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Can a Popperean be a Multiculturalist?

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Summary

Author shows how the epistemological concept of incommensurability was turned into a key category in political theory and then evaluates the cogency of category as it is used in contemporary critiques of liberalism. After recounting the debate between Karl Popper and Paul Feyerabend over the implications of incommensurability for the understanding of progress in science, the paper examines the multicultural attack on liberalism in which the concept of incommensurability plays an important role.

The paper argues that incommensurability-based anti-liberal critiques pose a serious problem for a certain type of liberal theory, but not for liberalism in general. Feyerabend and others, each in their own way, demonstrate that liberal neutrality and universalism are not *really* neutral and universal, but derived from a certain tradition. However, even if we accept their insights, it does not follow that the essentially liberal culture of consensus-building political dialogues is undesirable, or impossible.

The author believes that the political concept of incommensurability has a variety of implications. As a term used in philosophical attacks on liberal theory, its value is clear but limited. Karl Popper can not be accused of false neutrality, or a naive universalism.

At the same time, when the concept of incommensurability is used to defend a multi-cultural relativism, it tends to subvert one of the foundations of contemporary liberal societies – the will to live together. In some contexts, the concept of incommensurability supports a right to remain different that paradoxically reinforces the most powerfully illiberal ideology of our time – nationalism. Can a Popperean be a multiculturalist? Of course, not.

Key words: liberalism, multiculturalism, nation state, incommensurability, universalism, epistemology, nationalism, Karl Popper



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In this short paper I will present Paul Feyerabend's attack on Popper's "open society". In his book *Science in a Free Society* Feyerabend argues that "open society" is not a free society. In a very Popperean way he uses an epistemological concept in order to attack his former mentor. The concept in question is incommensurability.

My paper consists of two segments. In the first one (A) I will try to show why Feyerabend's criticism of Popper's political theory anticipates the contemporary discussion between liberals and multiculturalists. In the second one (B) I will tell a story which explains why for a Popperean multiculturalism can not be reconciled with liberalism.

A

Feyerabend's provocative political relativism is inspired by his epistemological relativism. If Newton's and Einstein's theories are incommensurable, then it is not possible to rationally prove that Einstein is better than Newton. By the same token it cannot be proven that Western medicine is better than acupuncture, or chemistry better than alchemy. How then can we objectively say that humanism is better than Nazism? We cannot.

In *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* Popper offered a rational reconstruction of science, while in *The Open Society and its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism* he defended a type of liberal gradualism. He tried to show the analogy between science and liberalism, and he argued that critical rationalism was their common foundation. However, Popper realized that verisimilitude does not have its equivalent in politics and morality. Liberalism is a rational tradition that presupposes a commitment to reason. One cannot rationally prove to antirational people that they are wrong. Popper knows that different traditions have different conceptions of the good, and that it is impossible for liberals to prove anything to those who do not want to discuss at all.

If the others are Nazis Popper suggests much tougher measures than rational argument. Feyerabend pushes the argumentation one step further. Unlike Popper, he does not say that the lack of objective good makes the job of liberals more difficult, he says that the lack of an objective good makes liberalism no better and no worse than any other tradition. If one wants to identify liberalism with rationalism, then rationalism is as good or as bad as any other tradition.

Feyerabend's attack on Popper's liberalism is based on the distinction between "open exchange" and "guided exchange". A guided exchange is the one in which interaction happens with the help of the rules of one of the traditions. All participants adopt the same set of standards. Liberal democracy is an institutional incarnation of guided exchange. An open exchange is completely different. The participants get "immersed" into each other practices because this type of exchange does not prescribe the rules of interaction in advance, whether an interaction happens between individuals or between cultures. So, Popper's liberalism is a form of assimilationism on a national level and something like neo-imperialism on the international level.

How is this criticism of “open society” related to the contemporary liberal-multiculturalist debate?

Liberal democracy is still a dominant form of government in Europe. European nation states united in the EU are states whose nations accept liberal individualism. The question raised by multiculturalism is: What would happen if cultural, ethnic or immigrant enclaves, existing in almost all former colonial centers, decide to resist the process of assimilation? What would happen if the entire cultures decide to fight for the highest level of cultural autonomy? Isn't the consequent multiculturalism the ultimate destroyer of the nation organized in a liberal-democratic way? Can cultures have a right to determine themselves like nations?

There are two types of multiculturalism discussed in contemporary political theory. The first one is usually associated with writers like Iris Marion Young, the second one with authors like Kymlicka and Taylor.

The first type mostly focuses on the problems of “oppressed groups” like women, homosexuals and disabled, while the second type primarily deals with ethnic minority groups. Those two concepts of multiculturalism are quite different but they have something in common, they question the liberal idea of equality between individuals, and insist on the equality between cultures.

The discussion between liberals and multiculturalists can have dramatic political and legal consequences (the exemptions which allow ethnic minorities to protect the authenticity of their cultures can cause the backlash of traditional European nationalism and xenophobia).

Can the criticism of egalitarian justice and universal human rights cause the dramatic disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) with liberal democracy? I believe it can. Radical multiculturalism can question the will of different cultures to live together, especially if other cultures are recognized only as oppressive assimilators.

B

I would like to explain the central idea of this paper with a kind of a fairy tale. I read it almost twenty years ago in one of Bagwan Shree Rajneesh's books. A few years later I saw a caricature based on this story in a former Yugoslav magazine *Start*. I do not know whose story it actually is. It goes like this.

A fairy godmother is walking through a park. After some time she sees two sculptures in the distance: a sculpture of a naked male figure placed on the left side of the road and a female sculpture on the right. They look as if they were about to jump into each others arms, so the fairy godmother decides to use her magic wand. She touches both sculptures and they come alive. The couple immediately disappears behind a large bush nearby. Our fairy godmother hears strange sounds coming from the bush and decides to see what they are doing. The sight she faced was not the one she expected, because she saw the male sculpture holding a pigeon with both hands, and a female sculpture defecating on it.

How is this story related to incommensurability as a political concept? I think directly. Because it helps us to understand why cultural relativism can not be reconciled with liberal democracy. Incommensurability in its radical form causes the disenchantment (Entzauberung, razčaranje) of democracy as it is known in the West.

So, the key word is disenchantment. Why disenchantment and not some other word? Because the word disenchantment tells us that some kind of magic is losing its power, that an order based on the force of enchantment may disappear. Disenchantment is the end of enchantment. The etymology of the word shows its origin in magic, because the word enchantment comes from incantare (carmina, charm) from a magical activity of chanting. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* says that to enchant means to “lay under a spell”. Merlin, king Arthur’s mentor, is one of the greatest enchanters in English history.¹ Both words, disenchantment and razčaranje can be used to describe an act in which the counter magic is used or the original spell removed. How is that related to the story about two naked ex-sculptures or to a paper on multiculturalism? The connection with the story is simple. The fairy godmother did not make dead sculptures come to life, since a piece of stone would not be aware of the pigeon problem. The naked sculptures were in a state which resembles the one in which the bewitched people from *The Sleeping Beauty* had to spend years, just waiting to be woken up from a dream. The only difference is that the sculptures were frozen and aware of their misery, unlike the Sleeping Beauty people who were fast asleep. The thing I want to stress is the closeness of enchantment and dreaming.

Paul Feyerabend, while recalling how the idea of incommensurability occurred to him writes: “‘Making a discovery’ I said ‘often is not like finding America, but like waking up from a dream’” (Feyerabend, 1986: 67). A few pages later he describes a theory shift, and points out: “...We certainly cannot assume that two incommensurable theories deal with the same objective state of affairs...hence, unless we want to assume that they deal with nothing at all we must admit that they deal with different worlds and that the change (from one world to another) has been brought about by a switch from one theory to another. Of course, we cannot say that the switch was *caused* by the change (though matters are not quite as simple as that: waking up brings new principles of order into play and thereby causes us to perceive a waking world instead of a dream world)” (Feyerabend, 1986: 70). A new revolutionary solution makes scientists feel as if they have woken up from a dream. For Feyerabend and Kuhn it is, of course, just shifting from one dream to another, to a new dream in which one believes that one is awake. Unlike the sculptures, who are creatures turned into stone but awake, and the characters from *The Sleeping Beauty* who are unconscious, participants in a scientific revolution have a strong feeling that for the first time they are seeing reality with their eyes open.

¹ Croatian word *razčaranje* is not used in everyday language like German word Entzauberung or English disenchantment. As a matter of fact words like *razčaranje* and *odčaranje* are almost never used, however the magical origin of the very concept of disenchantment (*razčaranje*) is perfectly clear. The reason for that is the word *čar* (magic, spell, allure) which was originally a magical taboo term used by the ancient Slavs and Baltic Slavs. The word *čar* provides the etymological root, the foundation for words like *čarobno* – charming, beautiful, *čarobnjak* – enchanter, sorcerer, *razočaranje* – disappointment, *čarolija* – magic spell, *čarobni štapić* – the magic wand, *očarati* – to bewitch, and for many others.

When Popper was writing about the difference between the open and the closed society, he made an Enlightenment type distinction between reason and magic. In his opinion World War II started because “this civilization has not yet fully recovered from the shock of its birth – the transition from the tribal or ‘closed society’, with its submission to magical forces, to the ‘open society’ which sets free the critical powers of man” (Popper, 1986: 1). The closed society is under a spell. The historical shift from the closed to the open society is not for Popper just another incommensurable dream-world, but more like a rational liberation from the magical spell of tribalism.

Richard Rorty also stumbles upon the word dream in his pro-American writings. He insists on a liberal utopia, which is something like a dream; his society as he would like it to be. Rorty explains: “You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become, as well as in terms you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning” (Rorty, 1998: 101). “Common dreams” keep individuals and cultures together. Rorty’s dreaming is like a self-imposed spell.

So, scientific theories are dream-worlds, the closed society is determined by magical powers, and ‘common dreams’ are social glue. How are they all related to ex-sculptures and political incommensurability?

I would like to establish a relationship by imagining a big park packed with sculptures of different sizes. Some of the sculptures in my park consist of a few different characters. For example a knight on a horse fighting a dragon. Imagine this to be an enormous sculpture which for ages prevented the sunlight from warming the nearby sculpture of a tall old man. His is green and covered with moss. Or, what if there is a small sculpture of a girl walking behind the horse who just can not stand the sight of the horse’s legs any more. Let us imagine what would happen if our fairy godmother uses her magic wand on all of them. Would the dragon and the knight continue their fight? We can easily imagine the tall man removing the moss from his face and rubbing it into knight’s or horse’s face, or a girl happily running away from everybody. The most serious political question is: What if ex-sculptures recognize pigeons in each other?

Feyerabend’s concept of the “open exchange” implies that that the ex-sculptures from the original story would fuse into something new and better. But, as we learned from the fairy tale, the result of the fairy godmother’s activity was a joint attack on pigeons, not a romantic embrace. It is not difficult to think of examples of political pigeon hunting. The young Marx talks about the first phase of communism which would in his opinion be dominated by an attempt to wipe out individual talents and differences. During the French Revolution *Sans-Culottes* were not killing only the political enemies of the revolution, but anyone who looked suspicious, including people who were too fat and nicely dressed. A few years ago a group of the New School feminist students called their historical research ‘shestory’. One of the first things usually done by successful nationalist movements is to purify their languages of foreign words.

In my opinion, the attack on pigeons quite often precedes “open exchanges”. It is an act in which those who actually suffered, or strongly believe they did, take justice in their own hands. Incommensurability questions the common-dream-spell and makes dubious the very idea of staying together in the same park. The ex-sculptures may easily

fall into conflict. It is not prudent to expect an “open exchange”, when we can easily end up having something like *defecation of everybody against everybody*, or to put it more scholarly – *faex omnium in omnes*.

Finally – can a Popperean be a multiculturalist? Of course, not. However, the argument based on the incommensurability of cultures has to be taken seriously. Instead of the post-Cold War optimism we will have to adopt liberalism with a skeptical face.

Literature

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