Toleration Sure Ain’t What it Was

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At its most fundamental, Andrew Sabl’s work is interested in examining a mode of hypocrisy that works towards a politics of toleration – a hypocrisy between citizen’s actions and their belief systems, or, the potentially violent or hateful depths of their ideologies. To do so, Sabl positions himself in dialogue with Pierre Bayle’s *pensées diverses*, wherein Bayle suggests that social behavior is dictated by norms and fear of punishment, and not by a guiding set of principles. This assumption runs through a body of work labeled anti-rationalist and for Sabl finds fuller expression in modern moral psychology’s interest in the causal relationship between actions and beliefs and moral psychology’s supposition that beliefs are best understood as rationalizations of instinctive actions, not as that which is expressed *in* action. When considered within the framework of hypocrisy, this seemingly backward relationship between action and belief is what Sabl labels a “secondary hypocrisy,” though such a framing requires a theory of “false consciousness,” a lying to oneself. Our interest here is instead with “primary hypocrisy” – those actions that are in seeming defiance of one’s beliefs, and the productive potential of such hypocrisies to steer the public away from their belief systems, at least in public practice.

The transposing of early modern debates into the present is an action likely to result in numerous problems, the details of which we will hopefully examine in this course of this discussion. In the case of toleration theory two particular problems stand out. These, to use Sabl’s terminology, are a democracy problem and an equality problem.

Early modern “tolerationists,” including Bayle, understood absolutism to be the most effective governmental system, insofar as it was able to create at least an illusion of pluralism. But the sociotropic trend in democracy, the tendency of citizens (who do not truly exist in such absolutist systems) to act on behalf of their perception of the ‘public good,’ even as it might be reflected in hypocritical public acts, cannot work to eradicate the citizen’s belief systems. In a large enough social landscape, these beliefs, even when muted in practice, shape the public debate rather than being drowned out by it. (The example of a belief that fornicators should be stoned translating into a political alliance with conservative positions on sex education, abortion, gay rights, etc., reveals this *problem*). Further, as this democracy expands beyond the protections of security and survival to advocate for increasingly specific opportunities and equalities, the *equality problem* arises insofar as these new governmental interests no longer allow as blind an eye to the divide between public acts and private beliefs.

The solutions to the *democracy problem*, namely a public sharply divided between strong sectarians, at least those solutions suggested by constitutionalism: the creation of an antidemocratic elite, the diversification of the polity away from a majority, supermajority requirements for policy implementation, and procedural hurdles meant to encourage sober reflection, are all, in the light of Sabl’s focus on hypocrisy, called into question.

One might want to approach the *equality* *problem* by suggesting that we must accept some inequality, or, in other words, by suggesting that sometimes our valuations of diversity incline us towards a diminished push for strict equality. Again, with hypocrisy in mind, Sabl encourages another approach, though here it is different type of hypocrisy – a comparative hypocrisy. This hypocrisy is revealed in the concern that the hijab threatens Western conceptions of gender equality while, as Sabl notes, one could describe a “compulsory sexualization” of French girls – an “affair of the thong.” Therefore, the “hypocrisy perspective” does not provide a way of resolving prejudices with liberty, but instead suggests that we are all likely to, however subtly, harbor such prejudices. Here that idea of false consciousness reappears.

Emphasizing the use of toleration as a political *technology*, Sabl suggests four “institutional innovations” to address the *democracy and equality* problems more directly: 1) a “local option,” whereby a cultural group is given some form of local accommodation, some local authority; 2) “forced disaggregation” – an attempt to remove second-order hypocrisies, to “narrowly-tailor,” our laws and cultural practices to remove ideological suppositions (e.g. reshaping our understanding of American gun violence to reflect the inefficiency of policies targeting gun ownership); 3) the broadening of the political landscape to include more ‘fringe’ parties, thereby providing a political outlet for what could otherwise turn to violence; and 4) the power of the market to guarantee ranges of options and choices that go beyond the regulatory efforts of “sub-cultural” groups.

This use of toleration – that which allows choice beyond just collective agreement – is a fundamental departure from Bayle’s magisterial absolutism. Beyond which, it suggests a limited equality, insofar as the responsibility for reaching equality is left up to myriad social and cultural entities (e.g. the family).

Sabl leaves us with a provocative place to begin today’s discussion. Briefly reframed, a history of ideas or intellectual history presents a variety of diagnostic and interpretive technologies. But such efforts to look to the past for guidance on contemporary political action cannot succeed when they fail to account for the complexities of the past. Sabl is particularly interested in frameworks that have been forgotten, those that failed to triumph. Broadly speaking, what can we learn from these failures while not falling into the trap of what Sabl terms the “Cambridge mode”?

Additionally, there is a hint early in this chapter about the danger of intolerance not showing up, not reading as intolerance, “it will look like good government,” (14) especially within states with cultural supermajorities. The example of French laïcité and its ongoing resistance to highly visible Muslim and even Jewish populations, comes to mind. However, it seems that this danger reaches its apex with the culture of paranoia that defines the contemporary American landscape. This sort of fear is quite different from the fear that Bayle thought would suppress people’s actions; indeed, it transforms the competition between social groups into an anxiety that one social group poses a threat to the very structure of civic society. I wonder if toleration is strong enough to respond to this threat.