Diversity and Homogeneity in a "Multicultural Society": A Critique of the Pervasive Picture of Collective Identities[1]

In the foreword to its "Declaration on Cultural Diversity", adopted in 2001, UNESCO *notes* that "culture is at the heart of contemporary debates about […] social cohesion." Moreover, the second article of the declaration itself contributes to these debates:

> In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together. Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conductive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life.[2]

Two things are especially interesting about this formulation. Firstly, that it gives expression to the idea that contemporary society is characterized by a diversity of *cultural identities*, and secondly, that *cultural pluralism* is presented as a means for obtaining social cohesion. These features make the UNESCO declaration symptomatic of that general ideological tendency in post cold-war capitalism described by Walter Benn Michaels in *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004) as "posthistoricism," and by Nancy Fraser in *Justice Interruptus* (1997) as "the postsocialist condition." According to Michaels, posthistoricism is marked by an increased interest in cultural diversity, at the expense of both ideological conflict and material injustice, which leads to the transformation of "all politics" into "identity politics."[3] A similar analysis is made by Nancy Fraser, who argues that the postsocialist condition is characterized by "a shift in the grammar of political claims-making", which has resulted in claims for "the recognition of group difference" eclipsing claims for social equality and, as a consequence of this, "the rise of 'identity politics.'"[4]

[2] http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001271/127160m.pdf
[3] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2004, pp. 16 and 24.
[4] Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition*, New York and London: Routledge 1997, p. 2.

The term "identity politics", as used by Michaels and Fraser, is more or less synonymous with the "cultural pluralism" promoted in the UNESCO declaration. The strong link between the two concepts in contemporary debates is made clear by Amanda Anderson in *The Way We Argue Now* (2006), where identity politics is defined as a "commitment to the notion that forms of cultural affiliation must be acknowledged, defended, or cushioned," in combination with an interest in "the virtues of mosaic diversity" and a conviction about "the importance of socialized belonging."[5]

Contemporary Swedish debates about social cohesion to a high degree reproduce the basic ideas outlined in the UNESCO declaration. That they focus on culture, and especially cultural differences, has been pointed out by the philosopher Aleksander Moturri, who, in the essay *Etnotism* (2007), argues that, "explanations of deviant behavior are made possible by a repeated and generally accepted reference to cultural difference."[6] However, it is not cultural differences in general, but *ethnic* differences that are being discussed. Ethnicity has, to use a concept coined by Fredric Jameson, been appointed the "master code" for the understanding of Sweden as a multicultural society.[7]

The reason for this is that the hegemonic discourse about Sweden as a multicultural society is based on a narrative centered on an opposition between a culturally homogenous past and a present which, *because of migration*, has become culturally diverse. A good illustration of this can be found in Hans Ingvar Roth's *Mångfaldens gränser* ("The limits of diversity", 1996). In Roth's words, most participants in debates about multiculturalism subscribe to the idea that "Sweden is in the process of becoming a multicultural society, where more and more inhabitants have their origins in other countries and cultures."[8]

That ethnicity has been appointed the "master code" for the understanding of Sweden as a multicultural society has had the result that threats to social cohesion are

[5] Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2006, p. 5. Anderson chooses to use the expression "[t]he 'politics of identity'" as a substitute for "the reified and discredited […] 'idenitity politics'".

[6] Aleksander Motturi, *Etnotism: En essä om mångkultur, tystnad och begäret efter mening*, Göteborg: Glänta 2007, p. 28. My translation.

[7] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London: Routledge 1996, p. 22.

[8] Hans Ingvar Roth, *Mångfaldens gränser*, Stockholm: Arena 1996, p. 9. My translation.

primarily described in ethnic terms, as noted by Motturi: "It is in this ethno-saturated space that segregation and the need for integration, segregation and immigration-related problems, segregation and cultural clashes are discussed."[9] Another consequence has been that the 'solutions' to the 'problem' with ethnic or cultural diversity have generally been formulated in terms of cultural pluralism and diversity. For, as Michaels empathically argues in the essay "Plots Against America" (2006), "[w]hat races and cultures want–what identities want–is respect. What we want as black people or Jews is for our difference not to be understood as and treated as inferiority."[10] Thus, the conceptualization of Swedish society as a society characterized by ethnic and/or cultural heterogeneity makes identity politics and cultural pluralism an almost inevitable prerequisite for social cohesion.

One area where the effects of the hegemonic discourse about Sweden as a multicultural society are especially visible is the field of cultural politics. As observed by Motturi, Swedish cultural institutions are currently reorganizing themselves in order to be able to deal with the "demands and 'challenges'" presented by "other cultures."[11] The advent of these "other cultures" is generally seen as a result of "demographic reorganization" caused by immigration, and the aim of the reorganization is to promote "intercultural understanding and integration."[12]

A good example of this kind of cultural policy is the Swedish government's designation of 2006 as the official year for multiculturalism ("Mångkulturåret"). The main aim of this project was to increase "the ethnic and cultural diversity" in publicly funded cultural activities, and thereby ensure the experience of culture as "characterized by equality and equal accessibility."[13] In other words: Segregation in the realm of cultural production is countered by cultural pluralism.

An area even better suited for the study of the discourse presented above, and its effects, is the field of literary criticism, for it is in contemporary debates about literature and the multicultural society that the most interesting criticism of this discourse has been formulated.

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[9] Motturi, p. 24.
[10] Walter Benn Michaels, "Plots Against America", *American Literary History* 18.2 (2006), p. 297.
[11] Motturi, p. 24.
[12] Motturi, p. 24.
[13] www.regeringen.se/sb/d/5682/a/45951 My translation.

In contemporary Swedish literary criticism the notion of the advent of a multicultural society has resulted in extensive interest in ethnicity and identity politics. One effect of this interest has been – as Satu Gröndahl has pointed out – to "define immigrant and minority literatures as separate literary sub-cultures which, most of all, give expression to the group's identity."[14] This ethnifying reading-strategy has, however, been challenged by authors reluctant to be labeled "immigrant or minority writers," authors such as Theodor Kallifatides, Astrid Trotzig and Marjaneh Bakhtiari. Trotzig, for example, argues that the concept "immigrant writer" is *discriminating*, *homogenizing*, *based on stereotypical fictions about the writers' biographies*, and, thus, *racializing* and *racist*.[15] A similar argument is put forward by Motturi, who identifies a recurrent "neo-exotic representation of music, literature, theater, etc – in which knowledge about the artist's ethnicity, or ethnic or cultural background, becomes not just a biographical detail, but also an unavoidable, identifying, and othering mantra in any review or aesthetical analysis of the artistic work."[16]

It is this *othering* to which Muttori refers that is the central problem, not only in contemporary Swedish literary criticism, but in the posthistoricist/postsocialist ideas about diversity and cultural pluralism. This is a consequence of the fact that a politics dedicated to "cultural diversity" risks reifying and reproducing collective cultural identities. This has been pointed out by Fraser, who argues that "[r]ecognition claims often take the form of calling attention to, if not performatively creating, the putative specificity of some group and then of affirming its value. Thus they tend to promote group differentiation."[17] And this promotion of group differentiation can, in turn, result in othering.

Fraser doesn't, however, argue that claims for recognition always promote group differentiation. On the contrary she distinguishes between two kinds of recognition claims that correspond to two versions of remedies for injustice, namely affirmative and transformative remedies:

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[14] Satu Gröndahl, "Idenitity Politics and Construction of 'Minor' Literatures: Multicultural Swedish Literature at the Turn of the Millennium", *Multiethnica*, no. 30, 2007, p.22.
[15] Astrid Trozig, "Makten över prefixen", *Orentalism på svenska*, ed. Moa Matthis, Stockholm: Ordfront 2005, pp. 107-111.
[16] Motturi, p. 23. My translation.
[17] Fraser, p. 16.

> By affirmative remedies for injustice I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them. By transformative remedies, in contrast, I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework.[18]

Affirmative remedies for cultural injustices can, according to Fraser, be associated with "mainstream multiculturalism," which "proposes to redress disrespect by revaluing unjustly devalued group identities, while leaving intact both the contents of those identities and the group differentiations that underlie them." Transformative remedies, on the other hand, "redress disrespect by transforming the underlying cultural-valuational structure," by way of "destabilizing existing group identities and differentiations."[19]

It is affirmative recognition claims that promote group differentiation, and thereby (potentially) othering. Elsewhere, I've argued for a transformative approach to collective identities as a good way of avoiding the ethnic othering that characterizes contemporary Swedish debates about literature and the multicultural society.[20] In this paper I would like to propose a theoretical model for such an approach, and also investigate the consequences it might have for the posthistoricist/postsocialist idea that cultural pluralism promotes social cohesion.

Fraser doesn't view deconstruction of collective identities as unproblematic. On the contrary, she points out that deconstructive cultural politics is often "far removed from the immediate interests and identities" of the people who suffer cultural injustices, and that it becomes psychologically and politically feasible first when all people are "weaned from their attachments to current cultural constructions of their interests and identities."[21]

This problem becomes especially acute when there is a need for abandoning an identity-category altogether. One such situation would be when anti-racists wish to abolish the category *race*. This is a fairly common – and fully legitimate – position, taken by, for example, Paul Gilroy in *Against Race* (2000). Gilroy argues that "raciology" – defined as "the lore that brings the virtual realities of 'race' to dismal and destructive

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[18] Fraser, p. 23.
[19] Fraser, p. 24.
[20] Magnus Nilsson, "Literature and Diversity". Paper presented at *INTER: A European Cultural Studies Conference in Sweden*, Norrköping, June 11-13 2007. Under publication by Linköping University Press.
[21] Fraser, pp. 30-31.

life" – has "saturated the discourses in which it circulates." Therefore it cannot be "re-signified or de-signified, and to imagine that its dangerous meanings can be easily re-articulated into benign, democratic forms would be to exaggerate the power of critical and oppositional interests."[22] For that reason, Gilroy calls for "liberation not from white supremacy alone, however urgently that is required, but from all racializing and raciological thought, from racialized seeing, racialized thinking and racialized thinking about thinking."[23]

It could be argued that Gilroy's argument has direct relevance for the struggle against ethnic othering. Ethnicity is, in most cases, nothing but a synonym for race. As has been pointed out by Michaels, the attempts to define race in cultural, rather than biological terms – i.e. to re-define it as *ethnicity* – has failed. "The problem with culture," he argues, "is that it's utterly dependent on race. We can only say what counts as white or black or Jewish culture if we already know who the whites and blacks and Jews are."[24] Motturi has put forward a similar argument. According to him, the contemporary "return of concepts such as culture and ethnicity," represent nothing more than a re-formulation of the concept race, which, post-Holocaust, can no longer be used.[25] A good illustration of this is given by Trotzig when she criticizes the ethnic othering she has herself suffered. She was adopted from Korea as a small child, so to regard her as an ethnic writer requires a conflation of the categories ethnicity and race.

Hence, the struggle against ethnic othering could be seen as part of the struggle against racism. And, as a consequence of this, a radically deconstructive approach to ethnic identities that would do away with ethnic categorization all together, might seem desirable.

However, as the advent of a society in which ethnicity is attributed no meaning is certainly a long way off, a radical deconstruction of ethnic identity-categories might seem utopian. On the other hand, one cannot overlook the fact that an affirmative approach toward race/ethnicity will risk reproducing the ethnic/racial identity-categories supporting racism (or, at least, ethnic othering). In order to move forward out of this

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[22] Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture .beyond the Color Line*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2000, pp. 11-12.
[23] Gilroy, p. 40.
[24] Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity*, s. 43.
[25] Motturi, p. 19. My translation.

quandary, a more pragmatic approach to collective identities must be tried. The basic outline of such an approach can be found in Toril Moi's critique of "the pervasive picture of sex," formulated in *What is a Woman* (1999).

One of Moi's aims is to show that the idea that "any use of the word 'woman' (and any answer to the question 'What is a woman?') must entail a philosophical commitment to metaphysics and essentialism" is mistaken.[26] Instead she argues that "a feminist theory that starts from an ordinary understanding of what a woman is, namely a person with a female body," will be metaphysical or essentialist, only when "sex and/or gender differences" are seen as something that "always manifest themselves in all cultural and personal activities," or when it is assumed that they are "always the most important features of a person or a practice."[27] This is what Moi calls "the pervasive picture of sex."[28]

Moi's reason for arguing that the concept woman should be 'rescued' from radical deconstruction is that is useful in certain circumstances. Her primary example is that "as long as technology has not made the usual methods of human reproduction obsolete, the biological requirements of pregnancy, childbirth and childcare will have to be accommodated within any social structure."[29] Thus Moi finds it "as oppressive and theoretically unsatisfactory to reduce women to their 'general humanity' as it is to reduce them to their femininity."[30]

Moi's approach is 'transformative enough' to be able to deal with the problem of othering. If collective identities are not viewed as pervasive, they will not necessarily produce unwanted group distinctions. But the question is whether race and/or ethnicity are categories worth rescuing.

Moi herself seems to deny this. She argues that sex is a category at a level different to those of race and class, because it would be possible to imagine societies in which race and class no longer exist as social categories, whereas a society where the biological differences between men and woman were no longer of any relevance is hard

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[26] Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999, p. 7.
[27] Moi, p. 8.
[28] Moi, p. 14.
[29] Moi, p. 79.
[30] Moi, p. 8.

to imagine.[31] But at the same time she also provides an argument that seems to make this distinction more or less irrelevant.

This argument is presented with point of departure in a close reading of the opening paragraphs of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). The aim of this reading is to analyze Beauvoir's claim that the fact that she is a woman "is the background from which all further claims will stand out."[32] Moi's interpretation of this statement goes as follows: "[H]owever hard I try to define myself through what I am saying and doing (through my self-assertions), my interlocutors will try to reduce my assertions to my sex."[33]

Moi argues that race too can be understood as a *background*. As illustration of this, she gives a quotation from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), which she interprets in the following way: "[T]he gaze of the white man imprisons him in his subjectivity, a subjectivity that is reduced to the fact of his black skin."[34]

The solution to this form of othering is to argue against the pervasive picture of race and sex. If identities are not viewed as pervasive, they can not be imprisoning. But must we not, when we discuss race, adopt a more radical stance? Is there not a risk that the "biological remainders" of the *non-pervasive* category race will become problematic?

I do not think that this is a sizeable risk. Because, as Moi points out, "the body understood as background is […] the body perceived by the Other."[35] Thus biology never really enters into the picture – only ideas about biology. It is the idea that biological phenomena, such as "the female body" or "black skin," have far-reaching consequences – i.e. the pervasive picture of sex or race – that lies at the bottom of racial othering and othering of women. The solution to this problem is not to deny that biological differences exist, but to deny that they are always relevant, i.e. to argue against their pervasiveness. This will not reproduce any racial or sexual identity-categories that can cause othering. Indeed, it will have no necessary consequences whatsoever for how we view people with certain kinds of bodies.

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[31] Moi, p. 79.
[32] Moi, p. 191.
[33] Moi, p. 193.
[34] Moi, p. 203.
[35] Moi, p. 197.

In fact, one way of criticizing the pervasive picture of sex and race would be to argue that sex and race *are* biological categories. According to Moi, "[t]he only kind of essentialism that feminists need to reject is biological determinism."[36] And the best way of achieving this is "to deny that biology grounds or justify social norms."[37] A rejection of biological determinism does not have to include a rejection of biological difference, but has only to invoke the claim that biology has no necessary political or social consequences. Thus, it could be argued that a good defense against biological determinism – and against othering based on biological identity-categories, such as sex and race – could be built on the *insistence* that these categories are *biological through and through*. Then race would be reduced to phenological traits such as skin color, hair texture and shapes of skulls. And until we have managed to create a race-blind society, it is easier to live with this conception of race than the one that currently underpins our ideas about ethnicity.

A non-pervasive picture of collective identities would make it possible to avoid the ethnic othering characteristic of contemporary thinking about Sweden as a multicultural society. But it would also render the posthistoricist/postsocialist idea about cultural pluralism appear problematic. Among other things, it would highlight the risk that this idea might promote unwanted group differentiations, which of course may not advance social cohesion. More important, however, is that a non-pervasive picture of collective identities would challenge the focus put on *cultural identities* characteristic of posthistorisist/postsocialist thinking. One aspect of a non-pervasive picture of cultural identities is the insight that every member of a given culture also belongs to, for example, a class. And classes *are not identities*. As Fraser has emphasized, classes do not – primarily, at least – suffer cultural injustices but economic ones: injustices rooted in the political-economic structure of society, such as *exploitation*, *economic marginalization* and *deprivation*.[38] The remedies for these injustices involve "political-economic restructuring of society," not a recognition of identities.[39] If a non-pervasive picture of collective identities can make this visible, then it also makes it clear that the question

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[36] Moi, p. 37.
[37] Moi, p. 113.
[38] Fraser, pp. 12-13.
[39] Fraser, p. 15.

about social cohesion has to be radically reformulated. This reformulation must involve what Fraser describes as a shift of focus away from "culturally defined 'groups' or 'communities of value' who are struggling to defend their 'identities,' end 'cultural domination' and win 'recognition'", and instead deal with "'classes' who are struggling to defend their 'interests,' end 'exploitation,' and win 'redistribution.'"[40]

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[40] Fraser, p. 2.