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Political Tolerance, Culture, and the Individual

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ESSENTIALIST PARADOX

To conceive of an act in complete isolation from any other act is about as extreme as to assume that anyone may speak a language which had no previous currency in any human group.

- Karl Mannheim

Ever since John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, the concept of political tolerance has enjoyed a tremendous deal of intellectual scrutiny in the modern era. Whether or not individuals are willing to "put up" with other individuals and groups and thus respect their civil liberties is an important problem in discussing the viability of modern democracies. The importance of political tolerance is due to the fact that it is considered to be one of the key virtues of the modern era. It is held to be the moral principle that mediates between the competing moral claims of individuals and communities alike. Political tolerance, then, is thought to contain specific obligations that if individuals and communities fulfill will result in a peaceful, civil, and ultimately more democratic society. Consequently, much intellectual energy has been devoted to clarify just what tolerance means and what are the duties that it imposes on society and its members.

Not only has conceptual clarity been a part of the modern intellectual scrutiny into political tolerance but evidence of tolerance among the public has also fueled much social science research. It is important, we are told, to ascertain just how politically tolerant modern societies really are. After all, of what use is conceptual clarity in regards to tolerance if it cannot be known whether or not people are willing to exercise this very important moral characteristic? If peace, civility, and democracy ultimately depend, at least in part, on the exercise of tolerance, it is crucial to determine just how tolerant a society is and is becoming.

To do so, political tolerance itself must be accurately measured among the general public and at various times with these findings serving as benchmarks of a society's democratic and civil progress.

Defining and measuring political tolerance, though, do not exhaust the modern investigation into this important concept. Many scholars have also been interested in the etiology of political tolerance as well. If one can assume an accurate definition and measuring instrument for tolerance, a complete understanding of it behooves one to discover and tell from whence it originates. Research into the causes of political tolerance has led to alternative approaches of investigation: the demographic and the psychological. The demographic approach to political tolerance links individual attitudes on civil liberties issues to characteristics such as education, religion, and gender so that it is possible to root tolerance in an individual's demographic make-up. The psychological approach seeks to ground tolerance primarily within the individual psyche and only secondarily in demographic differences. Hence, democracy's robustness depends on the psychological make-up and well being of individuals not necessarily their social characteristics.

A viable contribution to the discussion regarding the etiology of political tolerance is the consideration of the cultural and sociological bases for tolerant and intolerant attitudes and behavior. Both the demographic and psychological approaches attempt to derive the causes of tolerance from individuals alone with little concern for the possible importance of their cultural and social relations. And while the contributions of both of these approaches to our understanding of political tolerance is substantial, it is by no means complete. Political tolerance research has not focused much attention on whether or not there is a relationship between culture, social relationships, individuals, and tolerance. And, it should be noted, if such a relationship does exist, it should cause these research efforts to change focus from explanations based solely on individual psychology and social attributes to culture and social relations.

There is a very real practical implication to this discussion. Most, if not all, researchers delving into the area of political tolerance assume that democracy

is a superior form of government and that political tolerance is a moral good that ought to be defended and incorporated into the personal ethic of democratic citizens. This also seems to be a working assumption of public leaders, politicians, and most citizens. To defend the need for and education in tolerance within a democratic regime, we must have a grasp of its causes so that society can control and facilitate tolerance and eliminate its opposite. If demographic and psychological approaches to tolerance tell us that the seat of these attitudes is within the individual alone, society will see its duty as re-educating its citizens and affecting their psychological make-up to produce more tolerant and democratic human beings.

Such conclusions are not far fetched. Various types of tolerance education have been in place for some time and have received increased attention since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Such programs begin at the preschool level and teach children that it is important to tolerate difference and to learn to "respect, protect, celebrate, and honor" that difference.¹ Other programs like "Green Circle," operated by the National Conference for Community and Justice, attempt to foster tolerance in first through third graders by teaching students to appreciate differences in ethnicity, gender, and race through the use of inclusion and exclusion exercises.² Many high schools have begun efforts to address the issue of tolerance toward Muslim students in an attempt to preempt a backlash toward Muslims in America.³ Academics have even joined the tolerance education movement by seeking to implement their studies' conclusions in schools for the purpose of fostering a more tolerant youth and future citizenry.⁴ These efforts may not be disagreeable to most seeing that tolerance is an important aspect of a civil society. However, what may be

¹ One such program is the early-childhood curriculum "Anti-Bias" developed by Helen McCroskey. An exposition of this program appeared on November 22, 2001 in *The Boston Globe*.

² Such a program has been in place in the Pittsburgh, PA area since the 1980's. See the October 14, 2001 edition of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

³ See "America's Ordeal," October 5, 2001, *Newsday*.

⁴ See Bird, K., J.L. Sullivan, P.G. Avery, K. Thalhammer, and S. Wood. 1994. "Not Just Lip-Synching Anymore: Education and Tolerance Revisited," *The Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies*, 16:373-86.

troubling is the tremendous degree of control that these attempts grant state institutions to influence the moral and ethical content of education and the psychological dispositions of students. Furthermore, and this can be gleaned from various studies, such attempts often lead to labeling individuals who demonstrate a tendency toward intolerance as being psychologically-ill and in need of reformation.⁵ This raises troubling implications for any society that aspires toward liberty and freedom.

The purpose of this project is not to denigrate such educational initiatives or to criticize the value of tolerance for contemporary society. Rather, attention needs to be drawn to a potentially dangerous dilemma that can result from accepting the view that it is the individual alone that is the fount of attitudes and behavior- in this case, the fount of tolerance or intolerance. Part of the problem is that many researchers approach the study of political tolerance among the citizenry from an essentialist perspective. They assume that human beings possess some sort of essence; that they are much like an eternal principle- the same everywhere and at all times. Consequently, all that is needed is an understanding of the inner-psychological structure of this nature and of the various demographic factors that may influence it with little or no concern for how individuals interact within culture and social relations and, likewise, with little concern as to how culture and social relations may change individuals themselves. A fuller understanding of the dynamic relationship between individuals and culture may cause us to re-evaluate just how much of one's inner-psychological make-up is unchanging and, therefore, pre-disposed to intolerance, rigidity, authoritarianism, and un-democratic behavior. Further, it may cause us to re-consider seriously the nature and implementation of educational attempts to foster tolerant outlooks and actions.

⁵ For example, refer to Hightower, E. 1997. "Psychosocial Characteristics of Subtle and Blatant Racists as Compared to Tolerant Individuals," *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 53/4: 369-374; Kantor, M. 1998. *Homophobia: Description, Development, and Dynamics of Gay Bashing*, Westport: Praeger; Marcus, G.E., J.L. Sullivan, E. Theiss-Morse, and S.L. Wood. 1995. *With Malice Toward Some*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

For now, it is important to understand what culture may encompass and what are the effects of ignoring it. Culture may incorporate several things such as art, music, religion, etc. Though these are important in a study of toleration, these are not the only causal factors that may affect tolerant attitudes or behavior. Culture ought to be the principal causal factor in the study of toleration in the sense that it should be seen as the horizon within which human beings function, behave, and understand their world. This horizon includes, among other things, the particularized *Weltanschauung* that shapes a group in which individuals are socialized and on the basis of which they think and act and cultural artifacts with which an individual interacts. By ignoring culture as the seedbed of attitudes and ultimately behavior, social science has tried to link behavior with *bastardized attitudes*, attitudes with no origin and no family tree.

This book is an investigation into the study of culture and its relation to political tolerance. In particular, it is an attempt to conceptualize culture in such a way so that its influence on tolerant attitudes can be measured. While tolerance regarding the civil liberties of controversial groups and individuals is an important issue that this study assesses, the main concern is the role and centrality of culture as a possible alternative basis for attitudes on political matters. Hence, the following strategy will guide this study. Chapter two critically summarizes the significant and influential *statistically driven* research on political tolerance. The overarching focus is placed upon the demographic and psychological approaches to the study of tolerance and to various understandings of how tolerance ought to be scientifically measured. This is not to say that discussions regarding the philosophical perplexities and political necessities of tolerance are not important. It would be foolish to deny the importance and centrality of John Locke, John Stuart Mill and other contemporary tolerance theorists to discussions on the significance of tolerance for democratic societies. However, it must be clear that this study does not seek to engage such philosophical or practical discussions. The goal is quite specific: it is an attempt to re-align the *scientific* study of tolerance away from a stagnant view of individuals to a holistic view that takes

into account their cultural dimension. Consequently, discussions that are not central to this issue will not be considered.

The cultural approach to the study of tolerance is presented in chapter three. This approach has already been introduced in the preceding pages and herein receives further elaboration. As will be seen, this method breaks new ground in researching the possible reasons for tolerant and intolerant attitudes by moving away from essentialist based etiological explanations. The cultural approach is developed by synthesizing the important contributions to our understanding of culture and its influence on individuals which thinkers such as John Dewey, Karl Mannheim, and George Herbert Mead offered in their works. These observations are augmented by considering other important scholarly insights regarding the role of culture upon human beings. The choice of thinkers in this section makes perfect sense if one keeps in mind that the goal of this study is an understanding of how culture influences individuals' attitudes, in particular tolerant attitudes. Tolerance itself simply allows one to test this new approach to the study of attitude formation.

Theoretical justification and formulation is only half the battle. As all social researchers know, actually implementing a theory is the other and often more difficult part of any project. Chapter four presents the embodiment of the cultural approach toward toleration argued previously. Further, the method by which the tolerance of subjects is assessed is also presented. This is not a novel part of this project. As chapter two demonstrates, there are various measurement scales that are often used to determine the level of one's tolerance in political matters. This study uses the standard Sullivan items with some minor modifications and gauges their correlation to the operationalization of culture employed herein. Since the conceptualization of culture involves not only cultural artifacts (e.g., music, art, etc.) but also social relations, ample space is given to the types of social relations used in this study and the method of selecting these. This section concludes by offering a formal presentation of the hypotheses guiding this study. Chapter five explores the methodology involved in this project, types of questions asked, population surveyed, sampling issues, and other

specifics regarding data collection and analysis. Herein, the findings collected are evaluated and their implication upon the research questions and hypotheses involved are assessed. The final section offers a brief overview and conclusion and suggests possible further venues in which to investigate the relationship between culture and political tolerance and attitudes in general.

Now, some caveats are offered. First, the operationalization of culture herein used may contain its own limitations. Certainly, it is not a comprehensive solution for all ills. The goal of this approach is to situate the study of toleration into a possibly more fruitful though untilled landscape. Others are encouraged to advance and improve this present effort. As will be seen in the final chapters, the data suggest some surprising conclusions regarding the social relations aspect of culture and its relation to the attitudes of individual on civil liberties issues. The development of a theory is no easy task and is laden with incremental steps in the acquisition of validity and reliability. This project is one of these steps, perhaps the initial one that may lead to further investigations. Second, readers must not lose sight of the fact that while this book treats the topic of political tolerance its main concern regards its basis in culture. Such observation has been made in the preceding pages but it is worthwhile to consider it anew so that the real purpose of this project may not be lost amidst consideration of the importance of tolerance for contemporary society.