

Turning on the citizen.

Modern citizenship and its cultural hazards

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Much turns on the citizen, in three senses that cover three central features of citizenship. First, citizenship has become an important issue in political theory, next to issues like ‘the state’ or ‘government’. After an extended period of innocuous and rather inconsequential existence in political theory, the citizen has enjoyed a remarkable revival. From a faceless, passive ‘subject’ he, or she, has become an active, mobile, self-confident political actor. In this paper, I trace this rise of the citizen, starting with the anonymous man behind the Rawlsian veil of ignorance, through the good communitarian man, to the democratically moved deliberator.

This development is critically assessed on the basis of a second aspect of ‘turning on’ the citizen. That concerns the ‘move’, or ‘switch’, that people need to make to move from private, idiosyncratic considerations to public, general deliberation. The ability to make this switch is of central importance for the maintenance of democracy and the *Rechtsstaat* (a much more citizenship-attuned, and more encompassing notion than the lame English notion of ‘rule of law’). Citizens need to do more than just understand how government draws the line between public and private. They need actively to be able to maintain a public sphere together, without the benefit of either moral consensus or (constant) government supervision. To do this, they need to be able to deal with challenges to their private or public identity, and to respond in an appropriate way. That is to say, a way that saves the dignity and esteem of all parties concerned. Switching between public and private is like an art that has to be learned and mastered.

Citizens in ‘postnational’ democracies not only have become active participators, they also have acquired *identities*. Cultural background affects the switching between private and public. This leads to the third aspect of ‘turning on’: culture has become a political motivator (or, conversely, a demotivator). Awareness of one’s cultural identity is what turns people on to become active citizens, it ‘fuels’ politics. Some liberal political theorists, like Will Kymlicka, acknowledge this cultural drive, but deem cultural identity to be primarily a political ‘handicap’ in liberal politics, albeit one that might require compensatory measures. Others, like Charles Taylor, recognize the empowering effect of identity. And, at least as important, poststructuralists emphasize the positive side of the disruptive effects of identity, caused by the many vicissitudes of recognition.

Throughout my discussion of these aspects of how to properly turn on the citizen, I use an example that nicely fits this metaphor, although it is not perhaps at first sight a very appropriate example of citizenship. This example concerns the political implications of the ‘sexual identity’ that U.S. president Bill Clinton nolens volens acquired in the ‘Lewinsky affair’. I ask how this ‘identity’ was seen to influence his political functioning, according to the several perspectives on political theory and citizenship that I discuss. Admittedly, a president is not a typical model of a citizen. Nevertheless, many of the perspectives on ‘culturally charged’ citizenship are strikingly brought out in this case. Identity, in this case ‘sexual identity’, can respectively be seen as: overcome by a ‘mind switch’ (liberalism), irreparably harming one’s political authority (communitarianism), totally irrelevant for politics (republicanism), a handicap to be compensated for (multicultural liberalism), empowering (‘identity politics’) or subversively revealing (‘politics of difference’).

The liberal citizen

Up until the sixties, or even the seventies, political theory (or at least its Anglo-American incarnation) viewed the state and the citizen both as static, passive, and abstract entities. It stripped citizens, as much as possible, of their distinguishing features. States were nondescript, unchanging, and indeed interchangeable entities. Governments ruled neutrally over faceless, sexless, and cultureless citizens. And also the activity of politics itself was thought of in passive terms: as something to be administratively executed rather than performed, and participated in.

What motivated such a disenchanting vision on political life? On the one hand, political life up till thirty years ago simply *was* more passive and static. People generally knew their place, and followed their leaders. On the other hand, the study of political behavior aspired to become a political *science*, narrowing the focus of political research to quantifiable, generalizable, and measurable aspects of political behavior. Citizenship thus became almost synonymous with voter behavior. More active, subjective, and normative aspects of citizenship did not fit this type of scientific interest. And political strategy may also have played a role. The post-world war II ‘first world’ was in need of a reliable, stable and relatively passive citizenry. That is to say, citizens who learned to relegate their passions to private and to civic life, and certainly to keep them out of political life.

In the sixties, however, things began to change. Citizens became more active and ‘vocal’; they criticized government policy, and exercised pressure to change it. Contemporary citizens no longer fit the stereotypes that political science, and political theory, used to apply to them. They are often active political subjects, instead of passive objects of government policy. Moreover, in contemporary society, many formerly public issues are expressly ‘privatized’; that is, they are dealt with through ‘market’ mechanisms. Consequently, modern citizens are *expected* to be active, calculating, mobile, and self-sufficient. Moreover, culture has become a force in politics, too. Citizens experience themselves as culturally shaped, and their demands and expectations often exhibit a cultural dimension. The culture war has entered politics.

The first response from political theorists in the sixties was a shift in interest in government to the right to *resist* government, especially to the issue (or right) of ‘civil disobedience’. The term itself already indicates that such a right concerns exceptional cases, cases in which ‘civic conscience’ simply cannot be reconciled with (‘democratic’) political decisions. No switch from private to public is possible at all. In time, such thinking on rights led to more general theories on the nature of just government and its implications for the obligations governments had toward their citizens. The most famous of these was Rawls’ *A theory of justice*, published in 1971. This book quite successfully attempted to merge moral philosophy with political theory. Still, it is primarily an exercise in moral philosophy and ‘government’. It contains very little about politics or citizenship. For Rawls, the option (and possibly even the duty) of civil disobedience is not a political matter, but rather a very general duty inherent in being a moral subject. We might say it entails a direct translation into the political realm of Kantian deontology: ‘here I stand, I can do no other’. It does not require any specifically political motivation. Rawlsian citizens generally are moved only by very general factors like a sense of justice, respect for the rule of law, and human dignity. There is nothing to show either that they are motivated by being a member of a particular political community or culture, or that they might or must act to support such a culture.¹

Such a citizen, in other words, resembles a *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, to borrow a phrase from Robert Musil. Indeed, the ‘characterless man’ is featured prominently in *A Theory of Justice*, where he goes by the name of the ‘Man behind the Veil’ (of Ignorance). This veil, and the ‘original position’ in which it features, plays the lead role in a thought experiment designed to show how an impartial view might be attained. The experiment consists of ‘unthinking’ (to borrow a phrase from George Orwell) one’s position, characteristics, and

context, and then designing a new social order. The temptation to design an unjust social order will be curtailed by the risk of ending up at the unjust end of it. Or so Rawls thinks.

In other words, everyone can at any time just ‘switch’ from private to public by a playing a simple mind game. It is like a judge telling a jury to ‘disregard this evidence’ – only infinitely more difficult, because infinitely more encompassing. The idea that a simple lack of characteristics, or identity, would produce an acceptable concept of justice is rather extreme, and Rawls later asked us to, indeed, disregard it. He now proposes a different ideal type of the citizen: a person as (s)he can be understood and accepted (‘overlapping consensus’) form diverging, and potentially conflicting, encompassing conceptions of human life. A civilized citizen therefore – not atopic Everyman, but well-thinking Western man. This (wo)man doesn’t have to perform the vanishing trick of the rationalist thought experiment any more. He just needs to separate private from public life. This maneuver solves, or rather sidesteps, the problem of impartiality by historicizing it. The acceptance of liberal political principles is no longer a matter of ‘unthinking’ one’s own identity, but of having such an identity that it can easily connect to liberal principles. Rawls now in fact argues that the liberal conception of politics, based on reasonableness, is like a ‘module’, which every citizen of a western democracy should be able to ‘plug’ into his private world view, however controversial or unconventional (or ‘culturally different’) that view may otherwise be.

Against this view, critics have charged that this still entails a strong monocultural orientation.² One’s cultural particularity can very well interfere with the way one draws the line between public and private domains. Different people, or different cultures, may draw this line in different ways – which may or may not be compatible with liberal sensitivities. Moreover, and in this context even more importantly, one’s social or cultural ‘outfit’, or characteristics, may very well influence the ease with which the ‘switch’ from private to public viewpoint is made. Taking a public view involves more than ‘flicking a switch’, and social or cultural background is an important factor in how this switch is in fact negotiated.

The first major lesson of the Lewinsky affair about the liberal view on politics and citizenship is that most of the opinion-forming American public³ obviously deemed the sexualized Clinton unable to perform a Rawlsian ‘switch’ from a private to public, ‘impartial’ view. They believed, or pretended to believe, that his affair with Lewinsky somehow betrayed a sexual obsession that necessarily clouded his political actions, making him incapable of proper governing. I do not think this is a particularly good argument against (the early) Rawls’ rationalistic account of the switch from private to public, but it at least suggests that the sense of its implausibility is widely spread. There must be more to ‘flicking the switch’ than an a cool mind exercise, or ‘thought experiment’. Moreover, deep division actually developed on how Clinton’s behavior should be judged, even in terms of ‘constitutional essentials’. This showed that, not only for Clinton but for many others, making the ‘rational move’ was asking one step too many.

The consequences of Rawls’ later view for this case are somewhat different. It doesn’t ask all the parties involved to make that extra, rational step towards impartiality by shedding their partial attributes. Rather, it asks them to ‘plug in’ a module of reasonableness into their, otherwise partial and particular, spiritual hardware. This should lead to overlapping judgments, at least concerning the ‘constitutional essentials’. Diverging, or changing, conceptions of good do not affect one’s identity as a citizen.⁴ As we all know by now, diverging conceptions of the good most certainly affected citizen identities in the Lewinsky affair. Many, often desperate efforts were made to maintain dignity in the least politicized institution of American politics, the Senate. But what followed, for all to see, was a bitterly divided group of politicians that couldn’t even decide on basic matters of procedure, let alone substance.

Let’s keep in mind that the Lewinsky affair was certainly *not* an extreme case. No crime had been committed, no harm had been done (except emotional harm), and no state interests had

been affected.⁵ The Lewinsky affair in no imaginable way resembled Watergate (as republicans liked to have everyone believe) or, for that matter, the Iran-Contragate affair. Watergate was indeed an extreme case, in which agreement among politicians, or the general public, was probably too much to ask. The Iran-Contragate affair was almost as outrageous, but (regretfully) fitted a long tradition of cynical American involvement in Latin America. In sharp contrast, the only extreme aspect of the Lewinsky case is that a supposed 'constitutional essential', the legal powers of the special prosecutor who should monitor abuses of presidential power (an office created, of course, to prevent another Watergate), was now used in the most irrational, unreasonable, and irresponsible way possible, namely to assist what amounted to a presidential coup.

The communitarian citizen

Obviously not everybody managed to insert the liberal 'module' with equal ease, and make the required switch to impartiality. In fact, many of the people involved would reject the implication of Rawls' political theory that political action can be 'detached' from social and moral character. They would not describe themselves as political liberals, but rather as *communitarians*. Against Rawls, communitarians argue that citizenship is intrinsically related to social and cultural context. Such a critique essentially argues that people can never be socially or culturally 'stripped' – neither in the public, nor in the private sphere. Some communitarians, most famously Michael Sandel, advanced ontological arguments, or arguments derived from philosophical anthropology, to make this case.⁶ This was a good case, in so far as it revealed the ontological implications of Rawls' argument. That is to say, Sandel pointed out that the apparently simple trick of 'unthinking' one's identity had far-reaching, and even unacceptable ontological implications.

Sandel's own argument seemed to be that the kind of 'switching' between public and private identity that is entailed by Rawls' theory, is effectively foreclosed by the ontological 'inertness' of identity. This is not a very good case. It would imply that we cannot switch at all from being a bad person to being a good citizen. The good citizen *must* be a good person. It would support the conservative republicans who in effect argued that Clinton was wholly incapable, on grounds of personal morality, of being a good president.⁷ An interesting example is Jean Elshtain, who is both something of a liberal and (quite) something of a communitarian. In her comments on 'Monicagate', she was close to arguing, as a communitarian, that Clinton was simply morally unfit to be president. But her sympathies for political liberalism led her to conclude that, if he really had to indulge in his sexual affairs, he should at least have taken care to adequately shield them from public view. In conclusion, better moral taste should have moved him to properly separate public from private business.⁸

Against the communitarian claim on ontology, political liberals can justifiably counter that the notion of ontological inertness of identity is very speculative. They are indeed justified, I think, in shifting the burden of proof (of ontological disruption) to the communitarians. To stay in business, they need to show that liberal political practice is not ontologically 'neutral'. More exactly, that the continuous, seemingly effortless 'switching' between public and private identities as entailed by liberalism has unsettling effects at the ontological level, on both individual and society.

Such an argument would be critical of the liberal pretense that we can simply separate public from private. It would hold that *all* subjects of liberal societies are unsettled by the 'schizophrenic' liberal public-private switching, and try to articulate the consequences of this ontological disorder. Modern liberal society, many communitarians argue, threatens to destroy the virtues traditionally cultivated in the private sphere. The self-sufficient, mobile citizen constitutes a symbol of excessive individualism, lack of solidarity, and absence of community

bonds. Think for instance of the 24 hour economy, the disintegration of families, and the effects of commercial mass culture. In this view, liberal politics is a volatile structure that can exist only if superimposed (and thus parasitic) upon a solid layer of social cooperation and consensus. However, the modern liberal lifestyle will progressively weaken and dissolve the underlying social texture.

Like some members of the (first generation) Frankfurter Schule before them, communitarians believe that behind the ‘alienation’ brought about by the nefarious impact of a liberal political culture, still remnants can be found of an original, more civilized, less fragmented, ‘authentic’ culture. Liberal culture, at least to some extent, is parasitic upon this authentic culture. Many communitarians feel that something of this original unity, and authenticity, could be restored if we could somehow revert from the moral and social fragmentation they deem characteristic of liberalism, to the moral and social convergence they envision in the original, authentic culture. Moral and social convergence imply that public and private identity need not differ much; the ‘citoyen’ will rather closely resemble the ‘bourgeois’.

This brand of communitarian thinking branded Clinton as a latter day Socrates, as someone who’s improper actions in the public sphere constituted a threat to the moral health of their children. Compare for instance the criticism by the conservative moralist William Pfaff, columnist for the Los Angeles Times and the International Herald Tribune. In one of his op-ed articles he tries to show, in an almost comical way, that Clinton’s behavior does not fit the American constitutional tradition.⁹ That tradition, Pfaff thinks, flows from ‘certain lofty moral principles’ that were characteristic of the ‘golden’ 18th century. Well, that is, he concedes, for the *rhetoric* of that era; actual statesmen didn’t behave so well. Anyhow, this rhetoric established ‘a history of political decency’ in education and culture. True, Pfaff concedes again, this is not much notable in practice; actually its most concrete effect is the reverence generally felt for Abraham Lincoln. (A sceptic might say that apparently you need a civil war to establish a tradition, or rather a myth, of political decency.) However contorted the reasoning, the gist of the argument is clear. Conservative puritans like Pfaff think that the masses are prone to sin and moral confusion, and exactly for that reason high-ranking officials should set a virtuous example. *Noblesse oblige*.

Such elitist moral gloom, both concerning Clinton and more in general, is much overdramatized. On the social and cultural level, one might indeed argue that liberalism has ‘brought down’ culture to the level of, let’s say, commercial television stations. But in as far as this is true, it results from a general democratization of cultural tastes, and of access to culture. Culture may have degraded, but it is certainly less elitist than it used to be. And certainly there never was a time of unblemished moral decency and virtue, late 18th century or whenever. Neither is there reason to believe that if there is moral decay, it could be stopped by a leader with high personal moral standards (whatever those may be).

To sum up, there is some merit in the communitarian critique that both liberal private individuals and liberal citizens lack a sense of direction. Liberalism does not provide citizens with means to make the switch between public and private. It is not a good idea, however, to engage this problem by removing the difference between public and private, and thus the necessity to switch between them. We want individuals to be able to recognize and employ the distinction between public and private, albeit not in the naive liberal way. We want individuals to have a sense of judgment about when, and how, to act as a citizen and when to act as a private person.

The republican citizen

In sharp contrast to the conservative moralism concerning Clinton as exhibited by many American newspapers and journals stood the reaction in France. *Le Monde* (September 13,

1998) expressed many (French) republican's feelings when it proclaimed, with regard to the Lewinsky case, that 'l'enfer est Américain'. In the tradition of republican political thought, the French believe in a total separation of public and private spheres. Nothing a president does in the private sphere is of importance for the assessment of how he conducts public affairs. President Mitterand, for example, had an extramarital affair for decennia. This was a sort of public secret, known to everyone but also kept by everyone. The idea that the affair would affect his public functioning, in a negative way, was never even entertained.

Although much better than the conservative fusion of public and private, this extreme separation of both domains isn't satisfactory either. First, although leaders do not need to be moral champions, citizens need to be able to develop *some* confidence in their personal integrity. Second, and more importantly in this context, a strong separation between public and private does just as little to improve responsible switching between them as the conservative fusion of both dimensions. Much more promising in this regard is the philosophical version of republicanism, developed in the tradition of critical theory, by Jürgen Habermas.

According to Habermas, Rawls' criterion for the formulation of a neutral point of view is insufficient. The acceptance of some neutral view from within all participating conceptions of the good life cannot be expressed in the form of a simple 'switch' of mind. Such acceptance can gain real form and real value only when the capacity to make such a 'switch' forms an integral part of public opinion formation.¹⁰ Shared orientations are not a test for communicative action; on the contrary, they are its product. In this way, more emphasis is given to citizenship as a dimension of civil society, more specifically the sphere of public opinion formation. The citizens' political orientation flows from a broad self-understanding – that is to say, from their encompassing social and cultural worldview. However, institutions and processes of public deliberation and accountability must be organized in such a way that they invite and enable citizens to take an impartial point of view on matters of public interest. The ability to switch between public to private, and the judgment of when and why this is appropriate, is thus developed and supported by the public culture.

As an alternative to Rawls' characterless citizen, Habermas thus proposes a citizen whose identity is anchored in the experience of democratic communication. Rather than by liberal tradition, or by communitarian consensus, Habermas' citizen is moved by an ensemble of communicative capabilities. Such an outfit guarantees that individuals can meet each other in the political sphere as equals, and that they are able to realize the conditions of freedom or self-realization together, through deliberation and action. This is an important gain compared to Rawls, on the one hand, and communitarians, on the other. Neither Rawls nor the communitarians prepare or support the citizen for the required switching between public and private. Liberal citizens value freedom above everything else, but their notion of freedom is very much privatized, divided between a idiosyncratic, personal dimension on the one hand, and a strongly legalized public dimension on the other. The most common liberal reactions to public challenges are, accordingly, either 'mind your own business' or 'see you in court'. Communitarians, on the other hand, overreact by aiming to eliminate such responses from public life altogether. A healthy public life, informed by both democratic and *rechtsstaatliche* considerations, needs citizens who can assert both own interests, and the common interest. Habermas' theory accounts for such citizen sensibility.

The main problem with Habermas' approach is that its demands on citizens are too heavy. They always need to see themselves as committed to the project of democratic will formation. This seems both normatively and descriptively overdone. Descriptively, because contemporary citizens do not view themselves that way. They are mobile, 'fugitive', not really involved in any encompassing project, certainly not a collective one. Normatively, because both citizens and the democratic Rechtsstaat are usually able to function quite well without such an insistent communicative, democratic mission. Citizens need not be much attached to the idea of

democracy, or concerned with the protection of the constitution. In many cases, it's even better when they aren't.

One of those cases was the Clinton-Lewinsky case. Among its most salient characteristics was that *all* parties involved seemed genuinely (and therefore all the more dangerously) driven by a desire to protect political values, be it the presidency, democracy, or the constitution. The Democrats especially insisted that the president was not 'above the law'. That is, normal citizenship standards applied to him, especially the standard of 'not lying under oath'. By this they meant, of course, the famous denial by the president of 'sexual relations' with Monica Lewinsky. Obsessed as they were with democratic propriety, they forgot that no ordinary citizen would ever be brought to trial for such inconsequential 'transgressions' as Clinton had committed. In their zealous insistence on democratic and legal purity, they were prepared to push through an unprecedented campaign of 'moral cleansing'. Ordinary citizens, on the other hand, indeed act somewhat like Clinton acted in the Lewinsky case. They rightly feel the *Rechtsstaat* will not fall just because of some periodic lapses in democratic commitment, let alone because of publicly telling some lies about private affairs.

Citizenship and identity

What has this short overview learned us so far about the conception of citizenship? A first conclusion should be that we need a conception of citizenship that is more active than that of Rawls, less moralistic than that of the communitarians, and less demanding than that of Habermas. Secondly, all the views on citizenship discussed so far contain general, across-the-board precepts for all citizens. In so far as they recognized citizens to have 'Eigenschaften', these were always characteristics that all citizens possess, or can possess, in common, to the same degree, and in a similar way. In Habermas, as well as in Rawls and in communitarian theories, 'otherness' or 'alterity' cannot have a positive meaning for citizenship.¹¹

There is of course good reason to detach normative considerations, concerning citizenship or any other issue, from descriptive considerations. Without such detachment, we are in danger of subverting equality, of creating different classes, or types, of citizens, some better or more powerful than others. But there can also be good reasons to establish *some* relation between the normative and the descriptive level. Individuals or groups may justifiably feel, for instance, that their specific situatedness, in economic, social, or cultural terms, makes it difficult for them to manifest or realize themselves on the normative level. This was once a common argument of marxists against the liberal emphasis on legal equality, and it is now frequently used to point out disadvantages of women or minorities vis-à-vis dominant majorities. What we need, therefore, is a more *differentiated* conception of citizenship, that allows for the possibility that not all citizens possess all characteristics of citizenship in the same way, or to the same degree, due to differences in social, cultural, or economic status. What we need is citizens with more specific *identities*. Of specific interest here is the relevance of otherness and identity for the liberal 'switch' between public and private domains.

The ability to make this switch, the way and the style in which it is done, has consequences for one's capacity to function in liberal society. Not everyone is able or willing to switch between public and private in the way, or the style, liberal culture expects or requires. It is not obvious, moreover, that everyone should adapt to the dominant liberal way of dealing with this switch. Especially in multicultural, multi- or postnational societies, we should expect to find lasting differences between individuals and/or groups in this regard, and this plurality may very well be regarded as valuable. But it seems necessary to account for these differences in the normative conception of citizenship. Depending on circumstances, this may be expressed in special rights, privileges or obligations. But it may also require a broader recognition by all

citizens of both differences, and shared obligations regarding the maintenance of the public sphere and the *Rechtsstaat*.

The multicultural liberal citizen

Those who recognize that citizenship needs to take account of identity issues may see it as either a liability or an asset. Identity appears as a *liability* when it is taken primarily as a potential obstacle for the proper functioning of liberal citizenship. The most prominent example of this approach is Will Kymlicka's multiculturalist adaptation of the Rawlsian liberal framework.¹² Kymlicka does not quite consider contemporary political communities themselves as multinational, but he at least recognizes that their citizenry is. The typical political community is still 'national' in that it is taken to be (legitimately) dominated by a liberal majority culture, supplemented by a number of nondominant minority cultures, usually deriving from other nationalities. It is then recognized that the members of some minority cultures, or rather their cultural context, need special protection in order for them to adequately function as liberal citizens. Such citizens are, we might say, 'handicapped'.¹³

Such cultural handicaps may dissolve in time, when minorities gradually adapt to liberal ways – more especially to the liberal style of switching between public and private. But then again they might not. Cultural differences may be deep-seated and fundamental, or otherwise prove persistent in nature. In certain areas, therefore, citizens may simply not be able to comply with liberal imperatives, or desiderata. They may continue to perceive issues as private that liberals consider public, or vice versa. Or they may have different ways of drawing, or guarding, the line between public and private. Or they may see the relevance of 'private' issues for public affairs, or vice versa, differently than liberals do.

To accommodate such culturally induced handicaps, Kymlicka proposes to exempt certain illiberal cultural practices from the stricture of liberal norms. In other words, he allows members of minority groups to 'hide behind' their cultural context, in cases where they would probably be disadvantaged if there were to be a regular confrontation according to liberal rules of impartiality or neutrality. This could result in (limited) rights to self-government, for 'national minorities', or in weaker rights that help preserve 'cultural dignity', weaker rights accruing to 'immigrant groups' – the difference being that members of the first group were 'enlisted' in liberal society, while members of the second group voluntarily applied for membership. Finally, Kymlicka proposes (still weaker) 'special representation rights', available to all minority groups who are inadequately represented in political or social institutions.

Cultural identities for Kymlicka thus count as handicaps; minority citizens are handicapped liberal citizens. Their handicap is either serious ('involuntary'), or not really serious ('voluntary'). Those with a strong cultural identity have a serious handicap; they are barely able to perform the required switching between private and public, or not at all. They may therefore be radically exempted from liberal life. Those with a less serious handicap are required to adjust. A liberal political culture may decide to provide certain 'shelters' for minority cultures, if this better enables their members to function as liberal citizens in general. Perhaps in the form of something like an 'imaginary domain', a 'free identity space' protected by liberal rights, as Drucilla Cornell has suggested.¹⁴

If we apply this analysis to the Clinton-Lewinsky example, we might say that Clinton's sexual behavior has become (or has been made) part of his political identity. It was suggested that Clinton's sexlife was inextricably tied up with his political functioning. Like minorities that cannot function adequately in politics without expressing their cultural identity, Clinton apparently could not function politically without expressing his sexual identity. Sex, in other words, was (or had become) Clinton's cultural characteristic. (If you think this is weird, or unlikely, just think of how the actions of prominent female politicians are often linked to 'sexual

culture’.) In a Kymlicka-type of approach, this identity can only count as a handicap. Measures might be called for to accommodate such a handicap, for instance in the form of a right to privacy concerning affairs like that with Lewinsky. Obviously this didn’t work very well, because Clinton in fact *had* a right to privacy, but for ‘democratic’ reasons was forced to waive it. But more importantly, Kymlicka could not imagine that sexual identity, or any identity for that matter could be a part of *regular* politics.

Recognition and identity politics

Can we see plausibly see identity, sexual or otherwise, as an *asset* for politics, or citizenship? This is the central issue that divides contemporary political theorists dealing with culture or identity issues. In other words, does a positive valuation of (cultural) identity of citizens necessarily jeopardize liberal political values – especially the value of impartiality? Liberals like Kymlicka fear that if identity claims were allowed to play a direct role in political life, ruly politics would turn into unruly ‘identity politics’. Instead of learning how to switch between public and private, minority citizens would in fact be encouraged to turn private convictions into public demands. Impartiality would be lost, and intolerance rampant.

None of the ‘positive’ identity approaches would deny that citizens of liberal polities must possess, or acquire, an ability to switch from private to public viewpoints. Most would argue also, with Habermas, that a particular cultural ‘habitus’ of public opinion formation is required for such switching. But they also share a feeling identity needs to be introduced in citizenship, because the dominant habitus is insufficiently amenable, or hospitable, to the expression of views by citizens that do not belong to the dominant social or cultural groups – either because of their different cultural background, or because of their unempowered position in society.¹⁵

What would recognition of identity in politics, or citizenship, imply? The first step would be to see that citizenship activity can lead to ‘injury’ to one’s identity: the experience that one’s identity is depreciated or misrecognized. Shared experiences of social or cultural ‘misrecognition’ should be allowed to be expressed in the form of moral and social claims for recognition. Room should be found in the framework of social recognition, that is to say in the vocabulary or language in which moral and social claims are acknowledged and evaluated, to express claims that hitherto were unexpressed, or inadequately expressed. Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition moves along these lines.¹⁶ A lack of recognition, Honneth proposes, results in inadequately developed forms of self-confidence, self-respect, or self-esteem, leading to insufficient opportunities to manifest and express oneself as a citizen, as a participant in the public sphere. Awareness of one’s cultural background is the first moment in the process of formulating and explicating claims for recognition.

This first moment of recognition might still be called negative; identity is still perceived as a handicap, a criterion for exclusion. But in a second moment of recognition, the ‘handicap’, or liability, turns into something of an asset. In what is called the ‘politics of recognition’, or ‘identity politics’, it is precisely the awareness of being a ‘handicapped citizen’ that provides the motive for being an active citizen. The perception of being handicapped (excluded, ignored, marginalized, repressed, exploited) generates the drive to manifest oneself publicly and press for recognition of one’s needs and goals by others.¹⁷ The emancipatory and empowering aspects of (the experience of injury to) identity are thus emphasized. According to the politics of identity, liberal cultures should stimulate an atmosphere in which processes of recognition, the process of growing awareness through which cultural handicaps are turned into sources of empowerment, can become an integral part of the culture of public confrontation, discussion, and action.

Thus cultural identity can be considered an asset, at least in the sense that it fuels citizenship. Implicit in this account of ‘identity politics’ is that identity groups, or individuals,

strive to be accepted into dominant society. They are unjustly excluded; a justified claim for recognition will provide them with the social esteem they deserve to get. We may call this the *affirmative* dimension of recognition. It is notably expressed in Charles Taylor's approach to identity and recognition, in which cultural dialogue, or intercultural understanding, tends to increase the awareness, particularly with members of national majorities, of the plurality of ways in which particular convictions and lifestyles might be accommodated within the dominant (liberal) political framework. Recognition requires a far-reaching ability and willingness to reflect upon one's own culture and to engage in dialogue with other cultures. Its goal is not the rejection of the existing liberal political culture, but –possibly- to 'enrich' it by broadening its range of values and its repertoire of how such 'new' value patterns, or rather the practices in which they are embodied, can be recognized in public interaction.¹⁸

Although this perspective aims to bring out the 'ecumenical' potential of recognition, it is certainly not blind to what we might call its *transformative* dimension.¹⁹ Taylor, after all, does emphasize the potential identity consequences of recognition for both minority *and* majority cultures. That is to say, recognition does not imply taking the majority cultural and social framework and simply fitting some minority in. The claim for recognition, we may say, is (necessarily) at the same time an acknowledgment of, and a challenge to, the dominant group or framework. The claiming party wants the other to recognize it for what it is, while at the same time the experience, or grief, or injury, shows that the other is unable to do so. To be recognized 'for what one is', in one's full particularity, is by its nature impossible. First, because recognition is always in *some* sense a 'fitting in' (namely, in the other's framework of values). Second, because either party significantly misperceives its own particularities, as well as their impact on others. This is one reason why even 'successful' claims for recognition will have many unforeseen consequences.

So both the affirmative and the transformative perspective on recognition acknowledge, in my view, the many possible failures, or misunderstandings, implicit even in 'successful' recognition. Two characteristics of the affirmative view need to be emphasized. First, it believes that it is possible to address such failures from within the process of recognition, thus continuing the process of intercultural understanding. James Tully for example has tried to show how the accommodation of demands for recognition, even when based on dialogue and understanding, neither necessarily imply an affirmation, nor a radical transformation of the existing political framework. More specifically, he shows how multiculturalist claims for recognition might be translatable into terms of basic rights without necessarily squaring with the existing, dominant cultural patterns.²⁰ Or for example Maria Pia Lara has argued for an extension of the Habermasian framework with an identity-informed notion of recognition, especially with regard to social movements: 'By conceiving their identities as flexible and self-reflexive tools for their performative actions, social movements achieve illocutionary force, connecting their particularities to the normative basis of more collective and universal self-understanding.'²¹

Second, as mentioned above, the affirmative perspective is essentially *empowering*. Successful claims for the recognition of (group) identity are a very important condition for enabling an individual, or a group, to speak up (or 'act up') in public and gain entrance to social institutions that are essential for social and political functioning. The boost in self-esteem which recognition provides, which is itself a non-political 'commodity', often forms a precondition for acting as a citizen. In the terms used earlier, it provides the confidence needed to make the switch from private to public, to address one's private concerns in public, in terms and contexts that are accessible to others. We may therefore characterize identity politics as 'lifestyle turned into politics'.

In a radicalization of the transformative perspective, the process of recognition primarily shows up 'difference'. Identity is not strengthened, but weakened.²² That is to say, this perspective brings to light how identities, and identity claims, are based on mere assumptions,

usually misperceived, of how one differs from others. A radically transformative approach, or ‘politics of difference’, reveals that identity reigns where difference was assumed, and vice versa. Moreover, identity is, to a significant extent, ‘indeterminable’ anyway. Its determinacy is merely ‘imagined’, or projected. Changing the ‘imaginary’ perspective – which in reality is very hard to achieve, certainly when attempting to do so deliberately – will probably destroy the illusion of determinacy, or create a different one. Where the affirmative perspective is stabilizing, the transformative perspective is disruptive.²³

Furthermore, the transformative perspective is critical, rather than empowering. It may show how claims to speak for, or from, some identity are often based on misperception of both oneself, and others. Or how identity is an expression of processes of exclusion and repression, or of *power*, rather than of (inter)cultural and social understanding. The ‘firmness’ of an identity is not just a matter of subjective and intersubjective self-search, but also a product of what lacanians call the symbolic and the imaginary order. That is to say, both of the general cultural framework in which one is ‘thrown’, and of the personal psychological framework that sets the parameters for our idiosyncratic, ‘unique’ self. Identity, in this perspective, is a matter of developing a personal ‘style’ within such frameworks and parameters. The politics of difference therefore is ‘politics turned into lifestyle’.

From the standpoint of a ‘politics of identity, Clinton’s ‘sexual politics’ appear not as sleazy, nor as a handicap, but on the contrary as empowering. That is to say, his sexual affairs may be perceived not as detrimental, but as beneficial to his presidential functioning. They may help him to deal better with political life; maybe he wouldn’t even have gone into political life without the support and stimulation of such affairs. Why wouldn’t the sexual attraction of political power be considered, at least to some extent, as a political asset?²⁴ Recognition is sought for political goals, but at the same time expression of (sexual) identity should be allowed, and even valued. This was in fact probably true for Clinton, and also for John F. Kennedy. The most problematic aspect of this viewpoint is not its supposed lack of moral character. It is rather its capacity for being abused. It is easy to suggest a negative connection between the political misfortunes of one’s opponent and his sexual lifestyle. For instance, ‘Clinton’s affair was sleazy, so he must be a sleazy president.’ Or think of the protracted identity battles fought in the controversy between Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill.²⁵ But besides considerations of political strategy, there is nothing in principal opposed to the recognition that the sexual identity of a president may support, rather than undermine, his political functioning.

The ‘politics of difference’ viewpoint, on the other hand, is especially suited to show that what is considered ‘normal’ political functioning is possible only *because* of relegating identity, including sexual identity, to the ‘private’ sphere. In Slavoj Žižek’s phrase, normality and decency always need an ‘obscene supplement’.²⁶ The obsessive attention for Clinton’s sexual behavior is thus seen as the ‘return of the repressed’; it suggests that the more normal and regular other politicians appear, the darker the sexual secrets they probably hide. And, it is hinted (most prominently by *Hustler* publisher Larry Flint) that they secretly derive pleasure from these hidden transgressions.²⁷ And indeed some prominent Republican leaders, most notably Newt Gingrich and Bob Livingston, had to admit to possessing ‘obscene supplements’.. Exposing Clinton’s ‘transgressions’ thus did not lead to a ‘morally improved leadership’, but on the contrary to exposure of all moral righteousness as a thin cover for morally sleaziness.

The politics of difference, or ‘agonistic politics’, has a good point here. Identity is a disruptive issue. We might even say it is empowering, in the sense of possibly providing a stick to beat righteous opponents with. However, the politics of difference is not much concerned with citizenship motivation or action. It might claim difference as a ‘resource’ for democratic politics, as Iris Young for instance has done.²⁸ But this seems to apply to the precondition for democratic communication, not to the actor’s motives for political action. Or it might claim that understanding the plurality, instability, and inscrutability of both one’s own identity (‘strangers

to ourselves'²⁹) and that of others furthers toleration towards identities that we (probably wrongly) perceive as 'different' . Or that this makes stereotyping more difficult (Butler). Or that the valuing of difference generates democratic energies, or an attitude of care for plurality, and of generosity concerning enemies an 'ethos of pluralization', as William Connolly has called it.³⁰

Such ways of dealing with identity and difference are often (self-)described as 'political', because they take identities as the unstable products of inherently 'unruly' encounters, negotiations, and alliances. But its depreciation of concrete identities make agonism in fact quite *apolitical*. First, in the sense that it makes *representation* near to impossible. If there are no stable, and/or socially grounded identities, how can we determine whether representation is adequately organized? Second, even more than with republicanism, it is unclear what drive people would have for public deliberation about common interests. Republicans can still claim that people might be motivated by an affective attachment to 'the democratic process', or 'the constitution', in a wide or narrow sense. Such as 'Verfassungspatriotismus', a la Habermas, or faith in one's country, a la Rorty.³¹ An ethos of pluralization, however, although it may encourage 'generosity', does not appear to be attachable to any specific institution or social identity. It is not obvious how to deduce a substantive politics of difference from an ontological conception of identity.³² The 'politicization' of identity thus paradoxically leads to ever *weaker* motives for political action, or citizenship. To realize the relative validity of one's convictions (or identity) tends, contrary to what Joseph Schumpeter and (in his wake) Isaiah Berlin suggested, to dissolve one's preparedness to 'stand for them unflinchingly'.³³

Thirdly, what does the politics of difference, or agonistic politics, imply for the switch between public and private identity? Given the lack of determinate identity of subjects in both the public and the private sphere, there is no serious obstacle to overcome in switching from private to public viewpoint, and vice versa. The reason for this is, however, that there is no longer any necessary link between the two at all. The relation between public and private point of view becomes contingent, shifting, and unstable. (This is another way to express the point of representation mentioned above.) This leads to erratic or unpredictable switching, which is just as problematic for democratic citizenship as a profound difficulty in switching from private to public, as is the case in 'fundamentalist' politics.

Conclusion

Good citizenship in modern liberal societies requires the ability to switch between private and public viewpoints. Such switching always requires some effort, but the nature and the extent of this effort depend –at least in part– on one's cultural identity. This issue was easily overlooked by political communities that considered citizens to be monocultural – or rather acultural – and passive. Under such conditions, it seemed possible to switch between private and public point of view merely by making the switch, within one's own mind, between a partial and an impartial point of view. A passive, monocultural citizen does not even need the active, independent capacity to do this; he merely needs to be able to understand how and why the government does it.

But once we understand democratic politics, including the maintenance of a Rechtsstaat, as a project in which both government and citizens are involved, the model certainly needs revision. It must be acknowledged that 'doing the citizen switch' is something that needs both regular practice, and a culture that enables and supports such a practice. A culture of public discussion and opinion formation, as well as the experience of encounters in daily life, informs and instructs the citizen about the appropriate ways, times, and places of switching between private and public. Such ways may be very polite and respectful, or quite rude and confrontational. Citizens need capacities and repertoires to deal with such public confrontations.

Active citizenship in multicultural, or postnational societies also requires recognition of the *identity* of citizens. First because identity is important in the empowerment of citizens (it makes for active citizens), second because identity is likely to influence one's ability and potential for 'switching'. Empowerment implies gaining recognition: excluded or marginalized individuals identify on the basis of shared experiences of 'identity injury', and ask that this injury be recognized by dominant groups, usually in the form of institutional inclusion.

This may partly be effected through exceptions and exemptions regarding certain practices, through education (e.g. 'citizenship courses'), or through a certain 'vertical compartmentalization' of political and social life. However, this does not quite capture the role, both positive and negative, that identity plays in citizenship. Being a product of (imaginary) identification, identities express the need to 'belong', to tie one's actions and convictions to *some* 'deep' cultural context. This context or identity provides (at least part of) both the confidence and the drive needed for acting in public. Modern people do not have strong drives to belong to anonymous institutions like 'the democratic process' or even 'the constitution'. But they do have experiences of injured social or cultural identity, which act as powerful political motivators, as the phenomenon of 'identity politics' attests.

'Identity politics' is thus affirmative: it affirms that previously (excluded or marginalized) groups may properly require status within the dominant cultural framework. Recognition, however, is never fully adequate, nor can it be. First, it is impossible to be recognized in one's 'full particularity'. Second, perceptions of such particularity are often mistaken, both by the party seeking recognition and by the party offering it. Particularity, or 'difference'; thus gets 'aufgehoben' in a dialectic largely intransparent to both partners. The 'politics of difference' rightly points out this aspect of the 'transformative' dimension of recognition. However, to call the exposure of this dialectic 'political' is misleading, in the sense that it cannot have decisive normative consequences. That is to say, a better appreciation of difference does not by itself further democracy or the Rechtsstaat.

In discussing the merits of politics of identity or difference, we need to focus on two basic issues, both related to 'turning on the citizen'. First, we must consider the effects of identity or difference on how citizens can be 'turned on' in the sense of performing the switch from private to public. They should be able to deal with, and participate in, the way in which this switch is performed in their political 'habitus': street, neighborhood, city, country. If their identity is publicly challenged, or just referred to in public discussion, they need to have a 'repertoire' to take up such a challenge. Or to avoid it in an elegant way. Second, we need to see how identity, or difference, can 'turn on' citizens in the sense of 'feeling attracted' to citizenship. Here empowerment plays a large role, for instance implying that some 'balkanization' of multicultural identity should be accommodated if it leads to a better developed sense of how and why to manifest oneself in the public sphere, and how to publicly deal with claims for recognition.

References

- ¹ Cf. Will Kymlicka, Wayne Norman, 'El retorno del ciudadano. Una revisión de la producción reciente en teoría de la ciudadanía', in: *La Política*, 1997/3, p. 20.
- ² As Bhikhu Parekh wrote, in Rawls later work will still find 'a rational view of life (...), autonomous and state-centered conceptions of politics (...), abstraction of the political from the rest of political life, [and a] homogeneous view of public reason'. Parekh, 'Review essay', in *Political Theory*, June 1999, p. 411.
- ³ That is to say, the press and the politicians, especially those in and around Washington, who both formed a very partial and nonrepresentative public. The politicians were already busy placing their bets for the next elections, and the media were playing the post-Watergate game more shamelessly than ever
- ⁴ Cf Pablo da Silveira, 'Neutralidad del Estado y respeto del pluralismo', in *La Política*, 1998/4, p. 123.
- ⁵ Except maybe a very technical and actually extorted 'lie' from Clinton under oath about his sexual relations with Lewinsky. For an argument that even these did not violate the law, see Ronald Dworkin, 'Philosophy and Monica Lewinsky', in *New York Review of Books*, March 9, 2000, p. 48-52
- ⁶ *Liberalism and the limits of justice* (Cambridge up 1982).
- ⁷ Like, prominently, Richard Posner, cf his *An affair of State* (Harvard up 1999). Even some hysteric left-liberals joined in, like Andrew Sullivan in 'Lies that matter', *The New Republic* 14-21 September 1998, 19-22, an article that best be described as an attempt to outdo Robespierre.
- ⁸ *New Republic* 23/3/1998, p.12
- ⁹ Reprinted in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* of September 10, 1998.
- ¹⁰ Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen* (Suhrkamp 1996), p. 120.
- ¹¹ Cf. Diana Coole, 'Habermas and the question of alterity', in: Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (eds), *Habermas and the unfinished project of modernity* (Polity 1996).
- ¹² *Multicultural citizenship* (Oxford up 1995). More recent cf his 'American multiculturalism in the international arena', *Dissent*, fall 1998. And cf the forum on multicultural citizenship in *Constellations*, 4/1, April 1997.
- ¹³ This would in fact fit the analysis of requirements of justice designed by Kymlicka's mentor Ronald Dworkin, who tries to distinguish between 'ambitions', for which we may take credit, and 'endowments', for which –if negative, as in the case of handicaps- we should be compensated. Cf Dworkin's essays 'Equality of what?', in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1981.
- ¹⁴ Drucilla Cornell, *The imaginary domain* (Routledge 1995).
- ¹⁵ One of the first to argue this point was Iris Young, in *Justice and the politics of difference* (Princeton up 1990).
- ¹⁶ Axel Honneth, *Kampf um Anerkennung* (Suhrkamp 1992).
- ¹⁷ A point forcefully developed by Wendy Brown, in *Wounded attachments* (Princeton up 1995).
- ¹⁸ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "the politics of recognition"* (Princeton up 1992).
- ¹⁹ I derive the affirmative/transformational terminology from Nancy Fraser, 'From redistribution to recognition', in id., *Justice interruptus* (Routledge 1997), p. 23ff.
- ²⁰ Tully, *Strange multiplicity. Constitutionalism in an age of diversity* (Cambridge up 1995).
- ²¹ Maria Pia Lara, *Moral textures* (Polity 1998), p. 171.
- ²² Cf Hartmut Rosa, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis. Politische philosophie nach Charles Taylor* (Campus 1998), p. 491.
- ²³ Cf. for instance Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture* (Routledge 1994), p. 177ff
- ²⁴ On this point cf Slavoj Žižek, *The ticklish subject* (Verso 1999), p. 329.
- ²⁵ For an analysis of this confrontation from 'identity/difference' perspective, see Seyla Benhabib, 'From identity politics to social feminism', in David Trend (ed.), *Radical democracy* (Routledge 1996), p. 35ff.
- ²⁶ Why does law need an obscene supplement?', in Peter Goodrich and David Carlson (eds.), *Law and the*

postmodern mind (Un.of Michigan press 1998).

²⁷ From an anthropological perspective, we might call this the 'ambivalent pleasures of purity violations', as is pointed out by Laura Kipnis in her discussion of Flint and Hustler magazine in her *Bound and gagged* (Grove press 1996), p. 144.

²⁸ Iris Young, 'Communication and the other', in: Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and difference*, (Princeton up 1996), p. 126.

²⁹ Cf Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* (Gallimard folio 1991), esp. p. 283-284.

³⁰ 'A democratic state (is) a state with multiple, overlapping lines of identity, allegiance, and communication. Participants in these lines of communication practice forbearance in political initiative and cultivate an ethos of engagement that is generous in its presumptions about others.' Connolly, *Why I am not a secularist* (Un. of Minnesota press 1999), p. 95.

³¹ Cf. Habermas, *Einbeziehung des Anderen*, 143; Rorty, *Philosophy and social hope* (Penguin 1999), chapter 1.

³² Cf. Nancy Fraser, 'Equality, difference, and radical democracy'; in Trend (ed.), *Radical democracy*, p. 205.

³³ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, socialism, and democracy* (Harper 1942), p. 243; Berlin, *Four essays on liberty* (Oxford up 1969), p. 172.