

The Dilemma of Autonomy & Authenticity in Liberal Modern Society¹

To honour our host, Marta Dvořák, I am referring in this talk to two famous fellow Canadians of hers, the thinker Charles Taylor and the film maker Deepa Mehta. Charles Taylor is known as a communitarian philosopher and an advocate of some form of recognition of the cultural independence of Quebec. Deepa Mehta is known as a critical ambassador of Indian culture to Canada, mainly through her trilogy of films *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005). The following exposition of a central argument of Taylor's philosophy will be illustrated by reference to the film *Fire* by Deepa Mehta.

Allow me to briefly call this well known movie back to your minds. The film is set in contemporary Delhi in the household of a joint family which runs a fast-food and video business in the ground floor of their home. The protagonists are the two daughters-in-law, both of whom have joined the family by arranged marriage: *Sita*, played by Nandita Das, who is newly wed to the younger brother Jatin, and *Radha*, played by Shabana Azmi, who has been married to the elder brother Ashok for 15 years.

Both couples are unhappy. Jatin feels that he has been pressured into marriage by the family. He neglects Sita and continues to see his Chinese-Indian girlfriend. After two years of marriage, Ashok and Radha find out that she is infertile. As a consequence, Ashok chooses to abstain from sex altogether and follows his guru in attaining moksha through celibacy. By implication, Radha has to also abstain from sex. For the past thirteen years the couple is engaged in testing their resolve in abstinence.

Unlike Rekha, Sita is not inclined to suppress her sexual desire and simply acquiesce into her husbands indifference towards her needs. She finds a new object of desire in Radha and manages to seduce her into a homoerotic relationship. In her despair, Radha turns to Sita for solace and the two women become lovers. They are found out by Ashok, however, who discovers them in bed together after receiving a tip by the servant. Sita leaves, while Radha, stays back in order to explain matters to Ashok. She promises to meet Sita at the Nizamuddin Dargah later on. Quarrelling with Ashok in the kitchen, Radha's Sari catches fire. Ashok leaves her in the burning house and wife. Singed but saved, Radha reaches the Dargah where Sita is awaiting her and the two women are ready to begin a new life together.

The film illustrates the predicament of its modern Indian protagonists. The two women are faced with the dilemma of either upholding a traditional way of life at the expense of sup-

pressing their desires, or of embracing a liberal modern life-style that allows them to give expression to these. Of course choosing this option implies breaking the traditional home of the joint family and severing ties with the wider community.

Through the exemplary exposition of the dilemma of the modern individual in a contemporary Indian setting, the film serves as an illustration of a central concern of Charles Taylor's philosophical anthropology.

Taylor's Problem

In his *Identity and Cultural Practice (Identität und kulturelle Praxis)*, Hartmut Rosa offers a critical reconstruction of Charles Taylor's political philosophy. He points out the predicament in which the modern individual finds itself. The cultural reference frame that is characteristic of modernity, places authenticity among the higher ranking goods. Part and parcel of the modern way of leading an autonomous life is the ability to form an authentic personality.

An authentic personality is formed, according to Taylor, by arriving at an equilibrium between two sets of goods that a person may strive for. These two sets of goods are at two levels.

On the first level, there are our immediate needs and desires. Primary needs and desires may be of a physical nature or not, but I am taking the subject of the film as an example. The subject of Mehta's film is the desire and the physical and mental need for a fulfilled sexual life. The choice of this example is arbitrary. I could just as well have chosen the desire to expand one's horizon through learning and travel vs. the desire of leading one's life within the narrow bounds of a traditional community; the desire to learn how to ride a bicycle vs. to remain a pedestrian; the desire to learn how to swim vs. to remain a landlubber; or whatever other good a person might cherish as part of his striving for a fulfilled life.

On the second level, in Taylor's scheme, there are goods of a higher order. These meta-goods serve to qualify and prioritize first order desires and needs. For example one might first want to desire to learn how to ride a bicycle before one desires to explore the world; one might first want to desire to learn a language before one desires to travel abroad. Among these higher ranking goods there are also landmark goods that help to structure one's entire life. As a landmark good one might choose the desire to lead a life according to the rules of the traditional community or one might choose to desire to expand one's autonomy. One might desire to lead a life according to the precepts of religion or one might desire to free one-self from its tutelage.

Obviously, for any person it is not always easy to bring these two orders of goods into harmony with each other. This is illustrated by Radha's basic dilemma. On the one hand, Radha wants to lead a life according to the rules of her traditional community. She wants to be a good wife serving her husband and respecting his primacy in deciding what is good for both of them. Thus she accepts his decision to refrain from sex and its implications, that she also would have to abstain from sex. She's not a woman without needs, however, and thus she is in conflict with her own first order desire for physical intimacy.

This unresolved conflict between second order and first order goods renders the equilibrium required for her authenticity unstable. Taylor's assumption is that an authentic individual manages to arrive at a stable equilibrium between his or her first order goods and the higher order goods that qualify these. Authenticity, so understood, has to do with truthfulness toward one-self and towards others. Truthfulness or authenticity implies congruence between values that one chooses to live by and actions that one performs. When Sita enters the scene, Radha's unstable equilibrium collapses when she finds herself yielding to Sita's advances. By pursuing a love relationship with Sita, Radha's actions come out of tune with her second order desire to lead a life in accordance with traditionally prescribed norms regulating the life of a married woman in India.

In order to become an authentic person once again, Radha theoretically has two options. She can either stop pursuing her first order desires and give up Sita, or she can stop valuing tradition and give up her husband. If she decides the latter, she will probably choose a new landmark value that allows her to pursue her lesbian relationship without feelings of guilt. One such landmark value would be the pursuit of individual autonomy.

Consciously choosing one's higher order goods is an act that requires maturity. In formative years, individuals acquire their system of higher order goods from a primary social reference group such as the family and the community into which the family is embedded. After the process of primary socialisation is completed the individual can consciously change its reference group and thereby its higher order values. But even in later stages of life, some reference group, according to Taylor, is of critical importance for the maintenance of personal identity. Personal identity, in Taylor's view, is formed and maintained in a dialogical process between the individual and the reference group. In Taylor's philosophical anthropology, human beings are fundamentally dialogical beings. They are dependent for the articulation and expression of

their personal identity on the terms established and recognised by members of the reference group.

The reference group may be traditional or modern. If modern, the group will uphold the modern value of personal autonomy. This higher order or meta good encourages the individual to question any received norms and values stemming from traditional reference groups. The imperative of autonomy requires the individual to appropriate any norms only after critical reflection, possibly in the light of universal reason, the principle of equality of all human beings, and considerations of justice and fairness. As sociologists like John Meyer have noted, in the modern cultural reference frame, the individual self is thought of as being complex, structured, capable of illness, reification, or alienation. It is taken as the unmistakable expression of the person, the residue of its authenticity, dignity, conscience and abilities. It is made the true sovereign and the yardstick of everything social. Knowing one's self, therefore, is a task for every modern individual. The self is in need of cultivation and the individual needs to ensure its inner consistency and the coherence of its actions, sayings, and beliefs.

Since law, politics, and every social institution is justified, ultimately, with reference to the many selves that form society, the individual selves have to be placed in a position where they can bring to bear their responsibility for the whole of society. To fulfil this role, the modern self needs to be brought up, educated, prepared, authorised, and capable of checking and balancing its various components.

The self, therefore, becomes a task unto itself. Meyer speaks of the self becoming its own principal in a principal-agent relation. The modern actor-individual can be thought of as principal and agent in one, which is just another way of expressing the modern idea of the autonomous, responsible individual. As a principal unto itself, the sovereign individual has a share in shaping the norms governing society whose legitimacy ultimately rest on the collective consent of all individuals taken together.

As an agent, in turn, the modern individual is bound and legitimised by these very norms. Since the responsibility for the norms governing society (and by implication the responsibility for the justice of its institutions, for the fairness and efficiency of government, for the damage caused by progress to non-actors like plants, animals, children, handicapped, future generations etc.) ultimately rests on all individuals taken together, every responsible individual can also claim to act on behalf of all of these instances. These instances (the state, its government,

the environment, future generations) thereby become intermediate principals for the actor-individual and a service to its own coherence, consistency, and share in collective sovereignty.

The civic and ethic responsibility of the modern, sovereign self and its personal interests, private needs and secret desires may at times conflict. This conflict has found its reflection, as Meyer and Jepperson note, in the classical dualisms of psychology ('super-ego' and 'id' in Sigmund Freud's, 'me' and 'I' in George Herbert Mead's). The ego, self, or personal identity is the result of the dialectical mediation between the claims of society represented to the self through the generalised other (super-ego / me). This mediation is never perfect since individual claims to self-expression always exceed the recognised patterns of conduct available through the cultural reference frame. The result is a *Struggle for Recognition* (Axel Honneth) where new norms and values are fought for and the range of available models is expanded. A similar constellation of externally available normative models and internal raw interests is repeated in collective actors like organisations and states when they form their collective identities or 'selves' as institutions.

Choosing to be a modern individual, Radha would have to try to attain an equilibrium between her first order desires and her critically appropriated new system of higher order goods. This equilibrium could only be found outside the normative framework of her traditional reference frame. Thus she abandons her reference group, her husband, her family, and seeks a new life with Sita. The question that immediately arises and to which the film has no answer is, what will be the new reference group for Radha and Sita. Whose way of life are they going to follow and whom are they going to prove their new found authenticity. Which new reference group will provide them with the necessary recognition, to stay with Honneth's terminology, to form stable and authentic personalities?

With the modern cultural reference frame reaching more and more individuals, reference groups that are socially integrated around a common conception of a good life continually loose members. Ultimately, so Taylor, they can not reproduce themselves and vanish. This process has reached very far in many developed countries where traditional forms of collective life have eroded. What remains is an anonymous society consisting of liberated but atomised individuals as the only reference group.

Liberal society, however, is characterised by an abstinence regarding substantial collective first order goods. Liberal society is liberal precisely because it leaves to each individual the

choice of its most cherished goods. In liberal societies, instead of sticking to their primary reference groups, individuals can choose ad-hoc reference groups. Unlike traditional reference groups, these ad-hoc groups, however, cover only certain aspects of life like work, family, friends, music, sports, fashion etc. They never involve the whole individual in all aspects and stations of life as certain traditional communities do.

With ad-hoc reference groups as only resort for the modern individual the choice of higher order goods becomes context dependent and eclectic. Correspondingly, the equilibrium required for the individual to arrive at an authentic personality becomes equally ad-hoc and varies between contexts. In the end, neither liberal society nor the plurality of ad-hoc reference groups are in a position to grant recognition to the individual as a whole for the choice of its goods and for the success or failure to lead a life according to these. By encouraging the individual to lead an authentic life according to autonomously chosen higher order goods, liberal society, by the same token, diminishes the chances of its success.

This, according to Taylor and other communitarians, leads to a feeling of alienation, which is experienced by individuals throughout modernity. The European Romantic movement has given expression to this at the very onset of the political and industrial revolutions of the 18th century. Instead of living a life under the watchful eyes of a traditional reference group, modern individuals lead their lives in anonymous *non-spaces* (Marc Augé) such as office-buildings, shopping-malls, restaurant-chains, supermarkets, highways, airports, hotels etc. with no significant others to appreciate the modern individual as something more than a performer of specialised functions in certain circumscribed contexts like work, family, friends and hobbies.

In Taylor's view, liberal societies, although promoting authenticity as a higher order good, at the same time drain the individual of the resources that it needs in order to form an authentic personality. By encouraging individuals to renounce the norms of their traditional reference group in the name of autonomy, they drain those groups of their possibility to reproduce themselves. Thereby, so the claim, liberal societies drain themselves of an existentially required source of meaningful recognition and thereby of an existential prerequisite to form an authentic personality.

Taylor's Solution

This is, in very simple terms, Taylor's diagnosis of the dilemma of the modern individual. In thinking about possible ways out of this dilemma, Taylor identifies the traditional reference

group with the linguistic community. In doing so, he inherits the legacy of the German Romantic tradition that in turn draws on Johann Gottfried Herder and his language-based ontology of peoples. Taylor concludes that, in order to preserve a meaningful reference group for the individual, one has to protect the language group. From this he infers that group rights – such as the preservation of the French language in Quebec – should at times be allowed to override individual rights (e.g. the denial of English medium education).

Critique of Taylor's Solution

Against this one can raise a few questions. Firstly, it seems doubtful whether the differential criteria for a meaningful reference group can be the linguistic community. It seems that a shared language is no safeguard against processes of modernisation, which lead to the phenomenon of alienation admonished by Taylor and other communitarians.

Language groups as a whole do undergo processes of modernisation leading to the difficulties just mentioned. That is, by carving French speaking Quebec out of English speaking Canada, Quebec does not become less modern, less liberal, and less prone to produce alienated *non-spaces* for its authenticity seeking *Québécois*.

Instead it seems that if we follow Taylor's assumption about the dialogical nature of identity formation, only traditional reference groups would be efficient in providing the resources for an authentic life, for only traditional communities with their integration over a common conception of good and with their non-mass-mediated person to person contact are capable of appreciating the individual as a whole in all aspects and phases of life.

The notion of the traditional community, however, is independent of the notion of the linguistic community. There can be liberal and traditional communities within the same language group as well as disparate linguistic communities differing by degrees of modernisation. Thus, in order to preserve the resources for the development of authentic personalities, instead of language communities Taylor would have to preserve traditional communities. As a consequence, Taylor's argument would lead to outright conservatism. Under this assumption any individual liberty could be curtailed in order to preserve traditional culture.

This option would be tantamount to giving away the possibility of emancipation inherent in the project of modernity. By giving up the higher order value of autonomy, this option would lend itself to unrestrained paternalism and to the preservation of oppressive and potentially human-rights-denying traditional practices.

Under the assumption that humans are the way Taylor stipulates in his philosophical anthropology, it seems that autonomy and authenticity are mutually exclusive as higher order goods. The liberal cultural reference frame would then be inconsistent in trying to simultaneously uphold the two. To be consistent, it seems, we would have to give up one of the two higher order goods. Either we give up autonomy as a value, then we end up with conservatism, or we give up authenticity as a value. The question is then, what do we end up with?

Granting for the moment that Taylor's analysis of the dialogical nature of personal and collective identity formation is right, this question, to my mind, seems largely to be an empirical one. There can be no doubt that liberal modern society produces many atomised individuals, some of which feel they lack a sense of belonging. Yes, families disintegrate, there are lots of single parents and singles without children etc. But how representative is this of modern society on the whole? And does this really threaten its survival, as communitarians like Taylor fear? There is evidence to the contrary to be considered.

And finally, not every modern society is equally liberal. The debates about Islam in Europe and about the "integration" of Muslims into European societies have led to a reassertion in many countries of "who we are". The identity politics surrounding these debates form the subject of a book of mine that is to appear this very month.

As a response to the Islamic challenge to liberal modern society, individual European societies as well as the European Union are re-figuring their identities in a much narrower sense than what one would expect from a liberal point of view.

The integration debate in Germany, for example, has led to the codification of a German *lead culture* (Leitkultur) that is taken as normative for immigrants who apply for German citizenship and for foreign spouses joining their husbands in Germany. Since 2007 they have to give a language exam and prove minimal knowledge about their host country.

On the European level, the debate about a further enlargement of the EU has led some to advocate a narrow conception of European identity excluding Turkey. Conservative politicians and lobbyists evoke the Christian Occident as a lead model.

At this moment it is unclear where these debates will lead. In the proposed draft treaty for a constitution of the European Union, the mentioning of God or the Christian Heritage of Europe has been narrowly avoided.

More progressive thinkers like Taylor himself advocate against unrestrained liberalism along republican lines making civic virtues of active participation and engagement of citizens for the society normative. This is progressive in the sense that the demand for active citizen engagement bears less essentialising traits than the conservative idea of lead culture. Citizen engagement is in principle open to both, an enlargement of individual liberties as well as their restriction.

These debates go on, in philosophy as well as in larger society and an answer to all the open questions is not to be expected in the near future. I can only invite you to share your views about these issues in the following discussion.

1) Paper presented at the international workshop on "Intertextuality. A Colloquium on Trans-cultural & Intermedial Influence" organised by the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Study, JNU, and the French Embassy's Bonjour French Science / Bonjour India Festival, JNI-AS, 10 December 2009.

The workshop centred on issues transcending disciplinary boundaries and corpus, such as the issues of influence and authenticity in an increasingly globalised social order in which the borders between image and print media have become as porous as those between dominant and peripheral movements, canons, and fields of thought.

Workshop Programme:

10 am Welcome address by Aditya Mukerjee, Director of JNIAS; Patrick Chézaud, Counselor for Science and Technology, French Embassy; and GJV Prasad, Chairperson of the Centre for English Studies, School of Language Literature and Culture Studies.

10:15 **Marta Dvorak** (Sorbonne Nouvelle, France / JNIAS) "Dialoguing with Absent Texts: The Dynamics of Cross-Cultural Collocation"

11:00 **Michael Dusche** (Fellow, JNIAS) "The Dilemma of Autonomy and Authenticity in Liberal Modern Society: Authenticity and its Implications in Charles Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology"

11h45 Tea break

12:00 **Ronald Shusterman** (Université de Montpellier 3, France), "Art, Alterity and the Aporia of Classification, or do you need a reason?"

12: 45 **Ashish Agnihotri** (Centre for French and Francophone Studies, JNU), “Indian Cinema: Intertextual Musings”

1:30 Lunch

2:30 **Claire Omhovère** (Université de Montpellier 3, France), “Ways of Seeing / Ways of Thinking: Some Reflections on Landscape Writing in Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*”

3:15 **Susan Viswanathan** (Chairperson, Centre for Study of Social Systems, JNU), “Shakespearean Sonnets”

4:00 Concluding Round Table