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07 November 2017

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Wilson, Helen F. (2014) 'The possibilities of tolerance : intercultural dialogue in a multicultural Europe.', *Environment and planning D : society and space.*, 32 (5). pp. 852-868.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1068/d13063p>

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The possibilities of tolerance: intercultural dialogue in a multicultural Europe

Helen F Wilson

Geography, School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester, Arthur Lewis Building, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, England; e-mail: Helen.f.wilson@manchester.ac.uk

Received 28 June 2013; in revised form 4 February 2014; published online 10 September 2014

Abstract. Tolerance is everywhere. The Council of Europe endeavours to build it, schools are required to teach it, and neighbours are asked to extend it. It features in citizenship ceremonies, city-marketing campaigns, and religious texts and is attached to a variety of different objects, people, and behaviours. Yet despite its ubiquitous circulation as a moral good, critiques of tolerance as a way of relating have called for its rejection in favour of alternative projects such as respect and equality. In this paper I contextualise recent critiques and ask what possibilities remain for a politics of tolerance in multicultural Europe. In so doing, I argue that critiques are insufficiently attuned to the different contexts in which tolerance becomes productive and offer a starting point for further empirical research on its embodied practice. Using an example of dialogue, I argue that tolerance can be intrinsic to the development of alternative relations when positioned as part of an ongoing struggle to multiply ways of thinking and acting. I finish by reflecting on the relationship between tolerance, agonism, and dialogue, to outline a more pragmatic politics of difference, arguing that it is not enough to call for alternative projects without attending to the difficult and incremental learning that such projects demand.

Keywords: tolerance, multiculturalism, conflict, dialogue, Europe, diversity

1 Introduction

In 2012, during a workshop on the future of multicultural societies in Europe, a question was raised about the role of tolerance (Garner and Kavak, 2012). The response was clear and well received: tolerance has no place in a contemporary politics of multiculturalism. Following a firm reminder of its entanglement with disdain, contempt, and hierarchical conceptions of belonging, the panel put respect, equality, and justice forward as its clear and necessary alternatives.

Such demands for alternative projects are, of course, nothing new (Brown, 2006; Schirmer et al, 2012). Recent years have seen a substantial volume of work critique, and in some cases even denounce, tolerance as a desirable way of responding to difference. Yet, whilst the critiques are well founded, it is worthwhile pausing to ask how societies can achieve such alternatives in the absence of tolerance. How, for instance, does a society that is characterised by ethnic conflict move to respect? How do societies divided by fear move to acceptance? In such an outright rejection of tolerance, there is, as I will argue, a lack of account given to the difficult process that is needed to get to a point where such projects might be possible. This is not to say that we should overlook the negative undercurrents of tolerance or the relations of asymmetry that it might promote, nor is it to shy away from the more challenging projects of respect or equality that were called for by the panel. Instead, it is to recognise that tolerance can play a significant role in the realisation of such projects when it is positioned as part of a much wider telos of ethico-political practice—rather than as a political end. Such a positioning would recognise the sometimes difficult realities of lived multicultural

more fully—the pragmatics of everyday life and encounter and the varied contexts in which difference comes to matter. It would also recognise the spatiotemporalities of tolerance as a practice and process rather than as an abstracted concept and value, which, as I will suggest, is crucial to qualifying some of the recent critiques of its politics.

Through a critical interrogation of tolerance as both a practice and a politics, this paper contributes to recent debates on the social sustainability of contemporary Europe (Amin, 2012), alongside work concerned with the development of intercultural competencies and the facilitation of behaviour change. Reflecting on work with a nonprofit leadership training organisation concerned with dialogue and conflict transformation, it demonstrates how tolerance can be valuable to ongoing efforts to multiply ways of thinking, acting, and belonging. Such a renewed engagement with tolerance is important, for despite claims that tolerance is diminishing – or in some cases, *should be* diminished—it is nonetheless ubiquitous. Schools are required to teach it and neighbours are asked to extend it (Jones, 2010). It features in citizenship ceremonies, diversity management programmes, religious texts, and media campaigns and is attached to a variety of debates concerning social behaviour, sexuality, ethnicity, race, religion, and nationality (Nussbaum, 2012; Wemyss, 2006). Zero-tolerance policies and zones designate its public limits (Merrifield, 2000), whilst it is presented as a counter to prejudice and an antidote to civil unrest. It is a vital characteristic of the creative city and its ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2005) and is considered central to the growth of economic development (Rutten and Gelissen, 2010). It is thus linked to knowledge and understanding and features as a key measurement in multiple liveability indexes (Morris and Hill, 2011), with tolerant cities described as those with low levels of hate crime, high religious and racial diversity, and with far-reaching antidiscrimination laws.

In contemporary societies, tolerance thus works across many sites for a variety of purposes, and it is vital to recognise just how divergently it is conceptualised. It is positioned within public policy as a national good and a key component of human dignity, whilst simultaneously circulating as both a political and a moral discourse (Brown, 2006). It is regarded as a virtue, a moral, a practice, a life skill, a tool, a responsibility, a relation, and a value and is considered to be both an outcome *and* a conditioning factor of social relations and encounter. Indeed, it can operate as many of these things simultaneously. These multiple understandings are testimony to the difficulty of providing a coherent or universal definition of tolerance across different institutions, cultures, religions, nations, individuals, groups, and spaces, whilst further emphasising the need for a more careful and nuanced account of its contextual politics, practice, and translation. In response, I develop a critical and conceptual interrogation of the different ways in which tolerance works, to outline the possibilities that tolerance might hold for a more pragmatic, yet progressive, politics of difference.

A critical interrogation of the possibilities of tolerance is made more valuable given the recent concerns about a European ‘backlash’ against multiculturalism, which have refocused attention on questions of coexistence and belonging and have further complicated debates concerning the place of tolerance within contemporary Europe (Lentin and Titley, 2012; Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010). The idea that multiculturalism has ‘failed’ has acquired potency in the aftermath of events such as the Norway massacre in 2011 (Bachmann et al, 2012; Eide, 2012), the political assassinations of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands (Van der Veer, 2006), and the publication of the Muhammad cartoons by

the Danish *Jyllands-Posten*⁽¹⁾ (Todorov, 2010)—all of which have been variously presented as cases for thinking through interpretations of (in)tolerance. Whilst tolerance is regularly held to be a distinctly European value, for some the last decade has been characterised by disturbing trends of *intolerance* (Hervik, 2012; Kundnani, 2007; Nussbaum, 2012), including the rise of assimilationist policies (Alexander, 2013), right-wing populisms (Wodak et al, 2013), and political Manichaeisms (Todorov, 2010). Yet, at the same time, the failure of multicultural politics has also been blamed on ‘*excessive tolerance*’ (Kundnani, 2012, my emphasis), which has been accused of weakening collective identity by permitting beliefs and practices counter to national values. Such accusations of a degeneration into cultural relativism and the “toleration of reprehensible cultural and religious practices and minority self-segregation” are especially apparent in the UK and have laid the grounds for a new emphasis on integration and cohesion and a redrawing of the national limits of tolerance (Nagel and Hopkins, 2010, page 5). This is not, however, confined to British politics. In the Netherlands it has been argued that the minaret ban is a vote *for* tolerance in a “post-multicultural Dutch discourse” (Lentin and Titley, 2012, page 131), whilst in France the principle of nondifferentiation or *laïcité* has been “vigilantly reasserted” (Simon and Sala Pala, 2010, page 94) as a means of restricting the public expression of religious belief—also in the name of tolerance (Kastoryano and Escafré-Dublet, 2012). Taken together, these differing responses to controversies and changing demographics might reflect a crisis of European pluralism, which has emerged out of conflicts not only between “liberal secularism and accommodations of religious sensitivity” but between different understandings of liberal values, including tolerance (Lægaard, 2009; Lindekilde et al, 2009, page 298).

Whilst this paper is concerned with the place of tolerance in multicultural futures and dialogue, it necessarily begins by examining the academic scrutiny that tolerance has attracted as it has grown in political significance. Section 2 thus outlines the debates that have laid the grounds for the rejection of tolerance as a value, discourse, and politics, to locate and contextualise current critiques. In so doing, it highlights what is at stake in prevalent critiques—namely how tolerance has been legislated, promoted, and used as a discourse of power within Western societies. As I will argue, whilst these critiques are valuable, they need to be disentangled from other sites and practices of tolerance. The paper joins recent work that has sought to offer an alternative account of its ethical and political value (Gill et al, 2012) to examine the conditions under which tolerance can *lead* to alternative projects. Section 3 will thus present the example of a leadership training organisation that specialises in the facilitation of dialogue across difference in order to think through the value of tolerance when used as part of a much wider telos of ethico-political practice. The discussion is linked to the steps taken by the Council of Europe to position intercultural dialogue and conflict prevention as one of its main axes and as a means to prevent linguistic, ethnic, religious, and cultural divides (CoE, 2008). It acts as a starting point for future empirical work and concludes by reflecting on the relationship between tolerance, dialogue, and forms of agonism in order to identify the basis for a more pragmatic politics of difference.

⁽¹⁾In 2005 the newspaper published twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad as part of a commentary on censorship and Islam. The cartoons included images that made links between Islam and terrorism, the repression of women, and the anticipation of violent protest in response to the circulation of the Prophet Muhammad’s image. Whilst initially triggering a national crisis concerning freedom of expression, it soon escalated into an international crisis (Lægaard, 2007). For Žižek (2008a, page 89), this example confronts us with the “antimony of tolerant reason”, for whilst the violent response from Muslim protestors demonstrated a lack of understanding for Western principles of press freedom, the publication of the cartoons showed a similar lack of understanding and respect for Islam.

2 Critiquing the politics of tolerance

Debates have long focused upon the political projects of tolerance, its religious foundations, and its liberal lineage through Rawls, Locke, and Mill (Habermas, 2003; Johnson, 2007; Kymlicka, 2011), with philosophical debates scrutinising its moral worth and virtuous character as an interpersonal ethic (Galeotti, 2002). Whilst this paper stems from a concern with the politics and geographies of tolerance in the context of multicultural and multiethnic belongings—both as a strategy for managing diversity and as a necessity for developing interactions across it—it is necessarily attentive to the breadth of such debates, which have largely been responsible for its circulation as an unquestionable common good. The growing political significance of tolerance reflects a wider shift to a concern with shared belongings and common values, as a way of both managing diversity and further outlining the limits of multiculturalism and national belonging (Kundnani, 2007, page 122; 2012). In the UK, for example, tolerance is considered to be a core value of ‘Britishness’, reflecting a wider turn to common values within political discourse and sparking debates concerning their so-called ‘common’ or universal quality and the place of the state in the legislation of them (see also Bialasiewicz et al, 2005). Indeed, it is only through marking out the intolerable that we can have a conception of what is to be tolerated in the first place. Thus, whilst tolerance is mobilised as an intersubjective quality to secure solidarity, the conditional nature of tolerance is often premised upon its necessary reconciliation with a common sense of purpose, which is often national in character.

As Brown (2006, page 25) argues, whilst on the surface tolerance would seem to promote relations of mutuality, it is concurrently underwritten by a series of conditions that need to be addressed. Tolerance is an internally “inharmonious term” which combines “goodness, capaciousness, and conciliation with discomfort, judgement and aversion”. It is positioned as a strategy for coping with something that one would rather not, requesting a withholding of force from its subject because one should not, for a variety of reasons, seek to intervene. The very condition of tolerance thus necessarily emerges from a set of circumstances that elicit disapproval, dislike, or disdain, marking the subject of tolerance to be undesirable, marginal, or even liminal (page 28; Galeotti, 2002). It is worth quoting Brown (2006, page 88) at length here:

“Tolerance as a social ideal figures a citizenry necessarily leashed against the pull of its own instincts; it embodies a fear of citizen sentiments and energies, which it implicitly casts as inherently xenophobic, racist, or otherwise socially hostile and in need of restraint. In its bid to keep us from acting out our dislikes and diffidence, the ubiquitous call for tolerance today casts ... difference rather than sameness [as] the source and site of our enmity.”

As Scanlon (2003) argues, if tolerance is about permitting and accepting practices despite disapproval of them, or is a mask that works to control an otherwise natural and perhaps violent response to difference, as Brown (2006) suggests, then tolerance is necessarily removed from any qualities of indifference or neutrality. This contradicts writers such as Dussel, who suggest that tolerance might “assume a certain indifference before the other”, making it a disposition, or relation of passivity in which “one absolves oneself of the other’s fate” (2004, page 329). Such an idea of passivity or indifference is one that is contested quite forcefully by Gill et al (2012), who argue that tolerance is capable of “nurturing simultaneous recognition and disagreement” (page 509). Whilst tolerance can certainly lead to indifference over time, it is undeniably reactive in that it responds to a negative judgment (Fisher, 1997; Fletcher, 1996; Habermas, 2003). Furthermore, if tolerance is presupposed to counteract “an impulse to intervene” in the lives of others through no more than a withholding of force (Brown, 2006, page 7), it can also be said to maintain the initial (negative) relation—to fix its subjects

at a threshold in a gesture that distances. Such maintenance of negativity or suspension of ‘condemnation’ (Jenkins, 2002) can render tolerance inherently unstable (Fletcher, 1996) and does not require that the reasons behind the initial disapproval are addressed (Dussel, 2004). As a consequence, negative feeling might remain only temporarily out of view.

Taken together, these arguments make it reasonable to conclude that living together under the conditions of tolerance does not encourage, or indeed allow, alternative relations of recognition, respect, equality, justice, or acceptance to emerge. It is thus necessary to attend to these critiques in order to properly contextualise them. I will return to the idea of transformation in section 3, but for now, I want to address one of the more substantial and provocative charges against tolerance, which has firmly linked it to processes of depoliticisation and the regulation of aversion (Brown, 2006).

2.1 Depoliticisation

For Derrida, when considering the relationship between tolerance and globalisation, particularly post-9/11, tolerance might best be described as a “condescending concession” (2003, page 127), used by those in a position of power as a supplementary mark of sovereignty. It is thus “first and foremost a form of charity” (page 127), for whilst permitting the subject or object to remain as it is, there is the persistent reminder that the subject or object is not necessarily deserving of the right to remain. Tolerance can therefore be withdrawn at any given point, positioning the other within particular boundaries or constraints, to perform a “symbolic violence in which a mode of domination is presented as a form of egalitarianism” (page 87). Who these subjects are, and how they are created as such through discourses of tolerance, is clearly of political importance, and therefore it is paramount to ask: who outlines its conditions?

The limited and conditional nature of the so-called generosity that tolerance affords can be described as being ‘tempered’ by a concern for maintaining one’s own well-being, which would predict the withdrawal of tolerance to be the point at which the benefits of nonintervention for the tolerator are compromised, or the tolerator is required to ‘adjust their ways’ (Jenkins, 2002). Its limits are thus prone to fluctuate according to various factors or perceptions of threat, which is what makes it an inherently *unstable* relation. Tolerance of immigration, for example, may be dependent upon job availability, the wealth of the welfare system, or the availability of “societal hope” and one’s sense of available possibilities (Hage, 2003, page 20). This has significant ramifications at a time of global economic insecurity—and particularly so in Europe, where economic and social insecurities have had catastrophic effects on the governance of diversity. Such ‘conceit’ of the continuity of the dominant term and the fluctuation of its limits thus quite clearly undermines and even contradicts the projects of unity amidst difference, to which tolerance is so often considered key.

When attending to prevalent critiques, it is important to note that distinctions have been made between individual tolerance and political tolerance (Jones, 2010), although the differences are regularly blurred. Whilst individual tolerance is considered to be more closely related to virtue (on the assumption that it is less likely to be coerced) and requires the personal negotiation of those things that one finds disagreeable, political tolerance requires a set of reasons and a coherent understanding of what or who should or should not be tolerated. Certainly, as Kundnani (2007, page 137) argues, any value that is put forward as part of a project of consensus or duty of citizenship would be somewhat meaningless unless it was appropriately codified by institutions and further disseminated across a range of venues – schools, gurudwaras, court rooms, and so on—to provide “formal mechanisms for their elaboration in particular contexts and cases”. Thus, whilst tolerance is not written in law, it functions as a sociopolitical tool which is often pedagogically achieved (Brown, 2006, page 183). Tolerance therefore functions through a variety of knowledges and the

employment of tactics by political and formerly nonpolitical institutions (page 79). Therefore, it would appear to operate from, and further disseminate through, ever more invisible and nonaccountable social powers (page 79). This might be through ‘values education’ programmes in England, where tolerance is taught as a core value alongside others such as honesty, humility, and responsibility (Nesbitt and Henderson, 2003), or through learning enterprises such as the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles (Brown, 2006, pages 107–148).

The political use of tolerance in most instances thus relies upon a taken-for-granted theoretical value of equality and “cultural valence” and is further “presumed to be sufficiently secure so as to provide the moral equivalent of a stable starting point for political reflection”, as McClure argues (1990, page 362). It is this taken-for-granted value of equality that has not only enabled the easy and ubiquitous uptake of tolerance across a spectrum of political projects and civic institutions but further concealed some of its negative undercurrents and political agendas. As Brown (2006) argues, the call for tolerance can have the effect of analytically disappearing complex and political dimensions of conflicts and inequality. In Britain, for instance, tolerance was claimed to be the value that was absent during the 2001 disturbances in the northern mill towns of Bradford, Burnley, and Oldham between Asian youths, white youths, and the police. In presenting tolerance to be the tool that was needed to enable communities to live together despite their differences, the segregations and civil unrest—which were described as Britain’s worst riots since the 1980s—were framed as matters of individual or group prejudice. This downplayed the social and economic contexts of the tensions (Burnett, 2004)—the economic disparities, uneven distributions of power, local politics, and years of marginalisation (Amin, 2002). Such a deployment of tolerance in these instances thus marks a “de-emphasis of material deprivation and socio-economic marginalisation ... in favour of concentrating on inter-community relationships” (McGhee, 2003, page 376).

This framing of conflict sees the devolution of *responsibility* to communities and the individual rather than the government, in such a way as to quieten the demand—and possibility—for political solutions (Mitchell, 2004). As Burnett (2004, page 15) contends, “rather than the state having an obligation to cater for all of its citizens, that obligation is now contingent upon the reworking and realignment of individual identities and value systems”. Thus, the promotion of tolerance in these instances reduces political action to “no more than sensitivity training” (Brown, 2006, page 16). Such a removal of political context enables the easy demarcation of subjects, groups, and identities between good or bad—tolerable or intolerable, tolerant or intolerant—and in this way becomes a tool of governance (Todorov, 2010). It is thus no coincidence that there has been a rise in political references to ‘barbarism’ as a way of distinguishing the rational tolerant from the irrational intolerant (Todorov, 2010). Indeed, in this respect some of Brown’s (2006) exegesis shares Mouffe’s (2005, page 75) concerns with the ‘moralisation’ of politics, and illuminates a political vocabulary that is constructive of a ‘we–they’ opposition according to moral categories of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’. As Mouffe suggests, whilst such a ‘moralisation’ of politics does not necessarily mean the replacement of politics by morality as such, it has considerable consequences for the antagonistic potential of society, for “when opponents are defined not in political but in moral terms, they cannot be envisaged as an ‘adversary’ but only as an ‘enemy’” (2005, page 75).

In examining the ‘depoliticising tendencies’ of tolerance, it becomes possible to see how an appeal to tolerance is bound up with the emotive and affective regulation of aversion. We might reflect, for example, on how forms of abjection are described as “directions against the scope of the tolerable” (Kristeva, 1984, page 1), or how the mobilisation of shame (Povinelli, 1998) and the generation of anxieties or fear (Hage, 2003) work to redraw national limits of tolerance and in so doing, regulate hostility. In Europe the call for a rebalancing of tolerance

has emerged in the context of growing anxieties about the presence of Muslims and has thus become most readily associated with issues such as “veiling, extremism and separatism” (Kundnani, 2012, page 158), which have been presented as evidence of the “irresolvable conflict between Islamic and liberal values” (page 159). In Povinelli’s provocative description of anxieties about cultural diversity and the limits of tolerance, she argues that the construction of national limits is not achieved by acknowledging the universal principles that minority cultural practices are thought to violate, but is instead brought about through the evocation of supposedly more affective relations of aversion. These relations are cohered through repeated accounts of “savagery and barbarism, of ignorance and superstition” (1998, page 577), whilst emphasising the national shame that would amount if particular cultural practices—such as polygamy—were to be allowed to take place within the nation’s border. The evocation of aversion, rather than the acknowledgement of violated principles, is perhaps testimony, she claims, to the “difficulty of discursively grounding moral claim[s] within a multicultural discourse”, arguing that liberal democratic societies might “stumble, lose their breath, panic, even if ever so slightly, when asked to say why, on what grounds, according to whom, a practice is a moral, national limit of tolerance” (page 578).

Before moving to outline the possibilities of tolerance, it is worth recapitulating the points made about depoliticisation, of which there are two main arguments. The first, that the value of tolerance can be depoliticised and the second, that tolerance can function as an important part of depoliticising processes. When bringing these points together with the wider critiques covered in the first half of this paper, it can be seen that they revolve around four key concerns. First, the instability of tolerance as a politics; second its negative undercurrent as a value associated with disapproval; third, its inbuilt hierarchies of power; and finally, its function as a depoliticising tool of governance. Taken together, these narratives document its unsuitability to projects of equality and justice and at times highlight how a politics of tolerance might actively work against them. In drawing them together, however, I want to emphasise that much of these critiques concern the abstract theorisation of tolerance or its use within national or international politics, often by those in positions of power. Therefore, these critiques should not be taken out of context, for they do not deal with the value of tolerance as a pragmatic and embodied way of relating to others in more mundane contexts. There are two further points worth noting here. First is the tendency to talk about tolerance as a political end point or static value—as something that fixes difference and as something that is to be worked towards but never beyond. If tolerance can fail and turn into hatred, we should ask whether it can succeed and move on to something else. In short, we should ask what tolerance can *produce*. Second is the relative inattention given to the taking place of tolerance and to its multiple temporalities. As I will argue in the next section, these two points can become the basis for thinking through the possibilities of tolerance in the context of multicultural Europe.

3 The possibilities of tolerance

It would be difficult to overlook the violence that tolerance might prevent in instances where reconciliation or understanding is impossible. Yet rather than focus on extreme circumstances, this section considers a more prosaic example that evidences how tolerance can be central to intercultural dialogue and incremental transformation. This focus on the oft-neglected possibilities of tolerance presents both an alternative and a challenge to the metanarratives that have typically characterised much of the debate concerning its value. Whilst recent attention to the geographies of tolerance has begun to highlight the political possibilities of tolerance as a value (Gill et al, 2012), there is still much more to be said about its taking place (Wilson, 2011). For example, Gill et al (2012) demonstrate how tolerance as a pragmatic practice can provide “a dual space of recognition and disagreement” (page 511) and thus the “necessary condition for a functioning politics” (page 510). Responding to recent theorisations of the

postpolitical and its threat to foreclose and manage the parameters of political debate (Darling, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2011; Žižek, 2008b), their account challenges some of the connections made between tolerance and depoliticisation in circumstances dealing with the more “applied dilemmas of the everyday” (Gill et al, 2012, page 516). In the remainder of this paper I want to take some of these debates further, to consider how tolerance might do more than enable people to ‘rub along’ or maintain “antagonistic relations” (Gill et al, 2012). In other words, I want to examine how tolerance might *transform* relations to challenge established codes of belonging and ethico-political judgment.

3.1 Tolerance and intercultural dialogue

Following the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008, as declared by the European Union, and the publication of the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue by the Council of Europe (CoE, 2008), ‘intercultural dialogue’ is increasingly presented as the preferred response to the challenges of living with difference and the democratic management of Europe’s cultural identity.⁽²⁾ According to the CoE (2008, page 17), intercultural dialogue might be broadly understood as

“an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others.”

As Ganesh and Holmes (2011, page 81) argue, whilst the exchange of views outlined does not necessarily require consensus, the reference to mutual understanding and respect would appear to locate intercultural dialogue “beyond mere tolerance of the Other”. Yet given that intercultural dialogue is linked to the Council of Europe’s agenda for conflict management, it might be argued that dialogue is most important precisely in those circumstances where mutual understanding and respect do not already exist. There is, however, no indication as to how dialogue might be achieved *without* this basis. Whilst the White Paper acknowledges that dialogue can only ever be achieved under certain conditions and recognises the need for clearly defined and negotiated objectives (see also CLRA, 2007), its conceptualisation is, for the most part, ambiguous (Näss, 2010). It is not forthcoming, for example, in outlining how the conditions for dialogue might be established or whose objectives might be negotiated, and this point takes on greater significance when we consider how the concept of dialogue is differently understood in cross-cultural contexts. Thus, these calls for dialogue would seem to assume a ‘discursive sphere of coherence’ that does not necessarily exist (Carbaugh, 2013).

For the purpose of this paper, I do not want to focus on discussions concerning cross-cultural understandings of dialogue. Instead, I want to take forward the general consensus that the ‘usefulness’ of dialogue in this European context is based on the presumed existence of “some sort of social problem or conflict” (Ganesh and Holmes, 2011, page 84) and refers to an ongoing process that requires the “freedom and ability to express oneself” (CoE, 2008, page 17). Religious dialogue, for example, is considered key in tackling the problems that arise from conflicting moralities and divergent interpretations of public expression (CLRA, 2007). Local authorities are charged with the task of identifying “opportune moments” for the development of dialogue and aiming for a “steady progression from ignorance to knowledge, from knowledge to understanding and from understanding to confidence” (page 224) in instances where difference has become a problem. The key question, however, is how the progression from ignorance to knowledge might take place, and it is here that I think the possibilities of tolerance can be realised.

⁽²⁾It is worth noting that in the context of dialogue, *interculturalism* rather than *multiculturalism* is used so as to place emphasis on communication, connection, and interrelations between different cultures, although whether this is the case in practice has been questioned (Meer and Modood, 2012).

To address this idea of progression, I want to begin with the central position given to the production of knowledge. As Ettliger (2012) argues, difference becomes a problem when we lack knowledge of others, which can both prohibit and deter communication. Strategic efforts to embed practices of learning into everyday routines are thus central to creating “spaces of negotiation” (page 222; Wilson, 2013a; 2014). It has long been held that in order to construct coalitions or alliances across difference, individuals must first recognise the finitude of their own culture to appreciate other human possibilities (Connolly, 2005a; Young, 2000). Indeed, as Butler argues, “ethical generation is bound up with the operation of critique. And critique finds that it cannot go forward without a consideration of how the deliberating subject might actually live or appropriate a set of norms” (2005, page 8), which is especially pressing in instances where conflicting moralities are at stake. For Gressgård (2010), such a reflection is vital if we are “not to forget the forgotten” (page 137) within the discursive frameworks of multiculturalism, which demands that “the dominant cultural forms be aware of their finitude and historicity [and] that they recognise that theirs is not the only way of proceeding”. Having asked how such ethical reflection can become possible in the first place, I suggest that it is useful to focus upon the condition of suspension.

As Butler (2005, page 46, my emphasis) has argued, under certain conditions of suspension, ethical reflections can become more likely. It is worth quoting her at length here:

“Consider that one way we become responsible and self-knowing is facilitated by a kind of reflection that takes place when *judgements are suspended*. Condemnation, denunciation, and excoriation work as quick ways to posit an ontological difference between judge and judged, even to purge oneself of another. Condemnation becomes the way in which we establish the other as nonrecognisable or jettison some aspect of ourselves that we lodge in the other, whom we then condemn. In this sense, condemnation can work against self-knowledge, inasmuch as it moralises a self by disavowing commonality with the judged. Although self-knowledge is surely limited, that is not a reason to turn against it as a project.”

Condemnation, denunciation, and excoriation foreclose the possibility for recognition by hindering self-knowing and responsibility. Projects of self-knowing thus *demand* suspension, and suspension is precisely what tolerance is about. Given that intercultural competencies can be achieved only through the acquisition of knowledge, asking how the suspension of stereotypical perceptions of others might be achieved in a climate of suspicion—or how that steady progression from ignorance to knowledge might be accomplished—is critical, particularly when such a climate has been exploited for political ends. Given that much of the Council of Europe’s focus on intercultural dialogue concerns the address of social exclusion through the reduction of prejudice, I want to now turn to an example of dialogue in action to think through the role of tolerance.

3.2 Tolerance, dialogue, and conflict transformation

Since 2009, I have worked with a nonprofit international leadership-training organisation that specialises in the facilitation of dialogue across difference. This work has fed into two linked projects, the first of which was focused on ordinary spaces of tolerance (see also Wilson, 2011; 2013a; 2013b), and the second of which is focused on programmes of community intervention. With an international network including branches across North America, the UK, and Europe, the organisation aims to tackle prejudice and conflict through workshop events tailored to meet the requirements of different groups, communities, and organisations. This has included work on Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and community work in the aftermath of riot events, as well as more general workshops on racism, homophobia, and cultural diversity, to name just a few.⁽³⁾

⁽³⁾Since 2009, I have participated in over twenty workshop days in the UK and US. As a participant,

Workshops aimed at conflict transformation are reliant upon the careful facilitation of suspension in order to provide pedagogic spaces where people with conflicting views and perspectives are given equal attention and space for expression and thus provide a useful arena for examining the value of tolerance. At the beginning of each of the workshops is a call for a commitment to tolerance as a key requirement of participation. As with any call for tolerance, this comes with conditions. Participants are required to tolerate the views and perspectives of other participants along with their ‘mistakes’, which are described as “anything that may cause offense as the result of misinformation or ignorance”. This precondition—that offence, feelings of isolation, or psychological disturbance must not be caused by intent or malice, but should rather be the unintended effects of participation—mirrors guidelines surrounding the definition of hate speech in many democracies, whilst also acknowledging the ‘agony’ that comes with allowing elements of yourself to be questioned by others (Connolly, 2005a). In this case, the very question of ‘what counts as intolerable provocation’ becomes part of the dialogical discussion.

Unlike some of the examples considered in section 2, tolerance is considered acceptable only as long as it is working towards something else, which was highlighted rather poignantly when, in one workshop, a participant added her own additional requirement—that she was willing to tolerate, only if others were ‘willing to learn’ (2009; see also Wilson, 2013a). In this way, she demanded a mutual respect for the situation as one of self-cultivation and simultaneous negotiation and as one where people were open to both the risks and the productive possibilities of diversity. The recognition of the moral or obligatory reasons for restraint or ‘suspension’ provides a space within which one can be ethically addressed by another and within which oppressive, offensive, or ignorant comments can be confronted and opposing views heard. Therefore, workshop spaces are sites where entrenched beliefs are put at risk and where a move towards threatening or external ideas is supported in order to build bridges across difference (Williams, 2008). This has included, for example, dialogue between individuals with opposing views on religion and homosexuality, as well as discussion on the role of religion in public life, immigrant rights, and gender equality. All of these are frequently cited as controversial issues in plural societies (Habermas, 2003), and all of them took place without intervention and with space for each viewpoint to be heard in full. Tolerance thus creates a space for exchange—understood as the fundamental basis for dialogue—in which people with apparently incompatible views have the opportunity to hear from the alternative position. For some, these workshops were the first time that they had heard the ‘other’ speak.

The workshops are certainly not about consensus but provide a working example of agonism or agonistic respect (Connolly, 2005a)—of spaces marked by contestation and a simultaneous concern or respect for the view of the other as legitimate within the context of the dialogue event. Whilst this echoes Gill et al’s (2012) concern for how tolerance might nurture difference and political debate or enable differences to ‘rub along’, I am concerned with how these workshops place tolerance within a wider project of transformation and social learning and thus position it as central to the group’s wider ambitions for developing alternative ways of relating, without it becoming the ultimate goal. Viewed in this way, tolerance is not simply a political end or value but is orientated towards the future as part of a much wider telos of social change and ethical praxis. It is a *tool* rather than an *outcome*.

I have taken part in training and dialogue exercises, have observed them, developed ethnographic accounts of their taking place, and have interviewed facilitators and participants about their experiences of the programme, their motivation for diversity work, and their thoughts on its effects. Participants attend the workshops for a variety of reasons and either sign up individually or are sent by organisations, including local councils, schools, the police, and businesses. Workshops are run both as a means to train people in conflict mediation and as a means to address ongoing conflicts and discrimination within a particular area [for a more detailed account see Wilson (2013a)].

This framing begins to illuminate how tolerance might be part of, and even necessary to, the alternative social projects that it is often said to oppose (Brown, 2006). Indeed, whilst Connolly (2005a, page 123) describes tolerance as a relation that is normally practised by a group that “construes its own position to be beyond question”, it can provide the very conditions from which “agonistic respect” might gradually develop and flourish. This is particularly true when starting from a point of conflict, disagreement, or even contempt, for without tolerance, there is no room to speak and certainly no room to listen to what the other has to say. Therefore, given that the generic features of dialogue typically include coproduction, cooperative interactions, exchange, social cooperation, and both speaking and listening, its value as a condition of contact is plainly apparent (Carbaugh, 2013).

It is paramount, of course, to recognise that this workshop example is not free from power relations or structures of condition—no site of tolerance could be. It is a workshop run by a charity that occasionally taps into government funding sources and which has a programme of exercises designed and judged by the organisation to be the most effective for facilitating dialogue. It has conditions of conduct and rules of entry that are overseen by facilitators, even if these are open to discussion. And, whilst it is the case that facilitators take an active part in the workshop and so have their own views, prejudices, and experiences equally examined by other participants and facilitators, their role in the facilitation of tolerance unavoidably places them in a position of power. Rather than placing the workshops outside of the sphere of critique, I thus argue that it is precisely because we can see traces of those critiques examined in section 2 that this works as a good example. Rather than making the example redundant, the demonstration that tolerance can be productive *despite* its negative undercurrents (Fisher, 1997), its tendency to counteract an “impulse to intervene” (Brown, 2006, page 7), and its taking place within certain conditions and constraints, highlights that the value and possibilities of tolerance are dependent upon the context in which it is practiced and thus should be scrutinised accordingly.

These workshops provide an opportunity to explore the workings of prejudice alongside ongoing conflicts and incompatible perspectives and systems of belief. They bring together people with different backgrounds, identities, and affiliations, cover questions of religious belief, sexuality, ethnicity, race, ability, and gender, and give participants the opportunity to share their experiences of prejudice, discuss their viewpoints, and reflect upon their own personal intolerances. Everybody is given the chance to speak, to tell their own story, and to listen to others. Whilst participants rarely intervene or openly condemn others, stories, statements, confessions, and explanations are often met with tears, flushed cheeks, clenched fists, and flexed muscles. Occasionally, tolerance fails, marking an eruptive moment, an outburst or cry, or an attempt to address the speaker or talk over their account, which is quickly followed by a reminder, an apology, or the removal of a participant until the conditions of their reentry can be (re)negotiated.

These eruptive moments are more frequent in the late afternoon and during the later stages of the workshop, as people tire, both emotionally and physically, and their capacity for tolerance dwindles. The discomfort of spending a day sat on a plastic chair in a community centre or conference facility can have an extraordinary impact on one’s capacity to affect and be affected. Furthermore, whilst the workshops begin with a commitment to tolerance, the capacity to keep that commitment is clearly dependent on the issue. Tolerance, and the capacity to tolerate, is therefore fluid, embodied, and temporal—informed as much by the body as it is by careful consideration. This is made clear in moments when participants are invited to ‘vent’—to react, rather than control their responses to disagreeable views, and it is often here, when tolerance breaks down, where the embodied nature of tolerance is so apparent:

For the purpose of a venting exercise, Danny is told that he no longer has to put up with the hurtful comments that he has tolerated for so long. He is given the chance to react, to shout back at the perpetrators—to say what he would have liked to have said at the time. The facilitator repeats a hurtful comment. Danny’s gaze is fixed on the floor. He shakes his head. The facilitator repeats himself. Danny swallows hard, arms down by his sides—his left hand starts to flex. With no verbal response from Danny, the facilitator starts to work his way through all of the hurtful remarks that Danny has discussed, one after the other. Danny purses his lips. He is now tapping his foot. He nods slowly, the pace quickens and he seems to be concentrating on keeping his mouth shut. Jaws clamped shut, his eyes begin to well, and the agitation is written on his face. The facilitator makes a comment that seems to resonate, and the tension explodes as Danny yells “Screw you!”, throwing his weight forward as he jabs his finger at the facilitator and startles the watching participants (fieldwork diary 2013, UK).

Whilst the notion of ‘gritted teeth tolerance’ is regularly referred to within conceptual debates (Gill et al, 2012), it is only through observing the *taking place* of tolerance, as seen in this example, that its visceral and embodied politics can really be appreciated. As Connolly (2005a) argues, it is not enough to come to terms with contestable positions on an intellectual basis only. If we ignore the visceral, embodied element of politics, personal belief, and identity, we can only ever fall back on abstract accounts of relating. Such abstraction makes it difficult to successfully organise and develop countermovements that challenge normative evaluative standards and wider attempts to affectively regulate aversion (Connolly, 2005b).

Whilst tolerance is something that is demanded and closely maintained by a workshop facilitator and, in this regard, is to some extent coerced or managed (which, for some, might automatically strip it of any moral value), I suggest that this example of facilitated suspension, highlights the need for a more pragmatic understanding of tolerance as a distinct, contingent, and situated way of relating. The reactions of workshop participants highlight the *risks* that come with suspension. To permit another to voice their prejudiced remarks about you is to abdicate self-interest (Massumi, 2002) and to allow them to get close enough to potentially cause personal injury. This idea of connection—of bringing another closer—is far removed from some of the accounts of tolerance presented in section 2, which position tolerance as something that fixes others at a distance. As Jenkins (2002, page 120) argues, it might be the case that the generosity afforded by tolerance—although admittedly limited—could leave the tolerator open to “a risky connection” with others, in place of what might otherwise be a “self-protecting separation”. This notion of connection with others, and the personal risks that it brings, begins to draw out its potential contribution to projects of social learning in which a destabilisation of social boundaries is required.

In Connolly’s work “only risk-laden steps towards others are true to a reality that is itself plural and necessarily complicated, mixed, free of absolutes and resistant to final ends” (Williams, 2008, page 154). If Butler’s work illuminates the ethical reflections made possible under conditions of tolerance, Connolly outlines how such reflections might be used to cultivate a desire to “modify the terms of relationship between us and them” (1999, page 62). Within the workshops personal stories, accounts, and dialogue are presented with the hope that they might “alter part of the context in which judgements are formed and negotiations are pursued” (Connolly, 2005a, page 127). Facilitators encourage participants to recognise their shared humanity in a bid to encourage them to work on their prejudices, think critically about their habits of judgment, or commit to the fight against different forms of discrimination, in order to *expand* their capacity for tolerance or to work towards greater acceptance, justice, or equality. These calls are regularly made after participants have been given the chance to speak. Such a chance included a dialogue between two opposing

positions on abortion legislation, whereby following explanations of their positions, it was recognised that both had reached their positions with a “genuine concern for enhancing the quality of human lives” and that therefore, each position was equally contestable. This was not about encouraging people to change their viewpoint, but to simply recognise the validity of the other. Of course, not every workshop situation is about developing respect; on some occasions, where it is felt that the language of antiracism or antidiscrimination should be applied, or where structural inequalities needed to be addressed, tolerance provides a space within which different perspectives can be heard without interruption—including those that are considered discriminatory—as a necessary step to unpacking and understanding their roots along with their very real effects. This form of dialogue, contrary to the discussion on abortion, was seen to mark the beginning of an entirely different form of learning, with a much stronger emphasis on changing behaviour.

For Connolly (2005a, page 125), individuals that enter into practices of self-modification in the very process of changing their recognition and treatment of others might be considered “critical respondents” who actively work to expand their capacity for tolerance in the future, or maybe move beyond tolerance altogether:

“When such crossings are explored without resentment, they can evolve into reciprocal commitment to inject generosity and forbearance into public negotiations between parties who reciprocally acknowledge that the deepest wellsprings of human inspiration are to date susceptible to multiple interpretations. They evolve toward a public ethos of agonistic respect rather than devolving entirely into the public tolerance of private differences.”

This ‘critical responsiveness’ *stretches* tolerance, to create new terms of contrast and similarity and a movement of position that challenges established codes of belonging and ethico-political judgment. In so doing, it becomes easier to apply the language of discrimination, injustice, and oppression to subjugated constituencies and to recognise the equally contestable nature of different positions (Connolly, 1996). And so, we can see how, in those situations where negative feelings exist, tolerance might work as part of a wider project for respect, justice, or equality. In particular, it is worth focusing on the way in which ‘crossings’ *evolve*, for whilst the ‘progression’ and ‘evolution’ of relations is mentioned within theoretical debates and within the Council of Europe’s account of conflict resolution, the actual taking place of such progression is rarely acknowledged. As the workshop example begins to demonstrate, it is in such contexts that the value and possibilities of tolerance can be realised.

4 Conclusion

The debates concerning the possibility of tolerance are clearly not limited to Europe. Yet given recent claims of a ‘multiculturalism backlash’ (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010) and a growing ‘crisis’ of European pluralism and liberal values, the European agenda for intercultural dialogue and conflict resolution provides a valuable case. The example of the workshop is useful precisely because it outlines a context in which tolerance—*despite* its negative underpinnings and conditionality—can open up new possibilities for ethical engagement. Whilst this paper has developed a predominantly theoretical account of its potential, the example of the workshop acts as a reminder that tolerance is embodied, affective, and emotive—that it *takes place*. As such, it demonstrates the need for more empirical work that is attentive to its practice.

It is, of course, necessary to continue to pursue political debates on what should or should not be tolerated, and these debates should continue to challenge and carefully scrutinise the periodically defined limits of tolerance. Indeed, the workshops drawn upon within this paper should not be removed from the sphere of critique, for to continually ask why and at what point a matter becomes a matter of tolerance is to continually challenge evaluative standards,

along with the processes of subordination that the politics of tolerance can enact when utilised in the pursuit of domination (Brown, 2006; Hage, 2003). As Schirmer et al (2012, page 1052) argue, “whilst tolerance might be a required minimum of social interaction, stagnancy on that level involves a life without dignity”. With this in mind I support calls for alternative projects such as respect, acceptance, and equality, particularly when tolerance is wrongly pursued *in their place*. Yet, as I have argued in this paper, whilst it is of paramount importance that the paradoxical qualities of tolerance are revealed and that its ubiquitous circulation as a moral good and civic value is challenged, critiques such as those put forward by Brown (2006) should not be taken out of context. Such critiques do not attend to the different ways in which tolerance is practiced, embodied, negotiated, or challenged—and certainly do not attend to the instances in which tolerance might be intrinsic to the development of alternative relations.

Whilst tolerance is regularly criticised for being no more than a ‘suspended condemnation’, I have argued, along with Butler, that suspension can facilitate reflection and can create a space within which we might be “ethically addressed” by what another’s personhood says about “the range of human possibility that exists” (2005, page 44). Thus, whilst not always spectacular, spaces of dialogue can be important sites of resistance, which seek the continuous destabilisation of normative and categorical thinking. In recognising the role that tolerance can play in facilitating the slow movement from ignorance to knowledge, we can better place it at the heart of a more progressive social politics, one that is concerned with the *ongoing* struggle to multiply ways of thinking and acting. As Connolly states, “every affective movement of difference [necessarily] moves the identities through which it has been differentiated” (1996, page 267), and thus, despite claims that it permanently fixes others at a distance, in some circumstances tolerance can clearly help redirect attention to *relations* with others that are continuously in the making. It is this movement or evolution that is rarely accounted for.

I have only begun to outline the relationship that might exist between tolerance, dialogue, and forms of agonism, and it is certainly a relationship that should be taken forward if dialogue is to be taken seriously as the desired response to conflict and misunderstanding. Whilst Gill et al (2012, page 515) have underlined the agonistic quality of tolerance as a relation that evokes simultaneous recognition (albeit grudging) and disapproval, the workshop examples in section 3 suggest that agonistic *respect*—understood as a much more generous recognition of the other and of the equally contestable nature of one’s own position—might evolve *from* a situation of tolerated multiplicity. In these cases tolerance thus becomes the *foundation* for a very different way of relating.

Importantly, this understanding invests hope in the notion that dialogue with others can be a genuinely progressive force in the right circumstances. In the workshops, tolerance was sometimes required in order to provide a space within which contested opinions and beliefs were presented and discussed so as to work towards a respect for the other position. At other times it was used in order to set out an antiracist or antidiscrimination agenda, to provide a space for the critique of prejudices in a movement towards equality, rather than simply ‘more tolerance’ (Habermas, 2003). It is important to recognise the different role that tolerance plays in both cases and to recognise that such relations and projects are anything but stable—for with any of these projects there are always risks. However, as I have argued, it is only with risk taking that a space for negotiating the terms of belonging can be facilitated. It is to this difficult and incremental process that we should turn our attention in order to develop a more pragmatic politics of difference in a multicultural Europe.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers along with Ash Amin, Ben Anderson, Jonathan Darling, and Nick Gill for their helpful comments on various versions of this paper. Thanks in particular go to Rachel Colls for the afternoon spent in Newcastle library and for the many discussions on the concept of tolerance. Finally, this research was funded by an ESRC +3 award.

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