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Liberalism and Culturism as Interrogatories

Reading *Lolita* in Tehran

Alfonso J. Damico

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Introduction

An interrogatory has a harsh ring to it. Commonly defined as a set of formal questions submitted to an opposing party during the discovery phase of some legal proceeding, the procedure is grounded in the assumption that some wrong has occurred and that the responsible party needs to be identified.¹ Political criticism differs from such an adversarial procedure but not entirely. The most obvious difference is the wrongs that political criticism seeks to remedy are injustices, more a matter of moral and political responsibility than legal liability. Becoming a party to some political quarrel, moreover, requires nothing more than the decision to do so by picking a side in some conflict.² Yet the sharp questions – who are you to rule over me? – that are at the center of political criticism resemble interrogations both in their form and tone. Both legal interrogatories and political ones seek to answer such questions as how the benefits and burdens of social cooperation should be distributed and by whose authority.

The jural world treats this last issue, authority's legitimacy, as settled, but political criticism often unsettles authority's claim to respect. It is easy to see why this happens. To demand an explanation and justification for the way in which the social and political order is arranged is to issue a presumptive challenge in which there is at least the suggestion that some part of that order is suspect. To think, for example, about authority in an interrogatory mood is to imagine it as 'guilty until proven innocent.' Rather than lamenting the fact that political criticism encourages individuals to adopt such an accusatory tone towards social and political arrangements, I propose to defend it.

Sustained rational examination of social and political practices always carries with it the possibility that some significant part of those practices will be found deeply unsatisfactory. Liberalism endorses this possibility, culturism prefers to delay or counter it. When it comes to political criticism, liberalism plays offense,

culturism prefers defense. For example, culturists often object to liberal theories precisely because their approach to other ways of life is “primarily judgmental” and indicates “only a limited interest in understanding them.”³ Since it helps to capture the differences that interests me, I am going to use the term *culturism* – a systematic devotion to culture – to describe this alternative to liberalism as a posture for interrogating the social order. The term culturism better conveys the presumptively high valuation of culture that is typical of much of the multiculturalist literature.

Central to culturism as a theory of political life is a view of culture itself as the locus of normative meanings, e.g., intrinsic social goods, cultural identity, that is authoritative in the sense that it generates strong claims for respecting the various practices and conventions that constitute it. We can call this a standard of *presumptive respect*. The standard works within culturist writings to encourage deference towards other cultures and communities, especially nonliberal ones, because their practices are ‘simply theirs.’ Liberalism, in contrast, is harder on social and political life, pressing culturists for an answer to the question “why respect culture?”⁴

Culture matters for how people live their lives. It binds us together through the ties of language and history, it shapes how others see us, and it provides many with “the safety of effortless secure belonging.”⁵ That cultures matter in these ways or that culture is a *social fact* is beyond dispute. Culturists are right to remind us of them. What is disputable is whether culture is a *moral fact* with unambiguous implications for how we should go about interrogating either cultures or the wider political setting of which they are a part.⁶

Culturists typically begin with the premise that we owe equal respect to all cultures. Bhikhu Parekh take this to mean that we should not use liberal values of personal autonomy or freedom of choice as key standards for judging a culture’s practices. Liberal justificatory demands, he argues, reflect a moral monism that is incapable of seeing that “the good life can be lived in several more or less equally worthwhile ways.”⁷ While some liberal thinkers such as Will Kymlicka have sought to parry this complaint by developing a liberal theory of multiculturalism, my aims are different.⁸ It is the contrasts between liberalism and culturism as models of political criticism that I aim to describe. Once we have some key differences between liberal and culturist visions of social and political justification before us, I turn to a discussion of to Azar Nafisi’s book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to defend the first and criticize the second,

of which more later.⁹

What commonly encourages critics to interrogate politics is one of two things. For many it is a sense of injustice, the belief that people are being so badly mistreated that they are victims. Others interrogate politics less to uncover injustices than to uncover the elemental or foundational nature of justice in the hope that politics can satisfy or honor its ethical demands. The first project speaks to our fears about politics when it goes badly. It rests upon the feeling that people are more likely to have a sense of what is unjust about their circumstances than a fully developed sense of the nature of a just society. The second motive for interrogating politics is more ambitious precisely because the question of the just society defines its project.

If so inclined, one can divide liberalisms according to whether they take injustice or justice as their major topic, distinguishing the liberalism of fear from neo-Kantian liberalisms.¹⁰ Alternatively one might divide liberal camps into contextualists and foundationalists. A contextualist might ask, “Does this social order rest upon shared understandings that include my expectations and my life story?” The foundationalist, on the other hand, would ask, “Could I consent or agree to this social order.” These are choppy waters, and I try to sail around them by keeping in view features that distinguish liberalism as political criticism from culturism.

The contrasts drawn do not apply only to liberalism and culturism. In a broad way, they could also be used to characterize the differences between early social contract theory and, say, Burke’s conservatism. Where the contract theorists sought to pull back ideological curtains so as to get a closer look at the beliefs, customs, and experiences purporting to underwrite the legitimacy of authority, Burke was equally certain that the state’s survival depended upon keeping most of this hidden.¹¹ The choice between transparency and opacity is being replayed today in the differences between liberalism and culturism.

Liberalism

Liberalism seen as a justificatory strategy deploys two core values – *transparency* and *individualism* – as standards for judging the social order. The importance of individualism first appears in liberal theories as a demand that social and political practices should be interrogated from the standpoint of *anyone* who is part of them. What is often known today as the politics of difference, giving

pride of place to particular identities, liberals consider an obstacle to greater transparency.

Consider the proto-liberal Hobbes's observation that in order for the social contract to be effective "every man [must] acknowledge another for his equal by nature."¹² Whether counted a moral or prudential rule, what is called for here is the recognition and affirmation of each individual's worth. Behind that proposal is Hobbes's warning that preoccupation with one's particular identity can become an obsession. Individuals overly concerned about their relative social status, he noted, are too quick to see in their differences occasions for slights and affronts. The desire for recognition by some too easily becomes the demand for deference from others. The moral Hobbes draws and one that many liberals have drawn since is that indifference towards our more particular identities can promote recognition of each person's equal standing *qua* subject and citizen.

Sounding a different note but making a similar point, Locke argued that, "Men being, as has been said, by Nature, all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this Estate, and subjected to the Political Power of another, without his own *Consent*."¹³ Exactly how consent is expressed is something about which liberal theorists have been understandably divided. Since consent is bound up with notions of human agency, freedom, and the capacity of individuals to engage in intentional actions, consent is very much a "cluster concept" and like all such concepts, its meaning will depend upon how "the broader conceptual system within which it is implicated" is elaborated.¹⁴

A voluntaristic account of consent is the most difficult to imagine, since it requires that political arrangements in some meaningful sense reflect the individual's *will*. So far as I know, the only major effort by a liberal thinker to normatively theorize political life from this standpoint is to be found in the recent work of Richard Flathman. Arguing that freedom presupposes that we can make meaningful distinctions between "voluntary action and compelled, coerced, or manipulated movement or behavior," he reconfigures consent as a claim about the good of voluntarism. "Voluntary' in this regard means both that the actions taken are not coerced or compelled by other agents or agencies and that they occur because of the choices and decisions of the individuals whose conduct it is, because of desires and interests, beliefs, values and reasons that are in some sense the individual's own."¹⁵ Flathman's point reminds us not only of why liberals embrace individuality but why they view

voluntary associations more favorably than ascriptive ones and divided selves more favorably than unitary ones.

The self, Michael Walzer writes, “answers to many names, defining itself now in terms of family, nation, religion, gender, political commitment, and so on. It identifies itself with different histories, traditions, rituals, and, above all, with different groups of people, incorporated, as it were, into a wider selfhood.”¹⁶ The self, on these readings, is not *an* identity but a process of self-making that occurs, in part, through a negotiation of its existing affiliations and additional aspirations for itself. Self-criticism is one way in which the self negotiates its plurality. Political criticism is another and aims at identifying the power of others to constrain these possibilities. For culturists (and some liberals), these are unsettling observations. They effectively assert that identity categories may themselves be artifacts of assigned positions and asymmetries of power. Liberal interrogations encourage efforts to determine when this is the case. Not surprisingly, the culturist seeks to replace them with other criteria for judging the social order.

In any justificatory strategy, it is always a matter of some importance to determine how it calls forth the *we* that is expected to be persuaded by its more substantive conclusions. No justification is “ours” until we have persuaded others so that they can become everyone’s. There is no “I” immune from criticism, no “we” without mutual interrogation. While stated in the more osmotic language of foundational reasoning, the conditions defining the original position in John Rawls’s contract theory promote the same point. In arguing from the original position, he writes, “justification includes everything that we would say – you and I – when we set up justice as fairness and reflect why we proceed in one way rather than another.”¹⁷ Rawls labels this the “condition of publicity.” By this he means to exclude conceptions of justice that depend upon ideological delusions or illusions that foreclose the possibility of mutual agreement and “mutual recognition.”¹⁸ Working within the social-contract tradition, Rawls in effect says that people cannot be asked to enter into an agreement about the principles that will govern their life together unless they have full knowledge of the commitments that those principles will demand of them. The principle of publicity means that the basic structure of the political order “should stand up to public scrutiny” so that it does not “depend on historically accidental or established delusions, or other mistaken beliefs resting on the deceptive appearances of institutions that mislead us as to how they work.”¹⁹ Transparency or publicity aims to defeat institutional opacity. Success on this score is a chief

moment in the public conception of the autonomous individual.²⁰

When undertaken from the standpoint of 'everyman,' liberal political criticism aims to make what was previously opaque transparent. Transparency, Jeremy Waldron writes, means that the social order "must be one that can be justified to the people who live under it. . . . Society should be a *transparent* order, in the sense that its workings and principles should be well-known and available for public apprehension and scrutiny. People should know and understand the reasons for the basic distribution of wealth, power, authority, and freedom. Society should not be shrouded in mystery, and its workings should not have to depend on mythology, mystification, or a 'noble lie.'"²¹

As a justificatory standard and as a desired state of affairs, transparency is, of course, elusive. Since institutions and practices can mislead in a variety of ways, it is unrealistic to imagine that their opacity can ever be overcome once and for all. Participants in some practice or institution rarely can see all of the implications of their participation. I often remind my students that many of their activities such as working for a wage or getting married reproduce the institutions of capitalism and marriage, respectively. Their failure to notice this is an innocent one but one for which capitalists and social conservatives are arguably grateful. One of the functions of political criticism, however, is precisely to expand the causal context in which people form judgments about what they have done or what has been done to them. Incomplete understandings of the by-products of their actions, self-deception, ideological distortions, psychological and cultural conditioning: all can affect how clearly participants in a practice see its meaning. All of this points to the problematic relationship between knowledge and power. The more opaque the circumstances in which individuals must willy-nilly act, the more the choices underwriting their actions are impaired. The norms that belong to some social or cultural practice always enable and disable.

Conceived both as a justificatory standard and as a desirable state of affairs, transparency is the easy ally of liberal individualism. The argument that the social order should be transparent presupposes that it is in the interest of individuals for it to be so. Anything that impairs their self-understanding or their knowledge of the constraints that restrict their range of action weakens their capacity for choice. A self-justifying society, one concerned with the legitimacy of its collective decisions and the consequences of various ways of life for the life of its members, can hardly be anything other

than a society in which individuals are at least presented with the opportunity to become self-justifying as well. For individuals to increase control over their lives, they will also have to gain some greater control over their social world.

A chief way in which the idea of culture appears in liberalism conceived as a strategy of justification is in the advice that care should be taken to encourage a culture that promotes interrogation of the social order. The interrogation of social and political power is done by individuals and always goes better, as J. S. Mill constantly insisted, when it becomes a social practice and the means for its practice are kept close at hand. Transparency, including how one relates to their own beliefs, is a product of our disagreements. Membership in a liberal culture means being a critic and being among those criticized. Transparency is carried along by a culture of complaints and grievances.

Culturism

There are several ways in which one might juxtapose liberalism and culturism. Moving from the specific to the more abstract, one could begin with any number of specific controversies that revolve around the question of how far a liberal order can or should go in accommodating cultural diversity. I have in mind such things as the relief sought by Amish parents in America from public school laws requiring that children attend school through the age of sixteen, relief granted by the United States Supreme Court in the case of *Wisconsin v. Yoder*. Similar issues about cultural accommodation surround the effort by some Sikhs who have sought and in some cases won an exemption from laws banning weapons in public places so that they might carry a ceremonial dagger with religious significance. More famous is the *l'affaire du foulard* of 1989 when French officials expelled three young girls from school for wearing the traditional Muslim head scarf, or chador.²²

While these issues often have their origins in the specific demands of some members of a particular culture so that they end up being conceived as cases in search of a judicial ruling, they quite quickly and inevitably require both liberals and culturists to consider the principles that should be controlling in such judgements. Liberalism, for example, can easily endorse the state granting some exceptions to its laws; it frequently does so. Culturists, however, might very well reject this strategy of granting exceptions insofar as it reinforces the ruling liberal principles, e.g., tolerance, equal

treatment, that give rise to the need for them.

At the most abstract level, we are then confronted with a choice, Charles Taylor argues, between liberal politics of equal dignity and a multiculturalist politics of unique identity:

the modern notion of identity has given rise to a politics of difference. . . . *Everyone* should be recognized for his or her unique identity. But recognition here means something else. With the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else. For one, the principle of equal respect requires that we treat people in a difference-blind fashion. The fundamental intuition that humans command this respect focuses on what is the same in all. For the other, we have to recognize and even foster particularity.²³

Culturists often map their quarrels with liberalism on the terrain set out by Taylor's distinction between two versions of the politics of recognition. Various terms "the politics of recognition," "the politics of difference," "multicultural citizenship," a large and growing literature now exists that attempts to diminish, correct, or revise liberal values in light of "the claims of culture."²⁴ Taylor's argument that culture itself generates normative claims that merit recognition is central to these developments.

Restricting my comments to the implications of culturism for political criticism arguably misses much that is important in this literature. At the very least, culturism has reaffirmed the social constructivist's claim that social rules and behaviors often take on a life of their own and become constitutive not only of what we are allowed to *do* but of whom we are allowed to *be*. The most relevant point of constructivism to the politics of culture is its location of the self in a web of power relations. If the formation of the self takes place in response to the pressures and normative meanings provided by its culture, society, practices, and institutions, the individual is confronted with the task of balancing, endorsing, accepting, rejecting, and negotiating their place in these multiple and different locations. Not everyone will take up these tasks. The identity of those who do so is not a thing but a critical activity. Culturists, however, make this task more difficult. That difficulty can be traced

to their tendency to cast the idea of culture at a very abstract level where unwelcome attributes are drained off. *Abstraction* is a key strategy for privileging culture so that it is given greater priority than the liberal values of transparency and individualism.

We can see the strategy of abstraction at work in Charles Taylor's conception of culture as a locus of normative values that are "undecomposable" into individual goods, e.g., solidarity, cultural identity. "If these things are goods, then *other things being equal* so is the culture that makes them possible. If I want to maximize these goods, then I must want to preserve and strengthen this culture. But the culture as a good, or more cautiously, as the locus of some goods (*for there might be much that is reprehensible as well*) is not an individual good. . . . The idea that the culture is only valuable instrumentally in this kind of case rests on a confusion."²⁵ As numerous writers have noted, Taylor effectively looks at cultures in a holistic way that often overrides concern with how individuals position and reposition themselves in relationship to a culture's practices.

The drive to abstraction in Taylor's thought is also evident when he takes up the notion of linguistic communities as being a culture in which self only exists as part of a "web of interlocutors."²⁶ That language plays an important role in the discursive formation of one's identity is not an issue. It is easy to concede the point. More contestable is the way in which phrases such as "web of interlocutors" flatten out what is going on in the conversations that are part of cultural life. "From the general principle," Seyla Benhabib objects, "that all human identities are linguistically constructed, no argument can be derived about *which* webs of interlocution should be normatively privileged, and under *which* circumstances and *by whom*."²⁷ Any effort to answer Benhabib's questions would require interrogating how and why some discursively formed identities prevail while others lose. Sharp questions about winners and losers reference the fate of individual members of a culture. Yet Taylor's earlier insistence that culture has an intrinsic worth that cannot be judged in terms of its effects upon individual well-being blocks or, at the very least, discourages such critical interrogations. The category of an "undecomposable" cultural good in this context does important justificatory work by inviting an understanding of culture as "one for all, and all for one." When the culturist talks (frequently) about how cultures enable some possibilities and foreclose others (infrequently), he or she is likely to assign this sorting to culture as an ontological category rather than to the competing narratives of cultural members or

struggles over how to distribute cultural symbols.

Will Kymlicka similarly deploys a strategy of abstraction to argue for the intrinsic value of culture. He accomplishes this by drawing a distinction between a culture's "structure" and its "character." This permits him to repeat Taylor's treatment of culture as a settled singularity, marginalizing the lived plurality of cultures. Since he presents his work as an effort to develop a liberal theory of multiculturalism, Kymlicka starts out on a liberal note. His writings frequently discuss how cultures can oppress some of their members. This explains the restrictions attached to his argument for extending group rights to certain minority cultures. Group rights should not prevent cultural members from having a right to exit nor should they restrict "the right of group members to question and revise traditional authorities and practices."

Since this position is largely indistinguishable from liberal or democratic accounts of how much freedom of association members of a culture should enjoy, Kymlicka needs an addition in order to reestablish the priority of culture as a good in itself. He accomplishes this by arguing that we need to "distinguish the existence of a culture from its 'character' at any given moment." Cultural members should enjoy freedom of choice, but the value of culture itself is independent of this individual guarantee. We should, he argues, be concerned

with the fate of cultural structures, not because they have some moral status of their own, but because it's only through having a rich and secure cultural structure that people can become aware, in a vivid way, of the options available to them, and intelligently examine their value. . . . A *societal* culture. . . provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres. Cultural membership provides us with an intelligible context of choice, and a secure sense of identity and belonging, that we call upon in confronting questions about personal values and projects.²⁸

Kymlicka's concept of a societal culture is fashioned out of a sharp disjunction between subjective and objective criteria for reading a culture's meaning. This is most evident in his use of territory and language to distinguish between the culture of national minorities,

on the one hand, and the culture of ethnic groups, on the other. Societal culture is described using similar objective and holistic criteria. The more subjective disagreements among a culture's members or the ways in which power is used to distribute identity are marginalized by being assigned to its "character." As James Johnson observes, "It is fairly easy to respect culture on the account Kymlicka gives simply because he so thoroughly de-politicizes it."²⁹

Among culturists, Parekh may be the most keen to privilege cultural practices even or especially when they disable liberal notions of equality, autonomy, or the idea that people should be free to challenge their social roles. To protect cultural practices from such liberal interrogations, Parekh needs some strategy for dismissing the liberal complaint that some cultural identities may be enforced or assigned rather than simply register a valued way of being one sort of self rather than another. The key to this strategy is an insistence upon *not* seeing a culture as a voluntary association, thereby diminishing the relevance of individual choice.

In a response to Susan Okin's argument that "multiculturalism is bad for women," he allows that some women may be "indoctrinated" or even "brainwashed" to accept cultural practices that discriminate against them. On the other hand, he is, I think, right to criticize Okin for too quickly dismissing cultural practices that she finds offensive as instances of "false consciousness." So it is a matter of some interest to know whether individuals embrace or endorse a particular cultural identity and when they might, if conditions permitted, reject it.

There is the additional tension between the identity embraced by group members and the identity assigned them by group opponents. "You say you are a Choctaw, but do the Choctaws say so? The Catholics claim you, but do you claim them? The Apartheid government declared you to be colored, whether you did or not."³⁰ This conflict between chosen identities and assigned identities describes a key feature of the *politics of culture*. If cultural identity is an important good, its formation, how it is distributed, and by whose authority become matters for political inquiry and criticism. This, I worry, is exactly what the culturist seeks to avoid.

While Parekh, in his criticism of Okin, encourages us to believe that the authenticity of cultural membership is a genuine problem, addressing this problem is next to impossible within the terms of his discussion of what culture means. In *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, he starts out by contrasting the thin diversity endorsed by liberal

individualism with the “deeper cultural diversity” in which cultures themselves are conceived of as “self-determining collective subjects.” The problem with liberalism is that it turns collectives into voluntary associations and dismisses “the cultural aspirations of such communities as the indigenous peoples, national minorities, subnational groups, and the immigrants.” He is especially keen to insist that “A cultural community performs a role in human life that a voluntary association cannot. It gives its members a sense of rootedness, existential stability, the feeling of belonging to an ongoing community of ancient and misty origins, and ease of communication. And it does all this *only because* it is not a conscious human creation and one’s membership in it is neither a matter of choice nor can be easily terminated by oneself or others.”³¹ The contrast between community (non-voluntarism) and association (voluntarism) overlays Taylor’s distinction between social goods and individual (decomposable) goods.

In *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, Parekh considers alternative liberal arguments for valuing culture. He notes Joseph Raz’s instrumental defense of culture as important to people’s sense of secure belonging. It is the instrumentalism of this formulation to which he then objects. Parekh declines to join liberals in inviting cultural members to consider when they have “rational and valid” reasons for valuing their culture.

This is one way of relating to one’s culture but not the only one. For some people their culture is a trust to be cherished, for others an inheritance to be enjoyed and suitably adjusted to changing circumstances, for yet others too constitutive of their identity to permit the kind of detachment that Raz’s view requires. . . . Furthermore, to say that one should love one’s culture for the right reasons or that one’s love should be rational and valid implies that one’s relation to one’s culture is external and contingent and that one’s love of it is conditional, a reward for its good points. To love a culture (or anything or any one) for the good in it is to love the latter not the culture itself, and entails the untenable view that one could or even should transfer one’s love to another if that seemed better.³²

This is a very odd comment. It effectively equates the unqualified commitment to another that is a mark of personal intimacy (and why should even *that* be unqualified?) with a person’s love of an

abstraction, a culture that might, among other things, include relations with others who mistrust and dislike me. Perhaps, it is the very oddity of the equation that explains Parekh's inability to imagine someone falling out of love.

Lastly I return to the culturist's starting point; namely, the argument for extending presumptive respect to cultures. The principle starts out as an appeal to the principle, shared by many liberals, that every human being is entitled to equal respect. A culturist spin is applied to the principle by transferring the respect to which the individual is entitled to culture itself. James Tully's statement is fairly typical: "the social basis of this threshold sense of self-respect is that others recognize the values of one's activities and goals. . . . Since what a person says and does and the plans he or she formulates and revises are partly characterized by his or her cultural identity, the condition of self-respect is met only in a society in which the cultures of all members are recognized and affirmed by others, both by those who do and those who do not share these cultures."³³ Tully asks a great deal of individuals insofar as he expects that those who are in most ways unlike will nonetheless affirm the value of beliefs, ways of life, dietary habits, religious rituals that appear strange to those on the outside. In fact, almost everything we know about how members of a culture police the borders separating them from other cultures argues for considerable pessimism about this possibility.³⁴

My more limited purpose, however, is to call attention to how his comments also discourage criticism of cultures either in the name of greater transparency or individual agency. Tully's standard of equal recognition displaces the notion that everyone is entitled to equal treatment *regardless of ascribed characteristics* by making "recognition and affirmation" of those characteristics markers of our respect for others. Rather than interrogating culture, the culturist assigns us the fairly daunting task of recognizing and respecting cultural practices ranging from dietary habits to religious beliefs with which we cannot be expected to identify. The very fact that the worth of a way of life is a function of shared experiences means that others who have not had those experiences will not be able to judge their worth in the same way. To a liberal, this argues against making our respect for others conditional upon our willingness to recognize and affirm the value of their differences. The culturist, on the other hand, uses such facts about the differences among cultures to argue that the differences themselves are entitled to equal respect, i.e., should have normative force for the actions of others. In this case, it is clear that this means deferring to rather than interrogating

culture.

Azar Nafisi, Reading *Lolita* in Tehran

Azar Nafisi is a Professor of English literature. She left Iran at the age of thirteen and was educated in the West, earning her graduate degree from the University of Oklahoma. In 1979, she returned home to Iran to become part of the English faculty at the University of Tehran. After fifteen difficult and contentious years culminating in her refusal to continue wearing the veil on campus and in her classes, one of many conflicts with her employers at the University of Tehran and later at Allameh University, she resigned her last post under pressure.

It was ironic that Mr. Bahri, the defender of the faith, described the veil as a piece of cloth. I had to remind him that we had to have more respect for that “piece of cloth” than to force it on reluctant people. . . . A stern ayatollah, a blind and improbable philosopher-king, had decided to impose his dream on a country and to re-create us in his own myopic vision. So he had formulated an ideal of me as a Muslim woman, as a Muslim woman teacher, and wanted me to look, and in short live according to that ideal. Laleh and I, in refusing to accept that ideal, were taking not a political stance, but an existential one. No, I could tell Mr. Bahri, it was not that piece of cloth that I rejected, it was the transformation being imposed upon me that made me look in the mirror and hate the stranger I had become.³⁵

Cut off from access to students through a University appointment, she invited seven of her best and most committed female graduate students to come together as a class in her home every Thursday morning to discuss some of the greatest works of Western literature: *Lolita*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*. This secret class of women, inviting men would have been too dangerous, met for almost two years. Nafisi tells the story of their time together against the background of the Iranian government’s efforts to use Islam to consolidate its power. It is, as her subtitle records, “*A Memoir in Books*.”

Nafisi’s book can and should be read in any number of ways. At one level, it is a sympathetic and deeply engaging recounting of the

efforts by her young Iranian students to manage the conflicts arising out of the demands placed upon them in the new Iran, an Iran in which they are widely treated as inferior to men. It is also about the power of literature to transform lives by leading individuals, Henry James's words, to enjoy "the aggression of infinite modes of being." "Readers," Nabokov's words, "are born free and they ought to remain free." In one of many interviews that she has given, Nafisi summarized the lessons of those Thursday morning classes: "Austen told us that a woman has the right to choose the man she wants to marry, against all authority. Nabokov taught us that people have a right to retrieve the reality totalitarian mindsets have taken away from them. That is why works of imagination, especially fiction, have become so vital today in Iran. . . . Americans gifts to us have been *Lolita* and *Gatsby*."³⁶

Above all, it is the work of Nabokov's *Lolita* that powers Nafisi's memoir. She leads her students (did they find their own way?) to see that Humbert's mocking criticisms of *Lolita*, even giving her a new name, are efforts to re-create her according to his fantasies and imagination. She is his victim; the crime is identity theft. "The desperate truth of *Lolita's* story is *not* the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but *the confiscation of one individual's life by another*." For Nafisi, her students are similarly oppressed by a regime that seeks "to make their personal identities and histories irrelevant. They were never free of the regime's definition of them as Muslim women."³⁷

At the end of Nafisi's book, she and most of her students have left Iran; Nafisi for Johns Hopkins University in the United States, Nassrin for England, Mitra to Canada, Azin starting over in California, Yassi was admitted to Rice University in Texas, Nima and Manna continue on in Iran. One might, I suppose, say of those who left Iran that they exercised their right of exit, a right often used by both liberals and culturists to distinguish between oppressive and non-oppressive groups. It is an odd test. Aside from the difficulty of choosing to be free in this way, the test scores a life's success by undercounting its losses. "But for you, at least, wearing the veil is natural; it's your religion, your choice." "My choice," said Mahshid with a laugh. "What else do I have but my religion, and if I lose that . . ."³⁸

Mashid's comment expresses a frustration with identity politics. Nafisi's students do not escape identity categories – religion, gender, culture – but they cannot be reduced to them. Confronted with the honesty of their imaginations through literature, they (we)

come to recognize their lives as a project. Nafisi's book helps us to see the relationships and interactions with others that shape identity. In this sense, the culturist is correct to treat culture as something that distributes important social and individual goods – solidarity and personal identity. The liberal seems to me equally correct to ask who does the distributing and are some substantially more powerful than others to affect the process.

Nafisi's book, then, is about the *politics of culture*. There is an obvious and less obvious way in which this is true. Because it is about life in Iran after the Islamic Revolution, many of the conflicts recorded in the book are a result of the *politicization* of culture by elites ambitious to attain power and legitimize their position. On this reading, Nafisi's book might be judged as most successful as a complaint about political not cultural oppression. Privileging cultures and cultural identity is not the problem. The problem is the hijacking of cultural symbols and practices by an unaccountable government. This seems to me true and potentially misleading. It is true about the ways in which a culture's meanings, e.g., the veil, the burqa, can be exploited by some (usually men) to control and coerce others (usually women). The oppression is the same whether it is the Shah of Iran's policy of the mandatory deveiling of Muslim women or their mandatory revealing by the next regime. It would be a mistake, however, to read Nafisi's complaints about the politicization of culture as exhausting the ways in which cultural identity is a problem for politics. There is more to it. Identity formation is about knowledge and power. Knowledge of the social order, both its limits and possibilities, matters. Somewhere between the constraints of social practices, institutions, and culture and the individuals freedom and power to respond, reject, and rearrange those constraints is where personal identity takes shape.

The culturists's mistake is to speak about identity categories as though they are clear and fixed. Ambivalence and ambiguity are dissolved into clear categories. One can say these things; Nafisi's students, however, could not live them. Each in her separate way is confronted with the task of discovering and constructing an identity. This assignment was not handed out in class. It was and is work done in response to the conflicts arising out of the expectations that they have for themselves and the expectations that others – parents, boyfriends, teachers, censors, and the police – have for them. In a culture that values self-justification and the right to demand a justification for why things should be arranged in such a way to create such pressures, self-making could hardly be considered easy. It could approximate honesty. In Nafisi's Iran, this

was one choice or way of being in the world that culture and politics conspired to prevent. Becoming a good liar is one of the 'identities' that begins to make sense. Nassrin, one of the students, lied to her father so as to cover her time spent in the class. "She lived in so many parallel worlds: the so-called real world of her family, work and society; the secret world of our class and her young man; and the world she had created out of her lies."³⁹

Through their study of literature, Nafisi's students redefine or, more accurately, uncover the politics of culture. There is the open problem of how to deal with the government's effort to force an identity upon them in the name of Islam. This gives rise to familiar struggles against censorship.

One incident, partly amusing, mostly disturbing, occurs when Nafisi, when she was still teaching at the University, invites some of her more militant students to put *The Great Gatsby* on trial. The indictment, as recounted by Nafisi, is as clumsy as any offered in an ideological trial. Gatsby's materialism, adultery, his carelessness, the attraction of Daisy's money for him are odes to Western decadence. Nafisi, in contrast, articulates a compelling view of Gatsby as a dreamer who is doomed by the honesty of his own imagination, his dream is the wish that he can neither have nor abandon.

It is, however, two comments of Nafisi's students in defense of the novel that speak against the project of conceiving culture as a thing, as "actually evolved." Argues one student: "Our dear prosecutor has committed the fallacy of getting too close to the amusement park. . . . He can no longer distinguish fiction from reality. . . . He leaves no space, no breathing room, between the two worlds. He has demonstrated his own weakness: an inability to read a novel on its own terms." But Nafisi reports that another student observes quietly: "This is an amazing book. . . . It teaches you to value your dreams but to be wary of them also, *to look for integrity in unusual places.*"⁴⁰ Nafisi and her students are remarking on the ways in which choices can be suppressed and alternatives unconsidered. Literature exposes both cover-ups. Novels create "counter-realities" that restore the capacity to become an agent. It is not so much that her students lose themselves in literature. Rather it is how they find a self of their own making.

The interrogation of cultures in the name of the liberal values of transparency and individualism requires overriding culturism's presumptive principle of according all cultures equal respect. That

principle, as noted earlier, starts out as a fairly standard liberal claim that individuals deserve equal respect, at least as regards their standing in the political order. Charles Taylor then carries this forward in two steps. First, we should respect “the potential for forming and defining one’s own identity, as an individual, and also as a culture.” And this requires a next step of according “equal respect to actually evolved cultures.” Aside from, again, the drive to abstraction and holistic concepts (“actually evolved cultures”), Taylor’s defense of the principle of presumptive respect depends upon our willingness to treat personal identity and cultural identity as belonging to the same sort of formative process. The only way to do this is to concede his claim that culture is an “undecomposable” good so that the good of the culture *is* the individual’s good.

Looked at either from the perspective of the culture or one of its members, you get two for one – culture and identity, ‘the unity of the knower and the known.’ Or, in Taylor’s admiring quotation of Rousseau, “a society with a common purpose, one in which there is a “we” that is an ‘I’, and an ‘I’ that is a ‘we’.”⁴¹ Parekh argues that liberals fail to take cultural diversity seriously because they take individual diversity too seriously. The success of this formula – the culture or the individual, take your pick – depends upon a willingness to treat the diversity that shows up in the differences *between* cultures as being fundamentally more important than the diversity *within* a culture. This, in turn, requires jumping over the concrete relationships and special attachments of everyday life to get to the abstract claims made in the name of cultures as sociological wholes.

Literature in Nafisi’s telling puts the lie to these notions of identity as a settled singularity. Her students lives cannot be fitted to a unified pattern, there is no single identity that answers to the question ‘who is she.’

Nor should Nafisi’s book be read as a rejection of culture. Rather it is about pluralizing culture, so as to create a place where oppositions “do not need to eliminate each other in order to exist.”⁴² She would, I think, agree with Andrea Baumeister’s warning about culturism:

A preoccupation with cultural identity may not only restrict the freedom of future generations, but may also prove oppressive vis-à-vis existing group members. Even if individual rights are respected a “politics of cultural survival” may lead to pressure being placed upon membership rather than a whole host of

alternative criteria which may shape her identity. After all, our cultural identity constitutes only one influence upon our conception of the good life. . . . our occupation, social status, and choice of neighborhood all contribute to our sense of self and conception of the good life.⁴³

None of us can be entirely free to manage those competing demands in any way that we choose; institutions and practices constrain what can be done and even what can be imagined. It is, however, one of liberalism's most important achievements to have problematized such arrangements by encouraging interrogation of them.⁴⁴

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Notes

¹ The unpleasantness we associate with interrogatories and, worse, interrogations partly arises out of our awareness of how they can be turned away from a concern with the wrong done and the wrongdoer to the end of providing one's client with the best possible representation, which does not rule out questions that aim to deceive and humiliate. Deception becomes "zealous advocacy." Held together in a vortex of accusations and denials, "Adversaries act for by acting against." See Arthur Isak Applbaum, *Ethics for Adversaries: The Morality of Roles in Public and Professional Life*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 108 and 4.

² This statement sets aside the issue of whether justificatory theories that deploy criteria such as "reasonable agreement" or "discursive rationality," John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas respectively, inappropriately disqualify some from participating in the quarrels. See John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

³ Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 49.

⁴ James Johnson, "Why Respect Culture?" *American Journal of Political Science*, 44, 3, July, 2000, pp. 405-418. Johnson argues that answers to his question typically depend upon de-politicizing culture. I have learned a lot from his analysis of how this occurs.

⁵ Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz, "National Self-Determination," *Journal of Philosophy*, 87, 9, September, 1990, pp.

439-461, on p. 447.

6 I borrow the point from Johnson, “Why Respect Culture?”

7 Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, p. 16.

8 Will Kymlicka is the author of numerous books on multiculturalism. He is, perhaps, best known for arguing that under certain conditions national minorities are entitled to group rights. I am working mainly from *Multicultural Citizenship*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995. Also see *The Rights of Minority Cultures*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

9 Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, New York, Random House, 2003.

10 See Judith N. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, Nancy Rosenblum, ed., Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 21-38. For a useful and critical discussion of Rawls and other versions of neo-Kantian liberalism, see Ian Shapiro, *Political Criticism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990.

11 For a fascinating discussion of how late eighteenth century conservative thought attempted to win the cultural wars over fashion and much else in an effort to “hide” the social order, see Don Herzog, *Poisoning The Minds of The Lower Orders*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1998.

12 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Michael Oakeshott, ed., New York, Collier Books, 1962, p. 120. Despite Hobbes’s undeniable preference for a strong even absolutist state, numerous features of his thought anticipate and vigorously defend positions that have become importantly identified with liberalism. These certainly include his insistence that the “power of the mighty” has no other foundation than the “opinion and belief of the people” and his resolutely instrumental view of the state. At a deeper level, both Hobbes’s skepticism and his contractarianism support the sort of demand for transparency that is a core feature of liberal political criticism. For these points, see, respectively, Richard E. Flathman, *Thomas Hobbes: Skepticism, Individuality and Chastened Politics*, Newbury Park, CA, Sage Publications, 1993, and Jeremy J. Waldron, “Hobbes and The Principle of Publicity” in Bonnie Honig and David R. Mapel, eds., *Skepticism, Individuality and Freedom*, Minneapolis, MN, 2003, pp. 180 – 211.

- 13** John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Peter Laslett, ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1962, p. 374.
- 14** William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2d ed., 1983, p. 14.
- 15** Richard E. Flathman, *Willful Liberalism*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, 1992, pp. 123 and 9. For more recent statements of what he means by willful liberalism see, *Reflections of A Would-Be Anarchist*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998 and *Freedom and Its Conditions*, New York, Routledge, 2003. I am pretty sure that Flathman would disagree with some of my appropriation of his argument. Most generally, one imagines him objecting that the very effort to persuade one another so as to realize a mutually intelligible “we” undermines rather than promotes the liberal values of individuality and plurality. See *Willful Liberalism*, pp. 168-172.
- 16** Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1994, p. 85.
- 17** John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 67.
- 18** John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. 581-582.
- 19** Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 68.
- 20** As is well known, Rawls’s theory locates transparency in a conception of public reason that establishes standards for how individuals should debate or deliberate about constitutional essentials. The activity is rational and non-voluntaristic. Flathman has objected to various features of the Rawlsian project insofar as the “frequent insistence on the rational, reasonable, mutually intelligible character of action itself serves to make voluntary conduct vulnerable to control and diminution” (*Willful Liberalism*, p. 128). There is a suggestion (conviction?) in his writings that the two features, transparency and individualism, that I have singled out as characteristic of liberal interrogations can only achieve a minimal fit. His arguments suggest that the more we conclude that the state has satisfied our demands for transparency, the more “we risk adding the force of our thinking and acting to the authority and power of the state” (*Reflections of A Would-Be Anarchist*, p. 158). A

quick response to his point would be a reminder that institutions and practices mislead in so many ways that mutual intelligibility seems the least of our problems. I am also arguing that transparency is more likely to be the offspring of our disagreements than our agreements. If I am right about this, no real conflict may exist between my position and Flathman's insistence that pluralism and the self's opacity enhance opportunities for voluntary conduct.

²¹ Jeremy Waldron, "The Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism," *Liberal Rights*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 57-58.

²² The issue is again national news in France. A recent government commission has recommended that Muslim school girls be banned from wearing the hijab (headscarf) in state schools. Other religious symbols, large crosses, are also to be banned. In a televised speech, President Chirac said, "I consider that the wearing of dress or symbols which conspicuously show religious affiliation should be banned."

²³ Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, Amy Gutmann, ed., Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 38 and 43.

²⁴ The literature is far too large to list. For balanced discussions, see Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000; Andrea T. Baumeister, *Liberalism and the "Politics of Difference"*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2000. For a sharp attack upon those I am calling culturists, see Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2001.

²⁵ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 137; cited by Johnson, "Why Respect Culture?" p. 407.

²⁶ See Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture*, pp. 55-57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁸ For the first part of this quotation, see Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, pp. 165-166. The second part can be found in *Multicultural Citizenship*, pp. 76 and 105. I am following James Johnson here.

- 29** Johnson, "Why Respect Culture?" p. 416.
- 30** Martha Minow, *Not Only for Myself*, New York, New Press, 1997, p. 40.
- 31** Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, p. 62.
- 32** Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, pp. 98-99.
- 33** James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 190.
- 34** Those intoxicated with such possibilities might be sobered by starting with Jacob T. Levy, *The Multiculturalism of Fear*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 35** Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p. 165.
- 36** This is from an interview with *The Atlantic online*, September 10, 2003, p. 11; <http://www.theatlantic.com/cgi-bin/send.cgi?page=http%3A//www.theatlantic.co>.
- 37** Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, pp. 33 and 28.
- 38** *Ibid.*, p. 327.
- 39** *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- 40** *Ibid.*, pp. 128 and 135, emphasis added.
- 41** Charles Taylor, "The Politics Of Recognition," pp. 42 and 50.
- 42** Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p. 268.
- 43** Baumeister, *The Politics of Difference*, p. 143.
- 44** Some will surely note that this paper says nothing about another strategy of justification that has become increasingly prominent in the multiculturalist literature. This is the strategy of immersion as opposed to abstraction. I am unprepared to discuss it at this time, but a good example of what I have in mind is Joseph Carens, *Culture, Citizenship, and Community*.