

Intolerance and Fundamentalism Seminar

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I am a social anthropologist and anthropologists deal with cultural differences, and how people conceptualise and use them. Intolerance and fundamentalism are all about cultural differences. This is what is implied when people talk of ethnic differences being at the base of the genocide in Rwanda, when they speak of 'ancient hatreds' as the source of the Balkan wars of the 1990s. One definition of intolerance is the inability to accept differences. One definition of fundamentalism is intolerance towards competing ideas, especially competing ideas of the good life, the right way to live. Difference in some way or other always seems to be tied up with conflict, with the inability to get along. One famous formulation has characterised this as the 'clash of civilizations', a geo-political fracture based on competing values, morals and ideas. What I want to do this evening is to suggest the opposite, to argue via a detour through some reflections on the politics of tolerance and some ethnographic examples, that the problem is not difference but sameness. Paradoxically what divides us are the things we share.

The liberal position on fundamentalism as a form of intolerance is that it is unambiguously a bad thing, and that it can be approached through the application of knowledge, and by extension through the deployment of reason. In Isaiah Berlin's view, cultural differences are inherently positive and knowledge of them breeds respect. There is much that I would want to recommend in this view, but the central question still remains does knowledge lead to respect, does recognition result in tolerance? This is a question we are all familiar with and it is the issue at the core of all policies of multiculturalism. The idea that cultural differences mark boundaries, that differences are in fact contrastive, underlies much of the way we view social and individual identities. So that in discussing British identity, for example, Cohen argues that 'one only knows who one is by who one is not' (1994:198).

Difference involves forms of emulation, both conscious and unconscious. After 1974, Cypriot Greeks and Turks could distinguish each other at a glance just by noticing such seemingly insignificant details as different brands of cigarettes. Greeks usually preferred those packaged in blue and white because these are the Greek national colours. Turks smoked brands packaged in red and white, the Turkish colours.

It is the hidden similarities between groups in conflict which thus perpetually threaten each group's sense of identity. It is paradoxically those with much in common who develop a intense need to differentiate themselves, to make distinctions and keep things apart. This is precisely why so many scholars have argued that globalization – which through its many processes drives people together – is actually provoking a need to turn to cultural differences, stoking the fires of ethnonationalism, religious fundamentalism

and other particularistic assertions of difference (cf. Featherstone 1990; Friedman 1994; Hughes-Freeland and Crain 1998; Meyer and Geschiere 1999).

The processes I have been talking about, Freud termed ‘the narcissism of minor differences’: ‘... it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them. Freud’s conclusion was that something about how we become individual selves sheds light on how we relate as groups. Essentially, we come to know who we are by recognizing who we are not, separating ourselves from others who care for us. But, this process is a profoundly ambivalent one because it involves processes of both disavowal and recognition.

We might use this model to understand why a group cannot be the same as or even closely similar to a neighbour who is perceived as an enemy and dangerous. If relations deteriorate, the enemy is perceived more and more as a stereotype of negative qualities and is demonized, but retains some human qualities. In the worst case, the enemy is dehumanized.

In his only other reference to the narcissism of minor differences Freud (1930: 305) wrote ‘It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness’. What looks like difference is actually the denial of resemblance. If Isaiah Berlin is right and we need the knowledge, the insights of anthropology, history, literature and law to open up people’s minds, to combat prejudice, intolerance and fundamentalism, then it seems to me that we must also use the insights of psychoanalysis in understanding that what divides us are the things we share.

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