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# The “Claims” of Culture Properly Interpreted

## Response to Nikolas Kompridis

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In his strident article on “Normativizing Hybridity/Neutralizing Culture,” Nikolas Kompridis sharply criticizes a view of culture “which often exaggerates the fluidity, permeability, and renegotiability of culture.”<sup>1</sup> Although Kompridis admits that this anti-essentialist view has much to recommend it, he finds that the exaggerated emphasis on the hybridity of cultures results in “a concept that undermines the conditions of its own application, such that nothing empirically can actually conform to it” (319). Essentialist anti-essentialism normativizes cultural fluidity and change, thus endorsing a mindless modernity; it individualizes cultural attachments, thus making it impossible to renegotiate one’s cultural identity, and amounts “to cultural Darwinism: minority cultures that cannot survive without ‘special’ subsidies and ‘extraordinary’ provisions do not deserve to survive” (322). Since Kompridis lists my book *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*<sup>2</sup> as committing these sins and devotes the major part of his article to its critique, I am grateful to have a chance to respond to his objections.

*The Claims of Culture* was written against the background of a worldwide trend when cultural identities, and in particular cultural differences evolved into sites of new forms of struggle. From the ethnocultural struggles of post-Soviet republics in east-central Europe and central Asia to the separatist aspirations of the Quebecois, Catalonian, and Basque nationalisms, to the more familiar variant of struggles over multicultural curricula in U.S. schools, we faced conflicts in which “culture has become a ubiquitous synonym for *identity*” (Benhabib, 1). In such conflicts, political groups demand legal recognition and resource allocation from the state in order to preserve and protect cultural difference. I engaged in a dialogue with some of these movements by following a dual strategy: on one hand, I put forth a philosophically adequate and social-scientifically defensible concept of culture; on the other hand, I advocated “complex multicultural dialogues” through which the claims of cultural groups could be dynamically incorporated into the theory and practice of liberal democracies. Kompridis misunderstands me on both counts.

Kompridis insistently characterizes my position as radically constructivist, ignoring my theses about *the narrative constitution of cultures*, and about the crucial distinction between the standpoint of the *observer* and that of the *participant* in social theories of culture (Benhabib, 5). Culture presents itself through narratively contested accounts for two principal reasons. First, human actions and relations are formed by a *double hermeneutic*: we identify ‘what’ we do and ‘who’ we are through an ‘account,’ a ‘narrative’ of deeds and persons. Human actions and interactions together form a “web of narratives,” in Arendt’s sense.<sup>3</sup> But humans also dispose of second-order narratives that entail a normative or evaluative attitude toward accounts of first-order deeds. “What we call ‘culture,’” I conclude, “is the horizon formed by these evaluative stances, through which the infinite chain of space-time sequences is demarcated into ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ ‘holy’ and ‘profane,’ ‘pure’ and ‘impure.’ Cultures are formed through binaries because human beings live in an evaluative universe” (Benhabib, 7).

Ignoring this dimension of the narrative constitution of actions and identities, Kompridis assumes that contestability and hybridity are merely arbitrary acts of interpretation; but the contest *within* cultures and *among* cultures occurs within narrative structures, which at the end of the day have to ‘make sense,’ have to ‘enable’ their members to go on in a meaningful way. This is the moment of the ‘identity of the non-identical’ in the work of culture, when conflicting narratives nonetheless are woven together to form an epistemically plausible whole in the light of which cultural groups continue to resignify the good and the bad, the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure. The sociological constructivism I defend does not suggest that cultural differences are shallow or fictional. Kompridis dismisses my use of the term “imagined boundaries,” with the charge that this merely recapitulates the dichotomy of reason and imagination (326). Quite to the contrary. My concept of narrativity weakens that sharp divide by revalorizing the work of the imagination in continuing the project of culture.

The narrative view of culture permits one to identify cultures without falling into a correspondence theory of truth. “The radical hybridity and polyvocality” of cultures, argues Kompridis, does not permit one to “individuate one culture from another” (324). But why not? The individuation of cultures occurs through narratives, and narratives are more or less coherent, more or less plausible, more or less convincing. To put this in the vocabulary of the philosophy of language: the absence of definite descriptions, which provide necessary and sufficient conditions for reference, does not mean that the work of signifying and individuation cannot take place. We do not need a theory of types in order to individuate actions, events, and complex practices and ways of life such as cultures. As with other general terms of our language, we

operate within a framework of family resemblances (Wittgenstein) in finding the identical in the non-identical self-constitution of cultures.

There is an important asymmetry between the standpoint of the social observer and that of the participant in the identification of cultures: the observer seeks for more unity and coherence in identifying a culture than does the participant. For members of cultures, the universe is constituted by a series of interlocking, fluid, and often competing strands of signification and argumentation. "To be X"—a Catholic, a Jew, a Muslim, an American, a Greek—is to know and to identify with *some* strands of collective narrative through which the past is accounted for and the future anticipated. Such cultural identifications require an awareness of alternative stories and competing points of view.<sup>4</sup> There is no *single* narrative of what it means to be a good Catholic, a good American, or a good Greek. In fact, a cultural tradition dies or ossifies when its members no longer find the resources through which to contest the past, present, and future narratives of their collective existence.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to the *politics of culture*, Kompridis ignores what Max Pensky has very aptly named the "Yoder's dilemma."<sup>6</sup> Commenting on the conceptual and moral dilemmas involved in appealing for the protection and recognition of one's traditional cultural identity on the basis of secular and universalistic norms which register the freedom and equality of all persons and their equal entitlement to a democratic schedule of rights traps one in the Yoder's dilemma: either one must abandon the claim to the holistic and totalizing aspects of one's identity, recognizing now that it is *one among many* such identities competing for equal recognition in the public space of democracies; or one must adopt a *purely strategic* attitude toward legal norms and make one's culture a good, which, like money and power, can be pursued strategically. (There is a third option, that of narrative resignification, which I will discuss below.)

Kompridis, by contrast, presents the predicament of minority cultures as if this were a consequence of the wrong *theories of culture*, rather than of the general dilemma faced by *all* cultures in the public sphere of liberal democracies. In justifying claims for special recognition of their dietary habits, such as kosher and halal meat, and for special clothing items such as turbans, yarmulkes, or head scarves; and in demanding subsidies for language rights, independent schools, and community centers, and for legal rights to hunting, water, and burial grounds, minority cultural groups, whether consisting of indigenous peoples, immigrants, or national minorities, have to enter into the political arena of contestation. There is no a priori reason to assume that all such claims are justifiable before being submitted to the test of discursive and deliberative justification. At this point, Kompridis hears "the normative gears loudly grinding" (331), and

believes that my position dismisses the “otherness of the other.” Quite to the contrary: precisely because I treat the other as an equal with whom I must dialogue in good faith and without paternalistic pretensions, all demands cannot be said to be valid because they are articulated by groups with a history of oppression and marginalization. Oppression and marginalization are no guarantee of progressive or just politics. The recent history of cultural politics is rife with contests, where the protection of the identity of a particular group in accordance with the understanding of some of its (often male) members would have meant discriminating against its women and children, disenfranchising them from tribal or religious belonging because they outmarried, or denying them equitable alimony and the like. Precisely because I view cultures as complex narratives formed by multiple and often clashing voices, I treat the French scarf affair (Benhabib, 94-100), the use of the ‘multicultural defense’ in U.S. criminal courts to acquit defendants who murder or abuse their unfaithful wives on the grounds that these are honor crimes (Benhabib, 86-91), and discrimination against Muslim women in India under the Muslim Family Defense Act (Benhabib, 91-95). Kompridis does not tell us how *he* would resolve some of these heart-wrenching conflicts other than advocating ‘sensitivity’ to culture.

Whereas Kompridis finds my concept of culture too fluid, he considers my normative criteria of *egalitarian reciprocity*, *voluntary self-ascription*, and *freedom of exit and association* too rigid. The criteria of voluntary self-ascription, that “in consociationalist or federative multicultural societies, an individual must not be automatically assigned to a cultural, religious, or linguistic group by virtue of his or her birth” (19), bring charges of “unyielding modernism” (334) and assimilationism (327). These are strong claims, but they miss the mark: I certainly did not mean to suggest that you can stop being an African American or a Jew or an Indian simply by exiting your community of birth; obviously you cannot leave your skin behind, but you can take leave of your religion and your ethnicity and try to pass as white, assimilate, dissimulate, or, more positively, become a “self-conscious pariah,” in Hannah Arendt’s words. My concern was not with the cultural repertoire of negotiating identities but with the limited fact that under certain political and legal arrangements, one would be assigned at birth to a group which was entitled to different rights and privileges than the majority. Examples include the differential legal status of Jews, Palestinians, and the Druze in Israel; of Hindus and Muslims in India; and of Native American and First Nations people in the United States and Canada. Particularly for the most vulnerable members of these groups, women and children, the availability of *exit* may be a counterweight to the absence of *voice*.<sup>7</sup> While I applaud

the struggles of those who challenge conditions of their membership by remaining within their communities, I do not see why some should be denied “the capacity for self-definition . . . internal to the notion of self-determination” in modernity (329) by exercising their exit option.

Kompridis fears that if we lose the “semantic resources upon which our sense-making, meaning-creating, justice-endorsing capacities depend,” because we lose fragile and vulnerable cultural practices (335-36), then the project of critique itself will be endangered. But the sociological reality of the Yoder’s dilemma, faced by all cultures today, need not only lead to fragmentation, instrumentalism, and cynicism. There is also the possibility of narrative resignification and reappropriation. Cultures which are subject to decentering, reflexivity, and pluralization can regenerate from within themselves novel semantic resources of resistance.<sup>8</sup> This is not an “instrumentalist” view of culture (335) and would provide us with criteria for discriminating “between values and practices we should want to continue and those we should want to discontinue” (335). It was this faith, and not some romantic attachment to *Volkskultur* and to national or popular mythologies, that led Walter Benjamin to celebrate the creative impulses of modernism. Kompridis does not make clear that Benjamin did *not* bemoan the loss of aura by the artwork in the modern world; he celebrated photography and film, among other products of modern culture, as media that contained novel potentials of auratic signification.

Kompridis concludes with a warning: “Deliberative democrats and critical theorists must guard against naturalizing processes of modernization and globalization that make resistance to them seem ‘unnatural’” (337-38). I do not recognize myself as the addressee of this warning. *The Claims of Culture* was dedicated to searching for the sources of democratic resistance and resignification which would come from within multicultural liberal democracies. The semantic resources for mobilizing such resistance not only reside with the traditional ways of life of cultural minorities, although they very well may, but also are present in public culture, as well as in the popular culture of such marginalized groups as gays and lesbians and immigrant urban youth.<sup>9</sup> *The Claims of Culture* concluded with a critique of immigration, citizenship, inclusion, and exclusion policies within the European Union by showing how race, culture, gender, and citizenship entered into a faithful mixture around such practices. This is hardly a defense of unbridled globalization or neoliberalism. As I practice it, critical social theory does not *naturalize* the present, but it takes its contradictions and dilemmas seriously and seeks sources of transcendence from within. The search for alternative modernities and immanent critique of the present are not incompatible.

## Notes

1. See Nikolas Kompridis, "Normativizing Hybridity/Neutralizing Culture," *Political Theory* 33, no. 3 (June 2005): 318-43, here 319. All future references in the text are to this article.
2. Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002). All future references in the text are to this edition.
3. I am much indebted to Hannah Arendt's work in formulating the narrativity of actions and identities. This theme has been present in my work since *Critique, Norm and Utopia: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 327-52. It was further discussed in Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Post-modernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge and Polity, 1992). While it is not incumbent upon the critic of an author's book to engage with her oeuvre as a whole, the total neglect of this central thesis leads Kompridis down the wrong path.
4. Is the narrative multiplicity of voices a feature of *all* cultures at *all* times or only a feature of *some* cultures under *conditions of modernity*? Following Clifford Geertz, I am inclined to the view that there is more internal contestation of narratives even in traditional cultures than a sharp contrast between the modern and the premodern would suggest. Nonetheless, since the contemporary debate about the politics of culture is occurring in a modern, and maybe even postmodern, universe, even those cultural communities that cling to their traditionalism are faced with the paradoxes of the Yoder's dilemma, as explicated below.
5. I am puzzled by Kompridis's example of Béla Bartók's ethnomusical researches into Hungarian music, since it supports precisely my argument that the discovery of multiplicity of voices in the narrative of culture does not hinder cultural identification. See Kompridis, "Normativizing Hybridity/Neutralizing Culture," 328-29.
6. See Max Pensky, "Comments of Seyla Benhabib's *The Claims of Culture*," *Constellations* 11, no. 2 (June 2004): 258-66. Compare also David Peritz, "Toward a Deliberative Democratic Response to Multicultural Politics: Post-Rawlsian Reflections on Benhabib's *The Claims of Culture*," *Constellations* 11, no. 2 (June 2004): 266-291; and Seyla Benhabib, "On Culture, Public Reason, and Deliberation: Response to Pensky and Peritz," *Constellations* 11, no. 2 (June 2004): 291-309.
7. For further discussion on the politics of voice and exit in *The Claims of Culture*, see the symposium on it in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* with comments by James Bohman, Maria Herera, and Eduardo Mendieta 31, no. 7 (2005).
8. I have explained these criteria as well as processes of cultural resignification in Benhabib, "On Culture, Public Reason, and Deliberation," 291-99.
9. For an analysis of contemporary immigrant culture, transcending the labels of ethnicity and nationalism, and even deploying the prejudices of the majority culture ironically against itself, see Levent Soysal, "Rap, HipHop, and Kreuzberg: The Institutional Topography of Migrant Youth Culture in the World City Berlin," and John Brady, "Dangerous Foreigners: The Discourse of Threat and the Contours of Inclusion and Exclusion in Berlin's Public Sphere," both in *New German Critique, Multicultural Germany: Art, Performance and Media*, no. 92 (Spring/Summer 2004): 62-82 and 194-224.

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