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**Community, Language and Ethical Dimension
of Cultural Identity.
Charles Taylor and Challenges of Post-modernity**

As many people maintain, we live in a postmodern world. Many popular thinkers, like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty, have declared that in last decades a Western culture's quest for universal criteria of truth, good and beauty finally failed. Since the ancient Greece, the man of our culture has been looking for universal answers to niggling questions about his nature, happiness, needs and fate. Yet, his efforts turned out to be fruitless. His vain attempts were questioned by Nietzschean nihilists and American pragmatists. However, these are postmodernists, thinkers of our times, who announced inevitability of complete deconstruction of our ethic culture. According to them, there is no chance to reach harmony, so praised by ancient philosophers. We are going to fail even if we limit our expectations to the national or ethnical level only, as romantic philosophers like Hegel or Herder postulated in the nineteenth century. The world of unity collapsed irretrievably, if it ever existed. Therefore, accepting his/her particularity is the only demand of a person in a postmodern and global society. This postulate was taken very seriously by Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, the author of a widely commented book, *Sources of the Self*. The history of self-understanding is the main field of Taylor's interest. Self-definition of a person can affirm postmodernist perspective, but can also rebut it. The author of *Sources of the Self* attempts to do the latter.

In my presentation I would like to make some remarks on another text by Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition*, where he maintains that in the contemporary politics, in its both theoretical and practical dimensions, one of the most urgent demands is the recognition of identity – the identity thought as the appreciation of personal autonomy and sovereignty, on the one side, and of the right of the community to declare its peculiarity in the pluralistic, heterogeneous world, on the other. Fulfilling this need of recognition makes politics a domain of human activity that is forced to persist in a troublesome contradiction. The former recognition of identity

can be understood as an answer to the question “Who am I?”, when the latter to the question “Who are we?” Therefore, we need to distinguish the recognition of myself from the recognition of ourselves.

Historically, the recognition of myself as a widespread demand should be connected to the collapse of traditional, hierarchical societies which differentiated people in the access to honor – understood in the ancient sense. In the eighteenth century, a notion of *isotimia* (equal respect) emerged and was planted in the progressive minds of Europeans and their contemporaries in North America. The traditional notion of honor was replaced by the modern notion of dignity, used in a universalistic and egalitarian mode. This idea was not an absolute *novum*. There were some traces of this kind of perception of humanity in the stoic philosophy and in the doctrine of Christianity, but both the ancient world and the Christendom were not ready to fully adopt it. It was during the Enlightenment when the universal dignity of all human beings was implemented, ignoring any social differences dividing people in earlier ages. Taking the step from honor to dignity was a sign of universalism, with equalization of rights and entitlements. This way a new democratic culture was born. However, the eighteenth century brought even more fascinating issue for the development of personal identification demand. Not only did it confirm that we all deserve equal respect as human beings, but also that each of us has an original way of being human. As Taylor maintains:

Before the late eighteenth century, no one thought that the differences between human beings carried this kind of moral significance. There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s life. But this notion gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life; I miss what being human is for *me* (Taylor, 228).

To be *myself* became a powerful moral idea. To achieve my dignity I need to listen to my inner voice that lets me understand my uniqueness in the world, my humanity. It leads us to affirm moral autonomy as a central value of an agent. This idea is vividly present in the ethical project of Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher who inseparably harmonized dignity with being a moral person.

However, the recognition of myself is commonly associated with the

recognition of others; when others are those who were named by Herbert Mead “significant others” (a term that depicts people who let me define my social role, my place in the world, weight of my being), that is parents, close friends, teachers, idols. Being myself is defined in a dialog with people around me. I need interlocutors and a proper tool of communication – a language, a code of understandable conversation. Since I am not able to work out that language required in isolation – on my own – I look for partners in a dialog. Yet, to recognize my authentic identity I might be forced to repudiate others, their significance to my self-understanding, and, as a consequence, to declare myself in a strong opposition to them. An individual earns his/her self-comprehension by denial of the role of significant others – liberating himself/herself from influence of other individuals, like Nietzschean *Übermensch* – a superman. An identification by declaring peculiarity lets an individual perceive himself/herself as an authentic being. Therefore, Taylor names modern times the age of authenticity. In this age the recognition of myself is rather a kind of monolog than dialog, accomplished with effective exclusion of others’ perspective. Liberating from the defining presence of others became a crucial challenge for a modern individual. As Taylor explains:

It is true that we can never liberate ourselves completely from those whose love and care shaped us early in life, but we should strive to define ourselves on our own to the fullest extent possible, coming as best we can to understand and thus get some control over the influence of our parents, and not to fall into any more such dependent relationships. We need relationship to fulfill, but not to define, ourselves (Taylor, 230).

This postulate can fundamentally reformulate my perspective of “where I am coming from” and is seriously deliberated by philosophers associated with procedural liberalism. These thinkers tend to question the very possibility of recognition of identity in a collective (communal) dimension. According to Taylor, “liberalism conceives of society as made up of individuals with life plans, based on their conceptions of good, but without a commonly held conception espoused by the society itself” (Taylor, 194).

Distinguishing between dialogical and monological recognition of myself has a crucial meaning in any attempt to recognize my identity in the context of larger than personal classification, that is, for example: sexual, racial,

lingual, national, and cultural identification. It is a breakneck to show transmission of monological myself into identification of ourselves. One is not able to define “we” when repudiates others from his contemplation. A self-discovery of myself in the perspective of my sex, race, language I use, nation I identify with, and culture I grew up in is impossible without identification with those of similar natural assets or social experiences.

It should be strongly emphasized here because complexity of the problem of recognition has an important meaning for political practice. When we take a look at the political culture of Western democracies, including Canada, which is without any doubt liberal, we notice that there are tendencies to oppose the recognition of individual identity to the recognition of larger social groups he/she belongs to. Everyone deserves to be recognized for his/her unique identity. However, when defining oneself is left to an individual, ourselves-recognition can become a part of official politics. And this politics in liberal democracy should be interpreted as fair and equal treatment of all social groups. It means that an individual can declare his/her unalienable right to be left alone in choosing his/her ends, when at the same time he/she demands assistance of the state in preserving distinctiveness and well-being of a social group he/she belongs to. In other words, our *personal* identification presumes that the state is “difference-blind”, when recognition of our *over-personal* identification requires the politics of “difference-appreciation”. In the former case, the state is passive (*status negativus*); in the latter, it is expected to be active (*status activus*).

It is common to invoke the problem of recognition of identity in the struggle for acknowledgment of racial diversity and women’s issues. However, as noticed above, ourselves-recognition, if one accepts the dialogical nature of self-definition, influences, or even determines, the way an individual perceives himself/herself. Misrecognition of women in Canada or Native Canadians, as a part of society, can influence the way a single Native Canadian woman perceives herself in her individual search for authenticity. If we accept this fact we will, in consequence, find ourselves in a trap of inconsistency in the aspect of personal and over-personal recognition of identity in the public sphere. How to reconcile “difference-blindness” and “difference-appreciation”?

It is very easy to detect a cultural struggle for a proper recognition of identity in nowadays Canada. Firstly, identity of a human being as a unique quality in the cosmos (in the context of human rights); secondly, identity as a unique individuality in opposition to other people (in the context of

freedom to choose one's own way of life); and thirdly, identity as a membership in a peculiar social group in opposition to other social entities (in the context of cultural rights). When the first appeals to universalism of humanity, the second calls for subjectivity, and the third invokes social particularity. These three dimensions can create a number of axes that can sometimes run in the same direction but can also cross one another. For example, a francophone woman can look for her identity being submerged in the French culture, with her speaking French fellow-citizens, when at the same time she could feel a unity of interest with Canadian females, no matter what language they use to communicate. She can declare various aspects of her identity according to an axis of recognition.

Anglo-Saxon procedural liberalism treats society as an aggregation of independent individuals, who present a variety of visions of the good or conceptions of the worthwhile life. Simultaneously, this liberalism believes in possibility to work out universal principles of fair distribution of social goods that will be promoting equality. The new pluralistic society fights against discrimination: not only in ability to adopt a large variety of social roles and positions, but in declaring different conceptions of good life as well. The society is not to define what good is worthy to be adopted by individuals, but rather how to secure rights of citizens to fulfill their personal preferences. Therefore, a liberal society should not be based on any specific vision of the good life. Ronald Dworkin, one of the leading American political theorists of liberalism, argues that a liberal society is one that adopts no particular substantive view about the ends of life. The central concern of a liberal society is the need to implement principles (procedures) to arbitrate the competing demands, interests and visions of good declared by its component individuals.

Liberal regime makes recognition of personal identity one of its main ideological challenges and eagerly executes this demand in practice through constitutional protection of individual rights and freedoms. It is an expression of a "negative freedom" defined by Isaiah Berlin. A state is passive in the field of personal choice as long as this choice is not a threat to a fellow-citizen's right to choose his/her own understanding of good life. But a serious problem emerges when a demand of over-personal recognition is presented. Is a state legitimated to frame a policy aimed at promoting values and visions of good associated with a particular group fighting for securing its uniqueness? How does a state cope with both levels of recognition in case they confront each other?

In his article *The Politics of Recognition*, Charles Taylor points at complexity of ideological dimension and political consequences of Meech Lake Accord of 1987 for the Canadian liberal political culture. Although the signed agreement to amend the Canadian Constitution negotiated at Meech Lake has never been ratified, it gives us a unique perspective on political consequences of the politics of recognition. The opening declaration of the accord contains the following: The Constitution of Canada shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with (a) the recognition that the existence of French-speaking Canadians, centered in Quebec but also present elsewhere in Canada, and English-speaking Canadians, concentrated outside Quebec but also present in Quebec, constitutes a fundamental characteristic of Canada; and (b) the recognition that Quebec constitutes a distinct society within Canada. These provisions were thought to guarantee, among other privileges, that Quebeckers can retain a number of laws passed in the Quebec legislature in relation to language restrictions, introduced to ensure survival of French culture in this province. One that regulated who was allowed to send their children to English-language schools (not francophones or immigrants); another that businesses with more than fifty employees had to be run in French; and another that commercial signs in any language other than French were outlawed. Those restrictions, placed on Quebeckers by their own government, were thought to serve the public good which was: preservation of French culture in Quebec allegedly infiltrated by alien, English influences.

The Meech Lake Accord opened a wide discussion on equality, equal treatment and discrimination in Canada. How to differentiate positive discrimination from forbidden discriminatory actions? Can the recognition of Quebec as a “distinct society” be perceived in the legal category of compelling state interest that can substantially burden civic rights of Canadian citizens, no matter in what lingual culture they grew up? The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, adopted as a part of Constitution in 1982, though rejected by Quebec, protects a set of individual rights similar to guaranties adopted in other western democracies and secures equal treatment of citizens in many aspects of their personal and social lives. A discriminatory action can be legally taken only when unequal treatment is justified by a relevant distinction differentiating subjects of political action. And the question is: is the language a relevant distinction to substantially burden individual rights in the field of running business or the right of parents to choose a school with the specific language for their children? Can the right to preserve culture of majority of Quebeckers, their collective goal, determine

the language of commercial labeling? Certainly, the answer depends on who is asked. Negative for most of nonfrancophone Canadians, both inside and outside Quebec; and positive for most of francophone Canadians. Quebeckers, emphasizing their distinctiveness, delegitimize homogenizing liberal political culture that dominates in the English-speaking world. This kind of liberalism strengthens their recognition as individuals. Yet, at the same time is not able to fully adopt their need for recognition of over-personal identification, defined by a need of flourishing the French culture in Quebec. Procedural liberalism is not able to show boundaries of the civic rights concept.

Another weakness of this kind of liberalism is the cultural context of its birth and development. As a product of English and American intellectual contemplation and political practice, as a part of these nations' political history, it can be identified by francophones as a manifestation of "cultural imperialism". As a consequence, as Taylor notices, Quebeckers tend to opt for a quite different model of liberal society. According to their view, a society can be based on a substantive definition of the good life, without depreciating those who do not personally share this definition. This common good should be a matter of public policy, even if this involves some restrictions on individual rights and freedoms. Therefore, they reject procedural liberalism and opt for some form of republican one, that blends a personal identification with over-personal identification. Certainly, this combination of sources of identification is dialogical in nature. A person perceives his/her identity in participation in a larger entity, he/she has a strong affinity with. Taylor explains the weakness of procedural liberalism and a need to limit the scope of personal interest hiding behind the term *rights* in the following words:

On this model, there is a dangerous overlooking of an essential boundary in speaking of fundamental rights to things like commercial signs in the language of one's choice. One has to distinguish the fundamental liberties, those that should never be infringed and therefore ought to be unassailably entrenched, from privileges and immunities that are important but can be revoked or restricted for reasons of public policy – although one need a strong reason to do this (Taylor, 247).

And, for many, both flourishing of French culture in the province and securing identification of Quebeckers among Canadians fulfill the criteria

of that strong reason. Meanwhile, the acceptance of a unique status of Quebec is perceived by anglophones as a policy of giving in to some vision of collective goal that is questioned by substantial part of Canadian society. Therefore, it is obvious to Taylor that resistance to the “distinct society” originates mainly from the popularity of procedural model of liberalism among English-speaking Canadians. The procedural liberalism strongly resists any submission of personal interests and rights to collective goals. In other words, the conflict originates from a misperception of both communities, including their political cultures. Multinational and multicultural societies struggle for the proper recognition of equal value of each component. Nowadays this is a crucial challenge to multicultural societies. To many, the situation in Quebec seems to be a dead end. Quebecers question the Anglo-Saxon culture, perceived by them as hegemonic and condescending at the federal level, when at the same time anglophones inside and outside Quebec, discard French culture as a tool of domination in the province. How to switch refusal to endorsement? The only help seems to come from a mutual respect and citizen-solidarity. This is what we call patriotism – an identification with others in a common enterprise, the common expression of respective dignity (Taylor, 188).

But when we try to interpret this kind of patriotism within the context of postmodern philosophy we receive pessimistic results. According to postmodernist philosophers any visions of uniting patriotism or common good in culturally fragmentized society are utopian. We cannot get rid of thinking in a particularistic manner. We always tend to form others to be like us, to accept our values and ways of life. Through generations anglophones have created a linguistic community of shared values and understating of historic facts that defined them as the people of common memory. The same must be said about Canadian francophones. Any form of universalism is a chimera. Therefore, what postmodernists reiterate, it is impossible to think out a transcultural code of communication other than this proposed by the procedural liberalism, that is blind to any cultural ties, no matter if defining our identity or not. Incommensurability of languages we use, the term language should be understood as widely as possible here, excludes a chance of unconditional recognition. When Canadians try to work out a standard of mutual respect, a *modus vivendi* for peaceful coexistence, they are invariably forced to adopt principles of North Atlantic civilization which are commonly recognized as the great achievement of the western world.

Richard Rorty in his paper *The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy* and the book entitled *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* ignores meaning of scheme of values, visions of good or lingual memory – which are characteristic of a particular society – for developing a stable system of social cooperation. Stability depends only on one kind of identification: with an impartial liberal regime, with its political and legal institutions. Any social, lingual, national, gender, outlook or other identification is secondary in nature to procedural liberalism and cannot constitute an individual as a citizen. Rorty rebuts the idea that since the procedural liberalism is a product of Anglo-Saxon political culture, its adequacy is limited to it. His political perspective is consequently anti-foundational. Contemporary procedural democracy proved its efficacy in the western world as such and thanks to that it lost genetic dependence on English or American political culture.

As a conclusion, we ought to notice that Charles Taylor points that we need to differentiate between two major types of recognition of identity: as a single individual of unalienable personal rights and freedoms; and as a member of a larger social entity which declares its peculiarity by invoking specific cultural rights and privileges that need to be legally secured. Nowadays, in western democracies the core of political culture is made up of liberal, procedural institutions. In this model individual rights gain predominating concern. The common good is also defined in the procedural manner. Any substantive vision of the common good is questionable. The notion of “distinct society” declared in the Meech Lake Accord was a practical embodiment of substantive common good and it is why it was repudiated by the majority of procedurally oriented English-speaking Canadians. However, what Taylor emphasizes, we need to notice a strong connection between the recognition of personal identity and the recognition of over-personal identity as a result of dialogical nature of our existence. The common perception of good life, sharing similar values and understanding of fundamental interests and needs, create a society, a political community. But this assumption is dubious today, in the age of postmodernity. Since there is no universal notion of good life, any unquestionable truth or criterion of beauty – other than personal – we cannot appreciate any “distinct society” that without a doubt substantially burdens individual choices. A society is cemented only by fair and impartial procedures that secure a peaceful coexistence of different visions of good; and there is no room for any, encumbering personal choice, vision of common good.

Place and Memory in Canada: Global Perspectives
Lieu et Mémoire au Canada: Perspectives Globales

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