
14

We have been asked to reflect on the links between cultural heterogeneity on the one hand, economic performance and the fair redistribution of economic resources on the other hand. What is at stake here is the effectiveness of what Seekings calls “social citizenship”. And our marching orders (“reflection orders” would be a better term) state that should we find that cultural heterogeneity does effect negatively economic performance and redistribution, we should then propose institutional solutions.

That is a challenging task since it implies nothing less than a general examination of the relations among the cultural, the economic, the social and the political subsystems that constitute the polity.

To help me take an overall view of the problem at hand in relation to the papers before us, allow me, for this kind of health check up of the solidarity function, to imitate the doctors of my childhood, who would display the instruments of their diagnosis in front of the presumably ill, before prescribing something normally illegible. I shall try to avoid illegibility, although the analytical instrument that I shall use comes from Talcott Parsons.

In *Societies*, Parsons studies the evolution of the polity from its so-called primitive days to its post-modern phase (societies of which the papers give a variety of examples, from David Laitin’s fragmented African states (where the fragments belong to different periods of evolution) to the post-modern societies covered by Grin’s paper, societies such as the Swiss and the Belgian where all the fragments are in their contemporary phase).

In a primitive system, says Parsons, politics, economics, sociality, and culture are normally merged together in the care of the same institution (a king, a group of elders for example) and that institution is run according to tradition. The various functions are so

Comments on Laitin and Grin

Jean Laponce

University of British Columbia

closely tied together that they respond to the same organizational logic. However, as the challenges from the environment become more complex, as innovations interfere with tradition (faster modes of transportation, new modes of production, the invention of writing, for example) a tightly integrated multi-function system becomes dysfunctional and, to re-establish functionality, the functions tend to get separated until they eventually become autonomous. A series of historical big bangs propels them apart so that in a contemporary liberal democracy we see a largely autonomous economic system be guided by the logic of profit, while the religious system may continue to be guided by the unchanging logic of authoritative dogmas that ignore what the economy has to say. Culture may be inspired by the repetition of past forms in the case of folk art, by innovation and pleasure of the senses in the case of its high-brow as well as of its popular variety. In the case of language, which is the cultural focus of Laitin and Grin as well as Kalel papers, the organizing logic is that of pattern maintenance, it is a conservative logic that seeks the transmission over time of a basic framework. As for politics, it may, in turn, respond to a yet entirely different logic, the logic of equality for example, a political logic taken as a given by all the papers presented at this conference. Under such functional desaggregation, what happens to social integration and to social solidarity in a multilingual society? Should they be detached from economics and closely linked to politics? at what level and how? Let us see what the three papers say or suggest on the subject.

Mukash Kalel¹ gives us a detailed case study of the linguistic regime of the Democratic Republic of the Congo; with its 220 local languages; its four languages of regional inter ethnic communication (each of those with geographical areas of concentration); its official language, French; and its world wide lingua franca, English, which is gaining ground. All these languages are very much alive. How to integrate such a system? How to create national solidarity?

Mukash Kalel's partial solution is to seek an increase in understanding and equality by requiring that all Congolese called to administrative and political functions be able to speak the four regional languages in addition to French. The ideal linguistic system would then be for everyone to add to one's maternal tongue not only French and English but also the four regional languages. That is more easily said than done, but, even if it were to be obtained, would that solve the problem at hand, would it turn economic resources into fairly distributed social benefits? My guess is that Mukash Kalel's generous intention, if implemented, would have perverse effects. Bringing the regional languages into increased contact at the center would increase competition and conflicts of precedence among them. I

¹. In a paper in French circulated among participants to the conference (Mukash Kalel, 2003).

would recommend instead that the local and regional languages be made secure, when that is possible, in their territorial niches, to isolate them, as languages, from the bargains and trade offs occasioned at the political center by the redistribution of resources. In Parsons's terms: separate economics and culture at the national level but keep them linked at the local level as long as needed by their stage of evolution. However, even if secure locally, the peripheral languages will need power at the center, but a power all the more effective if it is exercised through the medium of the official language.

David Laitin notes a correlation that begs for an explanation. The correlation is in the occurrence of insurgencies and of the granting of rights to minority languages. He is quite convincing and I kept writing "yes" in the margins of the paper. Yes, I agree that the weakness of the state is a major factor explaining the recent explosion of insurgencies as well as of language concessions to minorities. I have no quarrel with what he says about the weak states of the developing world. I shall concentrate my remarks on the old western democracies and bring out from behind the wings of his paper some alternative possibilities to his single factor explanation.

Take the example of France, a state particularly successful at state building through language planning. At the time of the French revolution of 1789, the majority of the French people did not speak French. A century and a half latter, a policy of unilingualism had unified the country linguistically. The regional languages did not disappear but they were put on the sideline with very limited market value. French had won. Then, starting in the 1950s we see the very central government that had pushed the local languages to the ground, offer them some limited help rather than complete the job of annihilation. Why? A weakened state says David Laitin. Let us consider other factors.

Since the defeated languages were no longer a threat to the Republic, they could become pawns in the electoral competition. They could be given symbolic recognition (a few classes and teachers here and there) for the sake of electoral support in a system moving toward equibalance among its political forces, hence a system where even a few votes mattered.

Another possible explanation, a bit far fetched I realise, is that the disappearing languages were saved, at least temporarily, by their very weakness. As long as the regional languages were relatively powerful, they looked like potential enemies. Once defeated, they turned into handicapped children. After the battle, the Red Cross. The very languages that were previously on the political right as maintainers of tradition, moved to the left and were now in need of help and solidarity.

ity. At this point may I open a parenthesis and make a parallel *à la Laitin*, to note the similarity of right to left shift of minority languages and of the environment. When nature was powerful, inexhaustible, immortal, it was on the right and could look after itself. When it was suddenly found to be weak, perishable, and endangered, it was made to cross the floor to the left. Whether I am right or not in calling as I do on the motherly instinct as an alternative explanation, the case of minority languages invites us not to forget what the extremists of the rational choice persuasion (David Laitin is not among them) often tend to ignore: man has two sides, the egoistic and the altruistic, the two sides that David McClelland joins in his “two faces of power”, the face that grins and dominates and the face that smiles and helps and uplifts.

And finally there is also a Parsonian alternative explanation: The political system, having entered the field of language to build a state and having obtained hegemony for the language of its choice, can now leave the field, at least partially, and give it some autonomy. And that, not because the state is weaker but because what was a security concern has been “downgraded” to a cultural issue. That would explain that, in the United States, we see the various levels of government go through phases of tolerance of incoming languages and phases of intolerance according to whether immigration is seen as a blessing or as a threat. David Laitin may want to bring the United States into his comparisons. He might also want to add a fourth category to his typology where we see 1) a strong state confronted by a weak group, 2) a weak state confronted by a strong group and 3) a weakening state confronted by a group that is either weak or strong. The category to be added would fit the Canadian case where we have a strong state confronted by a strong Québécois community (without threat of civil war).

With François Grin’s paper we move, not exclusively, but mostly, from South to North, we move to industrial advanced capitalist democracies, those that should not have serious problems of redistribution of wealth because of their very wealth. But, of course, wealth is always relative and those who want to catch and hold it are like those children that run after a ball that they cannot manage to pick up in their hands because the foot is faster than the hand and keeps kicking the ball further and further away.

François Grin gathered a great deal of evidence to show that the cost of bi- and multilingualism is vastly exaggerated by the critics of the translation burden, even when it is as expensive as in the European Union. The savings made by a hypothetical transformation of such institutions from multi to unilingualism would not free many resources to be used for the welfare and redistribution functions.

In a multilingual society, the cost of multilingual communication is born mostly by the individuals who have to learn and maintain extra languages. Rightly, the author points to the importance of bilinguals who reduce the friction of language in economic, social, and political transactions. The role of these individuals as facilitator of communication is especially important in countries such as Switzerland and Belgium who have adopted the principle of unilingual territoriality to structure the coexistence of their language communities.

But, individual bilingualism can have a serious psychological cost that Grin may want to bring to the fore, a cost that may have serious effects on solidarity. I refer here to the psychological cost resulting from asymmetrical bilingualism when the learning of a second language is not equally shared by two different language communities. Such cost sharing is relatively well balanced in Switzerland compared to Canada for example. While 43% of Canadian francophones say that they know English, only 9% of anglophones say that they know French. I do not have the recent statistics for Belgium but I imagine that they are of a Canadian type. In Switzerland, according to the statistics Grin obtained from his 1995 survey, 47% of Romand francophones say they have a good or excellent understanding of German while, on the Alemannic side, 46% say they understand French at the same level of competence.

At the elite level there are enough bilinguals in Belgium, Canada, and Switzerland for effective communication not to be a problem; but in Canada the communication will nearly always be in English. The Quebec separatist leaders are not unilingual French, they are typically fluent in English. When language motivates their resentment it is not for their inability to communicate, it is for their language being constantly reduced to second fiddle, or even worse: not being allowed in the orchestra. In short, we must consider the psychological costs of bilingualism on a case by case basis and pay particular attention to the consequences of asymmetrical sharing of those costs.

Switzerland is not only blessed by a high level of bilingualism, it is not only blessed by the cross cutting cleavages of religion and language described by Grin, it is also blessed for having anticipated what Talcott Parsons would have recommended. From mid 19th century to present times, Switzerland has clearly set culture and the economy on different paths. It centralized its economic system, then opened it to the world, while decentralizing its culture, particularly so in matters of language. Canada, by comparison, is not yet sufficiently centralized economically, and not sufficiently decentralized culturally. The Swiss wisdom (Dominique Schnapper will return to the subject) may have been inspired by the works of Otto Bauer and Karl Renner,

the Austrian socialists who, in the late 19th century, had become frustrated by the brake that the conflicts among nationalities put on the performance of an economy in need of centralisation. Hence their idea of federating the country twice, at the regional level for the economy, at the local and community level for the nationalities. Austro-Hungary disappeared before Austria had a chance to implement such Parsonian separation of culture from the economy. But Switzerland, if not Austria, evolved according to the logic of the Bauer-Renner proposals; and so did Belgium, but to a much lesser extent, when it distinguished regions and communities in its new federal structure. However, and that may be part of the problem in Belgium, while Switzerland went the whole way of delocalizing the economy while rooting culture locally, Belgium went only part of the way, and, especially in Flanders, correct me if I am misinformed, culture and the economy, are re-linked together, when, following the Swiss strategy, language and culture alone should be regionalised.

How does too tight a linkage between economics and culture affect the solidarity function? It does if cultural or economic disagreements spill over each other within the same governing institutions. Thus, and to repeat, one should, whenever possible, ground and secure languages regionally and hope that the level of peace and satisfaction so obtained will make it easier for the central political system to redistribute economic resources. Let the political confront the economic without the complicating interference of language.

In his section on compensation and redistribution rights, François Grin argues that the refusal to endorse and maintain diversity is likely to give rise to inequalities difficult to justify from a liberal point of view. From an individualistic liberal point of view, yes; but I note that he chooses his verbs cautiously when he speaks of the refusal to "endorse and maintain", he did not say "endorse and expand". The "endorse and maintain" is relatively easy to deal with, To "endorse and expand" poses a more difficult problem. Switzerland "endorses and maintains" its official languages but makes it a duty of the schools to assimilate the incoming languages.

That is sound policy, I think, but does not such a policy pose a problem to the individual liberal. Can that liberal be comfortable in having different prescriptions for the insiders and for the newcomers? By comparison the French Jacobins are more consistent egalitarians when they say that the same language regulations apply to all citizens, old and new.

In conclusion, the messages I get from the papers, lead me, once again, to note that minority languages tend, for their very protection, to form compact territorial units. One can thus offer them secu-

rity locally and regionally and by so doing avoid, at least to some extent, that they be caught in the tug of war in which the political and the economic system are engaged over the redistribution of social benefits.

The nation wide redistribution of these benefits can thus be done, in modern democracies, according to the principle of individual rights, while language, by contrast, needs, in a multilingual society, to be regulated according to the principle of collective rights. Individual rights in one case, collective rights in the other. We have here an example of the dissociation of strategies and philosophies needed to achieve fairness and functionality.

R E F E R E N C E S

- [1] Parsons, T. 1966. Societies, 2 vol., Englewood-Cliff: Prentice Hall.
- [2] Mukash Kalel. 2003. “Situation et dynamique des langues au Congo”