

Lecture Notes 7 : Multiculturalism and its Critics

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Challenge: how to construct a political theory incorporating minority groups and cultures consistently with the demands of justice, without simultaneously undermining all values cherished by communitarians.

Will Kymlicka picks up this particular glove.

Some distinctions: national minorities, vs. immigrant groups, vs. 'metics'

Cultural rights

Kymlicka defends claims for support of cultures (as such) as a matter of right:

- (1) All members of a liberal polity are entitled to equal concern and respect as a matter of right.
 - (2) Equal concern and respect requires equalization in (benefits or burdens from) unchosen circumstance, or opportunity.
 - (3) One's culture (incl. language, religion, ethnic origin) is unchosen circumstance that's a necessary vehicle for the good life.
- ∴ (4) Inequalities due to cultural differences ought to be compensated as a matter of right.
- (5) The only way to provide such compensation is to support and empower minority cultures, given the state-sponsored preponderance of majority culture.
- ∴ (6) Minority cultures are entitled to support as a matter of right.

Premise (1) A platitudinal claim about the nature of the concern a liberal state ought to have for its citizens.

Premise (2) A luck egalitarian interpretation of premise (1). Equality requires that the distribution of some x , where x is some *desideratum* of justice, is just if and only if it reflects nothing but differences in individual choices, or responsibility (and not differences in unchosen circumstances).

Premise (3)

In general, the language and culture people are raised in should be seen as part of their unchosen circumstances, rather than a voluntary taste. Indeed, access to one's language and culture can sometimes be a precondition for the very capacity to make meaningful choices. (Kymlicka 2001, 340)

Premise (5) All multicultural states involve a majority culture, such that their function and structure is inevitably skewed in the direction of that culture.

Even 'multicultural' states will need: standard language, national holidays, public monuments, state regulation of work and leisure, etc. This places unchosen burdens on, say, non-native speakers of standard language, and raises claims of compensation.

Thus there are *group-differentiated* rights attaching to groups.

Critiques of Kymlicka

Conclusion (6)

Feminists have objected to Kymlicka's conclusion, to the effect that support for certain minority cultures implies the domination and subjection of women.

Kymlicka's response: distinction between 'internal restrictions' and 'external protections': the first is about intra-group relations, whereas the latter about inter-group relations.

Premise (5)

Some philosophers attack premise (5), by saying that group-level compensation is not necessary to 'make it up to' culturally disadvantaged groups. All that is required is that the state practice and enforce a policy of purely individual rights, including an effective right to exit.

Premise (3)

The overextension objection: Kymlicka, in his drive to accommodate communitarian intuitions about culture, ends up with an overextended account of circumstances, or opportunities.

The reification objection: Kymlicka misidentifies the proper basis for compensation with some stable and concrete notion of culture. Rather, it is its individual constituents (language, religion, etc.) that constitute circumstance.

Political implications of multiculturalism

Critics claim multiculturalism is divisive, as it can—at most—muster a divisive 'politics or recognition'. But such a politics is not necessarily congruent with, and may indeed hinder, the realization of a 'politics of redistribution', which is absolutely necessary for strengthening the weak and vulnerable (many of whom find themselves in minority cultures).

Study questions

Are there any cultural rights?

Does an argument for support of minority cultures require an egalitarian premise?

Further Reading

Kymlicka, W. (2001), *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ch. 8.

Song, S. (2010), 'Multiculturalism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.