

# **In Defending a Moderate Concept of Cultural Equality**

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Saul Bellow is famously quoted as saying something like, 'When the Zulus produce a Tolstoy we will read him'. This is taken as a quintessential statement of European arrogance, not just because Bellow is allegedly being de facto insensitive to the value of Zulu culture, but frequently also because it is seen to reflect a denial in principle of human equality (Charles Taylor, 1994, p.42).

There is a progressive current to the idea of equality which has traversed the spectrum from the political equality of rights and suffrage in democratic systems, through economic equality (embraced through socialist principles) and social equality which stresses equal access to jobs and social services, to the notion of cultural equality. The notion of cultural equality has assumed increasing importance in the normative discourse of multiculturalism and international relations. Since the end of World War II, the international community has repudiated decisively the older tradition of a racial or ethnic hierarchy, and come to endorse the idea of human and ethnic equality. Indeed, with the rise of East Asian economic power in the 1980s, policy-makers and academia placed particular emphasis on the notion of cultural equality. Nevertheless, the events of September 11 in 2001 seem to have stalled this trend, undermining the value of cultural equality and perhaps rendering it impossible because of a supposed civilizational conflict between Western and Islamic cultures.

A number of theorists have focused on the idea of cultural equality. Notable in this respect are Edward Said's idea of equality of civilizations, Will Kymlicka's concern with the cultural equality of minorities, Charles Taylor's emphasis on the equal value of cultures, and Iris Marion Young's demand for the equal value of different cultures to be publicly affirmed. Recently, however, Brian Barry has

mounted a substantial critique of this body of work with its support for multiculturalism and the equal value of cultures. As reflected in the title of his book, *Culture and Equality*, Barry seeks to separate culture from equality, and indeed repudiates the notion of 'cultural equality' (2001, p.266).

Differing from Barry's approach, this paper aims to defend the concept of cultural equality by critically engaging with the idea and dealing constructively with attendant problems and limitations. It has two basic aims. The first aim is to mount an argument in favour of a more limited form of cultural equality. The second one is to provide a critical response to those who reject the possibility of any presumption of cultural equality. The paper begins by assessing arguments in support of cultural equality and discussing its multiple meanings and value. It then canvasses some of the arguments against cultural equality, highlights the complex theoretical difficulties and problems that arise if the question of cultural equality is taken seriously, and suggests strategies for dealing with these problems.

For the purposes of this paper, cultures are understood as a set of attitudes, values, sentiments, and beliefs that give order and meaning to social process and that provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern human behaviour. Cultures are seen as certain social practices including religious activities, the reproduction of language and traditional custom, and philosophical interpretation. Cultures are also understood as open, multifaceted, and dynamic systems that possess essentially multiple groups with overlapping memberships that are interactive and internally negotiated. They are sites of contestation and heterogeneity, of hybridization and cross-fertilization, whose boundaries are inevitably indeterminate (Tully, 1995, p.30). Clearly, as Robert B. Walker (1990) points out, there is a great deal of confusion over the concept of 'culture' itself in international relations.

We should consider the *context* in which the principle of cultural equality can be defended and what sort of cultural inequality is acceptable. Two contexts need to be distinguished. In an international context, cultural equality is concerned with equal treatment with other cultures in making foreign policies. This is an external cultural equality. In a multicultural state, cultural equality is about the equality of cultural communities within a nation-state. This

is an internal cultural equality. It is important to have a clear sociological understanding of the context and content of cultural equality. Any defense or rejection of the idea of cultural equality must be made in the concrete context in which the specific content of cultural equality has particular meanings. This is the major problem with Barry's argument against cultural equality: it fails to contextualize the concrete content of cultural equality. Instead, his approach is to examine critically the ideas of cultural equality put forward by Taylor and Young (Barry, 2001, pp.264-71). Consequently, he overlooks the context and content of cultural equality itself.

### **Arguments for Cultural Equality**

*Linking Culture and Citizenship:* Typically, nation-states employ the institutions of citizenship to create cultural homogenization within civil society and thus deny the cultural rights of minority groups. In this way they tend to promote national cultures at the cost of minority cultures. Traditionally, citizenship and culture have been regarded as mutually exclusive, especially by classical liberals; yet, we can detect more than a hint of hypocrisy. For instance, in colonial India, classical liberalism took indigenous culture seriously so much so that it formed the view that inhabitants of this culture were rendered incapable of autonomous action and thereby unsuited to citizenship (Hindess, 2001). Meanwhile, back at home, culture and citizenship were seen as separate. In the case of the French Revolution, which was premised on the view that all humans are equal, it declared equality for all irrespective of race, ethnicity, and culture. We see that there is no space here for 'cultural equality' and culture appears to be largely irrelevant to the liberal conception of equality, in which a secular civic state should be ethnically and culturally neutral. In other words, the French civic tradition favors the universal over the particular, civic over ethnic and cultural values.<sup>2</sup>

In practice, however, there is inequality in the nation-state system where minority cultural groups are treated differently and majority culture tends to assume a privileged position as the

paradigm of national identity and nationhood. Nic Craith Mairead (2002) argues, for instance, that in Britain English has been institutionalized as the national language, a symbol of national coherence, while Welsh and Irish have long been regarded as a 'commodity,' so that government subsidy for their rejuvenation is seen as some sort of paternalistic favor. In other words, a supposed 'neutral' state has favored, financed, and privileged a majority language (English), thereby putting minority cultures in a weak position. The problem now is how to level the playing field according to the principle of cultural equality and to link citizenship with culture. Mairead suggests that the idea of citizenship should seriously embrace that of cultural equality regarding it as integral to citizenship.

*Deepening the Idea of Equality:* The idea of citizenship has been associated with the struggle for political, economic, and social equality. According to T. H. Marshall (1963), the idea of 'full citizenship' for all is linked to the welfare state's attack on poverty. However, citizenship is no longer exclusively concerned with the struggle for political, economic, and social equality, but has become a major site of conflict over cultural identity and demands for the recognition of cultural rights and equal cultural status.

Cultural right is the claim made by a cultural group for cultural empowerment, namely the equal capacity to participate effectively, creatively, and successfully in one's society. Cultural claims to language and religion are typically extra-state or supra-national rights.

The idea of cultural equality extends the claims of cultural right, demanding equal status for different cultures. Adherents to the idea of cultural equality may well think certain form of multiculturalism insufficient because it recognizes cultural diversity but not cultural equality. While multiculturalism aims to 'resolve' minority culture problems by granting minority rights, it does not attempt to do anything with the taken for granted privileged position of the majority culture. Thus to be fully effective as a tool of cultural equality, multiculturalism needs to be based upon the principle of equal respect.

*Culture as a Primary Good:* According to John Rawls there are things that we need regardless of our natural talents and our aims. These he calls 'primary goods' and his list includes liberty, opportunity, income, wealth, and the bases of self respect. Fundamental to his theory of justice is the premise that parties to the original position will rationally seek to maximize their share of these primary goods, which are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution benefits the least favored (Rawls, 1971).

The issue here is what Rawls means by the 'bases of self respect.' More particularly, can Rawls's idea of self respect be extended to include the equal recognition of cultures? For Tully (1995, p.189) the answer is affirmative: that in making self respect one of the primary goods, Rawls is committed to the public recognition and affirmation of all cultures. By contrast, Barry (2001, p.268) argues that Rawls does not describe self respect as one of those 'primary goods' whose distribution is the concern of social justice. Rawls only mentions 'the social bases of self respect' that refer to equal civil and political rights. It is questionable whether Rawls has anything meaningful to say on this issue. Instead it may be more constructive to look at the work of other social justice theorists, such as Michael Walzer, Will Kymlicka, and Bhiku Parekh, who all emphasize culture as a primary good in institutional design.

For instance, while Walzer's list of social or basic goods includes offices, wealth, honor, education, health, membership, and safety, he also sees cultural membership as a fundamental value because it defines the shared understanding of social goods within a given culture (Walzer, 1983). The problem, as Kymlicka points out, is in identifying which community is in fact the bearer of cultural membership. Here Walzer faces a challenging boundary problem: how can two different historical communities within one nation-state work out the shared meanings of all citizens?

Kymlicka (1989, p.162) also argues for the primary good of cultural membership: 'The individuals who are an unquestionable part of the liberal moral ontology are viewed as individual members of a particular cultural community, for whom cultural membership is an important good.' In his view the intrinsic value of cultural diversity lies in the context of choice that the cultural structure provides; individual choice is dependent on the presence of a societal

culture, defined by language and history (Kymlicka, 1995, p.8). Jeremy Waldron (1995, p.106) disagrees with Kymlicka's assessment: 'from the fact that each genuine option must have a cultural meaning, it does not follow that there must be one cultural framework in which each available option is assigned a meaning.'

On the other hand, Bhiku Parekh 1994, p.13; also 1998, p.206) leans towards Kymlicka's position with regard to equal respect for different cultures: 'The liberal is in theory committed to equal respect for persons. Since human beings are culturally embedded, respect for them entails respect for their cultures and ways of life.'

*Global Citizenship and Cultural Equality:* The theory of global citizenship is premised on the notion that all peoples – insiders and outsiders – are equal, as are all funding agencies and recipients. In practice, however, there are always structural inequalities that prevent the equal distribution of goods and resources. As Alexius Jemadu (2004) argues that transnational networks remain challenged to overcome the structural inequalities in the relationship between the Indonesian NGOs and their international partners. Transnational activists may use resources and funding in undemocratic ways and this should be seen as an internal contradiction of global citizenship.

Such structural inequalities pose a challenge to transnational activists who are committed to the notion of global citizenship and who value democracy. How does one deal with structural inequality? One way is to push the idea of world citizenship in the direction of democratic citizenship. That is, if one understands democracy as primarily concerned with equality then global citizenship must address the issue of cultural equality. Global cultural citizenship transcends national borders and is concerned with cultural equality between different civilizations and cultures. To be effective, the agenda directed to the democratization of global culture must take cultural equality seriously.

Global citizenship is premised on the notion of a floating or transcendent cultural identity that is not situated in or related to any specific form of national identity. Yet it does not deny the importance or value of national and local cultures nor does it undermine the desire of individuals to belong to a specific place. Indeed, those who support the right to self-determination also tend to

see the need, in certain circumstances, for global and local cultures to align themselves against certain forms of national culture. Global citizens and transnational activists will always encounter different cultures and be faced with the question of whether to treat the cultures of strangers and refugees as equal or inferior.

Moreover, as the processes of cultural and economic globalization march on, commercial culture has come increasingly to prevail over and so undermine traditional cultures, albeit without the use of force, giving rise to what Benjamin Barber refers to as "McWorld" phenomenon. This tendency for global commercial culture to threaten the survival of small cultures adds further impetus to the project of realizing cultural equality.

*The Value of Cultural Equality:* Most important, the idea of cultural equality provides a normative basis from which transnational activism can deal with the structural inequalities outlined above. It does this by challenging a form of political power in which cultural superiority plays a part in the domination of the weak by the strong. In particular, it challenges the master concept of liberty in international trade and within the cultural sphere. According to the idea of cultural equality, liberals should listen and think about non-liberal questions arising from non-liberal societies and even make a concession to non-liberal practices that can be shown to have some normative validity.

Parekh (2000, p.14) argues that liberalism 'represents a particular cultural perspective and cannot provide a broad and impartial enough framework to conceptualize other cultures or their relations with it.' Indeed we can say that liberalism is neither salient nor predominant in the Middle East and in East Asia. This raises the question of whether liberals can in fact ultimately impose their liberal mode of thinking on others or whether they must recognize the legitimacy of alternative modes of normative thought. For example, drug policies reflect different historical and cultural traditions. Thus, while Holland adopts a more liberal and lenient approach towards drug issues, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and China take a much tougher line. It is difficult to say that the Dutch liberal approach is superior to the non-liberal policies of Malaysia, Singapore, and China.

The right to bear arms and the right for gay couples to adopt children suggest a life style that depends on the particularity of cultural conditions and history; but the pressure for such rights would hold little weight in poor societies that are more concerned with survival and to put bread on the table. In these societies the pursuit of such liberties would be regarded as a luxury that has little to do with the daily necessities of food, medicine, and clean water. While the right to bear arms and the right for gay couples might be seen to have primacy in certain Western cultures, this is simply insufficient and irrelevant to meet the needs of the poor in the third world.

Given its claims to openness, tolerance, and plurality, liberalism promises genuine dialogues between different cultures; but, by viewing equality as secondary to liberty, liberalism can come to regard as inferior other cultures that seek equality first. So while the voice from the 'South' may be heard it is not generally taken seriously in the area of transnational activities such as international conferences and publications. Occasionally, organizers of global or international conferences will include people from the third world or the South as token 'representatives' but seldom are they taken seriously as equal participants. An example illustrates the point. Paul M. Evans, from the Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia, Canada, has produced a study of the various kinds of 'engagement' that occur in international politics. It provides 39 definitions that include the categories of comprehensive, constrained, cooperative, deep, deeper, realistic, selective, and conditional engagement. However, there is no mention of *equal* engagement.<sup>4</sup> The justification for this neglect is that an authoritarian regime like China does not respect equality and is thus not entitled to be treated equally. 'It is equally unjust to treat unequals equally as it is to treat equals unequally' (Crick, 1992, p.13).

### **Critical Definitions of Cultural Equality**

It is important to distinguish two conceptions of equality. One is a universal conception of equality, which stresses the equal treatment, right, opportunity, and entitlement of all human beings. The other is a differential approach, which emphasizes diversities and differences. Most writings on cultural or minority rights adopt this latter

differential approach, seeing it as unjust for a disadvantaged group to be forced to compete with a dominant group on unequal terms. As Kymlicka (1989, p.162) puts it, ‘the members of minority cultural communities may face particular kinds of disadvantages whose rectification requires and justifies the provision of minority rights.’ A clear exception to this position is that of Brian Barry, who rejects the differential notion of equality in favor of an egalitarian approach to group rights.

This paper deviates from the differential notion of equality espoused by thinkers such as Kymlicka and adopts instead a global perspective of cultural equality. This is because the politics of international relations tends to associate the notion of cultural equality primarily with the equal respect and treatment of other cultures. So by taking a differential notion of cultural equality at the global level we may neglect the important question of an equal respect for cultures across nation-states.

Equality has many meanings:

- All people are equal, because they share humanity in common;
- All people should be equal, and should be treated as equal beings;
- All people are entitled to equal opportunity (Williams, 1971);
- All people should be equally subject to the law;
- Law should be impartially administered;
- All the advantages of society should be thrown into one common stock (Stephen, 1993), p.124).

Similarly, we can trace multiple meanings of cultural equality. It should be stressed, however, that cultural equality does not refer to the equal value of cultural artifacts such as oil paintings and novels. As Taylor (1994, pp.66-7) states clearly, ‘There is no reason to believe that, for instance, the different art forms of a given culture should all be of equal, or even of considerable, value; and every culture can go through phases of decadence.’ If we unpack the idea of cultural equality we can isolate various conceptual components.

*1. Equality as an Epistemological Starting Point:* Who defines culture? What constitutes culture? Where are the boundaries of cultures? Who has the right to interpret culture? Who can be construed as a cultural actor? While one cannot definitively settle these questions, a normative commitment to the equality principle seems to provide the most constructive starting point. Drawing on Rawls's theoretical strategy one suggests that parties in the original position under the veil of ignorance are likely to choose equality principle to protect their lives and advance their cultures. And, according to Taylor (1994, p.66), equal respect for all cultures should be 'a starting hypothesis with which we ought to approach the study of any other culture.'

However, this epistemological starting point confronts a methodological difficulty brought about by the different positions of individualism and communitarianism. An individualist tends to see culture as an open and dynamic way of life predicated upon the ideas and actions of individuals. In contrast, a communitarian views culture as closed and exclusive; and stresses cultural rights and citizenship and focuses on the means by which individuals access *their own* culture and common space. Communitarians assert that culture, including language, cannot be reduced to individuals. The problem here is determining who counts as the representative of so-called collective culture. While individualists assert that the wellspring of culture is the individual, communitarians hold that cultural community shapes the identity of individuals within it, providing their sense of self. Moreover, they argue it is through the common perspectives and attitudes of cultural community that social norms and standards are established and internalized, thereby accounting for homogeneous behaviour within specific communities.

*2. Equal Esteem:* The idea of cultural equality rejects traditional categories of high versus low cultures thereby challenging cultural and racial superiority. If one accepts the view that the Anglo-Saxon race is destined to 'spread itself over the earth' or that it is the mission of 'the American people as [God's] chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world,' there seems little room for cultural equality and plenty of scope for racial inequality (Chace,

2002, p.34). While Amy Gutmann (1994, p.5) raises a difficult question of whether a liberal democratic society should respect cultures that hold themselves ethnically or racially superior to others, there are in reality few if any non-democratic cultures that hold superior positions in the face of Western domination. Rather, the urgent question is to deal with the taken for granted superiority of the West and Western democratic traditions.

*3. Equal Right to the Interpretation of Culture:* A serious problem associated with global cultural production is that weak cultures are forced to gain their recognition from more powerful cultures. Indeed the final arbiters of culture, at least with respect to the global social sciences, seem to be located in the hallowed halls of Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford, Princeton, and other renowned Western universities. Yet the idea of cultural equality seems to suggest that academic arbiters should be more representative and located more equitably within different cultural communities. In this respect, it is suggested that along with traditional Western interpretations, such as rational choice theory and institutionalism, non-Western theoretical frameworks, such as Confucianism and Islam, should be deployed to help fully explain the cultural phenomena of East and West. The current practice which privileges Western approaches serves to deny the principle of cultural equality.

Nevertheless, caution should be exercised in designating the equal right to cultural interpretation. One could hold the thesis that each culture has an equal right to interpret what constitutes equality while others can entertain the antithesis that an equal right to interpret what is equality will lead to a justification of inequality. For an example, it is often assumed that Islam has provided a cultural basis for terrorism. While this assumption may be true, one may argue that to posit a necessary relationship between Islam and terrorism is to be biased. We need to recognize that terrorism occurs not only in and through Muslim culture but also Western and Confucian cultures.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, any such recognition cannot be used to legitimize terrorism. It cannot be argued, for instance, that because ‘your culture has terrorism, the practice of terrorism in my culture can be tolerated!’ Clearly all forms of terrorism must be condemned, no matter what the justification.

*4. Equal Weight in Institutional Design:* Equal respect for cultures should be taken into account in institutional design, although its incorporation may take different forms where circumstances dictate. For example, the Singapore government has been able to institutionalize the traditional festivals of Chinese, Malay, and Indians as national public holidays. In China, Vietnam, and Laos, however, where there are more than 56 ethnic groups, it is not possible for their governments to recognize *all* the traditional festivals of ethnic minorities through *national* public holidays. In these cases, therefore a differential public holiday system has to be designed.

*5. Equal Access to Cultural Communication, Production, and Distribution:* The distribution of or access to certain cultural goods should be arranged more equitably. For example, in an international gathering, people from different cultural backgrounds should have equal access to a range of different foods that derive from their traditions. There should also be an equal right to use one's own language in multicultural communication. While international organizations such as the UN and the EU use multi-languages in their official communications, this is not a universally accepted practice. For instance, in France, speaking languages other than French is sometimes seen as culturally divisive, politically threatening, or detrimental to French nationalism. Such attitudes surely contradict the idea of cultural equality.

*6. Equal Status of Cultural Practices:* Some people in Europe protest against the consumption of dog meat in Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; but why should Europeans not respect the East Asian cultural custom of eating dog meat, particularly during winter? Similarly, should it be legitimate for Europe to impose its own views of capital punishment on some states in the United States and Asia? It could be argued that different cultures, which practice different customs, should be entitled to enjoy equal status and be equally accommodated in institutional arrangements and social policy. Respecting cultural difference is one way of implementing the principle of cultural equality.

Moreover, cultural order and mutual dialogue must be established on the basis of equality. For example, any discussion of the relationship between Confucianism and liberalism should be based on the assumption that the two traditions exist on an equal footing because all civilizations have the right to respect and cultural equality. Such an assumption is obviously implied in the universal discourse of human rights, where all human beings regardless of their cultural background deserve the right to equal respect and consideration. Thus a necessary step towards cultural equality in this case would be to separate Confucianism from its association with authoritarianism – which has given it an inferior status to liberalism – and to see it purely as a theoretical framework that offers an alternative way of thinking to liberalism.

The above six components of cultural equality can be grouped in two categories. The first category of Points 1-3 deals with principle, philosophical interpretation and psychological attributes which are soft, subjective and abstract. The second category of Points 4-6 deals with the institutional implications and arrangements of cultural equality which are hard, objective and concrete. Among these six components of cultural equality, some are justifiable and workable; some are problematic and face enormous difficulties. A feasible and workable notion of cultural equality cannot endorse all six components. Only a limited and moderate form of cultural equality will be defended in this paper.

By pursuing the idea of cultural equality, different understandings of what it might entail will inevitably emerge, which will in turn offer very different institutional requirements that can accommodate cultural equality. An institutionalized cultural equality confronts the structure/agency problem. How far can the idea of cultural equality be institutionalized and enforced? Who is an agent with the capacity to enforce cultural rights and equality? How can an unequal international structure promote and realize cultural equality across civilizations? If the state promotes and protects the minority rights of one culture, this cultural community has in return a duty and obligation to respect other cultures and the principle of equality itself. But a central problem associated with realizing cultural equality is the difficulty of defining exactly what constitutes ‘cultural obligation’ without which rights are often passive and empty.

In addition, there is the problem of convergence. This is the problem of whether or not individuals under the to-be-designed institutions for cultural equality will ultimately support them. Obviously, under institutional arrangements designed to realize cultural equality, some would fare better than others. How can these individuals accommodate each other so that convergence on the project of cultural equality is possible?

### **Arguments against Cultural Equality**

In this section, I would like to present a critical response to those who reject the possibility of any presumption of cultural equality.

*The Incompatibility Argument:* One common strategy in rejecting equality is to stress the incoherence and inconsistency of such a demand. J. R. Lucas (1971, pp.138-9) argued in 1965 that ‘...this demand [for equality] is incoherent, because what is demanded is both internally inconsistent and incompatible with other more precious ideals.’ Similarly, Barry (2001, p.265) points out the inconsistencies in Taylor’s approach to equal concern for cultures, suggesting ‘he still tries to whistle a tune about the equal value of cultures while at the same time continuing to sing the old song about incommensurability.’ The idea of incommensurability implies that there is no impartial or universal standpoint from which the claims of all particular cultures can be rationally assessed, while the idea of the equal value of cultures, according to Peter Jones (1998, p.44), ‘requires us to bring a common standard of values to all cultures.’<sup>5</sup> As a result, Barry (2001, pp.264-5) argues strongly that the idea of cultural equality is logically incompatible with the idea that cultures are incommensurable.

Nagel (1991, p.3) also pointed out, ‘The unsolved problem is the familiar one of reconciling the standpoint of the collectivity with the standpoint of the individual.’ The impersonal standpoint produces a powerful demand for universal impartiality and equality. The personal standpoint gives rise to individualistic values, motives and demands which impede the pursuit and realization of equality ideals of equality. As Gould argues (1988, p. 160) “The full development of some individuals would seem to require an inequality of conditions

on the supposition that different individuals have greater capacities or different capacities for self-development than others and therefore have a right to more of the conditions than do others.'

Barry's argument is not convincing in the eyes of those who hold the idea of cultural equality but do not endorse the idea of incommensurability. If we assume cultural interaction and hold a universal cross-cultural perspective, it is imperative to see equality as the basis for the communication, production, and distribution of culture both internally and externally. The idea of cultural equality is able to avoid the position of cultural relativism, which is forced to endorse a type of equality that holds all cultural practices equal and is unable to distinguish between their relative values. What is being canvassed here is not relativism but a willingness to allow the possibility for all cultures to be given an equal hearing, not that all cultural practices are equally valuable. This avoids the dilemma faced by cultural relativists who are forced into a solipsistic stance that precludes open dialogue between cultures and renders consensus impossible.

*The Nature of Culture: Inequality is Natural:* Another argument against cultural equality is that inequality is a natural phenomenon. Most cultures are patriarchal and even pluralist societies contain elitist and unequal elements (Okin, 1999, p.17). Moreover, as Thomas Nagel (1991, p.131) asserts, 'a complex culture magnifies their inequality and diversity by permitting a wide range of achievement and the flourishing of different talents.' In other words, culture has been used as an instrument for gaining and maintaining power.

Power cannot be equally divided and distributed over the whole population. It is necessarily concentrated in few hands...Besides an inequality of power, there is an inequality of prestige, which will arise in any society...It will stem from men's natural inequality of ability resulting in their being able, some to a great greater, others to a lesser, extent to be successful in achieving their ideals' (Lucas, 1971, p.147)

The above argument surely questions the feasibility of cultural equality. It holds that the idea of cultural equality contains the hoary old chestnut of utopianism. Thus Barry (2001, pp.229-71) argues that the demand for equal recognition of all cultures is not only psychologically unattainable but also logically impossible. One who holds the ideal of cultural equality is doomed to, borrowing Lucas' (1971, p.150) phrase, 'a life not only of grumbling and everlasting envy, but of endless and inevitable disappointment.' The idea of cultural equality represents only stupidity, confusion, and illogical reasoning. Cultural equality is nothing more than, borrowing Stephen's (1993, p.124) phrase, 'a vague expression of envy on the part of those who have not against those who have,' or 'a vague aspiration towards a state of society in which there should be fewer contrasts than there are at present between one man's lot and another's.'

However, this argument is not fully corrosive of the principle of cultural equality and will not deter those who cherish a hope for its realization. In their view the cultural practice of inequality can and must be changed, and human psychology reshaped to enable cultural equality to occur. In the twentieth century, a new culture of human rights has emerged and will continue to develop. A hundred year ago black culture was deemed inferior by many White people. In the last several decades, however, the transformation of white perceptions and values has made it possible to talk about racial equality between the White and Black. Indeed, the transformation of human psychology is a necessary condition to realize the goal of cultural equality. For proponents of cultural equality the battle is one over human feelings. The key issue for them is to criticize any tendencies towards cultural bias, arrogance, prejudice, and superiority. In Taylor's (1994, pp.66-7) words, 'withholding the presumption [of equal respect for cultures] might be seen as the fruit merely of prejudice or of ill will. It might even be tantamount to a denial of equal status.'

*Fear of Cultural Equality:* There are those who fear that the equalization of different cultures will result in the loss of elite culture and a subsequent vulgarization. Nevertheless, an assertion of equal respect for cultures can be combined with an unequal evaluation of

cultural products through making, as Mill did, a distinction between higher and lower pleasures, or between high and low evaluations of cultural product.

*Inherent Paradox (I)*: Stephen (1993, p.163) said the recognition of substantial equality is 'usually a step towards the development of inherent inequalities.' If cultural equality is taken to be an integral part of world citizenship, one confronts a series of paradoxes. For example, demands for equality between different cultures and civilizations constitute *external* forms of cultural equality. However, the external equality of cultures does not necessarily ensure *internal* cultural equality. Rather it entails the possibility of justifying unequal arrangements within a culture or civilization. Indeed, in the politics of cultural equality, the idea of 'cultural equality' can be used to promote the status of 'Asian values' against human rights. It also entertains the idea that Islamic culture should enjoy equal status in the struggle against new forms of neo-liberal 'imperialism.' Demanding equality between Western and Islamic civilizations can downplay the human rights principle for it is seen as a product of Western culture.

It is true that one sort of equality always implies and involves another kind of inequality; but this argument does not render cultural equality meaningless. Importantly, the idea of cultural equality applies not only in international relations but also in cultural practices within nation-states or a single cultural community. It is unjustifiable for one state or one community to use the slogan of external cultural equality to justify its practice of internal inequality. To protect internal cultural equality is one effective way for a state or community to win international support for the struggle for external cultural equality.

Habermas once distinguished between culture and *political* culture. While the former does not need to be shared by all citizens, the latter is marked by mutual respect for rights. Constitutional democracy dedicates itself to this distinction by granting members of minority cultures 'equal rights of co-existence' (Habermas, 1994). In the case of cultural equality, it is necessary to make similar distinctions between human beings and culture. A global citizen will never compromise the equality between human beings and will

always treat others as ends rather than means; but such equal respect does not compromise our capacity to criticize some traditional practices in other cultures. Human rights are now widely respected in different parts of the world and by different cultural societies. This provides us with a minimal standard whereby we can engage in cultural critique. While a global ethics respects different cultures it does not retreat into them and become ossified.

Cultural equality is restricted by the human rights principle. All cultures are accorded equal value only if they respect or honour human rights, which specify that governments should protect their own people and should not kill innocent people. Accordingly it is illegitimate for any one culture to justify torture and killing on the basis of cultural difference. While I disagree with Barry's (2001, p.127) arguments against equal respect for culture, I do endorse his point that 'Equal respect for people cannot therefore entail respect for their cultures when these cultures systematically give priority to, say, the interests of men over the interests of women.'

The principle of human rights must constitute the first order of culture, and define the basic rules with which all cultures must comply. Today we see more and more nation-states endorsing the human rights principle; but there remain differences in the interpretation of human rights and different understandings of how strongly human rights should be applied. John Rawls (2001, pp.79-80) deals well with this issue by insisting that membership in the Society of Peoples requires respect for a list of human rights including the right to life, liberty, and security of the person; security of ethnic groups from mass murder and genocide; rights against slavery and torture; freedom of movement; the right to marry and start a family; the right to own property; the right to freedom of conscience. These rights are universally applicable to liberal peoples and decent hierarchical peoples. At the same time, Rawls omits the freedom of speech and opinion, the freedom of assembly, the freedom to participate in governance and the right of equal access to public services, the right to the free choice of employment and to non-discrimination in employment, and the right to education.

*Inherent Paradox (II):* There is another paradox. One may hold the thesis that each culture should enjoy an equal right to use its

language in global communication and that each language should be regarded as equally valuable. Yet there are many who maintain that it is necessary for English to be the global language. According to Rosenau (1997, pp.88-9), for instance, the cultural institution of English should be regarded as a universal functional control system which offers a key to individual liberation within all cultures, despite the fact that it gives rise to reactive linguistic nationalism. Indeed, it can be conceded that even though global English language results in an unequal status for other languages, it does make cultural dialogue and daily communication possible and this is particularly important in the case of transnational activities that involve different peoples who speak different languages.

Clearly, multi-linguistic practice is also difficult to develop for economic reasons. Suppose, for instance, the Chinese, Malay, and Indian cultural communities in Singapore demand their cultural languages as official ones, then communication between them would require interpretation; but how would these cultural communities share the cost of interpretation? An apparent and easy solution is to stick to a common official language, as Singapore has done. There, as a colonial legacy, the official language is English and this seems fair to all ethnic groups despite the resentment felt by the older Chinese. By contrast, where multi-ethnic countries, such as India and Sri Lanka, have abandoned English as an official language in the wake of their independence, cultural inequality and tension between different ethnic groups has arisen. Interestingly, Malaysia attempted to introduce English as a teaching language for science and mathematics in 2002. While this may seem an equitable language arrangement it presents a problem for the Malaysian Chinese cultural community, implying a reduction of teaching hours for Chinese language in Chinese schools.

### **Strategies for Cultural Equality**

Drawing on the public/private distinction, Barry (2001, p.229) provides a crucial argument against the claim that cultures should be presumed or affirmed to be equal in value. Such a claim, he suggests, shifts matters that should be left to individual judgment into the realm of public control. In his view the state has no right to

interfere in matters of individual judgment. Barry's position is to leave issues of cultural equality within the purview of individual choice and to reject any role for the state. Such an option is unacceptable. Clearly the state has a major role to play in maintaining neutrality and ensuring maximal cultural equality. In contrast, individuals can make different choices and enjoy their private views of culture, even to the point of asserting their own cultural superiority, providing it remains in the private sphere. However, any such public assertions or acts certainly cannot be tolerated. To achieve substantial cultural equality, one must wage a 'war' against all cultural prejudice and bias at the level of both state and individual. For this to occur, cultural equality must be a public matter.

For Barry, cultural equality is ultimately a matter of individual choice, which seems a weak basis for its realization. Yet does that mean we are doomed to suffer cultural inequality with all its attendant problems? Surely it is more rational to prefer cultural equality to cultural inequality. If so, one can be forgiven for attempting to develop strategies to overcome the apparent barriers to realizing cultural equality. Perhaps this is the pressing task for a global or intercultural citizen who values cultural equality: to aspire to build a culturally equal society where the principle of cultural equality becomes a powerful force for change.

We can identify a number of strategies to deal with the paradoxes of cultural equality. The challenging question is how to avoid utopianism and persistently to search for realistic strategies for cultural equality.

### *Negotiations over Cultural Difference and Equality*

Rather than rejecting the idea of cultural equality, one can acknowledge that, although we cannot resolve or eradicate the tension or contradictions, we can reduce the tension and negotiate between the universal and the particular, the absolute and the relative. We can negotiate over cultural difference and equality to develop some sort of minimal overlapping consensus. Such a negotiation strategy offers hope as a useful mechanism towards achieving greater cultural equality.<sup>6</sup> Each culture, recognizing its

incompleteness, limits, and weaknesses, will engage in dialogue with others, learn from them, and so an overlapping consensus will develop. As Andrew Linklater (1999, p.3) argues, what is needed 'is a transnational public sphere in which different and overlapping moral communities can all have an input into the decision-making which affects them.'

#### *Self-Criticism as a Precondition for Cultural Equality*

For two cultures to recognize and respect each other, each must be prepared to engage in mutual criticism. Just as genuine friendship involves open and frank criticism and advice, mutual criticism between cultures is a crucial element of cultural equality and a fruitful way to develop mutually successful relationships. Importantly, each culture must be prepared to subject itself to both external and internal criticism in order to help overcome cultural bias and prejudice and thus improve its cultural practice. In short, each culture must maintain a stance of critical self-reflection and criticism, without which its claims to equal status lack legitimacy.

#### *Cosmopolitan Virtue*

It is not beyond the realms of possibility to envisage that, in an increasingly interdependent world, the structures of each culture will come more and more to overlap and enmesh, thereby giving rise to hybrid cultures that might display a preoccupation with cosmopolitan thought and behaviour. In this way an intercultural perspective could serve to endorse and support multicultural citizenship because individuals are able to hold membership of multiple cultures and thus have access to shared culture and space.

Rather than polarizing the two extremes of Jihad and McWorld, one might explore the possibility of some sort of coexistence between the two that furthers an intercultural ethics which encourages mutual tolerance rather than mutual threat. This idea is usually greeted with derision and skepticism because Jihad tends to be seen merely as a fundamentalist, militaristic movement that supports terrorism. Yet, there are multiple meanings of Jihad. According to Patricia Martinez (2003), University of Malaya, Jihad

should be understood as the struggle with one's own heart and the attempt to bring oneself into accord with the will of God. The means appropriate to this struggle are prayer, study, and various forms of inner-worldly asceticism. A more nuanced and perhaps sympathetic understanding of Jihad is crucial to realizing any sort of coexistence with McWorld. Islamic fundamentalism may be partially explained by the resentment caused by a sense of cultural inferiority vis-à-vis the West's economic and political domination. Were the Muslim world to experience a sense of cultural equality the resentment against Western culture would likely be reduced.

What is suggested here is that cosmopolitan virtue is a necessary condition for realizing cultural equality. In the current climate the major barrier to achieving cultural equality is that attempts to preserve certain cultures against the threats of Western domination are all tied up in a vicious cycle between terrorism and the war against it. Yet surely violence and terrorism are not the civilized way to defend the existence of a culture. Equally a military war against terrorism is most likely to prove unproductive and ineffective in restraining terrorism and even likely in the long run to provoke more of it.

#### *Developing Psychologically Complex Feelings of Ambivalence*

Because there are contradictory impulses associated with notions of cultural equality, psychologically complex feelings of ambivalence are likely to occur. One might value cultural equality yet at the same time remain sensitive to internal inequality and the multiplicity of issues involved. Thus there is a need to develop skills to manage the complexity and contradictions associated with realizing cultural equality. Indeed, it is vital for a global citizen to see 'contradictions' as the driving force that enables the dialectical development of world citizenship. It could even be said that the successful furtherance of a politics of transnational activism depends on the development of a cross-cultural psychology that is able to deal with the inevitable problems that will arise from intercultural conflicts.

#### *Bilingual or Multilingual skills*

It should be stressed that despite the paradox of the equal status of languages discussed in the last section, it is imperative for English speaking people to make efforts to minimize cultural inequality by learning other languages. Cultural equality requires bilingual or multilingual skills. An English speaker working in another culture needs to learn the language; to speaking an other language is not only to show respect for other culture but also to have an opportunity of participating in genuine cultural dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has defended a moderate concept of cultural equality. It has pointed out a number of serious problems with the equal starting point of epistemology and the equal right to interpret culture. At the same time, each culture deserves the right to equal respect and consideration. And institutional arrangements need to be redesigned to ensure cultural equality in institutional setting, minimize cultural inequalities, and to promote the equal status of cultural practice. However, all cultures are accorded equal value only if they respect and honour human rights. Cultural equality is restricted by the human rights principle. It cannot be used to justify internal cultural practices of inequality.

Inequality may have held sway throughout history while the idea of political equality is in its infancy. Although political equality is yet to be fully realized, the notion of cultural equality as a late comer in the battle for equality cannot be ignored. Indeed, it is hoped that the idea of cultural equality serves to disrupt the normative discourse of international relations at least for long enough to ensure it receives serious consideration.

### **Notes**

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- 2 By contrast, German citizenship was defined in terms of blood and ethnic origin. Both French and German citizenships are expressions of the contradiction of modern citizenship.
  - 3 Such an argument was presented at the Workshop on 'After Bali: the Threat of Terrorism in Southeast Asia,' organized by the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 27-28 January 2003.
  - 4 Taken from his talk given at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 2001.
  - 5 George Grower (2002, pp.2-3, 49-54) distinguishes incomparable, immeasurable, and unrankable; while it is difficult to compare, measure and rank the total properties of cultures, it is possible to compare, measure and rank certain features of cultures.
  - 6 Jacques Derrida (2001) has advocated the negotiation strategy as a way of handling the internal contradiction of cosmopolitanism.

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