

Reviews

Lasse Thomassen's *British Multiculturalism and the Politics of Representation*

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Lasse Thomassen's *British Multiculturalism and the Politics of Representation* (below: BM) is a valuable recent addition to the growing literature on political representation. The main theoretical objective of the book is to formulate an account of representative politics that can avoid the essentialist traps in representation and can affirm the contingent character of identity formation. The author masterfully illustrates this theoretical argument by providing a detailed analysis of the representational possibilities and setbacks pertaining to multicultural politics in Britain. Further, the book is easy to follow as it is organized around four core concepts that are treated both separately and in relation to one another: equality, recognition, tolerance and hospitality.

One of the key theoretical merits of the book has to do with its ability to talk about the politics of representation beyond the old liberalism-communitarianism debate. This becomes particularly visible in Thomassen's engagement with arguments about cultural identity by Brian Barry and Bhikhu Parekh. Barry's nuanced liberalism acknowledges the pertinence of cultural identities in understanding who we are and the choices we make, but does not see cultural identities as relevant to our considerations of justice. As Thomassen puts it elegantly, "Barry is not saying that you can abstract individuals from their culture; what he does say is that you can abstract justice from their culture" (BM, p. 59). Parekh, on the other hand, situates identities at the core of his understanding of political justice, but talks about cultures "as objective states of affairs" (BM, p. 64). Thomassen disagrees with both theorists since they assume the existence of an objective, extra-representational reality, which can appear either in the form of an autonomous chooser or a culture-dependent subject.

This theoretical intervention by Thomassen, which is informed by insights from Jacques Derrida and Ernesto Laclau, sets the general tone of his book and yields the following aporia pertaining to representation: there is "no inclusion

without exclusion” (BM, p. 6). Thomassen’s key contribution to the literature hinges on his decision to examine this aporia also in politics of recognition, tolerance and hospitality. Recognition, for example, entails “the emancipation from ascribed negative group identities” but it also “binds the individuals to those very group identities” (BM, p. 97). Similar tensions are present in practices of toleration: “tolerance always involves a limit... I cannot tolerate what I like” (BM, p. 132). The tolerated subject occupies the undecidable position of being both accepted and marked as an outsider. Similarly, hospitality involves an element of hostility as it “raises questions of home and identity – for instance, of who is cast in the role of being at home and therefore able to host a guest” (BM, p. 186). Recognition, tolerance and hospitality, in short, take place at the limits of inclusion and exclusion, which is a tension that Thomassen observes in all aspects of representation.

The normative upshot of this interpretation is that all acts of inclusion cannot be set apart from power relations and the terms of exclusion always remain open to further contestation: “The task is then to intervene analytically and politically to ‘undo’ this fixity and show how things may be otherwise” (BM, p. 37). Put differently, the binary between reality and representation does not go any further than being a fiction that is also a product of a representative construct: “all we are left with are attempts to posit one representation against another and to challenge them in this way” (BM, p. 8). When authenticity cannot be our benchmark in representing the world, even basic facts become exposed to such interpretive freedom: “representation involves recognition insofar as (the representation of) a fact must be recognized as a fact in order for the representation to be authoritative” (BM, p. 102).

This is probably the reason why instead of following Laclau’s theory of populism, Thomassen frames politics of representation from a different angle and treats inclusion as a matter of being situated within the confines of “concentric circles” (BM, p. 132). This more nuanced understanding of inclusion, which resists the tendency to divide the demos in half, becomes manifest in Thomassen’s interpretation of multicultural politics in Britain. The chapter on tolerance, for example, takes us on a journey of analyzing three different cases (i.e. *X v Y*, *Playfoot* and *Watkins-Singh*) which are about different schoolgirls from Muslim, Christian and Sikh backgrounds demanding to wear their religious symbols and attires in their schools. The book also analyzes a literary piece, Nick Hornby’s novel *How to be Good*, that demonstrates how each generous act of hospitality is accompanied by the more calculative moment of deciding who or what to exclude. All these cases point to the impossibility of thinking about inclusion and exclusion in a binary form. For example, once we approach British multiculturalism in terms of a conflict between moderates and extremists, it becomes possible to think about the moderate Muslims as “properly” British. If the conflict is framed as a struggle against the Muslim popula-

tion in general, then it is very likely that being British will be codified as being Christian. There is, however, also the conflict between secularists and the religious populations at large, which generates an affinity among different religious groups. Representation, therefore, never works as a matter of “either/or” and should rather be studied as “circles of more or less included and excluded” (BM, p. 170), which is what Thomassen shows masterfully in his analysis of multicultural politics in Britain.

While I am sympathetic to this poststructuralist line of reasoning, I am not sure if I want to follow Thomassen all the way down this slippery path of treating all facts as an outcome of representative construction. This is because a strictly representational world undermines a key distinction that Hannah Arendt draws between rational and factual truth in *Truth and Politics* (below: TP). Truth and politics have an uneasy relationship because truth is supposed to be “beyond agreement and consent” (TP, p. 237) whereas politics is “representative” as it involves “considering a given issue from different viewpoints” (TP, p. 237). Yet, a factual truth is different from rational truth in that regard because it is of this world and therefore circumstantial. With factual truth, there is no option of removing oneself from the world and taking recourse to the solitude of the rational mind. This is what makes factual truths “infinitely more fragile than axioms, discoveries, theories... produced by the human kind” because “they occur in the field of the ever-changing affairs of men... Once they are lost, no rational effort will ever bring them back” (TP, p. 227). Facts, in other words, share the same phenomenological reality of being able to exist only to the extent that they are perceived by the many: “Factual truth... is always related to other people... it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is talked about” (TP, p. 233–34). This is what constitutes factual truth’s ambiguous relationship to politics, which is absent in rational truth. On the one hand, facts go against the grain of politics because they do not invite disagreement. On the other hand, they are “political by nature” (TP, p. 234) because they are of this world and can only be retained by being preserved by the many. But once facts are collapsed into opinion, imagination starts to manipulate the world beyond comprehension, which is a threat that Arendt has highlighted in her works on totalitarianism: “Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed” (TP, p. 234). Politics need facts to have a ground to stand on in interpreting the world and facts need politics for their preservation.

Can a poststructuralist account of representative politics, then, be considered as compatible with Arendt’s emphasis of the indispensability of such a gap between factual truth and opinion? Contra Thomassen, I am not convinced that a poststructuralist defense of representative politics warrants such

a removal of factual truths. Facts and interpretation are not antithetical to one another and for that reason one should not domineer the other. Facts can have a truth value *and* invite interpretative freedom in representation because they have “a peculiar opaqueness” as “it is in their very nature to withstand further elucidation... for facts have no conclusive reason” (TP, p. 238). Facts are opaque because they are contingent and could always have happened otherwise, which is how they solicit interpretation. Such contingency also makes their preservation of utmost importance because otherwise they can be easily manipulated, omitted, hidden or even destroyed. When Thomassen claims that “there is no extra-representational fact” and “there are only facts that have already been articulated as facts within a particular discourse,” (BM, p. 30) I cannot help but read this as an unfortunate invitation to collapse this delicate distance between facts and opinion.

Let me flesh this point out by revisiting one of the cases in the book. Shabina is a Muslim high school student who wants to wear a *jilbab*, which is a religious attire that covers almost all parts of her body. The school authorities reject Shabina’s demand because they associate this attire with Islamic extremism and perceive the exclusion of “Shabina Begum’s difference” as “the condition of possibility of others’ freedom and a pluralistic school” (BM, p. 121). The situation is exaberrated by the fact that Shabina’s “older brother, who is also her legal guardian, is a member of the radical Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir” (BM, p. 101). It is not so much that the school denies all religious differences, but it wants to include only those Islamic differences that they see as fit. After consulting the religious authorities in the community, the school chose *shalwar kameez* – an outfit involving baggy trousers and a long shirt – as the appropriate attire that could fulfill the religious duties of other Muslim female students while disassociating the school from the extremist circles. Shabina, however, does not deem this decision as inclusive enough as it excludes her own conception of Islam and the Islamic demand for modesty.

Thomassen discusses this case because it shows how the actors involved in the conflict have a hard time dealing with the aporetic character of representation and recognition, where the line between inclusion and exclusion can never be secured in a conclusive manner. Shabina Begum, for example, has to acknowledge the pluralism within Islam to make her voice heard. Yet her arguments also rest on “a homogenizing and essentializing representation of Islam” as she “refers to a true Islam on references to scriptures and classical scholars” and claims that “better Muslims wear a jilbab” (BM, p. 120). Thomassen convincingly underlines the inevitably contestable nature of political identities and symbols, where politics of recognition is always “marked by several tensions of paradoxes; playing up and playing down difference; taking identities as given and constituting them; reproducing relations of power, yet also inherently open” (BM, p. 123).

However, it would be a mistake to extend the scope of such interpretive freedom to those facts that make up the case. When I was doing my own preliminary research on this case, for example, I found out about a fact that was not mentioned in the book. Since Islam is a minority religion in Britain, I was working under the assumption that Shabina would be in the minority in terms of being Muslim in a predominantly non-Muslim school. This presumption was bolstered by the fact that Thomassen's discussion of the case only focuses on "the head teacher, the deputy, the teachers, the government, their lawyers" (BM, p. 105) and the religious authorities that spoke on behalf of Islam. I presumed that the voices of the other students in the school are silent because they are non-Muslim and hence would not be affected by the decision that was taken. It turns out that the Denbigh High School is "a 1,000-pupil comprehensive where almost 80% of pupils are Muslim" (BBC News). I am not presenting this fact to pass any judgment on Shabina's claims for representation. My point is rather to argue that this is an essential fact about this case that cannot be omitted because otherwise our interpretative horizon becomes severely restricted. Once this fact is included into the picture, the following questions, for example, gain much more importance: Why did Shabina choose to take a strictly legalistic route for her activism? How did this affect her ability to mobilize others and render her claims legitimate in their eyes? How should we interpret the absence of other voices in a case that is defined through representation and recognition?

I do not intend to provide an answer to these questions because I am more interested in what this omission means for the relationship between facts and opinions. If we claim, as Thomassen does, that "(the representation of) a fact must be recognized as a fact in order for the representation to be authoritative," (BM, p. 102) then it becomes permissible to leave this fact out of consideration. I, on the other hand, would like to claim that this fact has a truth value beyond such representative freedom. This is not to say that its meaning can be determined beforehand. It simply means that no representative freedom can justify its omission. Going back to Arendt, interpretation might give us "the right to rearrange the facts," but it does not grant "the right to touch the factual matter itself" (TP, p. 234). Otherwise, it becomes almost impossible to talk about the omission, manipulation and destruction of facts. Thomassen's willingness to extend representational freedom all the way up to facts can unintentionally pave the way for such distortion or omission, which is a risk that is too costly to take in a political environment that is replete with such manipulation. Facts are too valuable and fragile to be left into the hands of opinions, which is where I part ways with Thomassen's poststructuralist reading of representation.

References

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