Review

British multiculturalism and the politics of representation

Lasse Thomassen
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An approach to politics and political theory which wants, as in this book, to connect abstract normative arguments with questions of collective identity, especially their exclusion and recognition, contestation and development, is to be welcomed and, in relation to multiculturalism, is most apt. The book's focus is on how identities, such as British, Muslim or gay are constituted by political discourses.

It is very clearly and accessibly written, even at the expense of repetition, without over-simplification of or unfairness to the arguments under investigation. There is clear and accurate exposition of authors, without sacrificing original points of interpretation. It is very well researched in relation to the central cases it discusses, namely Gordon Brown and David Cameron on Britishness; Brian Barry and Bhikhu Parekh on equality; the *Mandla* case on the Sikh turban; the *Begum* case in relation to Muslim dress and aspects of the concepts of tolerance and hospitality. In relation to these, Thomassen has many interesting and original things to say at the level of analysis. His discussion of the Shabina Begum case (her school already had a uniform which accommodated Muslim requirements of modesty but she thought it was not Islamic enough and wanted to wear a jilbab to school) is particularly good. The analyses are offered as an undertaking based on a theory of discourse derived from Derrida on deconstruction, and Laclau and Mouffe on hegemony, which he lucidly explains though I felt the specific contextual insights are independent of the theory or at least can be detached from its theory. Indeed, this reader found that some of the central theoretical claims distracted from the analyses.

For example, there is an insightful discussion of the debate between Parekh and Barry on the culture-dependence of equality but the general take away point offered is that the concept of equality is not 'out there' waiting to be discovered and so the debate is about the elaboration of the constituent parts of the concept or its representation of, e.g. who the subjects and objects of equality are taken to be (pp. 65-66). This however is too metaphysical a theory, and the discussion is not derived from it. The normative discussion is illuminated but not progressed. This remains

true even when the theory is fleshed out through the concepts of discourse, hegemony, articulation, chain of equivalence, empty signifier and so on. Similarly with claims such as 'There is no inclusion without exclusion' (p. 6) or 'equality is always bound up with inequality' (p. 67), what are these logical truisms supposed to help us understand? Consider: the concept of 'hot' is really a concept of hot–cold; wherever hot is deployed cold is logically present, whether explicitly stated or not. This is true, but does not get in the way of our discussing whether something is hot or cold, or whether it is getting hotter or colder and what is causing that, what we can do about it. So, similarly, a logical point about the tandem nature of equality–inequality gives no warrant to come to the conclusion that 'there is no reason why we should accept one negotiation of equality and inequality over another'. (p. 86)

Similarly, with his concept of 'radical contingency' as in '[s]ince all identity is marked by contingency and therefore "fails", all we have are identifications and the more or less stable identities as outcomes of those identifications'. (p. 17). Even if all concepts are contingent, meaning that they are open to innovation, it cannot be the case that all concepts in all contexts are equally open or equally contingent such that terms like 'closed' lose their meaning. In any case, it forces the question upon us, which conceptual innovations are, and which are not, contextually appropriate or justified. We might ask 'justified' by whom and to whom, but this relativism cannot go on forever, otherwise it would undermine the theory itself: the theory is not true but only true if it fits one's conceptual presuppositions, or social location or identity or interests. At some point reasons will have to be given that are not merely contingent and so the theory must explain how it is possible to give non-contingent reasons.

Thomassen's argument seems to be something like this: *all identities are attempts at achieving fixed identities* (identifications), but because alternative identifications in relation to that identity are always possible, no identification is once and for all, and so every identity is a failure by the standards of a theorist. This is odd, because that fixity is not a feature of human identities is at the core of the theory, so why does analysis of an identity begin with the contention italicised above and require fixity to be the criterion for judging identities as successes or failure? It may be said that fixity is empirically observed, yet it is used as a generalisation that allows for no exception and so is part of the *a priori* structure of the theory. It is doing the exact opposite of what Wittgenstein advises: it is creating what Wittgenstein sometimes called a metaphysical problem by introducing an incoherent and impossible standard, while claiming that the problem lies not in the theory, but in the phenomena that are being analysed. Thomassen does invoke Wittgenstein's view that a rule cannot tell you how it is to be interpreted and so does not, by itself, fully determine its applications – thus, it can be interpreted in a novel or unpredictable way, but he betrays Wittgenstein by embracing a metaphysics of discourse. 'Metaphysical' in the sense that it is not derived from how identities are constructed in practice; indeed, this is a concept of discourse that judges practice by standards that are logically impossible to fulfil. Thomassen's

'ideal language' approach thereby generates a problem that Wittgenstein's dictum, 'meaning lies in use', was directed to help philosophers avoid.

Of course, post-structuralism adds power relations to a Wittgensteinian approach, and, while power relations are regularly mentioned by Thomassen, they do relatively little work in his analyses, which are largely focused on bringing out what is at stake, conceptually and politically, in particular debates – rather than the causality of power. Thomassen can be commended, however, for trying to constrain some of the excesses of some post-structuralism: for example, he largely resists smuggling a political radicalism into the meaning of contingency. However, as I have indicated, he would do even better were he to interpret contingency in ways that aligns with the anti-foundationalism of Wittgenstein.

Another problematic feature of the book is the ambivalent approach to normative reasoning – which perhaps has some resonance with Wittgenstein's 'philosophy leaves everything as it is'. Thomassen notes that post-structuralists recoil from coming up with positive normative positions (p. 36). And yet, while recognising that there is no neutral position (pp. 102, 140) he argues that the purpose of his analyses is not to take sides or come up with a better view but simply to 'better explain what is going on' (p. 94). His discourse analysis is a second-order inquiry, similar to mid-twentieth century Anglophone ordinary language philosophy, but with the crucial difference that the contexts it refers to are those of users of a shared language, imbricated in social relations in which certain discourses are dominant or hegemonic due to unequal distributions of power. This is the theoretical claim, but the book does not show how things could have been different or changed over time or are in the process of (not) changing – over and beyond the postulated absence of necessity.

Radical openness or contingency seems to mean that no option is better than another because there is no such thing as more or less contingency; all are equally open. Or, if I am mistaken here, then it raises the normative question of why more openness is better than less openness, a question that cannot be answered by this theory of hegemony, though an answer in favour of openness is assumed. Progressives assume that to point to the contingency of the *status quo* is to undermine it. But radical contingency can also be interpreted conservatively: we can be content with our existing identities or feel free to reform them *or not* once we have been persuaded that all change consists only of replacing one 'failed' identity with another. The theory seems to point to different directions here: an implicit bias for openness and an explicit second-order neutrality between the *status quo* and the challenge of more open identities.

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