

After Multiculturalism: *Response to Anne Sofie Roald*

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ABSTRACT

Anne Sofie Roald's critical approach to multiculturalists' discourse is in many aspects justified. The 'strong' version of multiculturalism gets stuck in strange paradoxes: in the name of 'respect' and 'tolerance' I defend repression and submission; the 'weak version of the multiculturalist attitude is in fact a universalist liberalism. But the most relevant political philosophical opposition, I argue, is not the one that Roald defends, namely between (western) 'freedom' or 'autonomy' and (religious, especially Muslim) tradition and 'collectivism'. Also in Western democracies freedom is defended out of a particular (collective) horizon. A more honest *and* more fruitful framing of the problems in multicultural and multi-religious Europe is to describe them in terms of clashes between different cultural prejudices, incarnated meanings and practices.

KEYWORDS

multiculturalism, tolerance, freedom, collectivism

1. FAREWELL TO A 'MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY'

Reading the paper of Professor Roald, I had the sense of experiencing something very familiar. Indeed, in the last ten years, many people distanced

themselves from the political and ethical ideal of ‘multiculturalism’, whether or not driven by dramatic political events like the negative consequences of a growing segregation or religiously motivated terror and murder. This is certainly true for my native country, the Netherlands. In this country, the recent developments can even be called spectacular: the good-hearted and even eager embracement of a ‘multicultural society’ in the eighties and nineties on the pretext of ‘let many flowers blossom’ is followed in my country by a fierce rejection of this ideal and – not seldom – a strong reversion to our so-called ‘own culture’ in the last few years.

For outsiders, this turbulent development can give the impression of a sort of shallowness, instability and lack of political self-confidence – rightly, I think. The doubts about ‘multiculturalism’, the benevolent welcome to cultural identities in so-called ‘colourful Holland’, in this country were followed soon by a severe criticism concerning the ‘emptiness’ of a culture of tolerance that had made possible the ill-considered and noncommittal embrace of cultural multiplicity. Those who wish to be solely ‘tolerant’, makes no claim to be taken seriously by others: this was the core of the argument in this criticism. The political debate on the integration of newcomers from then on took the form of a public discussion about the ‘values’ that support *and* limit tolerance. Already before 2006, the year the movie maker Theo van Gogh, known as a aggressive critic of Islam, was murdered by a devout Muslim, the public discussion concentrated on the freedom of speech and the public dealing with Islam, and the last few years on the ‘correct’ relation between democratic politics and religion in general.

I think Roald’s critique of multiculturalistic discourse and some consequences of it, such as ‘legal pluralism’, is in many aspects pertinent. Correct is in the first place her observation that there is ‘a tension *within* the notion of multiculturalism’ (p. 149-50): between a Romantic and an Enlightenment element, between stress on collective rights versus individual rights, or between a ‘strong’ and a ‘weak’ understanding of the term. The philosophical, ethical and political inconsistencies of a ‘strong’ multiculturalism are very well known in the international political-philosophical discussion since more than two decades.¹ I can confine myself here to the essence of it. I am a multiculturalist in the strong sense when I have the opinion that all cultures in their core deserve a deep respect, have a right on the formation of their own

¹ Alain Finkielkraut, *La défaite de la pensée* (Paris: Gallimard 1987); Stanley Fish, ‘Boutique Multiculturalism’, in: idem., *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1999, 56-72 (originally from 1994).

identity and the cherishing of their own idea about what is rational and human. Multiculturalism in this version is – in Roald’s words – ‘a system open for various value systems to live side by side’ (p. 152). Here, *tolerance* is the highest principle. In this ‘tolerance-centered-multiculturalism’, I am confronted with a dilemma as soon as I meet cultures or religions that refuse tolerance or inclusion of dissenters. In this case, I can – first possibility – accept with respect the intolerance of this culture of religion, but then tolerance is no longer my leading principle. I can – second possibility – also reject this intolerance, but in that case I refuse respect to this culture on a point where the difference really matters.

Let’s concentrate on the first case. Here, I am willing, on the basis on the right to be different, to assign the right to remove this right. Or, out of a benevolent (self)critical attitude towards ‘eurocentrism’ – the colonial prejudice that true civilisation one can find only in Europe – I bring an ode to the ethnocentrism of the other. In this vision, Europe must learn to be modest: she is only one culture among many others, while at the same time I defend the right of migrants to uphold their culture, even when it contains in our eyes barbaric elements. In this case, I am a universalist towards my own culture, but a particularist towards the other or foreign culture. Here, I find myself in strange paradoxes: out of humanism and respect, so with ‘good intentions’, I tend to plea for a ‘right to submission’, for example the inferior position of women in certain traditions – as Roald argues, following Okin.

A second problem in this attitude is that I am rather defenseless towards the ethnocentrists of my own culture or country. Since, the extreme right can make the arguments of multiculturalists their own and, doing so, save on explicit but problematic racist notions. You are defending the right to be different? Well, we do the same! Let’s listen to the old French politician Jean-Marie Le Pen who now has followers in many European countries: ‘The nations cannot quickly be qualified a superior of inferior. They are different, and one must take these physical and cultural differences into account.’² We can notice: the underlying principle of multiculturalism (i.e. the ‘right to differ’) is endorsed in this statement, together with a definite, romantic concept of culture (‘all our expressions are the expression of a particular culture’), but only the political conclusion of the new right is different from the hospitality of the multiculturalist. The conclusion of these representatives of a ‘racism without race’ is, that it is a tragic mistake to let communities with a different

² Le Pen, cited at Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Réflexions sur la question antiraciste’, in *Lignes. Revue* no. 12, ‘Penser le racisme’, December 1990, 15-53, p. 42.

civilisation live side by side, because then clashes are inevitable. 'France for the French', 'our own people first', etc., now can become the slogans.

Up to now the first version of multiculturalism. In the second, the 'weak' version of multiculturalism, I put limits to tolerance. To a large extent, the disenchantment of many people in the Netherlands and in other parts of Europe with regard to the ideal of a multicultural society, had to do with the growing understanding of many multiculturalists that in fact they always had been nothing more than multiculturalists in the 'weak' sense – some call this 'boutique multiculturalism'. A 'boutique-multiculturalist' is someone who frequently visits multicultural festivals, feels jealous on the physical suppleness of Antilleans or Cape Verdeans, and can appreciate cultural differences as long as they do not affect his or her core values, so as long as they can be considered *secondary* in relation to a universal identity we are supposed to share as humans. This lover of culture, for whom 'culture' is chiefly something (exotic) others have, can perhaps approve the wearing of a veil as an act of self-will, but begins to get the creeps when confronted with a niqab and with other cultural or religiously sanctioned practices like genital circumcision, the ritual killing of cattle, the revenge for honor's cause, the giving in marriage etc. What such a person can admire is the universalist human *potential* to make own choices, not the choices that has been made and that have been *incarnated* in traditions, cultures and religions. The latter can possibly be an obstacle for individual autonomy. Besides this, cultural choices must not hinder other people or be enforced on others, for example by means of 'group rights' or the state; these choices are, just as the religions, not a collective affair but a private matter. In this vision, 'cultures' cannot have rights. To conclude, the 'weak' version of multiculturalism in its essence is not a multiculturalism at all, but rather proves to be a universalistic liberalism that has liberated itself from the paradoxes and naïveté of multiculturalism in the strong sense. Roald too endorses this (universalistic) liberalism, for example when she frequently refers to the (individual) human rights.

II. CULTURE VERSUS AUTONOMY?

Is the deepest or most relevant political philosophical opposition the one between liberalism and anti-liberal collectivism or *Volksgeist*-thinking? Roald's paper definitely offers this suggestion, when we pay attention to the sustaining oppositions in her text, mostly following Okin. We find opposed the 'modern' and 'secular' society where the protection of every individual (p.

156) and 'equality between universal individuals' (p. 151) are basic, and on the other side 'premodern', 'traditional' and especially 'collectivistic' (Muslim) society where (male) elites keep watch on the preservation of their power. Roald opposes also (once again) a 'collectivistic' theological approach on religion and the sacred texts (p. 155) and a more 'relaxed' (read: liberal) one (p. 158). This more relaxed lecture of the sacred texts she finds for example – they can consider themselves fortunate! – in circles of the younger generations of (Muslim) immigrants. In short, the basic opposition in her text seems to be the one between 'freedom' and individual autonomy on the one hand and 'collectivism' (under the guidance of a male religious elite) on the other.

The danger of the ideology of multiculturalism – that is a *political* implication of Roald's oppositions – is precisely that the 'collectivistic' approach gets a chance to penetrate the 'modern' society through the cultural claims of immigrants, so that their 'group identity' (p. 155) and their 'purified religion' (i.e. Islam in the hands of Islamists and traditionalists) settles in our liberal states. The image of multiculturalism as a Trojan horse comes into our mind.

Well, it is considering this sharp and rather fairy-tale opposition between freedom and collectivism when my questions begin. As an example of the fact that 'group identity' still plays an important part in power relation and in social networking in countries with Muslim majority populations, Roald reminds us that 'non Muslims are for instance excluded from the presidential office', even in the more 'liberal' Muslim countries. (p. 155) But how big is the chance for an atheist to become the next president of a 'liberal' state like the United States, not only *de jure*, but *de facto*? If we admit that in this country a kind of *civil religion* is predominant, must we then not admit that also a liberal state like the US (even in his legislation) remains dependent on particularistic cultural practices and certain distinctions and virtues connected with these practices? Jean Bauberot, the holder of the (only) French special chair on the constitutional, but also cultural value of *laïcité*, calls this value the French version of a civil religion.³ It will be very difficult to get an important political position in France if you do not adhere to (the national traditions of) *laïcité*. In other words: also so-called liberal or secular states cherish and defend elements of cultural, national or even religious homogeneity. 'Freedom' in these countries is understood out of this horizon, not without or against it. And if we admit this, does this not put in perspective the harsh opposition between a individualistic culture of freedom and

³ Jean Bauberot, *Laïcité 1905-2005. Entre passion et raison* (Paris: Seuil 2004), chapter X: 'La religion civile, impensé de la laïcité française', 163-187.

human rights and the collectivistic and traditionalistic culture of 'Muslim states' and Muslim subcultures in Western states?

Further, Roald rightly observes that the tendency to 'reify Islam, seeing Islam as a homogenous system of belief and practice' can not only be found in circles of Muslims but also in 'non-Muslim' milieux and in the 'external majority discourse' in western states. (p. 157) For this practice of reifying Roald immediately holds responsible the dominance of (Muslim) 'leaders with collectivistic theological approaches' to the religious texts (p. 157). To me, this seems to be only the first half of the truth. The propagation of the static image of a 'pure' and homogenous 'Islam' is, together with the 'Trojan horse' ideology, one of the main ingredients of the politics of right-wing liberalism and the extreme right. There is no and there cannot be such thing as a 'liberal', European Islam: this mantra is shared by what Roald calls the protagonists of a 'Islamist' interpretation of Islam *and* by these right-wing politicians. And more general understood, the 'purification of the impure' is a practice *also* in the countries that receive (Muslim) immigrants. A stunning example of this purification was given by a expert on Turkish history and politics, the Dutch professor E.J. Zürcher. In 2006, he pointed out a strange paradox. The more European politicians tend to refuse Turkey as a future member of the European Union, the more their own societies are going to resemble Turkey. Only ten years ago Turkey was told that it was not democratic and not secular enough, too nationalistic, that it refuses the blessings of a multicultural society, and that it repressed his cultural minorities. Today, the ideal of a multicultural society is in most European countries dead and gone, the national sovereignty is often (as earlier in European history) opposed to European solidarity, and the definition of a pure 'national identity' to which newcomers must adhere is supposed to be of urgent necessity.⁴ To be sure, the new nationalistic and sometimes also xenophobic politicians often frame their political ideology in terms of 'freedom' versus 'submission' or collectivism, but this window-dressing must conceal a purified particularistic content of their message.

I must remark here that Seyla Benhabib, who is presented by Roald as someone who simply developed the implications of Okin's criticism of multiculturalism (p. 159), is rather critical of Okin's framing in her famous article 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?' 'I argue', we read in Benhabib's *The*

⁴ E.J. Zürcher, paraphrased in: Theo W.A. de Wit, 'Gevaarlijkheid is slechts de keerzijde van de ernst. Fundamentalisme, tolerantie en hypocrisie', in: *Vrijheid in verdeeldheid. Geschiedenis en actualiteit van religieuze tolerantie*, Stephan van Erp (red.), (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers 2008), 152-183, p. 169.

Claims of Culture, ‘that this (i.e. Okin’s) manner of posing the question has led to an unnecessary impasse and polarization, because both opponents and proponents of multiculturalism, despite disclaimers to the contrary, continue to defend a faulty understanding of cultures as unified, holistic, and self-consistent wholes.’⁵ The moral and political implications of Roald’s asymmetric framing in terms of freedom versus collectivism can be studied in an excellent study of the American political theorist Wendy Brown. In her book on tolerance she analyses and criticizes the implications of this opposition at length. They can be summarized in the following formula: “‘We’ have culture while culture has ‘them’, or we *have* culture while they *are* a culture.’ And this asymmetry, she goes on, ‘turns on an imagined opposition between culture and moral autonomy, in which the former vanquishes the latter unless culture is itself subordinated by liberalism.’⁶ In classical liberalism already (for example in John Stuart Mill) this opposition between culture and autonomy legitimizes the colonial submission of ‘barbarians’ – those who are not capable of liberal autonomy. In this view, of course, ‘Muslims’ are the new barbarians. Needless to say that Okin is one of the targets in Brown’s study.⁷

III. NEGOTIATING INSCRIPTIONS: ‘DAS FREMDE UND DAS EIGENE’

What comes after multiculturalism? As suggested before with some examples, I think a more honest (in the intellectual sense of the word), less polemical and more fruitful framing of the problems in multicultural Europe is to describe the cultural and political encounters and clashes in terms of encounters and clashes between different cultural prejudices, incarnated cultural meanings and practices. What happens in these encounters is what the Germans call the experience of the tension between *das Eigene und das Fremde*.⁸ In these phenomenological descriptions one can find an answer to the question, why so many pleas in favour of more ‘intersubjectivity’, inter- or transcultural openness and ‘respect’ seem to end in sheer moralism and political impotence, or even worse, in the reinforcement of aversion and xeno-

⁵ Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture. Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2002), p. 86.

⁶ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion. Tolerance in the Age of identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2006), p. 151.

⁷ Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, p. 191ff.

⁸ For example Anke Thyen, ‘Das Eigene und das Fremde oder Ueber universelle Gerechtigkeit’, in: *Zeitschrift für Didaktik der Philosophie und Ethik*, 1004/1, 5-17.

phobia. An example of this approach is the Belgian philosopher Rudi Visker.⁹ His proposition: the experience of alterity and strangeness, inescapable in our pluralist ‘open’ societies, does not liberate us from our singularity but – on the contrary – exposes us both to the *weight* as well as to the *contingency* of this singularity. Therefore these endless debates on ‘our’ identity, about language, about national identity, and about gender and race/racism. ‘We experience everyday’, Visker writes,

that next to the values we identify ourselves with there are other values others identify with. Hence, our commitment to our values obtains an arbitrary nature and this arbitrariness is threatening in a way: suddenly we realize that we are committed to values that ‘have us’ instead of the reverse (...).¹⁰

In philosophical terms: our subjectivity is ‘decentered’, and we have no access to this centre. We do not know precisely what it means to be Flemish, German or Dutch, nor what it means to be a man or a wife, black or white, but most of us *also* know that we must distrust people who claim to know exactly what all these singularities mean. Ethnocentrism, sexism, racism are all (disastrous) solutions to this experience of uncertainty, contingency or even an anxiety to our singularities.

The French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut called these singularities our ‘inscription’. Without our inscription in the world, that enables us to make sense of or to give meaning to our existence, we would be nothing more than organic life. This inscription makes us at some moments glow with pride or go red with shame: the powerful emotions of a ‘rustic mankind’.¹¹ The real question is if we can neutralize this ‘rustic’ dependence on a contingent inscription in a cosmopolitical project where only the abstract man rests. Finkielkraut frequently warns in his work against the following ‘dualism’: to have to choose ‘between the power of the Other or the autonomy of the ego; the feeling of gratitude toward what is given or the capacity to think, feel, and act by oneself; the weight of being or the lightness of being; genealogical inscription or individual affirmation; identity or humanity. No matter what form it takes, this dualism violently distorts our understanding of the human condi-

⁹ Rudi Visker, *Truth and Singularity: Taking Foucault into Phenomenology*, Phaenomenologica 155 (Dordrecht: Kluwer 1999); idem., *Vreemd gaan en vreemd blijven. Filosofie van de multiculturaliteit* (Amsterdam: Sun 2005); idem., *Lof der zichtbaarheid. Een uitleiding in de hedendaagse wijsbegeerte* (Amsterdam: Sun 2007).

¹⁰ Visker, ‘Vreemd gaan en vreemd blijven’, p. 96.

¹¹ Alain Finkielkraut, *Comment peut-on être Croate?* (Paris: Gallimard 1992), p. 88.

tion.”¹² At the same time we must resist to the temptation, to romanticize our inscription and our singularity.

Here, I cannot go more in depth in the philosophical background and credits of this phenomenological approach to our multicultural experience. Instead, I shall give a familiar example of the experience and structure of our subjectivity that is at stake here. A few years ago, a well known female Dutch columnist and publicist Beatrijs Ritsema fulminated against the veil, and especially against the niqab that suddenly appeared in Dutch society when a few girls were wearing it. She only could consider this dress – just as most people, I guess – as an ‘expression of religious fanaticism’ and as ‘perverse’. More interesting is the argument sustaining this opinion, but perhaps ‘argument’ is not the accurate term here. It is an expression of a deep aversion rather than an argument – an aversion clarified by a self-description of her own ‘inscription’. First she tells an anecdote about a Dutch writer who in an autobiographical story tells that he experienced a ‘fantastic sensation of liberation’ when he ended up by accident on a nudist beach and went swimming on impulse – naked. For Ritsema this spontaneous action is an excellent example of an ‘open mind’ and of the human experience of freedom. ‘Sometimes’, she writes, ‘freedom only means “without”: without textile, without ties, without pressure, without obligations’. It is from this conviction (or limit, we can say) that the linking of the word ‘freedom’ (in this case first of all the ‘freedom of religion’) with wearing a veil or a niqab for her is unthinkable, ‘indigestible’ and ‘perverse’. The sainthood and pureness that seems to be the ideal of the women with a veil or a niqab reminds her of the ‘religious hysteria’ and the ‘anorectic female martyrs’ that were adulated by the Catholic Church in the past.

Let’s point out what happens here: confronted with the veiled women, Ritsema falls back on her ‘final vocabulary’ (Rorty): ‘freedom’ in the sense of liberation from galling bonds, ‘emancipation’ in the sense of a farewell to female masochism, and an ‘open mind’, incarnated in the courage, to cast off bourgeois decorum and to drop the last piece of textile. But who can deny that this is at the same time a striking (self)description of the (mainly negative) values of the post-war generation who had their education in the sixties and seventies, and is suddenly confronted with a irritating strangeness and therefore with her own contingency? And the confrontation is not so much that between an ideal of ‘freedom’ and a outmoded ideal of ‘sainthood’, as

¹² Alain Finkielkraut, *In the Name of Humanity. Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2000), p. 103.

Ritsema suggests. Her polemical self-exaltation conceals that the profanation comes from the other side, from the veiled women! They confront us with our singularity, and with the contingency of this singularity. Multiculturality, therefore is (mutual) 'unintended profanation' (Visker) – and this is also the reason for our struggles in our multicultural societies, and the explosive potentialities of this type of society.

It is because of this explosive potential that Visker suggests to give a new role to the public domain in our democracy. Modern pluralist democracy can no longer sanctify our singularities. But it can make visible our singularities, by imposing a regime of visibility where the participants in the public sphere have the *masks* of their political part. These masks protect them against the singularities of others (and the passions invested therein) *and* against their own sacred values. Modern democracy also has the character of a *ritual* to live with the 'dissociation of justice and truth' (Paul Ricoeur): while recognizing each other as free and equal citizens, we accept at the same time that discord and peaceful conflict are normal when questions of truth and (spiritual) welfare are at stake. This 'ritual' definition of democracy (democracy imposes a *form* on the conflicts of society) is about the opposite of a political sphere as a direct expression and therefore doubling of the feelings, judgments and prejudices that are going on in society. But why defend this kind of democracy, in favour of what? In the end, to protect us against our own individual or collective egotisms, so that the co-existence of different people becomes possible.