

Culture

by Bart Nooteboom

236. The problem of multiculturalism published 3-1-2016

Finkielkrautⁱ argued, and I sympathize with this, that a state should be based not on cultural affinity but on the law, consent, and plebiscite, able to combine multiple cultures.

That would plead for tolerance of different cultures in a society. But that has brought mutual indifference, which has led to isolation of cultural or ethnic minorities in ghetto's.

Also, one cannot so easily separate laws from culture. Laws are laden with culture and corresponding ideology. Liberalism, for example.

Furthermore, like it or not, present nationalist populism demonstrates how people are emotionally, viscerally attached to cultural affinity, raising doubts whether a state or community (such as the EU) is viable without it.

The central question then is how much overlap there is between different cultures, as a basis for living together.

Let us assume culture is made up of a constellation of features, both more fundamental, deeply rooted, foundational (faith, ideology) and more derived (dress, food, art). I define ideology as ideas and ideals concerning the human being and its relation to society. There are underlying philosophical views, often implicit, tacit, concerning the true, the good, and the beautiful. I will untangle the features of culture in more detail in the following item in this blog.

Then there are three positions with respect to multiculturalism:

1. *Universalism*: some fundamental features are absolute, applying always and everywhere. They are the basis for universal human rights, for example. That was the dream of the Enlightenment. Here, multiculturalism is no great problem.
2. *Particularism*: the features are systemic, connected, forming a distinct ‘collective spirit’ (‘Volksgeist, going back to Herder, 1774), rooted in history and location. Individual identity is moulded by the collective spirit, adopted tacitly, taken for granted, not easily amenable to criticism and inter-cultural debate. Here, multiculturalism cannot exist.
3. *Postmodern eclecticism*: any features from any cultures can be mixed at will. This started with a mix of styles in architecture and art and spread to mixes of cultural features such as dress, food, music, dance, slang ... Here again multiculturalism is no problem.

I go along with none of these.

The problem with universalism is that every culture proclaims some of its own features to be the universal ones, and that what the salient features are may change.

The problem with particularism is that it locks people up in their culture, without ability to wrest oneself free, thus denying individual identity and responsibility. And it leads to a re-emergence of nationalism.

While particularism exaggerates the coherence of cultural features, the problem with postmodernism is that it neglects them. Surface features of style are rooted in deeper features of faith, ethics, etc. Culture contains narratives, and one cannot simply take out one element without loss of meaning. The whole depends on the parts but the parts also depend on the whole. Postmodernism breeds superficiality, mixing styles of consumption without touching upon deeper sources of sensemaking (religion, ideology, etc.). Yet in discourse between them, cultural narratives can change, or so I propose.

There is diversity within culture: not every individual shares all the features equally. There can be no individual identity without contrast. On the other hand, different cultures have more or less overlap, sharing features, also more basic ones, and overlapping narratives. That yields some bridgehead for connections.

Slavoj Zizekⁱⁱ noted that if cultures are distinct, one views other cultures from the perspective of one's own, adopted tacitly, taken for granted, not seen to be prejudiced. Tolerance then is condescending, and can become repressive.

The perversity of this is that there is a hidden bias, hiding implicit claims of superiority. Under the guise of allowing for cultural difference, minorities are in fact discriminated. Explicit intolerance is more honest, in not hiding such claims.

In order to succeed, then, multiculturalism must become reflexive, aware of the difference from which it relates to a multicultural world.

Zizek's conclusion, and I agree, is that one should own up that politics is antagonistic. That is democracy. It requires a choice of position, not an equalisation of positions. One should shed the political correctness of pretended equality and frankly and openly engage in defending and promoting one's own, partisan position, not pretending to be loftily lifted beyond it.

From being reflexive, aware of the parochiality of one's view of differences, one should open up to debate between such views. One should stick to one's views tenaciously, while facing those of others, remaining open to opposition, as a basis for changing one's views.

There lies the value of freedom of expression: being frank in expressing one's views, while allowing for the possibility that they are wrong, or biased, or even blind, and for that reason welcoming opposition. Contesting the value or validity of other cultures, while allowing for them to contest one's own. As Erasmus said: fire is kindled by striking flintstones together.

Admittedly, there is a problem of 'incommensurability', the difficulty of comparing perspectives. But one should not give in to this problem too easily. Cultures share features, more or less, even though with different senses attached. There is always potential for some mutual understanding, using the force of metaphor, imaginative switches of perspective. Literature and art can help. And even if this fails, one should manage to grant the possibility that the other is right. And come to some pact of non-aggression.

But again, here still reappears the joker in the pack. I am saying this from the perspective of my culture, struggling to maintain an ethic of open debate, an afterglow of the Enlightenment, even against all odds. So, is there anyone out here who wants to contest this? And then, is it too much to ask for arguments?

237. The container of culture published 6-1-2016

In the preceding item in this blog, on multiculturalism, I announced that I would untangle what is involved in culture.

Culture contains a lot. It refers to what is man-made, in contrast with nature. Cultural heritage includes architecture, art, music, literature, science, philosophy, etc. Culture in the anthropological sense is the set of habits, customs and rules people live by.

Culture includes religion or other sources of spirituality. It includes language. And ideology, defined as ideas and ideals about the human being and its relation to society. That includes things like justice, equity, rule of law, separation of powers (or not), free speech (or not), separation of church and state (or not), democracy or authoritarianism, scope of markets and private enterprise, corruption (or not), inclination to trust, and so on.

Underlying all that are philosophical ideas, often implicit and tacit. This includes views on knowledge and truth, language and meaning, ethics and morality, relation between subject and the world, between individual and collective, orientation more towards ‘exit’ or ‘voice’, legalism or consensualism, and so on.

The different elements of culture seldom stand alone, and depend on each other. Culture is systemic. Presence or not of compassion is related to religion and ethics. Free markets are related to liberalism.

Culture is rooted in history, myths, literature and art. It is a product of history: religious contention, wars, political and technological revolutions, alliances, disasters, and so on. As a result it contains much narrative. But as I argued earlier in this blog (item 10), this does not mean that it has some essence distinct from any other culture. There is always more or less overlap.

However, against postmodern mixomania, one cannot arbitrarily mix elements from different cultures. Mix Christianity with the Islam? Utility ethics with virtue ethics? Individualism with collectivism? Patriarchy and matriarchy?

Given the long and yet far from complete list of features, it is clear that culture is not homogeneous. Within a culture, people do not equally share features. There may be different religions, and belonging to the same religion people can be more or less religious. There is, thankfully, opposition between different views on many features of religion. Within cultures one cannot arbitrarily mix elements either. That is what a culture of democracy is for.

Cultural overlap between cultures arises from trade, communication, exchange, invasion, alliances, and refugees.

Intercultural differences are both a problem and an opportunity. A problem of misunderstanding and an opportunity of diversity that feeds intellectual and spiritual growth. Here, ‘cultural distance’ is similar to the ‘cognitive distance’ that I discussed in item 57 of this blog. Profiting from cultural difference requires some basis for viable interaction and communication.

There is an essential vagueness, indeterminacy, variety in cultural categories. Without those there would be no basis for difference of views and meanings, needed for cultural development, and how boring would it be? Indeterminacy of meaning is needed for poetry and created by poetry. Imperfect as cultural similarities may be, they do provide some basis for making connections. Inter-cultural debate is the poetry of politics.

Cultures feed a human lust for expansion, will to power, for manifesting oneself (‘conatus’), for feeling superior. Again ironically, this can arise from both a universalistic and a relativistic view of culture. The first is prone to yield a messianic drive from universalistic pretensions of one’s own culture, to ‘help’ other cultures to see the light. The second may arise from a sense of superiority that deserves to expand and replace, if necessary annihilate other cultures. Here, the apparent opposites meet.

238. What universality in culture? published 10-1-2016

To what extent is culture universal? That was a crucial question for the debate on multiculturalism, in item 236.

Finkielkrautⁱⁱⁱ deplored the re-emergence of culture as collective national spirit (‘Volksgeist’), yielding relativism and loss of universal cultural values. By contrast, I view the loss of universals, in an absolute sense of applying always and everywhere, as a blessing. I argued that at several places in this blog.

On the other hand, against relativism, I argued in item 10 that culture does not have some distinctive, unalterable essence. Both the universalistic and the particularistic view follow from an obsession with substance, in the history of Western philosophy.^{iv}

Any deviance from one’s own cultural perspective is hysterically attributed to some stereotype, an essence ascribed to foreign culture.

So, what might be a candidate for an absolute universal, across cultures?

It is useful to distinguish between universals of fact, descriptively, and universals of value, normatively, while recognizing that fact and value mingle or depend on each other. A universal of fact might lie in the nature of the human being, or surrounding nature, or some logic of society. A universal of value might be an ethics, such as Kant’s duty ethics.

I also distinguish between universality and uniformity. One can have a universal that is not uniform, though that may be at odds with a strict interpretation of universality.

One candidate for a universal of fact would be anything embodied in the human genome. Perhaps the instinct for ‘parochial altruism’ that I discussed in item 205. There are arguments from evolutionary logic as well as empirical evidence that people (and some other animals)

have an instinct for some degree of altruism within the group, at the price of suspicion of outsiders. That is not helpful for multiculturalism.

Another candidate might be natural science. Regardless of culture, people are subject to the same laws of nature. Admittedly, there are different views concerning proper explanatory principles and method. Nevertheless, if we assume that there are stable natural laws, those provide an objective selection environment that sooner or later weeds out inadequate theory. In science, universality of nature yields a universal of culture.

Culture is of a different order, of the symbolic. Society may also be subject to some kind of regularities (I hesitate to call them ‘laws’) that may also weed out inadequate ideas and practices, but that yields a far less strict selection environment than nature. Both democracy and autocracy have limits of survival, but with political means they have a wide potential for affecting the conditions of their survival.

Language may have a universal ‘deep structure’ in grammar, in terms of nouns and verbs, as claimed by Noam Chomsky. That would help but does not by itself eliminate sticky differences of sense more on the surface.

Death is a universal. Nature again. Is Heideggers’s view of how it marks ‘life unto death’ a cultural universal? I think not.

Is sexism, up to sexual violence, a universal? I think it probably is, first of all perhaps as being a natural trait. However, and here culture appears, in all its complexity, its degree of virulence and violence depends on other cultural factors, such as patriarchy, machismo, religion, history, emancipation, education, socio-economic conditions of unemployment, discrimination, isolation, and diligence of the rule of law.

Here, consider the upheaval concerning the intolerable incidents of sexual assault in Cologne during New Year 2016.

How, then, about respect for women, is that a universal? It ostensibly is not, as a matter of fact, but it should be, as a matter of value. Physical integrity certainly should be. But beyond that it may mean different things in different cultures, with different values. Adversarial argumentation may be a sign of respect in some cultures and of disrespect in others. Being courteous may be seen as condescending in some cultures, as a sign of respect in others.

In this blog I have pleaded for a more modest sense of universality, as temporary and seldom strictly universal. There are similarities and overlaps, more or less, between cultures. This is not a matter of features being identical between cultures (see also items 9, 11, 12). In other words: universality without uniformity.

I discussed respect for women. For another example, markets operate across the world, but differently between countries, depending on the institutional and cultural setting. But they also operate differently between industries, within a country.

Across cultures, phenomena are perceived differently. What for the one is nationalism for the other is patriotism, what for the one is isolationism for the other is sovereignty, what for the one is prosperity for the other is decadence, what for the one is free markets for the other is

economic colonialism, and what for the one is liberation from religious obscurity for the other is loss of meaning in life.

Here, consider the sharp opposition in Poland between conservative nationalists and liberals. This also shows how perspectives also vary within cultures.

I conclude that to a fair extent one can extricate oneself from one's culture, be open and learn from other cultures. One can do so without claiming, on the one hand, to grasp and wield some absolute universal or, on the other hand, that any postmodern mixing is viable.

239. Ideas, action, and integration published 13-1-16

Let me now get more practical. In preceding items in this blog I discussed culture mostly in terms of ideas, perspectives, and ideologies. How about action? Isn't that more basic and important for multiculturalism?

In view of having adopted a pragmatic perspective, in this blog, perhaps I am a little late with this, in my analysis. If ideas not only shape action but are also formed by it, then shared activity, in common practice, is perhaps the best basis for multiculturalism.

These days, a study appeared in the Netherlands showing that immigrants who entered for work integrate much faster and better than refugees seeking asylum, who are isolated for a long time, in detention centres, waiting for residence permits, without work or training. That blocks integration.

What is to be shared, then, between people from different cultures, in a given society, is interaction, work, in some organizational structure and process.

Then one may think or say whatever one likes, according to one's own culture, as long as it does not preclude working together.

Then a problem arises when one's culture forbids participation, or there is lack of shared language, or there are other cultural blockages.

An Islamic patient may refuse to be treated by people from an opposite sex, or to bedded in a ward with people of mixed sex or religion. Or a personnel manager may discriminate applicants according to sex, religion or appearance.

Of course, the idea of action as a basis for integration is not as simple as it may seem. Organizations are shot through with culture. The degree and form of authority, deliberation, style of communication, degree of prejudice, style of socialization, rituals, etc.

Lack of understanding often relates not to deep or fundamental issues but to trivial things in daily practice that are taken for granted in the country hosting refugees but are not familiar to the refugee.

To understand this, I pick up, as a link between action and thought, the notion of scripts that I used before (in item 34) as a model of mental ‘framing’. To recall: A script is a network of connected *nodes* that represent component activities (in case of a practice) or notions (in case

of a concept). In an activity a connection between components may indicate a sequence in time, one-sided or mutual dependence, the use of pooled resources, a relation of authority (supervision, control), etc. In a concept or theory it may indicate logical implication, conditionals, etc.

The classic example is that of a restaurant, seen as a sequence of nodes of entry, seating, selecting, ordering, eating, paying and leaving.

If something happens but one does not have the appropriate script to absorb it, as part of a culture, one is at a loss about what to do. If one is not used to self-service restaurants, then just taking a seat will not get you served. This is part of the problem of integration of foreigners: they cannot properly ‘read’ events.

In earlier items (219, 231, 232) I discussed the notion of ‘voice’, the deliberation between conflicting views or interests. Voice needs a script. Outside the script voice is just noise.

Scripts entails prejudice, invalid attribution. A gesture towards a pocket is falsely interpreted as the reach for a gun. Scripts serve to identify an individual as having a place in one or more scripts.

Exhibiting, in ones actions, the absence of the ‘proper’ scripts, one is branded, largely subconsciously, as not belonging. And that may trigger the instinct for ‘parochial altruism’, with suspicion and ostracism of outsiders, which I discussed in item 205. That applies not only to foreigners, but, to a lesser degree, also within a culture, to class differences. Down to the way you hold your knife at a dinner. Some rituals or practices arise for the very purpose of ostracism or discrimination.

In sum, the scripted nature of ideas and practices yields problems, especially between people from different countries or cultures, carrying different mental scripts.

But it also shows all the more clearly how important shared action is, to develop scripts that allow for collaboration and mutual understanding.

Of course, organizations are free to craft their scripts, within the law, and newcomers will have to adapt to them in order to integrate. Newcomers may need to adapt their goals and values, and learn requisite knowledge and skills, and they must be given the means to participate, and not to be excluded by discrimination. It can help to have role models of people that had success in this.^v

However, innovation entails changes of script, and organizations do well to welcome misfits in the script, which may trigger novelty. Here again we have the potentially beneficial effect of cognitive and cultural distance, discussed before, in his blog. In the long run those organizations will be most successful who have learned to collaborate with people who think differently. owwve

240. Flattening culture

published 17-1-2016

Does culture still have depth? In item 238 of this blog I discussed the range, the different kinds of things in culture. That is the horizontal dimension, the width of culture. Here I

consider the vertical dimension, the surface and depth, the high and the low of culture. Do we still have that?

Culture seems to have flattened, in art, religion, public debate, politics, and science. Religion without theology, art without high and low, public debate without argument, politics without knowledge, ideology without ethics, science on a side-track.

Do talent, skill, knowledge and experience still count, or is any claim as good as any other?

Culture has been democratized, and democracy has become consumption. In markets customers are king. The customer is always right. Now, with markets encroaching on public services, citizens have become customers, and there they now exercise what they have been told: they are always right. It is not the producer or elite that judges value, but the citizen customer, resentful of any claim of superiority from above.

In art, there has been growing criticism and antipathy towards professional elites that judge awards and allocate funds. They have been accused of being esoteric, inward looking, disregarding popular taste. That criticism may be valid, but what now? Does anything now go? Some compromise is found, for awards in art, literature and entertainment, in combining the choice of a public with that of an expert jury.

In philosophy, popular ‘philosophy of life’ appears to crowd out the more abstract, academic forms. I have mixed feelings about this. I grant that much academic philosophy appears to have drifted away from recognizable issues of humanity, life and society. And in principle there is nothing wrong with popular philosophy. However, I do hope there is still some room for deeper, more abstract reflection as a basis for it.

Ideology should be based on some underlying ethics. Without that it becomes footloose, unaware, arbitrary, a flight of fancy. Market ideology is based on a utility ethics without being aware of it, and as a result claims to be value free (see item 180), while exercising all the power of an ideology.

In education, standards have been subject to pressures to shorten study and let students pass more easily. To compensate, some universities have instituted special ‘university colleges’ to add some depth.

Science still holds fast to criteria of technique, skill, knowledge and argument. But it seems to be increasingly bypassed in much discussion, at least in the humanities. Policymaking does not adequately use what is known. Perhaps there are good reasons for this. Disciplines look at aspects while policy needs the whole picture (see item 218). Natural science can study phenomena more or less in isolation, it is subject to reasonably stringent falsification in experiments, and natural law as the object of study is stable and autonomous. The humanities, by contrast, are less falsifiable and study phenomena that hang together more, and are subject to shifts. They affect the behaviour they study.

Nevertheless, on all the urgent issues, of populism, refugees, terrorism, culture, identity, European integration, democracy and autocracy, Islam, fundamentalism, discrimination, markets, and so on, there is ample useful insight that is diligently ignored.

There is an increasing disregard of facts and arguments, in much public debate, which is more management of and by emotion, with a disregard, devaluation of deeper knowledge needed to understand what underlies the phenomena. In present democracy, policy needs to be dumbed down to pacify demands for simplicity, and to be heated up to satisfy a clamour for emotional appeal. Intellect is denigrated.

The refugee problem evokes emotional eruptions without the nuance that relevant knowledge would bring. It is a nonsensical hassle between all-or-nothing. Violence against women is all due to the Islam or has nothing to do with it. Of course both are untrue. The violence arises across cultures and religions, but in some cultures it is more virulent due to things like patriarchy, economic underdevelopment, lack of education, no history of emancipation, and, yes, religion. It has something to do with religion but not everything.

In the media, debate needs to be dressed up as entertainment, with time for hardly more than one-liners, and an urge towards provocation, stereotyping, and invective, all needed to boost viewer statistics.

In the press, pressures from falling readership and competition from other media have caused a dumbing down, and replacement of older, expensive, more knowledgeable journalists by cheaper, younger, less experienced ones.

In the barking of twitter (see item 219 in this blog), fact-free opinions are picked up and broadcast on an equal basis with news that is checked.

In this blog I have argued for truth as ‘warranted assertibility’. It seems to erode into mere assertibility, waiving the warrant.

The Enlightenment aimed to abolish despotism and obscurantism. We have managed the first, but the second has been institutionalized instead of abolished.^{vi} And now this obscurantism is paving the way for renewed despotism. If we don’t think, the despots will do it for us.

ⁱ Alain Finkielkraut, *La défaite de la pensée*, Gallimard, 1987.

ⁱⁱ Slavoj Zizek, ‘Multiculturalism. Or, the cultural logic of multinational capitalism’, *New Left Review*, September-October 1997.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alain Finkielkraut, *La défaite de la pensée*, Gallimard, 1987.

^{iv} Or with what I called an ‘object bias’ in thought.

^v See item 220, on a logic for hosting refugees.

^{vi} I owe this comment to Alain Finkielkraut, *La défaite de la pensée*, Gallimard, 1987, p. 165.