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NATIONALIST FUTURE: THE MALLEABILITY  
OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN A SMALL,  
GLOBALLY-ORIENTED STATE**

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# **BETWEEN POLITICAL FOUNDING AND POST-NATIONALIST FUTURE: THE MALLEABILITY OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN A SMALL, GLOBALLY- ORIENTED STATE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

For many critics of multiculturalism a chief weakness of the approach is that it augments a problematic tendency among cultural groups. Multiculturalism, they argue, either facilitates or actually rewards behaviour that tends to harden group boundaries and narrow definitions of cultural identity. As Arash Abizadeh put it, the desire to treat cultures like “bounded things” belies a latent essentialism in multiculturalist thinking that sets off a downward spiral of authoritarianism and discrimination (Abizadeh, 2004: 241; see also Abizadeh, 2002).

The paper argues that critics of multiculturalism like Abizadeh are wrong on two important scores. First, it is not clear that cultural groups will automatically narrow or harden their identity once the group identity is politically institutionalized. This point is illustrated through a discussion of political founding in the Republic of Ireland. Second, even if there are tendencies towards hardening of identity, they can be augmented both by multiculturalism and by efforts to exclude cultural or group identity from political debate. This second point is argued with reference to Judith Butler’s work on hate speech, where she explains how efforts to exclude harmful speech actually serves to authorize it in unexpected ways.

While the paper is intended as a partial defence of multiculturalism, in one regard it shares the concerns of critics like Abizadeh. Even if the hardening of identity is not an automatic outcome, our political structures certainly have a bearing on the capacity to renegotiate a cultural or group identity. A multicultural approach that rewards cultural longevity over cultural change is unlikely to serve a population well. Unfortunately, Abizadeh is correct that the focus in theorizing has often been on identifying a culture and delineating its rights, rather than supporting the processes of transformation and reinterpretation that keep it vibrant.<sup>1</sup> Yet the recent debate on multiculturalism has created a false choice: between institutionalizing a form of multiculturalism based on defined groups or rejecting group identity as dangerous for politics. Neither is a viable strategy, however. The only solution, the paper argues, is to reject this polarization and develop a new approach based on transformative

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<sup>1</sup> There are exceptions to this generalization. The work of Ayelet Shachar, for example, is premised on the idea that multiculturalism should involve “transformative accommodation.” Shachar recommends hybrid forms of accommodation that recognise the inevitable interaction between cultural groups, and that can harness those interactions to the cause of justice thereby creating “a catalyst for internal change” (2001: 118). Recent works by Anne Phillips (2007) and Tariq Modood (2007) also stress the need for group identity to be fluid and open, without abandoning requirements for multicultural politics.

multiculturalism—meaning a multiculturalism that recognizes and accommodates groups in ways that facilitate the dynamics of cultural and group identity change.

### HARDENING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

Multiculturalism today is not only an embattled public policy, it is undergoing a strange self-evisceration as a political theory. Prominent theorists are lining up to reject concepts usually thought to be at the heart of the approach. Witness Anne Phillips recent contribution entitled *Multiculturalism without Culture* (2007), or Geoffrey Brahm Levey's pronouncement that what is dead in multiculturalism is culturalism itself (2009). Group identity, especially when couched in cultural terms or aiming at its own self-preservation, is now viewed with scepticism by multiculturalists. Some of this scepticism is healthy and timely, but it risks leaving the approach theoretically incoherent. Even Phillips, with her provocative title, admits that it's not really possible to do multiculturalism without some attention to collective identity, because "People are cultural beings" (2007: 52).

At their most practical level the objections to multiculturalism are driven by concerns around fairness. There is concern that it tends to reinforce paternalistic patterns within traditional cultures, leaving women and other vulnerable group members at risk (Shachar, 2001; Okin, 1999). In a related objection, Brian Barry took issue with what he considered the fetishizing of tradition for tradition's sake, which defends all kinds of questionable conduct with a vacuous "This is the way we do things here" response (Barry, 2000: 279). More recently Christian Joppke has charged that the approach legitimates "unilaterality" where minorities can make unlimited demands on majority populations, without having to offer concessions in return (Joppke, 2004: 242). And David Goodhart suggests that the energy invested in multiculturalism tends to drain resources from more significant social justice struggles, leaving advocates of progressive politics torn between two causes, one focused on recognition the other on redistribution. Since the impact of recognition politics is to fracture the social solidarity required for a healthy democracy, it's ultimately a losing strategy (Goodhart, 2005) Nancy Fraser detects the same tension between recognition and redistribution but argues that neither multiculturalism nor solidarity lead to true justice because both serve to reify social categories (2005).

Aside from the concerns around fairness, theorists also raised conceptual concerns over multiculturalism. The chief concern was that the approach misrepresented culture or nationality by assuming they were "concrete" and could be identified and accommodated (Abizadeh, 2004: 241). Even worse it tended to repeat the "billiard-ball" fallacy,<sup>2</sup> where cultures were conceived as if they were discrete units with defined boundaries that encountered each other in finite ways like billiard balls knocking around on a table. This false "thing-ness" of culture could be explained in a

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the "billiard-ball" theory of culture, a term coined by anthropologist Eric Wolf to describe the misrepresentation of culture as discrete units. It was cited early on in the multiculturalism debate by James Tully to insist that this was precisely what multiculturalism *did not* endorse (1995: 10), but the approach has never been completely successful in avoiding this association.

number of ways. Abizadeh believes it is inherent in the dynamics of culturalism or nationalism to act as if one's group identity is complete and inviolable, because there are built-in incentives to harden group boundaries, essentialize identity, and augment authoritarian traditions (Abizadeh, 2004: 244). If so, any attempts to accommodate these forms of identity can only have perverse consequences.

Another possibility is that group identity is hardened as a result of attempts to institutionalize multiculturalism, because the approach requires us to identify groups and award special rights collectively, or to identifiable group members. This approach tends to reward certain kinds of group behaviours—maintaining traditional lifestyles, speaking indigenous languages, etc.—that have the effect of fixing a culture around certain established social markers (Weinstock, 2005: 241).

So at the heart of the conceptual concerns with multiculturalism is the potential for group identities to become hardened over time, compounding systems of repression that may already exist in paternalistic or authoritarian cultures. That multicultural policy can contribute to these developments seems to have been conceded by multiculturalists like Phillips and Levey. Even Will Kymlicka has recently acknowledged that multicultural policy may change the course of group identity (2009: 225). But while policy may inadvertently promote the hardening of cultural identities and group boundaries, what does this say about group identities themselves? In other words, a multiculturalist retreat from culturalism appears to confirm the view that group identities can be expected to harden around traditionalist forms, especially when they attain institutional authority.

But can we say this for certain? Do group identities (which will be here taken to suggest the concepts of culture, nation, or people) have a built-in drive towards essentialism? So that empowering a group's leadership, or recognizing claims about its cultural identity feeds into a undesirable process of hardening or narrowing of that identity? This is a strong claim, one that sees a great deal of power concentrated in the hands of group leadership, by virtue of their ability to speak for and direct the identity experience. The charge is that multiculturalism can compound the problem by augmenting that power. These claims against multiculturalism can therefore be expressed as follows:

Certain group identities (culture-nation/people) have a built-in tendency to narrow or harden in essentialist ways. I will call this the "hardening thesis".

Multiculturalism can exacerbate this tendency by rewarding traditionalism and augmenting the power of group leadership to speak for the group. I will call this the "exacerbation thesis".

In effect this paper will argue that the "exacerbation thesis" is true, while the "hardening thesis" is not. This may seem an unlikely finding, given that multicultural exacerbation appears to imply the initial hardening as a prerequisite. But the paper will argue that the dynamics of group identity are more complex than the hardening thesis suggests. Meanwhile certain versions of multiculturalism and certain multicultural critiques both respond to group identities in ways that promote hardening of

the identity. In other words, the effort to either recognize, or reject, cultural claims, may undermine the flexibility of group identity and self-understanding.

To approach this argument, the paper asks whether the “hardening thesis” is borne out in history. Since this is a strong claim concerning the inherent tendencies of certain forms of group identity, even one historical case that contradicts the position should cast doubt on the claim. The paper suggests that through an analysis of the Irish founding we can see that the “hardening thesis” does not adequately describe how group identity is developed and institutionalized politically. While Ireland is noted for its strong nationalist tradition, the Irish case reveals notable plasticity in the identity experience. Specifically, it reveals how ambiguous elements of group identity are arbitrated through processes of elite and popular interpretation. By looking at the role that the 1916 Proclamation of Independence plays in Irish identity, the paper argues that the power to formulate group identity remains distributed among a population.

Based on the experience of the Irish founding,<sup>3</sup> we learn that when it comes to articulating group identity, subsequent interpretation (of group claims, by group membership) is in many ways more powerful than original intent (expressed in group claims by group leadership). This means that we cannot easily accept the “hardening thesis” because the tendency to essentialize is not an adequate account of the dynamics of group identity, even politically institutionalized identity.

### **SPEAKING FOR THE GROUP: THE VAGARIES OF IRELAND’S IRREGULAR FOUNDING**

This section aims to put the “hardening thesis” to the test, by showing that even in the most classic form of political organization—the political founding—the institutionalization of group identity does not necessarily lead down a predestined path towards hardening or narrowing. Instead, because political institutions provide a new expression of group identity they simultaneously provide a locus for re-examining and reworking that identity along new lines. The Irish case provides a powerful example of this dynamic because for one thing it illustrates fairly spectacularly the retroactivity of founding as a political act. This in turn reveals that the real authority in the process remains not with the original founders but with those who inherit or adopt the founding as their own. In this way the Irish case also reveals the incompleteness of all foundings, which are driven to renew themselves in an effort to address internal tensions, another key factor in the Irish experience. These dynamics—of retroactivity, and political renewal—in what is taken to be a firm and fixed political form, reveal that hardening of group identity is not an easy matter,

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<sup>3</sup> This paper will occasionally use the term “Irish” to refer to what is properly the Republic of Ireland. This is done for ease of expression, following common practice, and is not intended to disregard or diminish the Irish identity associated with Northern Ireland. Nor is it intended to include Northern Ireland under the terms of the Irish founding. While the whole-island approach to founding may have been the interpretation adopted by some Irish at certain points in time, it is not the view of the author.

and that the contours of group identity ultimately remains in the hands of new generations.

For those not familiar with the Irish founding, a brief review is in order. This is not intended to be a complete history, and will focus on developments and factors with most relevance for this discussion. The first thing to know is that there really is no precise date on which the Irish founding occurred. A great many people look back to a small, short-lived uprising in Easter 1916, which included a Proclamation of Independence of the Irish Republic. But the path of historical developments both before and after those events is quite muddy.<sup>4</sup>

The background to the 1916 Rising is significant because Ireland had, at least on paper, already secured a certain degree of independence from British governance through a long-sought Home Rule bill passed in 1914 but which was temporarily suspended at the outbreak of the first world war, mainly in response to Ulster Unionist concerns. Home Rule grew out of a constitutional nationalist tradition that dated back over a hundred years through prominent Anglo-Irish figures such as Charles Stewart Parnell and Henry Grattan. But Ireland also saw successive revolutionary efforts associated with popular mobilization in rural Ireland. The 1916 Rising was initiated by a fragmentary secret society based within a larger volunteer militia, was localized to Dublin city centre, lasted a week, and ended in surrender.

While celebrated today, the Rising was an equivocal event at the time. It took place while more Irish were fighting under the British flag overseas, or serving the crown in police, military or voluntary militias in Ireland, than participated as revolutionaries (estimates put the number at 265,000 serving in various forces, compared to 1,600 insurgents [Boyce, 1996: 165; Foster, 1988: 481]). It was initially unpopular with local Dubliners who resented the shelling and siege the city underwent (although many took the opportunity to loot), and there are reports that the leaders of the Rising faced hostile crowds as they were marched out under surrender (Lyons, 1973: 373-4).

Despite this ignoble beginning, three important developments emerged from the 1916 Rising. First, the "Proclamation of the Republic" read by its leaders became an influential but hardly definitive statement of Irish political identity. Second, the British response to the Rising made them in part authors of a new and ultimately successful independence movement, and third, the ill-fated efforts of 1916 led to a sputtering and incoherent kind of founding that has taken most of the rest of the century to complete. Because the Irish founding was so halting and long-drawn out, however, it provides an opportunity to see elements of the founding process in ac-

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on this period, see: FSL Lyon's *Ireland since the Famine* (1973); AC Hepburn's *The Conflict of Nationality in Modern Ireland* (1980); RF Foster's *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (1988); JJ Lee's *Ireland 1912-1985*; Terrence Brown's *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* (2004), and Diarmaid Ferriter's *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (2005). For an examination of the historiography of this period see D George Boyce and Alan O'Day's *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy* (1996).

tion, rather than compacted together in a relatively unified and successful founding moment such as the American Declaration of Independence.

Take the Irish Proclamation of Independence for example. It is in many ways a classic example of founding speech. It repeatedly appeals to what Hannah Arendt calls “an absolute” which is a capital-letter forms of authority that stand outside the political world, and which is (falsely) called upon to empower the founding (2006: 174). Such absolutes include God, History and Myth, and the Irish Proclamation appeals to all three. Its opening sentence cites the authority of “God,” “the dead generations” of Irish nationalists, and “Ireland” itself, styled as a woman who “summons her children to her flag”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed this feminized Ireland is attributed with responsibility for the revolutionary response. She is described as “having organized and trained her manhood” and “having patiently perfected her discipline” until “relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory”.

But Arendt says that in reality the only absolute that does the work of founding is the power to begin something new, a shared power based in political communities, and one that Bonnie Honig explains is fundamentally performative in nature (1991). But would-be founders are often insecure in this power and so they conceal it beneath more familiar forms of authority in a move that Arendt considers “political genius” (Arendt, 2006: 190-1). Still, in the same way that phrases like “we the people hold these truths to be self-evident” represent the real authority behind the American founding, the Irish proclamation slips into genuine founding language when it declares: “we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State”. Because as JL Austin—who first identified and defined performative speech—explains, one giveaway that a performative is in play is the use of the term “hereby” (1975: 57).

The role of performative speech in political foundings points to a deeper theme in Arendt’s account of founding, and it is the idea that founding speech is also a kind of creative fraud. It is not true until it has been adopted, and so in the moment of declaration itself, it lacks authorization and has no ground to stand on. Jacques Derrida captured this idea nicely when he explained that in making the Declaration of Independence for an American political community that did not yet exist: “The signature invents the signer...in a sort of fabulous retroactivity” (1986: 10). What makes a founding complete, both Arendt and Derrida agree, is the subsequent uptake of those ideas by a population. In other words, the way a Declaration is embraced and acted upon, even reinterpreted and amended in a process Arendt calls “augmentation” is part and parcel of its efficacy (2006: 194).

And this is where the 1916 Proclamation presents an interesting case. It is certainly a popular document, and probably the only Irish historical document available in poster format. But its performatives were, in JL Austin’s terms, unhappy—they were

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<sup>5</sup> The one-page proclamation was issued April 24<sup>th</sup> over the signatures of seven leading revolutionaries. All future references to the Proclamation will be without additional citation, but full details are provided in the reference list. See Clarke et al 1916.

effectively voided by the realities that surrounded it (1974: 45). For one thing the Provisional government it founded lasted mere days and never effectively held power (even if later bodies based their authority on these foundations). It did not receive “the allegiance of every Irishman and Irish woman” that it declared itself “entitled to” and “hereby” claimed. And it never had the opportunity to cherish “all of the children of the nation equally” in an effort to overcome divisions it blamed on “an alien government”. Perhaps most strikingly, however, the Proclamation is not a constitutional document. Although it was adopted by the separatist Dáil legislature in 1919, it was not ratified in either of Ireland’s two recognized constitutions (one in 1922, the other in 1937), or in any constitutional reforms since.

The omission from the 1922 constitution is understandable given it was created in coordination with Britain as part of ceding legislative authority to a Dublin government. And even the 1937 constitution could still be understood to be working in the shadow of British governance and therefore its authors may have been reluctant to provoke conflict. But at no point since, including in 1949 when Ireland officially revoked its connection with the British crown and left the Commonwealth, was the Proclamation—the ostensible founding document of the Irish Republic—integrated into Ireland’s constitutional order. Moreover while the document paid homage to religion and tradition, the rising was conducted in cooperation with Ireland’s left wing labour leadership, who expected that an independent Ireland would embrace more solidaristic and socialistic property and production practices. These too failed to materialize in the wake of independence (Ferriter, 2005: 158).

In essence as an act of political founding the 1916 Rising failed on every score. As performative speech it failed the minimal standards for effectiveness. As an act of popular sovereignty it was too marginal to be an expression of the contemporary will. (Indeed, one historian called it the act of “a minority of a minority of a minority” [O’Tuathaigh, 1994: 63]). And many in Ireland still anticipated attaining independence within the British structure, preferring to avoid a course that would force both Anglo-Irish and Ulster Loyalist populations to choose between two allegiances. Even when events subsequently led a majority of Irish to retroactively endorse its goals, neither its founding declaration, nor its political aspirations for social reform were functionally integrated into the new political structure.

It takes some explaining then, to account for how 1916 acquired the status it has in Irish political history. And the general explanation lays credit for the initial transformation of the Rising at the feet of an overly punitive British response. Badly misreading the situation in Ireland the British authorities sought to crush a popular revolt that didn’t as yet exist. The leaders of the Rising were imprisoned and executed, and ill-trained veterans of the Boer War known as the Black and Tans were brought in and given free reign to suppress resistance.

Combined with a general loss of faith in the British will to deliver Home Rule, the outcome of the British effort to quash revolt in Ireland was that nationalist candidates swept the Irish seats in the 1918 general election, winning seventy-three of 105 seats, with twenty-six held by Ulster Unionists in the North. The Irish delegates refused to take their seats in Westminster and in 1919 convened in the form of a

separatist legislature. A struggle with British authorities in Ireland for control of the country followed, culminating in a 1922 treaty (and constitution), which provided for British troop withdrawal but also effectively partitioned the country. Disagreements over the wisdom of the treaty settlement led to a brief but wrenching civil war, followed eventually in 1937 by a new constitution, adopted by referendum, that aggregated more power to the Irish state and, in keeping with the 1916 Proclamation, renamed it a Republic.

One thing that is significant about these *ex post facto* developments for the understanding of group identity is that the re-interpretation of the Rising from a marginal and inconvenient event to a central expression of popular aspirations owes a great deal to the British response. To put it another way, if 1916 was, against all odds, the founding event in Irish politics, then the British authorities share a remarkable degree of authorship in that founding. In Derrida's terms they helped create the signatory because of the way the event was retroactively interpreted. Indeed the role of the British-Irish relationship in Irish politics has never been completely settled. Almost every significant political development in Ireland—from 1916 right through to the recent Good Friday Agreement of 1998—has struggled to express in some form or another the relationship with Britain and the Anglo-Irish inheritance in Irish identity.

This tortured relationship helps explain the sputtering and halting nature of the Irish founding. Beginning with an unpopular revolution in 1916 it included constitutional separatism in 1919, open conflict over the British relationship in 1922-23, a new more nationalist constitution in 1937, the 1949 departure from the Commonwealth followed by a period of isolationism and clericalism, then a 1973 return to a kind of co-existence with Britain through EU membership. Even today's peace efforts in the North, recent measures to restrict access to citizenship, and the rejection of the Lisbon treaty are all expressions of uncertainty about the boundaries of Ireland and the appropriate expression of its collective identity. At every stage, the relationship with Britain-Europe, Northern Ireland, and the role of internal Irish diversity churned up political tensions that have never been completely resolved. Meaning that the founding is as yet, incomplete. This should come as no surprise, since from Arendt's point of view, political founding is not a one-off event, but a series of recreations and reinterpretations over time.

This reveals two important factors. That even in the presence of a strong nationalist tradition, the path of Irish political development was never fully captive to narrowed ideas of group identity (although it may have been held hostage for a while in the mid-century, and again today may be withdrawing into isolationism). It repeatedly emerged from supposedly fixed identity forms to articulate a new shape and new possibilities. It also shows that the process of founding, of expressing a group identity in political form, is a difficult one to complete and close off, and that even its authorship is ambiguous. Because the process is, as Derrida and Arendt point out, retroactive. It is heavily dependent on subsequent interpretation. Which means no element within it is ever definitively excluded, including the British heritage in Irish identity.

The biggest mistake we can make is to underestimate the inherent flexibility of group identity even in its most institutionalized form. It is hard to get more institutionalized than national independence, expressed through the act of political founding, yet Ireland has continued to reinterpret its own origins over an extended period, integrating and reworking its revolutionary, constitutional and colonial heritage. In many ways this is unremarkable, since all collectivities remake their foundations over time. But few have done so in such an overt manner, revealing both the ambivalence and interpretation involved.

This fluidity of group identity really isn't news to multicultural critics, however, who might argue that the "hardening thesis" considered here is an overstatement of their position.<sup>6</sup> Even if cultural hardening is not an automatic result and merely a common tendency, they might respond, we should still be equally concerned. Since Ireland went through a period of essentialism in the mid-century, the Irish example confirms this is a plausible scenario. Note however, that once the hardening of group identity is taken as a possible rather than certain outcome its critical power against multiculturalism is similarly diminished. The possible hardening of identity must now be weighted against the possible benefits of group recognition and accommodation, making it a more complex evaluation. This paper initially considered the "hardening thesis" in its strongest form, but once that proves untenable it is still worth considering what to make of multiculturalism in a world where the hardening of group identity is a distinct possibility.

### **AUTHORIZING GROUP SPEECH**

Since the "exacerbation thesis" basically says that a multicultural response to group identities can aggravate their worse features, it's possible for it to be true, even if groups are not inherently essentializing but merely have leanings in that direction. As noted, this claim is encountered in the arguments of advocates and critics alike, and there is good evidence to suggest it is correct. Anne Phillip's main argument with existing forms of multicultural policy, for example, is that they pay insufficient attention to cultural interactions, in particular to the way that majority institutions frame the cultural identities of minorities, even when the intent is to be accommodating. These interactions create perverse incentives for groups or individuals that shape the cultural experience in particular ways, accounting for the tendency to harden identity among minority groups (2007: 64).

In effect, Phillips is arguing that the way that dominant institutions interpret the cultures that they encounter, is a critical element in making cultures what they are today. And multiculturalism requires us to try to interpret other cultures, so it is doomed to repeat this pattern. If this is so, why make any effort to retain some kind of multicultural approach, as Phillips does? In other words, if the "exacerbation the-

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<sup>6</sup> Arash Abizadeh does, however, advocate a strong version of the hardening thesis when he maintains that civic nationalism will inevitably slide into ethnic essentialism because of the internal logic of nationalism itself (2004). Evaluating the hardening thesis in its strongest form is, therefore, warranted, even if its more nuanced forms also deserve consideration.

sis” is correct, and multiculturalism can worsen essentialist leanings in group identity, isn’t it better to abandon the policy entirely and look to developing other ways of handling identity? This could be true regardless of whether groups are inherently or just occasionally essentializing. In short, shouldn’t we regard group claims, especially those focused on accommodation or institutional authority as potential hazards, to be discouraged?

As noted, Phillips answers this position by claiming that at some level the cultural issue is unavoidable, saying: “People are cultural beings” (2007: 52). In making this claim, however, there is a risk that Phillips may re-validate the culturalism she seeks to avoid. For this reason this paper adopts a different approach, one that does not require us to make ontological claims for the status of culture. The blanket rejection of cultural or group identity claims, I will argue, is not the elegant solution it appears to be because the effort to keep culture out of politics may contribute to the hardening of identity that we’re trying to avoid.

Judith Butler has argued with regard to hate speech, that efforts to ban it or control it can be self-defeating (1997). This response, she explains, removes one critical tool from the arsenal of those contending against racism, and that tool is the “reappropriation” of the language and speech involved (1997: 92). By trying to identify abusive terms or hateful speech, she says, states are in many ways the ultimate authors of hate speech, because they recognize it as having, even empower it with, a kind of sovereignty over language (1997: 77). In doing so they are actually conceding the meaning and interpretation of that language to those who wish to use it in destructive ways, and falsely localize the source of injury to isolated speakers. This is neither a necessary nor productive course of action, she believes. In contrast, she suggests that reinterpretation may be a more powerful, and more lasting, counter to racist speech, than any efforts to identify and prohibit individual speech acts. It’s important to note that Butler does not suggest that reappropriation and reinterpretation should be the only resources used against hate speech, and she is ready to endorse legal measures in certain cases (1997: 102). Yet she thinks the banning response, while well intentioned, goes too far when it is cast as the sole reliable solution.

Something similar is also true, I would argue, in the case of group identity. For Butler, our capacity to reappropriate and reinterpret language is the best resource for undermining hate speech. By the same token the capacity to reinterpret group identity is one of the best resources we have for undermining essentialism. In which case efforts to put group identities outside the scope of conventional politics—in effect, to ban them from the political arena—could have the same counterproductive results that Butler identified with hate speech law. Because it authorizes those who articulate group identity in a particular form, or assign it a particular (possibly noxious) meaning, as having what Butler calls a “sovereign power” to define (1997: 77). Moreover it falsely localizes the noxious content to specific collectivities, as if they are an isolated aberration that can be neatly excised.

In short, the drive to exclude group identity on the grounds of essentialism concedes the interpretation of group identity in its problematic form, rather than engag-

ing efforts to transform its meaning in new directions. Allowing problematic forms of identity to become fixed in usage, the way hate laws allow certain forms of harm to have a fixed place in language, undermines a potential resource for change, and lends noxious forms of identity an authority they do not merit.

It might be objected that the analogy to Butler's work on hate speech is not appropriate. Speech is, after all, is a distinct process when compared to the practices of group identity. I would argue that the analogy is closer than this objection supposes, since speech is, in Wittgenstein's terms, a lived practice, and part of a larger cultural grammar (2001). Even JL Austin's idea of performative speech, which is the inspiration for Butler's theorizing, assumes that speech cannot be made sense of in isolation from everyday social and cultural practices (1975). In other words there is no great difference between how we understand and attribute meaning in language, and how we understand meaning in the social, cultural or political world. This effect is inescapable since these worlds are produced through language, meaning an analogy between speech and other cultural practices always remains possible.

Nonetheless, the conclusion that multicultural critics are also implicated in the exacerbation of essentialist group tendencies may still hold even if Butler's arguments are set aside. Because their position contains an internal inconsistency. If the objection of multicultural critics is that culture or group identity is not a discrete thing, that it is not identifiable and circumscribable and therefore is ill-suited to institutionalization or accommodation, why then conclude it can be excluded from politics? If the problem is that cultures or group identity lack firm structures or boundaries, then you can no more keep them out of the picture than put them in it. The effort to do so can be equally problematic. The only way to resolve the situation is to create political structures that can work alongside the development and reinterpretation of group identity. Progressive politics will then be politics that facilitates the development of group identity away from narrowed or hardened cultural forms, but without the expectation of transcending the group experience entirely.

## **CONCLUSION**

In rejecting the "hardening thesis" the paper argues that even in institutionalized forms group identity is subject to popular interpretation, and this provides the key to its flexibility and capacity to adopt new directions. In accepting the "exacerbation thesis," the paper broadens this claim to include critics of multiculturalism whose recommendations concede the meaning of group identity in its most problematic forms, and therefore unwittingly contribute to essentializing identity in the same ways that some multiculturalism does.

In effect, if contemporary theories on culture and group identity are responsible for exacerbating the worst tendencies of group behaviour, the responsibility is shared by advocates and critics alike. When theory, whatever its leanings, casts group identity in fixed terms it tends to interrupt the patterns of interpretation and change that the historical experience reveals. This finding should caution us in how we ap-

proach cultural and group identity. But it should equally caution us against tidy solutions based on setting them aside. The only remaining option is to develop practices of reappropriation and reinterpretation that seek to empower healthier forms of identity, and paradoxically, recognizing or accommodating existing identities may be a key step in that transformative process.

Note that nothing in this account suggests that culture or group identity is an intrinsic good, essential for individual well-being, or naturally inclined to take positive forms. These are different claims entirely, and there is good reason to doubt they are true. What the paper does suggest, however, is that group identity may itself be a resource in dealing with essentialism once it is understood as an inherently flexible form open to reinterpretation, rather than as a specific entity that can be neatly accommodated or excluded. When it comes to rethinking multiculturalism then, the emphasis should be on interpretive practices both within and between groups, and a key goal of multicultural policy should be to preserve that function as a resource for social transformation. What we are looking for, in other words, is a kind of transformative multiculturalism that neither accommodates group identities as pre-defined things, nor rejects the claims of group identity to a place in the political debate.

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