

Cultural identity and self-definition

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I

We have the ideals of universality of the Enlightenment and the claims of particularism of the Counter-Enlightenment. In its finest and most nuanced statements, as in the work of J.G. Herder, there is in the particularism of the Counter-Enlightenment no ethnocentric identification of a favorite people (*Favoritvolk*) but there is a firm recognition of the central significance of local attachments: a self-identity as a particular kind of cultural identity.

I hope that we can indeed have it both ways and in my optimistic moments I think that it is just barely possible that we can, that is to say, we can consistently keep the universalistic ideals of the Enlightenment while accepting the Counter-Enlightenment insight. We can be universalists while still stressing the importance of recognizing ourselves as particular sorts of persons, the bearers of a particular culture and tradition.

The Enlightenment, and Marxism as one of its heirs, has seen very well indeed how tradition and local attachments fetter us. It took, as a way of counterbalancing that, Herder to show us the importance of local attachments in enabling us to find significance in our lives and to sustain that sense of significance. He showed us how we could have that without falling into cultural chauvinism.¹

Herder acknowledged – indeed passionately acknowledged – the extensive diversity of these different forms of life. And indeed it is evident that there is such diversity, but I shall not follow him in his relativistic claims about these forms of life being equally

valid and all being incommensurable. It is one thing to see, as Herder did very well indeed, that cultural comparisons were typically utterly ethnocentric and that it is very unclear whether we have, or even can come to have, any genuine Archimedean point to make such evaluative comparisons and it is another thing again to say all forms of life with their distinctive belief-systems are both incommensurable and equally valid.² (It is not clear how, if they are really incommensurable, we could coherently say that they are all equally valid or not equally valid for with incommensurability we can have no basis for comparison. Still, if Herder is right, we can have no grounds for the assertion of the superiority of one way of living over another.)

I think this relativism, in rightly resisting the absolutism of both the religious sort and of the Enlightenment sort, has pushed things too far in the other direction. It is deeply counter-intuitive and not just anxiety-arousing to our cultural sensitivities to think that all forms of life are equally valid, are equally worth living.

While giving what I hope is true weight to local attachments, I explore to what extent Jürgen Habermas's conception of undistorted discourse will give us a non-question begging and non-ethnocentric basis for cultural comparison. I explore the extent to which it will give us some basis for a transcending of, without an utter setting aside, our own culture's (whatever it is) way of viewing things.

Habermas's account, no more than Peter Winch's or Hans-Georg Gadamer's, does not set cultural understandings aside, for it does not iconoclastically view them as the cultural muck of history or as a cluster of irrational prejudices. It is open to the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that *some* of the beliefs of one's inherited belief-system are cultural prejudices unsustainable in the light of a cool and informed investigation while it is not the case that all, or even most, should be, or even can be, set aside as dross.

There are, of course, radically different belief systems in the world rooted in different forms of life. When we reflect on this and reflect on the facts of our own socialization, it is not unnatural to wonder whether we are inescapably the victims of cultural imprisonment. And this can, of course, be unsettling.

Can we be in any position to appraise the legitimating beliefs

of our society or any society? In facing this, Habermas asks us to try to characterize a set of legitimating beliefs which would have to be accepted by any rational person in an ideal speech situation. For this to obtain our beliefs would have to be formed in conditions of absolutely free and unlimited critical discussion. Moreover, the participants to the discussion must all be capable of recognizing that they are freely consenting to the establishment of the institutions and practices that they would come to establish under conditions in which the only constraints on their consenting are those of the distinctive force of the better argument.³

Institutions are, or at least can be, in various ways coercive. If such potentially coercive institutions are rightly to be regarded as legitimate, it must be possible to conceive of their acceptance as authoritative and legitimately coercive under conditions of freedom and equality and, as well, of their acceptance by all those subsequently liable to be affected by the workings of these practices and institutions.

Where we have in force such stringent conditions of acceptance, we have an ideal speech situation and we have conditions of undistorted discourse. We can look at our received beliefs and culturally conditioned practices under that filter. The local attachments (if any) which would still remain attachments when viewed in such a light would no longer be *just* local attachments but would be genuinely legitimate beliefs. We have here a litmus paper test for the various idols of our tribe which will enable us to sort out what is ideology from what is not and will help us to assess whole societies. We will have, that is, something of a basis for assessing societies, e.g., we could come to have some handle on whether or not socialist societies are better than capitalist societies or whether it would be better to live in a traditional Sicilian peasant society or in a society like that of contemporary Iceland.

The way Herder conceptualizes things it would be impossible meaningfully to ask those questions. Habermas, by contrast, at least allows us to put such questions on the intellectual and moral agenda. We may continue to have ethnic loyalties but our self-definitions will no longer be in purely ethnic terms. Since they must be sustainable under ideal speech situations, they will be beliefs that all rational agents, starting with certain considered convictions, would still find it reasonable to hold under such

conditions. There are elements here of what are in both relativistic views and more universalistic views: we start with considered convictions but they also must be considered convictions which stand up to critical probing from a universalistic standpoint. (Here we have a holistic, anti-foundationalist model of what justification comes to.) They will be beliefs that will be sustainable from an external point of view in which each agent will appear just as one person among others. In this way we will have escaped the distorting effects of ideology and a conceptual imprisonment that in turn leads to the moral impoverishment of an ethnocentrism resulting from the making of our self-definitions in purely ethnic terms rather than in terms which are also universal, where we view ourselves as members of the family of humankind.

II

Is it so clear sailing for contemporary extensions of the Enlightenment view of the world? Again look at relativism. In acquiring a language we acquire a distinctive view of the world and a distinctive culture. The language and with it the conceptual scheme we acquire and the way we acquire it differs radically over cultural space and over historical time. Given that this is the way we acquire our beliefs how is it possible that we could even approximate being in an ideal speech situation where we could come to have some tolerably firm conception of what the good society itself would look like? Are not societies just too different? Even with full factual information dispassionately taken to heart do we have good reasons for believing that members of these very different cultures will come to have similar self-definitions or similar conceptions of the Good? Perhaps not? Perhaps we are just too different?

Still, there is the phenomenon of modernization and the steady de-mystification of the world. Moreover, where cultures come in contact the more modernizing ones win out. There are many explanations of that and it is not clear which ones provide the best explanations or even that there are any such 'best explanations'. Perhaps here we have something which is not only contested but essentially contested. One explanation (perhaps a

good candidate for the best explanation here) is that even with the trade offs — the evident losses along with the gains — over the long haul the move to modernization brings more gains than losses. It brings with it, or at least can bring with it, a greater human flourishing for more people. Moreover, while Habermas gives us a model for how people should conceptualize themselves and how they would reason in conditions making for emancipation where conditions of undistorted discourse obtain, rationally reconstructed versions of historical materialism, such as the one articulated by G.A. Cohen, provide a reasoned account of the causal mechanisms which bring about epochal change in a way that would spur modernity. Habermas gives us a model of the mind set of modernity and Marx a schema of a theory about how it could come about: a conception of developmental social change over epochs.

Herder was a powerful champion of the counter-Enlightenment but he, as Isaiah Berlin shows, was also deeply influenced by the Enlightenment. He was anything, vis-à-vis the Enlightenment, but a pure nay-sayer. I have tried to show how we need not take his relativism as the decisive word — as ‘the last word’ in a world where there can be no last words.

Still, a modern Herder might respond to the Habermasian turn that I have been articulating by remarking that all that about undistorted discourse to the contrary notwithstanding, it remains the case that genuine self-definition must be a cultural identification and a cultural identification cannot but be a distinct cultural identification in terms of some particular culture. What makes us something, what gives our lives meaning, are our distinctive cultural identities. If we lose them we lose ourselves.

This may be true. It is hard to tell now whether rootless human beings under conditions of modernity must continue to have local attachments. Perhaps we — or at least some of us — will give many of them up and become universal men and women. And perhaps that is a good thing? More likely we will become universal men and women who will also have our local attachments which will not stand in the way of our commitment to the ideals of the Enlightenment. And this, in terms of an enriched human flourishing, may be a still better thing.

There is no way of being human which is not *a* way of being human. A Frenchman, say, can – and indeed rightly so – be very much attached to all things French. He would have a sense of belongingness there, feel quite at odds with himself if he is a long way from that culture and he would find, speaking for himself, its intellectual and artistic traditions the most stimulating, without needing to think that things French are superior to all other ways of living and conceiving or without for a moment thinking they (or for that matter any other tradition) would, for anyone who is knowledgeable, reflective and sensitive, be the most stimulating no matter who they were. It is in France where he is most at home and that is where his deepest stimulation is to be found, but that need not add up to a belief in cultural superiority. It may be that all genuine self-definition is rooted in some distinctive cultural identity but that does not imply ethnocentrism, relativism or a rejection of the universalistic ideals of the Enlightenment.

I do not want to deny – as should be evident from what I have just said – that self-definition is culturally mediated. That that is so seems to me tolerably evident. What I am concerned to claim is that this particularism can take benign forms that are not ethnocentric and that such a particularism is perfectly compatible with the universalism modeled for us in Habermas's conception of undistorted discourse.

It is certainly a *logical* possibility that this model would have an empirical exemplification or instantiation. But that, of course, is not to say very much for it is also logically possible that I might sprint from Green Bay to Ottawa in ten minutes. But I also think that a reasonable approximation to such undistorted discourse in a form of life is an empirical possibility, as well, though its order of probability may not be very high. However, given its desirability, it is worth struggling to bring it about even if its order of probability is not particularly high. Here, as in many other situations, it is well to keep in mind Antonio Gramsci's conception of the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will.

Indeed it is true that part of what makes us human is that we

are a particular kind of human being, a member of a distinct community with its own sense of how it is appropriate to live and with its distinctive conceptual categories for interpreting and responding to the world. But, all that notwithstanding, there is such a thing as cultural borrowing, there is the possibility for people to forge new tablets and to come to well understand an alien culture and to see that some ways, perhaps all ways, that that culture has of viewing and responding to things are superior to one's own inherited ways of doing and viewing things. We human beings do not always uncritically go on doing the thing done. We all, and unavoidably, start with a certain determinate enculturation but this is not to be conceptually imprisoned for cultures change and we are sufficiently big brained animals to be able to rebuild the ship at sea and indeed, if need be, to replace it timber by timber until it is at least theoretically possible that not a single plank would remain just as it was and in its initial place.

We no doubt will, and not unreasonably so, have our local attachments but we can also transcend them without setting all of them, or perhaps even most of them, aside. But until we can so transcend them, we will not, under conditions of modernity, have obtained the adult maturity and emancipation that Habermas, as a child of the Enlightenment, so prizes.⁵ Still, having, and indeed having very firmly, our local attachments is perfectly compatible with accepting a set of legitimating beliefs which would have to be accepted by any rational person if she were in the position of being an ideal participant observer.

To be an ideal participant observer in an ideal speech situation one would have to know the causes of one's beliefs and principles of action and the consequences of acting on them and one would, as well, have to have taken the whole matter reflectively to heart. In addition, one would have had to form one's beliefs in conditions of absolutely free and unlimited critical discussion and the institutions and social practices one would reflectively accept under such conditions as authoritative one would accept where the only constraints on accepting them would be the force of the better deliberation.⁶

No one, of course, ever will actually be an ideal participant observer under ideal speech conditions, but some people, living

in certain cultural situations come more closely to approximate being such a person than others. Moreover, we can conceive of, and seek to bring into being, various empirically feasible situations which more closely approximate it. We all have our local attachments but the closer we come to this ideal speech situation with some of our local attachments intact the less they will fetter us and the closer we will come to human emancipation and to what the young Marx called a truly human society.

Notes

1. J.G. Herder, *Ideen zu Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, *Herders Werke*, in fünf Bänden, vierter Band (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1964); I. Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (London, England: The Hogarth Press, 1976).
2. The sort of conceptual distinctions that need to be made here get made in some fairly standard discussions of relativism. See J. Rachels (Ed.), *Understanding moral philosophy* (Encino, CA: Dickerson Publishing Co. Inc., 1976), pp. 3–25 and P. Taylor (Ed.), *Problems of moral philosophy* (Encino, CA: Dickerson Publishing Co. Inc., 1972), Chapter 2.
3. J. Habermas, *Knowledge and human interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), trans. J.J. Shapiro.
4. J. Habermas, *Communication and the evolution of society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), trans. T. McCarthy, pp. 1–68. See also T. McCarthy, *The critical theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1978), pp. 272–290.
5. J. Habermas, *Knowledge and human interests*.
6. It is here, of course, where a lot of criticism of Habermas has been directed. The claim here is that his position is thoroughly unrealistic. My concluding paragraph is meant to be a beginning of a response to that. See here, for example, Q. Skinner, "Habermas's reformation," *The New York Review of Books*, 29.13 (7 October 1982).