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Representation of Minority Groups – A Bottom-Up Pluralist Approach

Today, democratic theory, mainly its deliberative strands unite in the quest for an increased inclusiveness of democratic process and democratic polity. Defenders of the deliberative model of democracy argue that 'it is a necessary condition for attaining legitimacy and rationality with regard to collective decision making processes in a polity, that the institutions of this polity are so arranged that what is considered in the common interest of all results from the process of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals' (Benhabib 1996: 69). In the critique of deliberative models of public sphere, feminist theory prepared ground for further refinement of the idea of an inclusive public sphere, equally hospitable not only to individuals of different genders but also to members of different cultural or religious groups. The feminist call for the pluralisation and opening of the sphere of deliberation found enthusiastic listeners and supporters among like-minded theorists of multiculturalism. Many authors, like Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser, or Anne Phillips (see Young 2000; Fraser 1999; Phillips 2007), argue that in order to restore the legitimacy of democratic systems vis-à-vis the changing and ever more diverse citizenship of (European) states, it is indispensable to not only to ground democratic policies firmly in the process of public deliberation, but above all to eliminate internal boundaries and structures of inequality within the (civic) public spheres themselves by means of pluralisation of public sphere, deconstruction of the strict boundary between the private and the political, deconstruction of

the universalist values underpinning the rules of deliberation, and accommodation of different forms of discourse related to varying identities of individual citizens.

To sum up, there is a wide-spread consensus that representatives of different genders, cultures, ethnic and religious groups, holders of diverging sets of values should be represented both in political process and the formative process of deliberation within the public sphere and the definition of what issues are and are not a matter of public discourse must be reassessed. Of course, this constitutes a difficult, intriguing task. But for the moment, let us assume that we can agree on a way how to better accommodate difference within the deliberative public sphere.

Still, the haunting question of how should the different identity groups be represented, who is to be the legitimate representative of group interests, and generally who gets to speak for a group and be listened to remains to be resolved by deliberative democratic theory, feminists, and multiculturalists equally.

In my paper, largely informed by eloquent arguments of Iris Marion Young and Anne Phillips, I start from the basic assertion that the ultimate aim of democratic inclusion must be the elimination of structures of power between the majority and marginalized groups within the public sphere. For that purpose, it is indispensable to invert the top-down logic immanent to the process in which the representatives (or spokespersons) of individual groups are selected and acknowledged by the majority. First of all, the notion of representation needs to be understood as self-representation which means that not only it is necessary for the standpoints of minority groups and individuals to be articulated in the public sphere but it is crucial to make sure that the members of minority themselves, as individuals are present in the public sphere not only represented and spoken for by members of the majority group. In Phillips's words, 'the politics of ideas' has to be accompanied by 'the politics of presence' (Phillips 1996, see also Phillips 2007, Born 2013: 132-133)[1]. The process of democratic inclusion has to start from de-objectification of the Other and allowing the Other to transfer from the sphere of listeners to the sphere of actual agents and speakers.

I argue that the basic mechanism the majority of society uses for the ceaseless projection of power over minorities and their marginalization consists in the reification of difference between Us and the Other. Far from any essentialist claims, my idea of group identity is purely relational. The identity of a minority group is mainly constructed in their

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[1] As Phillips powerfully argues, '[i]t is indeed dangerous to pretend that who or what we are is irrelevant, to say that politics should be only a matter of ideas' (Phillips 1993: 100). For an analysis of the importance of identity and culture for individuals see also Young 2000.

interaction with majority population. In this sense, 'what makes a group a group is less some set of attributes its members share than the relations in which they stand to others [...] culture provides people with important background for their personal expression and contexts for their actions and options [...] People discover themselves with cultural affinities that solidify them into groups by virtue of their encounter with those who are culturally different in some or many respects' (Young 2000: 90-91).

Under the conditions of structural inequality and with the presence of relations of power between minority and majority, we can observe the rather one-directional hierarchical relation in which the majority defines the minority as unified group, characterized by given attributes and stereotypes, and thus presented as different, i.e. in effect subordinate to the majority. Thus, it is impossible to achieve better inclusiveness and representation of minority groups within the public sphere unless we overcome the above mentioned imposition of identities on the supposed members of minority groups.

One salient result of such projection is our approach to public and political representation of minority groups. Drawing on the binary logic of Us/Them and our tendency to reify/construct groups as internally unified units, the majority shows tendency to select representatives who they acknowledge as legitimate spokespersons for the minority and legitimate partners in discussion ('candidates for inclusion') so as they mirror the picture of the group identity that the majority has imposed upon the minority. Ultimately, the publicly acknowledged representatives of the minority tend to mirror the stereotypes and image the minority was given from the top. Such an approach 'has tended to encourage the sedimentation of cultural groups and communities' and 'focuses attention on the more established and often also more conservative elements within a community' (Phillips 2007: 161). The representatives of groups are legitimized by majoritarian discourse and preferences rather than by internal procedures and bottom-up processes from within the minority group. In fact they cannot be considered representatives of minority. Rather they represent a reified idea of identity in front of and independently of the members of minority. Their position at the top of their group's hierarchy is often to an extent arbitrary, as the source of their power lies outside their community. This way, the relations of power that are functional throughout the society are reproduced inside the minority groups as well.

Another outcome of this prevalent approach to minority representation consists in a rather logical and pragmatic reaction and adaptation of certain individuals from within the minority communities to such common practice. In response to the demand of the majority political representation for a 'typical', 'intelligible', and in the eyes of majority 'easy to

identify' representative of minority, minority groups, or rather the more entrepreneurial figures from inside the minority groups produce specific spokespeople, usually male (Phillips 2007: 161) and tailor them to the needs of majority that requires the representatives to 'mirror' (see Phillips 1993: 99-101) the reified group's identity.

Notice that there is a substantial deal of narcissism going on here on daily basis. The quest for inclusion often initiated by the majority as part of their reform programme is rarely inspired by respect for difference or readiness to listen and be transformed by an encounter with the Different. On our way towards a true equality in the public sphere, we celebrate the representatives of mental images of difference we have brought into life, our own works of art. And at the same time, and here we came back to the issue I have outlined at the start, the criteria of success of these representatives that determine whether they will or will not be listened to and taken seriously, remain the same. The norms of what is considered reasonable, normal, and desirable in the public discourse still reflect the dominant universalist principles of majority. Hence, despite we are publicly enthusiastic about difference, what we are ready to enjoy are minor peculiarities (matters of folklore). In decisive moments, we expect the representatives of minority groups to submit to our rules, adopt our modes of behaviour, our forms of reasoning. Thus, they are partners in discussion as long as we can view them as perhaps a mildly extravagant, peculiar, or even amusing picture of ourselves.

I argue that the way toward democratic inclusion ensuring legitimate representation of minority groups leads through the rejection of the idea of a reified group identity on the side of both marginalized groups and the majority. In her essay, Georgina Born powerfully argues that 'culture should be understood as dynamic, fluid, and differentiated, fuelled by intercultural contacts that generate multiple new hybridities' (Born 2013: 132). With respect to the issue of minority representation, it means that we must refute any modes of selection of group representatives that reinforce the reified idea of the Other and the illusion of single 'authentic' representation of group interests. 'Rather than a relation of identity or substitution, political representation should be thought of as a process involving a mediated relation of constituents to one another and to a representative' (Young 2000: 127). We can go back to Young's eloquent refusal of any kind of identification between the representative and the constituents informed by Derrida's concept of *différance* (see Young 2000: 121-153). However, the same time, we should bear in mind that in a situation when mechanisms of group authorization and accountability in the representative – constituency relationship are unfortunately bound to work with severe limitations in practice, there cannot be a single authoritative voice representing each minority group (Phillips 2007: 169).

Thus I propose that our aim must be a system of 'a pluralist representation of minority groups', as opposed to monist or singular representation. By pluralist representation I mean the inclusion of a number of representatives of the minority in public deliberation instead of any attempt to find the one, true, authentic, exclusive, overarching representative of the group's interests. The system of pluralist representation projects a picture of represented group that on one hand shares an identity but on the other hand is internally varied, not uniform. This picture destabilizes the reified boundary between the majority and the minority and allows deconstruct the relation of power between the two groups. Only this way, we can establish bottom-up procedures for recruitment of truly legitimate public representatives of minority groups.

On the contrary, should we search for one representative that represents the very essence of group's identity, we will always end up imposing our majoritarian view of who can best represent the group's identity as WE see it upon the objectified, marginalized members of minority who, at the end of the day, stay completely disregarded, deprived of their capacity as agents.

With respect to the majority, I concur with Anne Phillips in her idea that it would be a mistake to pour the baby out with the bathwater. Despite its tricky nature, there is too much value in certain universalist claims to be dismissed forever. However, at the same time, it must not mean that we stubbornly resist all attempts at reconstruction of our public identity under the influence of the new (formerly) marginalized members of the public sphere. Transformation and change, both on the side of majority and minority, are part and parcel of the promise of radical democracy (Phillips 1993: 160). In order to fulfil the promise of deliberative inclusion, a substantial transformation of the whole culture and ambience of the majoritarian public is indispensable. For that sake, we need to see the boundary between Us and the Other as fluid, permeable. Our relation to others in the public discourse should not be based on the fact that we can discover a mirror picture of Us in Them (and thus see Them as easy to assimilate). We have to search for completely new, de-reified common identities that are neither a mirror picture of Us, nor of Them but a product of creative forces of listening and talking. Inclusion, to use Tully's inspiring account, does consist in a kind of sanctioned influence of specific interests in the official democratic public sphere (Tully 2013: 194), filtered through the restrictions and rules of rational discourse. Rather, inclusion is facilitated by the strategy of 'walking the talk' (Tully 2013: 195), by individuals in the public sphere living their daily lives according to ethical norms conducting their relations to others and establishing a relationship of respect, reciprocity and mutual aid to members of minorities.

Accordingly, on the institutional and organizational level the pluralized notion of representation will require a pluralized landscape of sites of representation far away from the initial Habermasian idea of a unified rational public sphere. In this context, we must support the creation of a host of channels of representation, from local and regional, to national and supranational level. 'The public sphere, in its most familiar sense, is a composite public sphere of the historical conglomeration of this eve/changing kaleidoscope of diverse public spheres' (Tully 2013: 170). While political parties may serve as one of the vehicles of minority representation, they have to be accompanied by a plurality of associations, movements, actions, publics and non-official counter-publics for which the official political public sphere serves only as an umbrella structure (see Fraser 1999), not the only venue of expression.

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