

**The Politics of Disengagement**

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## Introduction

In politically polarised and uncertain times the disengaged constitute a crucially important yet often forgotten demographic. This paper examines the relationship between systems of oppression and political disengagement using identities as my level of analysis. Following Taylor (1994) and Young (1990) I suggest the ‘politics of difference’ provides the best public philosophy for reducing oppression but argue that, in some circumstances, this entails an unstated right to disengage from traditional political activity. I aim to show that this surprising implication of the politics of difference is also compatible with both major accounts of good citizenship (liberalism and republicanism). I hope that through a better understanding of the relationship between identity, oppression, disengagement and citizenship, oppressive forces in society can be confronted and a public philosophy promoting the best of citizens can be adopted most effectively.

## Identity, political engagement and authenticity

Many of the terms used in coming to this position are subjects of ongoing discussion in their own right, so it will be worth clarifying their use in this context. A ‘political identity’ is a socialised sense of individuality in relation to social categories including how one is perceived to be held by others (Epstein 1987, 29). This self-conception is social, dialogical and can provide what Appiah calls “life-scripts”, the behavioural expectations that an individual might hold for themselves or be expected of them in public life (Appiah 2005, 22, Taylor 1994, 34). The ‘political’ aspect of this identity simply refers to its relation to politicised social categories including race, gender, sexual orientation and religion. The wide scope of the ‘political’ makes it necessary to limit the breadth of political activities with a qualifier “traditional” to avoid disengagement meaning abstaining from all behaviour. I adopt Uhlener’s focus on voluntary activities by the public to influence public policy directly or through indirect representation. Examples of these activities include voting in elections, donating money to a candidate, contacting officials and petitioning (Uhlener 2001, 11078).

Disengagement is the process of voluntarily abstaining or rejecting traditional political activity. As such, disengagement is distinct from exclusion from political activity, such as the experience of segregation during the apartheid era, although exclusion from some activities will likely encourage disengagement from others. On reflection it is clear that individuals will have different motivations for their disengagement whether they are politically motivated,

disillusioned or simply apathetic. However, I suggest that Appiah's analysis, highlighting the importance of authenticity to your life-script, applies to all these categories. This is because everybody has a legitimate life-script relating to their political identity, their socialised self-conception, whether they are politically engaged or apathetic, the main difference being their opposed norms of behaviour. Some examples of the politically disengaged include: 1) Young's reference to feminist separatists whose active disengagement is clearly politically motivated (Young 1990, 161). 2) Donnalaja's study of immigrants in Britain who feel politically alienated so unable to trust and engage with British politics through traditional channels (Donnalaja 2020, 2727). 3) The politically apathetic. Dagger describes this group as preferring to play the part of the citizen-consumer and Dahl et al. find examples amongst youths living in the EU by measuring future non-voting intentions (Dagger 1997, 132. Dahl et al. 2017, 294).

Political identity can help explain disengagement insofar as when there is conflict between the behaviour required for engaging in politics and the requirement to be authentic to your own self-conceived identity, refusing to assimilate can be preferable to "self-annihilation" (Young 1990, 179). To be authentic means to embrace your identity and perform the associated life-script as you see fit. For Taylor, this authenticity is of fundamental importance, in fact he claims to be inauthentic would "miss the point of my life; I miss what being human is for me." (Taylor 1994, 30). There is of course a balance between the social, externally constructed aspects of identity and an essentialist view that implies identity is an 'inner essence independent of the human world'; Appiah highlights the error in both extremes (Appiah 1994, 20). However, there is no inconsistency with recognising the importance of authenticity so long as this is understood as constructed against our social backgrounds (Taylor 1994, 31-32). Life-scripts can thus provide the details of what it means to be authentic:

*"In constructing an identity, one draws, among other things, on the kinds of person available in one's society. Of course, there is not just one way that gay or straight people or blacks or whites or men or women are to behave, but there are ideas around (contested, many of them, but all sides in these contests shape our options) about how gay, straight, black, white, male, or female people ought to conduct themselves. These notions provide loose norms or models, which play a role in shaping our plans of life." (Appiah 2005, 21).*

Given the importance of authenticity, this suggests that in cases where it risks being undermined by engaging in political activity, disengagement is a legitimate course of action. Young for example writes about feminist separatists who reject the goal of entering a world defined by male standards (Young 1990, 161). This is because engaging with this world would undermine the authenticity of their ideals and identity as separatist-feminist. Donnalaja's empirical study on the experience of immigrants living in Britain also evidences this dissonance. She finds that despite immigrants' subjective sense of belonging and 'Britishness' the realities of political discourse can result in disappointment and push people to disengage from politics (Donnalaja 2020, 2726-2727). Ultimately if engaging with politics requires a "self-annihilation", sacrificing your own authenticity, then in these cases engaging is an unreasonable and unjust requirement of citizenship, so disengagement must be tolerated (Young 1990, 179).

This often-painful experience of being expected to behave in ways inconsistent with one's sense of self is an aspect of what Taylor dubs 'misrecognition' (Taylor 1994, 25). To be 'recognised' is a basic human need to have your authentic identity respected and not have other life-scripts imposed on you. The absence of this can cause real harm to an individual as there is an expectation to internalise these norms: "imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being" (Taylor 1994, 25). In this way, misrecognition is a kind of oppression which is one explanation for the various types of disengagement considered above.

Oppression is often associated with explicit, exclusionary or violent behaviour. However, listening to the experiences of oppressed minorities tells us that misrecognition is systemic; engrained in society to the point that oppressors may not even be aware of their oppressive actions. Young's multitiered account of oppression identifies this kind of systemic, habitual misrecognition functioning subconsciously at the level of 'practical consciousness' (Young 1990, 131-135). So, oppressive forces whether explicit, institutionalised or unconsciously engrained in society combine to create an environment of misrecognition in which oppressed individuals may need to disengage to maintain the authenticity of their identity. This makes measures to reduce the level of oppression in society more difficult than simply policing certain behaviours; we need a suitable public philosophy.

#### Solutions to the oppression of misrecognition

A public philosophy is a set of normative principles for assessing public policies, institutions and laws (Lovett and Whitfield 2015, 121). Among other things this must be able to assess policy in a way that minimises oppression by protecting individuals, ‘recognising’ their authentic identities and allowing them to reach their full potential in public life. Given existing oppressive forces in our societies I have suggested that disengagement is acceptable in some cases. In fact, to avoid the oppression of misrecognition, this specifically must be protected by our public philosophy. It might seem intuitive that minimising disengagement would also be a route for curbing oppression but the invalidity of this should be clear. As discussed, systems of oppression are a cause of disengagement but removing this effect will not eliminate the root cause. However, disengagement is shown to be a marker of oppression so analysis of the relationship between oppression, recognition and engagement should help explain the sources of oppression and how they can be mitigated. This leaves us with the difficult question: how should we go about creating an environment with less identity-oriented oppression?

There are two main candidates considered in the literature: universalism, which prioritises the principle of non-discrimination, and the politics of difference which promotes and celebrates individual differences within a group. Both provide principles intended to reduce discrimination and oppressive forces. Universalism might intuitively seem the strongest candidate since a community that is difference blind would surely be unable to discriminate against an individual’s identity. However, both Taylor and Young convincingly argue that, given existing differences within communities, this would require a process of forced assimilation. This process directly undermines the authenticity of minority identities, therefore actually increasing oppressive misrecognition and encouraging further disengagement:

*“When participation is taken to imply assimilation the oppressed person is caught in an irresolvable dilemma: to participate means to accept and adopt an identity one is not, and to try to participate means to be reminded by oneself and others of the identity one is.” (Young 1990, 165).*

Whilst universalism appears egalitarian and non-discriminatory in principle, Taylor notes that it is the dominant group which creates the “homogenous mould” that all of society must come to identify with (Taylor 1994, 43). By celebrating difference, minorities can own their identities and assert their own positive life scripts. Within the politics of difference,

difference loses the hierarchical implications emphasised by oppressors and becomes a relational term: “Difference comes to mean not otherness, exclusive opposition, but specificity, variation and heterogeneity.” (Young 1990, 171). Celebrating and allowing difference creates the space to construct positive life scripts independent of the dominant group. Given the history of oppression faced by minorities, the politics of difference is therefore a public philosophy which can respect the authenticity of minority identities.

This points to an unstated implication of the politics of difference. If celebrating difference is necessary for minorities to live without oppression and disengagement is a right that must be afforded for some to live authentically, then the politics of difference must protect this freedom to disengage.

This will likely seem a legitimate claim, one might even wonder why disengagement needs protecting. After all, this is protection from not doing something, which is not usually the type of activity needing special protection. The concern here arises when we consider how disengaged citizens should be thought of. Given that inclusion and participation is assumed to be a goal of social justice, we need to avoid the disengaged being branded ‘bad’ citizens (Young 1990, 173). In this way the protection is from a new type of oppression that those who must disengage might face; the oppression involved in being labelled inferior citizens. To avoid this, we must show that the politics of difference and its protection of disengaged individuals is compatible with the theory outlining notions of good citizenship.

#### Is disengagement compatible with good citizenship?

There are two major models within citizenship theory: liberalism and republicanism (Leydet 2017). It is initially clear that the politics of difference and all it entails is compatible with the liberal conception. Liberal citizenship emphasises neutrality to divergent views of good public behaviour. This means that public policy and institutions must give equal treatment to any reasonable person’s conception of good (Lovett and Whitfield 2015, 123). As such, political engagement may be instrumentally good for society but it is not an individual requirement for being a good citizen. In fact, in the cases where engaging is oppressive, then this would undermine liberal neutrality and have a damaging effect on society. Therefore, if good public behaviour means disengaging, for an oppressed individual, then liberal citizenship must be accommodating of this.

On the other hand, republicanism is a perfectionist model meaning active engagement in the political community is a duty, not only required for being a good citizen but a good person. This could pose an issue for adopting the politics of difference as a public philosophy. If the politics of difference requires allowing some individuals to disengage, in order to curb oppression, but republican citizenship requires engagement for an individual to be a good citizen, then this risks the disengaged being oppressed in a new way. The task is therefore to reconcile the politics of difference with republican notions of citizenship.

A proponent of liberal citizenship theory might wonder why this is necessary, perhaps suggesting that this incompatibility reveals a weakness in the republican model. However, contemporary scholarship has recognised that classical republicanism is unsuited to modern pluralist societies and have adapted the original theory (Laydet 2017). Updated accounts of republicanism prioritise principles such as “freedom from domination” over civic engagement and thus no longer requires antiquated demands for traditional political engagement (Lovett and Whitfield 2015, 123). Dagger even explores the idea of liberal-republicanism arguing that the models are not incompatible and utilising the strengths of both in conceptualising citizenship (Dagger 1997, 12). Republicanism therefore remains an influential force in our conceptions of citizenship. It follows that building the strongest case for adopting the politics of difference requires a compatibility with both liberal and republican notions of citizenship.

Civic republicanism is one such updated account. Within civic republicanism there is an ideal that citizens will be politically engaged but the central principle is that citizens have freedom from arbitrary power; this is the principle of non-domination (Lovett and Whitfield 2015, 123). Forced assimilation and any policy that would be intolerant of individuals who freely choose to disengage would be an exercise of arbitrary power insofar as it would “interfere with or frustrate the choices and actions of others.” (Lovett and Whitfield 2015, 123). Therefore, taking a civic republican reading, the politics of difference and its protection of the disengaged is consistent with good republican citizenship because political engagement is not an activity that can be enforced.

It might seem that an anti-perfectionist interpretation of republicanism, not requiring civic engagement, is simply a redressed version of liberalism. This is a legitimate concern, in fact it has been noted that rejecting the perfectionist aspect of republicanism removes all of the philosophically interesting disagreement between contemporary republicanism and liberalism

(Patten 1996, 36). However, Lovett and Whitfield show that this oversimplifies the matter by exploring the difference between toleration and neutrality (Lovett and Whitfield 2015, 124-132). Whilst the liberal model is neutral to all legitimate conceptions of good civic behaviour, civic republicanism only requires toleration of difference. In the context of this discussion that means the republican model would allow policies in place that promote or encourage engagement but there cannot be disadvantages for disengagement. This is because civic republicanism promotes a ‘discretionary democracy’ which rejects the idea that legitimacy requires a ‘collective general will’. Rather there only needs to be the opportunity for the citizens to contest the decisions made by representatives; a “possibility of contestation” (Lovett 2018). It follows that civic republicanism remains a distinct, republican conception of citizenship and yet would be compatible with the politics of difference since it must tolerate the right for some individuals to disengage.

### Concluding remarks

This compatibility has promising implications for a more diverse, authentic society where oppressive forces can be exposed and removed. I have argued that misrecognition is a manifestation of oppression and disengagement is a legitimate reaction to this which should be protected. Furthermore, since the politics of difference is the public philosophy best suited for limiting identity-oriented oppression, it must therefore allow and protect this freedom to disengage. By showing that this freedom to disengage is compatible with both liberal and republican conceptions of good citizenship, it follows that the politics of difference, and its implicit protection for the disengaged, is a consistent public philosophy that should be adopted in varied contexts to curb oppressive forces.

This being said, a lot more will be required to create a society free from oppression, adopting the politics of difference is only the beginning. The politics of difference makes an important first step, highlighting the need for a ‘difference positive’ public philosophy, allowing oppressed minorities to reinforce the positivity of their specific experiences, assert their needs and interests and eliminate oppressive double consciousness. However, in her exposition of the politics of difference, Young recognises the need for continued work against injustice by all members of society (Young 1990, 167). An immediate concern is how the needs of disengaged individuals can be met once they have stopped engaging through the traditional channels. This is a difficult question and finding the most effective methods will ultimately

need further research and dialogue with victims of oppression. Whilst the mission of a society free from oppression might seem a long way off, there are some positive lessons that we can take from this work. Simply recognising the diversity in our community in a positive way can have a tangible effect on oppressive forces and the life experiences of minorities. Lastly, this work highlights the importance of compassion from our leaders and society as a whole. Compassion allows us to recognise that behaviour we might expect from ourselves, such as traditional political engagement, cannot and should not be applied universally. In this way a compassionate and empathetic attitude can create a less oppressive and better society.

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