The Baltic Sea Region
Cultures, Politics, Societies
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1. The public and private domains

It is important to stress that a society needs to have two ideals which seem difficult to reconcile: the recognition of cultural differences, and the recognition of equality of opportunity in terms of various rights, among them certain legal, political and social rights. These ideals should not downgrade one another. How may they be reconciled? One common way is to relegate the ideals to different spheres of community life: the private and public spheres. This solution assumes that the private/public distinction can be clearly explained.

Many advocates of cultural pluralism, especially in the United States, make a distinction between political citizenship and cultural heritage. To become an American is to endorse the political rights that define the concept of American citizenship such as freedom of speech and the other ideals of the American constitution. It is not a question of denying one’s ethnic heritage. In other words, political citizenship is located to the public sphere while cultural identity remains in the private domain. The idea of making a distinction between private and public spheres touches a chord among many people. It seems that there really is a vital part of our lives that we would like to describe as private. A complete denial of this distinction is described in a dramatic way in George Orwell’s novel “1984”, where the state penetrates every corner of the private sphere, and almost completely controls the minds of its citizens.

The distinction between private and public domains is difficult to draw in a general manner. A more modest way of defining the distinction is to point out some different spheres between the domains. Spheres such as law, politics and economy may be seen as spheres of the public domain, while marriage, family and religion are regarded as more private spheres. Education may be seen as both a public and private matter. In countries such as Finland, Norway and Sweden the curriculum is still to a large extent determined by public decision, although some educational content is handed over to the private domain. For example, Muslims and other religious minorities in Sweden have been allowed to have a Muslim grade in schools.

However, there are certain aspects of private institutions that may be considered public matters. A society needs, for example, a civic morality and the transmission of morality takes place in spheres such as the family and the school. This fact has been seen as a motivation for
not allowing the “independent” religious schools to distance themselves from norms that are seen as necessary parts of a civic education, norms such as psychological and physical integrity, tolerance and various democratic attitudes.

It might be that the distinction between public and private requires all but the traditional liberal to be endowed with a schizophrenic personality. “Because liberalism regards a whole range of beliefs as mere personal opinions, liberals have no difficulty in tolerating a variety of views on most questions. True believers, in contrast, admit no such scepticism and would be inconsistent to do so.” (Bellamy 1992, p. 240.) According to the political philosopher Richard Bellamy, many true believers would sacrifice their core commitments if they embraced the private/public distinction. Numerous religious fundamentalists reject the private/public distinction on the basis of a conception of religion where religious faith permeates every sector of society. However, the distinction has been used by several authors in the debate about multi-cultural society, and it has been seen as a useful tool for clarification. An important task is to look at its various interpretations and empirical applications.

2. Four types of society

The British sociologist John Rex uses the private/public distinction when he tries to characterize different conceptions of multi- and mono-cultural society. He distinguishes four types of society which may be interpreted in de jure and in de facto senses:

1. Equality of opportunity in the public domain (between ethnic, national and “racial” groups) with multiculturalism in the private domain;
2. Equality of opportunity in the public domain with monoculturalism in the private domain;
3. Inequality of opportunity in the public domain with multiculturalism in the private domain;
4. Inequality of opportunity in the public domain with monoculturalism in the private domain.

Rex has recently challenged the realism and the plausibility of a sharp distinction between the private and the public domain. The distinction may be challenged on the basis of sociological observations. Institutions located in different spheres influence one another in various ways as we have stated before. The moral values inculcated by a family, for instance, are evaluated in terms of their functionality for performances in the political and economic spheres.

Society of type 1 represents a common ideal when people talk about a multicultural society. In this society every citizen has equal rights before the law, in politics and in the market place. People furthermore have the right to conduct “private” matters, for example, the practices peculiar to their own cultural community. In the Baltic region several states would probably like to officially consider their ideal as the first model. The Swedish immigration policy and other Nordic countries’ policies come close to this first type at least de jure. However, Sweden and the other Nordic countries still show cultural homogeneity in spite of increased immigration. Immigrants in the second generation have become assimilated to a large extent into the majority culture. De facto these states still seem to be of the second type.

The Baltic states are today in a different situation. Latvia and Estonia, especially, have large Russian minorities which, after the secessions from Soviet Union, have expressed concern about their status as citizens if, for example, full citizenship and work in public offices are con-
ditional upon the ability to speak the language of the majority culture. Finding an arrangement that can be accepted by both sides remains a crucial political problem. Russian groups fear the Baltic states will become societies of the third or fourth type. Estonians and Latvians on the other hand are apprehensive about possible fragmentation of their societies in their current “nation building” projects. The fourth type of society sounds more or less like a contradiction in terms. How could a society have inequalities between various ethnic groups in the public domain and still be monocultural in the private domain? To have a monocultural private sphere could in this context alternatively mean that the majority population only encourage their own culture as the ideal or “the high culture” of society, including the private sphere at the same time as they do not allow certain minorities to have the same opportunities as the majority population in the public sphere.

Between 1920 and 1930 progressive minority policies were developed in the Baltic states. Germans and Russians had found themselves in new situations in 1917-18 when they lost political power. Many Germans also lost their estates. Germans, Russians, Jews and Swedes were interested in protecting their cultural needs and interests in the new Baltic states. The independence of the Baltic states raised the question of minority rights in the new constitutions. In the Estonian constitution all citizens were granted equal rights irrespective of nationality. All national groups were also allowed to establish their own schools and teach their children in their mother tongue. A similar constitution was established in Latvia where various national groups had the right to set up autonomous cultural corporations.

One state which has given a minority a privileged constitutional standing is Finland. Finland has a Swedish-speaking minority which has special language and educational rights in areas where the Swedish-speaking population consists of at least 3,000 people in the municipalities. The Swedish-speaking population on the Åland islands has special property rights in comparison to people on the Finnish mainland. The method is, in other words, to maintain language diversity or a bilingual society overall in Finnish society through special legal provisions for historical minority groups. The method comes close to a society of the third type in Rex’s scheme. The aim in this case is to provide general equality and justice between various minority groups through special measures for a minority group that at first sight could be interpreted as “inequality in the public sphere”.

Various countries have, for example, recently ratified “the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages”. In Sweden there is a new minority legislation that has given minority status to five historical minority languages: Finnish, Saami, Yiddish, Tornedal Finnish (Meänkieli) and Romani Chib. The new legislation means, among other things, that children who have these languages as their mother tongue should be granted the right to have education both in and with the language. In some municipalities in the North of Sweden Saami, Finnish and Meänkieli-speaking people should be allowed to address the authorities in their own languages.

However, in a society of the third type the model may be applied in less favourable ways and amount to negative discrimination. One may refer to Apartheid in South Africa where different racial groups have had unequal status in the public domain. The lesson is that the scheme needs to be filled out in order to make an evaluation of each type of society.
The crucial questions are:
1) what is included under the labels “private” and “public”, and
2) what special provisions are made in the public domain for various ethnic groups, i.e. what kind of inequalities in the public domain could be justifiable from the perspective of justice?

A controversial example in the debate concerning justified differential treatment in the public sphere is the policy of “affirmative action” (or positive discrimination) of various minority groups. Could differential treatment of minority groups be accepted, for example in the case of higher education if it is done in the name of justice? Or, is it basically an unfair policy that amounts to reverse discrimination of certain members of the majority population? This policy is especially well known with reference to the situation of African Americans in American society, but it has also attracted a lot of attention in several states around the Baltic Sea in recent times, not least with reference to the problems that women face in the labour market. The policy assumes that one could clearly delineate the salient public (and private) spheres of society that various groups should be integrated with, such as the labour market and the institutions of higher education.

An especially contested form of affirmative action (or more specifically – “preferential treatment”) is a quota policy that states that a certain number of seats should be reserved for under-represented minority members in higher education or in certain prestigious professions. A softer and more uncontroversial form of affirmative action is the attempt to reach out to various disadvantaged minority groups through advertising and certain methods of encouragement or alternatively, specific training programs. The harder forms of affirmative action, which are often named “preferential treatment”, have been questioned on the basis of the conviction that they merit or that competence should be the sole determinant of educational and professional success. The critics of the programs also claim that the policies do not help the minorities and instead present serious problems. According to this view the programs encourage negative attitudes among the citizens that downgrade the performances of the minority members because everyone knows that the members did not get the job through ordinary merit assessments. The advocates of the programs have, on the other hand, stressed that these harder forms of affirmative action are necessary in order to combat a deeply ingrained “multidimensional” history of personal and institutional discrimination. The methods may not be ideal but as long as there are no other less costly methods available, these methods provide the most reasonable alternatives. An often cited reason for various forms of affirmative action (cited in higher court settings in the U.S.A.) is that affirmative action/preferential treatment fulfill a vibrant and fruitful cultural diversity within the institutions of higher education. The democratic accountability of an important public institution could also be enhanced if it includes members from both the majority population and the minority groups in society.

3. Welfare institutions and justice

The public sphere can be limited whereby the function of the state would not exceed the provision of public goods such as national defense, a legal system, police institutions and a market economy. This is the so-called night-watchman state. It seems plausible to assume that this form of state may be a thin common denominator, even in an extremely plural society. We can imagine that all ethnic groups in a certain area are interested in physical protection, institutions of law and an efficient market. These general needs motivate the acceptance of a minimal state by...
different groups. Within this state people can choose to live in certain enclaves where their own cultures may be sustained and developed. The idea is that groups also develop welfare institutions on their own. Let us call this idea the cultural enclave model. Ethnic culture and the public sphere are held separate, and the public sphere is defined in a minimal way. Equality of opportunity means equality with respect to what is provided by a state that is deemed necessary according to the cultural enclaves.

For some, it is important to uphold a night-watchman state that defends property rights and an efficient functioning of the market economy, in order to allow people to live autonomous lives. People should have opportunities to enter into different cultures according to their tastes. There exists, in other words, a market of cultures. Models of ethnic coexistence exist that are similar to the cultural enclave model in the sense that they allow for specific forms of segmental autonomy.

The cultural enclave model, however, should not be equated with the Ottoman millet system which existed for about five centuries starting in 1456. In the Ottoman empire, different ethnic and religious groups were given autonomy in vital areas, but people were not allowed to dissent within these communities. Three non-Muslim minorities (the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Orthodox, and the Jews) were allowed to have self-governing communities (or “millet”). Traditional legal practices as well as religious traditions were respected by the Ottoman Turks. The relations between the communities and the Ottoman Turks were, on the other hand, strictly regulated. Inter-marriage was not allowed, and proselytization and apostasy were prohibited. The millet system has been described as a federation of theocracies. In some ways the Ottoman system was similar to the system of co-existence between Protestants and Catholics established under the Edict of Nantes (1598). In comparison with the millet system, the cultural autonomy model has the advantage of allowing individual dissent.

However, from a normative point of view, other criticism may be levelled at the cultural autonomy model. What happens to the people who cannot find their identities within the groups available? It seems at first glance handy to think in terms of definite classifications of ethnic or cultural groups, but reality is more complex than that. Groups are not fixed, static entities. If ethnic groups possess different resources, the result may be an extremely unequal society. The limits of the state may also be questioned. Why should people just be interested in a night-watchman state? Would they not also be interested in a state which expressed commitments in terms of provision of welfare and a common civic morality if the groups find out that it is not realistic to live separate lives in the new globalized economy? In other words, diversity is maintained at the price of commonality in the cultural enclave model.

One question is how a well-ordered society should be organized where the members disagree radically in moral and religious beliefs. The American philosopher John Rawls argues that a necessary condition for a well-ordered society is the agreement of citizens about the principles of justice which apply to its basic institutions. These principles must be based upon something other than shared morality, because this morality is lacking. Rawls states that people may reach agreement about these principles even though they have dissimilar ethical and religious views. He assumes that people are able to abstract from their divergent conceptions of good and formulate a common political framework. Rawls claims that, given the facts of pluralism, people with varying ethical or religious outlooks will accept certain political principles.

Liberal toleration is something that people may agree upon even though they have different ethical or religious views. Toleration can be justified on the basis of utilitarian philosophy (this defines right actions in terms of the promotion of overall welfare) by pointing to its posi-
tive consequences in a plural society. The principle may also be justified on religious grounds. Religious belief has to be sincere, and one cannot force people to have certain religious beliefs. These shared principles constitute an “overlapping consensus”. The principles do not presuppose any specific ethical or religious outlook but can be seen as the outcomes of radically different ethical or cultural views in a plural society. Ethnic culture and the public sphere are connected by means of the implications of private ethical views. Equality of opportunity then means equality with respect to political or public principles that are the outcome of an overlapping consensus.

A problem with this view is that it seems too optimistic. Overlapping consensus may be valid in certain areas in a plural society. The example of toleration is one plausible case. But how is overlapping consensus reached in all vital areas of public life? Could a Christian fundamentalist and a Marxist reach agreement about the content of public education? One has to build in certain assumptions about the limits of diversity in order to reach agreement about the character of basic institutions in a society. Rawls has to assume a conception of reasonable diversity. Commonality is thus reached at the expense of diversity. The model of overlapping consensus could only be applied to societies with limited diversity in ethical and religious beliefs. The other alternative is that various ideological and religious outlooks reach general agreement through “thin” political principles. The principles are then described in such a general and vacuous manner that various life-views may subscribe to them. All ethnic groups in Western society presumably condone ideals such as justice. The controversial problem is how to interpret the ideal in concrete situations. The dilemma for a model of overlapping consensus is, then, between limited application (through assumptions about reasonable diversity) or generality and emptiness.

4. To find a *modus vivendi*

Another alternative is to organize public life in a multicultural society through certain “neutral” procedures that do not presuppose any contestable life-view or ideology. The question then becomes how to find a *modus vivendi* in a multicultural society. One possibility is to bargain or compromise. The opponents have to bracket their sincere beliefs, and they have to accept a compromise solution or a solution that is favoured by “neutral procedures”. The aim is to organize a public debate through a consistent and rule-governed adjudication. The political solution is not something that is directly justified on the basis of the different ethical/religious doctrines, but rather on (the implications for the outcome for) stability and peaceful co-operation. The model could be seen as superior to that of overlapping consensus in the sense that it does not put any limits upon cultural diversity other than that the ethnic groups should strive for a stable and peaceful society. Ethnic culture and the public sphere are not in touch through the overlapping consensus of the ethnic groups but through the acceptance of neutral bargaining procedures and considerations of stability. Equality of opportunity then means equality with respect to public principles that govern the basic institutions through a modus vivendi.

The problem with the modus vivendi model is that some things are not matters for compromise among certain cultural groups. The different groups may also have different ideas about how long the bargaining process should take. What is the ultimate time limit for making a compromise? This decision is based upon conceptions of value, that may differ among ethnic groups. One could generally question the sharp dichotomy between neutral procedures and more substantive philosophical or ethical views. They often go hand in hand. Procedures
are delineated for different areas on the basis of what is regarded as morally suitable, given the specific subject matter. If a group of people finds out that a cake has been sliced in a specific way (the person who has not sliced the cake should take the first piece), the decision procedure is based upon views concerning the urgency of the needs of the people, and the importance of the subject matter, i.e. the cake. The model of modus vivendi thus makes assumptions about the limits of diversity. The choice of decision procedures is based upon conceptions of good. Commonality is in this case also reached at the price of diversity.

All models have problems in striking the right balance between diversity and homogeneity. The model of cultural autonomy makes room for diversity at the expense of commonality, while the models of overlapping consensus and modus vivendi make assumptions about the homogeneity of their societies. The first model makes the concept of citizenship very “thin” indeed, while the two latter models do not fulfil their ambitions of neutrality.

So far we have reasoned on the basis of the assumption that cultural groups influence the politics of the public sphere in one way or another. But we have not used the view that they constitute the public sphere as a departure point, i.e the private domain is a part of the public. The public domain is regarded instead as plausible ways of formulating common interests from the private domain. A radical challenge to this view might state that the different ethnic groups should constitute the public domain in the sense that they are actually represented as participants. The people in the groups are, in other words, not only citizens that are abstracted from their cultural identities; they participate in the public domain as representatives of different cultural groups. The main objective becomes the fulfilment of a cultural identity policy.

In order to safeguard the interests of different groups, one has to argue for the claim that cultural diversity should show itself directly in the public domain. It is not enough that it is located to the private domain. It is necessary to strive for cultural or ethnic corporatism. Equality of opportunity then means equality in terms of ethnic or cultural participation in the public sphere.

However, there are some striking problems with this model. One problem might be described as the problem of arbitrariness. How are the groups that should be represented selected? Why should we just concentrate our attention upon ethnic or national groups? Why not include Christian fundamentalists, homosexuals, etc? Radical feminists also make claims of being neglected in political life. Even within the ethnic sphere there is room for vagueness. How do we determine the main ethnic groups? How wide should the scope be? Ordinary people may also find their loci of identification in different groups. There is, in other words, a diversity of identifications, and it could prove difficult for people to state which group is the most important locus of identification in terms of politics. One person may describe his or her identity in terms of sex, profession, education, family status, religious allegiance, ideological sympathies, nationality, or ethnic or regional origin. What is emphasized as identity depends then upon the circumstances.

Another criticism of the model is that it may increase polarization in politics. When ethnicity is emphasized and expressed at a public level it could undermine a sense of common citizenship. The representatives may feel that they represent first and foremost their ethnic groups, and the state or the public domain acquires a secondary or purely instrumental status for the representatives of the groups. As in the case of the cultural autonomy model, diversity is sacrificed to commonality. People who accept the model of identity politics celebrate their own ways of living, and the upshot may be cultural isolation instead of openness to other cultures that for many signifies what multiculturalism is all about.
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