

Rational Bases of Identity: Toward Cultural Anarchy

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Part 1

Increasing cultural diversity has given rise to an increasing number of identity claims based on culture. Insofar as what we call ourselves has implications for social and political practice, sorting through these claims is of some importance: the merit of an identity claim may validate certain social roles and power distributions; it can also determine the legitimacy of certain collective rights and responsibilities.

It seems to me that there is something fundamentally irrational about claiming as your identity aspects of your self that are mere accidents of birth: if you do not choose X, if you have no control over X, then surely you cannot justifiably take any credit or blame for X--nor then can you justifiably take any of the attendant benefits and burdens, rights and responsibilities. It's also a very passive thing, basing your identity on what chance has done to you rather than on what you've done yourself. Perhaps most importantly, it is also unfair, if rights and responsibilities are assigned on such an identity.

Is one's culture such an accident of birth? Is cultural identity irrational? What exactly *is* cultural identity? It seems to me that race, religion, and nation are used almost interchangeably to define culture: consider 'I'm Black', 'I'm Christian', 'I'm Chinese-Canadian'; consider 'I'm Jewish' which is, apparently, a bit of all three.

First, insofar as cultural identity is *racial* identity, it must depend on an accident of birth, on chance, on something we did not consent to: we do not choose our race--we do not choose the colour of our skin, the shape of our eyes, the bridge of our nose, the fullness of our lips, etc.

One may argue, however, that, fair or not, such accidents of birth create who we are. Certainly I have been influenced by the colour of my skin, at least as much as by American television. And while I can reject American television, I cannot reject my skin colour. I *can*, however, reject its importance. Though considerably more difficult, I can try to reject any privileges and penalties that have resulted because of my skin colour. I think accidents of birth create who we are largely because they lead to labels that *others* use to describe us, labels that accord with physical attributes that have, illogically, a whole bunch of other non-physical attributes. The self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon kicks in and there we are. Therefore, to proclaim loudly 'I have blue eyes' may be necessary--if one is being ignored or underprivileged because of having blue eyes. (And therefore the statement is more '*I* have blue eyes' than 'I have *blue eyes*'.) But if the ideal world is one in which having blue eyes is irrelevant, then such a proclamation must be only an intermediary. For to proclaim 'I have blue eyes' is to say 'it matters', and is to encourage people to identify you, to think of you, as having blue eyes--when they should be doing the opposite, ignoring your eye colour. (I have been confused by people defining their personal identity by race, or sex,

who are then upset when they are defined by others in the same way.) As Bissoondath comments, "...to define yourself by your colour is to be racist, just as to define yourself by your gender is sexist; it is to reduce the complexity of human beings to formulae" (170). My argument for *rational* bases of identity extends to identity *ascriptions* (by others) as well as to identity *claims* (by self), and as we move toward such rational bases of identity, positive racist claims will not be necessary to counter negative racist ascriptions.

Second, insofar as cultural identity is *religious* identity, and insofar as religion is a system of beliefs, it is, at least *not* an accident of birth: one cannot be born a Catholic, for example, because one cannot be born believing anything. But such a cultural identity then is something one can have only as an adult, when one has developed the intellectual faculty capable of understanding, assessing, and choosing beliefs.

Unfortunately, many do not view religion in this way; many do think one *can* be born a Catholic, Muslim, Jew, or whatever. And unfortunately, many equate cultural identity *with* such religious identity: a recently aired W5 program (July 4/95) dealing with the problem of multiculturalism in the schools was actually about the problem of accommodating many religions in the schools: if Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter Monday are school holidays, then so should be the important days for Judaism, Islam, etc.; if an Islamic prayer must be said at noon facing East then Islamic children must be excused from class to do so; etc. I find this truly distressing! There should be *no* religion in public schools: one, public schools are funded by the State, which is supposed to, and should, maintain its separation from the Church; two, such superstitious beliefs are antithetical to the pursuit of reason, one of the fundamentals (I thought) of education. Certainly a school could offer a course on World Religions just as it may offer a course on Mythology--but that's the only 'solution' required to the 'problem'.

Insofar as values are involved--though I hasten to remind that values can certainly be held independently of any religious belief--perhaps yes, we should attempt some accommodation, in our schools as in our society. But the limits of our tolerance must be sharp and firm. What if a religious culture believes that women should be bought and sold? What if a religious culture believes 'an eye for an eye'? Whenever 'cultural' values violate Canadian law, surely our fine declaration to "encourage the preservation, enhancement, sharing and evolving expression of the multicultural heritage of Canada" (Multiculturalism Act) must be subordinated.

Third, insofar as cultural identity is *national* identity, we are, barring emigration, back to an accident of birth, chance, and involuntariness: we do not choose the country in which we are born. However, even if we happen to like the country in which we're born, to identify ourselves by country (I'm Irish, I'm half-Japanese, I'm Afro-American) presumes such a nationalism (not necessarily a patriotism): it is to accept the territorial divisions made by people with economic power eager to retain that power. And I agree with Einstein, "nationalism is an infantile disease."

Further, to identify oneself by country of origin seems bad enough, but to do so by country of ancestry, as many do ('I am Irish because my greatgrandmother was Irish'), according to the birthplace of people you may not even have known, people who are long dead, seems worse. Not only is it irrational, it is potentially absurd, because of its arbitrariness: How far back do you go? Why that far and no further? (What if your greatgreatgreatgrandmother was British?)

Such identity claims according to ancestral lineage are important in many territorial conflicts, but they are often based on arguments of primacy which are flawed on at least three

counts. One, what does it matter who was 'there' first? Does mere presence entitle one to ownership? Doesn't the quality of one's presence matter at all?

Two, what time shall we establish as the starting point (and on what basis shall we establish it as the starting point)? For example, surely the 'Natives' were here before the 'Europeans' (and so 'I have a right to X, a greater right to X than you that is, because my ancestors were here before your ancestors'), but didn't they also migrate from somewhere else at some point in time? Isn't it quite probable that 'Natives' aren't *native* at all but only *prior*? To be fair, we'd have to determine the time and location of each evolution into homo sapiens (should this be a measurable moment) and then establish complete lineages, in order to determine whose ancestors were where first. (Unless we just accept the Judeo-Christian view--in which case everyone not currently living in whatever country the Garden of Eden was in is an immigrant, a non-native.)

Three, even if we accept a right of primacy, on what grounds do we include that right in one's genetic heritage? What my greatgrandfather did or didn't do has nothing to do with me--I should not pay for his sins. Nor should I have the right to go back to my greatgrandmother's childhood home (should I be able to determine where it is) and demand to be paid for what was stolen from her. It was stolen from *her*, not from *me*. What is hers is hers, not mine. Unless I suppose, she left a will stating that whatever it was that was stolen was to have been given to me. (But even then, one could reasonably argue that what is merely *potentially* yours isn't yours enough to warrant a charge of theft should such theft cause that potential not to be actualized.) However, she could have as easily willed that it be given to the greatgranddaughter of a friend. Why are genetics so very important? What if, after all, I'm adopted? (And therefore don't even have the same skin colour as my greatgrandmother?)

Quite apart from the problems which result when we equate cultural identity with racial, religious, or national identity, we should distinguish between race, religion, nationality, and culture purely on logical grounds because the relationships between race, religion, nation, and culture are neither exclusive nor exhaustive. For example, there is much of Buddhism that non-Buddhists can identify with; not all Americans subscribe to 'American culture'; and being Black doesn't automatically mean you're 'into' 'Black culture' just as being White doesn't mean you're not.

Perhaps, rather than defining culture as a matter of race, religion, or nationality, it is better defined as a collection of costumes and customs, mere habits, practices, a way of living. But it seems strange to elevate your habits to the status of an identity, and then perhaps to demand certain rights on the basis of those habits.

What about defining culture as a set of values? This would certainly make racial and national group irrelevant: values are seldom clearly correlated with racial or national boundaries--to say 'I'm Black' or 'I'm Serbian' doesn't necessarily say anything about one's values, let alone anything exclusive or exhaustive. And while one's religious identity more probably does say something about one's values, it would also be irrelevant because, again, it says nothing exclusive or exhaustive--a Muslim and a non-Muslim may both value X, and a Muslim may have values additional to those of the Islamic religion.

Defining culture in terms of values *independent* of race, religion, and nation at least ensures a *rational* basis of identity, but it seems to be an incomplete definition: to identify myself by my values (for example, to say I'm a humanist) is not *sufficient* for a *cultural* identity (I would not call humanism a culture).

Another interpretation of culture refers to group history, the group involved being a group in which membership depends on some kind of heritage. But why should history, heritage, constitute identity? Why should one's past define one's present? More important, why should *another's* past define one's present? One possible reason might be in order to avenge and/or to ensure compensation. But this would have us enact on one individual what is really another's due. On the contrary, compensation for past wrongs should be awarded to past grievors, not their descendants--unless their descendants have suffered the consequences of the wrongs done to their ancestors. And while one might want to distinguish between direct and indirect consequences, this can be quite complex and, at the very least, quite uncertain--how can we really know which aspects of one's present are due to which aspects of another's past?

A second reason for considering group history to be the basis of one's cultural identity might be in order to recognize and award respect. But again, this gives to one what is another's due.

A third reason might be in order to learn from the past, to preserve what's of value. Surely this is important, but why restrict oneself to the lessons of one's own group? While there may be value in being custodians of the past, why should the job be open only to those with a direct genetic line of descent? Why can't I carry the torch for a tradition I value *whether or not* anyone in my bloodline also carried it? This definition of cultural identity, then, because it so ignores the individual as an individual, is also rife with irrationality.

To summarize to this point, cultural identity based on race is irrational and unfair because it depends on chance; cultural identity based on religion is irrational if it is considered a heritage because one can't inherit beliefs, and it is a questionable basis for rights and responsibilities if it is considered a freely chosen system of beliefs; cultural identity based on nationality of origin is irrational and unfair because it depends on chance and arbitrary political divisions, and cultural identity based on nationality of ancestry depends on the very weak arguments of primacy. Culture as custom is too superficial a basis for rights and responsibilities; culture as value is not group-differentiating enough; and culture as group history is irrational for its lack of recognition of the individual.

Having thus considered the 'cultural' of 'cultural identity', I will, in the next part, consider 'identity'.

Part 2

One of the central problems of 'identity politics' is determining the constitution of identity. Two major areas of conflict are the essentialist/constructionist debate and the subjectivist/objectivist debate.

Roughly speaking, the essentialist/constructionist debate parallels the nature/nurture or heredity/environment debate. The essentialist position is that there is some essence in the individual that is the basis for the identity in question; cultural identity based on race, nationality by origin or ancestry, (heritage) group history, or, according to some, religion would be essentialist. The constructionist position is that identity is a social construction and society, therefore, determines what we are; cultural identity based on values, costumes and customs, or, according to others, religion would be constructionist. The former is basically a psychophysiological view of

identity; the latter, a sociological view.

A distinction made by Glazer and Moynihan with respect to ethnic identity, which is perhaps most often synonymous with cultural identity, conforms to this axis of debate as well: primordialists, like essentialists, treat ethnicity as an inescapable given (which, if it depends on some innate essence, is biologically determined) whereas circumstantialists, like constructionists, treat ethnicity as something that can be "shed, resurrected, or adopted as the situation warrants" (Eisenger 90).

To my mind, neither of these views is very rational. One of the problems with the essentialist view is that it assumes a very superficial view of the self; perhaps that's why it is most often manifested in 'labelling', in one-dimensional attribution or ascription by others.

Another problem with the essentialist position is that people adopted at birth could not 'claim' the culture they were raised in, however much their ideology and practice reflected that culture. For example if I, white by birth, was adopted by a Native family and raised on a reservation, I nevertheless could not claim to 'be' Native.

A third problem with the essentialist position is the standard of attribute required: How much genetic heritage is enough? How black is Black? Many people of 'mixed' ancestry experience first-hand this problem of definition.

Yet another problem with the essentialist position is that because it is involuntary, it 'coerces' membership--one has no choice in the matter of one's identity.

The constructionalist view, on the other hand, may be equally coercive: an identity constituted by one's society can be equally involuntary, especially because that identity is constructed, for the most part, while one is a child, vulnerable in formative years.

What seems to be missing in both accounts is the influence of the individual self. And this takes us to the other major area of debate regarding identity. The centrality of the individual is what characterizes the subjectivist position: one's identity, according to this position, depends solely on how one feels (this view is, therefore, necessarily anti-essentialist). Since it posits no behavioural standard, then as long as I say I'm Native, I should be allowed to hunt during the off-season. That is, assuming that the granting of rights and responsibilities on the basis of cultural identity is legitimate.

The objectivist position, on the other hand, is one that requires *only* a behavioural standard--such as language, religious practice, ritual, kinship pattern, dress, cuisine, organizational pattern, and mode of habitation (Ross 5). This position, I think, can easily lead us to hypocrisy: as long as I show up at the pow-wow, I'm Native. And especially if such identity is, again, the basis for granting special rights and responsibilities, we have a problem.

To argue that the individual self is central to identity is circular, if that self is nothing more than nature and/or nurture. I believe, however, that there is more to self: will--or whatever it is that enables choice, that enables voluntariness.

But by the time one *can* choose, one might argue, one already has an identity. This is true, suggesting that something else is missing from both accounts: the possibility of self-revision.

Granted, a good question, then, is this: Who is the self that chooses, to revise? More specifically, from what position of power and privilege are the alternatives understood? As I've mentioned before, power differentials are often what motivate identity claims in the first place ('I have blue eyes'): the oppressed proclaim their identity in a politic of needs and the marginal

proclaim their identity in a politic of difference (Tittle; Young). These contexts hardly enable voluntary choice. And if you are part of a group that has been denied the independence (intellectual, emotional, economic) necessary to choose, certainly it will not be easy. But there need not be a tabula rasa for a starting point; a self can *recreate* itself. So while capacity for self-revision may be limited, it is because self-creation is a recursive process, done in bits and pieces, that one can, if one has time enough, perhaps spin from sphere to sphere. Some choice is possible and as all choices become rational, power differentials based on accidents of birth will disappear, rendering all choices possible.

Thus if one accepts the existence of the will, one accepts the possibility of change. One can undo or counter cultural upbringing if one wants to; to be feminist, in most societies, is proof of this. One can, more or less, recover from one's childhood; once a Catholic, *not* always a Catholic. Again, I quote Bissoondath: "I was born a Trinidadian. I was brought up a Trinidadian. But that was a long time ago. I am no longer a Trinidadian. I have not been Trinidadian for many years. I do not share the hopes, fears, joys, and views of Trinidadians. I am not familiar with the thoughts that move them, the ideas that stir them" (Bissoondath 27). After nature, and then nurture, there is will.

Not only is the influence of nature and nurture often impermanent, it is often neither as extensive nor as definitive as one might think. To identify myself by the culture into which I happen to be born presumes such a behaviouralism. Contrary to this presumption, which is apparently the basis of 'multiculturalism' (which has, as Elshtain very nicely describes it, a "vision of tribalistically exclusive groups given ontologically: this is what we *are*"), I am *not*, only, what my culture, be it however identified or defined, conditions me to be. If being born in Canada *makes* one a Canadian, why may people from Halifax and Vancouver be *more* different than people from Toronto and Rochester? I question the extent to which being, for example, half-Japanese (i.e., having one parent born in Japan) (or two grandparents? or four greatgrand-parents?) *ensures* a certain 'mindset'--having Japanese ancestors does not guarantee that one has 'bought' whatever it is that's 'Japanese'. Nor, as mentioned earlier, does being Black guarantee that one has 'bought' 'Black culture'.

The possibility of *change* by revising one's identity has been discussed by many theorists of identity politics: Young, Rorty and Wong (one can reject one's social role identity and/or one's group identity), Miller, Brittan and Maynard (revision depends on class because access to resources is required), and Karst (change is not linear but rather identities co-exist and change in interaction). But this idea of self-definition, of the freedom to constitute ourselves in any way we choose, to create, to revise our selves, is not at all new: it's an integral part of the existentialist philosophy which was developed, to a large extent, by Sartre.

From this context of choice and change, self-creation and self-revision, as it is applied to cultural identity, one is surely moved to re-examine 'assimilation': What is assimilation and why does it have a bad name? It can be said that assimilation has occurred when something has become like something else, i.e., when it has changed. Change in and of itself need not be bad; becoming like something else need not be bad. If such change is merely a matter of conformity, for no good reason, then yes, I'd agree to discourage it. Or, if the assimilation implies rejection, non-acceptance, non-approval of the other, for no good reason, then in that case too, yes, I'd agree to discourage it. But isn't conditioning, isn't education merely assimilation? Weren't we assimilated into,

encouraged to conform to the customs and values of, our first cultural group, the one we belong to by birth, by history? Then why the foofarah to be *reassimilated*, into a second cultural group, the one we might choose? Is it, again, mere supremacy of the primary, of the prior?

To the extent that assimilation means accepting the majority view, I haven't been assimilated, in many ways, into 'my own' culture: I do not have and do not seek a full-time job; I have not gotten married; I have not become a parent; I don't wear clothes in hot weather; I do not celebrate the New Year or birthdays; I do not 'go shopping'; etc. Then again, in many ways, I *have* been assimilated: I believe murder is wrong, likewise stealing and lying; I pay attention to time; I use deodorant; etc. The lesson left for a grade eight class I taught one day consisted of two lists, a cultural comparison of 'Indian' and 'White' values. The Indian list was closer to my own list than the other, and yet I am white. What does all of this prove? That insofar as culture is a matter of practices, beliefs, and values, one does choose one's culture. I decide, I choose; I thus define, I identify, my self. It's as simple as that. And if my values are closer to this simplistic and stereotyped list of Indian values, then can't I say, if I want to say at all, that I'm more Indian than White?

Am I suggesting the crime of cultural appropriation at will? I am indeed. But not as a crime: no one can *own* culture, therefore no one can *steal* it. When significant aspects of one's culture are determined not by heredity (in any sense) but by free and rational choice, one can choose, at will. What colour my hair is, what religion my parents adhere to, where my grandparents were born--these things don't have to have anything to do with what I am. I am an atheist, I am a humanist, I am pro-choice, I am anti-sexism, I am a writer--I am what I choose to value, what I think and what I do.

Becoming more rational about our identity claims (and ascriptions), assimilating and appropriating by choice, will lead, I think, to a sort of cultural anarchy, simply expressed by Marge Piercy in the utopia of her novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*: "When you grow up, you can stick to the culture you were raised with or you can fuse into another" (104).

But what if you don't fit into another? What if there is no list that matches your own? Am I or am I not Canadian given that I accept some things Canadian and reject other things Canadian? These questions suggest that identity defined by group membership--be it culture, race, religion, nation, sex, class, or sexuality--seldom accounts for the whole individual.

I was fired from a job because I dressed differently: I wasn't a Sikh police officer wearing a turban; I was 'merely' a teacher wearing jeans and a sweatshirt.[1] Why should the Sikh's turban be considered in a different light than my sweatshirt? Is it *less* important to tolerate individual, chosen differences than to tolerate group, inherited or conditioned differences? Shouldn't tolerance of differences include aspects of self beyond and apart from culture? Shouldn't multi-individualism be as important as multi-culturalism? Shouldn't the individual be as important as the group? One more time, I quote Bissoondath: "I learned instead to keep my distance from the tables that would have welcomed me not as an individual but as an individual of a certain skin colour, with a certain accent, with a certain assumed cultural outlook--the tables that would have welcomed me not for *who* I was and for what I could do but for *what* I was and for what they presumed I represented" (Bissoondath 23). Surely many of us (especially those of us who *are* someone and can *do* something?) resent such invisibility of the individual.

Choice is relevant to moral responsibility: to choose something is to agree to share

responsibility for it and therefore to accept any blame or praise for it; if one doesn't choose, one can't be held morally responsible. To choose our cultures, to choose our practices, our beliefs, and our values, to so choose our identities according to rational bases, is to be responsible for ourselves. Such choice is absolutely essential to any just consideration of any identity claims, especially insofar as they have *any* consequence, be it social or political. And cultural anarchy, assimilation and appropriation at will, enables, indeed reflects, this choice.

[1] Rand provides an insightful analysis of this kind of thing: "In Rand's view, the mixed economy had splintered the country into warring pressure groups. Under such conditions of social fragmentation, *any individual who lacks a group affiliation is put at a disadvantage in the political process*" (my emphasis, Sciabarra 346). This bears on my earlier comment about claiming 'I have blue eyes'--"individuals are driven to racial identification out of self-defense" (Sciabarra 347).

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