

# DIVERSITY VERSUS DIFFERENCE: NEO-LIBERALISM IN THE MINORITY DEBATE

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In the ongoing intellectual and political European debates about cultural diversity in the context of immigration and globalisation, two dimensions are often missing: First, class tends to be drowned out thanks to a widespread eagerness to discuss cultural differences, and yet, it remains absolutely crucial to distinguish between horizontal and vertical forms of differentiation, or hierarchical and egalitarian difference if one prefers, when one tries to make sense of contemporary cultural complexities. Second, the blanket term ‘cultural difference’ can refer to a lot of different kinds of phenomenon, from the cosmetic and aesthetic to the moral and social-structural.

What I am going to do here, consists in an examination of some of the widespread conceptualisations of difference as they are expressed not in academic discussions, but in public life. Now, of course multiculturalism is not a simple term with a well-defined meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary, tracing its earliest appearance to an article about Switzerland published in 1957, defines it as ‘[t]he characteristics of a multicultural society; (also) the policy or process whereby the distinctive identities of the cultural groups within such a society are maintained or supported’. However lucid this definition may be, it leaves important questions unanswered. As a matter of fact, very different ‘multiculturalisms’ are being promoted, and this is a main reason why it is so difficult to discuss with outspoken opponents of ‘multiculturalism’ who tend to associate ‘it’ with either an exaggerated

tolerance of foreign customs and beliefs or an uncritical support of any kind of immigration into the country, where immigrants are accorded many rights and few duties. In a review of the term, Stuart Hall (2000) mentions no less than six multiculturalisms: Conservative, liberal, pluralist, commercial, corporate and critical or 'revolutionary' multiculturalism. Each has its own distinctive approach to the central problem in culturally complex societies, namely how to reconcile diversity with social solidarity. At the extreme ends of the spectrum are 'assimilationism' (everybody who lives in the same country should have essentially the same culture) and 'difference multiculturalism' (a kind not mentioned by Hall, see Turner 1993), which demands that society should not be based on one set of values, but should accommodate, recognize the equality of, and indeed celebrate a great variety of cultural values. In practice, most theories of multicultural societies and most state policies in the Western world try to strike a balance between these extremes. On the one hand, too great diversity makes solidarity and democratic participation difficult to achieve. On the other hand, total cultural homogeneity is an impossible (and, to most, undesirable) goal to achieve even in ethnically homogeneous societies; there will always be religious sects and sexual minorities, to mention only two of the most obvious examples, demanding their right to be 'equal but different'.

What is of interest in the present context are the kinds of difference discussed in contemporary European societies, their evaluation by majorities, and indirectly, the ways discourses about cultural difference relate to power relations, notably class. My examples are Norwegian, but similar examples would not be difficult to come by in other countries in Western Europe.

### **Diversity versus difference**

It is easy, common and politically uncontroversial to 'celebrate diversity'. An important UNESCO report on cultural rights and cultural variation (World Commission on Culture and Development 1995) was titled *Our Creative Diversity*, and it managed to combine a strong defence of local cultures with a similarly strong engagement in favour of universal, global values (see Eriksen 2001 for a critique). How can this be possible? How is it possible to defend

cultural variation and simultaneously insist on a shared set of values? As if values were somehow independent of culture? A cursory reading of the report nevertheless makes it clear that values and diversity are held to exist in separate domains. 'Diversity' is, in the UNESCO report, largely associated with phenomena such as rituals, food, folktales, arts and crafts, as well as a few traditional economic adaptations which are either threatened by modernity or proven to be consistent with it (and should by that token be given a chance). The social organisation of society, including its political structure and voting rights, human rights, its kinship structure and rules of inheritance, its gender roles and educational system, its labour market and its health service are kept separate from the notion of 'creative diversity'. There is in fact nothing in the report which suggests that its authors regard child marriages, political despotism or religious intolerance as expressions of creative forms of diversity.

Notwithstanding the many fine distinctions that can be made here, I propose a simple contrast between *diversity* and *difference* in order to highlight two fundamentally distinctive ways of dealing with, and identifying, cultural variation. Bluntly put, there is considerable support for diversity in the public sphere, while difference is increasingly seen as a main cause of social problems associated with immigrants and their descendants. In the present context, then, diversity should be taken to mean largely aesthetic, politically and morally neutral expressions of cultural difference. Difference, by contrast, refers to morally objectionable or at least questionable notions and practices in a minority group or category, that is to say notions and practices which are held to (i) create conflicts through direct contact with majorities who hold other notions, (ii) weaken social solidarity in the country and thereby the legitimacy of the political and welfare systems (Goodhart 2004), and (iii) lead to unacceptable violations of human rights within the minority groups.

Interestingly, politicians and other public figures often praise the immigrants for 'enriching' the national culture. At the same time, they may worry about arranged marriages or Islam as impediments to national cohesion. This seeming contradiction indicates that cultural difference is not just one thing.

Broadly speaking, we may state that diversity is seen as a good thing, while difference is not. A non-technical but potentially useful distinction could be made between 'shallow' and 'deep' cultural differences. In a typical endorsement of diversity, Robin Cook, the then English foreign minister, said in 2001 that 'Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish' (quoted from Christiansen and Hedetoft 2004: 8). At the same time, concerns about gender roles, political loyalties, democratic values and religious rigidity have turned 'the question of integration' into a political issue of the first order. The same people who endorse diversity tend to reject difference. The question, which the examples below may serve to illuminate even if they may not answer it conclusively, is where the boundary between diversity and difference is located. However, it is also necessary to explore whether it could be the case that this kind of boundary, usually seen as one between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' cultural differences, is a token one, concealing conflicts of another order, to do with politics and class.

### **The murder of Benjamin Hermansen**

In the evening of 26 January 2001, a fifteen-year old Norwegian boy of partly African origin, Benjamin Hermansen, was on his way home in the Oslo suburb of Holmlia. Intercepted by some youths in a car, he was stabbed to death. The murderers were soon caught and were revealed to be members of a small right-wing, possibly neo-Nazi group called 'Boot boys'.

The media reactions to Benjamin Hermansen's murder were unanimous, using terms like 'shameful', 'shocking' and 'outrageous' in describing it. Soon afterwards, an anti-racist demonstration was organised as a testimonial to the boy. In spite of the unusually cold weather – it was almost twenty degrees below zero – more than ten thousand individuals, the vast majority of them white Norwegians, participated in the event, which took place in central Oslo. Leading clergymen, politicians and media celebrities made appeals condemning the murder and praying that a similar atrocity would not happen again.

There can be no doubt that a huge majority of Norwegians sympathised with these views. Having grown up with his white Norwegian mother, Benjamin was culturally Norwegian and part of a multiethnic social environment in the Holmlia suburb (an area where nearly a hundred languages are said to be spoken). His only fault, seen from the perspective of his right-wing killers, consisted in having the wrong colour. The virtually unanimous expression of disgust and outrage in the aftermath of Benjamin's death may suggest that blackness is not, in contemporary Norway, a marker of undesirable difference. In a strict sense, it may not even be a marker of diversity, since many black Norwegians are culturally one hundred per cent Norwegian, meaning that they do not deviate from mainstream culture concerning language, religion, food habits and other everyday practices. Many years ago, during a 1980s television broadcast of highlights at the nationwide Constitution Day celebrations, a major public ritual in the country characterised by ubiquitous flags and folk dresses, the commentator remarked that in a not-so-distant future, many of the children in the procession might be brown. He did not intend this comment as a warning, but as a matter-of-fact prediction. Significantly, this programme, almost sacred in character, never deviates from mainstream Norwegian nationalist sentiment. The commentator Knut Bjørnsen, a household name from innumerable sport broadcasts, knew what he was doing and was to my knowledge never reproached for it.

This kind of comment would not have been seen as equally innocent twenty years later. The reason is not that Norwegians have, as a rule, become more racist in the most restricted sense of the word, but that the semantic centre of blackness has moved from mere colour to strong cultural connotations. Apart from Somali and Eritreans, there are comparatively few sub-Saharan Africans in Norway. Dark skins are thus associated primarily with South Asia and the Middle East, and a comment to the effect that in the future, half the kids in the 17 May processions will be brown, may be interpreted not as meaning that Norwegians are going to intermarry with non-Europeans, but that half of the children will be Muslims.

Colour, culture and religion are not easily disentangled as markers of difference. Only a few days ago, I came across a newspaper story about a Pakistani-Norwegian who owned a flashy BMW car and who had been asked ten times by the traffic police to show his credentials since he bought it. The newspaper had found seven ethnic Norwegians who owned almost identical cars, and not entirely surprisingly, only one of them had been stopped by the police, and that had just happened once. The Pakistani-Norwegian BMW owner, by profession a successful shopkeeper, might have been one hundred per cent integrated into Norwegian society at the level of culture – he may not even have been a Muslim believer for all I know – but at the level of ascribed identity, he remained as ‘entropy-resistant’, to use Gellner’s (1983) term, as black Americans under Jefferson.

The question is: Which kinds of difference, that go beyond mere diversity, are subconsciously drawn on by the police in treating non-whites differently? In all likelihood, class is the main strand of association here. Since non-white immigrants largely belong to the working class, the policemen may reason, if one of them has a flashy car it cannot have been acquired by honest means. In other words, although the police’s behaviour cannot be put down to ‘old racism’, it has an inescapable racial dimension in that it results in a systematic discrimination of non-white citizens with nice cars.

There is a website devoted to the memory of young Benjamin. Viewers are invited to post their messages, and nearly five years after his death, people (judging from the style, most are teenagers) still send their condolences and expressions of concern to the site. His death has come to signify the evil of racist violence. At the same time, it has been well documented that non-white residents in Norway with exotic names have difficulties in getting high-level jobs. Documented examples include a man with a higher degree in engineering, who had not been shortlisted for a job once in several years – he had applied for around two hundred – and who eventually changed his name to a Norwegian-sounding one. He was immediately hired by a large company.

In other words, racist violence is generally frowned upon. Skin colour as such, with no further cultural or religious connotations, does not seem to function as an important marker of difference, in spite of the fact that the term neger, negro, is still in common usage in the country (Gullestad 2002 dissects the debate over the term). Yet at the same time, having the wrong skin colour, or a kind of name which suggests the wrong skin colour, does mean that one must be prepared for systematic discrimination. Although it is not related to skin colour as such, this does little to help those who become victims of a cultural semantics which connects colour to other traits deemed undesirable, that is to say difference as opposed to diversity.

### **Hijabs**

Like every West European country, Norway, too, has had its share of hijab controversies. The hijab or Muslim headscarf was rarely seen in the country before the 1990s, but it has quickly caught on among many Muslim girls and women of South Asian, Somali or Middle Eastern origin. The debate, which was very visible on most of Western Europe and elsewhere in the first years of the new century, had interesting national variations. Some claimed that the Muslim headscarf was incompatible with secular values (in France), others claimed that it was oppressive to women (in Scandinavia) or at odds with 'common values' (in the Netherlands). Some Muslims who had been indifferent to headscarves before, now began to take an intense interest in it. Some of their leaders said that it is the duty of a Muslim woman to cover herself up, including her hair. To many Muslim girls and women, the result is a catch-22 – a double-bind situation. If they cover themselves up, they retain the respect and recognition of other Muslims, but are denounced as unwilling to integrate by the majority. If they choose not to cover their hair, they retain the respect and recognition of the majority, but lose their honour in the Muslim community.

One of the most publicized incidents involving headscarves was the attempt to dismiss a young woman working as a cashier in a large furniture store because she had taken to wearing the hijab at work. In stark contrast to the simple Benjamin Hermansen case, the politicians and public commentators were

divided on this issue. While most of the latter felt, on principle, that the woman should be allowed to keep her job and wear a hijab, there was perceptible discomfort around the hijab as such. Like in France, there were suggestions in the Norwegian public sphere to the effect that it should be banned in schools. Many, both women and men who had formerly taken no interest in feminist issues, claimed that the headscarf was per se a symbol of male oppression and should therefore be condemned. Interestingly, those academics and intellectuals (including myself) who defended the right of Muslim women to cover their hair in any kind of situation, never once invoked a cultural relativist argument defending the other cultures' right to be different in any way they liked. Instead, it was pointed out that the hijab might signify many different things, including a deliberately chosen freedom from the outside pressure to assimilate. Another argument, from the liberal tradition, stressed the individual's freedom to make his or her own private decisions, even if one might oneself dislike them. The debate thus narrowed down, the questions that remained to be answered were (i) whether hijab use was something chosen by individual Muslim girls or women, or whether it was enforced on them; and (ii) whether it could be said that the hijab necessarily signified female subordination. In the Norwegian public sphere, there seemed to be no disagreement over the desirability of gender equality and individual choice regarding dress.

Simultaneously with the hijab controversy, there was a more low-key debate in some local newspapers about dress codes in schools, where adolescent girls increasingly were wearing sexually tantalising clothes, revealing their often pierced navels and so on. Many felt that these kinds of dress should be banned in schools, which ought to conform to certain moral standards. Although the hijab debate was more wide-ranging than this, understandably so since it was directly connected with the increasingly strained relationship between non-Muslims and Muslims in the post-9/11 world, the two issues were not dissimilar from one another. The questions concerned, in the first case, the hijab's inherent meaning (if any), the freedom of the individual to choose and the issue of male oppression; in the second case, the main question was whether or not young girls were subjected to a harmful pressure to act out

their sexuality prematurely. No unanimous conclusion about Islamophobia can be reached from this discussion.

### **Female circumcision**

Another Norwegian incident involved a group generally considered vulnerable and subaltern, namely Somali woman refugees, an anthropologist specialising in East Africa and, last but not least, the media. Following a controversial television documentary about female circumcision, which documented that the practice existed among certain Somali immigrants to Norway, a journalist with the largest Norwegian newspaper, *VG*, decided to write an opinion piece on the issue. She duly contacted Aud Talle, who had done fieldwork in Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia and among Somali women in London. Talle faxed her an article describing the social and cultural embeddedness of the practice, as well as explaining the practice on the phone. Soon after, *VG* published an article on female circumcision illustrated by an image of a veiled, chained woman trotting behind a brisk and confident female anthropologist. The story objected against the ‘cultural relativism’ of the anthropologists, who preferred to study circumcision as an exotic rite rather than trying to combat it.

At first, Talle was uncertain as to how she should react. Eventually she decided not to write a response in the newspaper itself. The fast media, she reckoned, were simply unable to accommodate the kind of detail necessary in an account which had to take all the relevant factors into consideration. So she wrote a book instead, *Om kvinneleg omskjering* (‘On female circumcision’, Talle 2003). The book was published a year after the newspaper commentary, and it is written in a popular style. It ends with a few policy recommendations, where Talle makes an interesting comparison between North-East African female circumcision and Chinese footbinding, suggesting that the successful campaign against the latter practice a hundred years ago might inspire similar strategies today. Her main arguments are the ones to be expected from a social anthropologist, but which are, incidentally, rare in general public debate: Circumcision has to be understood as an individual experience, but also in the contexts of cultural meaning and power structures.

Predictably, Talle's book was not reviewed by *VG* nor by any of the other mainstream media. But it had its share of attention in the small elite media, and – more importantly – it began to be used by health workers and public servants, who are often reminded of their need to understand why certain immigrants do certain things. However different their interpretations of each other might be, none of those involved in this debate actually defends the practice of female circumcision on cultural grounds.

During the debate about female circumcision, two minority views came across. One was the view, expressed by journalist Peter Normann Waage, that it should be legal but with an age limit of say, 18 or 20 years. When you have come of age, the argument went, you should have the right to make decisions about your own body. The other view, expressed by a minority of academics, was that female circumcision may be compared to body practices common in the West, such as piercing, extreme slimming often associated with anorexia nervosa, and silicone implants. They argued that societal pressure is exerted in both cases and that it cannot be claimed that the one is chosen and the other enforced. However, it was added during the debate, it does make a difference regarding the possibility to exert choice whether one is an infant or a teenager.

### **Arranged marriages**

The final example, which like the previous ones is a staple in migration studies as well as public debate on minority issues, may also be helpful in drawing the boundary between diversity and difference. Although it has been shown time and again that arranged marriages is not a unitary phenomenon but rather a continuum of marriage practices, public and political debate on the issue have been less nuanced than research. Now, much of the immigration into Western European countries consists in 'family reunification', often meaning bringing young kinsmen and -women into the country in order to marry them to relatives already resident in the country. Denmark passed a controversial law on family reunifications in 2004, which made it illegal to bring prospective spouses under the age of 24 into the country. Officially an attempt to stop enforced marriages, the new law also sought to limit new migration into

Denmark. While similar measures have been discussed in Norway as well, no such law has been passed yet. At the same time, arranged marriages, especially in the large Pakistani-Norwegian community, are often perceived in the majority as being more or less the same as enforced marriages. Marriage between relatives – there is a cultural preference for patrilateral parallel-cousin marriage – is seen as problematic, ostensibly for genetic reasons, and more importantly, it would appear that most Norwegians strongly favour individual choice over collective decisions in matters like marriage. Indeed, a generation gap has been identified among immigrants from South Asia, where members of the second generation, influenced by individualist values, are inclined to oppose the parental decisions. However, as Bredal (2004) documents, the institution of arranged marriage continues to enjoy considerable legitimacy among Norwegian residents of South Asian origin. Now, arranged marriages cannot easily be banned, but enforced marriages are. A second-generation Pakistani working as a journalist and writer, Khadafi Zaman, once expressed the view that arranged marriages ‘are cultural’, while enforced marriages are just ‘uncultured’ (ukultur in Norwegian). In other words, if it were possible to draw an unequivocal dividing line between the two, diversity would have been preserved, and difference would have been condemned. Of course, such a boundary is unthinkable. Merely a cursory look at the intricacies of marriage negotiations between and within families, where small sacrifices and larger compromises are the order of the day, shows that it is in fact impossible to identify objective criteria for distinguishing arranged marriages from enforced ones. Moral pressure is being exerted by all the parties involved, including the young persons about to be engaged, and a society that bans moral pressure ceases to recognise the most basic social tie known to humanity.

### **Shared values?**

I have briefly presented four cases, where the boundary between difference and diversity is made relevant. The public debate and policies implemented suggest that the boundary is important in defining the shared values of the new Norway of multiple, contested identities. The question is whether or not diversity can be said to encompass more than curry houses and a sprinkling of

brown in the 17 May processions. The cases indicate that neither variations in dress codes, in body practices or marriage strategies are seen as problematic in so far as they do not violate conformity to 'shared values'. However, it appears that most such variations associated with immigrants are as a matter of fact seen to be at odds with these values, given the public reactions to cultural variations here.

What are those shared values of the majority, then? The answer may have been straightforward a generation or two ago, when Norwegian society still defined itself almost uncontestedly as Lutheran and was equally uncontestedly based on the ideal of the nuclear family, the authority of the father and a cultural class structure according to which classical music ranked higher than pop ditties. Homosexuality was illegal and there were no non-European immigrants. Since the 1960s, the cultural hierarchies have, like in other Western societies, become less clear, and it has become increasingly uncertain what the shared values underpinning society are. In 1997, a 'commission of values' was thus set up by the government with a mandate to define, and propose ways of strengthening, the shared values of Norwegian society. Its findings, disseminated through a series of publications, suggested that society is less strongly committed to a set of shared values than it may have been some decades ago. Individualism, sexual permissiveness and legalisation of homosexuality, an increased variation in household structure, social and geographical mobility, democratisation of the family and secularisation are some of the keywords.

In other words, if it can be said that certain immigrants fail to conform to the shared values of Norwegian society, it then becomes logically necessary to make those values explicit. Judging from the examples briefly mentioned above, it may appear that gender equality, individual choice in finding a partner and the right to make decisions pertaining to one's body are seen as such overarching values. Interestingly, the Commission of Values made it one of its priorities to look into the situation of the elderly, concluding that there is a huge discrepancy between the values people in general claim to support, on the one hand, and actual practices, on the other. Elderly Norwegians are often

isolated and institutionalised, and nobody seems to think that this is a good thing. By contrast, elderly immigrants tend to stay with their families until death. In this regard, immigrants succeed better than ethnic Norwegians in conforming to the 'shared values' supported by the Christian Democrat-led government in power at the time of writing.

As a preliminary conclusion, we may state that individualist values associated with the freedom to choose – the ethos of consumerism or neo-liberalism, one might say – are paramount, and that (intolerable) difference as opposed to (unproblematic) diversity appears whenever the collectivity overrules the individual. This situation sets the stage for a kind of xenophobia which is markedly different from earlier forms; the yardstick is now individual human rights and values associated with freedom, not adherence to national ideas and practices.

### **Conclusion: A shift to neo-liberalism**

Over the last decades, there have been changes in the ways multiethnic society is being debated publicly and in politics. This is not a situation unique to Scandinavia; in all of Western Europe, there has occurred a gradual shift in recent years, especially after 11 September, in the dominant framework regulating exchanges of views about immigrants and natives.

Two changes are particularly noticeable. First, there has been a shift from a sociological focus on discrimination and racism, towards a focus on repression and rights violations inside the minority communities. Second, the anthropological emphasis on cultural rights (associated with language, religious practices etc.) has been replaced almost completely by public debates regarding individual rights and choice as unquestioned values, even in extreme quantities. Freedom values replace security values, and the burden of evidence is pushed from greater society across to the immigrants themselves. The stigmatising right-wing term 'culturally alien' (fremmedkulturell) has entered the everyday vocabulary of the press in spite of warnings from both academics and journalists. The blanket term 'immigrant community' has become synonymous with oppression and dark powers. The tragic Fadime

affair in Sweden, where a secularised Kurdish-Swedish girl was murdered by her father (Kurkiala 2003), demonstrated to the public sphere once and for all that groups are evil, and what now matters is to speed up and intensify 'integration' (read Norwegianisation).

Both of these tendencies can be connected to neo-liberalist ideology, which transcends conventional political divides and is as widespread in the social democratic Labour Party as in the neo-nationalist Progress Party. This is the ideology which, among other things, promotes maximal individual freedom of choice and the adjustment of public services to render them more efficient and their institutions more compatible with market-economic commonsense. Neo-liberalism is not in itself xenophobic. Quite the opposite: it is a doctrine of freedom which promotes open borders and free competition. However, it is based on a view of what it is to be human which conforms badly with lived reality in ways which can stimulate xenophobic attitudes.

Neo-liberalist ideology can be described as an unreformed (and unreflected) individualism where the only thing the individual owes his surroundings is self-realisation. This individualism carries with it conventional criteria of success – money, power, public visibility. Moreover, it implies that groups either do not exist ('There is no such thing as society') or create obstacles to the individual's freedom.

The ideological shift has led to a change in emphasis in the standard presentation of minority issues (enforced marriages rather than discrimination in the labour market; unwillingness to integrate among immigrants rather than demands for cultural rights), and entails that greater society is either regarded as non-existent or devoid of responsibilities – it is up to the individuals themselves to sort out their lives – and cultural institutions in minority groups become disturbing elements; they curtail individual freedom and reduce the efficiency of Norway Ltd.

As a part of the new rhetoric, it has become a common exercise among commentators to denounce the 'kindness policy' of the 1970s and 1980s. Since both female circumcision and enforced marriages demonstrably occur among

immigrants (however rarely), and researchers have devoted relatively little attention to such phenomena, myths have been spun and disseminated quickly and efficiently about powerful alliances of NGOs networks, researchers and high-ranking bureaucrats who have refused to face realities, and who have instead built a castle in the sky called 'the rainbow society'.

On the other hand, it is correct that it was until quite recently common to accept the validity of a structural understanding of problems associated with migration; that is, one could not just blame failures and shortcomings on individual decisions, personal idiosyncracies and so on. Someone who belongs to a minority is entitled to both freedom and security. He or she can take decisions, and greater society is obliged to ensure that the choices are real. For example, within the framework of a liberal society it must be possible, not just in theory but also in practice, for rural and working-class youths to take higher education if they want to, and it similarly must to be possible for a young woman with Pakistani parents to refuse to marry the man her parents have chosen for her.

At the same time, it would be an expression of sociological illiteracy to deny that important aspects of the social world we inhabit have not been chosen, neither by ourselves nor by anybody else. We do not choose our early childhood experiences, our kin, our class background or our mother tongue. As every anthropologist knows, crucial experiences vary and imply that each of us make decisions on differing premises. To some of us it is not even certain that the decisions or choices are the most important things in life; maybe we prefer security, predictability and belonging to a group.

There is a genuine predicament here, which incidentally goes right to the core of the foundational problems of social science. On the one hand, society is nothing but the result of a lot of individual choices. On the other hand, these choices are impossible unless there exists a society beforehand, which provides us with a language and a set of values, and identifies which alternatives it is possible to choose between.

Eager to emphasise the freely choosing individual, public debate and policy have almost inadvertently done away with the groups. At the very least, this has happened in the minority debate. All of a sudden, culturally specific experiences and cultural differences have no value in the marketplace of ideas; and if they exist after all, they should be flattened out of consideration for the free choices of individuals. Just a decade ago, it was acceptable to talk about cultural differences in a respectful way, indicating that they had to be understood and acknowledged if the integration of culturally different groups in a single society were to be successful. Differences in child-raising and gender roles provoked and enraged social democratic politicians and social workers, and many were hoping that things would eventually change – but at the same time, everybody involved agreed that it was impossible to remove deep-seated cultural practices by decree. Such changes come about slowly and gradually, as people acquire new experiences and notions.

This kind of insight has become rare. The Norwegian public sphere thus tends to see only shortcomings and evil intentions when confronted with cultural differences. Diversity is fine; it is morally harmless and potentially economically profitable, but ‘the others’, bearers of difference, have again become inferior, as they were in the past. This time, however, they are not inferior as a race or a cultural group, but exclusively as individuals, who oppress each other, who tacitly allow themselves to be oppressed, and who cannot blame majority society if they are insufficiently integrated.

The new way of talking about minorities and rights in Norway is not, in other words, a result of nationalism. The latter was a kind of collectivism which could occasionally propose compromise and peaceful co-existence with other groups. It nevertheless had its obvious weaknesses, which could only be addressed properly via a strong antidote of no-nonsense individualism. However, the pendulum has now swung so far in the opposite direction that concepts such as ‘ethnic group’ or ‘cultural minority’ are immediately associated with enforced marriages and authoritarian religion. In this kind of situation, entire life-worlds are opened to general suspicion and censored.

In sum, diversity is economically profitable and morally harmless (see Hutnyk 1997 on the WOMAD festival), while difference threatens the individualism underpinning and justifying neo-liberalism. In this perspective, it is no wonder that immigrants were praised in the 1970s, when the collectivist ideology of social democracy still held sway in Scandinavia, for their strong family solidarity; while in the new century, they are criticised for it since it impedes personal freedom. Finally, through a narrow focus on moral issues, the hierarchical and structural dimensions of minority/majority relations is made invisible.

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