1 Ethnicity, nationalism, and minority rights: charting the disciplinary debates

Stephen May, Tariq Modood, and Judith Squires

Introduction

This edited collection aims to bring together key perspectives and debates in social and political theory on ethnicity, nationalism, and minority rights. This is important because, despite the rapidly burgeoning literature on these topics in recent years within both fields, their discussion continues to be largely situated – we would say, constrained – within their respective disciplinary traditions.

One of the interesting features of the way disciplines develop is how they reflect their own distinctive starting-points and dynamics. For example, a generation ago, social theory was strongly committed to the Marxian proposition that the point of theory is not merely to understand the world but to contribute to changing it. Those in sociology who were not Marxists were more likely to favor a social democratic, "social engineering" approach (Popper, Kalakowski) rather than a systemic change but, interestingly, were also more likely to be working on more substantive fields within sociology. Nevertheless, it was a feature of sociology that it was organized by the idea of contemporary relevance and so, despite differing views of how contemporary relevance was to be demonstrated, theorists could not afford to become too remote from substantive studies.

This was not the case in political theory. Around the middle of the twentieth century, Anglophone political philosophy seemed to have retreated into linguistic analysis and the death of political theory was regularly announced until, in the 1970s, Rawls relaunched a liberal normative political philosophy. Political theory then became less introspective about the possibility of theorizing and more concerned to build a systematic view of the world. But this "view" was spun out of abstract, universal propositions with no reference to the empirical, merely some hypothetical, sketchy cases to illustrate a logical distinction. Hence, as political theory gained in confidence and purpose, a chasm grew between political theory and the empirical study of politics.

As political theory was gaining in confidence, however, the epochal disillusionment with Marxism in most of its manifestations meant the opposite was happening in social theory. Echoing previous declarations of the death of political theory, social theorists who declared the "end of grand narratives" met little resistance from their colleagues. Moreover, social theory – and indeed, several humanistic disciplines such as anthropology, geography, and literary criticism – became extremely self-reflexive and skeptical of what their disciplines, or any other disciplines, could say about one's own or another's society. Concerns were increasingly expressed about how any such analysis invariably involved particularistic and sometimes oppressive assumptions, masquerading as universalistic truths about human nature, reason, or modernity.

Meanwhile, to complete the symmetry, as political philosophy has come to actively pursue the justification of principles, postmodern social studies has defined its object of study as discourse and representation rather than true propositions about society. So, for many inquirers it is sufficient to study how Asian women are represented in Western media without having to take a view as to whether those representations are true or what kind of corrections would be required to render them true.

Given this broad characterization of the contrasting dominant trends within social and political theory, it is no surprise that each kind of theory has engaged with issues of ethnicity, nationalism, and minority rights in different ways, though these engagements too have influenced the developments within the respective disciplines.

In political theory, for example, the analysis of ethnic and ethnonational movements has tended to concentrate on the sociopolitical implications that such movements have for liberal democratic nation-states. In recent years, the development of political theory has thus provided us with rich and varied discussions concerning the actual and potential consequences for modern nation-states of ethnic and ethnonational claims. Such discussions have ranged from orthodox defenses of liberalism and liberal democracy to alternative communitarian, consociational, and "politics of difference" conceptions of the nation-state. Questions of ethnicity, nationalism, and identity politics have been usefully explored in relation to fundamental normative concepts such as equality, liberty, democracy, and justice. At times the constitutional implications of these discussions for nation-states have been elaborated but the key thrust has been to (re)define key normative concepts.

Sociology, with its interest in society as a whole rather than in political institutions, took a much earlier interest in questions of "difference" and "identity politics." In social theory, this has been expressed principally via the dominance of social constructivist accounts of ethnic and national

identity, focusing in particular on the constructedness and malleability of identities. These discussions provide an important dimension often missing in political theory analysis. Indeed, the latter has, more often than not, simply assumed the nature of ethnicity and nationalism as given, with less emphasis placed on the constructedness of social groups and more on the social and political consequences of group claims. In contrast, constructivist social theory accounts tend to reject any solidary notion of groups, emphasize the complex and cross-cutting identities at play in the postmodern world and, from this, articulate and explore the consequences of a more fluid (and contested) politics of identity and representation.

These debates, which also link in with anthropological discussions of culture and ethnicity, thus highlight the complex, and at times constructed and contradictory interconnections between identity claims, their political mobilization, and their social and political consequences. Along with related discussions in cultural studies, feminist studies, and some strands of political philosophy, these debates also explore issues to do with postmodernity, postcoloniality and globalization, and their influence upon articulations of ethnicity, racisms, gender identities, and other forms of social and cultural identity and politics in the postmodern world (see, for example, Said 1978; Benhabib 1992; Hall 2000).

A successful exchange between the disciplines should thus facilitate an analysis of wider theoretical debates, and their potential consequences for the (re)construction of democratic societies, in conjunction with their practical articulation in particular social and political contexts. This dual emphasis on the theoretical and practical consequences of ethnic, nationalist and wider identity claims is conspicuously underrepresented in extant literature in the area, where we tend to see theoretically sophisticated and empirically grounded analyses of ethnicity and nationalism, but seldom in the same publication. This collection aims also to redress this all too common disjuncture. Before exploring the potential interconnections between social and political theory further, however, we want to turn to a more detailed discussion of what each discipline has contributed thus far to the debates on ethnicity, nationalism and minority rights.

Political theory goes multicultural

Political theorists have, in recent years, addressed questions of ethnicity and minority rights with increasing gusto, even heatedness (see, for example, Kymlicka 1995; Kymlicka and Norman 1999; Joppke and Lukes 1999; Barry 2000; Parekh 2000; Kelly 2002). The particular locus of much of this discussion has centered on the merits, or otherwise, of multiculturalism as public (state) policy.

The emergence of ethnicity and minority rights on the political theory mainstream agenda can be traced back to Rawls' writing on pluralism and consensus as the essence of liberal democratic thinking (see, especially, 1971). This work generated a huge literature, much of which focused subsequently on what has come to be termed the liberal-communitarian divide. On the one hand were those who would prioritize the choice and autonomy of the individual (Dworkin 1977; Gutmann 1985). On the other hand were those who argued that a broader communal socialization in a historically rooted culture was necessary to enable the preconditions of such individualism (Sandel 1982; Raz 1986; Taylor 1994).

In the early 1990s the liberal-communitarian controversy transformed into a more particular debate about how to accommodate cultural and ethnic claims onto a broadly liberal political theory. Will Kymlicka's (1989) *Liberalism, Community and Culture* was a significant text in making this shift. This debate between liberals and communitarians soon evolved into a discussion about liberal western values in relation to non-western traditions, minorities and immigrants (Kymlicka 1999a; Okin 1999; Nussbaum 1999).

Political theorists have consequently focused their reflections on the kinds of demands made by minority cultures on the state. These demands have been categorized into three broad types (Kymlicka 1995). First, there are rights to do with government, including special representation rights, devolution and national self-determination. Second, there are rights that seek to accommodate a variety of distinct cultural practices within larger states. These include both exemption rights and cultural rights, which give special assistance to a disadvantaged minority, such as affirmative action programs. Third, there is a category of demands that are not rights claims, but pertain to the issue of collective esteem. This "becomes a matter for public policy when the symbolism of flags, currencies, names, public holidays, national anthems, public funds for cultural activities and the content of school curricula bear on a minority's fragile presence in the public political culture" (Seglow 2002: 158). This typology of the demands made by minority groups upon the state structures the debate within political theory, with theorists arguing for and against the normative desirability of the state granting the rights demanded and giving the recognition claimed. Yet, notwithstanding the heated nature of debate within political theory (see Barry 2000; Kelly 2002), the debate is very clearly framed in a manner which excludes as much as it illuminates.

Multicultural practices tend to be viewed, within political theory debates, through a rather liberal normative lens. Much of this literature therefore remains entrapped within the disciplinary confines of political theory. For example, in *Multicultural Citizenship* (1995), Kymlicka

draws an analytic distinction between national minorities and ethnic groups. The point of this distinction is to justify his hierarchy of cultural rights: while national minorities merit rights to special representation and devolved self-government, ethnic groups deserve only rights to help them integrate on terms that are fair. The nature of this distinction is a product of the normative analytic framework, requiring one to legislate, in a categorical way, when a culture qualifies for minority rights and when it does not. Yet the nature of culture and the nature of groups do not tidily fall into categorical distinctions, thus vitiating the aim of being relevant to real world dilemmas and challenges.

Young's work represents another significant shift within this liberal theory framework. Offering an explicit critique of Rawls, Young captured the thrust of US-centered radical multiculturalism, which challenged an important blind-spot in mainstream liberal thinking: the inescapable effects of power, domination, and historical oppression on the political and personal chances of true participation for minority and ethnic groups. Her theory brought back to center stage a sociological concern with the effects of substantive inequality on people's ability to choose, and a political scientist's awareness of the pervasiveness of power. Yet, Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990) remains bound by its context. Any attempt at a systematic analysis of cultural assimilation as a form of oppression undertaken within Western Europe, for example, would not have failed to include religion as a significant category. This raises the broader issue of the extent to which the central theoretical concepts of North American philosophy are informed by an experience that is different to that of Europe, and the degree to which an uncritical application of the former to the latter is highly damaging. Moreover, attempts such as hers and James Tully's, which try to integrate a constructivist account of social groups into their recommendations for group representation (Young 1990, 2000; Tully 1995) are open to a further criticism. Their normative commitment to group representation has led critics to charge them with holding a "billiard-ball concept of cultures" (Barry 2000). Whether it is possible to square a recognition of the "overlap, interaction and continuous renegotiation and transformation of cultures by their members" (Tully 2002: 104) with group representation is a contested issue (see Squires 2002; Tully 2002; Barry 2002; Owen 2003). This is a vitally important debate, and one which requires all the theoretical resources available within both social and political theory.

Another limitation of the dominant political theory approach to questions of minority rights lies with the level of abstraction at which the debate is usually conducted, and the rather cavalier approach to empirical

reality. There has been an internal shift within political theory, away from hypothetical armchair examples to the recognition that "practical reason" involves a sustained engagement with real examples taken from everyday political and social issues (Favell and Modood 2003). However, the introduction of favored – often highly selective – multicultural dilemmas into a predominately abstract analytical debate has still tended to proceed without much sensitivity to or awareness of the complexity of the social and political situations discussed. The principal limitation attendant upon this approach is clearly that empirical cases are inevitably employed as *illustrations* for a general theoretical point. The risk is then that facts will be selected and presented in such a way that they fit a preconceived normative judgment. Certainly, "thick descriptions" of social and political contexts, to employ Clifford Geertz's phrase, remain relatively rare in political theory and this militates against the efficacy of asserting normative principles in the first place.

Be that as it may, the shift towards a more applied political theory is still a significant one. The evolution of Will Kymlicka's work is a case in point. His *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (1989), though representing a significant intellectual shift, was still a predominantly abstract Oxford philosophy text, focusing on Dworkin and Taylor. *Multicultural Citizenship* (1995), however, was something very different, discussing the applied history of liberal principles on minorities, and wanting to engage with specific, contemporary hard cases. Unusually, it demonstrated awareness (in both sociological and legal terms) of the complexity of the actual issues surrounding the Native-American population in liberal Canada, an awareness that was extended in his next book (1998) to a broader discussion of Canadian multiculturalism (see also, Carens 2000). More recently still, Kymlicka has explored questions and concerns about the comparability and appropriateness of his model of minority rights to Eastern and Central Europe (Kymlicka and Opalski 2002; see also this volume), picking up on a comparative trend already well established by sociologists of ethnicity and nationalism such as Rogers Brubaker (1992, 1996).

This comparative engagement within political theory debates on multiculturalism is highly promising, and long overdue, not least in questioning and opening up for debate the normative ascendancy of North American philosophy in such debates and its applicability, or otherwise, to other national and regional contexts. This latter feature can be further illustrated, again in relation to Kymlicka's work, with respect to specific differences between North America and Britain.

What people in Britain call multiculturalism (for example, the provision of halal meat in hospitals or the marking of Diwali by a school holiday), Kymlicka calls "polyethnicity" (Kymlicka 1995). He makes a

sharp distinction here between a state incorporating, perhaps by treaty or conquest, a part or whole of a nation, and the presence of loose associations of individuals and families, with some connections based on origins, who have entered the state not as a nation but as voluntary migrants. This may be helpful for conceiving of immigration-derived polyethnicity in the USA and Canada, but it is less helpful for Britain. British "polyethnicity" is a legacy of empire; most migrants came from states that had been incorporated into the British Empire in ways not dissimilar to the incorporations of "nations" in Canada and the USA. These states contributed to Britain's economic development and to its superpower status; some migrants were ex-servicemen, with many others having relatives who had risked or given their lives for Britain. For the West Indians, England was the "mother country"; for the children of the Raj, the Queen was the head of the British Commonwealth and the migrants were subjects of the Crown with, albeit circumscribed by increasingly restrictive legislation, free rights of entry, settlement, and indeed British citizenship. It is thus difficult to apply Kymlicka's framework without severing, or making a mockery of, the connection between the "new British" and old Britain (Modood 2005).

While we have used Kymlicka's work as a prominent example of the growing trend towards comparative engagement in political theory, he is of course not the only political theorist so engaged. Bhikhu Parekh's *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (2000) further develops the tradition of applied political theory, showing a sociological sensitivity to practice and context. Parekh is a leading exponent of grounding political philosophy through discussion of real multicultural dilemmas. What is particularly significant is that Parekh's book, and the string of articles that preceded it, draw deeply upon policy challenges that have arisen in non-North American polities, especially Britain. While this makes his theoretical work particularly relevant to British policy thinking – most evident in the report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, which he chaired (CMEB 2000) – it also raises a further methodological issue. Neither normative political theory nor postpositivist social theory offer a sustained engagement with the kinds of methodologies basic to other social science disciplines, stressing the need for empiricist comparative approaches before any generalizations can be drawn.

The significance of such contextual theorizing points towards the need to negotiate yet another disciplinary boundary: it signals the strength gained by theorizing that interacts with the comparative methodology of mainstream political and social sciences. Interestingly, Kymlicka's comparative evaluation (in this volume) of Western and Eastern and Central European state responses to minority claims represents precisely this

strength, indicating a further development in his own methodological framework.

Contextual political theory could draw on the work already developed within political science in this regard. There is now a large and important comparative literature on the national regimes and institutions shaping the sociopolitical context, and how they facilitate or impede the integration of immigrants and the second generation. Initially led by some North Americans (especially Brubaker 1992), this approach has focused much more on European states than the political theory literature has to date. This literature concentrates on the ideological aspects of citizenship and nationalism, exploring ways in which ethnic conceptions of citizenship have their own distinctive characteristics in different countries. Some countries see the migrants as temporary; others insist on assimilation and actively promote naturalization; yet others are more tolerant of group difference but valorize some forms of group, e.g. "racial," more than other kinds e.g. religious. Thus different countries can be said to have different "philosophies of integration" (Joppke 1996; Favell 1998). Such comparative work shows how political frameworks have developed in different countries, and explains why legislation, institutions and policies have emerged in different countries, and why different kinds and intensities of migrant mobilization have occurred. They also show how these factors have shaped the self-proclaimed identities and political strategies of migrant ethnic groups (Kastoryano 1998, 2002; Koopmans and Statham 2000).

Multiculturalism in social theory

The discipline of political theory has shaped and constrained reflections on ethnicity and minority rights by political theorists in very specific ways. Exactly the same can be said for social theory.

A principal feature of relevant social theory has been the dominance of constructivist accounts of ethnic and national identit*ies*, with a deliberate emphasis here on the plural. Many social and cultural theorists have argued that groups do not have the unitary character that political theorists and others assume, and that culture needs to be analyzed as an interactive process rather than a fixed set of properties (Gilroy 1987; Hall 1992a). The central idea is that ethnic identities are not pure or static but change in new circumstances or by sharing social space with other heritages and influences. Blackness, for example, is necessarily a syncretic identity, for it has historically grown alongside, in interaction with and influenced by dominant and dissenting European or white cultural forms (Gilroy 1993). This lack of pure identities means that minority groups

are not homogeneous and cannot be represented through formal group structures.

This broad constructivist consensus of identity – now itself under increasing challenge (of which more later) – can be traced to Barth's influential *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). Barth's principal argument here is that ethnicity is *not* some bundle of unchanging cultural traits – the "cultural stuff" of ethnicity, as he calls it – that can simply be examined and enumerated in order to determine differences between ethnic groups. 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.

Acknowledging that ethnicity is a social and cultural construction in this way allowed social theorists to explore its articulation with other social forces and the various, or multiple, manifestations, that may result. In so doing, the way in which ethnicity is deliberately employed – or mobilized – in specific contexts also becomes central, as do the particular ends pursued in the process of mobilization. Put another way, if ethnicity is primarily an aspect of social relationships, then it can best be analyzed through the various uses to which individuals and/or groups put it.

Such a view also presupposes the fluidity or malleability of ethnicity. In effect, the origin, content, and form of ethnicity are all open to negotiation, reflecting the creative choices of individuals and groups as they define themselves and others in ethnic ways (Nagel 1994). Mobilizing particular identities will also depend, to a large extent, on the audience(s) being addressed. As Joane Nagel observes, a "chosen ethnic identity is determined by the individual's perception of its meaning to different audiences, its salience in different social contexts, and its utility in different settings" (1994: 155).

Relatedly, these various identities may overlap with, or cross-cut other social identities. For example, one may be a woman, a Muslim, a Bangladeshi, a Bengali speaker, an Asian, working class, a Londoner, English, an English speaker, and British, all at the same time. However, which of these identities predominates in any given circumstance, and how they interact with each other, will depend on the context, the audience and the ongoing balance between the internal definition and external ascription of social identities discussed earlier. This complex dialectic also suggests that there will be significant *intra*ethnic differences evident within any given ethnic group. The varying confluence of ethnicity, language, class, religion and gender will result in a full repertoire of social identifications and trajectories among individual members of a particular ethnic group. In this light, it also needs to be constantly borne in mind

that ethnic, linguistic, class, religious and gender groups are themselves not solidary groups but have their own broad-based internal divisions.

Following from this, we have seen the articulation and development of the related notion of hybridity, most notably in the work of key social theorists such as Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and Paul Gilroy, among others. Hall's (1992b) discussion of "new ethnicities," Bhabha's (1994) celebration of creolization and subaltern voices from the margin, and Gilroy's (1993) discussion of a Black Atlantic – a hybridized, diasporic black counterculture – all foreground the transgressive potential of cultural hybridity. Hybridity is viewed as being able to subvert categorical oppositions and essentialist ideological movements – particularly, ethnicity and nationalism – and to provide, in so doing, a basis for cultural reflexivity and change (Werbner 1997).

Within the discourses of hybridity, and of postmodernism more broadly, the new social agents are plural – multiple agents forged and engaged in a variety of struggles and social movements. In line with postmodernism's rejection of totalizing metanarratives, exponents of hybridity emphasize the contingent, the complex and the contested aspects of identity formation. Multiple, shifting and, at times, nonsynchronous identities are the norm for individuals.

Conversely, postmodernist commentators reject any forms of "rooted" identity based on ethnicity and nationality. Rooted identities such as these are branded with the negative characteristics of essentialism, closure, and conflict. Instead, postmodernist commentators such as Bhabha (1994) argue that it is the "inter" and "in-between," the liminal "third space" of translation, which carries the burden of the meaning(s) of culture in this postmodern, postcolonial world. Others have described this process as one of "border crossing" (see Anzaldúa 1987; Rosaldo 1989; Giroux 1992; di Leonardo 1994). In his more recent work, Gilroy (2000) identifies the bonds of racial solidarity as one of the biggest obstacles to moving forward towards what he describes as a new "planetary humanism," one that is predicated on hybridity, but also allied to the principle of universalism.

The dominance of constructivist and postmodernist understandings of identity within social theory poses a particular challenge to the politics of multiculturalism and, by extension, political theory debates on the various rights attributable to minority groups. The challenge is this: how can multiculturalism, based as it is on a notion of group-based rights, avoid lapsing into reification and essentialism? In effect, how can it account for postmodernist understandings of voice, agency, and the malleable and multiple aspects of identity formation without solidifying corporate identities? Indeed, in light of the almost *de rigueur* dismissal of any