Journal of Exclusion studies
Vol. 1 No.2, August 2011, 133-138

Research Article

Resisting 'Alterity': Ambedkar and the Ethics of Recognition

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ABSTRACT

This paper reveals how mainstream society is organized around the politics of exclusion. An analysis of the primary institutional forces that shape social hierarchies shows that these are all based on the politics of non-recognition and exclusion. Not only do these systems exist as one-dimensional forms of subordination, but they also combine to create a larger, self-reinforcing and interlinking system of oppression. The main argument is that once domination is accepted on the basis of one arbitrary characteristic—race, nationality, sex, sexual orientation, or class— then it is easier to accept it also on the basis of another. On the other hand, if one form of domination is questioned, then it is likely that other forms are also questioned. Even before the world could debate the consequences of exclusion, Ambedkar had realised that the politics of exclusion plays a vital role in a non-materialist discourse of human and citizenship rights, democracy, recognition and respect. Conversely, he vied for a redistributive egalitarian discourse, which does not represent a denial of the material conditions that lie at the heart of marginalization. Rather, it offers an opportunity to transform the politics of marginalization into one that addresses questions of power as well as participatory processes. In this paper I have made an attempt to develop an analytical framework in which the politics of marginalization and exclusion can be both understood and forged. I have done this through the application of a number of concepts in social and political theory and finally posit that at issue are not just the promotion of an ethics of recognition, but also the redistribution of power and an egalitarian discourse.

KEYWORDS: Exclusion, Alterity, Recognition, Marginalization, Subordination

INTRODUCTION

"Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement"

Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty

Mainstream society operates through a heavily imbalanced system of hierarchy. A close analysis of these hierarchical systems reveals how the primary institutional forces that shape it are all based on the politics of exclusion. Not only do these systems exist as one-dimensional forms of subordination, but they also combine to create a larger, self-reinforcing and interlinking system of oppression. These systems of domination control all forms of socialization including the media, culture, religion and the state by influencing the power relations in society; and use these institutions to indoctrinate the dominant, repressive ideology. The dominant class controls these interlinking systems of power, and it is this class that decides on what basis people should be excluded and dominated. The powerful structure, the measurement so as to benefit themselves and there is no self-evident reason for the forms of domination that they have implemented, for example, discrimination on the basis of skin colour. If people can argue for one of these systems of domination, then they can similarly argue for another. Once domination is accepted on the basis of one arbitrary characteristic—race, nationality, sex, sexual orientation, or class—then it is easier to accept it also on the basis of another. On the other hand, if one form of domination is questioned, then it is likely that other forms are also questioned.

This paper attempts to put some practical initiatives in a theoretical context. 'Subjugated alterities' as a

problematic category serves as the conceptual cornerstone that defines my research problem. 'Subjugated alterities' result from a non- and/or misrecognition of the presence of the subordinated category. Such alterities are almost always obliterated in their reduction to a marked, negative and subordinate value. These alterities, however, are not permanent conditions, thus pointing to the possibility of reversal of the subjugated state. Using the concepts of exclusion, democracy, recognition and empowerment, the paper makes a normative case for the inclusion of the oppressed and the marginalied. It argues that such inclusion should be seen as a central element in the ethics of recognition and empowerment of the excluded.

Social exclusion has been an increasingly debatable concept in political and social theories. An analysis of the social procedures renders evident that, whereas the notion of marginalization primarily concerns the distribution of material resources, that of social exclusion focuses "primarily on relational issues, in other words, inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power" (Room, 1995: 5). This approach points to the conceptualization of social exclusion as "the denial—or non-realisation—of citizenship rights" (Berghman, 1995: 19). This is also indicative of the ways in which discriminatory and oppressive behaviour can serve to exclude particular groups such as 'the underclass', women, disabled people and gays and lesbians. All this serve to explicate the role played by social and economic institutions in creating and reinforcing marginaliation and exclusion. Theorists of recognition have insisted that the acknowledgment and/or affirmation of one's social position is a vital human need and that non- or misrecognition inflicts real psychological harm (Taylor, 1992: 35; Honneth, 1995: 15). Charles Taylor et. al. (1994) argues against the demeaning effect of non- or misrecognition:

Equal recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it. The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized. (36)

This brings us to the question of how subjugated alterity is produced and maintained through a strategic misdistribution of power. My analytical perspective in this paper is an attempt to produce a framework to examine 'subjugated alterities' and their modes of marginalization. These 'alterities' are 'subjugated' because the unequal power struggles through which they are constituted as object of subordination are those that rest upon operations of division, misdistribution, hierarchiation and segregation of the social sphere. 'Subjugated alterities' project how specific power relations have successfully maintained apparatuses of capture. It is a matter of empirical research to examine the power structures in which 'subjugated alterities' have emerged and operated. Power accords the dominant class an unquestionable degree of control over social, cultural and economic resources exercised by different sections of society. It is also unequally distributed—the dominant group having greater control over the sources of power, and the subordinated having little or no control.

Our understanding of power would be incomplete, unless we examine its relation with ideology. Ideology can be understood as a complex structure of beliefs, values, attitudes and ways of perceiving and analyzing social reality. The dominant class widely indoctrinates and enforces its repressive ideologies through social, economic, political and religious institutions and structures such as the family, education system, religion, the media and the state. Using the economic, political and cultural institutions as powerful ideological apparatuses the society tends to reinforce the dominant ideology and the power of the dominant groups within it. These unequal power structures mediated by dominant discourses, in fact, serve as tools of subordination although their stated objectives may be superficially egalitarian. While ideology serves as a powerful apparatus of hegemonic control, it is reinforced by the threat of coercion. Dominant ideologies control the social and psychological procedures of participation by influencing how individuals think about their place in the world. This level of power shapes people's beliefs, sense of self and acceptance of their own superiority or inferiority. Culture, ideology and the processes of socialization, perpetuate exclusion and inequality by defining what is normal and acceptable. Feminist scholar Rae Langton (1956) has identified two ways by which groups can be excluded:

If you are powerful, you sometimes have the ability to silence the speech of the powerless. One way might be to stop the powerless from speaking at all. Gag them, threaten them, and condemn them to solitary confinement. However, there is another, less dramatic but equally effective, way. Let them speak. Let them say whatever they like to, whomever they like, but stop that speech from counting as an action. More precisely, stop it from counting as the action it was intended to be. (299)

What emerges from Langton's assumptions is how societal procedures ensure that the subordinated class does not express moments of resistance. Does this also imply that power and ideology are free from resistance and subversion? Certainly not; for neither power nor ideology is static or monolithic. They are subjected to a continuous process of resistance and challenge by the less powerful and marginalized sections of society, that effects various degrees of change in the power relations. These challenges, however, can become strong and extensive enough to result in the total transformation of a power structure.

The politics of exclusion plays a vital role in a non-materialist discourse of human and citizenship rights, democracy, recognition and respect. This does not represent a denial of the material conditions that lie at the heart of marginalisation. Rather, it offers an opportunity to transform the politics of marginalisation into one that addresses questions of power as well as participatory processes. In this section, I have made an attempt to develop an analytical framework in which the politics of marginalisation and exclusion can be both understood and forged. I have done this through the application of a number of concepts in social and political theory. Against the backdrop of this theoretical framework I would now approach Ambedkar's adversarial discourse and his ethics of recognition.

For a successful revolution it is not enough that there is discontent. What is required is a profound and thorough conviction of justice, necessity and importance of political and social rights

Dr. B.R.Ambedkar

Ambedkar's ethics of recognition is closely allied with his resistance to the conditions of alterity created through the non- or mis-recognition of the socially excluded by the dominant group. All his life he struggled for the structural transformation of the social sphere, which maligned by the misdistribution of power, denied the excluded its dignity, value and respectability. He insisted that a subordinated group cannot obtain dignity, enjoy it for a prolonged period or find stimulation for its expression unless it acquires a sense of agency. The struggle for cultural representation and recognition needs to manifest itself in social and political movements, for recognition to be ensured and stabilized what is required is the structural transformation of the social sphere. He insisted that behind social conflict one must discern something else, something fully positive, namely, the search for recognition and a quest for reciprocity. He strongly recommended democracy as the governing principle of human relationship, but emphasized that principles of equality, liberty and fraternity which are the cornerstones of democracy should not be interpreted narrowly in terms of political rights alone. He stressed on the social and economic dimensions of democracy, and warned that political democracy cannot succeed in the absence of egalitarian discourse in the social and economic spheres. Ambedkar, a champion of the rights of the underclass, remarks:

I am of the opinion that in believing that we are a nation, we are cherishing a great delusion. How can people divided into several thousands of castes be a nation? The sooner we realize that we are not as yet a nation in the social and psychological sense of the word, the better for us. For then only we shall realize the necessity of becoming a nation and seriously think of ways and means of realizing the goal. (Cited in Moon, 1994:1217)

Ambedkar's concerns for the democratization of the social sphere has been echoed by the political theorist Carol Gould (1988) who has argued for the democratisation of all the institutions of society—social, economic and cultural as well as political. Gould (1988: 84) insists, "Every person who engages in a common activity with others has an equal right to participate in making decisions concerning such activity. This right to participate applies not only to the domain of politics, but to social and economic activities as well". Ambedkar also finds an echo in Anthony Giddens in his exposition of the third way. Giddens (1998) has argued for the "democratization of

democracy." He contends that "the crisis of democracy comes from its not being democratic enough" in the face of "the demand for individual autonomy and the emergence of a more reflexive citizenry" (Giddens,1988: 71). When political and social theorists around the world were busy debating issues concerning participation of the underclass in social and political procedures, Ambedkar insisted on evolving radical democratic procedures for a structural transformation of the social sphere. He worked towards creating a deliberative and participatory democracy with the provision of public space in which the voices of different excluded groups can be heard. He was aware that the exclusionary social structure might lead to the subversion of the social order if it was not cleansed of its malignancies. Ambedkar remarks:

Where the Social Order denies opportunity to rise, denies right to education and denies the right to use arms; it is in a position to prevent rebellion against the Social Order. On the other hand, a Social Order allows the opportunity to rise, allows the right to education and permits the use of arms; then it cannot prevent rebellion by those who suffer wrongs. The only remedy to preserve the Social Order and suppressing rebellion is by the use of force and violence. The Hindu Social Order has adopted the first method. It has fixed the social status of the lower orders for all generations to come. Their economic status is also fixed. There being no disparity between the two there is no possibility of a grievance growing up. (Ambedkar, 1916: 1)

What Ambedkar is trying to suggest is how the repressive social order not only keeps the 'underclass' restricted to the periphery, but also how it strategically prevents any resistance to the locus of power. However, this mode of repression cannot remain free from resistance for long, and the repressive social order must allow participatory procedures to help itself from dismantling. Ambedkar's concerns for the sustenance of the society by means of participatory procedures has been echoed by Iris Young who tempers her advocacy of participatory democracy with the warning that "only if oppressed groups are able to express their interests and experience in the public on an equal basis with other groups, can group domination through formally equal processes of participation be avoided" (Young,1990: 95). Ambedkar insisted that a true democratic procedure should provide mechanisms for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of those of its constituent groups that are oppressed or disadvantaged. He advocated a radical democracy, which can counter two very different kinds of impediments to democratic participation namely social inequality and the misrecognition of difference. He maintained that inclusive social orders "allow equal opportunity to all. They allow freedom to acquire knowledge, they allow the right to bear arms and take upon themselves the odium of suppressing rebellious force and violence. To deny freedom of opportunity, to deny freedom to acquire knowledge, to deny the right to arms is a most cruel wrong" (Ambedkar,1916 a: 2).

Ambedkar's insistence on the necessity of the politics of redistribution and of recognition by rethinking the politics of alterity helps to redefine the contours of participatory democracy. His concept of social justice primarily revolves around his resistance to both exclusion and (s) exclusion. His resistance to exclusion can be rooted in the struggle against socio-economic and cultural injustice, whereas his resistance to (s)exclusion involves demands for recognition of the social and cultural status of women. Ambedkar points to the uneven caste system on which Hindu society is built as the source of social exclusion. He says, "By the Hindu social system the communities are placed in an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt" (Ambedkar,1917: 2). While debating (s)exclusion he questions the social and cultural positioning of women during and after the Manu era:

That a woman was entitled to Upanayan is clear from the Atharva Veda where a girl is spoken of as being eligible for marriage having finished her Brahmacharya. From the Shrauta Sutras it is clear that women could repeat the Mantras of the Vedas and were taught to read the Vedas. Panini's Ashtaadhyai bears testimony to the fact that women attended Gurukul and studied the various Shakhas of the Veda and became expert in Mimansa. Patanjali's Maha Bhashya shows that women were teachers and taught Vedas to girl students. The stories of women entering into public discussions with men on most abstruse subjects of religion, philosophy and metaphysics are by no means few. The story of public disputation between Janaka and Sulbha, between Yajnavalkya and Gargi, between Yajnavalkya and

Maitrei and between Shankaracharya and Vidyadhari shows that Indian women in pre-Manu's time could rise to the highest pinnacle of learning and education. That women in pre-Manu days were highly respected cannot be disputed. In short in pre-Manu days a woman was free and an equal partner of man. Why did Manu degrade her? (Ambedkar,1916 a: 240)

Ambedkar's resistance to alterity is based on the politics of non-recognition—the state of being rendered invisible through the authoritative, representational, communicative and interpretative practices of one's culture; and disrespect—the state of being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public and cultural representations and/or in day to day interactions. In fact, his resistance to alterity is central to the politics of redistribution of the egalitarian discourse. Ambedkar identifies recognition as a vital human need and underlines the links between recognition and cultural identity. His views on the need for recognition have been corroborated by Charles Taylor who insists:

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm; can be a form of oppression. (Taylor, 1992: 25–26)

Ambedkar's demands for social recognition of the excluded and the dispossessed for the sustenance of humanity in the face of conflict has also been corroborated by David Donnison who has suggested that the demand for respect and "to be treated as the equal of anyone else" is indicative of an emergent new paradigm in social policy (Donnison, 2000: 25) By globalising these issues The Human Development Report 2000 also corroborates Ambedkar's concept of dignity and respect while identifying "a life of respect and value" as a key aim of human development (UNDP, 2000: 2). Similarly, Iris Young places greater emphasis on the interrelationship between the two forms of injustice and politics. She maintains that "we should show how recognition is a means to or an element in, economic and political equality" (Young,1997: 156–159). In a contribution to New Left Review, Nancy Fraser suggests that " properly conceived, struggles for recognition can aid the redistribution of power and wealth and can promote interaction and cooperation across gulfs of difference" (Fraser, 2000: 109). Indeed a successful politics of redistribution in Ambedkar's theoretical paradigm could remove the dispossessed category altogether, as 'the underclass' are a group who are primarily the product of the misdistribution of social structures. An ethics of recognition involves the assertion of agency in the sense of equality of status and respect, which, as stated above, are critical to the recognition of those in the periphery. Diana Coole has observed similar issues in social relations, where discourses of difference have tended to marginalise social underclass. While elaborating the difficulties in applying such discourses to the excluded, including the 'underclass', she asserts that respect for those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy is 'patronizing' (Coole, 1996: 22).

Ambedkar was aware of the imbalances of power, which resulted in the creation of uneven categories. He insisted that it is the powerlessness of the dispossessed, which lies at the heart of their exclusion from the recognition debate and helps to explain it. There is a need to address this powerlessness in order to promote participatory democracy and redress imbalances of power. Ambedkar's assumptions are echoed by David Byrne who, drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, looks to the collective "empowerment of the dispossessed" as part of "a popular democratic politics of solidarity" necessary to overcome social exclusion (Byrne, 1999: 133).

This paper has attempted to chart, both theoretically and empirically, Ambedkar's resistance to alterity and his ethics of recognition, which are inextricably enjoined with the democratic process and serve as both an expression and recognition of the power of those experiencing exclusion. Although the paper's focus has been on the process rather than on the outcomes of the resistance to alterity, the latter, of course, must not be forgotten. The ethics of recognition, which Ambedkar propounded almost eight decades ago finds a compatriot in Axel Honneth who unassumingly insists, "Social progress is based on the normative expectations of individuals, which must be construed as moral claims,

rather than as socio-economic interests" (Honneth, 1995: 7) Ultimately, at issue are not just the promotion of an ethics of recognition, but also the redistribution of power and egalitarian discourse.

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