

## **Cultural Diversity and the Politics of Recognition**

Rachel Lawlor

University of Stirling  
r.a.lawlor@stir.ac.uk

### INTRODUCTION

‘Recognition’ seems to have become the ‘master-concept’ for analysing a range of claims advanced on behalf of a plethora of social movements and struggles.<sup>i</sup> Political theorists have found the idiom of recognition useful for describing and evaluating the rather disparate claims of an array of individuals and groups, whose self-definitions may be couched in terms of nationality, language, culture, ethnicity, gender or sexuality.<sup>ii</sup> These distinct groupings all represent emancipatory movements seeking public affirmation of identities, which are regarded as being marginalised or degraded by the dominant culture. They present challenges to the domestic arrangements of democratic states, to the liberal model of equal citizenship, and to supra national bodies charged with promoting and upholding international human rights.

Developing a conception of citizenship, which takes these claims for recognition seriously, has become a central aim for theorists addressing these challenges. However there is less consensus about what providing due recognition entails. Charles Taylor’s seminal statement of the politics of recognition, ties recognition closely to the ideal of cultural authenticity. While this model remains influential, recently two other important alternatives have emerged. One ties recognition to equality of status, the other associates it with the idea of civic freedom. This paper critically evaluates these three models.

# I

## Charles Taylor: recognition of Cultural authenticity

In his short but influential essay on *Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition* Taylor presents the thesis that “Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.”<sup>iii</sup> He seeks to tease out the social and political consequences of this thesis starting from the premise that:

“Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves”<sup>iv</sup>

Given that interpersonal recognition is so fundamental a feature of human life yet, is one which came to be expressly articulated as such only relatively recently, Taylor thinks it expedient to trace the developments in modern society that led to themes of identity and recognition becoming so central and problematic. In so doing, he finds that the need for recognition has two distinct aspects which correlate with two major sociological shifts, both associated with disintegration of socially defined roles and identities.

Firstly the notion of *honor*, which was intrinsically linked to hierarchy and inequality of status, is superseded by the concept of equal dignity which affirms the equal integrity of each citizen and is an essential component of democratic culture. The second feature of modern culture, to which Taylor alludes, is the “massive subjective turn.”<sup>v</sup> This second feature, Taylor associates with an ideal of authenticity which implores each individual to discover his or her own original way of being<sup>vi</sup>.

These two themes of equal dignity and authenticity are both, according to Taylor, developed and expanded in contemporary societies. First, as democratic struggles have broadened to the domestic and cultural spheres, the ideal of equal dignity has come to be associated with demands for equal status of cultures and genders<sup>vii</sup>. Secondly, the ‘monological’ formulation of the ideal of authenticity, which Taylor associates with Herder, is superseded by an appreciation that an individual’s identity and self understanding is informed by a complex of intersubjectively shared meanings articulated within the continuing conversation of a community.<sup>viii</sup> The fundamentally ‘dialogical’ nature of identity has come to be more fully appreciated as the

ascriptive identities that were tied to social hierarchies have fallen away. Furthermore, it is only in these circumstances, that attempts to be recognised can fail and questions of recognition and identity naturally come to the fore.

The political consequences of these most recent developments are played out, according to Taylor in the conflict between two distinct conceptions of citizenship and rights. Firstly, the politics of equal dignity demands the equalisation of rights and entitlements. Secondly, the politics of difference demands that the unique identity of specific individuals or groups, their distinctness from everyone else, be the object of recognition. The politics of difference, Taylor tells us, undergirds a model of citizenship which allows for differential treatment and group rights. This may even extend, he argues, to the right of minorities “to exclude others in order to preserve their cultural integrity”<sup>x</sup> and transmit their cultural heritage through to indefinite future generations. Taylor undoubtedly has in mind here his native Canada and in particular the “restrictions.... placed on Quebeckers by their government in the name of their collective survival”<sup>x</sup> such as those which forbid francophone and immigrant children from attending English-language schools and the requirement that commercial signage be in French<sup>vi</sup>.

Taylor recognises that the politics of difference may seem like a betrayal or a reversal of the politics of equal dignity and its central principle of non-discrimination. However, in an inspired move, he argues that the politics of difference actually grows out of and is required by the politics of equal dignity which is itself powered by the acknowledgement that *everyone* should be recognised for their own unique identity. In the case of the politics of equal dignity, what is singled out as worthy of respect is some universal human potential; a capacity that is thought to be central to human dignity and which all human beings share. For Kant, this was “our status as rational agents, capable of directing our lives through principles.”<sup>xii</sup> Something like this notion of autonomy, Taylor argues, has underpinned our intuitions about equal dignity ever since. However, in the case of the politics of difference, a related and equally important capacity is at stake according to Taylor, namely “the potential for forming and defining one’s own identity, as an individual and also as a culture”<sup>xiii</sup>.

There are several problems with Taylor’s thesis as it stands. Firstly, the question arises as to who is allowed to define the ‘authentic’ content of a culture. In the case of Quebec, from which Taylor draws most of his examples, the problem is perhaps less pressing. The feature most central to the self-definition of *la nation canadienne-française* is clearly language. Difficulties

arise though in cases where providing for the right to define and preserve the authentic content of a culture is likely to merely reinforce extant, perhaps oppressive power structures. In these cases, the exigency of preserving cultural integrity would need to be balanced against the imperative to protect the well being and basic rights of vulnerable members within the group.

Taylor is attentive to this potential difficulty. He proposes to distinguish fundamental rights from privileges and immunities, suggesting that policies aimed at cultural survival should never be allowed to circumvent the former.<sup>xiv</sup> Individuals do not have an automatic right to the recognition of those structures within which they articulate their authentic self-expression Taylor explains. Rather, the politics of difference requires only that we approach other cultures with the ‘presumption of equal worth’. A *prima facie* injunction to respect all cultures would be nonsensical and patronising. The problem with this approach is that Taylor thereby becomes embroiled in the thorny problem of cultural evaluation a problem which he proposes to address by drawing on Gadamer’s notion of a ‘fusion of horizons’.

The ‘fusion of horizons’ is a hermeneutic approach to cultural evaluation which requires that other cultures be approached on their own terms and with the assumption that “all cultures that have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human beings.”<sup>xv</sup> A judgement is reached partly through the transformation of the standards of evaluation. This is made possible by the ‘new vocabularies of comparison’ that arise, as horizons of thought are broadened through the articulation of the implicit background assumptions and values that animate different cultural communities and traditions.

This approach to cultural evaluation raises several difficulties. Firstly, Taylor’s conflation of cultures deserving of recognition with ‘societies’ that have endured over a considerable stretch of time is highly problematic. Having mentioned “subaltern” groups and feminist movements as having some claim in the recognition stakes, these groups seem to drop out of the picture at the crucial stage at which claims are evaluated and resolved. Having connected the ideal of authenticity to the idea that identity is formed within the intersubjectively shared meanings of a cultural community, he seems to have rather arbitrarily privileged some communities over others. He also underestimates the extent to which cultural traditions are internally contested and, critically appropriated and renegotiated in the creative interplay *between* cultures. This leads him to overlook the multi-faceted nature of modern identity and the criss-crossing networks of cultural affiliations that underwrite modern democratic struggles.

## II

### Nancy Fraser: Recognition of Status

Nancy Fraser's most recent work shows a keen awareness of the problems that arise from adopting an approach to recognition which emphasises cultural authenticity. She highlights two main problems. The first, which she terms *the problem of reification*,<sup>xvi</sup> alludes to the aforementioned tendency of this model of recognition to reinforce extant power structures within cultural groups. She argues that,

“Stressing the need to elaborate and display an authentic, self-affirming and self-generated collective identity, it puts moral pressure on individual members to conform to a given group culture.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Ironically, she adds, this model of ‘recognition’ is actually a formula for ‘misrecognition’ since it shields the internal contestation within a culture from view and so reinforces intragroup domination.<sup>xviii</sup>

The second problem, which she terms *the problem of displacement*, points to the fact that the current proclivity for ‘identity politics’ threatens to displace socioeconomic redistribution “as the remedy for injustice and the goal of political struggle.”<sup>xxix</sup> Taylor’s essay on the politics of recognition sidelines issues of economic injustice and fails to draw any connections between these distinct, but related forms of democratic struggle. Fraser, on the other hand, is keenly aware that “In the real world...political economy and culture are mutually intertwined, as are the injustices of distribution and recognition.”<sup>xxx</sup> Her attempt to develop a theoretically integrated perspective capable of addressing both dimensions of democratic struggles therefore commands attention.

Fraser argues that in order to avoid the two main problems, of ‘displacement’ and ‘reification’, we need a new paradigm of recognition which answers the question ‘recognition of what?’ by appealing not to ‘identity’ but to ‘status equality.’<sup>xxxi</sup> On this alternative ‘status’ model, misrecognition is understood not in psychic terms as “a distortion in one’s relation to self”<sup>xxii</sup> but in terms of “*social subordination*” where this means, “being prevented from *participating as a peer* in social life.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Fraser claims that this model not only brings questions of distributive

justice back into the fold but also overcomes the *problem of reification* since it “submits claims for recognition to democratic processes of public justification.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

For a claim of social subordination or *misrecognition* to be upheld, two conditions must be met. Firstly, claimants must show that the institutionalization of majority cultural norms denies them participatory parity. Second, they must show that the practices for which they seek recognition do not, in themselves, deny participatory parity- either to members within the group or to non-members.<sup>xxv</sup> Let us call the first condition the principle of ‘*inter-cultural*’ justice and the second, the principle of ‘*intra-cultural*’ justice<sup>xxvi</sup>. Fraser regards these principles as being compatible with the priority of the right over the good, providing for a deontological account of recognition.<sup>xxvii</sup> This expanded conception of justice is, she claims, in line with the liberal commitment to neutrality.

In her article, *Recognition without Ethics* (2001) Fraser contextualises these principles by discussing the French controversy over the *hijab*.<sup>xxviii</sup> At this time, the wearing of headscarves was banned, but the wearing of Christian crosses was permitted.<sup>xxix</sup> Considering the first condition of ‘*inter-cultural*’ justice, Fraser swiftly conjectures that this clearly is a case of “‘French majority communitarianism’ since no analogous prohibition bars the wearing of Christian crosses in state schools.”<sup>xxx</sup> She spends longer discussing the second condition of *intra-cultural* justice, which is concerned with whether the *hijab* is a symbol of female subordination that denies parity to members within the group itself. But she ultimately concludes that it is a “symbol of Muslim identity in transition, one whose meaning is contested”<sup>xxxi</sup> and so does not reinforce patriarchy but rather brings issues of gender equality to the fore. In this particular case, it would seem that the claim to misrecognition should be upheld since both of the conditions stipulated by Fraser are apparently met.

Fraser thinks that this deontological approach can assure parity of participation and forestall recourse to ethical evaluation in most cases.<sup>xxxii</sup> Only in cases where people’s ethical visions are so directly antithetical that ‘peaceful co-existence’ is impossible, does ‘parity of participation’ cease to be the relevant goal. In these cases the deontological approach must be abandoned and attempts made to find a mutually acceptable compromise.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

While Fraser’s criticisms of Taylor’s *authenticity* model are pertinent, her alternative approach is deeply problematic. The key to this approach she says, “is to break with the standard ‘identity’ model of recognition”<sup>xxxiv</sup> I want to suggest that this strategy is unsustainable since

issues of identity and the good, cannot readily be extricated from conceptions of justice and models of citizenship. I will support this claim by considering the most recent developments regarding the debate over headscarves in French state schools.

Recently, controversial measures have been put before the French parliament which would ban *all* ‘overt’ religious symbols in schools taking effect from September 2004<sup>xxxv</sup>. This marks a fundamental shift from the earlier policy discussed by Fraser which permitted the wearing of Christian crosses. The question is: were this to become public policy in France, would it, on Fraser’s terms, be an instance of misrecognition? Here, her discussion of same-sex marriage is suggestive. She argues that while the current marriage laws clearly constitute a case of *misrecognition* for homosexuals, parity of participation could be re-instated *either* by legalising same-sex unions *or* by de-institutionalising heterosexual marriage, effectively de-coupling it from financial and other benefits. Either option, he argues “would promote sexual parity and redress this instance of misrecognition.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Applying the same reasoning to the current debate over the *hijab* in France would imply that the most recent proposals, which evidently puts all religious groups on an equal footing in respect of religious symbols in state schools, does allow for participatory parity on Fraser’s understanding. However, religious communities claim that the proposed legislation *does* constitute a case of misrecognition and injustice. The fact that these claims are inadmissible on Fraser’s account highlights the central difficulty of her strategy.

Without wishing to make any judgement in respect of the issue of religious symbols in state schools, I want to suggest that the question of ‘*intercultural*’ justice cannot be satisfactorily debated or resolved without some reference to the meaning and significance that symbols such as the *hijab* and the cross have to respective religious communities. Without, that is, entering the sphere of ‘identity’ and ethics.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Furthermore, even though the principle of parity is achieved *either* by banning *or* permitting all religious symbols, the choice between these two options is not neutral in relation to the good. Rather the choice to ban all religious symbols affirms strong ethical commitments to secularism and the republican principle of the separation of church and state. Similarly a choice to allow all religious symbols affirms a strong ethical commitment to multiculturalism where this indicates a normative commitment to cherish and foster cultural distinctiveness.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Fraser's commitment to liberal neutrality means that she does not open up a space for the norms and values of the dominant culture to be questioned and hence the 'process of public justification', to which claims for recognition are submitted, is likely to reinforce the values and goals of the dominant culture and perpetuate the harms of misrecognition.

### III

#### Tully: Recognition of Civic Freedom

Like Fraser Tully he aims to provide a theoretically integrated perspective capable of dealing with the interconnected claims for redistribution and recognition. He also circumvents the *problem of reification*, but without separating the issue of citizenship status from questions of identity. This, I will suggest, gives his approach a number of advantages over Fraser's.

His starting point is, the practices of freedom within which struggles for recognition take place. He argues that "modern political theorists tend to overlook this realm of free action"<sup>xxvix</sup> which, taking his lead from Hannah Arendt, he understands as a public sphere constituted by an agonistic struggle for mutual recognition among diverse equals.<sup>xi</sup> He outlines four principles which underwrite these struggles for recognition.

Firstly, the mutual character of recognition carries with it an implicit ideal of *reciprocity*. Since claims of misrecognition invoke the normative principle that all are entitled to due recognition, these claims cannot involve the misrecognition of other individuals or groups, as to do so would involve a performative contradiction. In other words, unilateral demands for recognition are ruled out since legitimate recognition is always mutual.<sup>xli</sup>

The remaining three principles, Tully informs us, "arise out of the principle of democracy itself"<sup>xlii</sup> The first of these, the principle of *reaching agreement*, commands that, "the rules in accordance with which citizens recognize one another and govern themselves should be based on the agreement of the governed and their representative."<sup>xliii</sup> Secondly, and relatedly, the principle of *audi alteram partem* (always listen to the other side) carries with it the imperative that amendment of existing rules of mutual recognition should ensure that all of those affected should have their say in the deliberations. This, Tully remarks, is particularly important in identity-

diverse societies.<sup>xliv</sup> Finally, since all of those affected in changes to the terms of mutual recognition participate in these democratic negotiations, “the resolution is grounded in the principles, values, and goods they share as democratic citizens of the larger society.”<sup>xlv</sup> This, Tully calls *the principle of reason based support*, and he regards it as the guarantor of stability.

These principles, Tully tells us, should be regarded as critical and immanent and he accepts that they “will never be achieved in practice.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Also, in conditions of cultural diversity and value pluralism, there will always be reasonable disagreement over the appropriate form of these relationships of mutual recognition. But crucially, political legitimacy is not dependent upon finding a final solution to the politics of recognition since no such settlement is available<sup>xlvii</sup>. Rather, it is grounded in the fact that “citizens are always free to enter into a process of contestation and negotiation of these rules of recognition.”<sup>xlviii</sup>

I wish to conclude by spelling out some of the relative advantages that I think pertain to this ‘agonistic’ approach. It will be remembered that the main difficulty with Taylor’s model was its tendency to ‘reify’ and ‘essentialise’ cultural identity. Fraser attributed this to the fact that it construed misrecognition in ‘psychic’ ‘identity related’ terms. She proposed to ground recognition in ‘status’ and so avoid the need to make evaluative judgements about cultures or address questions of the good-life. However, in so doing, she proposes a model of recognition, which makes no reference either to the self-understandings of those engaged in struggles for recognition, nor to the self-understanding of the dominant culture. Her theory risks a slide to ethnocentricity in conflating the norms and values of a particular culture with universal principles of justice. It is precisely this risk that prompts Taylor’s turn to ethics in the first place.<sup>xlix</sup>

Tully’s model of recognition avoids both the dangers of *reification* and *ethnocentricity* most satisfactorily. First, the emphasis he places on the practice of civic freedom shifts attention from the goal of defining the authentic identity of a culture to the self-identifications of diverse citizens. This allows Tully to develop a more sociologically sophisticated account of cultures as “overlapping, interactive and internally negotiated”<sup>l</sup> and does not force him to privilege some cultural groups over others in the recognition stakes. It also allows scope for struggles over distribution without endorsing any particular redistributive schema. Secondly, in emphasising the mutual character of recognition Tully makes clear that the identities of *all* citizens within the public sphere are contested and continually subject to future re-negotiation. Thirdly, in making *audi alteram partem* or ‘listen to the other side’ a ‘watchword’ for political justice<sup>li</sup>, Tully urges

us to approach others according to their own self-understandings. In so doing, Tully shows an appreciation of the potentially transformative impact of democratic dialogue on self-understandings and standards of evaluation. One of the central tenets of republican and democratic theory is that the self is not pre-politically constituted and that interests and values can be transformed in the activity of democratic negotiations. Finally, strong democratic practices and the ideal of civic freedom can underpin an inclusive conception of citizenship capable of fostering solidarity between strangers.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> Benhabib, Seyla 'The Claims of Culture' (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press: 2002)

<sup>ii</sup> The issue of the negative stereotyping of people with disabilities and concerns about access rights is frequently overlooked within this body of literature.

<sup>iii</sup> Taylor C. p26 'Multiculturalism and 'the Politics of Recognition' *Multiculturalism: Examining 'the Politics of Recognition'*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). First published as *Multiculturalism and 'the Politics of Recognition'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) **Henceforth abbreviated PR**

<sup>iv</sup> Taylor PR p25

<sup>v</sup> Taylor PR p29

<sup>vi</sup> Taylor PR p32

<sup>vii</sup> Taylor PR p27

<sup>viii</sup> Taylor p36 *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1989) compare Taylor 'Philosophical Papers' p8

<sup>ix</sup> Taylor PR p40

<sup>x</sup> PR p53

<sup>xi</sup> PR 52

<sup>xii</sup> PR 41

<sup>xiii</sup> PR p42

<sup>xiv</sup> PR p61

<sup>xv</sup> PR p70

<sup>xvi</sup> Fraser Nancy p108 'Rethinking Recognition' in *New Left Review* May/June 2000

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid* p112

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid* p112

<sup>xix</sup> Fraser, Nancy "From Redistribution to Recognition" in *New Left Review* July/ August 1995

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid* p75

<sup>xxi</sup> Fraser, Nancy.p24 Fraser 'Recognition without Ethics' in *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol 18 (2-3): pp21-42

<sup>xxii</sup> Fraser, Nancy. p109 'Rethinking Recognition' in *New Left Review* May/June 2000

p109

<sup>xxiii</sup> Fraser, Nancy.p24 Fraser 'Recognition without Ethics' in *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol 18 (2-3): pp21-42

<sup>xxiv</sup> Fraser, Nancy. p119 'Rethinking Recognition' in *New Left Review* May/June 2000

<sup>xxv</sup> Fraser, Nancy.p35 Fraser 'Recognition without Ethics' in *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol 18 (2-3): pp21-42

<sup>xxvi</sup> These are my own labels

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid* p36

<sup>xxviii</sup> Fraser uses the term *foulard* to refer to the head dress worn by Muslim women. I am assuming that the terms *hijab* and *foulard* are interchangeable for the purposes of this discussion. Both refer to a head dress worn to cover the hair.

- 
- <sup>xxxix</sup> For an excellent contemporaneous discussion of French public policy on religious symbols and the debate surrounding the *hijab* see Bhikhu Parekh's *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (London: Macmillan: 2000) p249-254
- <sup>xxx</sup> since no analogous prohibition bars the wearing of Christian crosses in state schools.p35 Recognition without Ethics
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Fraser, Nancy.p35 'Recognition without Ethics' in *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol 18 (2-3): pp21-42
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> She discusses the environment and gay marriage and argues that these are also amenable to deontological solutions. *Recognition without Ethics*
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Fraser, Nancy.p36 'Recognition without Ethics' in *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol 18 (2-3): pp21-42
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> *Ibid* p23
- <sup>xxxv</sup> The measure would ban all religious symbols including Jewish skull caps, Christian crosses and the *hijab*.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Fraser, Nancy. p115 'Rethinking Recognition' in *New Left Review* May/June 2000
- Rethinking Recognition
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> As Bhikhu Parekh insightfully remarks "The question is not whether the *hijab* is the Islamic equivalent of the Christian cross, but whether in contemporary France wearing the *hijab* has broadly the same religious significance for Muslims as wearing the cross has for Christians."P251-252 *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (London: Macmillan: 2000)
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> I am using the term in the sense that implies a normative commitment to foster and cherish cultural differences. See Parekh,Bhikhu *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (London: Macmillan: 2000) p6
- <sup>xxxix</sup> James Tully p162 'The agonic freedom of citizens' *Economy and Society* 28, 2 (May 1999) pp161-182
- <sup>xl</sup> *Ibid* p162 compare Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press: 1998 [1958])
- <sup>xli</sup> Tully, James p474 'Struggles over Recognition and Distribution' *Constellations* 17/4 (2000) 469-482 Tully 2000 compare Tully, James. *Strange multiplicity, Constitutionalism in an age of Divesity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p167
- <sup>xlii</sup> Tully, James p474 'Struggles over Recognition and Distribution' *Constellations* 17/4 (2000) 469-482
- <sup>xliii</sup> *Ibid* p475
- <sup>xliv</sup> *Ibid* p475
- <sup>xlv</sup> *Ibid* p475
- <sup>xlvi</sup> *Ibid* p475
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Tully, James. P175 *Strange multiplicity, Constitutionalism in an age of Divesity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Tully, James p477 'Struggles over Recognition and Distribution' *Constellations* 17/4 (2000) 469-482
- <sup>lix</sup> See Taylor, C. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1989)
- The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: 1992). First published as *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi Oress, 1991)
- Multiculturalism: Examining 'the Politics of Recognition'* , ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Sources of the Self p40 Politics of Recognition and
- <sup>l</sup> Tully, James. P10 *Strange multiplicity, Constitutionalism in an age of Divesity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)
- <sup>li</sup> *Ibid* p115