

Multiculturalism
Sarah Song
Encyclopedia of Political Theory, ed. Mark Bevir (Sage Publications, 2010)

Multiculturalism is a political idea about the proper way to respond to cultural diversity. Multiculturalists argue for more inclusive conceptions of citizenship, justice, and democracy, which extend special recognition and rights to cultural minority groups. The origins of multicultural theory can be traced in part to the dissatisfaction with liberalism's inattention to the value of community and the legacy of historic injustice against racial and ethnic minority groups, and a search for more inclusive ways to accommodate the racial and ethnic diversity generated by immigration to North America and Western Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century. Multiculturalists contend that the proper response to cultural diversity is to supplement the common set of civil, political, and social rights with a set of group-differentiated rights and accommodations for marginalized groups. While multiculturalism has been used as an umbrella term to characterize the politics of a wide range of historically disadvantaged groups, including African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and the disabled, most self-identified theorists of multiculturalism tend to focus their arguments on immigrants who are ethnic and religious minorities (e.g. Latinos in the U.S., Muslims in Western Europe), national minorities (e.g. Catalans, Basque, Welsh, Québécois), and indigenous peoples (e.g. Maori in New Zealand, Native peoples in North America).

Multiculturalism is closely associated with "identity politics," "the politics of difference," and "the politics of recognition"; they all share a commitment to revaluing disrespected identities and changing dominant patterns of representation and communication that marginalize certain groups. But multiculturalism is also a matter of

economic interests and political power; it demands remedies to the material and political disadvantages that people suffer as a result of their minority status. Examples of multicultural accommodations include exemptions from generally applicable law (e.g. religious exemptions), state subsidies for the pursuit of group practices (e.g. public funding for minority language schools), special political representation rights (e.g. ethnic quotas for party lists or legislative seats), or limited self-government rights (e.g. qualified recognition of tribal sovereignty). This entry provides an overview of the philosophical foundations of multiculturalism and considers its main weaknesses.

Foundations of multiculturalism

One possible philosophical foundation for multiculturalism can be found in the communitarian critique of liberalism. Liberals are ethical individualists; they insist that individuals should be free to choose and pursue their own conceptions of the good life. They give primacy to individual rights and freedom over community life and collective goods. Some liberals are also individualists when it comes to social ontology (what some call methodologist individualists or atomists). Atomists believe that you can and should account for social actions and social goods in terms of properties of the constituent individuals and individual goods. The target of the communitarian critique of liberalism was not so much liberal ethics as liberal social ontology. Communitarians reject the idea that the individual is prior to the community, and that the value of social goods can be reduced to their contribution to individual well-being. They instead embrace ontological holism, which views social goods as “irreducibly social.” Charles Taylor combines a holist view of collective identities and cultures to a normative case for a multicultural

“politics of recognition”: if diverse cultural identities and languages are irreducibly social goods, then there should be a presumption of their equal worth. The recognition of the equal worth of diverse cultures requires replacing the traditional liberal regime of identical liberties and opportunities for all with a scheme of targeted rights for marginalized groups, such as limited self-government rights for the Québécois.

An alternative foundation for multiculturalism is liberalism. Will Kymlicka has developed the most influential theory of multiculturalism based on the liberal values of autonomy and equality. Culture is said to be instrumentally valuable, for two reasons. First, it enables individual autonomy. One important condition of autonomy is having an adequate range of options from which to choose. Cultures provide contexts of choice, which provide and make meaningful the social scripts and narratives from which people fashion their lives. Culture is also instrumentally valuable for its connection to individual self-respect. Echoing theorists of communitarianism and nationalism, Kymlicka says there is a deep and general connection between a person’s self-respect and the respect and recognition accorded to the cultural group of which she is a part. It is not simply membership in any culture but one’s own culture that must be secured because of the great difficulty of giving it up. Kymlicka moves from these premises about the value of cultural membership to the egalitarian claim that because members of minority groups are disadvantaged in their access to their own cultures, they are entitled to special protections.

One might question whether cultural minority groups really are “disadvantaged” in the way that Kymlicka suggests; why not just enforce antidiscrimination laws, stopping short of any positive accommodations for cultural minority groups? He replies

that state neutrality with respect to culture is a chimera. While states may avoid official establishment of religion, they cannot avoid establishing one language for public schooling and other state services. While offered as a general normative argument for minority cultural groups, liberal multiculturalism distinguishes among different types of groups. It offers the strongest protection to indigenous peoples and national minorities (indeed, Kymlicka's theory of multiculturalism is a theory of nationalism). Immigrants are largely viewed as voluntary economic migrants who are expected to integrate. Immigrant multiculturalism is understood as a demand for fairer terms of integration through mostly temporary group-differentiated measures (e.g. exemptions, bilingual education) and not a rejection of integration.

Other political theorists have looked beyond liberalism in search of more pluralistic bases for multiculturalism. This is especially true of theorists writing about diversity and multiculturalism from a postcolonial perspective. On such a perspective, the case for tribal sovereignty rests not simply on premises about the value of tribal culture and membership, but also on what is owed to Native peoples for the historic injustice perpetrated against them. A postcolonial perspective also seeks models of constitutional and political dialogue which recognize culturally distinct ways of speaking and acting. Multicultural societies consist of diverse religious and moral outlooks, and if liberal societies are to take such diversity seriously, they must recognize that liberalism is just one of many substantive outlooks based on a specific view of man and society. Liberalism is not free of culture but expresses a distinctive culture of its own. This observation applies not only across territorial boundaries between liberal and nonliberal states, but also within liberal states and its relations with nonliberal minorities. As Bhikhu

Parekh argues, liberal theory cannot provide an impartial framework governing relations between different cultural communities. Instead, he argues for a more open model of intercultural dialogue in which the liberal society's constitutional and legal values serve as the initial starting point for cross-cultural discussion while also being open to contestation. James Tully surveys the language of historical and contemporary constitutionalism with a focus on Western state's relations with Native peoples to uncover more inclusive bases for intercultural interaction.

Critique of multiculturalism

Some critics contend that the multicultural argument for the preservation of cultures is premised on a problematic view of culture. Cultures are not distinct, self-contained wholes; they have long interacted and influenced one another through warfare, conquest, and trade. Today through global migration and economic and communications networks, people in many parts of the world live in multicultural contexts and possess multiple identities. Indeed, many cultures themselves are already cosmopolitan, characterized by cultural hybridity rather than purity. Even traditional cultures are not untouched, for good or for ill, by the global exchange of information and knowledge. Moreover, aiming at preserving a culture runs the risk of privileging one allegedly pure version of culture and freezing that in place, regardless of surrounding social, economic, and political conditions. Some multicultural theorists accept the cosmopolitan view of cultures as overlapping, interactive, and interdependent in their formation, but they still maintain the importance of special protections for minority groups to preserve the distinctiveness of their cultures.

A second major criticism of multiculturalism is that it is a “politics of recognition” that diverts attention from a “politics of redistribution.” We can distinguish analytically between these modes of politics: a politics of recognition challenges status inequality and the remedy it seeks is cultural and symbolic change, whereas a politics of redistribution challenges economic inequality and exploitation and the remedy it seeks is economic restructuring. Working class mobilization tilts toward the redistribution end of the spectrum, and the gay rights movement toward the recognition end. Critics worry that multiculturalism’s focus on culture and identity diverts attention from or even actively undermines the struggle for greater economic equality, partly because identity-based politics may undermine potential multiracial, multiethnic class solidarity and partly because many multiculturalists tend to focus on cultural injustices while ignoring economic injustices. Ethnic and national minorities have engaged in both modes of politics, seeking remedies to material disadvantages and marginalized identities and statuses. In practice, both modes of politics are required to achieve greater equality across lines of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, and class, not least because many individuals stand at the intersection of these different categories and suffer multiple forms of marginalization.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of multiculturalism is that it may threaten rather than promote the freedom and equality of individuals. Multiculturalists have focused on inequalities *between* groups in arguing for special protections for minority groups, but group-based protections can exacerbate inequalities *within* minority groups. This is because some ways of protecting minority groups from oppression by the majority may make it more likely that these groups will be able to undermine the basic liberties and

opportunities of vulnerable members. Group leaders may even exaggerate the degree of consensus and solidarity within their groups to present a united front to the wider society and strengthen their case for accommodation. As feminist critics emphasize, some of the most oppressive group norms and practices revolve around issues of gender and sexuality. Extending group rights to patriarchal cultural communities may help reinforce gender inequality within these communities. Examples include the use of “cultural defenses” in criminal law, recognition of religious arbitration over family law, and self-government rights for indigenous communities that deny equality to women in certain respects. This critique is especially troublesome for liberal defenders of multiculturalism who aim to promote intergroup equality while preventing intra-group oppression. Liberal multiculturalists stress that group rights need not and often does not have this effect since ethnocultural groups in Western democracies do not seek to limit the basic liberties of their own members. But this empirical premise may not be born out in a great many cases. The challenge then is to identify whether a particular case of minority group rights is consistent with ensuring the freedom and equality of all group members. If not, liberal multiculturalists would in principle have to argue against extending the group right or extending it with certain qualifications, such as conditioning the extension of self-government rights to national minorities on the acceptance of a constitutional bill of rights.

A fourth critique of multiculturalism is expressed more in public opinion rather than political theory. At the start of the twenty-first century, there is talk of a retreat from multiculturalism as a political program in the West. There is little to no retreat from recognizing the rights of national minorities and indigenous peoples; the retreat is

restricted to immigrant multiculturalism. Part of the backlash against immigrant multiculturalism is based on fear and anxiety about foreign “others” and a nostalgia for an imagined time when everyone shared thick bonds of identity and solidarity. Nativism is as old as migration itself, but societies are especially vulnerable to it when economic conditions are especially bad or security is seen to be threatened. In the U.S. the cultural “others” are Latino immigrants, especially unauthorized migrants. Since September 11, Muslim immigrants have also come under new scrutiny in the U.S., and concerns over security and terrorism have been invoked to justify tougher border control. The number of Muslim immigrants in North America remains relatively small in comparison to Western Europe, where Muslims have become central to the merits of multiculturalism as a public policy. In Western Europe, the concern is not only over security but also the failures of multiculturalism policies to integrate and offer real economic opportunities to foreigners and their descendants in the host societies.

The backlash against multiculturalism raises new challenges for defenders of multiculturalism. What is the relationship between multiculturalism and the integration of immigrants, especially those who are ethnic and racial minorities? Are liberal multicultural terms of integration really the most inclusive terms of integration? What is the relationship between liberalism, culture, and religion? Understanding the challenges that immigrants are said to pose to liberal values require sustained engagement not only with the idea of culture, ethnicity, and nationality but also religion and race, and the political and economic effects of these different categories in particular contexts.

Sarah Song
University of California, Berkeley

See also Citizenship, Contemporary Liberalism, Communitarianism, Cosmopolitanism, Historic injustice, Identity, Immigration, Justice, Nationalism, Pluralism, Politics of Recognition, Postcolonialism.

Further readings

Barry, B. (2001). *Culture and equality: an egalitarian critique of multiculturalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

Fraser, N., & Honneth, A. (2003). *Redistribution or recognition? a political-philosophical exchange*. London: Verso.

Kymlicka, W. (1995). *Multicultural citizenship: a liberal theory of minority rights*. Oxford University Press.

Levy, J.T. (2000). *Multiculturalism of fear*. Oxford: Oxford.

Okin, S. (1999). *Is multiculturalism bad for women?* J. Cohen, M. Howard, & M.C. Nussbaum (Ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton.

Parekh, B. (2000). *Rethinking multiculturalism: cultural diversity and political theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

Phillips, A. (2007). *Multiculturalism without culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton.

Song, S. (2007). *Justice, gender, and the politics of multiculturalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge.

Taylor, C. (1992). The politics of recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism: examining the politics of recognition* (pp. 25-73). Princeton: Princeton.

Tully, J. (1995). *Strange multiplicity: constitutionalism in an age of diversity*. Cambridge: Cambridge.

Waldron, J. (1995). Minority cultures and the cosmopolitan alternative. In W. Kymlicka (Ed.), *The Rights of Minority Cultures* (pp.93-119). Oxford: Oxford.

Young, I.M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton.