

Topic 1.1: What does Multiculturalism mean?

1. Definition

“As one of today’s most important and intensely debated terms, multiculturalism has become a conceptual flash point inviting some of the most stimulating and acrimonious discussions within and outside of the academic community. To some it is an idea about diversity. If we see the world from the perspective of many cultures and histories, we are in a better position to understand the past and the world today. [...] [I]n its simplest, most basic context, multiculturalism is the name for an approach that shows us another way of using knowledge to understand ideas and events. Most often a multicultural approach uses several disciplines to highlight neglected aspects of our social history, particularly the histories of women and minorities. Concepts of race, class, culture, gender and ethnicity are the driving themes of a multicultural approach, which also promotes respect to the dignity of the lives and voices of the forgotten. By closing gaps, by raising consciousness about the past, multiculturalism tries to restore a sense of wholeness in a postmodern era that fragments human life and thought. Whether community is always attained or not is difficult to say because multiculturalism is still evolving” (Trotman, 2002, p. 9).

In today’s political discourse multiculturalism is about how to understand and respond to the challenges related to cultural and religious diversity. The term “multiculturalism” is often used in a descriptive way to define diversity in a society. Even though the term has come to cover a variety of prescriptive claims, most proponents of multiculturalism reject the idea of the “melting pot” in which minority group members are expected to adapt to the dominant culture in favour of an ideal image in which members of minority groups can maintain their distinctive collective identities and practices. Concerning immigrants, supporters of multiculturalism emphasize that multiculturalism is compatible with, not opposed to, the integration of immigrants into society. Furthermore, multiculturalism policies offer fairer terms of integration for immigrants (Song, 2017).

2. Claims of multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is closely linked to the terms “identity in democracy”, “politics of recognition” and “politics of difference”, which all share a commitment to appreciate disrespected identities and to change main patterns of representation and communication that marginalize

particular groups (Gutmann, 2003; Taylor, 1992; Young, 1990). Multiculturalism does not only involve claims of identity and culture, but also economic interests and political power. In this context multiculturalism includes claims for preventing economic and political disadvantages that people from marginalized groups suffer (Song, 2017).

Multiculturalists assume that multicultural claims are about recognizing culture and cultural groups. However, claims of multiculturalism contain a wide range of demands concerning language, ethnicity, nationality, race and religion. This shows culture is a controversial, open-ended concept and all the mentioned categories have been subsumed by or equated with the concept of culture. The division and distinction between different types of claims can clarify what it is about (Song, 2008). Language and religion are the focus of many claims for cultural accommodation by immigrants. The basic claim made by minority nations is for self-governance rights. However, race plays a rather limited role in the multicultural context. Antiracism and multiculturalism are different but related ideas. The first emphasizes "victimization and resistance," while the second emphasizes "cultural life, cultural expression, achievements, and the like" (Blum, 1992, p. 14). Recognition claims in the context of multicultural education are demands not only for the recognition of aspects of the actual culture of a group (e.g. African-American art and literature), but also for the recognition of the history of group subordination and its accompanying experience (Gooding-Williams, 1998).

Examples of cultural adaptations or "group-differentiated rights" are exceptions to general law (e.g. religious exceptions), support for things the majority can do unassisted (e.g. multilingual ballot papers, funding for minority language schools and ethnic associations), representation of minorities in government institutions (e.g. Ethnic quotas for party lists or legislative seats, minority majority congress districts, recognition of traditional legal systems by the ruling legal system (e.g. jurisdiction over family law by religious courts) or limited self-government rights (e.g. qualified recognition of tribal sovereignty, federal agreements recognising Québec's political autonomy). Typically, a group-differentiated right is a right of a minority group or a member of such a group to act or not act in accordance with their religious obligations and / or cultural commitments (Song, 2017).

3. Justifications for multiculturalism

3.1 Communitarian

One justification for multiculturalism arises from the communitarian critique of liberalism. Liberals are usually ethical individualists - they insist that individuals are free to choose and pursue their own ideas about the good life. They give priority to individual rights and freedoms over community life and goods. Some liberals are also individualists when it comes to social ontology (what some call methodological individualism). Methodological individualists believe that one can and should consider social actions and social goods in relation to the characteristics of each individual and individual goods. The aim of the communitarian critique of liberalism is less about liberal ethics, but more about liberal social ontology. Communitarians reject the idea that the individual presides over the community and that the value of social goods can be reduced to their contribution to individual well-being. Instead, they adopt ontological holism, which recognizes collective goods as "irreducibly social" and inherently valuable (Taylor, 1995).

Taylor's argument for a "politics of recognition" is based on an ontologically holistic view of collective identities and cultures. Taylor argues with Rousseau, Herder and Hegel, among others, that we do not become full human agents and define our identity isolated from others, but "we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us" (Taylor, 1994, p. 33). Since our identities are formed in dialogue, we depend on the recognition of others. The absence of recognition or misinterpretation can lead to serious injuries: "A person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (Taylor, 1994, p. 25).

3.2 Liberal egalitarian

A second justification for multiculturalism comes from liberalism, but a liberalism that has been revised by the critical confrontation of its communitarian critique. Will Kymlicka has developed the most influential liberal theory of multiculturalism by combining the liberal values of autonomy and equality with an argument about the value of cultural belonging (Kymlicka, 1989; 1995; 2001). Instead of starting with collective goals and goods that are inherently valuable, as Taylor does, Kymlicka sees cultures of great value to the individual for

two main reasons. First, cultural belonging is an important requirement for personal autonomy. In his first book *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (1989), Kymlicka develops his argument for multiculturalism in a Rawlsian framework of justice and considers cultural membership to be a "primary good", things that every rational person is supposed to want and that are necessary for the pursuit of one's goals (Rawls, 1971, p. 62). In his later book, *Multicultural Citizenship* (1995), Kymlicka drops the Rawlsian framework and relies instead on the work of Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz on national self-determination (1990). Cultures serve as "contexts of choice", offering meaningful options and scripts with which people can define, revise, and pursue their goals (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 89). Secondly, cultural belonging plays an important role in people's self-identity. By referring to Margalit and Raz, Kymlicka understands cultural identity as an "anchor for their self-identification and the safety of effortless secure belonging" (Margalit and Raz, 1990, cited in Kymlicka, 1995, p. 89). This means that there is a deep and general connection between a person's self-esteem and respect for the cultural group in which they belong. It is not only belonging to a culture, but one's own culture that must be secured so that cultural belonging serves as a meaningful context of choice and as a basis for self-respect (Song, 2017).

3.3 Freedom from domination

Another argument for multiculturalism is freedom from domination. In contrast to the concept of freedom as non-interference prevailing in liberal theory, freedom as non-domination, derived from the civic republic tradition, concentrates on a person's "capacity to interfere, on an arbitrary basis, in certain choices that the other is in a position to make" (Pettit, 1997, p. 52). From this perspective of freedom, we can be unfree even if we do not experience disturbances, as in the case of a slave of a benevolent master. We are subject to domination to the extent that we are dependent on another person or group who has a certain amount of arbitrary power over us (Pettit, 1997, ch. 2).

Frank Lovett has examined the implications of the value of freedom from domination for multicultural accommodation issues (2010). He starts from the premise that freedom from domination is an important human good and that we have a duty to reduce it. He argues that the state should not accept social practices directly related to domination; if freedom from domination is a priority, then one should "aim to bring such practices to an end as quickly as

possible, despite any subjective value they happen to have for their participants" (Lovett, 2010, p. 256).

3.4 Historical injustice and a postcolonial view

Other theorists sympathetic to multiculturalism look beyond liberalism and republicanism to emphasize the importance of dealing with historical injustice and listening to minorities themselves. This is especially true of theorists who write from a postcolonial perspective. For example, in the contemporary discussion of indigenous sovereignty, the emphasis is not on the assumption based on premises about the value of indigenous cultures and their connection to the self-esteem of individual members, as liberal multiculturalists have, but on the reckoning with history. Such defenders of indigenous sovereignty emphasize the importance of understanding indigenous claims against the historical background of the denial of the equality of indigenous groups, the expropriation of their land, and the destruction of their cultural practices (Iverson, 2006; Iverson et al., 2000). This background questions the legitimacy of state authority over indigenous peoples and provides a prima facie ground for special rights and protection for indigenous groups, including the right to self-government. Jeff Spinner-Halev has argued that the history of state oppression of a group should be a key factor in determining not only whether group rights should be extended, but also whether the state should intervene in the group's internal affairs when it discriminates against certain group members. For example, "when an oppressed group uses its autonomy in a discriminatory way against women it cannot simply be forced to stop this discrimination" (Spinner-Halev, 2001, p. 97). Oppressed groups lacking autonomy should be "provisionally privileged" over non-suppressed groups, which means that "barring cases of serious physical harm in the name of a group's culture, it is important to consider some form of autonomy for the group" (Spinner-Halev, 2001, p. 97). Theorists who adopt a postcolonial perspective go beyond liberal multiculturalism and develop models of constitutional and political dialogue that recognize culturally different ways of speaking and acting. Multicultural societies consist of different religious and moral perspectives. If liberal societies want to take such diversity seriously, they must recognize that liberalism is only one of many substantial perspectives based on a specific view of man and society. Liberalism is not free of culture, rather expresses an independent culture. This observation does not only apply to territorial boundaries

between liberal and non-liberal states, but also to liberal states and their relations with non-literary minorities (Song, 2017).

4. Critiques of multiculturalism

4.1 Cosmopolitan view of culture

Some critics claim that theories of multiculturalism are based on a fundamentalist view of culture. Cultures are not separate, self-contained entities - they have long been influenced by war, imperialism, trade and migration. People in many parts of the world live in cultures that are already cosmopolitan and marked by cultural hybridity (Song, 2017). As Jeremy Waldron explains: "We live in a world marked by technology and trade, economic, religious and political imperialism and its descendants, mass migration and the dispersion of cultural influences. In this context, it may be a fascinating anthropological experiment to dive into the traditional practices of an Aboriginal culture, for example, but it is an artificial dislocation of what is actually happening in the world" (1995, p. 100). The goal of preserving or protecting a culture bears the danger of favouring a supposedly pure version of this culture and thus compromising its ability to adapt to changed circumstances (Waldron, 1995, p. 110). Waldron also rejects the assumption that the opportunities available to individuals must come from a particular culture. Meaningful options can come from a variety of cultural sources. What people need are cultural materials, not access to a particular cultural structure. For example, the Bible, Roman mythology, and Grimms tales have influenced American culture, but these cultural sources cannot be seen as part of a single cultural structure that multiculturalists like Kymlicka want to protect (Song, 2017).

In response, multicultural theorists agree that cultures overlap and are interactive, but still claim that individuals belong to separate social cultures. In particular, Kymlicka has argued that while options available to people in any modern society come from a variety of ethnic and historical sources, these options are meaningful to us only when they become part of the common vocabulary of social life- that means being embedded in the social practices based on a common language to which we are exposed to. Learning from other cultures or borrowing words from other languages does not mean that we no longer belong to separate social cultures or speak different languages (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 103).

4.2 Tolerance requires indifference, not adjustment

A second important aspect of criticism is particularly aimed at liberal multicultural theories of adaptation and arises from the value of freedom of association and conscience. If we take these ideas seriously and accept both ontological and ethical individualism as explained above, then we are obliged not to defend the special protection of groups, but the right of the individual to form and leave associations. As Chandran Kukathas (2003) argues, there are no group rights, only individual rights. By granting special protection and rights to cultural groups, the state exceeds its role of ensuring civility and threatens to undermine the right of individual association. States should not pursue “cultural integration” or “cultural engineering”, but a “politics of indifference” towards minorities (Kukathas, 2003, p. 15).

“A limitation of such a laissez-faire approach is that groups that do not themselves value tolerance and freedom of association, including the right to dissociate or leave a group, may practice internal discrimination against group members, and the state would have little authority to interfere in such associations” (Song, 2017). A policy of indifference would allow the abuse of vulnerable members of groups. To accept such a situation would mean abandoning the values of autonomy and equality that many liberals consider fundamental to any liberalism worthy of the name (Song, 2017).

4.3 Distraction from the ‘politics of redistribution’

A third challenge for multiculturalism sees it as a form of ‘politics of recognition’ that diverts attention from ‘politics of redistribution’ (Song, 2017). A policy of recognition questions status inequality, and the resolution it seeks is cultural and symbolic change, whereas a policy of redistribution challenges economic inequality and exploitation, and the aim it pursues is economic restructuring (Fraser, 1997, Fraser and Honneth, 2003). The mobilization of the working class is directed towards the realm of redistribution and claims to liberation from universal laws and the movement for same-sex marriages are on the recognition side. In the United States, critics who see themselves as part of the ‘progressive left’ fear that the rise of the ‘cultural left’ with its emphasis on multiculturalism and difference will turn the focus away from struggles for economic justice (Gitlin, 1995; Rorty, 1999). Critics in the UK and Europe have also expressed concern about the impact of multiculturalism on social trust and public support for economic redistribution (van Parijs, 2004). In 2003, Phillipe van Parijs organised a

conference to discuss the proposal: “Other things being equal, the more cultural [...] homogeneity within the population of a defined territory, the better the prospects in terms of economic solidarity” (2004, p. 8).

4.4 Universalist ideal of equality

A fourth objection questions the liberal multiculturalist's understanding of what equality implies. Brian Barry represents a universalist ideal of equality, in contrast to the group-differentiated ideal of equality defended by Kymlicka. Barry argues that religious and cultural minorities should be held accountable for bearing the consequences of their own beliefs and practices, just as members of the dominant culture are held accountable for bearing the consequences of their beliefs. He believes that special arrangements are owed to people with disabilities, but he believes that religious and cultural affiliations differ from physical disabilities: the former do not constrain people in the way that physical disabilities do. A physical disability creates a strong claim to compensation because it restricts a person's opportunity to engage in activities that others can engage in. In contrast, religion and culture can shape the willingness to seize an opportunity, but they do not influence whether one has an opportunity. Barry argues that egalitarian justice is only about ensuring an adequate range of equal opportunities, not about equal access to certain decisions or outcomes (Barry, 2001, p. 37). “When it comes to cultural and religious affiliations, they do not limit the range of opportunities one enjoys but rather the choices one can make within the set of opportunities available to all” (Song, 2017).

4.5 Feminist critique of multiculturalism

The set of criticisms that has provoked perhaps the most intense debate on multiculturalism argues that the extension of protection to minority groups can occur at the price of increasing oppression of vulnerable members of these groups - what some have called the problem of “internal minorities” or “minorities within minorities” (Green, 1994; Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev, 2005). Multicultural theorists have focused on inequalities between groups in arguing for special protection for minorities, but group-based protection can increase inequalities within minorities. Some ways of protecting minority groups from majority oppression make it more likely that more powerful members of these groups will be able to undermine the basic freedoms and opportunities of vulnerable members. Vulnerable subgroups within minority

groups include religious dissidents, sexual minorities, women and children. Group leaders may exaggerate the degree of consensus and solidarity within their group to present a united front to wider society and strengthen their argument for accommodation (Song, 2017).

Some of the most repressive group norms and practices revolve around issues of gender and sexuality, and it is feminist critics who first drew attention to possible tensions between multiculturalism and feminism (Coleman, 1996; Okin, 1999; Shachar, 2000). These tensions become a real dilemma if one accepts that group-differentiated rights for cultural minority groups are justified, as multicultural theorists do, and that gender equality is an important value, as feminists have pointed out. The extension of special protection and special accommodation to minorities involved in patriarchal practices may contribute to increasing gender inequality within these communities. Examples analysed in the scientific literature concern conflicts over arranged marriages, the ban on headscarves, the use of “cultural defences” in criminal law, the consideration of religious or customary law within dominant legal systems, and self-governance rights for indigenous communities that increase inequality of women (Song, 2017).

These feminist objections are particularly difficult for liberal egalitarian supporters of multiculturalism who want to promote not only inter-group equality, but also intra-group equality, including gender equality. In response, Kymlicka (1999) highlighted the similarities between multiculturalism and feminism; both aim at a broader understanding of justice and challenge the traditional liberal assumption that equality requires identical treatment. Addressing concerns about multicultural accommodation that increases inequality within the group, Kymlicka distinguishes between two types of group rights: “external protections” are rights that a minority group claims against non-members to reduce their vulnerability to the economic and political power of the larger society, while “internal restrictions” are rights that a minority claims against its own members. He argues that a liberal theory of minority group rights defends external protection while rejecting internal restrictions (1995, pp. 35-44).

However, many feminist critics have emphasized that granting external protection to minority groups can sometimes be accompanied by internal restrictions. For example, respecting the self-governing rights of indigenous communities may mean allowing sexually discriminatory membership rules enacted by the leaders of those communities. Whether multiculturalism and feminism can be reconciled within liberal theory depends in part on the empirical premise

that groups seeking group-differentiated rights do not support patriarchal norms and practices. If this is the case, liberal multiculturalists would have to argue in principle against extending group law or extending it with certain qualifications, such as conditioning the extension of self-government rights to indigenous peoples on the adoption of a constitutional declaration of rights (Song, 2017).

Author: Sonja Biock, M.A.

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