

Multiculturalism & Diversity in a Global Context: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism begins with the understanding that granting equal civil and political rights was important achievement within democracy, but it has not adequately addressed issue of discrimination in society. Marginalized cultural communities, as minorities, continue to be disadvantaged even within the democratic nation-state. Culture-based discrimination exists even in the most advanced liberal politics of the west, and it cannot be redressed simply by giving identical rights to all persons as citizens. What we need instead are a set of special arrangements that enable minority cultures to survive and flourish in the public arena.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, democratic, cultural, identities, communities, minority and discrimination and diversity

INTRODUCTION

Most countries of the world today are internally plural. They have people of different religions, races and cultures living within their boundaries. How can these diverse communities of the people be treated as equal within the frame work of democracy? This is the question that multiculturalism poses and seeks to answer. In fact, the world 'multiculturalism' connotes either some mode of trans-national interrelationships between the cultures of two or more countries, or it suggests in a more circumscribed manner, the broader dimensions of multiple cultural identities within the boundaries of single nation.

The world comprises different nationalities, ethnicity, races, cultures and genders, yet they are mixed, intermingled and hybridized. "States that embody multicultural ideals have arguably existed since ancient times. The Achaemenid Empire founded by Cyrus the Great followed a policy of incorporating and tolerating various cultures"(Menek, İbrahim Halil 2016:1 25)

Multiculturalism: Most countries of the world today are internally plural. They have people of different religions, races and cultures living within their boundaries. How can these diverse communities of people be treated as equal within the framework of democracy? This is the question

that multiculturalism poses and seeks to answer. Multiculturalism begins with the understanding that granting equal civil and political rights was an important achievement within democracy but it has not adequately addressed the issue of discrimination in society. "The term multiculturalism is most often used in reference to Western nation-states, which had seemingly achieved a de facto single national identity during the 18th and/or 19th centuries" (Geneviève Zarate; Danielle Levy; Claire Kramersch 2011:337)

Marginalized cultural communities, as minorities, continue to be disadvantaged even within the democratic nation-state. Culture-based discrimination exists even in the most advanced liberal policies of the west, and it cannot be redressed simply by giving identical rights to all persons as citizens. What we need instead are a set of special arrangements that enable minority cultures to survive and flourish in the public arena. "A historical example of multiculturalism was the Habsburg monarchy, which had broken up in 1918 and under whose roof many different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups lived together. The Habsburg rule was mired in controversy, including events such as the mass murder committed against Székelys by the Habsburg army in 1764 and the destruction of Romanian Orthodox Churches and Monasteries in Transylvania by Adolf Nikolaus von Buccow" (Georges Castellan 1989:109)

The Ideal of Non-Discrimination: Multiculturalism aims to minimize of discrimination of minority cultural communities and to promote the ideal of non-discrimination. Over the last three centuries or more, democratization has occurred by identifying sources of discrimination within the polity and finding ways to eliminate them.

As countries became democratic, they set aside discrimination based upon religion, gender, caste and race. Multiculturalism contributes to this ongoing project of democratization by pointing to a site of discrimination that had received little attention before, namely, cultural identity. The recognition that cultural identities may also be a source of marginalization, and that the actions of the liberal states may disadvantage member of minority communities is the singular contribution of multiculturalism to the discourse on democracy. More than

any other strand of political theory, it is multiculturalism that has drawn our attention to the discrimination faced by vulnerable minority communities within the state, and shown us that pursuing the goal of non-discrimination requires a radical re-consideration of the dominant tradition of liberal theory.

Promoting Cultural Diversity:

To counter existing patterns of culture-related discrimination in liberal democratic politics, multiculturalism recommends policies that enhance cultural diversity in society. Protecting and promoting cultural diversity is a primary value within multiculturalism and it is strongly favoured for the sake of i) minimizing minority discrimination; ii) creating conditions in which minority cultures survive and flourish.

Theorists of multiculturalism argue that the policies of liberal nation-state disadvantage minority communities. They place external pressures upon the members of minority community to assimilate in to the culture of the majority. Policies aimed at promoting diversity are seen as way of curbing the process of homogenization that is engendered by the nation-state. Eliminating sources of minority discrimination is, however, only one of the reasons for valuing cultural diversity. An equally important concern is that the rich mosaic of plurality that marks our societies should survive.

Within multiculturalism, this concern for the fate of diversity is supplemented by the belief that the presence of many different cultures enriches our lives and enables critical self-understanding. Different cultures enable us to experience different ways of living and thinking, and this makes us aware that our cultural horizon is only one of the many that have given meaning to lives of countless men and women. "Today's topical issues such as social and cultural differentiation, multilingualism, competing identity offers or multiple cultural identities have already shaped the scientific theories of many thinkers of this multi-ethnic empire" (Doris Griesser (2016:12)

For all these reasons, multiculturalists prize cultural diversity and consider it a deeply cherished value that must be protected and promoted in society. What needs perhaps to be underlined here is that the diversity and multiculturalism seeks to promote is that of cultures. While liberalism focuses on diversity of thought, belief and perspective, multiculturalism is concern about the viability and status of diverse cultures and communities that are associated with them. Further, it is the fate of minority cultures that face external pressures to assimilate or disintegrate that multiculturalism is most concerned about, and by attending to them it aims to protect diversity of cultures. Since the concern all along is for cultural diversity it is the community rather than the individual that

has merited greater attention within the frame work of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism, Pluralism and Diversity:

While arguing for cultural diversity, multiculturalism operates with the understanding that cultural communities are not voluntary associations. In forming association's people come together by their own volition to pursue a specific goal or interest. Cultural communities, by comparison, are groups in which people find themselves.

That is, most of the time people do not make conscious choices: at least they do not choose cultural membership as we choose goods in the market. Further, and this is extremely important, a cultural community is defined by a shared language, history, economic, political and social institutions. "Critics of multiculturalism often debate whether the multicultural ideal of benignly co-existing cultures that interrelate and influence one another, and yet remain distinct, is sustainable, paradoxical, or even desirable." (Nagle, John 2009:129)

Since each culture has its own distinct identity and practices. Cultures are seen as incommensurable entities that cannot be judged in terms of the values that mark another culture. They can only be known and understood in their own terms. That is, one culture may value technological advancement while the other may seek harmony with nature. Just because the latter does not value or pursue scientific advance as we know it, it does not imply that it is lagged behind. "Sarah Song views cultures as historically shaped entities by its members, and that they lack boundaries due to globalization, thereby making them stronger than others might assume" (Song, Sarah 007:22)

There is, in other words, no ground for assuming that the same values are either cherished in all cultures or that they must be considered worthwhile by all. Cultures must be seen as being incommensurable or non-comparable.

Informed with this perspective, multiculturalism is more than a statement of value pluralism. It does not merely suggest that different value systems exist in society and individuals may favour or commit themselves to any of them. Instead, multiculturalism argues that each culture incorporates a distinct value, different from that which is expressed in another culture.

Further, the life of an individual is shaped to a considerable extent by the value frame work of the culture to which he belongs. The customs and institutionalized practices of that culture structure his preferences and judgements. What multiculturalism tries than to protect is the cultural context of experience. Its policies are aimed at ensuring that minority cultures-their language, customs and institutions-survive and are treated as equals in the public domain.

The element that needs to be emphasized here is that the mere presence of different religions, races and languages is not enough for a multicultural democracy. The latter requires that each of these cultural communities flourish and receive equal treatment. It is this concern for equality between diverse cultures and communities that is distinctive of multiculturalism and it is this that sets it apart from the assertions of pluralism. Theorists of multiculturalism argue that a plural society requires a multicultural policy framework of democracy but this is at the level of an imperative. In actuality, plural societies may not always head in that direction. Pluralism at the societal plane may co-exist with a state that is mono-cultural, affirming only the culture of the dominant community. Multiculturalism points to just this predicament and shows that many liberal democracies that tolerate differences in society, nevertheless, discriminate against minority cultures.

It is to rectify such patterns of disadvantage and cultural discrimination that multiculturalism advocates policies that promote diversity and heterogeneity in the public domain.

Multiculturalism and Liberalism: Multiculturalism is not the first theory to address the issue of discrimination. In different ways, both Marxism and liberalism have dealt with this issue. Liberalism took note primarily of discrimination based on socially ascribed identities, such as religion, race, castes and gender. Further, in response to exclusions based on these identities. It suggested that individuals be conceived as citizens, dissociated from their social identities, and in that capacity they must all receive the same rights and be treated alike. In other words liberalism mooted the principle of formal equality. On the one hand, it tried to set aside distinctions and privileges based on an ascribed identity by treating all individuals equal in the eyes of the law, and on the other, it made a person's identity as a citizen the only relevant category in the public domain. All other identities were to be effaced or restricted to the private domain. Individuals were to enter into the political and public arena devoid of ascribed identities and personal modes of identification, and participate within it only as citizens of the polity. The category of citizen was, thus, to be religion and colour-blind.

Within liberalism ascribed identities are discredited as they are not chosen by the individual. People are born into them and the circumstances that they are placed in on account of these identities are not of their making. Hence, liberals argue that it is the responsibility of the state to ensure that received identities do not fix roles, positions and opportunities in society. What liberal's value then is the autonomy of the individual: the freedom to make choices and the availability of options receives the highest priority in their work. Rights are given to protect that freedom, particularly against opposition, from the state as well as

oppression from the community. The community, like the majority in society is perceived to be an authoritarian entity those constraints and restricts autonomy of the person. Hence, it is suspect and receives no rights. Within liberalism, it is the individual and not the community that is, therefore, designated as the bearer of rights.

Multiculturalism challenges this liberal understanding of the self with the argument that membership of a cultural community is valuable to the individual. That is, community membership structures individual experience and provides a framework within which things acquire value. One's relationship with other groups in society and their perception of us is also influenced by community membership.

While devising political institutions of democracy, we need therefore to acknowledge the existence of cultural community identities and begin with the understanding that individuals are not simply members of a political community or a nation-state. Some of them respond to the pressures that come from the external world by distancing themselves from their family. This alienation of the self from its family and friends places a heavy toll both on the individual, his family and the community. It creates inter-generation conflicts and deprives the individual of a secure social environment that is necessary for proper growth and development. Since hostile and adverse representations can in this way harm the individual, we owe to others to give them due recognition in the public arena.

CONCLUSION

For the multiculturalists, a secure cultural context is an essential condition for leading a reasonably autonomous existence and exercising choices. When a culture is misrepresented or threatened, its members become closed and resistant to any change and innovation. They oppose change that is imposed from the outside as well as suggestions that come from within the community. Eventually, members are loose out as the space that ordinarily exists for the expression of differences within each culture gets closed. Consequently, even for promoting the ideals those liberals favour-namely, autonomy of the self-a secure culture that receives due public recognition is regarded to be absolutely essential.

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