator sought a diverse group to pick out “authentic” pieces, even including one plausibly authentic practitioner, a traditional Baule artist from Ivory Coast. But while the European, American, and African curators, academics, and collectors comprising the rest of the group were shown photographs of all potential selections, the Baule artist was allowed only to select among the Baule pieces, because, the exhibition curator remarked, “African informants will criticize sculptures from other ethnic groups in terms of their own traditional criteria,” hence reject them. As Appiah summarizes, “This Baule diviner, this authentically African villager, the [curator’s] message is, does not know what we, authentic postmodernists, now know: that the first and last mistake is to judge the Other on one’s own terms. And so, in the name of this, the relativist insight, we impose our judgment that [the Baule] may not judge sculpture from beyond the Baule culture zone” (Appiah 1992: 139). For the curator, cultural diversity is *de rigueur*, but only as long as the cultural “member” has thinned her membership so much that she no longer identifies with it completely. But the inevitable fact is that cultural membership shapes judgment, whether one’s culture is that of a former colonizer repentantly gone relativist, or a former colonized who remains identified with her ethnic group. It is not *a priori* clear which perspective is in any particular case the more insightful or the more jingoist.

The new culturalists seem unwilling to acknowledge that culture *limits*. If it empowers, it also disempowers; if it enables, it disables too. A few current writers have accepted the constraining reality of culture. Allen Buchanan points out that it is culture’s job to provide limits. Human existence needs a “structure” of what is intelligible, proper, and rightly desirable (Buchanan 1995: 356). Even if my culture is a smorgasbord of elements drawn from diverse societal cultures, it is still *a* culture, and a culture that does not limit cannot perform its job. Chandran Kukathas, a rare libertarian in a discussion dominated by egalitarian liberals, proposes that a minimal-state policy toward cultural minorities, built on a negative conception of liberty as mere “acquiescence,” would be *more* tolerant of non-Western minority communities inside the liberal polity than “progressive” policies which promote the values of individual autonomy and equality (for example, gender equality) that many of the aforementioned communities *reject*, thereby undermining them (Kukathas 2003). In classical (not progressive) liberal style, Kukathas argues that the state’s legitimate concern about individuals inside an illiberal

minority community is to guarantee their right to exit, not their right to legislate community reform. He is willing to recognize that his kind of libertarian toleration means *tolerating what progressives consider coercion*, because that is what cultural diversity often entails. Likewise, Appiah points out the downside to a politics that recognizes cultural identity: "The politics of recognition requires that one's skin color, one's sexual body, should be acknowledged politically in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and sexual body as personal . . . [where] personal means . . . not too tightly scripted" (Appiah 1994: 163). Moral-political recognition of such identity makes it inevitable that there will be "proper ways of being black and gay, there will be expectations to be met, demands will be made." There is no cultural or associational identity without scripting. Absence of scripts would mean absence of identity, just as absence of exclusion means absence of membership. Appiah concludes, "Between the politics of recognition and the politics of compulsion, there is no bright line." Most cultures are pluralistic, but not utterly so. If *a* culture is not *all* cultures—if it is one thing and not another—it must be limited, hence impose limits.

Analogously, to allow culture into the center of our politics is not merely to empower minority affiliations, but to render majority cultural power unobjectionable. It is to turn the allegedly *de facto* promotion of the majority culture by the liberal state into an explicit promotion. Multiculturalists go to remarkable lengths to avoid this consequence. While Parekh admirably accepts that the majority culture has rightful claims against minorities, he consistently denies its coercive power. Thus in calling for a differentiated citizenship he writes, "A white Briton who does not understand the cultural accents of his Muslim or Afro-Caribbean fellow-citizen is just as incompletely British as the Indian ignorant of the way his white fellow-citizens speak. . . . Only he is fully British who can honestly say that no British citizen, black or white, Christian or Hindu, is a cultural stranger to him" (Parekh 1991: 203). Well, do the Chinese suddenly fail to be fully Chinese if I move to Beijing, obtain citizenship, and they fail to understand my "cultural accents"? This sets the bar so high that the concept of cultural membership lapses into uselessness. Once culture matters, *some* cultures will matter *more* than others, and some may matter very little. Parekh is right that culture must be "negotiated," but to be open to negotiation is to be open to the relative power of different groups, hence to the likelihood of unequal outcomes.

The new culturalists have cooked the books. They have forced cultural identity onto a diet, making it thin enough to be compatible with their

politics. They follow the classical liberals they criticize in their fear of biology, that is, race, ethnicity, or any descent-based affinity, which they link automatically with racism and anti-Semitism. For them, as for most liberals, the mention of blood and soil always brings Birmingham and Auschwitz to mind. At the same time, of course, they motivate their work by claiming to accommodate liberalism to ethnic, racial, and cultural identity. But despite that motivation, their analyses and proposals are justified—through what we might call *argument creep*—by reference to lighter, thinner, liberal identities, often freely chosen, unburdened by objective criteria, for which blood, soil, and birthright are irrelevant. As in the old joke about the man who loses his keys in the grass, but searches for them under a streetlight, they look for answers where the light is better. They should have tested their reformed liberalism against a thicker notion of culture, one not predigested by liberal values. If thin and elective associations adequately described cultural identity, then there would be no problem to address in the first place.

A Culture-Based Liberalism?

I agree with the new culturalists that cultural identity is compatible with liberal society, not because cultural identity is thin and nonethnic, but because even moderately thick, descent- hence blood-and-soil-based ethnicity is not a problem for liberal institutions and practices. To see this, however, requires work on the political end of their view, their concept of a liberal polity. For, despite their openness to culture, they derive their concept of a free society from the neutralism they claim to transcend. They continue to insist that government's handling of cultural identity must be neutral with respect to all cultural identities and associations, hence such groups must be treated equally in all respects. If these theorists made their lives easier by short-weighting culture, they made them harder by staying too close to the neutralist, and especially Rawlsian, version of liberalism. A less dogmatic liberalism would have been easier to combine with thicker and thornier cultural differences. To see this we must examine the forms of identity liberals fear most (which will be explored more fully in Chapter 3).

We may begin with the blood and soil. Blood does not mean race, but descent, the relation to parentage. To say that blood matters is merely to say that *who my parents were* plays a role in constituting my associational iden-

tity. Minimally, soil is locale. Their salience is a consequence of the front-loaded character of human biography. Blood and the soil that surrounds it are markers for the *natal-maturational world of personal origin*, which plays a disproportionate role in the constitution of identity. Descent and locale are thus virtually ubiquitous as the first determinants of social and cultural membership, because almost everyone in every society descends from some other social members. As Edward Shils writes, kin loyalty cathects a social environment, not because all social members are related—which would make society a clan—but because virtually everyone in a society *has kin* in that society. Put it this way: where is there a political society which does not regard the offspring of members automatically as members? Being born and growing up in a place inevitably tie one to that place and its residents, even if they are civic and liberal in their conception of membership.

Contrary to Tamir and Kymlicka, racial, ethnic, national, and cultural memberships cannot be solely personal choices because they logically entail *public and social* criteria. Their meanings are no more under personal control than the meanings of words in a natural language are. The culture sets its membership criteria, and often they cannot be acquired through choice. Must the Sioux accept me, with no Sioux blood, if I learn Lakota and give up my credentials in the outside world? Of course not. Some cultures set criteria that are easier to meet than others; the point is that the criteria are not under the individual's control. The "right to culture" is thus more like the right of association than, for example, the right to self-expression. My right to speak in Hyde Park is actualized whether or not anyone listens, but I cannot associate with others if they walk away. If cultural membership is a right, it is a right to *seek* such membership, not to have it.

Simply, for the vast majority of human beings, including those in contemporary liberal societies, culture and cultural identity are largely found or inherited, not created or selected. Most of us lack a self that could gain the "distance" required critically to examine and "revise" our cultural repertoire and exchange our identity. Even in the most liberal case of all, the highly modern, immigrant society that is the United States, such freedom there is mostly means the freedom to avoid affirming the group identity we were bequeathed via descent, or to prioritize one of several cultural identities my genealogy and maturation offer me. Even this degree of freedom is rare, and more rare as we go back in time, arising historically only in those cases where people occupy a "boundary situation" where they happen to

meet the criteria of two different societal cultures, often after conquest or dislocation (MacIntyre 1989). Tiger Woods could indeed identify himself as African-, Thai-, or European-American. But Arab-American?

As Michael Walzer rightly argues in *On Toleration*, political history exhibits a variety of “regimes of toleration” (Walzer 1997). For example, the liberal nation-state, where there is a dominant yet tolerant cultural majority and guaranteed civic rights for all as individuals, takes a different approach to polyethnicity than do liberal immigrant societies, where no ethnicity is officially dominant. France exemplifies the first, and the United States the second. Thus, as I write, the French continue to face a basic controversy over whether Islamic public school girls should be allowed to wear religious veils in school. The French understood the veil not as an issue of religious liberty but as a denial of a public religious neutrality that is synonymous with secular French culture and the guarantor of its equality and liberty. The girls were seen not as asserting individual freedom but as *rejecting* that freedom, and the French culture that provides it, by absorbing themselves into an anti-French, antiseccular *faction*. In the United States of today it is hard to imagine the issue arising, even given the American wariness of Islamic dress since September 11, 2001. We are legally and culturally committed to the notion that religious expression is *not* in conflict with our notion of citizenship, which we structure differently than the French. For us, individual identity is outside the civic realm; wearing the marker of an ethnic or religious community does not imply civic disloyalty (as long as the wearers pay their taxes and respond to draft notices). For the French, civic liberties are based in identification with a French-speaking, secular tradition.

Kymlicka is right that citizenship can be “differentiated,” various citizens being tied to the polity in various ways. But it is differentiated both in the sense of permitting different ties to the polity and in the sense of differentiating or narrowing the requirements of citizenship. The traits which constitute liberal citizenship are indeed more limited or thin than ethnicity, hence the former is compatible with, “civil” or tolerant of, a variety of other group memberships and identifications on the part of its citizens. The kind of cultural identity the theorists *want* their work to concern is actually best termed *ethnic*, not merely cultural, identity (although the two overlap, as we shall see in Chapter 3). For present purposes, we may say that such identity is acquired by *descent*, from what is understood by members to be a present or past *culturally homogeneous society*; and is *thick*, meaning that it significantly determines the meaning of the bearer’s life across insti-

tutional roles (thin identities being role- and institution-specific), hence is relatively *exclusive* of others (thickness being proportional to exclusivity). Liberal citizenship then requires of domestic associational groups an inversely proportional narrowing of associational identity to permit civic membership; the group identity must leave open whatever space is required by the thin civic identity. My point is that what violates liberal civility is not blood or soil or unchosen history; it is a matter not of identity's *source* but rather of its *thickness*, hence dominance over the rest of identity and the degree of exclusion of others.

We can see this in application to American cases. Clearly some Americans identify with no ethnic or national group except what they regard as "American." They may regard that identity, and the association it implicates, as purely civic, the endorsement of a political form of life; or they may regard it as relatively thick and descent-based, investing "American" with supracivic traits. Still other citizens affirm their citizenship while nevertheless identifying themselves with an ethnic (or other) group understood to be relatively thick—so-called hyphenated Americans. Concomitantly, they must regard their American-ness as relatively thinner. Their ethnicity has a significant meaning-constituting role in their lives; they may prioritize it in mundane circumstances over their American-ness, although they must limit its demands to make room for citizenship. American civic identity is *thin enough* to be compatible with these moderately thick group identities; in fact, probably most Americans fall in this category. It remains the case that the differences between the unhyphenated and the hyphenated, or all the various particular hyphenations, can lead to conflicting notions of who is a "real" American. But no stronger or thicker American unity is required; what I have described is for America the normal ongoing negotiation over the meaning of American identity.

What is more troublesome are the very thick, hence highly exclusive, forms of associational identity, which are at home only in homogeneous societies in which citizenship, social membership, and cultural identity are *fused*, that is to say, where to be a member of society also means being a citizen and having a single thick cultural identity. The American who invests American-ness with ethnic or descent-based meaning can reach this point—thinking, for example, that only American-born white English-speakers are "real" Americans. The same is true of a resident alien, or a hyphenated American, whose "offshore" identity thickens to the point of reducing the "American" component below its minimal, civic threshold. It is these forms

of thick association and identity which, when writ large, are sacralized by the highly modern technologies of an authoritarian-nationalist state, which are indeed at odds with civil society. But unlike some other liberal societies (such as France), *even these* forms of association and identity can be tolerated in America if they remain largely *private*, hence make minimal demands on fellow citizens. Members of the Aryan nation who stay on their compound in Idaho and Islamic fundamentalists who stay in their neighborhood are acceptable. It is only when they become a force in the public—not only in acts of intolerance or violence, but as a political movements—that they threaten civil society.

Thus I agree with the new culturalists that liberal society is *not* violated by cultural memberships or identities. But this is so whether the latter are thin or moderately thick, inherited, fixed or unchangeable, perceived as “primordial,” tied to blood and soil or even race. Those characteristics by themselves need not imply the exclusivity that either prevents or is in direct conflict with the conditions of citizenship.

The Dialectic of Civility and Culture

But to claim such compatibility we must move beyond the concept of liberalism that the new culturalists take over from neutralist liberals with little modification. We must accept that liberal society—or better, civil society—obtains only *in and through cultural tradition*. (Cahoone 2002a). This implies, among other things, that political norms cannot be wholly independent of other sociocultural norms and values, thus liberal politics must be undergirded by extrapolitical commitments; that liberalism may be incompatible with some cultures; and that individual liberty cannot mean independence from communal inheritance. The issue is not one of fleshing out a “liberal culture,” but of recognizing our political form as part of a cultural tradition sufficiently complex that it qualifies, and is qualified by, its civility or civic rules. This means breaking with the neutralist ideal. It means accepting that liberal or civil society, in its politics, law, and government, can *never be neutral with respect to cultures*. It cannot treat all cultures equally, cannot avoid differentially advantaging and disadvantaging particular cultural identities and group associations. Neither its “official,” civically implicated culture, nor its mass culture can fail to script, or valorize, cultural identities differently. Its polity cannot avoid cultural exclusion or discrimination. All it can do is

coerce as little as possible, exclude least often, permit in privacy what is publicly excluded, and treat a wider, rather than a narrower, set of cultural identities as officially, publicly equal. The toleration of civil society is a matter of degree.

Civility, which for present purposes we may take to be the rules of citizenship in a liberal society, needs cultural tradition. For civility must be interpreted, and the transmission across generations of the store of interpretive resources that form the background against which individuals make their unique selections and contributions *is* culture. The rules of citizen relations and behavior, including an account of membership, rights, obligations, and liberty, must be culturally represented and valorized across generations. Edward Shils was one of the few to articulate the complex relation of civil structures and culture. He reminds us that “civility requires respect for tradition because the sense of affinity on which it rests is not momentary only but reaches into the past and the future” (Shils 1997: 51). If civil rules are to be upheld as more than a *modus vivendi* or means of avoiding conflict (as Rawls agreed they must), then the cultures of society must endorse them as valuable in themselves. Loyalty to the sovereign society and fellow citizens, which is required as much by redistributive justice as by military service, implies that under culturally inherited accounts of the Good, the *polity is good*. Tradition thus provides the “largely unreflective acceptance” of the ultimate rightness of “rules of the game of the free society” (Shils 1997: 110).

But even while civility is culturally informed, it must also *restrain* cultural tradition. Culturally transmitted civility can limit and oppose other parts of the cultural tradition, thereby promoting toleration and liberty. There is nothing strange about this once we accept the complex and agonistic constitution of what Alasdair MacIntyre called living traditions (MacIntyre 1981). Civility exists in tension with other elements of our culture. And why not? Civility is, after all, all about limitation; as Shils claimed, it “permits neither the single individual nor the total community the complete realization of their essential potentialities” (Shils 1997: 49). Civility inhibits tendencies within a culture toward what he called ideology. Endorsing a pluralism represented in contemporary political theory by Michael Walzer, Shils wrote, “What is so malign in ideology is the elevation of one value, such as equality or national or ethnic solidarity, to supremacy over all others, and the insistence on its exclusive dominion in every sphere of life” (Shils 1997: 59). Thus the culture of a liberal society must distinguish between

the rules of association—culturally interpreted—and its supracivil cultural aims, in order to tolerate wider deviance in the latter than in the former. Cultures often designate subspheres as quasi-independent, that is, as operating by distinctive rules that differentiate them from other cultural spheres. The cultures of modern civil societies grant such quasi-independence to civic life. If we say that American culture currently valorizes both the civil good of individual liberty and commitment to the supracivic goods of work, family, and religion (if inconsistently), then the former must sometimes lead our culture to restrict its promotion of the latter. The culture of liberal society thus engages in self-deformation or self-limitation, itself restraining its reproduction of supracivil values by a valorization of civility, hence of the liberty and dignity of each member. That is the real basis of toleration.

An Overlapping Cultural Consensus

This opposition appears analogous to the neutralist distinction between the political and the cultural. That is true. But it is only “analogous,” and this makes, in my view, all the difference. First, here the line is drawn *within* the realm of culture, between the culturally valorized civic tradition and other cultural strains. Second, the line is *porous*, not rigid. As Shils rightly argued, there can be no “pure” civility, utterly procedural norms unconnected with cultural sources of legitimacy or theories of the Good. The problem with neutralism was not that it drew a line, but that it drew a *rigid* line and drew it in the wrong place, or better, in a *place that does not exist*—a “noncultural” place. Consequently, minority cultures can come fully dressed to the forum to negotiate their interests and impact political norms. But this also means, as neutralist liberals quickly point out, that cultural majorities would likewise be empowered, hence may be able to “establish” their dominant cultures and hence sanction intolerance of cultural minorities and individuals. To this a cultured liberalism must make a complex response.

First, a negative point. Critics of neutralism must admit the truth of the neutralists’ underlying fear: *any step away from neutrality permits greater limits on individual and minority liberty*. Yet, we retort, there has never been nor will ever be a culturally neutral polity, hence the kind of individual liberty neutralists hope for. Thus, the neutralist and I agree that any reasonable interpretation of American civil rules through its legitimately dominant cultural tradition must outlaw ritual genital mutilation of underage females.

The neutralist must argue that this prohibition is based on a culturally neutral principle of individual liberty. I suggest there is no such principle, that our prohibition is as inevitably cultured as our notion of liberty, and nevertheless acceptable as such.

More positively, in a diverse liberal society the “cultural majority” takes a rather special form. Here a Rawlsian concept is helpful, albeit for a purpose not shared by its author. In *Political Liberalism* Rawls introduced the notion of an “overlapping consensus” of reasonable, that is, fair or tolerant, comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 1993). Distinctive comprehensive meta-narratives overlap, or jointly endorse, political liberalism, each on a distinctive basis. The overlap for Rawls is solely political—it is a set of political values, procedures, and institutions. But arguably liberal societies require as well an overlapping *cultural* consensus, the joint endorsement of an account of the human Good and key social practices and institutions by distinctive cultural traditions. This consensus is likely to be *thick but vague*, in Martha Nussbaum’s phrase, substantive but formulated in nonsectarian terms (Nussbaum 1990). It can include goods or institutions jointly valued but differentially instantiated by prominent cultural groups, such as, for example, the promotion of family-friendly economic policies. The consensus around liberal or civil political practices, institutions, and values is then a subset of this broader, nonpolitical consensus. So the cultural majority of a pluralistic liberal society is already culturally pluralistic.

Still, the empowerment of an overlapping cultural consensus would authorize the deprivileging of those minority cultural values and practices which fall outside the overlapping consensus. In short, some people’s cultures will be more fully reflected in public policy than others. It is the function of a culturally valorized *civility* to provide the limit on what the consensus may encourage or require of all members. Civility requires tolerance of those who do not share the dominant cultural values and practices, since it requires the liberty and dignity of all members be respected. This is why civility is in occasional conflict with other cultural values. Civil society’s repertoire of strategies for reproducing its dominant cultural values is complex, ranging from legal requirement or prohibition, to government promotion or discouragement, to extralegal social approbation and disapprobation. What makes society liberal is, as Galston argues, not the absence of officially promoted or required notions of the Good, but that the strategy of coercion be held to a minimum (Galston 1991). And what constitutes the minimum is itself a matter of cultural interpretation. All societies, including

civil or liberal ones, have texts and margins, norms and exceptions, dominant and subdominant narratives. Marginalized cultures can demand neither a social declaration of their cultural normativity nor that their vision be uncluttered by the dominant consensus. I might be comfortable with a subculture in which adults ride their motorcycles naked while swilling beer, but while I can hope to do so on private land, I cannot expect others to endure such a vision in public space. The cultural majority has a right to promote its supracivil cultural aims via the *civitas*, as long as this promotion does not threaten to undermine civility, membership, and liberty—again, as interpreted—for any members. And the consensus is open to change through minority negotiation and promotion of their cultural aims within the civil space.

Arguably the political force of an overlapping cultural consensus *is a fact* in any liberal democratic society. What else ought we call that set of social meanings which interprets the requirements of civility, liberty, and membership, which teaches social members how to be civil, tolerant and respectful of others, other than the intersection and accommodation of a finite set of cultural traditions varying in pervasiveness and dominance? This affects even policies of distributive justice, which cannot ignore the cultural meanings of the goods that need to be distributed; as Michael Walzer writes, “Every substantive account of distributive justice is a local account” (Walzer 1983: 314). Culturally diverse Americans constantly negotiate these matters, striking a shifting balance in national politics, mass culture, and local publics. As in all negotiations, the outcome at any moment will tend to be closer to the intersection of the interests or traits of the most dominant groups. There is nothing profound or unusual in these observations; the point is simply that the political-legal-governmental sphere cannot be understood as devoid of cultural partiality.

In sum, the relation of civil society and culture is a *dialectical* one. Civil life cannot mean and be valued in itself without culture, and culture cannot be the culture of citizens unless it restrains itself from treading on civility, itself part of the complex of cultural values that gives life in the *civitas* meaning. Society as civil is society understood as a moral association of free members. Culture is the interpretive inheritance of those members. Thus cultural reproduction must not be allowed to overwhelm civility, and civil rules must not be allowed to eviscerate its own cultural cathexis. Neither side can win, each must support the other while struggling against it, each must limit its prevalence in order to survive.