

**Liberal Objections to Identity Politics:
the Morality of Association Reconsidered**

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Introduction

This paper highlights and probes the contention that there is no place for identity politics in a democratic civil society. I consider, in particular, the character and merits of some of the main objections to identity politics offered by Anglophone liberal theorists. While these thinkers have rightly observed some important tensions between democratic society and some of the arguments advanced and actions undertaken in the name of group identity, the reasons for this exclusionary stance are not, I will suggest, entirely uncontentious. The discussion that I present is informed by a broader interpretative interest in whether an alternative to the stances of condemnation and celebration of identity politics can be justified on liberal grounds.¹ At various points in the paper, I suggest the merits of some, relatively neglected, liberal arguments that contravene the ‘disciplinary’ stance adopted by many contemporary liberal theorists towards groups, movements and communities that are associated with identity politics.

Liberalism and identity politics

A concern for the integrity of civil society, and the ecology of associational life, represents only one of the respects in which identity politics has been critically engaged by liberal thinkers. Its manifestations have been criticised on various other democratic

¹ I discuss elsewhere what I take to be some of the main normative weaknesses of the celebratory readings of identity politics that emerge in some leading arguments for a politics of ‘difference’ or ‘recognition’; see my forthcoming Political Theory and the Politics of Identity (Polity Press, 2003/4).

grounds as well.² But the salience of the concept of civil society in much Anglophone democratic theorising makes this an interesting and important normative terrain in relation to this political paradigm. It also provides a bridgehead to concerns and ideas familiar in the political debates and public spheres of various democratic states, especially the United States. A commitment to the ideal of a vibrant and pluralistic civil society that deepens and enables the practice of democratic citizenship chimes with some of the main political self-understandings of the American political tradition. Such a commitment is central also to the influential and pessimistic account of the civic culture associated with the political scientist Robert Putnam (1995; 1993). His account of civic decline provides an important backdrop to, and influence upon, liberal reactions to identity politics.

A number of liberal commentators and political thinkers have come to believe that liberal democracy needs citizens who are sufficiently socialised into, and committed to, its constitutive norms. Political theorists remain sharply divided, at the same time, about which particular civic virtues are needed for a democracy to flourish (Galston 1991). This theme has returned to the fore in liberal theorising at a time when many are given to doubt the capacity of liberal democracies to generate citizens with the appropriate kinds of civic disposition and deliberative capacity. It is against the backdrop of this deepening anxiety that various forms of identity politics have been roundly condemned. While some of the groups and movements placed under this heading clearly occupy an ambivalent,

² Whether identity politics confounds the norms of deliberative democratic debate and public reason have become contentious questions in their own right. A similarly sceptical stance towards the hostility to identity politics evinced by some deliberative theorists is also, I believe, justified. See, for instance,

and sometimes uncomfortable, role within democratic life – radical Islamic groupings being a current example, the question of whether identity based associations are in general an alien presence in democratic society may be less clear-cut than liberal thinkers often suggest.

The decline of the civic culture?

Liberal political theorists have tended towards accepting as a social given the idea that the civic culture of democratic societies is in decline. An important strand of liberal thinking argues that the moral capacities and goods pertinent to citizenship have been underplayed as a result of the deontological and procedural biases of Anglophone liberal philosophy since the 1970s. Other thinkers link this ‘trend’ to the purported balkanisation of social life associated with the rise of a cultural politics of ‘difference’ in democratic society (Blankenhorn, 1995; Glendon and Blankenhorn, 1995). Like Putnam, they regard forms of association rooted in ethnicity and other kinds of social particularity as among the causes of civic decline.³

One consequence of this shift of focus in liberal political thought has been a renewed interest in the theoretical task of delineating the requisite set of dispositions and motivations appropriate to democratic citizenship, and an accompanying debate about the sources, or ‘seedbeds’, for these (Glendon and Blankenhorn, 1995). For some political

Jonathan Quong’s argument that claims about identity do not necessarily violate the norms of public reason (2002).

³ For an extended critical discussion of such ideas, see Kymlicka (1998).

theorists, the family, due to its associated roles in socialisation and personality-formation, offers the major arena for civic renewal (Glendon, 1995). Others emphasise the school, and the possibilities attendant upon formal civic instruction (Callan, 1997; Wingrove, 1998). A third perspective favours civil society as the arena in which different collective endeavours emerge that are germane to the cultivation of the arts of citizenship.

Two particular accounts of the ethical potential of civil society can be fruitfully distinguished in contemporary Anglophone theorising. These have generated some of the most influential objections to the presence of identity politics in democratic civil society. While some of these criticisms are more pressing and plausible than others, none is quite as unanswerable as their advocates sometimes assume. There are, I hope to show, sound liberal reasons for scepticism toward, or qualification of, these critical characterisations. The objections considered in this paper stem from two of the main strands of Anglo-American liberal theorising of the last two decades – namely democratic associationalism and republican liberalism. The claims and arguments associated with each are not, however, mutually exclusive, with the result that individual theorists can combine arguments from both (for instance, Elshtain, 1995). Yet there is some merit in highlighting the different underlying traditions from which these claims arise. As I will later suggest, some divergent, and indeed conflicting, ambitions underpin various liberal objections to identity politics.

1. Associationalist objections

Within Anglophone political theory, civil society is typically viewed as an indispensable pre-requisite for the achievement of a modern democracy. It has been presented by various liberal theorists as a space within which there emerges a variety of co-operative ventures, groups and associations (Seligman, 1995). Through the notion of a 'civil society', a conditional unity is accorded to the many different communities and practices associated with a liberal society. The term is also used to convey a sense of the ethical significance of the social space that lies between the domain of private, familial life and the institutions of the state. In this domain, many liberals suggest, the law secures the liberty of individuals to choose between an array of projects and commitments, and to leave these behind should they wish. In this broad approach, associational life is represented as morally valuable in so far as it promotes the exercise of freedom and enhances autonomy (Raz, 1986). Some liberal pluralists also place instrumental value upon the capacity of civil society to enhance the moral dispositions that a democratic society needs (Macedo, 1990). Some of the major skills and aptitudes required for democratic life are, they suggest, associated with the autonomy and plurality of associational life.

This approach to the practice of association places a premium upon group involvements that are voluntarily undertaken (these are sometimes imagined as conforming to a contractual model), as opposed to those associations, like the family, that are not. This perspective has drawn considerable sustenance from the continuing influence of de

Tocqueville's conception of the civic value of secondary association (1969). His twin claims that the pursuit of group interests can also be conducive to the generation of democratic virtue and that a sufficient number and range of 'secondary' associations are likely to exercise an egalitarian effect upon a political culture, have been extensively revived in recent American political thinking. Contemporary liberals argue that these kinds of associations are breeding grounds for such values as reasonableness, a disposition to compromise and public spiritedness. These are, in turn, seen as bridges between the background culture and political system of liberal democratic states. On this view civil society is 'a social structure which establishes constraints on the pursuit of private interests and provides incentives for individual and collective agents to develop habits of civility' (Bauböck, 2000: 98). The appeal of such an argument at a time when many Anglophone theorists are concerned about the purported demise of the democratic spirit should be evident. The idea that there are important moral benefits to be gained from such activities as volunteering, charitable work and involvement in the governance of responsible groups, is central to a body of literature devoted to the crisis and renewal of democratic citizenship (Kymlicka and Norman, 2000).

Identity politics

Liberal associationalists reproduce Tocqueville's emphasis upon the voluntary character of group memberships, seeing this as intrinsically morally valuable for a liberal society, and beneficial for the democratic character of the population. The idea of the potentially democratic effects of association is understood in both minimalist and maximalist terms

by different thinkers. At the minimum, individuals must be able to join a group of their own volition and be able to leave without bearing undue costs (Kukathas, 1992). Only if a sufficient number of groups are organised so that they meet this condition is individual choice among an array of options meaningful (Raz, 1986). For other associationalists, a more stringent standard needs to be met for groups to be 'schools of civic virtue'. They are required to offer sufficient opportunities for individuals to participate in their internal life and decision-making for their democratic skills and character to be enhanced (Warren, 2001).

Identity politics appears to violate both of these conditions, particularly through its propensity to promote the idea that one's membership of certain groups arises from deeply rooted cultural, biological or social processes that are beyond the volition of their individual members. Ethnic associations, religious communities and disabled groups are more likely to have recourse to arguments about biological destiny, ascriptively based injustice, cultural duty and the merits of identity based affinity in characterising the rationale of membership. Involvement with a group on the grounds that one is a lesbian, or because of one's ethnicity, is not in itself a problem for liberals. But civil society theorists worry that such attitudes towards group belonging promote an encompassing ideal that has the effect of diminishing the willingness of participants to join other kinds of venture. These theorists are worried too that the moral lessons of association – the merits of compromise for example – are not engendered by groupings that are liable to promote a fundamentalist orientation to a collective identity (Barry, 2001).

These groupings are problematic for associationalists in one important further respect. They appear to construct group interests in manner that is incompatible with familiar models of liberal pluralism. In their celebration of the variety of interest-based groups that sustain a democratic society, pluralists like Robert Dahl presented individual and collective interests as partial, contingent and revisable. Individual participants in such ventures are regarded as the self-conscious bearers of coherent, pre-formed interests, and these are seen as expressed and amplified through the choice to combine with fellow citizens (Dahl, 1963; 1967). The interests that individuals pursue in group ventures are typically regarded as sufficiently contingent and partial that they are readily set aside when the individual is called upon to deliberate and reason as a citizen. A dual characterisation of association is typical of liberal pluralism. Groups are seen both as potential conduits to democratic character and as vehicles for the promotion of particular interests. Hegel represented the ethical duality of interest based association favoured by many liberals in his compelling picture of the system of needs around which a civil society emerges, and the ‘warp and weft’ of various kinds of egotism and interdependence that associational life encourages. Corporate groups, he believed, articulated and advanced various kinds of group need; and have the potential to provide crucial forms of moral education (Avineri, 1972; Rosenblum, 1994a: 548-51).

Considered against the backdrop of these conceptions of interest-based association, the groupings practising the politics of identity appear inherently problematic. The interests that, say, a women’s group advances are hard to conceive as partial and contingent. They are typically regarded as intrinsic to a shared identity that is, in turn, seen as affecting the

experiences and well-being of group members. Equally, when a grouping is formed around the ethos of an irreducible collective personality, there appears little chance of the kinds of negotiative learning and tactical compromise that liberal theorists pinpoint as requisites for moral development. According to Jeremy Waldron, the ethical claim to a right to unique social identity that many such groups invoke is simply not amenable to the logic of democratic interchange. It threatens to escalate any kind of disagreement into an argument about the validity of the way of life of a given group (2000).

Associationalist objections reconsidered

The main assumptions behind this generic account of the morality of (secondary) association look less convincing, however, when viewed from other liberal vantage points. While associationalists remain enchanted by Tocqueville's notion of groups as breeding-grounds for the democratic spirit, some contemporary liberals worry about the apparent idealisation of group life promoted by the revival of Tocquevillian ideas. The idea of considering groups as (potential) 'schools of democracy' is a troubling claim for several different reasons. First, recent appropriations of Tocqueville's mantle are somewhat selective about his thinking, neglecting to recall that many of the associations he vaunted – Masonic lodges and secret societies included – are fairly unpalatable to contemporary tastes (1969). Current emphases upon participation and exit as pre-requisites for democratic association are in tension with Tocqueville's own arguments about the range and characteristics of groups that potentially promote the ethos of democracy.

Equally, his emphasis upon voluntariness merits re-consideration in the context of the profound differences of culture, society and self-understanding that distinguish current civil societies from his own. Does it still make sense to distinguish voluntary from involuntary groupings in terms of their moral effect in the way that Tocqueville did? The idealisation of this feature of (some parts of) civil society is not shared by many other liberals. Michael Walzer draws upon the insights of different parts of the liberal heritage in his critique of the associationalist tendency to conflate voluntary association with civil society (1995). Choices that are, in liberal parlance, 'free' are not always best understood as such. We operate in a social field in which we are likely to be guided, pressured and persuaded towards certain associations, many of which are also hard to leave. Walzer identifies four different kinds of constraint that are integral to the exercise of associational freedom, rather than its opposite. The first is the influence of family and other immediate communal attachments as well as wider non-voluntary social memberships: 'we are members of kin groups, nation and class and these forces determine a lot about people we associate with for rest of our lives...' (1998: 65). Despite the apparent erosion of some forms of deference and the increased volatility of cultural and political life, most citizens tend to join bodies and involve themselves in enterprises that confirm, rather than challenge, an established sense of identity. Although there remains scope for choice about whether to involve oneself in, for instance, a particular ethnic association, such a decision only makes sense against a tangle of social, familial and cultural influences. Many groups reflect the norms of imitation and reiteration as much as innovation and experiment in associational life (1998: 66). Moreover the one

identity that all liberals agree is ethically significant – citizenship -- flows from relations that are obviously involuntary. As citizens, our association is in crucial respects compelled, as well as contracted. Moreover, some of the most important influences upon decisions to associate or not, reflect the internalisation of constraints in the form of established moral preferences and traditions. These operate as important kinds of restraint upon the exercise of free choice, often aroused by our sense of duty and loyalty to particular groups.

These arguments suggest an important qualification to the emphasis upon the regulative ideal of free association. A variety of communities have survived and flourished because they meet different kinds of need and reflect various cultural traditions and moral purpose. Without involuntary association, Walzer argues:

there won't be individuals strong enough to face the uncertainties and difficulties of freedom; there won't be clear and coherent alternatives among which to choose; there won't be any political protection against the enemies of free choice; there won't even be the minimal trust that makes voluntary association possible.

(1998: 72)

The picture that Walzer sketches of a social culture in which family, community and tradition remain constitutive influences is as contentious as the individualist, volitional model that he rejects. In societies whose communities and traditional practices have been extensively undermined by the twin influences of consumer capitalism and the

pluralisation of moral belief, Walzer's communitarian vision is unduly biased towards fixed and stable forms of communal life. But his argument is a useful corrective to liberal ideas that conflate association with unconstrained choices. Many, perhaps most, of the collectivities to which we belong are hard to view as the straightforward results of unimpeded and conscious choice. While it ought to be possible to revoke any such tie – by leaving one's family, or moving to a different state – we rightly regard such moves in ambivalent terms, and often do not see them as healthy or beneficial experiences (Walzer, 1998: 64). The non-voluntary aspects of the identification many individuals feel with particular groups and communities constitute an important reason for revisiting the question of whether it is right to invoke the norm of voluntary association as a reason to marginalise or suspect identity based groupings.

A further reason for scepticism is that in their enthusiasm to establish the democratic consequences of association, these thinkers often neglect the variety of social goals and motivations shaping the clubs and communities of civil society. As Nancy Rosenblum observes, in different democratic societies many of the purposes around which associations have taken shape have been non- or even anti-democratic in character (1998a). Snobbery, a desire to exclude, and the wish to explore a shared practice or identity, are all more familiar features of the associational landscape than contemporary liberal thinking supposes.

The relationship between groups and democratic culture ought then to be considered without the rose-tinted spectacles that some civil society theorists have donned. Several

recent contributions to the associationalist literature have, indeed, argued the merits of a far more pluralistic, and indeed ambivalent, appreciation of the ‘public sphere effects’ of association (Kohn, 2002). Mark Warren, for example, illustrates the debilitating narrowness implied by the expectation that only groups that permit a range of participatory opportunities can have democratic consequences (2001). Groups that are less geared to providing participative opportunities, for instance, are sometimes more adept at providing ‘voice’ and self-esteem for individual group members. This is an especially pertinent consideration in relation to those cultural and/or ethnic communities that place little emphasis upon participation in collective decision-making. Some of these groups, he reports, score highly on other democratic criteria, such as voice, the enhancement of individual and collective self-worth, and the raising of awareness of wider public issues. Equally, Rosenblum brings to the fore research that illustrates how open-ended and ambiguous is the relationship between particular groups and democratic virtue (1998a). Remarkably few groups, including many of those that adhere to broadly liberal goals, function as schools of democracy, not least because the effects of distance, technology and the imperative of efficiency mean that democratic internal relations are often counter-productive (see also Tamir, 1998).

The findings that these commentators deploy suggest, at the very least, that the Tocquevillian story only makes sense if an implausibly narrow reading of the ‘ethicality’ of groups is adopted. In normative terms, they suggest the pertinent question of whether voluntarily undertaken association is necessarily more worthwhile, in moral and civic terms, than other kinds of membership and belonging (Mason, 2000). If it is the case that

democratic effects can also be linked to involuntary association, then an important ground for excluding identity orientated groups appears to be weaker than is widely assumed.

While the morality bound up with particular associational practices is more variable than liberals sometimes suggest, this observation does not necessarily address other parts of the associationalist case. The emphasis upon the organic and pluralistic ecology of a liberal civil society has been frequently adduced to criticise identity based politics. On this view, a healthy associational pattern is seen as arising from a diversity of group enterprises that cut across potentially divisive social cleavages, an argument that has its roots in the notion of contingent and revisable interests outlined above. The politics of identity is regarded by many liberal advocates of civil society – communitarians as well as individualists -- as a threat to the associational ecology pertinent to a democratic order (Elshtain, 1995; Wolfe and Klausen 1992). On this view, no single group should enjoy a monopoly within its particular domain, and individuals should be able to move between various affiliations with relative ease, sustaining simultaneous group memberships: ‘People are more likely to have some basis for understanding and empathising with others in societies where they inhabit crosscutting and overlapping roles’ (Warren, 2001: 16). The idea that one is part of an embattled cultural minority or an oppressed social grouping may well fatally inhibit such a self-understanding. Instead of ensuring that citizens in mass democracies experience particular kinds of mutuality and develop greater trust with others, identity politics highlights and reinforces differences that are latent in a social culture and potentially debilitating for the webs of social interchange that liberal

pluralists envisage. The salience of groups that make the 'markings' of sexuality, ethnicity or gender central to their self-understandings threaten to generate tensions and reinforce perceptions of difference, obviating the respects in which citizens enjoy commonalities of interest and social purpose (Gitlin, 1995).

Though critical of some aspects of the current Tocquevillian revival, for example, Rosenblum is similarly convinced that associations are more conducive to democratic ends than communities (1998a). The latter, she suggests, are inherently more conservative, whereas associations, through their intrinsic fluidity and plasticity, spring up rapidly in response to new social challenges and dangers. She also contends that those organisations that approximate most to the ideal of democratic association permit individuals to bracket other beliefs and convictions they may have, and come to realise that they share a variety of different interests, each of which links them to different groups. A democratic civil society is, for many liberals, necessarily subversive of the established ties of class, community, ethnicity and culture. The more that individuals are connected to each other in multiple and cross-cutting ways, the more likely it is that the tyrannies of community will wane (Rosenblum, 1998a: 46; Warren, 2001). A political culture in which groupings reflect, rather than transcend, cleavages of race, class, gender and sexuality, gives undue prominence to apparently ineradicable differences (Elshtain, 1995).

In evaluating the merits of this position, it is worth observing that these anxieties are not entirely novel responses to supposedly new problems. They are, in fact, longstanding

features of liberalism. Current critics of identity politics revive older concerns about the encompassing identities associated with the cultural politics of nationalism, the rise and impact of labour politics and the demands of religious organisations upon their members. Concerned at the persistence and appearance of these communities within the heart of civil society, liberal theorists have tended to stress the merits of associations that reflect the complex and shifting dynamics of separation from, and contingent attachment to, one's fellows.

Does the politics of identity necessarily constitute an insuperable obstacle to the diversity of associational practice that a healthy civil society requires? Liberals do not have to agree that this is so. The claim that self-understandings arising from ascriptively determined group memberships *necessarily* inhibit persons from joining other groups requires greater substantiation. Historical examples might just as reasonably be adduced to sustain the counter-claim that when subordinated groups are granted some kind of political legitimacy, their complaints treated as matters of public concern, and some resources channelled in their direction, a splintering effect upon a collective identity may well occur and a less fundamentalist and defensive mentality can emerge.

Various interpreters of the women's movement observe such a process as integral to the cyclical pattern of its forms of collective self-assertion (Banaszak, Beckwith and Rucht, 2003; Tarrow, 1994). The 'normalisation' of marginalised identities in the public domain may well engender a disaggregative effect with the result that different kinds of groups and communities emerge in relation to this identity, which in turn becomes less exclusive. The flourishing of a myriad kinds of feminist argument and politics, including

many instances of coalitional activity with liberals, socialists or ethnic minority women, suggests that movements of identity can be contributors to associational plurality as much as obstacles to it. In normative terms, it is not unreasonable to suggest that only when ascriptive memberships cease to be such a disabling source of subordination are its individual members sufficiently sure of themselves, and capable of understanding and deepening their fellowship with others, to explore the kinds of cross-cutting diversity that associational pluralists envisage.

Self-respect

Determining the moral implications and public sphere effects of association is, then, a more complicated and contingent matter than liberal associationalism assumes. While the focus of this literature is, *pace* Tocqueville, upon those groups that can be considered ‘schools of civic virtue’, other possible generic values have been unduly neglected in the discussions of civil society it has inspired. In particular, both empirical and theoretically orientated research into the practice and histories of social movements, ethnic minority cultures and subaltern social networks, coalesce in claiming that groups of different sorts promote the self-worth and confidence of their members (Melucci 1989; Rucht, 1991; Castells, 1997).

Interestingly, this empirical-historical claim chimes with the understanding of association supplied by various liberal thinkers, notably that developed by John Rawls. As is well known, in his model of the stages of moral development of the citizen Rawls placed self-

respect at the heart of the morality learned in association (1993: 163). Ties of fellow feeling and a sense of personal recognition are generated and strengthened, he argued, through participation in a variety of social endeavours, as well as by the confidence that others are doing their fair share in a given social enterprise. Moral development hinges crucially upon the existence of a plurality of overlapping and complex groups. These make competing demands upon the loyalty and energy of citizens and simultaneously teach them the values of reciprocity and social co-operation. As roles within particular groupings become more demanding and complex, the experience of the benefits and character of association deepens. Individuals' capacities to appreciate the values of co-operation at the societal level are thus prepared in the crucible of group life (Rosenblum, 1998b: 97-8). As the lessons of co-operation develop, so does the individual's sense of confidence about her own particular beliefs. An important part of the experience of association is to see one's talent and contribution given recognition in the eyes of others. It is out of such experiences that we can gain invaluable degrees of self-reliance and personal worth.

Rawls maintains that conceptualising self-respect in a morally substantive or cultural specific sense is a self-defeating move given the radical variety of human needs and infinite variations of individual psychological make-up. For some of his critics, his argument does not go far enough in acknowledging the unquantifiable range and facets of human character, and their relation to the diversity of human values; while others challenge the idea that self-respect is not exclusive to the Western moral tradition (Rosenblum, 1998b). But Rawls suggested, with some plausibility, that in a de-limited

sense, the need for self-respect could be understood as universalisable. He posited the need for a 'secure sense of our own value, a firm conviction that our determinate conception of the good is worth carrying out. Without self-respect nothing may seem worth doing, and if some things have value for us, we lack the will to pursue them' (1993: 92). Self-respect, on this view, amounts to a foundational sense that the goals we pursue are of some worth, and that the expenditure of effort upon them is likely to be worthwhile. In these minimally stated terms, self-respect may well arise from very different kinds of cultural condition and group setting. Though it may not follow that self-respecting individuals make good citizens, Rawls suggested that without a healthy sense of self-worth, other virtues are unlikely to be attained. An important condition of self-respect is met when we regard ourselves as holders of rights and as subjects with duties, but, he argued, we also require a degree of internal confidence to act as purposive agents.

While some liberals see groups that allow opportunities for active participation as the only social forms likely to promote this value, Rawls's account can be read as sustaining the idea that the 'ethicality' promoted by a much broader set of groups is of potential value to democratic society. If self-respect is enhanced by identification with groups that stress an element of one's identity that one experiences as foundational, then a great variety of collective endeavours and forms of belonging may well be important. Different social groupings and associations may satisfy the first of these considerations and

contribute to the self-worth of both active participants within, and sympathetic identifiers with, them.⁴

2. Civic objections

Though they disagree on many things, liberal advocates of civil society tend to share the conviction that civil society is morally separable from, and counter-opposed to, the norms governing the spheres in which the state and market are constituted as sovereign powers. This perspective sees in the arenas of civil society the sources of the virtuous disposition and civic consciousness that are vital for the sustenance of a liberal democratic polity. Not all liberal theorists of the modern democratic state, however, see the relationship between civil society and civic virtue in this way. As Charles Taylor notes in his grand overview of the traditions of western civil society theorising, the notion of state and society as organically counter-opposed has been continually checked by the idea that the constitution of a democratic society requires the prior achievement of a free state (1995a). Republican theorists, in particular, have argued for the priority of the constitutional and legal guarantee of freedom from arbitrary influence as preconditions for the exercise of individual liberties in the context of a civil society (Pettit, 1999). While some forms of republican thought see sub-national group commitments and loyalties as intrinsic obstacles to the development of a civic consciousness, various theorists have sought to incorporate some of the moral and deliberative emphases of the republican tradition

⁴ On the ethical value of identification with groups, as opposed to critical detachment from, or engulfment by, them, see Mason, 2000: 58-9.

within a reformulated liberalism. Civil society is an important value for such theorists (Dagger, 1997). It signals their commitment to the principle of individual freedom and conviction that a variety of moral beliefs is an ineradicable feature of a free society, in contrast to more stringent civic republican ideas about citizenship. Yet for republican liberals, the instrumental value of civil society is presented in relation to a particular set of civic purposes.

For these sorts of liberal, identity politics is a worrying threat to democracy both because it disrupts the role of civil society as a conduit to democratic virtue, and because it hampers the kinds of deliberative practice that the public sphere of a democracy requires. Identity based communities, it is suggested, are, overly encompassing, in both moral and psychological terms. They make excessive demands upon the loyalties and moral energies of their members, and deplete the motivations that they need to learn to be citizens (Elshtain, 1995). Above all, they undermine the socialisation of citizens into dispositions appropriate to democratic deliberation. Such groups tend to teach their participants to engage their fellow citizens primarily from the standpoint of membership of an aggrieved sub-group, rather than as co-equals engaged in the kinds of deliberation necessary to develop a sense of the general good of the community (Miller, 1995).

A particular concern for adherents of this perspective is the responsibility of identity politics for the purported decline of civility in the public life of various democracies. For liberal theorists, civility is presented as the value that is needed to regulate deeply diverse

societies, and that underpins the stance of toleration towards the moral ends of others. For republicans like Pettit, it signals the internalisation of the prevailing ethos of the liberal republic (1999). Yet the decline of civility has been widely linked in the United States to the ‘culture wars’ of the 1990s, and the latter blamed upon the emergence of identity politics (Hunter, 1991). The kinds of public rhetoric used by, for instance, radical religious groups, gay rights activists and ethnic minority representatives, it is said, tend towards the denunciatory rather than the deliberative, and reinforce, rather than offset, divisive cultural differences. The politicisation of culture and the intellectual cult of difference have, critics argue, had the effect of bringing cleavage-based differences to the surface of political debate, with the result that individual citizens engage one another primarily as members or representatives of pre-assigned groups rather than from the presumption that they are fellow members of a political community bound together in a common social purpose (Gitlin, 1995).

Evaluating republican-liberal objections

1. Beyond civic decline

The civic turn in liberal political theory is closely associated with the impact of the sociological thesis of civic decline. This is taken by many civic liberals to represent an uncontested starting point for political and moral theorising, rather than a contestable, normative interpretation of social and cultural change. Various liberal republicans echo Putnam in seeing the propensity of citizens to form clubs and groups founded upon such

factors as ethnic identity as signs and sources of a new social pathology: ‘In many ways, large and small, millions of Americans have been steadily disengaging from civil society during the past three decades’ (Blankenhorn, 1995: 274).

According to these commentators, the signs of a terminal decline in the participatory commitments of, and solidarity among, citizens are ubiquitous. In the U.S., the number of people who report attending public meetings on town or school affairs is, Putnam reports, down by more than a third since 1973. Voting has fallen twenty-five per cent since the early 1960s (1995). Membership of parent teacher associations has declined from twelve million in 1964 to seven million in 1993. ‘Virtually the entire panoply of major fraternal, women’s, and service organizations -- from the Red Cross to the Boy Scouts to the Jaycees to the League of Women voters – has experienced a steady erosion of members and volunteers’ (Blankenhorn, 1995: 274). Putnam emphasises declining participation within those associations long viewed by democratic theorists as potential sources of civic virtue, especially churches, synagogues, trade unions, civic groups, and parent-teacher associations (1995; 1993). He stresses the simultaneous emergence of ethnic organisations, self-help groups and religious sects that, in his eyes, deplete the stock of social capital.

This kind of analysis provides much of the empirical meat upon the normative interpretation of civil society and citizenship offered by civic liberals. Yet Putnam’s thesis has been subjected to an array of empirical and conceptual challenges.⁵ Despite the

⁵ See especially the criticisms of the applicability of Putnam’s thesis to non-American contexts in Hall (2002), and the conceptual criticisms offered by Wuthnow (2002) and Skocpol (2002).

marked interpretative disagreement it has elicited, political theorists have accorded a particular authority to Putnam's account primarily because it fits so neatly with some of their prior presuppositions and anxieties. As a result, different ways of interpreting the changing character of civic life have been ignored. A rival interpretation, for example, points to such trends as the apparent 'personalization' of political life and the rise of identity based or 'lifestyle politics' as indicative of a steady detachment of groups of citizens from established collective norms and traditions (Inglehart, 1979; 1997). Less mindful of their political superiors and established canons of morality, many citizens, it is suggested, have opted to engage in identity based forms of self-discovery and action, as well as localised kinds of social involvement, such as community volunteering. They are more inclined to participate in the affairs of their community but less keen to take part in conventional party politics. As bureaucratic and economic power have combined to make representative politics weaker and less effective, citizens, it has been suggested, respond by concerning themselves with issues close to their own life-circumstances and identities. W.L.Bennett synthesises other empirical findings that challenge Putnam's model (1999). In the United States, while there may be a decline in the membership rates of conventional political groups, volunteering continues to rise in numerical significance and new kinds of network litter the landscape of civil society. Other plausible social explanations of these trends include the erosion of deference and of some of the leading moral traditions in societies in which consumer capitalism is a powerful force. Depending on which account one accepts of the current societal paradigm, trends in civic engagement and social activism assume a differential moral significance. Rather than positing an aggregate decline in civic activity, therefore, some commentators point to the

gains, as well as losses, that liberal democracies have experienced as the character of collective endeavours in civil society has altered.

Disaggregating the generalised trends posited by Putnam is also instructive. The changing character of associational participation is more apparent among women, who generally have less to gain from maintenance of established traditions of group activity than their male counterparts. Membership of long established groups has fallen markedly in the U.S. among women; and volunteering has attracted more female participants in this period. This finding significantly correlates with the expansion of the numbers of women in full-time paid employment in the U.S. (Bennett, 1999: 746-7). These alternative interpretations of recent social trends also merit critical evaluation of course. But they reveal, at the very least, that there exists a range of plausible characterisations of changes to the civic culture of democratic states. Putnam's declinist story is merely one among various 'reasonable' readings of these developments.

2. Civil society and the republic of virtue

Republican-inclined attempts to effect a clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate collective identities in democratic society are also founded upon ethical claims that are troubling for liberalism. This particular assertion clashes with two longstanding aspects of the liberal understanding of civil society. It conflicts, first, with the sense that civil society is valuable, in part, because of the tremendous variety of

groups, cultures and projects that co-exist and collide within it (Lehning, 1998). And, second, an overzealous civic preoccupation is in tension with the pluralistic political ethics often advanced through the idea of civil society (Walzer, 1995). The celebration of this idea(1) has gained ground over the last two decades partly as a moral response to the disappointment and disillusion associated with various state-orientated moral and political projects. The notion that it is in the public spheres that are semi-independent of official state institutions, and in the associational endeavours, sub-cultures and communities of a democratic society, that the good life is, at least partially, located, is a powerful counterpoint to republican constructions of the public sphere. Relatively autonomous and spontaneous group activity constitutes an important bulwark against political projects that seek to order public life around a single moral logic.

Civic renditions of liberalism tend also to neglect one of the central insights of some of the major liberal exponents of civil society: that the various ties generated by communal loyalty and cultural affiliation can be viewed as potentially complementary with, not in tension against, the public selves of citizens. For these thinkers (Michael Walzer is one contemporary exemplar), the identities generated in civil society – ‘part-time union-officers, movement activists, party regulars, consumer advocates, welfare volunteers, church members, family heads’ (Walzer, 1995: 164; Taylor, 1995b) – lie on the margins of, or even beyond, ‘the republic of virtue’ cherished by republican thought. Ordinary citizens, therefore, learn to live partially virtuous lives, and to balance the moral obligations of citizenship with the benefits and dispositions gained from other kinds of belonging. A state that relates to civil society through the imperative of civic virtue, is in

danger of eroding the grounds for individual freedom and the socio-cultural conditions of moral independence. Underlying these ideas is the somewhat forgotten liberal ideal of citizens who are (potentially) capable of managing the various loyalties and affiliations that membership of multiple groups implies in modern society. Such a tradition can be usefully contrasted with both the ‘classical’ liberal idea that state and society are fixed in relations of mutual antithesis, and the republican ideal in which the various affiliations and loyalties that constitute a person’s ends must always be subordinated to the overbearing demands of citizenship.

Republican-inspired attempts to align civil society with the institutions and norms of a democratic polity tend to render those groups and communities that arise in relation to collective identity inherently problematic. Yet the realisation of such an ambition may come at a significant cost to some of the values that liberal democrats also hold dear. Yael Tamir, for instance, cautions against such projects by reminding us of the Madisonian context in which the freedom to associate emerged as an important ideal in post-revolutionary America (Tamir, 1998). Groups were viewed by some democrats as representing a vital bulwark against the tyranny of majority opinion, social conformity and powerful political elites. If the state does distinguish certain kinds of association over others, on the ground that civil society needs to be brought into line with the public norms of a democratic community, then the organic kinds of difference, collective assertion and self-discovery that associational freedom permits may well be imperilled. There are, indeed, grounds for concern that the spontaneous and independent qualities of association may be jeopardised if bureaucrats and political elites seek to impose alien

moral purposes upon them. An overly ‘disciplinary’ normative stance towards the voices associated with forms of collective self-assertion may well then be to the detriment of the conditions shaping individual freedom and the state’s future stability.

Amidst the various debates about the character and merits of group life that these two perspectives have generated, an important Anglophone liberal perspective is more rarely heard. This is the broad perspective that sees non-liberal cultures, traditions and groups as an unavoidable and valuable presence in a democratic society as these reflect the intrinsic diversity of human goods and needs (Ignatieff, 1994). In the work of Isaiah Berlin, for example, a liberal polity is defined not by the virtues of its citizens but by their willingness to devise, and abide by institutional and legal arrangements that allow as much tolerance as is feasible towards the, often incommensurable, values of their fellow citizens, and that protect a basic set of individual liberties. (Gray, 1995b; Galipeau, 1994). George Kateb, similarly, presents the ethos of a liberal polity in Aristotelian terms, suggesting that this is a political regime uniquely willing to accept the presence of values that are its opposite (1998). Behind these different liberal responses, there lurks a longstanding tension in liberal political theorising: between those who argue that society needs to be consciously engaged, and ‘shaped’, by the state so that it comes to conform to the prevalent values of a polity, and those who regard as valuable the diverse forms of cultural expression and moral good that democratic society permits (Rosenblum, 1994).

Civility

Perhaps the most pressing reason for doubting the merits of an overdrawn contrast between identity politics and democratic virtues, ironically, concerns the value of civility. It is hard to understand some of the most important transformations in the public culture of democratic states without comprehending the inter-relationship between the impact of identity based subaltern struggles, on the one hand, and changing applications of the norm of civility on the other (Kingwell, 1995). Such an argument may appear improbable in so far as identity politics is typically associated with forms of political rhetoric that are aggressive, self-justificatory and unyielding. Yet a very different conception of the relationship of civility to identity politics might be sustained, in both normative and historical terms (Kymlicka, 1998). Feminist advocates of the equal treatment of women in the workplace apply the principle of non-discrimination against various kinds of unjust practice. They also invoke something akin to the norm of ‘civility’ in demanding that women be treated with the presumption of equal worth (Nussbaum, 2000b). This notion of civil equality is closely related to the idea of self-respect. One’s sense of worth is, as Rawls suggests, conditioned in part by the kinds of interactions we have with others. The more successful and mutually appreciative these are, the more we learn the value of treating others who are different to ourselves, and being ourselves treated, with civility (McKinnon, 2000).

As the example of feminist demands for equality illustrates, civility is both the analogue of the principle of non-discrimination as well as a normative condition for compliance to it (Banfield, 1992b: xii): ‘since whether people have genuinely equal opportunities depends not only on government actions, but also on the actions of institutions within civil society – corporations, schools, stores, landlords, and so forth’ (Kymlicka, 1998: 188). Some of the social movements that have developed in order to promote excluded or repressed identities during the last thirty years have exercised a major impact by revealing the consequences and character of profound kinds of incivility – to blacks, women, gays and the disabled, for example. The educative dimension of these mobilisations has reaped rewards in terms of the formulation of legal codes and adjustment of public norms regarding uncivil behaviour and culture in workplaces, private clubs and public places. The dissemination of these ideas across the institutions and organisations of both state and society may indeed represent one of the most important achievements of contemporary movements of collective identity. One consequence of this impact has been that the state – in its legal and bureaucratic guises – has become a presence in realms traditionally conceived beyond its reach: in the bedroom, the corporation and the private club. These are not necessarily welcome developments for liberals, and the constitutional and judicial implications arising from the enforcement of the norm of civility are matters of considerable disagreement (see the essays collected in Gutmann, 1998). Nevertheless, one way of interpreting the ethical implications of these developments is in terms of the adjustment and extension of the norm of civility in relation to particular social interests and needs. As Kymlicka observes, it is increasingly accepted that citizens ‘must learn to interact in everyday

settings on an equal basis with people for whom they might harbor prejudice' (Kymlicka 1998: 189). Richard Rorty, similarly, argues that the slow and painful struggle to extend civil treatment to blacks, native Americans and gays in the last forty years, has been accompanied by changing public *mores* regarding the bigotry and cultural sadism once routinely expressed towards these minorities (1998). In societies increasingly conscious of their deep divisions, various mobilisations of collective identity have played an important role in legitimating a more expansive conception of the subjects deserving of democratic civility.

Understanding identity politics: some revisionist observations

Together, these objections have played a role in sustaining a broad consensus that the manifestations of this 'new politics' represent an alien, threatening and subversive presence within democratic society. While the movements, groups and networks placed under the heading of identity politics represent only one particular 'problem' for liberal political theory, the normative responses they have elicited offer some revealing insights into the character of Anglophone liberal thought. The various objections discussed in this paper arise from widely held convictions about the role and character of civil society in relation to a democratic polity. For adherents of both perspectives discussed here, it is legitimate and, indeed imperative, to delineate a boundary between acceptable and unacceptable kinds of grouping, and, for some thinkers, to justify the public promotion of certain civil society groups in particular. Groups, associations and communities that relate to a sub-national collective identity are usually placed on the other side of this

particular boundary. Where this particular line gets drawn, and how thick or porous it is considered to be, I have tried to show, should be seen as matters on which liberals can and do legitimately disagree.

Few theorists have probed the underlying terms of the interpretative consensus that informs critical reactions to the character and content of identity politics. This coheres around two very different understandings of what identity politics involves. One usage of the term is analytic-descriptive in kind, so that identity politics signals a pathological subset of associational life made up of groups committed to the socialisation of individuals into exclusive cultural traditions. A second usage, also familiar among political theorists, signals the prevalence of a certain type of normative argument – one that justifies political claims with reference to cultural, religious or national specificity, as opposed to democratic forms of public reasoning.

This dualistic framework informs much of the discussion of these social phenomena among Anglophone political theorists. Neither conceptualisation is, however, entirely satisfactory. The first encourages an essentialist approach that sustains the ‘a priori’ conviction that identity based groups are, by definition, those that pursue non- or anti-democratic goals. This approach has engendered the neglect of a promising, non-essentialist conceptual alternative: that identity politics may be treated as a set of socio-political practices rather than a label that can be neatly attached to a determinate sub-set of groups in civil society (Young, 2000). Understood in this way, identity politics might be regarded as a mode of group behaviour that forms part of a larger choice-set available

to social groupings. The latter might then be conceptualised as exercising forms of constrained choice over whether they adopt the practices of identity politics or not, and whether they move toward, or away from, these over time, or combine them with other elements of their behavioural repertoire. Analytical focus would shift accordingly to delineating those practices that groups use in different national political contexts, and assessment of their variable public sphere effects. Among these practices are:

- The projection of various kinds of public rhetoric;
- Heterodox contributions and challenges to democratic debate;
- Challenges to established normative understandings of the content and boundaries of the political; and
- The denunciation of perceived injustices by groupings with particular ascriptive characteristics.

Liberal political philosophy has tended to focus its attention on the third and fourth of these dimensions. The first two remain much less fully examined. The first, in particular, has been almost wholly neglected by political theorists. Yet the character of the public rhetoric adopted by groups in civil society constitutes a complex and highly significant subject in their own right. Some social critics have, usefully, discussed the intrinsic appeal of the logic of *'ressentiment'* in the public talk of identity founded groupings. According to Wendy Brown, this is a rhetorical mode into which such groups can all too easily slip, in order to vent deeply felt frustrations, and to exorcise a sense of ontological powerlessness (1995). Adapting Nietzsche's fertile and fragmentary discussion of the nature of this condition in modern culture, Brown and others suggest that identity groups

are especially prone to projecting arguments that are trapped within the terms of this *logos*. Resentment encourages the pursuit of an imaginary revenge by the powerless who are unable to articulate the real sources of their subordination. Group leaders and intellectuals who practise the logic of identity politics become overly invested in the oppressive relationships that they denounce. They develop arguments that are shaped by the desire to give vent to a self-sustaining and displaced resentment at a purportedly all-powerful, reified 'other'. Examples of this logic include some of the claims emanating from the intellectual left in the American academy in debates over the content of the liberal arts curriculum that broke out in the 1990s. Self-styled radicals became overly invested in the ethos of a never-ending, non-compromising opposition to the supposedly all-powerful white/masculinist/heterosexual power-elite. In such forms, identity claims collapse into circular and self-confirming arguments that other citizens are unlikely to find compelling. Proponents of them tacitly shift from the project of transforming the conditions in which subordination occurs and abandon any sense of partial victories, and worthwhile reforms.

For some, the idea of *ressentiment* captures all that we need to know about the character and motivations of the politics of identity. But Brown's fertile and challenging analysis can be deployed, in a non-essentialist fashion, to sustain a different interpretative conclusion: subordinated collective identities can give rise to groupings that adopt this kind of public rhetorical performance, but they need not do so. Resentment represents merely one among several rhetorical modes available to such groups (Lichterman, 1999). The themes of social frustration, a deep sense of anger at perceived injustice, the

proclamation of unmet needs, and a sense of the utopian, are all interwoven in the particular kinds of public talk that such groups project into public debate. There is more to the politics of identity than a discourse of self-confirming resentment. Paul Lichterman's research into the kinds of public talk that American gay activists deploy, offers an illustration of the merits of a pluralistic analytical approach to the public rhetoric of such groups. He suggests that the language of these affinity groupings is Janus-faced. In certain forums and political situations, they deploy a more liberal-orientated kind of talk in which civility is demanded and equality of respect invoked. In other situations, a more defensive posture is adopted, and fundamentalist projection of the collective identity prevails.

The second characterisation of identity politics alluded to above – in which its manifestations are seen as promoting essentially misguided kinds of normative claim – is, then, also lacking in interpretative subtlety. If this paradigm is defined in part by the propensity to advance a form of political justification that is anti-democratic, liberals are likely to overlook the importance of liberal values to the outlooks and self-understandings of very different kinds of minority grouping. Such values as toleration, equality and self-respect are in many cases integral to the political ethics of these collectivities, though they are often interwoven with more particularistic, non-liberal sensibilities and a sense of frustration with aspects of liberal culture. While many of these groups, movements and communities are undoubtedly suspicious of liberalism, their outlooks are typically marked by ambivalence rather than downright rejection.⁶ This nuance is missed by the

⁶ The substantiation of this argument requires a more thickly contextualist analysis, it seems to me, than political theorists tend to offer. Broad normative discussions of the tensions between, for instance, feminist

normative tendency to place them beyond the pale of democratic association. A related reticence characterising the responses of liberal philosophers concerns the consideration of a diachronic dimension to the relationship between different kinds of cultural minority and the norms of liberal democracy. In the competition to establish firm, principled boundaries between civil society and identity politics, political theory underplays the questions of when and how groups may evolve towards or in opposition to democratic values.

Various, unduly neglected, interpretative possibilities, and an alternative normative sensibility, may be available to liberals if they opt to avoid overly generalised condemnations of groupings that have their origins in a sense of collective identity. Some potentially important normative questions arise from this emphasis upon the character of the practices associated with politicised identity. What can the state do to create the social and political conditions in which the kind of ‘multivalent’ identity talk highlighted by Licherman is promoted, and incentives for the proclamation of ‘identity rage’ diminished? Should liberals seek a more nuanced moral distinction between the various practices of politicised identity? And, is it possible, and legitimate, to distinguish between those groups and communities that develop moral purposes that represent hybridised combinations of liberal and non-liberal goals, from those that seek to separate themselves from the egalitarian and pluralist implications of democratic society?

values and the practices of particular cultural groups (for instance Okin, 1999) are not sufficiently adept at registering the particular normative make-up of most identity based groupings.

Conclusions

In this paper I have suggested the merits of a critical examination of the premises behind the confident judgement of many liberals that identity politics is an uncomfortable and potentially destructive presence in democratic society. While some of the objections to it are significant, none is as unanswerable as is sometimes assumed. An influential tendency among contemporary liberal thinkers is to justify a morally principled boundary between associations with an appropriate democratic or civic orientation, and identity based groupings that introduce an alien pathology into democratic society. This generic approach, I have suggested, is by no means the only, or the most appropriate liberal interpretation of the relationship between democratic society and identity politics.

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