Essentialism

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Introduction

We live demonstrably in dyspeptic times. In the West, this has been marked by a relentless rise in right-wing extremism, particularly post 9-11, and a related burgeoning visceral skepticism of the merits of multiculturalism as public policy. The recognition of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural diversity, underpinning multiculturalism, has increasingly been constructed as public anathema. Among its most bellicose critics are far-right, nationalist politicians and their followers. Many of the latter now identify as the 'newly oppressed' or the so-called 'new minority' – working- or middle-class Whites, White males, and/or monolingual English speakers (Gest, 2016). Such individuals regularly denounce multiculturalism for affording 'special privileges' to minority groups and are a key constituency that has fueled the rise and current ascendancy of Trump's America. Meanwhile, this (re)positioning of 'disadvantage' conveniently overlooks the histories and products of imperialism and colonization that continue to shape the present, and from which Whites invariably benefit in settler colonies, often unconsciously and covertly.

So-called 'new minorities' and the political Right are not alone in their opposition to multiculturalism. Those on the Left have also consistently criticized multiculturalism, or more specifically its most popular variant: liberal multiculturalism – particularly, those adopting a critical race theory (CRT) approach. What these critics are most often exercised by is the cultural

essentialism that too-often underpins liberal multiculturalism. Cultural essentialism is taken to mean here 'the endemic tendency to assume that distinctive cultural attributes are the defining feature of all groups' (Barry, 2001: 305). While often well meaning, these essentialist constructions of culture simply entrench, rather than subvert, White supremacy because they simultaneously 'museumize' and 'exoticize' the cultural attributes of minority ethnic groups. What is needed instead are *material* and *structural* analyses that challenge the dominance of majority ethnic groups, along with the normalization of their cultural mores, in the key institutions of the nation-state, as in education, for example.

It is to these critiques of multiculturalism that we turn in this entry. We begin by examining *liberal multiculturalism* and its limits, particularly in relation to the cultural *essentialism* that still too regularly underpins it. We then argue that, along with *critical race theory* (CRT), *critical multiculturalism* should be considered as a useful theoretical complement for explaining, and critiquing, the current socio-political conditions that appear so antithetical to a continuing commitment to public multiculturalism.

Liberal multiculturalism and its limits

For much of its history, multiculturalism has been plagued by an idealistic, naive preoccupation with culture at the expense of power relations, and broader material and structural concerns. If only cultural differences could be recognized, or so the story went, the prospects of a harmonious multi-ethnic society could then (more easily) be achieved. This strain of multiculturalism is most evident in the rhetoric of early forms of multicultural education, developed throughout the 1970s and 1980s (for useful critiques, see Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Modood & May, 2001). It is encapsulated by the British antiracist commentator Hatcher's (1987) observation that:

[While] culture is the central concept around which [this] multiculturalism is constructed, the concept is given only a taken-for-granted common sense meaning, impoverished both theoretically and in terms of concrete lived experience. It is a concept of culture innocent of class. (p. 188)

Hatcher's acerbic assessment formed part of a sustained assault by antiracist theorists in Britain in the 1980s and, subsequently, critical race theorists in the United States from the 1990s onward, on what they perceived to be the endemic utopianism and naivety associated with the multicultural education movement. This movement has since come to be described as "liberal multiculturalism" in the United States and "benevolent multiculturalism" elsewhere (see May, 2009; Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004).

The crux of liberal multiculturalism is that individuals, groups, and societies will 'get along better' through greater recognition and inclusion of – and respect for – ethnic, religious, linguistic, and/or cultural diversity. Here, the source of conflict is perceived to be simply a *misunderstanding* of cultural differences (as opposed to inequitable power relations, to which we return shortly). Within liberal multiculturalism, culture, which is regularly elided with ethnicity, is thus treated in *historicist* and *essentialist* terms. That is, culture is perceived to be a set of homogenous characteristics and practices, frozen in time, that attach unproblematically to all members of (usually) an ethnic minority group. From this, liberal multiculturalism dubiously avers that these static characteristics and practices can be described, celebrated, and taught to promote intercultural understanding. This – often superficial and tokenistic – celebration of difference(s) is evident via (multi)cultural fairs and festivals for example, as well as many multicultural curriculum programs in schools.

Liberal multiculturalism's propensity to treat culture as a set of fixed characteristics and practices is highly problematic. This historicist and essentialist understanding of culture reflects an obsolete colonial view that dominated the work of anthropologists until roughly half a century ago. Its stance is one of "'other people' have culture out there, and our job is to study it through its artifacts" (May & Sleeter, 2010, p. 5). In so doing, liberal multiculturalism produces reified, uniform conceptions of cultures that exoticize and romanticize difference, while also often retrospectively creating fictional accounts of their supposed evolution. This is a process that can occur even when the narrators themselves are members of the (ethnic) group they are describing.

Such an approach not only homogenizes intragroup cultural characteristics, it also entrenches intergroup boundaries, both of which run counter to the actual dynamism, fluidity, multiplicity and interspersion of individual and group identities. The problem of essentializing group identities (and related group boundaries) has long been raised in anthropology, particularly since Barth's (1969) seminal essay on ethnic group boundaries. It is evident in a parallel sociological consensus on the arbitrary constructedness of ethnic groups – a process Brubaker (2002) has dismissively described as 'groupism' – and a related rejection of the apparent fixity of such identities.

Barth, for example, argued that ethnic groups could not be defined on the basis of their particular cultural (and linguistic) characteristics, what he termed the 'cultural stuff' of ethnicity. Rather, ethnic groups are *situationally* defined in relationship to their social interactions with other groups, and the boundaries established and maintained between them as a result of these interactions. In other words, cultural attributes only become significant as markers of ethnic identity when a group deems them to be *necessary*, or socially effective, for such purposes. Thus, particular cultural attributes may vary in salience, may be constructed or reconstructed, and may

even be discarded by an ethnic group, depending on the particular sociohistorical circumstances of their interactions with other groups, and the need to maintain effectively the boundaries between them.

In short, there is no inevitable link between particular cultural attributes and particular ethnic group identities. Liberal multiculturalism fundamentally overlooks the fact that ethnic culture – while important and influential – is but only one aspect of a person's identity. The historicist and essentialist view of culture underpinning liberal multiculturalism thus runs directly counter to constructionist accounts of culture and ethnicity, as well as postmodernist accounts of fluid and overlapping identities and related discussions of hybridity within postcolonial theory (see, e.g. Bhabha, 2004; Gilroy, 2000). As Said (1994) contends, "No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points" (p. 336). Liberal multiculturalism, then, attributes culture to (ethnic) minorities in ways that do not account for the multiplicity of their bona fide, lived experiences.

Notwithstanding those issues, liberal multiculturalism has gained significant purchase as a 'ready' response to the 'management' of cultural diversity, particularly in fields such as education. It appears to be an immediately implementable solution to the 'problem' of diversity. In schooling for instance, lesson plans that teach about visible cultural differences are easily obtained by teachers. Similarly, holding a (multi)cultural fair/festival at a local park – with performances, music and cuisine to celebrate the kaleidoscope of cultures that make up our cities and countries – is not exactly out of reach.

Liberal multiculturalism may be easy to implement, but this is only so because it fails to recognize and address unequal power relations that underpin inequity and limit cultural interaction. In education, for example, such an approach merely adds an 'ethnic' component to

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the existing and invariably monocultural (White) curriculum and society, while the normativity, universality and supremacy of the dominant group (Whiteness) continues to eschew questioning. Invariably, celebrations of difference(s) embody an ephemeral commitment/quality– lasting a day or a week at best – after which, minority groups must return to schools and societies that represent and reflect the cultural specificities of the dominant (White) group. Liberal multiculturalism, then, is "a feel-good celebration of ethno-cultural diversity" (Kymlicka, 2010, p. 98), which emphasizes the *lifestyles* of ethnic minority groups (through customs, traditions, performances, cuisine and music) as opposed to their *life chances*.

To be sure, our argument is *not* that the recognition of ethnic, religious, linguistic and/or cultural differences – and their incorporation within multicultural or antiracist practice within education, or elsewhere – are insignificant. Indeed, they are important because such understandings, while always partial, are vital for productive engagements. Our point, rather, is that such celebrations of difference(s) are simply inadequate on their own. After all, it is one thing to describe and acknowledge ethnic, religious, linguistic and/or cultural differences. It is quite another to uncover and disrupt the inherent monoculturalism of societal practices and institutions, and the unequal power relations and inequities that permeate, underpin and are promulgated by the current social order. Despite appearing to act in the interests of (ethnic) minorities, the celebration of cultural differences through multicultural curricula, festivals, performances, music and cuisine simply conceals the unchanged nature of power relations and the normativity of White supremacy.

Critical multiculturalism

In light of the issues discussed thus far, how might multiculturalism be (re)developed into a non-essentialist, "sensible, theoretically refined, and defensible paradigm" (Torres, 1998, p.

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446)? Critical race theory (CRT) is the most commonly adopted theoretical position by which this question is addressed – usually, via a rejection of any possibilities therein for multiculturalism's redemption. However, we suggest below that *critical multiculturalism* constitutes just such a paradigm – one that can *resituate*, rather than simply dispense with, multiculturalism as a response to racism and other material forms of inequality (May, 1999, 2009). By "*critical* multiculturalism", we mean an approach to multiculturalism that integrates and advances various *critical* theoretical threads. We also interpret "*critical* multiculturalism" here to mean a form of multiculturalism that is *critical* (i.e. vital) to responding to the ascendant right-wing nationalist, anti-immigration/diversity milieu we presently face in the West, and increasingly worldwide.

Developing a non-essentialist conception of cultural difference requires unmasking and deconstructing the façade of (cultural) neutrality and universality that shrouds the nation-state and its institutions. The nation-state and its institutions – such as schools – are not neutral, nor have they ever been. Rather, the public sphere of the nation-state represents and reflects the ethnic, religious, linguistic and/or cultural particularities of the dominant (White) group. For instance, nation-states observe public holidays that reflect a particular religious calendar(s) and accentuate a particular lingua franca(s). In Western societies, traditional university lecture halls (and the authoritarian pedagogical method such spaces facilitate) are structured to resemble a particular religious establishment – namely, the church. There are countless other examples.

A plausible and effective approach to multiculturalism must prioritize structural analyses of unequal power relations that inhibit the *life chances* of minority groups, rather than simply advocating for greater understanding and celebration of cultural differences (*lifestyles*). Unlike liberal approaches to multiculturalism discussed earlier, the interrogation of unequal power

relations is a feature that is at the heart of critical multiculturalism – as it also is in CRT. Acknowledging and challenging power relations requires understanding how power is exercised and institutionalized, and taking collective action to produce change to improve the life chances of minority groups. In particular, it requires actively and critically questioning whose ontologies and epistemologies come to be subjugated/excluded, and whose are accepted/included, within nation-states and their institutions. Like CRT, critical multiculturalism interrogates the normativity, universalization and supremacy of majoritarian forms of identity – most notably that of Whiteness – which tend not to be questioned, nor be deemed questionable.

Critical multiculturalism also situates culture and identities in the context of how unequal power relations – experienced through daily interactions – contribute to their production, rather than framing culture primarily as a fixed, historical artifact. Identities – be they ethnic or otherwise – are not, and indeed cannot, be freely selected. Rather, identity choices are inevitably shaped and constrained by one's position(ing) in the wider society, a product in turn of power relations. For instance, a White American may have a wide range of ethnic options from which to choose, both hyphenated (e.g. Italian American) and/or hybrid. In contrast, an African American is confronted with essentially one ethnic choice – Black; irrespective of any preferred ethnic (or, for that matter, other) alternatives they might wish to employ. Identity choices are shaped by class, ethnic and gender stratification, object constraints and historical determinations. Put differently, individuals and groups are inevitably situated, and often *differentially* constrained, by broader structural influences such as capitalism, racism, colonialism and sexism. Approaches to multiculturalism that both essentialize and depoliticize culture – reifying culture and cultural difference, while simultaneously disregarding the broader social and political context, as is the case in liberal multiculturalism – are therefore fundamentally limited.

Grounded in postmodernist conceptions of identity, critical multiculturalism recognizes that culture and identity are multilayered, fluid, complex, and encompass and intersect with numerous other social categories (such as class, gender, sexuality, and so on). Concomitantly, culture and identities are being reconstructed, realigned and reimagined through participation in social situations. Such a positive, dynamic conception of culture continues to recognize, however, "that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, *without being contained by that position*" (Hall 1992, p. 258; our emphasis). In other words, the acknowledgment of our cultural and historical situatedness should not define the boundaries of ethnicity and culture, nor should it undermine the validity of other, equally legitimate forms of identity.

Critical multiculturalism provides us then with a *non-essentialist* construction of both ethnicity and cultural identity, along with their complex *intersection* with other forms of identity formation and structural dis/advantages. Such an approach offers a theoretical complement to one of the most significant developments in critical race theory: the application of counter-storytelling to accentuate the voices of (the often voice-less) minority groups and their lived experiences of discrimination.

Where critical multiculturalism differs from critical race theory is largely in emphasis and by degree. First, intersectionality has been a feature of a critical multicultural lens from the start, while it is only in more recent work that intersectionality in CRT has come to the fore (see, e.g. Gillborn, 2015). Second, from its inception critical multiculturalism has drawn on theoretical discussions on racism from both the European and American sociological traditions, albeit disavowing the reified conception of 'race' that is still central to many discussions of racism in the United States. Third, critical multiculturalism accordingly provides a stronger international

perspective on, and engagement with issues attendant upon racism and in/equalities. While CRT has again attempted to internationalize its discussions in recent years (see, e.g. Gillborn, 2017), its grounding remains firmly situated within the history and context of the United States. This amounts to a form of 'methodological nationalism' that Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) describe as a "territorial limitation which confines the study of social processes to the political and geographic boundaries of a particular nation-state" (p. 578). In order to overcome this, they assert that "[w]e need to think outside of the box of dominant national discourses" (p. 581).

Conclusion

Multiculturalism has promised much but has had little to offer since its accession in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is particularly so with respect to its most popular variant: liberal multiculturalism. As demonstrated here, liberal multiculturalism – however well-intentioned – has grave limitations. Chief among these limitations are its antiquated historicist and essentialist views of culture, and its inability to challenge the inherent monoculturalism (White supremacy) of the nation-state and its institutions, along with wider unequal power relations and inequities. As a consequence, liberal multiculturalism, particularly as enacted in fields like education, has had a largely negligible impact on the life chances of minority groups.

Despite these demonstrable inadequacies, there are still some signs of hope for the further development of multiculturalism. We have argued in the latter half of this entry that what has come to be known as "critical multiculturalism" provides a key way forward for multiculturalism, both in education and the wider public sphere. Critical multiculturalism addresses the above-mentioned caveats of liberal multiculturalism, particularly by prioritizing structural analyses of unequal power relations that inhibit the life chances of minority groups. Critical multiculturalism engages actively with postmodernist conceptions of the contingent

nature of identity, and situates culture within the wider nexus of power relations of which they form a part. And critical multiculturalism disrupts the normativity, universalization and supremacy of majoritarian forms of identity, specifically Whiteness.

In conjunction with the related strengths of CRT, critical multiculturalism can also address directly the seemingly inexorable rise of right-wing nationalist, anti-immigration/diversity sentiments, and the associated burgeoning callous violence toward minority groups. The apparent entrenchment and expansion of these latter developments in the West, and increasingly worldwide, provide all the more reasons why we must articulate, defend and practice critical, overtly antiracist, forms of multiculturalism in their stead.

Related Entries:

Critical Race Theory

Intersectionality

Gloria Ladson-Billings

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