

In defence of anti-culturalism: a reply to my critics

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1. My *Cultural Identity and Political Ethics* turned out to be at least as much a polemical as a purely philosophical work, as the slogan I used for its summary – ‘Freedom from Culture’ – is meant to suggest. Yet this is not a slogan that one can imagine many who protest against the current ills of the world carrying on their banners. In fact they are far more likely to be proclaiming some cultural identity than denouncing it in the terms in which I believe it deserves to be denounced. It is therefore gratifying that Elvio Baccarini and Enes Kulenović, agree with so much of what I say in the book. But what I mainly have to thank them for are their penetrating criticisms, and what follows here are inadequate and provisional replies concerning questions about which I shall have to ponder more.

Of my two critics Elvio Baccarini is, I suspect, the more concessive. Baccarini agrees with me that ‘people are not distinguished pre-politically on the basis of supposed deep objective cultural differences’ (p.2) which support political claims for special treatment. However, drawing upon Akeel Bilgrami’s distinction between objective and subjective identity, Baccarini argues that such claims can sometimes be supported on the basis of subjective cultural identities instead and, furthermore, that these identities can be deep going ones. This, he suggests, is a possibility that I have overlooked.

In fact, in the book I did not entirely disregard such a subjective conception, though I did not relate it to Bilgrami’s account nor draw from it the sort of conclusions that Baccarini seeks. In discussing the way people supposedly recognise their cultural identity I argued that ‘identity is

dependent upon a sense of identity...even though it is attributed as pre-existing it' (p. 159). There is, I went on, a slippage here between a sense of identity as a perception and as an attitude. So, to have the identity, people would need to identify with the cultural features they supposedly recognise in themselves. This corresponds to Bilgrami's idea that a subjective identity requires a second-order endorsement of such features, e.g. of certain cultural values. Baccarini agrees with Bilgrami that this kind of endorsement can lead to the given identity being a deep one, as is manifest when the subject of the identity wants the features she endorses to be permanent ones. They mean, one might say, that much to her. It is on the basis of such a deep subjective identity that Baccarini makes a case for certain claims to political recognition.

It is, however, with the apparent assumption that subjective identities so construed are deep going in the sense which I gave to this notion that I have difficulty. For in my sense an identity is deep if it is an aspect of her psychological functioning which explains much of her behaviour. But this is a first-order state of mind, and it is because subjective identities in Bilgrami's and Baccarini's sense involve second-order states instead that whatever depth they had would not equate to this. For just as someone can have a first-order desire (e.g. to smoke) without reflectively endorsing it, so conversely someone could reflectively endorse the values of a group to which he claims adherence without actually internalising these values as first-order features of his psychological functioning. That is why throughout my book I am able to suggest that only lip service to the values or other positively rated cultural features of the group is required for membership to be claimed. No deep going internalisation of values is needed, nor could it reasonably be expected from all members of the sort of group we think of as supplying a cultural identity.

There is a difference here between cultural and religious groups which casts doubt on the analogy Baccarini draws between them. For Baccarini argues that deep subjective cultural identities can be the basis for political recognition on the same grounds that religious identities may need to be accommodated in a liberal order. He appeals to Joshua Cohen's view that the stringency of the demands that religious convictions impose, in virtue of being taken as authoritative, requires that special provision be made to accommodate them. Likewise, Baccarini suggests, those elements of a cultural

identity which individuals endorse should, so long as they are reasonable, be similarly accommodated. Thus such subjective cultural identities have a normative force which objective ones, as I argue, lack. Yet surely the difference between religious and cultural groups is that the former do demand first-order compliance with their dictates and the latter cannot. In many, perhaps most religions members can be excommunicated or otherwise expelled for violations of their codes. This is not how cultural groups, or at least modern western ones, operate: their demands on members are much less stringent, which is why I maintain that only lip service is required.

None of this implies that I disagree with Baccarini about the benefits of a liberal regime in catering for the religious or other cultural practices of minorities. But, as I think Baccarini would allow, this does not require recognition of a cultural group conceived as one sharing a whole way of life, as this is often expressed, rather than just a few cultural features. The claims of a religion, a minority language and so on can be accommodated without the recognition of such separate cultural groups. Baccarini suggests that I seem to limit such accommodation to that which serves a minority's material interests and that this would be too restrictive. Certainly it was not my intention to deny it to the claims of religion, for example; and I agree with Baccarini that the symbols which are significant for a minority may need to be publicly accepted. But while Baccarini rightly denies that such acceptance cannot imply respect, since respect cannot be demanded, one reason for giving acceptance is, I suggest, to avoid showing disrespect. For disrespect can be forbidden, and rightly so if its manifestation may provoke an adverse reaction. It may bend the twig which then jumps back and hits the bender, as in the Isaiah Berlin story from which my own account of cultural identity derives.

2. Enes Kulenović agrees with me in adopting the bent twig model and rejecting the Herderian 'crooked timber of humanity' picture, which Kulenović characterises as essentialist. However he disagrees with my contention that political claims based on assertions of cultural identity invariably betray a misunderstanding of what such an identity consists in. Rightly understood, Kulenović thinks that cultural identity can be the basis

for legitimate political claims. Thus, rather as Baccarini allows that my thesis works for identities conceived as objective but not as subjective, so Kulenović grants that it works for them if thought of as essentialist but not as socially constructed. This, he maintains, is how we ought to think of them, and do so think of them if we adopt the bent twig model. It may be worth observing, then, that, while essentialism implies the objective conception, not all objective identities need be essentialist, since some might be socially constructed, with not all members of the group needing to conceive of themselves as members under whatever characterisation it is in terms of which the group is constructed. However, if I understand him correctly, Baccarini would require that each member of a group for which claims are made must conceive of himself in these terms, and it is the implausibility of this applying to what we think of as cultural groups, by contrast with religious ones, that leads me to deny that there really are collective cultural identities subjectively conceived, any more than they exist as conceived objectively.

This last point suggests that Kulenović's criticism that my arguments touch only Herderian essentialist notions of cultural identity may be too quick. For the social construction of a cultural identity involves trying to get as many members of the group as possible to think of themselves in a certain way, to adopt, in Bilgrami's and Baccarini's term, some shared subjective conception of their cultural identity. So one of my claims, though perhaps one that I did not emphasise enough in the book, is that it is unrealistic to suppose that there ever succeeds in being a sufficient coincidence of self-conceptions between putative members of a cultural group for it to be regarded as existing on this basis any more than on the basis of shared objective characteristics.

Before moving on to confront Kulenović's defence of cultural identity claims I have to quibble a little with his account of social constructivism. First, Kulenović invokes Patchen Markell's distinction between cognitive and constructivist recognition to argue that, while the former would be involved in discerning cultural groups as essentialistically conceived, the latter may be part of the formation of a cultural group's collective identity under social constructivism. This, I think, is a mistaken application of the notion of constructivist recognition. Constructivist recognition is what is conferred upon people by a third party, and it is what cultural groups seek from states

or international bodies. But what supposedly constitutes them as groups entitled to make such demands is their own members' recognition, not a third party's. This recognition is, I maintain, taken to be a cognitive one, however mistakenly. Second, Kulenović regards the possibility of hybridity and dynamic change as telling in favour of constructivism about identity, while both these seem to me to be independent of the kind of account we give of cultural identity. Under essentialism either feature could be the result of the circumstances that individuals or groups are placed in, however regrettable these results might be in the Herderian scheme. They would be regrettable because either hybridity or easy change casts doubt on how deep going in a person's identity are the cultural characteristics concerned.

Now it is on the question of the depth of a socially constructed collective cultural identity and the relevance of such depth to the strength of political claims that I find myself most at odds with Kulenović. For Kulenović insists that 'many of cultural identity claims in multicultural discourse do actually have a deep character', and that 'even if something is nothing more than a surface part of someone's cultural identity, it can still offer a basis for a valid ethical demand' (p. 13). Wearing a *burqa*, he suggests, might be a deep part of someone's identity and, even if it is not, a liberal state should not ban it. Now, as should be clear from my discussion of this topic in relation to Baccarini's paper, this is not how I understand depth. Although wearing a *burqa* may be important *to* someone it is hard to see how it could be important *for* her, in the sense of being an important part of her psychological functioning. We should, of course, not disregard the fact that something is important to someone, but we have to weigh it against what is important to others. However, the consequences of overriding someone's concerns of this kind are, other things being equal, much less serious than those of interfering with factors which would affect her psychological functioning adversely.

On the *burqa* issue I have no problem with Kulenović's liberal conclusions. As with my reply to Baccarini, I am happy to concede a wide variety of special right and exemptions, especially to a group that has been discriminated against. I agree with Kulenović that it does not matter whether the group is or is not a close knit community or whether all or even most of its members engage in the practices for which protection is sought. Where I disagree with him is in his assumption that the group's claim is strengthened

by the profession of a common cultural identity or by consequential assertions that this identity would be endangered if their demands were not met. These seem to me to be mere rhetorical flourishes surrounding what might be good reasons for the demands, as, for example, that the practice is part of their religion, that it is a longstanding tradition which they would be upset to have to abandon or that it is of especial aesthetic significance to them. In the sense in which multiculturalism is a normative theory about the value of acknowledging and accommodating cultural differences I suspect I am as much a multiculturalist as Kulenović or Baccarini. But insofar as the term is taken to connote a metaphysic of deep cultural identities, however conceived, I remain, so far, an unrepentant anti-culturalist, despite their skilful attempts to persuade me otherwise.