CHAPTER 2

Tolerance, Power, and Civilizational Discourses

RECOGNITION AND SUSTAINABLE TOLERANCE

Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the topic of tolerance. Reviewing those “ink blotches” and connecting them to each other and other lines of inquiry point to ways of reconceptualizing tolerance that can establish more worthwhile societal goals. It also reveals what is at stake, and what may be obscured, when people and places are labeled as “tolerant,” or related terms such as “multicultural” or “cosmopolitan.” Some theorists question the desirability of tolerance, while others try to refine definitions of the term and consider how practices that seek peaceful coexistence can be better understood and made more equitably effective.

As stated earlier, *convivencia* means living together, getting along with each other, or coexistence; however, due to the work of Américo Castro and the usage of the term that it launched, the term has become tightly linked to certain kinds of discourses about medieval Muslim Iberia—a vision of al-Andalus as a time of religious communities harmoniously living together. While the term “coexistence” also means the state of living together peacefully in spite of differences, unlike the Spanish *convivencia*, the word “coexistence” does not carry the connotation, or cultural baggage, of a particular interpretation of history. In contrast, the term “tolerance” refers to an attitude of acceptance, typically understood as a virtue, held on a personal level toward other
individuals or groups, whereas the related term “toleration” is used in political science and related fields to refer to a set of practices in the social or political realms. Significantly, the con- and co- prefixes of convivencia and coexistence indicate mutuality, but in the case of the term “tolerance,” one party tolerates (puts up with) another, who is tolerated. The active and passive roles inherent in the idea of tolerance reflect a disparity in the power of the tolerator and the tolerated. Thus, the question that emerges is: how can societies move along the continuum of interactions between diverse groups that ranges from outright violence to underlying hostility to peaceful, respectful coexistence with difference, when the very attitude that is supposed to cultivate such coexistence—tolerance—is built upon disparity? In other words, coexistence refers to a healthy state of tolerance, one without the inequity and lack of mutuality inherent in the term “tolerance” itself. And here the ambiguities of tolerance and toleration begin to emerge.

Tolerance and toleration are such slippery concepts that Rainer Forst has categorized toleration as “a normatively dependent concept,” that is, one that requires further specification in order to be evaluated as a virtue and have defined limits (Forst 2004, 314). Part of what makes the concept of tolerance so difficult to separate from the opposing ideas of peaceful respect and tense aversion, is the number of paradoxes that constitute it. Primary among them is the paradox that limitless tolerance will most likely severely limit tolerance. In other words, if a society freely tolerates the intolerant, intolerance will dominate. This leads to a related paradox: to maintain a peaceful and predominantly tolerant society, there must be intolerance in specific contexts—hopefully carried out with civility. Forst in particular has explored the process of drawing the boundaries between what can and cannot be tolerated.

The traditional understanding of tolerance as permitting that which is considered reprehensible has, in fact, been rejected by many thinkers as intolerable. Slavoj Žižek contends that tolerance, when practiced, is only done so in a limited and superficial manner (Daly and Žižek 122–24; Žižek 674). Wendy Brown argues that tolerating
is tantamount to conditionally allowing that which is viewed as abhorrent and abject, thus marginalizing the tolerated and, especially in colonial and neocolonial contexts, labeling the intolerant as barbaric. The dynamic of one group allowing something of which it disapproves in another group—and thereby establishing a hierarchy, has been labeled by others the “permission” conception of tolerance. The disapproval inherent in permission tolerance is at the center of many critiques regarding the means and even the desirability of promoting tolerance. Forst distills the crux of the issue when he writes that, within a permission understanding, toleration can come to be “a word signifying power, domination and exclusion” (Forst 2012, 3, cited in Verkuyten and Yogeeswaran 85).

Before returning to the issue of power, what can be done with this stalemate regarding tolerance? Levinovitz’s observations help us out of the impasse by shifting the focus to the goals of tolerance: “The ultimate end of tolerance is not actually toleration, but the realization of specific ideals: human dignity, autonomy, reduced pain, diversity, recognition of the Other, etc.” On a day-to-day level, this includes the realization of cohabitation without violence or aggression. The question then becomes: what conceptualization of tolerance can help us coexist with difference, as well as with dignity and well-being? How can we cultivate peaceful coexistence while we avoid erasing difference in the name of a false universality, promoting the privileging of one group as arbiter of what should/should not be tolerated, or heightening a rigid sense of boundaries between in-group and out-group that leads to violent conflict? Can an equitable and socially empowering tolerance be conceptualized and put into practice?

The response that various thinkers have offered is the “respect” conceptualization of toleration. Respect-based tolerance seeks to respect each person’s right to hold a particular view, even when others do not agree with that view. In so doing, this conception tries to counteract asymmetrical power via mutual respect (Forst 2004). Levinovitz warns that we should not reduce tolerance to respect, because they are not equivalents. I agree that tolerance is not the same as respect, but I would argue that respect and recognition are crucial elements
in deeper, more horizontal forms of tolerance, that is, in sustainable tolerance.

In some contexts, conviviality is used to denote a sustainable type of coexistence. The dictionary definition of conviviality is friendliness, sociability, and/or merrymaking, which makes conviviality and convivencia false friends (the linguistic term for a pair of similar-sounding words that may be etymologically related but have different meanings). But starting in the late 20th century, the proximity in meaning and the etymological relationship between the two terms led to a reworking of conviviality in social movements that critique industrial development and the overconsumption of natural resources, and in scholarly work on issues of coexistence and cosmopolitanism. The Austrian philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich first used the term “conviviality” in his influential critique of industrialized societies, *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), to refer to a type of society in which individual autonomy and creativity flourish. However, Paul Gilroy later retooled the term as an alternative to “cosmopolitanism,” which he saw as having been coopted by Western neo-imperialism. In *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture*, Gilroy uses conviviality to describe the lively multiculturalism that he observes in young, urban, post-imperial Britain, a state of being that is at ease with diversity. Here conviviality points to the commonalities between people in spite of difference—what Gilroy describes as the “recognition of mutual worth, dignity, and essential similarity” that “imposes restrictions on how we behave if we wish to act justly” (2004, 4). Subsequently, conviviality has been taken up by social scientists to analyze forms of human interaction across difference that result in a coexistence based on respect and mutuality.6

In Kwame Anthony Appiah’s efforts to rescue the term “cosmopolitanism” in order to formulate an attitude supportive of coexistence to which humans can aspire, he seems to refer to—and reject—a permission-based conception of tolerance, while naming a recognition-based tolerance “cosmopolitanism.” Appiah formulates cosmopolitan communities as those defined by interpersonal relationships built upon
respect and ongoing conversation across boundaries of difference: “cosmopolitanism [. . .] begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association” (2006, xix). When discussing relativism versus objective moral “truths,” Appiah asserts that “there are some values that are, and should be, universal, just as there are lots of values that are, and must be, local. We can’t hope to reach a final consensus on how to rank and order such values. That’s why the model I’ll be returning to is that of conversation and, in particular, conversation between people from different ways of life” (2006, xxi). As he delves further into the fact that “beliefs are subjective,” he states that “even on the Positivist view there is no route from the subjectivity of value judgments to a defense of toleration. Toleration is just another value” (2006, 25). Here, Appiah echoes Brown to some extent in her rejection of tolerance on the grounds that it is the imposition of a set of values. At the same time, Appiah’s call for dialogue based on mutual respect “not because cultures matter in themselves, but because people matter, and culture matters to people” (2008, 88) is parallel to calls for mutual recognition. Whether we call it conviviality, cosmopolitanism, or recognition-based toleration, humans need to aspire to find ways to coexist harmoniously and in a sustainable manner.

Various thinkers have considered the necessity and complexity of recognition in the context of human rights and interpersonal relationships: Hannah Arendt’s “right to have rights,” Martin Buber’s “I-Thou [Ich-Du] relationship,” and Thich Nhat Hanh’s “interbeing,” to name a few. But the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli has questioned whether recognition can actually be achieved. In her study about aboriginal land rights legislation in Australia, Povinelli points out that the legal system employed is based on normative European ideas about aboriginals’ relationship with land. As a result, aboriginals must uphold stereotypically authentic ways of being. Liberal multiculturalism relies on the law, but by the same token the recognition granted is only a legal one. Within the framework of Hegel’s master–
slave narrative, recognition takes place only in the master’s terms. This creates a situation in which aboriginals serve to demonstrate that Australia is a multicultural nation but as part of the process they must “protect the liberal subject from suspecting the (ir)rationality of their intolerance” (109). Analogous to Gayatri Spivak’s famous “Can the subaltern speak?,” Povinelli wonders if the tolerated subaltern can be recognized. As de Boever has pointed out, the pragmatic response has been that this recognition, limited as it may be, is necessary for legal protection and an effective political process (41). Thus, a questioned recognition is our best available option.

One of the last times that I went to visit Tía Conchita in the Alpujarran nursing home where she has lived ever since she began to need 24-hour care, after our initial greetings, my cousin asked Tía Conchita if she recognized me. Tía Conchita, still holding my hand, contemplated my face for a moment and said, with great certainty “eres la cubana [you’re the Cuban woman].” My cousin and I laughed, unsure about whether my Cuban accent or my physical resemblance to my grandmother who had left Órgiva to live in Cuba with my grandfather, Tía Conchita’s uncle, had led her to place me correctly without being able to recall my name, whether my resemblance to my grandmother had made her think—through the logic of senility—that I was my grandmother, or whether the accent had just led her to state the one conclusion that she could draw, which remained a generic one. Had she recognized me, mistaken me for another family member, or not recognized me at all? My cousin and I had also laughed because, having been born and raised in the US—albeit a very Cuban corner of the US, I’m clearly not only/simply “cubana.” Had Tía Conchita never really grasped this even before senility? Had she forgotten the details of my family’s journey? Or had she not even placed me as a relative? There was no way to know, but we still kept holding hands and talking. Whoever she thought I was, she seemed happy to see me. Recognition has its limits and may be built upon a flawed, one-sided logic, but we need to sit with the uncertainty, hold hands if possible, and practice the most self-reflective recognition that we can manage.
RECOGNITION, TOLERATION, AND POWER

Axel Honneth (1995, 2012) and Anna Galeotti have established the importance of respect and acknowledgement as equals, that is, the importance of social recognition. Galeotti explains why “the symbolic meaning of public recognition” is crucial by stating that the symbolic dimension of toleration depends on a conjectural causal chain linking the lack of public visibility of “different” identities with the lack of public respect for their bearers and their consequent incapacity to develop adequate self-esteem. Given the public invisibility of their identity and its social stigmatization, self-esteem is often pursued at the price of rejecting difference, resulting in humiliation and the loss of self-respect. If this causal chain holds, and if public toleration of a certain trait symbolically entails public acceptance and the legitimization of the different identity, then this very gesture of symbolic toleration will signify public respect and consideration for minorities as well as for the majority. This, in turn, should help members of minorities to build up an adequate reserve of self-esteem and self-respect (Galeotti 12).

While recognizing that there have been few studies on “the social-psychological implications of being the object of toleration,” Verkuyten and Yogeeswaran similarly propose that being the object of permission toleration may have negative consequences for the individual and their community (86). They explain that “What is being tolerated transgresses or deviates from what is considered appropriate and normative and this implied deviance and inferiority thereby threatens a valued group membership among the tolerated. Such an identity threat may negatively impact (collective) self-esteem [. . .] and well-being [. . .] among the tolerated” (Verkuyten and Yogeeswaran 86). Additionally, they observe that in permission toleration “the tolerated can feel a decreased sense of control over their own lives [. . .] Such a lack of perceived control may undermine personal and group
efficacy” (Verkuyten and Yogeeswaran 86). Furthermore, “research on identity denial has demonstrated that denying one’s social identity leads to negative emotions and attempts at proving one’s belongingness in the group [. . .]” (Verkuyten and Yogeeswaran 84).

The importance of identity in toleration becomes clear when we acknowledge that the cultural practices involved in tolerance are entwined with the concept of assimilation—whether sought, rejected, or managed via hyphenation—in social contexts with immigrants or with other ethnic, racial, religious, or linguistic minorities. W. E. B. DuBois explored one aspect of this dynamic through the concept of “double consciousness,” which explains the burden of viewing oneself both from one’s own eyes and from the eyes of the dominant white world. This double awareness can lead to the internalization of racist beliefs or to the tactical use of racist rhetoric, which, at least in the short term, upholds the racist belief system. Social psychologists have pointed to the dangers of internalized essentialist beliefs. In the absence of the affirmation of their identities, minorities turn to essentialism to establish belonging (Morton and Postmes 2009; Verkuyten 2003, cited in Verkuyten and Yogeeswaran 82). This essentialism, albeit strategic, can lead to heightened tensions between in-group and out-group and assertions of identity that are neither civil nor tolerant. In contrast, through social recognition, the process of respect-based toleration can take place in a less hierarchical, more mutual fashion and thus one that has fewer negative consequences.

But how mutual can toleration be on an uneven playing field? Who is positioned to tolerate and to define what is, or is not, tolerable? Various scholars have noted that to tolerate one must have power: “one can only speak of toleration where it is practiced voluntarily and is not compelled, for otherwise one would speak of ‘suffering’ or ‘enduring’ certain things which one rejects but against which one is powerless” (Forst 2004, 315).7 Galeotti, rather than referring to “suffering” or “enduring,” notes that without power, instead of toleration, there is “acquiescence” (22). While I agree that power is a central factor in toleration, I find that the use of the terms “suffering,” “enduring,” and to some extent “acquiescing” confound the situation because to tolerate
is precisely to suffer through something of which one disapproves—even if one decides to suffer through it on the basis of respect and recognition. Moreover, it leaves open the question of whether a disadvantaged minority can exercise tolerance, or if only the powerful can bestow the gift of tolerance on others.

If power is understood as only being top-down, as only residing in structural centers of power and always being repressive, then the act of toleration is a gift—understood as an item of value bestowed on another to indebt that other toward oneself and establish one’s superiority. Marcel Mauss explained gift-giving as an act that establishes honor and status via a reciprocal exchange in which the gift creates a social bond built on the obligation to reciprocate. Building on Mauss, but with an emphasis on the role of the social agent over and above the societal structure, Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1991, 2014) viewed gift-giving as an act of taking possession of the receiver that is disguised as generosity. He developed this conception of the gift as concealed oppressive power into his concept of symbolic violence.8 This understanding of the bestowal of gifts is analogous to Brown’s understanding of the act of tolerance: a mechanism through which the powerful establish and maintain power in a concealed fashion. Yet this understanding is based on a static, structured, unidirectional conceptualization of power.

Catriona McKinnon suggests another way to understand the power dynamics inherent in toleration when she states that among the “essential structural features of toleration” are “Power: the tolerator believes herself to have the power to alter or suppress what is tolerated,” and “Non-rejection: the tolerator does not exercise this power” (14). She explains further that these features “relate to the control the tolerator believes herself capable of exercising over what she tolerates” (15). The belief in one’s ability to exercise power, to carry out the steps necessary to exert control over oneself or one’s social environment, is also known as self-efficacy. When recognition and consequently self-efficacy are part of social dynamics, even those on the margins can enact power, albeit in a limited way.

Foucault’s decentralized, mobile conception of power elucidates how power operates in such a space of (recognition-based) toleration:
“Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays. In other words, power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them” (Foucault et al. 2003, 29). Elsewhere, Foucault speaks of “a web of microscopic, capillary” power (2000, 86) to elucidate how power is not centralized and confined to structures, but rather includes a fluid network of multiple, smaller loci of power outside of government and religious institutions. Although oppression is pervasive, so too can resistance be found everywhere (Foucault 1980). Power is not possessed, but is exercised, passing from one person to another. Thus, the subject is both oppressed and exerts power, is both constituted by power and produces knowledge. Based on this conception of power, I contend that community members that are further from the main loci of power can still exert power and still bestow the gift of tolerance on others. This understanding of power allows the symbolic power of toleration to be reciprocal across asymmetrical power relations. It also allows room for power over the self, the power to develop a sense of self and will that are distinct from those imposed by the dominant culture, because when an individual is so marginalized, or unrecognized, that they have no means by which to enact refusal, the situation referred to by Bernard Williams can arise: the individual can still be aware that, if s/he were in a position to enact refusal of a disapproved-of behavior, s/he would intervene and be intolerant (or, inversely, would choose not to do so and tolerate) (19).

Generally, in the scholarly literature, it is acknowledged that toleration is about accepting something disliked in order to attain the reward of greater harmony, but there is emphasis on allowing without interfering for a broad societal gain, not on the rewards received in exchange on the individual level. Although Forst and others stipulate that tolerance by definition must be voluntary, not compelled, (2004, 315), once there is some form of recompense, due to the workings of power, ambiguity arises regarding voluntariness or choice. Brown notes the role of compensation, but considers that it irreparably taints
the toleration process: “As compensation, tolerance anoints the bearer with virtue, with standing for a principled act of permitting one’s principles to be affronted; it provides a gracious way of allowing one’s tastes to be violated. It offers a robe of modest superiority in exchange for yielding” (Brown 2006, 25). While “[m]agnanimity[,] in the case of tolerance, [. . .] disguises power” (Brown 2006, 26), the magnanimous position created by tolerating can also confer power on the more marginalized and contribute overall to a more peaceful state of coexistence. By understanding power as centralized and unidirectional, Brown sees the rewards of toleration as only being enjoyed by those with the highest status in society. I would like to propose that by recognizing other rewards in the forms of opportunities for recognition and quality of life (the overall goal of a peaceful society, but also the desire to live with a high level of recognition-based acceptance), we can better understand the dynamics of toleration, who partakes in them, and the extent of toleration’s positive potential. Even social actors who are marginalized and seen as Other have the power to tolerate and are part of the dynamic of gifting tolerance.

The ideal of tolerance is free of compensation, but rarely, if ever, is the process of toleration that innocent of power. The dynamic of toleration is a gift exchange, but, unlike Mauss’s understanding of gift-giving, it is not ritualistic and structured, but a fluid dynamic in which many have at least a modicum of power. Like gift-giving, the bestowal of tolerance rewards the giver with status. In many contexts, identifying as tolerant and being recognized as tolerant becomes a desired status that is often the main recompense, but there can be others as well. Tolerance as an ideal may be sought without any type of reward, but, in practice, rewards, even if only in the form of an identity as “civilized” (that is, tolerant), motivate tolerance and the willingness with which it is enacted.

**TOLERATION AND “CIVILIZATION”**

The association between tolerance and the concept of “civilization” requires further commentary. The term “civilize” means “To bring (a
person, place, group of people, etc.) to a stage of social development considered to be more advanced, esp. by bringing to conformity with the social norms of a developed society; to enlighten, refine, and educate; to make more cultured and sophisticated” and is etymologically related to “civil,” “citizen,” and “city” (Oxford English Dictionary). Thus, while “civilization” is associated with farming settlements that grow into cities and the centralization of authority, it is also closely tied to ideologies regarding progress and superiority. The term rests on an implicit comparison and a teleology of what is defined as development and, as a result, is inherently hierarchical. Reflecting the concept of progress characteristic of the Enlightenment, the period in which the term first circulated in French and English, civilizational hierarchy opposes cultures understood to be advanced to those seen as primitive or barbaric, without acknowledging the culturally determined definition of advancement. The civilizational hierarchy constructed by communities contributes to the formation of the types of capital that Bourdieu (1991) put forth in Language and Symbolic Power: cultural capital (one’s knowledge, skills, and education), symbolic capital (accumulated prestige or honor), and the distinction (self-presentation of status and distancing from “lower” groups) that both of these types of capital can be used to create. Civilizational hierarchy has been used to justify European colonialism and, in turn, the cultural capital and symbolic capital that link a person to Europe create the Occidental distinction that is part of the discourses and power dynamics of Orientalism, as laid out by Edward Said and further nuanced by others. Until today, civilizational hierarchy intertwined with Orientalism has established an association between the Middle East and North Africa and barbaric violence, on the one hand, and between Europe and civil tolerance, on the other.

Hirschkind reminds us that, as Said established, “the idea of Europe as a civilizational unity was constructed in [a] way that was dependent on a principle of differentiation opposing a Muslim Orient to a Christian Europe” (2014, 229). In the process of the construction of these civilizational units, Christianity, tolerance, Europe, and civilizational superiority became intertwined. For this reason, Brown
asserts that “tolerance has become a discursive token of Western legitimacy in international affairs [. . .] the identification of liberal democracies with tolerance and of nonliberal regimes with fundamentalism discursively articulates the global moral superiority of the West and legitimates Western violence toward the non-West” (37). This “exclusive identification of the West with tolerance, and of tolerance with civilization,” not only gives the West the power to determine what is intolerable (37), but results in “Islam, in that same discourse,” being “relentlessly identified with intolerance” (Brown and Forst, 19).

Hirschkind goes on to explain how even ideologies regarding European identity that apparently eschew religion point to values, including secularism and tolerance, that are deemed to be rooted in Christianity. In the current socio-political climate, concerns regarding how to maintain the identification between Europe and Christianity in the face of Muslim immigration, as well as conversions to Islam, have taken on renewed force:

The demand to include a reference to Europe’s Christian character within the 2003 Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, a position strongly championed by [then president of Spain] Aznar, is one symptom of this project, though it is also evident in claims that Europe’s secular traditions are an extension of its own forms of Christianity. Thus, for [French intellectual] Marcel Gauchet (1999), it is Christianity alone among religious traditions that has the theological resources to achieve its own self-overcoming and thus set in motion the processes that lead to secular modernity and the autonomous subject of modern democratic political life. Accounts of this sort introduce religion into the conceptual vocabulary of modern political life in a way that simultaneously naturalizes one particular religious tradition (Christianity) and secures the civilizational boundaries of modern Europe (Hirschkind 2014, 229).

In this identity narrative of European secular modernity, one of the cornerstones of which is tolerance, non-Christians are either not tolerated at all or considered a threat. Thus, the limits of the toleration process in Europe (understood as essentially and preferably Christian)
are found in the inclusion of non-Christians. On the one hand, as Hirschkind suggests, this conception of Europe belies Spain’s long history of entanglement with the Muslim world. On the other hand, the toleration dynamic in Órgiva brings to the fore and further complicates this contradiction between Europe as tolerant and as essentially or exclusively Christian.

Invocations of medieval Iberia as a space of carefree *convivencia* and especially the idea of a cross-confessional tolerance under Muslim rule destabilizes the conception of a modern Europe whose secularism or Christianity is the source of its tolerance. But drawing on the myth of idyllic interfaith harmony without digging deeper maintains a shallow and ultimately harmful (in that it entails marginalization) conception of tolerance. Both models, that of Muslim-led *convivencia* or that of European civility (whether Christian, secular, or pseudo-secular), are built upon the belief that to be tolerant is the hallmark of an advanced civilization (whether al-Andalus or contemporary Europe is taken as the setpoint for civilization). This overarching civilizational framework and the place of tolerance as a value within it is part of the broader context within which residents of Órgiva interact. Thus, the residents of the town are aware that intolerance is not tolerated. The issue that is up for grabs is where and how the limit between tolerant and intolerant is established.

In what follows, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine how civilizational hierarchies, the *convivencia* imaginary, tolerance practices, and conceptions of coexistence arise in written and televisual representations of Órgiva and in individual oral narratives about it. Overall, the televisual narratives invoke the cross-confessional interaction associated with *convivencia* and reference cosmopolitanism, while simultaneously eliding certain groups or tensions. In contrast, most of the written and oral narratives demonstrate that the residents of the town view their cohabitation as one characterized by separate realms, the negotiation of boundaries, and ambivalence, yet also reciprocal benefits.