On the Plural Forms of Pluralism

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Several years ago, with the relationship between Marxism and pluralism in mind (McLennan 1989), I stated that ‘we are all pluralists now…today any credible “big picture” will have to be very careful not to appear to obliterate or devalue perceived plurality’ (McLennan 1995: 99). I still think this judgement holds, but I do increasingly wonder whether the ‘glacial shift’ that I described, a shift away from monistic ideas and towards strong forms of intellectual pluralism, is beginning to go into reverse again. I am thus ever more inclined to say that pluralism is more effective when it is taken to critically qualify some other kind of big picture than it is when viewed either as its own kind of big picture, or as a deconstruction of all big pictures. This inclination was firmly reinforced by reading Rainer Eisfeld’s collection, from which emerged most clearly – for me at least – the essentially enigmatic and conflicted character of pluralism as a perspective in political analysis.

On the one hand, in positive mood, pluralism is presented – above all by the editor himself – as not only a ‘valuable approach’ and ongoing ‘research framework’, but also as ‘an analytical and normative project’, something that supplies the ‘vision’ that (still) has the capacity to ‘come to the rescue’ of the political imagination under contemporary circumstances of globalization and extended social pluralization. The over-riding purpose of the book, in that light, is to ‘restate’ the pluralist project (pp. 11, 15, 20, 40). On the other hand, in more reflective passages, it is accepted that pluralism amounts to nothing like a coherent project, because there are notably different – and increasing – ‘varieties’ to consider, all of which face pervasive
‘conundrums’ and ‘tensions’. Caught between upbeat positivity and questioning reflexivity, the minimum claim is that pluralism represents ‘a persistent inquiry into the theory and practice of democracy’ under changing social and cultural conditions (p. 41). But this is a very modest characterization, hardly requiring debate, and as such it might be taken to be a sign of the research programme’s ‘degeneracy’ as a sign of its continuing ‘progressiveness’, in Lakatos’s terms. In their different ways, the authors seem to share this sense of ambivalence about both the range and point of pluralism as a theoretical perspective, and I want to press this equivocation further, first by rehearsing some generic problems or puzzles that seem to go along with any intellectual outlook that claims to be distinctively pluralist, then by noting some of the very different, and to me problematical, expressions of political pluralism in the book before us.

The philosophical ‘upper levels’ of pluralism

If we are considering the plural forms of pluralism, then we need to note that the ‘entry’ or ‘keyword’, in Theodore Lowi’s terminology, signals positions or inclinations within at least three levels of discourse in the human sciences. It is as if Lowi’s matrix could be turned into a three-dimensional model, with ‘pluralism’ configured not as a flat blob but as a stretched central tube or hub around which more ‘floors’ of connections and axes could be mounted. Such stretching of the concept, and the matrix, would be perfectly legitimate: Lowi begins his paper by noting the central place of William James in modern American pluralist thought, and of course British pluralism developed in reaction to ‘metaphysical’ theories of the state whose
main source was Hegel. Today, with the (alleged) postmodern ‘de-differentiation’ of ideational and cultural spheres, it is perhaps harder than ever to confine pluralism strictly to the political realm, especially if we want to give it a normative as well as analytical status. Thus, Avigail Eisenberg (p. 60) immediately follows up her comment that general debates around value pluralism operate at quite a distance from concrete questions of democratic associational life by bringing the two levels closely together again through a principled rather than merely empirical or pragmatic construal of the ideas of group rights and the culturally-constituted self. If pluralism is valid at the socio-political level, the logic runs, then this rightness should find expression, and backing, at a moral-theoretical level.

In turn, the moral-theoretical expression of pluralism (multiplicity of valid different ways of life, multiplicity of concepts of justice based on these) might require some kind of further metaphysical (epistemological and ontological) rationale. Here is one recent suggestion along these lines:

_The pluralist picture of the world enjoins us to recognise that there can be many diverse and incompatible conceptual and moral frameworks, many belief systems and ultimate values, without there being an overarching criterion to decide between them as to ‘truth’._

(Baghramian and Ingram 2000: 1).

Many conceptual schemes, multiple worlds (or at least ‘pluriversity’), different knowledges. Just as, in the justice debates, pluralists disallow attempts to specify a ‘thin’ or procedural theory of right (that of Rawls or Habermas, for example) within
which rival theories of the good can jostle – such procedural theories are held to be fully in the fray, not above it – so, in the metaphysical debates, every statement of what there is and how we know it is a contender rather than a referee.

But now let us consider what it means to be a pluralist across the realms of discourse, and what it is to be a pluralist within each of the two philosophical ‘levels’ (theories of the good, theories of the world). On the one hand, it makes perfect sense to try to make pluralism at one level cohere with a complementary pluralism at the other levels – to adhere to, in the words of the quote just given, a ‘pluralist picture of the world’. On the other hand, this totalised and coherent pluralism looks suspiciously like a monistic understanding – a version of how all things and thoughts fit snugly together. Against this, it could be said that pluralism is not itself a super-coherent world view, but an attempt to persistently deflate all super-coherent world views, a feeling of being duty-bound to point out that these preferred coherences are always ‘one amongst many’. From that point of view, it would be perfectly reasonable, as a pluralist, to not worry at all about whether, say, one’s pluralist inclinations at the political level were fully supported at the moral-theoretical level, or at the epistemological/ontological level: presumably one could have rather different views, some of which might tend towards the monistic, depending on the rather different sorts of things and concepts that one was concerned with.

So here comes what I would call Pluralist Antinomy 1: it is perfectly reasonable to be a pluralist across the levels, but it is also perfectly reasonable (as a pluralist) not to be.
Now, let us note briefly what philosophers say about what pluralism involves.

According to Hilary Putnam (2000: xi), all that is required for pluralism is the avoidance of two extremes: the idea that there is a single, definitive truth about things and thoughts, and the idea that there is no truth. Anything in between is up for grabs, in different kinds of ways. A similar thought is put forward by John Kekes (2000: 5): that pluralism takes us beyond ‘absolutism’, but falls short of ‘relativism’. For Michael Lynch (1998), it is a little more complicated. Metaphysical pluralism holds that there are many conceptual schemes for understanding the world, and that there is always some kind of internal connection between what we take to be the content of our schemes and the form that our categories subtly impose on those contents. But it does not follow that there are multiple worlds as such, nor do we need to give up on the conventional realist notion that the propositions that we hold to be true are true (or not) in virtue of the nature of the world itself, even if we always grasp that world under some specific conceptual scheme rather than ‘in itself’. In other words, taking our cue once again from the quotation above, the prevailing pluralist thought here is not that there are a number of incompatible worlds and incompatible schemes (though neither can be ruled out); it is rather that there is diversity in the world of things and ideas, with no one single way of capturing all that diversity. But this then allows what Philip Pettit (2000) calls ‘sensible perspectivism’ to emerge. According to this standpoint, if pluralists are not committed (necessarily) to the idea of either multiple worlds or an essentially indeterminate world, then there is nothing wrong with trying to bring our multiple perspectives together in a ‘reductive’ way, provided that this is an ‘integrative’ rather than ‘eliminative’ type of reductionism.
Here, then, is Pluralist Antinomy 2: it seems eminently pluralistic, at any particular level, to see the world(s) as multiple, and versions of it as incompatible, but it is also eminently pluralistic to see the (single) world as diverse in character, with the different versions of that diversity amenable to coherent integration.

Just as in the metaphysical pluralist literature, the *moral-theoretical* climate of opinion tends to favour a ‘sensible’ or integrative pluralist option over any immoderate or radical pluralist line. As I read it, the only thinker who is a moral pluralist in any strict sense is Isaiah Berlin (1990), or rather the John Gray (1995) that brings out the strict pluralist in Berlin. Berlin does argue that within and across the distinctively different value frameworks that have existed in the past and still exist today, there are incompatible ‘goods’ that cannot be ranked according to any rational or final criterion of worth or truth. Thus, within modern, western, liberal societies we are often caught between the (different) values of justice and freedom, or between the life of art and the life of science, or between a political way of thinking and a personal way of thinking – and there is simply no metric by which these value forms can be fully integrated or hierarchically ordered. Indeed, within any particular valuation of worth, different *versions* of that value chafe and collide – think of the tension between negative and positive liberty, for example. Nor is any principled ranking possible of the western modern liberal way of life as against past or present alternatives. This is why Gray calls Berlin’s moral outlook ‘agonistic pluralism’: there is a painful, difficult, but inevitable hiatus between different judgements of worth and different cultural traditions.
But now we have to ask: is this kind of strict or ‘objective’ pluralism really so intellectually viable, and does it represent any kind of moral life that can actually be lived? Berlin himself, in fact, finally swerved clear of strict pluralism. He confessed that ultimately he was a liberal rationalist, holding that human freedom was the most cherished of values, and feeling that a sober assessment of the vast majority of valuable societies could generate minimal agreement around things like the avoidance of enslavement and unnecessary suffering, and the promotion of human freedom, learning and creativity. Berlin’s outlook retained a poignant sense of tragic pluralist conflict, but ultimately this was still a pluralism ‘within reason’ and thus within limits (Anderson 1992, Riley 2000).

Gray expresses regret at Berlin’s last minute capitulation to the call of liberal reason, insisting that there was no strict need for this to happen, and that pluralism cannot consistently grant the last word to any substantive worldview, even liberal rationalism or egalitarian democracy. For Gray, there are different ways of being and incompatible conceptions of the good, and all that is left to be done is to establish a *modus vivendi* between them. Two things need to be said here, however. One is that even Gray’s consciously ‘unprincipled’ approach to pluralism is conditional upon what he accepts, at the last minute, as ‘minimal conditions of decency’ amongst different ways of life (1995: 168). But ‘decency’ no less than justice or fairness is a criterion of human value, and to give it any kind of further specification would certainly involve some specific notion of the good that we would be asked to receive as both vital and cross-culturally valid. So Gray’s ‘modus vivendi’ is not, after all, the purely pragmatic or merely prudent undertaking that he presents it to be.
Secondly: what sort of person, what kind of cultural subjectivity, does strict pluralism invoke and address? The answer is surely: some kind of liberal, modernist subjectivity. Whilst it might well be true that all sorts of ancient, tribal and non-western value systems have found ways of coping with, and even constructively encouraging, a plurality of values – the Ottoman millet system is regularly cited in this context – ‘agonistic’ pluralism, this idea of being radically forced to choose between values that all seem to have something going for them, if only we can detach ourselves sufficiently from our own cultural specificity to see this, is a philosophical scenario – perhaps it is a psychological conceit – that could only arise in the cultural and intellectual context of modern liberal democratic society.

Thus, Pluralist Antinomy 3: strict pluralism enjoins us to entertain what is differently valuable in all cultures, and to accept that liberal ways and thoughts carry no special weight; yet the moral predicament of facing radical choice between equally reasonable systems appears to be quintessentially that of the liberal, modern intellectual.

The socio-political level: norms, grids, maps

The point of the foregoing discussion was to underline the reflexive, folded and dilemmatic character of the general concept of pluralism. It was also to try to indicate that strict pluralism, pluralism unmodified, is a barely sustainable position in philosophical and moral terms. Most pluralists seek to ‘draw a line’ somewhere, to effect some kind of integrative operation that brings pluralistic proliferation to a halt.
To that extent, the emphasis falls on what it is that qualifies the pluralism rather than on pluralism *per se*. Indeed, arguably, pluralism turns into the *qualifier* rather than the term *qualified*. This reversal, in my view, should be more fully acknowledged in socio-political pluralist analysis too. In spite of the editor’s attempt to present pluralism as a coherent and developing tradition – albeit with diverse strands, naturally – my sense is that each of the pieces in our volume is busy trying to control or reduce the unruly complexity of the keyword in significantly different and at times conflicting ways.

One divisive issue that hovers below the surface is whether political science pluralism can or should resist overt *normativity*. The Introduction to the book states that pluralism is simultaneously a positive and normative concept, and indeed rather controversially presents political science itself as having as a ‘foremost concern’ the problem of securing broad social participation in the polity. True, having the ‘problem’ of participation as a concern may not exactly equate to having a concern for equal participation as such, but the strong hint is that all political scientists are or should be radical democrats, and this is both implausible and too prescriptive for something as capacious as an academic discipline. But is it even right to insist that *pluralist analysis* is necessarily normative? Theodore Lowi’s paper retains genre connections to the brand and era of pluralist political science that all three other authors feel has been superseded in important respects, and in that mould, he develops a largely descriptive-analytical approach to the restatement of pluralist concepts. Of course, nobody these days thinks that any version of ‘empirical democratic theory’ can remain *entirely* value-free, and everyone accepts that pretending to be so was one of the major deficits of 1950s and 1960s pluralism. But still, Lowi’s paper is much
less ostensibly value-committed than Eisfeld’s and Eisenberg’s, in spite of the editor’s claim to the contrary (p. 15). In presenting his matrix as offering a way of curtailing the proliferation of pluralistic ‘narratives’ and ‘adjectives’, Lowi seeks to insulate the core descriptive-political usage of the pluralism concept from all sorts of extraneous connections and interpretations, including, no doubt, the kinds of philosophical linkages that I opened up a moment ago. The assumption appears to be that political scientists should be able to sit down together, think clearly and agree in a ‘pre-theoretical’ sort of way about the core elements and connections in the pluralist family of concepts. Only then, Lowi seems to be saying, can we move on to the construction of explanatory hypotheses and – if we must – some normative preferences.

If this might strike us today as somewhat ‘positivistic’, then we should be careful not to indulge those excessively post-positivist nostrums according to which social theory is always value-saturated from top to bottom, just as empirico-factual understandings are always held to be thoroughly theory-laden. In my view, it is both possible and desirable to establish some basic pluralist ‘facts’ about the rise and fall of particular organized interests, and about, in an old phrase, ‘who gets what, when, where and how’. In a similar way, it also seems reasonable to try to identify whatever conceptual reference points are shared by otherwise divergent explanatory and normative paradigms. (For the methodology of social science that would support these inclinations, see Runciman 1983.) Much in Lowi’s discussion and matrix, then, can be accepted as helpful and illuminating. Having said that, one balks at the idea that the grid be presents is somehow ‘pre-theoretical’, seeing as Lowi admits it is derived from selected existing literatures, the American experience, and a large dose of
intuition. These resources are bound to leave their mark on the coverage and weighting of the typology that emerges. For example, the kind of *cultural pluralism* with which Eisfeld updates the pluralist tradition, and which completely dominates Eisenberg’s understanding of contemporary pluralist politics, is entirely absent from Lowi’s model, and this seems a striking omission, unless – but we are not told *how* – cultural pluralism can be perfectly well comprehended in terms of the given axes and peripherals.

A second problem with Lowi’s model, unless I am an untypical or particularly obtuse reader, is that the account of the relationship between the ‘property spaces’ of the matrix and the sequence of the quasi-historical typology is both confusing and confused. Most problematically, we are led to think that ‘corporatism’, as the fourth element in the typology, corresponds to the property space of ‘contract’, rather than the more obvious one labelled ‘corporation’, bounded as the latter is by the constraining trio of government, class, and market. Moreover, Lowi’s encapsulating image of corporatism, namely the 1955 hit *Sixteen Tons*, is slightly bizarre and sociologically inappropriate for its purpose. Contrary to Lowi’s corrective footnote, Merle Travis composed both the music and lyrics of this number,¹ and it was first recorded in 1946. It tells the tale of a life working in the mines in the heyday of a capitalism ‘red in tooth and claw’, in Marx’s graphic phrase. Some of the lyrics recycle phrases and sentiments about working life familiar from Kentucky mining folk memory over the generations, and indeed one miner claimed that he actually wrote the song in the 1930s. So this is not at all the phase of corporatism *a la* Schmitter, with its peak associations of business and labour union leaders who sit down together and spend lots of time hammering out deals under the auspices of state administrators, but,
rather, the brutal regime of unregulated, soul-destroying capitalist exploitation, in which the equation of wage labour with slavery was still a convincing rhetorical connection for radical political purposes. But perhaps that is, after all, why this variant of pluralism fits the property space of unalloyed ‘contract’? – but in that case, it should have been bounded by ‘market’ rather than ‘public’, should not be called ‘corporatism’, and should not come fourth in the historical typology, which in any case appears to reach no later the mid-Twentieth century.

These comments are not intended to be hyper-critical. The point is rather to say that any matrix of pluralist possibility is going to be theoretically and empirically contestable, and is no longer likely to be able to stabilise the core term and its component elements, namely the nature of the political community, the agents of political activity, the institutional expression of social plurality, and the sources of political motivation, each of which appears to become more complex and debatable as time passes. Political community: the forms and boundaries of the decision-making centres that receive and deal with plural pressures have multiplied, and they overlap in various ways. Agents: ‘interest groups’ were of course the primary way that the ‘liberal pluralist’ tradition understood the carriers of pluralist politics, but when we bring in other past and present traditions of pluralist understanding, our conception of the agent of political activity needs to be vague enough to encompass all the individuals and collectivities that are capable of exerting political ‘pressure’: consumers, workers, professional associations, experts, organizations, firms, technological networks, consociational pillars, lifestyle clubs, corporatist peak associations, ethnic communities, religious believers, social movements, global campaigners, and so on. Institutions: the channels that focus political activity
nowadays include not only the official organs of the state and global and regional governance, but a whole spread of NGOs, charities, mass communications media, universities, professional associations, business circuits, and political parties.

Finally, the sources of political motivation: once upon a (behaviourist) time, the notions of ‘interest’ and interest groups were wholly unproblematic. Today, it seems much harder to be definite about what a politically relevant interest is, who holds the interest, and how manifest or latent it must be, or whether indeed we can even produce a viable literal rather than metaphorical definition of interest (Swedberg 2005). Wants, desires, expressions of relative deprivation, aspirations born of material possibility, competitive status envy, emotional and spiritual urgings, ideological and religious beliefs, ethnic habits and ways of life, individual self-improvement, lifelong learning, understandings of human flourishing – all of these and more are arguably contained within the portmanteau term ‘interests’. As for distinctions between real or genuine human interests, as against contrived or indoctrinated versions of interests, at the very least, this perennial quest for stabilization promptly takes us back up the levels of abstraction in pursuit of a comprehensive theory of the social good, and the result is going to be only minimally pluralistic in the usual sense.

If there is a way of capturing this more complex plurality, then Philip Cerny’s paper must come close to doing so, charting as it does the contemporary ‘disaggregation’ or ‘pluralization’ of political currents and forms. The compound layers and agencies that he points to as operating under conditions of globalization, re-conceptualised further into societal aspects of base, intermediaries, and superstructures, is probably too multi-dimensional to be representable as a matrix, but one kind of updating of the
Lowi ‘map’ is taking place here, captured prosaically but effectively in terms of a relentless evolving process of institutional differentiation and recombination.

Yet the extent to which Cerny’s perspective is distinctively pluralist – either analytically or normatively – remains unclear. In making a distinction between plurality and pluralism, and in seeing the relationship between these two as one of ‘chronic tension’ (p. 81), he seems happy to leave the older pluralist paradigms, already faulty enough (p. 84), behind. But whether Cerny’s observations on global late modernity amount to a new variant of pluralism is a moot point. He talks for example not so much in terms of groups or interests, but rather of ‘actors’, where these include entrepreneurs, movements, representatives, voters, elites and collectivities of many sorts. As to whether plurality effectively engenders pluralism as a political style and ethos within the various types of late- or post-modern polity, this is argued to depend upon the construction of a ‘pluralism-generating and pluralism-reinforcing playing field’ (p. 88), which in turn is deemed to be realizable only under some kind of sustained hegemonic effort on the part of pluralistic entrepreneurs (p. 91), the nature and outcome of which is left open.

Cerny’s most distinctive normative commitment to pluralism seems to rest on the claim that new kinds of ‘spaces’, ‘nodes’ and ‘networks’ are opening up, bringing with them the possibility of new forms of institutional contestation, interest-mediating activity and coalition-building. So, in upbeat terms: ‘globalization is increasingly what actors make of it’ (p. 110). However, in a familiar ‘structurationist’ balancing act, the continuing force of ‘structural constraints’, the ‘privileged position’ of multinational corporations, and the lack of ‘penetration’ of social actors into
economic structures and political processes ‘across the board’, are equally underlined (pp. 103, 105, 97). Cerny’s pluralist framework, then, like Lowi’s, is valuable primarily as a descriptive and analytical mapping, rather than as a fully explanatory or developed normative theory. It is geared to sifting carefully through the different levels and actors in the ‘broad but uneven pluralization of world politics’. Given the sheer ‘flux’ of global complexity, and the ‘plasticity’ of pluralism itself, the ethico-political outcome remains in the balance: a new type of messy medievalism and pervasive destabilizing conflict might yet trump any multi-nodal pluralist politics of a ‘structurally integrated and culturally holistic’ sort (p. 110).

Culturalism versus social-ism?

Rainer Eisfeld’s and Avigail Eisenberg’s papers are cast as though pluralism can readily be transformed from a merely descriptive or normatively liberal perspective into something more incisively ‘critical’. Eisfeld’s version is the more encompassing. He wants to say that pluralism, for all its internal divisions, retains coherence and progressiveness as an intellectual tradition. The earlier English theorists, especially Laski, emphasized the class and ‘functional’ group underpinnings of a pluralistic social democracy, a concern for the economic conditions of equal participation that was rediscovered by the later Dahl. Eisfeld recognizes that, of course, the liberal pluralist phase as a whole neglected such a ‘structural’ perspective, but we must not forget that ‘equal opportunity’, which is what most American pluralists wanted to endorse, is not a rival goal to equality of socio-economic condition, but complementary to it, and equally necessary. Multiculturalism, meanwhile, has alerted
us to the importance of the politics of cultural identity, something that is closely related to issues of both socio-economic condition and equal opportunity. So in a kind of extended version of T.H. Marshall’s celebrated schema of democratic progress, we get a vision of the pluralist variants working together to take us from civil and political rights, to social rights, to cultural rights as the cumulative basis of ever-fuller democratic participation. This is not, I hasten to acknowledge, a cosy ‘evolutionary’ scenario, as Eisfeld’s comments on the hegemony of neo-liberalism clearly attest: the achievement of this normative account of ‘progress’ can only be the product of sharp and sustained socio-political contestation. But still, his overarching thesis appears to be that the different bits of pluralism can be made to go together, and that pluralism necessarily challenges structural inequality.

I do have considerable sympathy with this attempt to re-frame radical social democracy, having tried to make the case in my 1989 book that significant connections can be made between the ‘critical’ wing of liberal pluralism and a pluralistic reading of Marxism. But – the persistent refrain of this paper – I do not see the point in trying to present what needs to be a contestable argument in favour of radical social democracy as a fitting and natural outcome of the ‘development’ of something called pluralism. What this inevitably involves is an overestimation of both the adequacy and deep compatibility of Eisfeld’s three pluralist variants, and the positioning of pluralism as the thing qualified rather than (as I would prefer) the qualifier of something else that is more substantive, in this case radical democracy.³

On the ‘adequacy’ front, one topic crying out for more detailed critical assessment is how to retrieve, as both Eisfeld and Eisenberg wish to, the kind of associational
democracy advocated by the English pluralist thinkers. As quasi-Marxists, Laski and Cole advocated egalitarian industrial associationalism, or guild socialism, and they assumed that this would more or less take care of the democratic question as a whole. As Eisfeld relays the message direct from Laski: ‘the object of the pluralist must be the classless society’ (p. 43) But of course today this is not something that many pluralists would countenance, and those who would countenance it would not primarily think of themselves as (unqualified) pluralists. Paul Hirst for example (1994, 1997) has tried to make a modern case for associationalism by considerably pluralizing the nature and number of the democratic associations to whom as much power as possible is to be devolved. Drawing on Durkheim and others, Hirst sees something like the professional association rather than the industrial guild or trade union as the kind of civil society entity appropriate for contemporary pluralism. However, if the general notion of associational democracy remains attractive, even Hirst’s updated account lacks plausibility, in at least two crucial respects.

First, in the conditions of relative affluence, social mobility, cultural variety, and widespread higher education that Hirst thinks pertains today, what sort of chosen, self-governing associations are going to be similar and stable enough to fulfil the welfare, deliberative, and civic functions that will be devolved to them? The potential array of groupings, and the potential for rapid, chosen migration between them, is almost mind-boggling: religious faiths, cultural communities, professional associations, lifestyle clubs, and more – all operating on rather different ideas about the social good in general and about their own particular virtues (which might include varying degrees of internal democracy).
Secondly, unlike the earlier English associationalism, Hirst came to the conclusion that the state could not realistically be superseded, and that its superintendent role would remain vital for the stability of the devolved polity. But Hirst significantly underplays the sheer amount of social energy and organization that it would take to secure this constructive, democratic, caretaking role of the state, energy that could not simply be channelled through the associations themselves. If educated citizens are not only members of associations but subjects of the state, they will seek to play a part, whether individually or associationally, in democratically debate and decision-making about the very principles and range of associational life. Moreover, the costs of the supervising state would need to be met out of general taxation, and both the collection and distribution of revenue would then have to be open to popular decision-making and scrutiny in some cross-associational way. Despite Hirst’s insistence that associationalism would be legally and administratively thriftier than parliamentary democracy, associationalism would surely involve a whole raft of additional legal, normative and policing rules about the conduct of institutions and associations, without foregoing the need for state-level administration and participation. Finally, an important democratic question about the role of the increasingly independent democratic individual would be bound to arise: how are the needs of those who do not feel comfortable in any particular association going to be catered for?

On the ‘compatibility’ front, Eisfeld tries to build bridges between his pluralist variants, whereas Eisenberg pitches the third of these, multicultural pluralism, directly against liberal pluralism. Indeed, although our two authors want to commonly draw from the English pluralists, this is ultimately for very different purposes. Eisfeld goes to Laski and Cole because he wants to save something from the principles of
economic and industrial democracy. These Marxists, after all, thought that the
democratic question was solely or chiefly a class question, largely because the
working class in modern capitalism was conceived to be either already or potentially
the majority social position and identity. Concomitantly, they proceeded, no doubt
unthinkingly, on the assumption that the working class in each of the ‘advanced’
capitalist nations possessed a certain sort of unproblematical cultural homogeneity.

Now Eisfeld still thinks, as I do, that these thinkers’ ideas of economic organisation
still have traction. But there can be no pretence that such ideas or traditions
automatically incorporate what are now understood as specifically multiculturalist
ideas or identities. Eisfeld asserts (p. 53) that ‘mounting social inequalities and
economic insecurities’ are amongst the central causes of the ‘rediscovery of ethnicity
as a source of belonging’. Expressed weakly in terms of ‘one cause among many’, no
one is going to disagree with this claim; but in any stronger form, the reduction of
ethno-cultural identity and cause-making to the effects (however indirect) of the
socio-economic structure is not going to be acceptable to normative multiculturalists.
That is why Eisenberg – the more committed multiculturalist – goes to Gierke and
Figgis rather than the Marxists for resources to substantiate the claim that selves are
thoroughly constituted by cultural and religious group life, a claim that has little to do
with matters of economic and industrial democracy. And if the Marxist
associationalists are regarded as valuable, for Eisenberg, this appears to because they
help her to draw a parallel between the struggle of different social ‘minorities’ for
‘recognition’:
Just as the members of trade unions, in Laski’s time, argued that freedom of assembly entails the ‘right to strike’, cultural and religious groups have argued that their basic rights to equal treatment is denied when they are social [sic], economically or even legally penalized for wearing yarmulkes, turbans, or headscarves, enjoying a day of rest on their Sabbath, or otherwise following their religious and cultural customs

(Eisenberg p.65)

To me, this tendentious parallel underlines the point that multicultural pluralism, with its almost monistic understanding of some over-riding need for cultural recognition and particularity, is in the end as incompatible with any Marxist-influenced account of radical social democracy as it is with liberal pluralism. Eisfeld, it could be said, is therefore ducking some rather serious issues when he simply slots culturalist pluralism alongside economic democracy as coalescing partners in the story of pluralism’s evolution.

But why do I think we need to question multiculturalism’s ‘critical’ credentials? Inevitably, I can only give a truncated form of the argument here (but see McLennan 2000, 2006), and I would like to point out in advance that, Cerny-like, I have no difficulty accepting the importance and existence of certain sorts of multiculturality. Rather it is multiculturalism, and the assumption that it is an obviously ‘good thing’, that I question.

One reason for my scepticism is that in spite of many attempts to define multiculturalism, its essential logic remains problematic. In an account that develops
Eisenberg’s highlighting of stable, deep and ‘constitutive communities’ (p.70), Bhikhu Parekh restricts the primary or ‘strong’ meaning of multiculturalism to recognition of the existence and importance of ‘communal’ cultures, those that represent a deeply embedded way of life. Insofar as multiculturalism refers to different lifestyles, habits, and politico-cultural diversity across a wide range of social groups, this meaning, though not illegitimate, must be regarded as secondary or ‘weak’. For Parekh, these often hybrid cultural spaces and identities, however interesting they may be, 'do not represent an alternative culture', they do not really depart from the society's 'dominant system of meaning and values' (Parekh 2000: 3).

But this foundational distinction immediately raises difficulties. What does it mean to represent an ‘alternative’ culture, and how are we to decide what does or does not depart from a society’s ‘dominant system of meaning’? Just empirically, many observers think that the deeply communal or ethnicized cultures to which Parekh, like Eisenberg, gives almost monistic priority, are eroding, whilst the second multiculturalist syndrome is growing. If it is then insisted that many people are moving back to their traditional cultures and values, and reclaiming their ethnicized or deep communal identities, this can be regarded as a matter of informed choice within an ever-more-shared setting of global politics and capitalist techno-culture. As such, it does not represent the kind of inherited, as it were unthinking or natural, quality of allegiance that alone would prompt us to distinguish deep cultures from various non-ethnicized subcultural options. In any case, many instances of the latter are not simply ‘choices’, but themselves possess (varying) degrees of sociological depth and compulsion, as Eisenberg concedes in her important footnote on p. 70.
To further soften the contrast between strong communal/ethnicized identities and hybrid, mobile, self-transforming ones, my Bristol colleague Tariq Modood (2005: 18-19) argues that multiculturalism ‘recognizes the legitimacy of both developments’.

But a moment’s thought shows that the understandings of the process of (contemporary) social life that lie behind the two senses of community, between which Modood proposes parity, are close to irreconcilable. As Stuart Hall (1988) first pointed up, the emphasis on the growing number, and increasingly fragmented or hybrid forms, of ‘new ethnicities’ – such that ‘ethnicity’ begins to seem the wrong word to use in this context – runs directly against the ‘strong’ multiculturalist concern for profound singularity. Instead of regarding culture as inherited, it is increasingly read as constructed; where cultural incommensurability is posited, the other side emphasises extensive cultural porosity; where culture used to be inhabited by settled and saturated selves, now nomadic subjectivities are spotted roaming all over the place.

Of course, we needn’t lurch from one extreme to the other: some identities may well be somewhat more self-constituting and apparently ‘natural’ or ‘given’ than others. This does need to be recognized. But as social scientists, it behoves us to take a critical distance from anything claimed to be experienced as ‘natural’ and ‘inherited’, since the ‘invention of tradition’ at particular social junctures and over time has proved to be a highly successful explanatory vantage point. In that light, Eisenberg’s claim that ‘constitutive’ identities simply cannot be treated as the product of the kind of interest group activity, elite manipulation, and political bargaining that characterises the practices of ‘voluntary’ associations comes across as wholly naïve. British multiculturalism, for example, is a highly organized and at times manifestly
‘top-down’ affair, and the relative sudden-ness with which, in the 1980s, British ‘Asians’ or ‘Pakistanis’ started to see themselves ‘all along’ as Muslims cannot be understood without some fairly standard (critical) pluralist tools of analysis.

Next we must ask: to whom, exactly, is ‘multiculturalism’ itself addressed to as a form of governmentality and source of identity? If we favour the strong, deep notion of culture, then we might think, and hope, that multiculturalism itself would develop into the kind of deep culture that would bind its members together through commitment to its values and participation in its extensive social practices. The paradox here, however, is that to take on that degree of multicultural commitment, to see ourselves as belonging to the higher-order community of communities in any deep sense, means discounting the depth of commitment and belonging that we might show for any particular first-order community. If, conversely, we really do belong to a deep first-order community, there is no reason to think we would accept the higher-order value of multiculturalism, duty bound as it is to treat as equally legitimate other first-order values and communities that might be anathema to us. Of course, we might pragmatically accept the higher-order compromise, just to preserve and protect our own first-order culture as far as possible, but in that case to say that we have a community of communities, and a deep value of multiculturalism is disingenuous.

If there is something in that sequence of argumentation, then we cannot accept the way in which Eisenberg paints her picture of the nature of interests and identities in contemporary society. If these, for sure, legitimately include cultural, ethnic and religious identities, we still need a social ontology that finds a central place for other groups, for strategic rationality in the behaviour of all groups and subcultures, and for
imaginings of the democratic individual *beyond* the hold of all groups and cultures. On the whole, it seems mistaken to insist that individuals are entirely ‘constituted’ by their inherited ways of being, and indeed to think of them in this way is, in my view, to inhibit any creative vision of future democracy. This thought chimes in well with the closing remarks of Eisfeld’s Introduction, in which he states that what is needed, ‘*first and foremost*’ (my emphasis) are well-educated, resourceful and resourced citizens, people committed to pluralist ‘orientations’ (nice phrase), and committed to democracy as a culture. Eisfeld does not reference the work of Roberto Unger in these comments, but there is a distinct echo of the latters’s rhetorically infective paean to the individual subject of ‘experimental democracy’. Unger argues that for sustainable, socially egalitarian, high-energy democracy to succeed – and in spite of the high costs and demands that this places on people, it is the *only* way that radical democracy is going to have a future – we must understand that we are each and all ‘greater than the institutions and cultures we build’; that ‘in a deepened democracy people must be able to see themselves and one another as individuals capable of escaping their confined roles’; that democratic experimentalism ‘must hold up the image of a reordered world in which people acquire different identities and interests as they seek to satisfy more fully the interests, and live out more fully the identities, they now recognize as theirs’ (Unger 1998: 256-60). This is a democratic politics that prizes above all social and personal *capacity*, not ethno-cultural *identity*; a politics of growth and self-discovery, not a politics that rests content with confirmation of current self- or group-perception. That it carries significant risks and lacks mundane plausibility is beyond doubt, but actually, so do the anti-majoritarian instincts of contemporary multiculturalism.
**Conclusion**

I have ranged rather far and wide in this contribution, and have only some ‘orientations’ to offer, rather than a full alternative, in support of my critical remarks on the contributions to the reframing of pluralist analysis under discussion. My overarching theme is that no social scientist, or sensitive normative thinker today could possibly be against pluralism. But pluralism as such, pluralism unmodified – whether as an empirical political heuristic, or as an account of the democratic life or the democratic future, or as the basis of a philosophical worldview – has possibly had its day. It is a qualifier of important thoughts about how we should live and how the world is, not the main thing qualified. In that sense, it would be reasonable to say that pluralism is a ‘degenerative’ research programme in Lakatos’s (1970) terms, rather than a progressive one. In fact, Lakatos was doubtful that there were any progressive research programmes in the social sciences, so maybe all socio-political perspectives are in the same boat. I don’t want to say, then, that all aspects or all variants of pluralism are finished, either empirically or theoretically. Let us continue to argue, by all means, about multiculturalism, experimental democracy, associationalism, global multi-nodal-networkism, and the rest, and continue to refine the notions of ‘groups’ and their ‘interests’. And let us of course observe carefully the extent of social and political plurality. But pluralism? No.
References


**Notes**

1 The words are also given incorrectly in Lowi’s chapter. The chorus in both Travis’s and Ford’s renditions, with one tiny variation [bracketed] reads:
‘You load sixteen tons [and] what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt
Saint Peter don’t you call me ‘cause I can’t go
I owe my soul to the company store’.

2 For an appraisal of Giddens’s structurationist social theory as a version of pluralism, see McLennan (1989: Ch. 7).

3 In response, it might be maintained that pluralism does not need to qualify democracy, nor democracy pluralism, because at bottom they are one and the same. Taking this line, Richard Bellamy (1999) insists that given the Berlin-like incompatibility of values and cultures in the world, only a deep ethos and practice of compromise constitutes the progressive democratic solution. ‘[pluralistic] Compromise is the stuff of democracy’, he claims (Bellamy 1999: 94). But this does not seem to be a viable position, however important (and under-estimated) the art and ethos of compromise might be. The motivation for compromise is not in the end intrinsic, but rather stems, where it is not merely a matter of prudence, from attachment to some other overarching first order value or values, such as humanism or democracy, that have the potential to break entrenched pluralism. Conversely, if pluralism is held in a strong form, such that no coherent sense can be made of the idea of one overarching system of human values, then compromise would seem to have no purpose at all. Bellamy has much of interest to say about both pluralistic compromise and democracy, but ultimately it is the latter that is doing the hard work for him, not pluralism or compromise.