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Multiculturalism, Individualism and Human Rights: Romanticism, the Enlightenment and Lessons from Mauritius

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

The term 'multiculturalism' covers a number of current political trends in North America and elsewhere which, although they are quite different in their aims and ideological content (see Goldberg 1994 for an overview), share a positive evaluation of cultural traditions and, particularly, the cultural or ethnic identities of minorities. Multiculturalism is evident in literature and the arts as well as in politics, and it seeks to revalorise the artistic and intellectual contributions of hitherto silent minorities as well as supporting their quest for equity in greater society. Related to the critical Hegelianism of the early Frankfurt School, to feminist critiques of epistemology and to postmodernist trends inspired directly or indirectly by Derrida, multiculturalist thought is often accused of inspiring nihilism (see for example Bloom 1987) since it seems to relativise absolute value judgements.

This chapter is restricted to a discussion of one particular political aspect of multiculturalism, and investigates under which circumstances multiculturalist ideas may be at odds with individual human rights (as depicted in the original UN charter). As a consequence, it is necessary to review the concept of culture invoked in multiculturalist thought. This conceptual discussion (which has practical ramifications) forms the head and tail of the article, the main body of which is devoted to a critical presentation of multiculturalist practices and debates in Mauritius, which is used here as an exemplar of multiculturalist dilemmas and opportunities.[1]

Cultural Variation as a Political Challenge

For many years, it was commonplace within post-evolutionist comparative cultural research – cultural and social anthropology – to assume that cultures were generally sharply delineated and distinct, relatively homogeneous and stable. The world was thus depicted as a vast archipelago of cultures, each possessing its own internal logic and its own values, and which could exclusively be understood in its own unique terms. Variations in morality, custom and tradition were thus regarded as evidence of people's ability to adapt to the most variable environments and to shape their

existence in a multitude of ways, and it was emphasised that there was no 'objective' standard available for the evolutionary ranking of cultures or the moral evaluation of actions. Value was defined from within. This line of thought, which is historically associated with the great German-American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942), is usually spoken of as cultural relativism or historical particularism.

Recently the classic perspectives from cultural relativism have become increasingly problematic (cf. also Wilson's Introduction to this volume), and cultural theory from the 1980s and 1990s tends to emphasise (now approaching the point of irritating reiteration) that 'cultures' are neither clearly bounded, tightly integrated nor unchanging. An important contributing cause, or at least a major catalyst, in bringing this change about, is the intensification of the globalisation of culture since the Second World War. The globalisation of capitalism and the modern state, along with innovations in communication technology (jet planes, TV satellites and various wireless telecommunications are key innovations), have been crucial for these changes to come about. When former 'tribals' now apply for mortgages, follow North American TV series, take their Higher School Certificates, elect local governments and are imprisoned for criticising the government, it becomes intellectually and morally indefensible to seek refuge in the fiction of assuming that cultures are isolated and committed to their 'proper logic': political discourse has, to a great extent, become globalised.

The situation may be even more problematic to handle intellectually for persons steeped in Boasian relativism when very tangible expressions of global cultural variation suddenly appear at our doorstep, which indeed is happening in most industrialised societies due to labour migration and to the ongoing influx of political refugees. This new polyethnic situation has, especially in European countries, provoked discrimination as well as a revitalised cultural nationalism and chauvinism in segments of the majority, but many – 'indigenes' as well as new arrivals – have also responded by developing ideological and practical models for polyethnic coexistence. Original alloys mixing anthropological cultural relativism, nationalism, modern individualism and human rights thought have thus, in the course of the past 20 years, created ideologies and theories dealing with 'multicultural society'. In this milieu of social and political thought, *difference* is seen not only as politically legitimate, but is also frequently invoked as justification for specific political rights. In this regard, multiculturalist thought could be seen as post-nationalist, since it acknowledges the existence of several 'cultures' within one and the same political system. At the same time, multiculturalism may easily conflict with values seen as universal in modern liberal states, especially those to do with human rights and the rights and duties associated with equal participation in the institutions of society.

The basic dilemma of polyethnic societies can be phrased like this: on the one hand all members of a liberal democracy are (in principle if not in practice) entitled to the same rights and opportunities. On the other hand, they also have the right to be different- and in the 1990s, the rights of minorities to maintain and promote their

cultural specificity, and to be visible in the public sphere, including the media, school curricula and so on, are increasingly insisted on. A crucial challenge for multi-ethnic societies therefore consists in allowing cultural differences without violating common, societally defined rights; in other words, the challenge consists in finding a viable compromise, for the state as well as for the citizens (representing power and agency, respectively, in the framework proposed in Wilson's Introduction), between equal rights and the right to be different.

This contradiction is as old as nationalism itself. Nationalism, the ideology holding that states ought to be culturally homogeneous (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983), has a double origin in German Romanticism and French Enlightenment thought, which emphasise, respectively, cultural (in many cases ethnic as well) uniformity, and shared territory and citizenship, as the basis for national integration and as the source of political legitimation. According to classic Enlightenment thought, there existed a universal human civilisation, which was in principle accessible to all humans. According to German Romanticism, represented in the works of Herder above all, every people (*Volk*) had its proper linguistic and cultural character and the right to defend it. This view of culture, incidentally, was developed largely as a defensive response to French universalism, which was locally perceived as a form of cultural imperialism (probably not without a certain justification). This perspective and its derivatives (including cultural relativism in its 'strong' variants) are currently expressed through ideologies arguing the importance of cultural homogeneity for political identity. This applies whether they are nationalist and champion the idea of homogeneous states, or ethnopolitical and insist on ethnically based rights for minorities within existing states.

However, the difference between 'German' and 'French' nationalism, so often stressed in the literature (see Kohn 1945 for a classic statement), is not absolute: in actually existing nations, the two principles are generally mixed, and even in principle, French territorialism is far from being culturally innocent. Insofar as the French universalist civilisation insists on speaking French, it has certainly not been perceived as culturally neutral among non-French speakers in Brittany, in Côte d'Ivoire and elsewhere. Modern human rights thinking is no more neutral either, incidentally, as it assumes global sharing of a specified set of societal values.

The contradiction between the demands for equal rights and for the right to be different is accentuated at present by two main tendencies. First, it has finally become clear in public discourse -nearly 80 years after Woodrow Wilson famously announced the right to self-determination of peoples – that hardly any ethnic group has its territory by itself. States are polyethnic, and any ideology stating that only people 'of the same kind' should live in a country is potentially dangerous. This problem was recognised already by Renan (1992 [1882]), but it has acquired unprecedented importance since the 1960s. Second, the current processes of cultural globalisation break down cultural boundaries and make it difficult to defend the idea that a 'people' is culturally homogeneous and unique. Cultural creolisation (or 'hybridisation', or

again 'bastardisation' if one prefers), migration and increased transnational communication are important keywords here.

A widespread counter-reaction against the perceived threat of boundary dissolution through globalisation consists in ideological emphases on 'cultural uniqueness'. In this sense, cultural homogenisation and ethnic fragmentation take place simultaneously; they are consequences of each other and feed on each other in dynamic interplay (cf. Friedman 1990).

In other words, modern societies are by default 'multicultural' – or so it may seem. I shall nevertheless argue that 'multiculturalist politics' have to be universalistic in their very nature. The position to be defended below argues that culture is not a legitimating basis for political claims, and that cultural singularities among minorities and majorities in modern societies can only be defended to the extent that they do not interfere with individual human rights. All societies are indeed 'multicultural', whether they contain diverse ethnic groups or not, since different citizens hold different values and different world views. Multiculturalism, a term describing doctrines which argue the importance and equivalence of cultural heritages *and* the decentralisation of defining power as to what is to count as one, may in practice be a strong form of individualistic thinking about personhood – the world seen as a smorgasbord of identity options. This line of thinking, described as 'critical multiculturalism' by Turner (1994), may enable diverse groups to participate in public life, with their 'cultural heritage' or 'cultural identity' as their legitimated symbolic capital, and it can thereby be liberating for formerly silenced or unarticulate groups, including non-ethnic groups such as women and homosexuals. If, on the other hand, institutionalised differences form the core of multiculturalist practices, it is liable to regress into nihilism, apartheid and/or the enforced ascription of cultural identities. As the empirical discussion below will argue, the former alternative has many virtues in relation to human rights, which the latter does not.

The Politicised Concept of Culture

Culture, Raymond Williams has written (1976: 87) in a much quoted passage, is one of the two or three most complex words of the English language. The meaning of the word, Williams shows, has gone through many changes since the original Latin *colere*, which referred to the cultivation of the soil. Today, the word has several, if related, meanings.

One of the most common meanings of culture posits it as synonymous with the way of life and world view the members of a particular group or community have in common, and which distinguishes them from other groups. This definition may at first seem plausible, but it does not survive closer scrutiny. Within nearly every 'group' or 'people' there are varying ways of life and world views; the rich differ from the poor, the men from the women, the highly educated from the illiterate, the urban from the rural and so on. Additionally, it is often extremely difficult to draw

boundaries between 'cultures'. If one argues that a Norwegian culture exists and is by default different from Danish culture, one will need to show what it is that all Norwegians share with each other but not with a single Dane. That is not an easy thing to do. Finally, culture is not naturally a solid object, even if the word unhappily is a noun. Culture is something which happens, not something that merely exists; it unfolds through social process and therefore also inherently changes.

Problems of this kind have made such a conceptualisation of culture difficult to manage, and many scholars have ceased to use it, while others insist on using culture in the singular sense, seen as that which all humans have in common, defining them as a species as opposed to nature in general and other species in particular.[2]

However, ideologists and political entrepreneurs of many shades have embraced this Romantic concept of culture. In recent years, 'culture' and 'cultural identity' have become important tools for the achievement of political legitimacy and influence in many otherwise very different societies – from Bolivia to Siberia. It is used by political leaders of hegemonic majorities as well as by the spokesmen of weak minorities.

Indigenous peoples all over the world demand territorial rights from the states in which they live, emphasising their unique cultural heritage and way of life as a crucial element in their plea. Immigrant leaders in Europe occasionally present themselves as the representatives of cultural minorities, demanding, *inter alia,* special linguistic and religious rights. The hegemonic elites of many countries also refer to their 'national culture' in justification of warfare or oppression of ethnic minorities. 'Cultural pleas' are, in other words, put very different political uses.

A frequently mentioned 'paradox' concerning the break-up of Yugoslavia and subsequent war is the fact that the fighting parties, Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims, are culturally very similar, yet justify their mutual hatred by claiming that they are actually profoundly different. This kind of situation, where ethnic relations between groups which are culturally close take on a bitter and antagonistic character, is more common than is widely assumed. In Trinidad, in the southern Caribbean, the following development has taken place in recent years (Eriksen 1992a). The two largest ethnic groups, Africans and Indians (originally from India; they are not American Indians), have gradually acquired more and more in common, culturally speaking; in terms of language, way of life, ambitions and general outlook.

At the same time, they have become ever more concerned to express how utterly different they are; culture and cultural differences are spoken about more often, and cultural differences are brought to bear on daily life, public rituals and political organisation to a greater extent than was earlier the case. Partly, this is because the

groups are in closer contact than earlier and compete for the same scarce resources; but it is also partly because members of the two groups feel that their cultural boundaries are threatened by tendencies towards creolisation and therefore feel an acute need to advertise their cultural differences.

The groups have *simultaneously* become more similar and more different. This paradox is characteristic of globalisation processes, whereby differences between peoples are made comparable and therefore come to resemble each other, and where 'small' differences are 'enlarged'. It could, in line with this, be said that the entire discourse over 'multiculturalism' is embedded in a shared cultural framework encompassing, and bringing out the contradictions between, the Romantic notion of culture and the Enlightenment notion of individual rights. To put it somewhat more crudely: to make demands on behalf of a self professed 'culture' indicates that one subscribes to a shared global political culture. The logic of multiculturalism and ethnopolitics shares its dual origins with the logic of nationalism in the Enlightenment and Romantic thought of early modern Europe.

In order to illustrate and further develop the preceding points, I shall now turn to an extended empirical example, which brings out many of the tensions and contradictions inherent in ideas of multiculturalism.

Ethnicity in Mauritius

Since Mauritius was permanently settled by French planters and their African and Malagasy slaves in 1715, this island in the south-western Indian Ocean has been a polyethnic society, and still is very much so, as witnessed in official symbolism as well as many aspects of everyday life (Eriksen 1988; Bowman 1990). The currency is the rupee, and the text on the bank notes is in English, Hindi and Tamil. However, Mauritian newspapers tend to be in French, but the video shops offer mostly Indian and East Asian films. A leisurely walk through the capital, Port-Louis, may bring one past, within half an hour or so, a Buddhist pagoda, a Sunni mosque, an Anglican church and a Catholic one, and two Hindu temples – one North Indian, one Tamil. And it is by no means uncommon that Mauritians have names like Françoise Yaw Tang Mootoosamy.

Contemporary Mauritius, with a surface of some 2,000 square kilometres, has about a million inhabitants. Their ancestors came from four continents, and they belong to four different 'world religions'. According to official categories, the largest ethnic groups are Hindus from North India ('Hindi-speaking', 42%), 'Creoles' of largely African descent (27%), Muslims of Indian origin (16%), Tamils and Telugus of South Indian descent (9%), Chinese (3%), *gens de couleur* (2%) and Mauritians of French descent (2%). Mauritius, independent since 1968 and a republic since 1992, is a liberal multi-party democracy and a capitalist society (meaning, in this context, that both labour and consumption are mediated by money) which was impoverished, relatively overpopulated and dilapidated, with a vulnerable single export economy

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[2] Science encountered similar problems with regards to the concept of race about a century ago. and modern anthropologists from Boas and Malinowski onwards have not used it as an analytical concept, but it was finally abandoned by geneticists more recently.

(sugar cane) and a high level of unemployment during the first decades after the Second World War. Mauritius has undergone an astonishing economic transformation since the early 1980s, and is now a relatively prosperous society with a dynamic economy based on sugar, textiles and tourism.

Mauritius is one among many peaceful polyethnic societies in the world. Although many of the country's inhabitants are concerned with their cultural identity, their 'roots' and the maintenance of local ethnic boundaries, compromise and tolerance are important ingredients in the shared Mauritian political culture. Notions which form part of a shared cultural repertoire include the admission that it would have been impossible to win a civil war, that secessionism would have been absurd, and that the country's political stability rests on a precarious balance between ethnic group interests. Therefore Mauritians have developed many more or less formalised methods for the maintenance of this balance (see Eriksen 1992b for details).

Ever since France lost Mauritius (then Ile-de-France) to Great Britain during the Napoleonic wars, the recognition of difference has been an explicit tendency in its politics; first *vis-à-vis* the French settlers, since the 'niggers and coolies' were not initially endowed with rights. When the French capitulated in 1814, the Britons guaranteed the settlers that they would be allowed to retain their religion, their language, their customs and their civil rights. That the British kept their promise is evident today, as Mauritius is still much more French-influenced than Anglicised. Even the legislative system appears as a unique blend of British law and the *Code Napoléon.*

During the twentieth century, and particularly since the extension of the franchise after the Second World War and the accession to full independence in 1968, policies relating to inter-ethnic tolerance have been extended so as to include the entire population. There is a continuous search for *common denominators* (Eriksen 1988) in legislation and in everyday social life, which are necessary for societal and national integration to be at all possible ('multicultural' or not, people need to have something in common if they are to have a society), and those universalist principles are balanced against the alleged conventions and culturally specific rights claimed by certain members of each constituent group.

Modes of Inter-ethnic Compromise

The electoral system in Mauritius is more or less a carbon copy of the British Westminster system, with simple majorities rather than proportional representation. The parties are largely organised along ethnic lines, and very many Mauritians vote for politicians who they feel represent their ethnic (sectional) interests. Attempts at creating inter-ethnic alliances or supra-ethnic alternatives (based on, for example, class) have generally been short-lived.

Although ethnic competition is in this way thematised in politics, there is nevertheless wide agreement over the political rules, and electoral results are respected. The Creoles, who are Christians, and the Muslims accept being governed by Hindus, who are politically dominant by virtue of numbers. At this level, there is no 'multiculturalism'. There is a shared discourse through which cultural variation and political disagreements may be articulated.

An important element in the Mauritian political system is the so-called Best Loser arrangement, which guarantees the representation of all ethnic groups through alloting a limited number of parliamentary seats to runners-up at General Elections. The 'best losers' are selected so as to ensure the representation of all ethnic groups in the Legislative Assembly. In this way, the importance of ethnic differences is made an integral part of the electoral system.

As in many other multi-ethnic societies, questions concerning schooling, religion and language are among the most complicated and controversial ones in Mauritius. It is perhaps here that the dilemma of equal rights and cultural differences is most evident. In all three fields, compromises of various kinds have been developed.

Regarding religion, the popular idiom *Sakenn pé prié dan so fason* ('Everyone prays in his/her own way') has nearly achieved legal status. As mentioned, four 'world religions' are represented in the island, and three of them (Christianity, Islam and Hinduism) are divided into a large number of sects and congregations. Religious groups receive state funding according to the size of their membership. In this field, a consistent compromise has been established, where no religion is given priority by the state.

The Mauritian schooling system represents a different kind of compromise. Here, equality is emphasised rather than differences. Thus a core curricula are uniform island-wide, as are exams. However, classes in 'ancestral languages' are offered as optional subjects. As a matter of fact, a growing majority of Mauritians speak *Kreol,* a French-lexicon Creole, as their first language, and scarcely know the language of their ancestors, but Kreol is rarely written. It could be said, therefore, that Mauritian schooling stresses equal opportunities yet allows for the expression of symbolic differences. It represents a compromise not only between ethnic groups, but also between a Romantic and an Enlightenment view of society.

A third kind of compromise is expressed in language policies. Officially, as many as fifteen languages are spoken in Mauritius; in practice, at least four or five are the mother-tongues of various groups. When Mauritius was to become independent from Britain in the late 1960s, in practice the new government faced four possibilities. First, it could have opted for Hindi, which is the ancestral language of the largest ethnic group (although many Mauritian Hindus do not understand it). Second, it could have chosen Kreol, which, in spite of its being held in low esteem, is by far the most widely spoken language. Third, French could have been an alternative, having been the dominant written language throughout the history of Mauritius.

In the end it was the fourth alternative, English, which was to win. English is an international language, and is learnt by Mauritians in the same way as non-native

speakers elsewhere in the world learn English as a foreign language. This means that most Mauritians master it only partially. More importantly, perhaps, English was nobody's ethnic language, the few Anglo-Mauritians (most of them colonial civil servants) having either returned or become assimilated into the Franco-Mauritian group. By choosing English, an ethnically neutral language of the state, Mauritians avoided turning nation-building into a particularistic ethnic project at the beginning.

The other languages are nevertheless also supported through the state and its agencies. Public radio and TV broadcasting alternates between the major languages of Mauritius, and French still dominates in the written mass media. North American films are dubbed in French. There is in other words a clear, but negotiable division of labour between the non-ethnic language English, the supra-ethnic languages Kreol and, to some extent, French, and the ethnic languages, chiefly Bhojpuri/Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Mandarin and Telegu.

Contradictions and Paradoxes

This will have to do as a general introduction to public policies relating to ethnic differences and national cohesion in Mauritius. I now turn to some of the problems, controversies, paradoxes and contradictions which inevitably arise during this kind of ongoing balancing act between demands for similarity and claims of difference.

The Catholic priest and ecumenic Henri Souchon became famous domestically when, at the height of the legendary 'race riots' of 1968, he admonished his congregation to visit the nearby mosque in order to familiarise themselves with a Muslim way of thought and thereby mitigate the mutual suspicion between Christians and Muslims. He called for contact and a possible 'merging of horizons', to use Gadamer's term, between the antagonists.

More than two decades after the riots, Souchon sees two possible scenarios for Mauritius regarding the relationship between ethnic boundaries and the formation of identity categories oblivious to ethnicity.[3] He calls them the fruit salad and the fruit compote, respectively. In the fruit salad, the components are clearly distinct; ethnic boundaries are intact, and reflexively 'rooted' identities are secure and stable. In the fruit compote, on the other hand, the different fruits are squashed and mixed together with substantial use of force. (This metaphor, it may be noted, is a variant of the American melting pot metaphor.) The result of the *compote de fruit,* in *pére* Souchon's view, would be uprootedness, nihilism and confusion. He himself therefore supports the fruit salad variety, although he goes further than most in expanding the compass of the common denominators or, to stretch the fruit salad metaphor a bit, thickening the syrup. In order to have a dialogue, Souchon argues, one needs a firm position to conduct it from.

Some kind of fruit salad metaphor, or a rainbow metaphor which politicians are fond of invoking, is hegemonic in Mauritius. Yet conflicts between equality and difference are inevitable since the tension between sharing and difference is endemic to the island. Allow me to outline a few examples.

Most Mauritian schools are public, but private schools also exist, many of them run by religious organisations. There are anti-discrimination laws. It is nevertheless well known that Catholic schools have tended to prefer Catholic applicants for teaching positions, although they have also occasionally hired Muslims and Hindus. This policy was tried in court when an unsuccessful applicant filed a suit against a Catholic school in 1989 because she suspected having been by-passed on religious grounds.

In court the following year, the defence argued that it was necessary to have faithful Catholics in certain teaching jobs because a part of their job consisted in turning the pupils into good Catholics. The prosecutor asked whether this was also relevant with respect to subjects such as French, English and mathematics, which the school's lawyer admitted was not the case. In his testimony, the Archbishop, Mgr Jean Margéot, argued that the colours of the Mauritian rainbow had to be kept separate 'for the *arc-en-ciel* to remain beautiful'. The Catholic school won the case, and succeeded in this way in creating a precedent for differential treatment on religious grounds in a limited part of the labour market. The principle of difference here won over the principle of equality.

Another nationally famous case from the same period concerned the controversial Muslim Personal Law (MPL), introduced during British rule, which allowed Muslims to follow customary Muslim law in family matters. A characteristic consequence of this law was that it became nearly impossible for women, but relatively easy for men, to obtain a divorce. In the course of the investigations of a Commission of Inquiry set up in the mid-1980s, it became clear that the opposition to the MPL was significant even among Mauritius's Muslims. Not unexpectedly, many women and young Muslims were against it, arguing that they were entitled to the same rights as other Mauritian citizens. In the end, and universalist (Enlightenment) principles won over multiculturalist (Romantic) ones.

This second example is the most interesting one in this context. Here, the fundamental paradox of multiculturalist ideology becomes highly visible: it presupposes that the 'cultures' are homogeneous and 'have values and interests'. The mere fact that the formal leaders of an ethnic group invoke particular values and traditions does not imply that all members of the group support them. This is why it can be dangerous to accord special rights to *groups,* for groups inevitably consist of persons with often highly discrepant values and interests.

A third example highlights the relationship between particularist identities and universalist principles in a somewhat different way. Some intellectual Mauritians, tending towards the 'fruit compote' as an ideal, have experimented with mixing

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[3] I have his mews from conversations which took place in 1991-92.

religions and cultural conventions in novel way, such as the radical music group Grup Latanier, which performs an essentially Creole *séga* music with strong Indian elements.

One leading Mauritian intellectual decided, some time during the 1980s, to challenge the rigid boundaries between different religions, reasoning that the island needed a 'shared culture' for a proper national identity to come about. On Christmas Day, therefore, he went solemnly to church, bringing bananas and incense as a sacrifice to the Hindu gods. This act was, naturally, frowned upon by Hindus as well as Christians, who both felt insulted by the blasphemous syncretism implied. If anything, they felt further apart after the experiment than before it. The ideal of the 'fruit compote' thus cannot be enforced against people's wishes. It should nevertheless be noted that universalist principles have been adopted by the Mauritian population with respect to political culture. In so far as discrepant religious or otherwise cultural practices do not interfere with the universalism guaranteeing individuals equal rights, there is no good reason to chastise them.

Dilemmas of Similarity and Difference

The Mauritian attempt at creating a synthesis between liberal principles of individual equality and a cultural relativist principle is remarkable and unusual, and it certainly deserves international attention.[4]

The examples sketched in the previous section suggest that both equal rights and the right to be different may in particular situations lead to discrimination and the violation of commonly agreed upon individual human rights. If one insists on shared civil rights as the basis of citizenship and nationality, as the French revolutionaries did, one will tend to oppress minorities by forcing them to assimilate to a public culture (language, rules, hierarchies and conventions) which they perceive as alien and intrusive. If, on the other hand, one opts for differential treatment on the basis of religion or ethnicity, the risk is the opposite: those affected may lose their equal rights. South African apartheid policies are a good example of this; South Africans were encouraged to use their vernacular languages at all levels, and the majority of blacks were thereby in practice excluded from national and international political discourse. The hidden variable in this puzzle is, naturally, power discrepancies.

Additionally, it should be pointed out that political leaders and others are frequently prone to exploiting notions about cultural uniqueness strategically to strengthen their positions. In a critical study of ethnopolitics in the US, Steinberg (1981) concludes that persons and organisations generally invoke principles of cultural relativism when they themselves have something to gain from differential treatment, and that they will otherwise support equality principles. 'Tradition', 'rooted culture' and similar catchwords are positively evaluated in the political discourse of our time, and are often used rhetorically to justify privileges and political positions. On the other hand, this warning should not be taken to mean that there are never legitimate reasons for wishing to protect oneself against cultural domination.

We just need to distinguish carefully between the right to a cultural heritage and particularistic politics.

Another, related point, which is also relevant for all polyethnic societies, concerns identification with collectivities in general. As a matter of fact, many Mauritians generally feel quite at ease as members of what they see as an emerging 'fruit compote', and do not long for roots and purity. They would prefer to be cultural hybrids to the extent they wish, to be recognised and not as the representatives of a particular group. The legitimacy of this kind of strategy was tried out by members of the small radical socialist party *Lalit* ('The Struggle') before the General Elections of 1991. The militants on the list first refused to register their ethnic identity (which is compulsory, partly because of the Best Loser system), arguing it was irrelevant, and then proceeded to draw lots deciding their ethnic identity. The result was not devoid of Theatre of the Absurd qualities. For example, one of their leaders, to all appearances a white Mauritian of foreign birth, turned out to be a Hindu on the election rolls.

The neo-Romantic ideological climate influencing many parts of the world today – either viciously nationalist or equally viciously multiculturalist – is such that persons may virtually be forced to take on an ethnic identity whether they want to or not. Indeed, culturalism may be just as oppressive in an ostensibly multi-ethnic and tolerant 'rainbow society' as in an ethnically hegemonic nation. The right to have an ethnic identity must also include the right not to have one. Here, perhaps, lies the greatest paradox of multiculturalism: in its apparently benevolent focus on 'the wealth of cultures and traditions' present in society, it neglects the Salman Rushdies of the world, so to speak; those persons who spend their entire lives midway between Bombay and London without wishing to, or indeed being able to, land.[5] It excludes the 'mongrels', anomalies and idiosyncratic individuals who are numerous and necessary as interethnic brokers and in the forging of cross-cutting or non-ethnic alignments, and who represent the possible future of many societies.

Finally, cultural relativism gives no moral advice. To make it the source of public morality would imply that any practice would be acceptable as long as it can be justified by reference to 'a culture'. This kind of position is tantamount to no position at all, and is an inherent danger of falling into communitarianism.

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[4] For example, a consideration of Mauritian politics and ideology might have made a wonderful section in Charles Taylor's now famous essay on multiculturalism (Taylor 1992).

[5] Someone asked Salman Rushdie about his roots during a TV interview. He pointed downwards and said something like this: 'What do I have at the end of my legs? Roots? What I see are feet.'

Individualism as a Key Factor

It has often been asked why Mauritius is such a stable democracy, incorporating, as it does, a vast number of religious groupings and people originating from different continents. The question is wrongly asked, and it reveals an inadequate understanding of culture. At the level of everyday representations and practices, Mauritian culture can actually be described as quite uniform in the sense that there is a wide field of shared premises for communication encompassing most of the population: there is a shared political culture and standardised and standardising educational system, there is considerable linguistic uniformity, and recruitment to the labour market is increasingly based on individual skills. It is generally not difficult to argue the virtues of individual human rights among Mauritians; the tend to share similar, Western-derived notions of justice. It is, in other words, only superficially (if noisily) multicultural even if it may be profoundly multi-ethnic.[6]

It should be noted that the 'multiculturalist' model of coexistence as practised in Mauritius and elsewhere, collapses unless the constituent groups share basic values of individualism and, in all likelihood, a shared *lingua franca*. For instance, it is widely believed , not least in that country itself, that the US has been capable of absorbing a great number of different nationalities without homogenising them culturally. This is wrong, and generally, migrants to the US have changed their language within two generations. One could perhaps say that the descendants of late nineteenth/early twentieth-century immigrants to the US have been assimilated to a degree of 99%, and have been allowed to use the remaining 1% to advertise their cultural uniqueness, which exists largely as a set of symbolic identity markers. As a Norwegian from Norway, I have often met Americans who identify themselves as 'Norwegians' but who unfailingly seem to betray, in their verbal and non-verbal language, lifestyle and values, a strong attachment to the moral discourses of US society.

If political multiculturalists favour equal individual rights, the 'culture' in their rhetoric is but a thin cosmetic film. If, on the other hand, they seriously defend the right of ethnic minorities to run their own political affairs according to a cultural logic of their own, they run the risk of defending practices which conflict with the human rights of individual group members.

The solution, or rather, the 'good multiculturalism', must arrive at a blend of sharing and difference. It requires common denominators in key sectors, including politics, education and the labour market, and it must institutionalise a dialogic principle (see Giddens 1994 on 'dialogic democracy') enabling a variety of voices to be heard on an equal footing. This is not relativism, but rather the recognition and democratisation of different value orientations in society, in the manner acknowledged as necessary and non-relativistic by Bauman (1993) when he notes the

ill effects of the attempts at extending the Western 'ethical code over populations which abide by different codes ... in the name of one all-human ethics bound to evict and supplant all local *distortions*' (Bauman 1993: 12, italics in the original).

It is a question of striking a proper balance between the demands for formal equality and the demands for justice in a more general sense, including the equivalence of cultural heritages *as well as* the right not to acknowledge a heritage. The keyword is dialogue, which, it should again be noted, presupposes the existence of common denominators or shared meaning at the outset.

On Similarities and Differences

In the foregoing discussion, I have argued the importance of universalist human rights in modern state settings, and have alleged that political multiculturalism is a very fuzzy concept as it presupposes, yet explicitly and self-contradictorily resists, the presence of powerful processes of cultural integration. The very statement 'I have a culture worthy of protection' betrays a considerable degree of integration into a modern, reflexive way of thinking about the individual, human rights and politics. At the end, I would like to reflect on the question, tangential to the foregoing discussion, of whether the promotion and spreading of individual rights is morally objectionable in the case of societies which are multicultural in the sense that they contain people who are not integrated into a capitalist mode of production, have not been exposed to individualism and modern education and so on.

Debates about indigenous notions of personhood in anthropology have frequently oscillated between positions stating, on the one hand, that remote peoples are 'just like ourselves'; and, on the other hand, that they are qualitatively and fundamentally different. Of course, both positions can be defended convincingly, given the appropriate selection and interpretation of empirical material. Regarding human rights issues, it is an often debated question whether or not they are or ought to be universal, and if so, whether they should be 'adapted' to local circumstances because of socioculturally conditioned differences in the constitution of the person. Be this as it may, the situation in societies where there are still groups which have been spared the mixed blessings of individualism, is not similar or directly comparable to the situation in Mauritius, the US or other thoroughly modern 'multicultural' societies where personal autonomy is considered an absolute value.

As many anthropologists have shown (see for example Dumont 1980; Strathern 1992; Morris 1994), concepts of personhood vary dramatically cross-culturally. In India and Melanesia, for example, dominant view on the individual emphasises that he or she is a product of social relations and far from that self-sustaining, independent and inviolable 'monad' the Western individual is seen as. In such societies, the community rather than the individual is accorded rights, and the individual has duties rather than rights. In such societies, individual human rights can

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[6] This recalls a memorable passage by V.S. Naipaul, where he writes, bitterly: 'Superficially, because of the multitude of races, Trinidad may seem complex, but to anyone who knows it, it is a simple colonial philistine society' (Naipaul 1979 [1958]).

be seen as truly alien, even if they are often promoted and adopted by some segments of society, usually educated middle-class elites.

In his very beautiful and melancholy book *Danubio* (Magris 1986, Eng. trans. 1989), Claudio Magris writes that a fascist is a person who has best friends but cannot understand that others may be just as good friends; who feels love for his homestead but cannot understand that others may feel the same kind of love for theirs; and so on. It may therefore be proposed, as a general principle, that 'human rights missionaries' have an obligation to gain some understanding of the world views and value systems current among their target groups. They would then discover that virtually all peoples are, like Mauritian Muslims, divided on important issues. Some of their members would have gone to school and acquired individualist categories; some would have learnt about women's rights in remote countries; some might see a solution in a Marxist revolution or a liberal multi-party system, and yet others might refuse to question tradition.

As Samir Amin has written (Amin 1989), individualist thinking and social criticism is just as 'rooted' in Islamic history as fundamentalism. And as Salman Rushdie (1991) and others have reminded us, one scarcely does southern or eastern peoples a favour by continuously telling them that individual human rights are really a 'Western invention and far from an aspect of their culture. This kind of attitude, essentialises 'other cultures' and alienates the growing numbers in those societies which hold positive views of individual human rights at the same time as they resist cultural neo-colonialism.

Integration in a modern state with a liberal constitution may create a dialogical situation where human rights principles become a common denominator for the many groups and individuals which make up the state. If this sounds like blunt cultural imperialism, it should be noted that the most likely alternative, in my view, consists in a form of segregation whereby the exertion of power is left to persons such as the old men who are the formal leaders of Mauritian Muslims, and where there is a mounting risk of ethnic conflict because of the inter-group competition implied by segregation.

In most contemporary societies, processes of homogenisation are taking place in some social fields (such as consumption, education and the media), while the demarcation of and the symbolic strengthening of 'identity', 'roots' and 'tradition' takes place in other fields. It is this process I described at the beginning of this article as the dual movement of cultural homogenisation and ethnic fragmentation. In this context, the Mauritius I have described may perhaps serve as a microcosm or an ideal type of a modern society: Mauritian society is simultaneously characterised by conflicts and contradictions, pluralism and value conflicts along several axes, and one cannot offhand say what kind of values or morality 'society as such' represents. For this kind of society to be cohesive at all, common denominators are necessary, and a recognition of cultural diversity which does not interfere with the principle of universal, individual human rights may actually be the best alloy available. It is the blatant non-recognition of cultural heritages which leads to ethnic revitalisation and fundamentalism, not their institutionalisation through the state.

India was mentioned above as an example of a society where Western human rights thinking seems outlandish and alien. It might therefore be appropriate to end by stating that Marxist, feminist, liberal and other kinds of individualist human rights related movements enjoy great support in Indian society. Such groups are no less 'authentic Indian' than those of traditionalists who dream of a reawakened Hindu millenarian kingdom where ancient hierarchies are respected in minute detail.

Perhaps it would be useful to speak of a 'weak' and a 'strong' variant of political multiculturalism. The former is the one practised in some liberal modern states, including Mauritius, where a high degree of cultural homogeneity is taken for granted. The latter, which I have argued against, would be a kind of political rhetoric rejecting liberal individualism and human rights ideology on the basis of alleged tradition.[7] (Recall Tiananmen Square if in doubt.) The former, 'weak' variety is, however, also hard to defend as a political project seen within a human rights perspective. It may, as I have argued with reference chiefly to Mauritius, (1) contribute to freezing ethnic distinctions and thereby heighten the risks of ethnic conflict, (2) remove the protection and entitlement of shared societal institutions from the members of minorities, (3) strengthen internal power discrepancies within the minorities, (4) direct public attention away from basic contradictions in society, notably economic ones, and (5) contribute to a general moral and political disqualification of minorities in society: since they are not accorded the same rights and duties as everybody else, there is no apparent reason why they should be treated as equals in other respects either. The conclusion is, thus, not that cultural variation in itself should be combated but that politicised culture is incompatible with the individual rights which modern states are, or ought to be, based on. The slogan could be 'cultural nationalism, political cosmopolitanism', to borrow a turn of phrase from Gellner (1994).

This final statement, I now realise, provides a starting-point for further discussion pivoting on the meaning of 'politicised culture'. Is marriage politics? If so, should, for example, arranged marriages in liberal individualist societies be seen as incompatible with human rights? Trusting that the reader will be able to draw on the preceding discussion in exploring further issues, I leave the problem here, partly unresolved.

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[7] This distinction is similar to Turner's (1994) distinction between what he calls 'difference multiculturalism' and 'critical multiculturalism'. He sees the latter as a perfectly reasonable progressive movement for social and intellectual justice, and the former as a dangerous 'licence for political and intellectual separatism' (Turner 1994). Cf. also Parens's distinction between 'egalitarian antiessentialists', their 'fellow travellers' and 'separatist essentialists' (Parens 1994), the latter corresponding roughly to Turner's concept of 'difference multiculturalism'.

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