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Cultural Scepticism and 'Group Representation'

Anne Phillips

Abstract: Arguments for group representation have commonly faced three objections: (1) that representing people via their membership of a group promotes sectionalism, parochialism, and the pursuit of vested interests; (2) that it raises impossible questions about which groups qualify for group representation; (3) that it falsely presumes the existence of a group with sufficiently shared interests, perspectives, values, or concerns for some of those group members fairly to represent the others. I have some sympathy with each objection, but am also convinced that group based inequalities cannot be adequately addressed by practices that treat people solely in their capacity as individuals. When the (legitimate) worries about group representation are taken as a basis for refusing *any* claim for group-based measures, they return us to an agenda of exclusively individual representation. This leaves untouched the systemic inequalities that continue to undermine fair representation. The challenge is to formulate genuinely transformative policies that begin to break cycles of disadvantage and exclusion, but to approach these in ways that recognise and engage with the legitimate concerns. I do not pretend that I achieve this in this essay, but hope at least to clarify the issues to be borne in mind.

In what is now a long history of disenchantment, we have become impatient with merely 'formal' equality. Telling people they are political equals, as we routinely do in societies with democratic systems of government, is clearly better than telling them the opposite; and no-one should underestimate the importance of universal suffrage and the equal right of all to participate in politics. But when lives are characterised by enormous social and economic inequalities, the mere assertion of political equality risks becoming an empty mantra. When those social inequalities cohere – as they so often do – around group characteristics such as gender, religion, ethnicity, caste, or race, we may become additionally impatient with the notion that equality can be achieved through measures of individual entitlement alone. In the course of the last sixty years, the persistence of group-based patterns of exclusion has encouraged a variety of measures, across a range of countries, aimed at equalising or better balancing the positions of different groups. In India, the history of special representation provisions for minority groups goes back to the constitutional reforms of 1909, and the history of quotas for public appointments as far back as 1918; but it was the adoption of quotas for the scheduled castes and tribes in the 1940 debates on the Constitution that introduced the most remarkable of these initiatives.¹ The development of 'race-conscious' districting in the United States, with a view to redressing the severe under-representation of African-American and Latino politicians in state

¹ The colonial initiatives were primarily concerned with governability; it was only with the debates on the post independence constitution that issues of social justice and minority rights came to the fore. Rochana Bajpai (2000) 'Constituent Assembly Debates and Minority Rights' *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXXV, May 27.

and federal legislatures, represents a second important example.² The now extensive adoption of gender candidate quotas, in over one hundred countries, so as to raise the proportion of women elected as political representatives, is a third.³ These initiatives have all been loosely (though in important ways, wrongly) described as group representation.

While widely practiced, group-specific ways of equalizing or balancing patterns of political representation are also widely criticized. My object in this essay is to explore three of the most commonly voiced criticisms, and I focus on strategies for political representation, rather than (often related) measures to address group under-representation in employment or education. The *first* criticism is that representing people via their membership of a group promotes sectionalism, parochialism, and the pursuit of vested interests, that it undermines efforts toward a common good, and intensifies rather than reducing lines of social division. The *second* is that any move in the direction of 'group representation' raises impossible questions about which groups qualify – and which ones are to be excluded. The *third* is that group-specific mechanisms of representation falsely presume the existence of groups with sufficiently shared interests, perspectives, values, or concerns for some group members fairly to represent the others. I have some sympathy with each of these criticisms, but also feel strongly that group based inequalities cannot be adequately addressed through practices that treat people solely in their capacity as individuals.⁴ When

²Some of the literature on this is discussed in Anne Phillips (1995) *The Politics of Presence*, Oxford University Press, ch 4

³ For information on quota initiatives around the world, see <http://www.quotaproject.org/>

⁴ For arguments against exclusively individual strategies for equality, see Anne Phillips (2004) 'Defending Equality of Outcome' *Journal of Political Philosophy*

the (legitimate) worries about group representation are taken as a basis for refusing *any* claim for group-based measures, they return us to an agenda of exclusively individual representation that leaves untouched the systemic inequalities that continue to undermine fair representation. The challenge is to formulate genuinely transformative policies that can begin to break cycles of disadvantage and exclusion, but to approach these in ways that recognise and where possible engage with legitimate concerns. I do not pretend that I achieve this in this essay, but hope at least to clarify the various issues to be borne in mind.

Before I start, I want to make one particularly important clarification as regards terminology. I have suggested that the loose term 'group representation' is often wrongly applied; while I occasionally use it in this paper - largely because it is so widely employed in the debates - I more commonly talk of group-specific mechanisms of representation. This might seem a pedantic distinction, but is I believe important. In previous work on political representation, I have strongly supported measures such as gender quotas to raise the proportion of women elected, arguing that this helps redress the discrimination practised against people on the grounds of their real - or sometimes just presumed - group characteristics. I have argued that such measures bring previously excluded experiences and perspectives into the decision-making arena; and that the inclusion of individuals from previously marginalised groups makes it more likely (though it does not guarantee) that their concerns will be more vigorously addressed. In these arguments, however, I have tried to avoid the notion of group representation, both because I am

12/1; Iris Marion Young (2001) 'Equality of Whom?' *Journal of Political Philosophy* 9/1.

sceptical of the notion of 'a' women's interest (for reasons discussed below), and because of the lack of institutional mechanisms linking women representatives to a supposed constituency of women.

The most common mechanism in Europe for increasing the proportion of women in politics is not the reservation of seats specifically for women (the alternative adopted in India's Panchayati Raj reforms) but the adoption of gender quotas for candidate selection. In effect, political parties decide to run for election with a balanced ticket of both male and female candidates, or, more commonly, ensure that at least 25% or 33% or 40% of the candidates they field are female. Strictly speaking, when parties introduce this kind of candidate selection quota, they are not increasing the representation of the group known as women, for what, after all, does it mean to interpellate a group named 'women'? And if they are elected by the same constituencies as their male colleagues, how are the newly elected female representatives supposed to know what the group called 'women' wants? Strictly speaking, initiatives such as gender quotas simply increase the number of women serving as political representatives; they increase the proportion of women serving in a legislature. In my view, there is an entirely legitimate expectation that this will bring into the political arena a wider range of experiences and a different set of priorities, and that the overall effect will be to enable the concerns of women outside the legislature to be more adequately voiced. But it would be a misnomer to describe this as group representation. It is important to keep in mind the distinction between including or representing 'a group' - which can only be said to happen if the group has constituted itself as such and then chosen its own representatives - and including or representing those deemed by themselves and others to constitute members of that group. We need to bear in mind, that is, the distinction between a corporatist representation in which individuals serve as the authorised representatives of their group and

are regarded as its authentic voice, and looser measures that seek to increase the representation of people sharing the markers and experiences of these groups. Only the first of these can really be described as 'group representation'. For the rest, it is more correct to talk of group specific measures of representation.

Three objections

The first objection to group specific mechanisms of representation is that representing people via their membership of a group – rather than as individual citizens and members of the polity as a whole – fragments the nation, intensifies divisions, encourages parochialism, and promotes the pursuit of sectional interest. This argument does not have to rely on simplistic notions of a common good, or implausible expectations of consensus: if it depended on these, it would be much easier to dismiss it. In any system of representation, there will be differences of opinion and judgement. Indeed, it is commonly recognised as a sign of a healthy democracy when people disagree about policies and programmes, and even those most influenced by Habermasian notions of deliberative democracy tend to look with scepticism on premature declarations of consensus. When we do disagree, moreover, it is commonly and uncontroversially recognised that some at least of our disagreement will stem from differences in social location: that employers, for example, will be more likely than employees to think it is appropriate for them to have the power of instant dismissal; that teachers will be more likely than their students to favour unseen examinations; or that women will be more likely than men to prioritise strong initiatives against sexual violence. But so long as people are speaking as individual citizens - rather than as representatives of a group - we can still regard their disagreements as reflecting different views about what is best for society *as a whole*. So long as they are addressing themselves to general concerns, the fact

that their judgments may be affected by differences of experience and/or interest remains relatively unproblematic.

The complaint against group representation is that it removes us from this sphere of potentially shared concerns and condemns us to a world of self and group interest. Instead of combating our tendency to tunnel vision - our tendency to think that the issues that most preoccupy us simply *are* the most important issues in the world – it seems to encourage us in precisely this kind of parochialism. Instead of challenging an inward-looking conception of politics that supports or rejects policies simply on the basis of how they might affect the interests of our own group, a system of group representation seems to thrive on precisely this narrowness. People are all too prone to put the concerns of their own neighbourhood or community or group first. Surely the aim of a well ordered democracy should be to challenge this?

In the most acute versions, the worry is that that a nation will dissolve into warring factions and fragment into secessionist movements. I do not address this concern, except to note that where divisions *are* so deep, it usually makes sense to ensure that representation is roughly balanced between groups, because anything short of this fuels resentments and distrusts and makes fragmentation even more likely. Where secession is not a real issue, the more common worry is that an ‘unhealthy’ focus on group distinctions makes it harder for people to address their areas of common concern. The ‘politics of faction’ is commonly counter-posed to the politics of the common good, and in discourses such as French republicanism, this generates a strong conviction that politicians should not speak for factions or regions or classes, or any other kind of corporate interest, but for the collectivity as a whole. As Joan Scott has put it in her analysis of the French conception of political representation, ‘representatives did not reflect some already existing, competing entities; instead they constituted,

through their actions, the singular body of the nation. And it was a nation “one and indivisible.”⁵

In this understanding of representation, any formal recognition of group difference – whether through reserved places for members of particular groups, or candidate quotas to ensure balanced representation - is taken as detracting from what democratic politics ought to be about. I am not, myself, a great admirer of France’s stern ‘anti-differentialism’, which prevents the collection of official statistics on differences of religion or race, thereby making it difficult for the state to monitor levels of discrimination; and bans school pupils from wearing ‘conspicuous’ items of dress that ‘manifest religious or political affiliation’, thereby making it impossible for Muslim pupils to wear headscarves or Sikhs to wear turbans.⁶ But even in criticising these consequences of a refusal to acknowledge group difference, I still see the power of that underlying political vision. We would surely all prefer to live in a world where our political representatives were able to address themselves to the good of all rather than to sectional interest; or had the capacity to look beyond the specific concerns of one interest group, class, caste, or region, to focus on wider, shared, concerns. Even if we consider the abstraction of the nation as a myth (as I incline to do), we might still oppose ‘group representation’ as encouraging us in exactly the wrong direction.

This is the first worry about group specific mechanisms of representation. The *second* is often described as the ‘slippery slope’: the idea that it is impossible to devise a plausible basis for identifying which groups qualify, hence that any

⁵ Joan Wallach Scott ‘French Universalism in the 1990s’ *New Left Review* 15/2 (2004): 34

⁶ Scott, ‘French Universalism in the 1990s’ ; see also Joan Wallach Scott (2007) *The Politics of the Veil*, Princeton University Press

move in the direction of measures to ensure the representation of some groups leaves us committed to representing an impossible number. In the facetious versions, it is said that we cannot consistently employ group specific measures to deal with exclusions by gender or race or caste without also adopting them to ensure a proportional representation of people with green eyes or those over six feet tall. The facetious versions are easy enough to deal with - people do not become a group just by virtue of sharing one characteristic; they may become a statistical category, but not thereby a 'group' - but the deeper questions remain.

If we argue that women, for example, are an under-represented group who thereby qualify for special or group representation, we expose ourselves to question about the many other under-represented groups who might also make a legitimate claim. This is widely – if sometimes dishonestly - employed as an argument against gender quotas in Europe; and is a pertinent concern when we consider that no-one proposes quotas to deal with under-representation by class, and that relatively few support quotas to address under-representation by ethnicity or race. In India, the introduction of special measures to promote the economic, educational, and political inclusion of the most disadvantaged castes and tribes opened up questions about the many other social groups experiencing social and economic disadvantage. The immediate focus, when the Indian Constitution was drawn up, was on the very harsh discrimination practised against the dalits, hence the famous schedule defining the relevant castes and tribes and establishing the legitimacy of quotas. At the time, it was widely assumed that these measures would be temporary, leading to the eventual integration of 'backward sections'; but in practice the move has been in the opposite direction, towards extending the reservations policy to include 'Other Backward Classes'. Thus in 1980, the Mandal Commission recommended the reservation of 27% of posts in central government and places in higher education

to members of the Other Backward Classes; this led – eventually, and after much vigorous debate – to the introduction of OBC quotas in the bureaucracy⁷. With the 2006 *Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act*, it has also led to the introduction of OBC quotas for higher education institutions.

There are two radically opposed strategies for dealing with the ‘slippery slope’ worry. The first is to devise a criterion that uniquely selects out the group that is the object of your current concern. This was broadly the approach adopted by campaigners for Parite, legislation finally introduced in France in 2002, which requires political parties to field equal numbers of male and female candidates in municipal elections and elections for the European Parliament. In the context of what I noted earlier about the anti-differentialism of French republican thinking, it was particularly important for French feminists to make their case for the equal representation of the two sexes without committing themselves to any arguments about the representation of other excluded or marginalised groups. They did this by identifying women as a unique ‘non-group’. As leading activists from the campaign put it, ‘Women are everywhere. They are in all classes, in all social categories. They are Catholics, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, agnostic...And they can’t be compared to any pressure group...that demands to be better represented...Women are neither a group nor a lobby. They constitute half of the sovereign people, half of the human species.’⁸

⁷ For a fascinating examination of the 1990 Mandal debate see Rochana Bajpai ‘Rhetoric as Argument: Social Justice and Affirmative Action in India’

⁸ Françoise Gaspard, Claude Servan-Schreiber, Anne le Gall, *Au pouvoir citoyennes: Liberté, Egalité, parité*, 1992: 166. For further discussion of the parite campaigns, see Joan Wallach Scott (2005) *Parite! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* University of Chicago Press; and Eleonore Lepinard (2007) ‘The Contentious Subject of Feminism: Defining Women in France from the Second Wave to Parity’ *Signs*, 32/2

The alternative approach is particularly well represented in the work of Iris Marion Young, who became convinced that the problems that preoccupied her as a feminist – women’s marginalisation, subordination, under-representation – were paralleled across a wide range of disadvantaged groups. She then felt compelled ‘to move out of a focus specifically on women’s oppression, to try to understand as well the social position of other oppressed groups’.⁹ From this, she devised criteria for special representation rights which do not specify in advance particular social groups, but depend on who has been exposed to what she called the five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. This more general set of criteria detached the demand for representation rights from any one category, and potentially offers us a way of determining which groups should qualify. A group would not qualify merely by virtue of constituting a group, for some groups already enjoy their monopoly of power, and efforts would be better directed to divesting them rather than ensuring their group-specific representation. ‘Groupness’ alone is not enough. Further evidence of oppression is necessary to identify the relevant groups.

This looks (to me) considerably more promising than a criterion that uniquely singles out one group. But Young then falls foul of the opposite problem, for the criteria she suggests generate a list of groups that spans practically everyone in American society apart from rich, heterosexual, white men. The first strategy looks far too exclusive; but the second threatens to include far too much. Many critics have considered these problems in determining which groups qualify as decisive arguments against any form of group representation.

⁹ Iris Marion Young (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference* Princeton University Press: 13-14.

The *third* common objection to group specific representation goes to the heart of what it means to constitute a group. If a group is to be represented 'as a group', this seems to require both that we can readily identify who belongs to that group *and* that there are sufficient shared interests, perspectives, concerns, or values for some group members fairly to represent the others. The first problem has not been especially difficult as regards women. There may be issues at the margins, but it is reasonably easy to say who is a woman and who is a man. The idea that there is a shared 'women's interest', however, is rightly regarded as more problematic. Precisely that fact alluded to by the parite campaigners (that women are everywhere) makes it hard to claim the existence of a specific 'women's interest' without falling into a species of essentialism. Differences of class, age, sexuality, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin, all impact in significant ways on women's lives, to the point where it sometimes seems the only common feature is the possibility of bearing children. In India, worries about differences in women's experience, and the implausibility of thinking that women share common interests across socio-economic divides, frequently figure in debates about introducing gender quotas for the national parliament, and it is commonly argued (including by feminists) that a focus on gender alone would give a voice only to already powerful and privileged women.¹⁰ This has been a concern even with the Panchayati Raj reforms, which established new institutions of local government and reserved a third of the seats for women. While many have seen this as significantly empowering the previously excluded,

¹⁰ For example, Shirin Rai (1999) 'Democratic Institutions, Political Representation and Women's Empowerment: The Quota Debate in India' *Democratization*, 6(3): 84-99

others maintain that it mostly assists women from already dominant village families.¹¹

Part of the issue here is that characteristics like gender, race, ethnicity, or caste are too broad brush to capture internal complexities and divisions, and that mechanisms to redress exclusions based on these characteristics may then end up misdirecting resources to relatively advantaged sub-groups. This has been a common theme in assessments of affirmative action policies in the United States, which sought to open up employment opportunities or access to prestige universities to applicants from racial minority groups, but in practice mainly benefited those who already had sufficient educational qualifications to be equipped to apply. There is a powerful body of progressive thinking that sees it as better to focus on race-neutral programmes that address poverty, rather than race-conscious programmes that address group exclusions, arguing that the former more effectively directs resources to those in greatest need, as well as enhancing solidarity across racial divides.¹² In India, there has been much discussion about ways of excluding the so-called 'creamy layer' in the implementation of OBC quotas, the worry, again, being that an undifferentiated form of affirmative action will end up benefitting those already relatively privileged. However crucial categories like caste or race may be in shaping peoples' life chances, these characteristics alone do not tell us everything we may need to know.

¹¹ There is an enormous literature here, including essays in Karin Kapaida, ed, (2002) *The Violence of Development: the Politics of Identity, Gender and Social Inequalities in India*, Kali for Women, New Delhi.

¹² African American sociologist William Julius Wilson is often associated with this view, though in fact he argues for both race neutral and affirmative action programmes. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the UnderClass and Public Policy* University of Chicago Press, 1987

The other side to these worries is that mechanisms that rely on group characteristics (like reservations or quotas) can have the effect of further stereotyping people according to the supposed characteristics of their group. The irony here is that stereotyping is usually part of what has marginalised or excluded people from participation in politics, education, or employment: the presumption that women, for example, understand too little about politics to serve effectively as political representatives; or that those from a particular ethno-cultural group hold 'backward' views. This dilemma has been much discussed in relation to women, where theorists have noted the paradoxical necessity simultaneously to assert and repudiate the category of women.¹³ It has also arisen in the context of recent debates on multiculturalism in Europe, where systematic inequalities between cultural groups provide the strong justification for group-specific policies of multiculturalism, and yet the very language of culture and cultural difference lends itself to ethnic reductionism, cultural stereotyping, and a hierarchy of 'traditional' and 'modern'.¹⁴

In Europe today, the notion of 'a culture', 'cultural practice', or 'cultural tradition' is almost entirely associated with minority, migrant, or non-European cultures - and is highly prone to stereotype. When people talk of recognising cultural diversity or accommodating cultural traditions (or alternatively, insist on the dangers of accommodating cultural diversity), it is nearly always minority cultures they have in mind. Those associated with majority cultural groups are rarely thought of as having 'a culture', precisely because the majority is taken as the norm. (This mirrors what is commonly said about both gender and ethnicity:

¹³ eg, in Nancy Fraser (1997) 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a "Postsocialist Age"' in Fraser *Justice Interruptus* Routledge.

¹⁴ I discuss this further in *Multiculturalism without Culture*, Princeton University Press, 2007.

it is women who are seen as defined by their gender, not men; and it is those from minority ethnic groups who are perceived as even having an ethnicity, while the ethnic identity of the majority remains an unnoticed norm.) In the daily discourse of cultural difference, moreover, people are inclined to talk of 'the Asians' or 'the Africans' or 'the Muslims' in ways that deny diversity and individuality to those from minority cultural groups, and represent 'their culture' as if it were the explanation for virtually everything they say or do. Gerd Baumann has described this way of talking as one in which 'all agency seem(s) to be absent, and culture an imprisoning cocoon or a determining force'¹⁵; and his perception of people as products of their culture, and culture as the all-encompassing explanation of what people do, can be found not only in common-sense discourse, but also in some of the political theory of multiculturalism. The irony again: part of the object of multicultural policy is to challenge prejudices against minority groups, but in so far as it encourages a view that people are indeed defined by their cultures, it can itself reinforce prejudice and stereotype.

Worries about cultural stereotyping are primarily about the way a group comes to be perceived from outside (primarily though not exclusively, for we are all also capable of *self*-stereotyping). The related problem is cultural straitjacketing: the way an overly solid representation of a particular cultural group can operate to curtail possibilities for individuals within it. When that overly solid representation is given political recognition – perhaps through official accommodation of what the group's leaders have described as core traditions or cherished practices – the falsely homogenised understanding of the culture or group operates to shore up the authority of more powerful over more

¹⁵ Gerd Baumann (1996) *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996: 1

vulnerable members.¹⁶ When political claims are made in the name of a culture or cultural tradition, these will commonly reflect the views and authority of the more powerful members of the group. So when those claims translate successfully into demands on the state --for example, when a demand that culturally specific ways of chastising children should be recognised as a legitimate alternative leads to a modification of state policy on the protection of children's rights - this cedes enormous power to cultural leaders.

Cultural scepticism

In what remains, I want to suggest that this third area of concern --the worry that group specific forms of representation or inclusion exaggerate the solidity of the presumed group - is the main one to worry about. I take the point of the first objection: the idea that representing people via their membership of a group promotes sectionalism, parochialism, and the pursuit of vested interests. But so long as inequalities and exclusions *are* structured around ascribed characteristics (and whether these are real characteristics or simply ones attributed to us by others does not really matter here), they cannot be adequately addressed by a politics that denies differences, or simply asserts, in high minded manner, that we *ought* all to be treated the same. I also take the point of the second objection: that it is hard to devise a plausible basis for differentiating between those groups

¹⁶ This issue is discussed in the multicultural literature as the 'minorities within minorities' problem, and in the feminist literature, as the feminism versus multiculturalism problem. See Avigail Eisenburg and Jeff Spinner-Halev, eds. (2005) *Minorities Within Minorities: Equalities, Rights and Diversity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, Martha C Nussbaum eds, (1999) *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

who should and those who should not qualify for group representation, and that a slippery slope seems to open up once any such groups are identified. But I have never found slippery slope arguments really compelling. We should, of course, take stock if favoured remedies for group inequality and disadvantage set up an unstoppable dynamic leading in unwelcome or unmanageable directions. But the consequences of *inaction* should also be weighed in the balance, and fears about the slippery slope should not be allowed to paralyse all initiatives against inequality and exclusion.

For me, it is the third objection – the scepticism regarding the solidity of groups, and more specifically for my arguments here, the scepticism regarding culture – that is the most compelling. Culture, of course, matters. It matters as part of the way we give meaning to our world; it matters as an important component of self ascribed identity; and at a more political level, it clearly continues to matter as one of the mechanisms through which social hierarchies are sustained. As noted at the beginning, material inequality still has a recognisably group quality, mapping onto differences of gender, race, ethnicity, caste, and national origin, and doing so in a structured manner that goes beyond questions of individual identity or choice. The individuals concerned may have no interest in defining themselves by reference to their sex or ethnicity or supposed culture, but they cannot thereby escape all the forms of discrimination or disadvantage visited on ‘their’ group. As part of the way people give meaning to their world, cultural diversity is both desirable and inescapable. As part of what currently allocates us to unequal positions in society, it is also contingently important. This is not something that can be addressed by pretending cultural difference away.

I would also agree with those who insist that the language of culture remains a crucial tool for analyzing differences between societies and over time.

One useful example derives from the experience of Ireland in the 1950s and 60s, where the Catholic Church still operated what were known as Magdalene Laundries, prison-like buildings housing young women who had become pregnant outside of marriage (or in some other way caused a scandal in their community), and who were expected to support themselves by taking in washing from neighbouring hotels or households. The women were not there by their own choice, but had been placed there by parents, usually on the advice of the parish priest. Many of them remained virtually as prisoners in these institutions, for many years. If we try to understand how such institutions could exist in the 1950s and 60s, and why that kind of incarceration of young women would be regarded as brutal today, we will, with reason, turn to the notion of culture. In Ireland in the 1950s and 60s, there was a very strongly felt conviction that sex outside marriage was a sin, the church had enormous power and authority, and fathers had very considerable power and authority over their children. Since then, there has been a major cultural shift. Note, however, that both then and now, there was enormous individual variation. Some parents were more horrified than others if their daughters became pregnant; some were horrified but determined nonetheless to support their daughters through their difficulties; and some were relatively untroubled by what others regarded as immoral transgression. What individuals do and think does not lend itself neatly to cultural explanation. We cannot just say, 'it's the culture'. There never is 'the' (single, bounded, unified) culture, but also cultural influence never provides the exclusive explanation for what people do.

One of my currently favourite quotes is from the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, who studies cultures but has arrived at a profound scepticism towards grand claims of cultural difference. She advises what she calls an ethnography of the particular that brings out the similarities in people's lives: 'The particulars

suggest that others live as we perceive ourselves living, not as robots programmed with “cultural” rules, but as people going through life agonizing over decisions, making mistakes, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragedies and personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of happiness.’¹⁷ Over the years, the discipline of anthropology has played a significant role in constructing or even inventing ‘cultures’: sometimes at the behest of colonial authorities, who needed the anthropologists to give them an angle on the societies they were seeking to control¹⁸; sometimes because it has seemed that the only way to make sense of something is precisely to treat it as a ‘thing’ and investigate how ‘it’ works.¹⁹ Nowadays, however, anthropologists are more commonly found among the sceptics. Culture, they argue, is not bounded, for people draw on a wide range of local, national, and global resources in the ways they make and re-make their culture. Cultures are not homogeneous, for there are always internal contestations over the values, practices and meanings that characterise any culture. Cultures are not entities, defined by essential or core values. Cultures do not produce people; they are, to the contrary, produced by them

That more plausible understanding of cultural difference warns us against the tendency to reify groups, the tendency to attribute to ‘a group’ more solidity

¹⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) “Writing Against Culture.” In *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* edited by Richard G Fox. Sante Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press: 158

¹⁸ Talal Asad (ed) (1973) *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter* London: Ithaca Press

¹⁹ Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

and reality than is justified by the facts. That scepticism as regards what constitutes a culture has implications for the parallel claims about what constitutes a gender, a race, an ethnicity, a caste, for in all these cases, the presumption that there is 'a group' also has to be subjected to continuous investigation. 'Group representation' is intrinsically problematic, because of the way it presumes and reinforces simplistic notions of the group. Yet I come back, again, to questions of inequality and power, to the cycles of disadvantages and exclusion that continue to revolve around real or presumed group difference. We cannot hope to address those inequalities by simply wishing difference away. This means we often require mechanisms for addressing the under-representations of people identified by the markers of their group, even as we challenge the false metaphysics of 'group representation'. The challenge is to formulate genuinely transformative policies that can begin to break cycles of disadvantage, and in societies where inequality *is* structured around group characteristics, this cannot be achieved by refusing to engage with demands for group specific representation. We need to take seriously the worries about group representation; we need to acknowledge the dangers that attend even its most moderate forms. But an agenda of exclusively individual representation leaves untouched the systemic inequalities that continue to undermine fair representation. We need to avoid the paralysis that sometimes comes with complexity, and continue to devise policies for change.