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REDISTRIBUTION OR RECOGNITION? DIFFERENTIATING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS IN PUBLIC LIFE

Plamen Makariev

*“St. Clement Orhysky” University of Sofia,
bul. Liberating King, 15, Sofia, 1504, Bulgaria,
e-mail: makariev@phls.uni-sofia.bg*

There are two criteria which interrelated and complement each other. The one of them concerns the rationality of behaviour – the actions done in the cultural dimension are based on contingent circumstances and cannot be completely rational, whilst everything which one does in the social dimension can be explained, at least in the ideal case, by reasonable considerations and because of that can be understood and possibly justified by everyone, independently of the context. The other criterion refers to human relations. The behaviour which is culturally relevant, presupposes identification of its subject with the people who share with her/him a way of life and consequently the morality of this behaviour is exclusivist, making difference between “us” and “them”. The actions with social orientation can be moral too, but in a different way. They are rationally motivated and therefore their morality is universalist.

Keywords: public life, justice, social, culture, identity, contingent identity, moral discourse ethics discourse.

The attention of modern socio-philosophical theories has been preoccupied with the problems of economic and power relations in public life, with universal human rights, liberty and justice. The changes in the “Zeitgeist” in the second half of the XXth century shifted the focus to cultural differences – religious, ethnic, racial, gender ones. This change of paradigm brought about certain conceptual misunderstandings which in some cases have lead also to disorientation of the public policies. I shall outline briefly the difficulties in question and further I shall propose and substantiate criteria for the differentiation of these two types of relationships in public life. In my opinion, if we can make clearly a difference between social and cultural relations, there will be no such misunderstandings.

I shall start by presenting the popular notions of the social and the cultural using a description by N. Fraser from the first chapter of the book “Redistribution or Recognition”¹. The author enumerates three manifestations of injustice in social and three – in cultural aspect. The first ones are exploitation (when the fruits of one’s labor are taken by others); economic marginalization (when the person has no access to a job, or only to such ones which are humiliating or with low pay) and impoverishment (when you are denied a normal living standard).

Among the manifestations of injustice in cultural aspect Fraser places cultural domination (when one finds him/herself in an environment where the models of interpretation and communication are of a different cultural “nature” and are alien and even unfriendly); denial of recognition (when

the practices of presentation, communication and interpretation which are characteristic for one's culture provoke an attitude of exclusion) and disrespect (when one is being confronted all the time by a hostile attitude or **shunned** – both in public and in everyday life [1, p. 23].

There are substantial differences also between the approaches to the solution of these two kinds of problems. The social ones can be dealt with by restructuring of economic relations, e. g. by redistribution of income, by reorganization of the division of labor, by democratization of the conditions for decision making concerning investment, etc. In the case of cultural problems of the kind just described, Fraser points out that they can be approached by action against the demeaning treatment identities and cultural achievements, by seeking ways to positive evaluation of cultural diversity, by reconceptualization of the patterns of presentation, interpretation and communication [1, p. 24].

In my opinion, the lack of clarity about the specificity of social and cultural relations brings about conceptual problems at two levels. Fundamentally, it can be claimed that the one of them is nothing but an epiphenomenon of the other, i. e. that its existence is illusory. For example, identity, religion, communal solidarities can be regarded as constructions, which are created by dominating groups in society with the aim of promoting their advantages [2, p. 57; 3, p. 478]. And conversely, social relationships can be interpreted as a manifestation of cultural traits. For example, the capitalist organization of economy can be represented as realization of a protestant consciousness, and real socialism – as product of the collectivist mentality of certain traditional cultures [4].

If this is the case, i. e. if only one of these two types of problems exists actually, everything which is being done to solve the ones of the other type is merely wasting of society's resources. Precisely in this sense we have here not only a theoretical, but also a public-political dilemma. The issue which is being raised nowadays most actively is whether the exaggeration of the importance of cultural problems (ethnic, religious, racial, etc.) is not an attempt to divert the attention from the injustice in the redistribution of material goods. Are not the struggles for recognition used **to screen off** social inequality? **Are not they merely a perverted form of struggle for social justice?**

In a more moderate interpretation the existence of the two types of relationships is acknowledged, but the question is which of them dominate in a concrete problematic situation. Let us consider for example a case in which an ethnic minority struggles for independence, i. e. for **secession** from the country of residence. What is the reality "behind" the values and ideals which are proclaimed as justification of this cause? Is this actually a **strife** of these people to preservation and promotion of their cultural identity (as is usually claimed in such cases), or this is only a **disguise** of the material interests of the intellectual and political elite of the community in question? If in a given situation of this type identity and solidarity do have a leading role, this does not mean necessarily that in other places instrumental considerations (in the sense of Weber's *Zweckrationalität*, [5]) can not prevail and vice versa. However, it is important to know what precisely the case is, because this should determine our attitude toward the cause in question and also – what public policies toward it would be appropriate and morally legitimate. And if we do not have clear criteria for the differentiation between social and cultural relationships, we would not be able to put the "diagnosis" which is so necessary. Besides we should take into account that often the influences of social and cultural factors **intermingle** and even mask each other – sometimes as a result of well calculated manipulations, and sometimes because of well meant self-delusions.

Without any pretensions for comprehensiveness, I shall propose here two criteria for differentiating between the social and the cultural elements of public life. The first one is based upon the difference between rational and contingent grounds of our behaviour. In my opinion, social actions (i. e. the ones which are not relevant to identity) can be entirely rational, whilst the cultural ones (i. e. related to identity) have in the last account a contingent basis.

What do I mean by “rational” and “contingent” in this case? The second of these two concepts is defined in the dictionaries usually by relating it to some **uncertainty** of being. **Contingent** is what can be, but also can be not. **However, not in the sense of chance.** Contingent are, for example, the cosmological realities – e. g. The number of the planets in the solar system, the distance between the Earth and the Sun, the duration of the year on our planet, etc. These are quite stable features of our galaxy, but they could have been absolutely different, and in fact the Earth could have not come into being at all. All these are results of coincidences of circumstances which have happened millions of years ago. However, once they have happened, these realities have become basis of processes which develop further in a quite regular fashion.

A short definition of “contingent” presents it as something which does not bear its necessity itself. In this sense every identity can be regarded as contingent because it does not necessarily follow from certain grounds, it is not an element of some reasonable whole, but is a product of a historical coincidence. One can give no answer to the question why is it such as it is. In a constructionist perspective of course its origin can be traced to some purposive-rational consideration of some hypothetical creators, but from such a viewpoint identity does not actually exist. It is merely an epiphenomenon. If we recognize its being at all, we must take its traits in each concrete case as given. The behavior which is determined by it can be in itself perfectly rational, but its ultimate grounds are not. One can explain reasonably why s/he has made this and this move at any point of her/his undertaking with the exception of the most important attitude of hers/his – why does s/he value precisely this identity and why s/he conforms her/his behaviour to it.

A basic element of an ethnic identity, for example, is the awareness of a common historical origin of a certain group of people. The boundaries which separate “us” from “them” are therefore not drawn on rational grounds. They are predetermined by a historical coincidence, but still they are taken very seriously by people. As the ethnic conflicts have demonstrated, certain solidarities which are accepted uncritically, as given, can turn out to be of crucial importance for the life and death of many people.

In what sense can the social behaviour, unlike the one related to identity, be entirely rational? As it was already mentioned, this specificity exhibits itself when we ask ourselves about the ultimate reasons for our actions. What guides us when our actions bear no relevance to our identity? Actually, is it at all possible to build human behaviour entirely on a rational basis?

A positive answer to this question has been given in Kant’s ethical theory. Following his critical philosophical line of thinking, the German philosopher does not postulate any dogmatic grounds for morality, he does not ask us to take anything for granted. In his conception, to act rationally means to act according to principles, however, only according to such principles which do not lead our behaviour to a contradiction with itself in any conceivable case. What does this mean?

To act according to principles means to keep to a consistent line of behaviour. However, this is not enough for a behaviour to count as rational. Can we agree that a person acts rationally if s/he uses any opportunity to cheat people for her/his benefit? In a way this seems to be a

consistent behaviour, but sooner or later it will cease to achieve its aims, because it will bring that person in confrontation with everybody. Even less rational in this sense would be the global results of applying such a principle by everyone. In the “Critique of Practical Reason” **Kant substantiates the thesis that no principle which proceeds from empirical grounds (like for example the universal strife for happiness) can be an element of a universal legislation.** If we conduct a thought experiment, i. e. if we imagine that all people start acting according to such a principle, we’ll see that this will lead to chaos – to results of peoples’ actions which contradict their aims. Or, as Kant puts it, “...such a principle, viewed as a law, would annihilate itself” [6, c. 29].

Departing from the counterfactual hypothesis „what will happen if everybody acts like that“, Kant reaches the conclusion that the fundamental moral law can only be formal. In our case, however, what matters is the **conception** of rationality which is implied by his arguments. It seems that rationality is understood here as a self-consistency of activity – an order of one’s actions which does not allow for them to get into contradiction with each other in any conceivable situation¹.

Is however the very acknowledgment of rationality as an ultimate norm rationally justified? Why should we regard ourselves as obliged to behave rationally? Isn’t the very imperative “**be rational**” **dogmatically taken for granted**? In my opinion Kant is logically consistent also at this point. In his philosophical frame of reference the subject of activity is man as reason – and as such s/he cannot be other than rational. For a reasonable subject to be rational is to be her/himself. Therefore the ultimate, though not explicit, ground for Kant’s ethical theory is the self-evidence of our reasonableness from which necessarily follows the **obligation to be true to ourselves** by behaving rationally, i. e. to act in a self-consistent way.

So, in a nutshell, the first criterion for differentiating between cultural and social factors in public life, which I propose is the following. The actions which are identity-related cannot be ultimately rational. They are based in the last account upon **assumptions** which are taken for granted. On the contrary, the activity which is irrelevant to identity, can be entirely rational, which allows for a unhindered communication in this respect. The Other’s behaviour is more or less predictable, hers/his motivation is “transparent” for us as is ours for her/him.

Another parameter of the difference between the cultural and the social is, in my opinion, the character of interpersonal relations. The difference between the two types of relations can be formulated in traditional terms as the one between community (in cultural respect) and society² (in social respect), but as these concepts are quite controversial nowadays, I’ll try to use for my differentiation a more general and not so **demanding** criterion – the identification of people with one another. In other words, we can find out whether certain public activities are of cultural or social type by checking whether the participants identify with each other or not. I shall clarify the meaning of “identifying with the Other” in this context by referring to a famous formulation

¹ The further development of the conceptions of rationality produces also a differentiation proposed by M Weber in his publication, cited above, between the so called instrumental rationality (“Zweckrationalität” – consistency of aims and means of the activity) and the value rationality (“Wertrationalität” – consistency of norms and reality of activity).

² “Community” and “society” in the sense of F. Toennies (see Toennies 1957).

from Toennies' "Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft": "...direct interest of one being in the life of the other, and readiness to take part in his joy and sorrow" [7, c. 47].

In order to draw this demarcation I shall use also the results of a relatively recent research by A. Gutmann of the so called "identity groups" (Gutmann 2003)¹. In my opinion she introduces this concept in order to "**blur**" somewhat the boundary between the two types of public relationships whose extreme, diametrically opposed forms are community and society (in the sense of Toennies). The "community – society" dichotomy has been criticized precisely because it leaves out many types of unquestionably existing relations which can be classified under neither of these two categories. Gutman proposes "identity group" in the place of "community" – such are the politically significant associations which attract people because within them mutual identification takes place. [8, c. 2]. She claims that individuals identify with each other on the basis of „ethnicity, race, nationality, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, age, ideology and other social markers“ (ibid.).

I have some concerns about placing „culture“ as a marker in the same line with "ethnicity" and "religion", as the latter are generally regarded to be forms of culture. However, in principle Gutmann's typology seems promising as means of filling the gap between "community" and "society". The groups which are not related to identity are called by the author "interest groups". This concept overlaps considerably with "society". However, Gutmann seems to aim at taking into account the cases which can be qualified neither as community nor as society – for example "race", "class", "physical disability", "age". These are categories of people who are not united by community ties solely because of belonging to the respective type, but who can establish relations of mutual identification. Within the same category such relations can exist in some cases and be absent in others. They can be of different intensity – as a stronger, binding identification, or as a weaker one.

In short, by replacing the „community – society“ dichotomy with a less contrasting typology, i. e. on the one hand a wide spectrum of „identity groups“, internally united by different in kind and intensity bonds, and on the other – "interest groups", Gutmann leaves behind the "all or nothing" logic, characteristic for the paradigm of Toennies.

And another advantage, which brings in my opinion the replacement of the "community – society" typology with "identity groups – interest groups". Unlike the community which is described by Toennies as a sort of quasiorganized, tightly united formation of individuals, the identity group can be like this, but it can be also very different, very amorphous. Its members may not know each other (even the term "member" should be understood here in a very general sense). In order to identify with someone on the basis of common ethnicity, religion, race, etc. It is not necessary to have personal contact with her/him. It is enough to share an awareness of common cause, or historical fate. In this respect Gutmann's typology is less "dramatic", it is more realistic and **plausible**.

In summary – what criterion for the differentiation between social and cultural factors in public life can we formulate on the basis of the "identity groups – interest groups" typology? It would be simpler, but not precise enough to draw the demarcation line between behaviour which is guided by the identification of its subject with other people (it would be even clearer but also more misleading to call it "collectivist") and one which is determined exclusively by the personal instrumental interest of its subject, i. e. behaviour which can be characterized as individualistic.

¹ Gutmann, A. Identity in Democracy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Why would it be **imprecise** to ascribe cultural specificity to every action which is done from the position of identification of its subject with some other people? Generally culture is considered to be a more or less **comprehensive, encompassing** way of life, but identifications with the Others are possible, as Gutmann has convincingly shown, also merely in some aspects of human existence. That is why it seems that we have to limit the spectrum of the cultural behaviour to the actions which are exercised from the position of identification of their subject with people who share with her/him a comprehensive way of life.

A legitimate question in this context would be: what is the relevance of morality to a typology of action which differentiates between what we do on the basis of identification with other people and what we do in an entirely individualistic way? In other words, is it possible to find out whether an action is done in a cultural or in a social respect by **judging** from the extent to which it is guided by moral norms? If we keep to some traditional categories, we would be tempted to qualify the former kind of behaviour as value-rational, and the latter – as instrumentally (or purposefully) rational in Weber's sense. However, this would not be a **plausible** demarcation, because the actions which are done in an individualistic fashion, i. e. without being guided by the identification of their subject with other people, can be moral too – we have already commented Kant's answer to the questions how this is possible in principle. I think that a good demonstration of the possibility of two kinds of moral behaviour, one which is based upon identification of its subject with other people and one which is not, is the "ethical – moral" typology, used by J. Habermas in some of his publications which deal with discourse ethics.

This typology refers to two alternative ways of working out standards of behaviour. Generally they differ (according to the analysis of one of the best experts on Habermas in the English-speaking philosophical circles [9, p. 51]. In their relation to the cultural environment. The ethical-existential and the ethical-political (in Habermas's terminology) **discourses are contextually situated, whilst the moral one transcends the situatedness in the name of an universalist, rational consensus**. Habermas means by "morality" here not a system of "ought – rules" of behaviour, as it is generally accepted, but a system of **just norms**.

The ethical-existential, as well as the ethical-political questions refer to the "good life" of the individual or the group¹. Their discussion contributes to the articulation of the group's identity, answering questions of the type of "who are we" and "what do we want to be" [11, p. 151]. But of course, such matters can be discussed in public only in the context of shared cultural traditions and values. The latter are not regarded as constructed with some purpose, but are taken by the group's members as given, as part of the group's life world, as product of historical coincidences. It is in this sense that the ethical-political discourse is dependent on the cultural context of the group's existence in every concrete case.

However, a debate of this type cannot come to an answer of questions which refer to the just regulation of human relations. If we ask how norms can be worked out which would guide the behaviour of a circle of people in such a way that nobody's interest would be hurt, the answer, at least from the viewpoint of Habermas, would be that this can be done only through a moral discourse. The latter is a rational debate in which the "...competing private interests are regarded as equal" [9, p. 54]. It should be clear that a necessary condition for such a discussion is that every participant takes a position of "selfless empathy" with regard of the others [11, p. 154].

¹ The ethical-existential questions refer to the self-understanding of the individual, and the ethical-political ones – to the self-understanding of the group (see Habermas 1992, p. 198).

As we see, an influence of the contingent circumstances in which a concrete discussion is taking place would prevent it from reaching the desired result, i. e. an agreement on the just regulation of the relations among the participants, and in general among all who would be affected by the application of the accepted norms. That is why moral discourse necessarily transcends its cultural context.

So, the main difference between “ethical” and “moral” discourses in Habermas’s sense is between situatedness in a contingent context, on the one hand, and independence of context, on the other. Actually I have already made such a distinction between the ways cultural and social factors “work” in public life. However, the new element which can be added on the basis of discourse ethics is that in the first case there is mutual identification of the participants in the ethical discourse (because of the importance of shared cultural traditions and values) and in the second one, i. e. in the case of moral discourse, there is no such identification. Justice does not allow you to give preference to the interests of certain people at the expense of the others.

Actually, what can motivate an universalistically moral behaviour if not the identification with other human beings? Where can the “selfless empathy” come from? In my opinion its ground can be only the rationality in Kant’s sense. I keep to justice in my relations with the others not because I love them – all of them and to an equal degree – but because this is dictated to me by my reason. If I do some injustice, I’ll go against my reason and eo ipso against myself, because I’ll adopt a behaviour which sooner or later will get in contradiction with its own aims, i. e. I’ll act irrationally.

So, in summary, here are two types of moral behaviour¹: one which is motivated by identification with other people and another, which is based only on rational considerations, but is not less moral because of that. The former is culturally contextual, and the latter is independent of cultural context and that is why we can use this difference as a criterion for differentiating between the cultural and the social factors in public life.

Finally, in the last account we come to two criteria which are interrelated, but still different enough in order not to be **redundant**, but to complement each other. The one of them concerns the rationality of behaviour – the actions done in the cultural dimension are based on contingent circumstances and cannot be completely rational (the answer to the question: „why do you act in this way and not otherwise“ can ultimately be only „because my identity is such as it is“), whilst everything which one does in the social dimension can be explained, at least in the ideal case, by reasonable considerations and because of that can be understood and possibly justified by everyone, independently of the context.

The other criterion refers to human relations. The behaviour which is culturally relevant, presupposes identification of its subject with the people who share with her/him a way of life and consequently the morality of this behaviour is exclusivist, making difference between „us“ and „them“. The actions with social orientation can be moral too, but in a different way. They are rationally motivated (although their subject may not be explicitly aware of that) and therefore their morality is universalist.

¹ From this point on I am using “moral” in the generally accepted sense, not as opposed to “ethical”.

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