



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2017; 3(1): 748-751
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 18-11-2016
Accepted: 22-12-2016

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Genesis of multiculturalism: Will Kymlicka's study of multiculturalism

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Abstract

The concept of Multiculturalism has undergone drastic transformation since its genesis in 1971. This article describes how the notion of Multiculturalism has evolved from being 'assimilation' of ethnic minorities towards 'acceptance and integration of diverse cultures' and how it continues to be perceived differently by multiculturalists who remain divided on what constitutes the concept. The article majorly focuses on Will Kymlicka's Study of Multiculturalism who was the first to present a elaborated systematic theory of the concept and differentiated minority rights into three kinds. The article also analyses Bikhu Parekh's theory of the concept which emphasises on equality and dignity to the members of cultural minorities.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, assimilation, cultural minority and dignity

Introduction

The concept multiculturalism was first employed in Canada in 1971 and then, in Australia in 1978, to describe a new public policy that moved away from assimilation of ethnic minorities, and immigrants in particular, towards policies of acceptance and integration of diverse cultures. It entered the American and British political lexicon in the 1980s. In the US, when it entered the public debate, in the first instance, it was about the need for reform of public school curriculum, in disciplines like history, literature and social sciences as its contents reflected a euro-centric bias.

Glazer observed that initially, it was about "how American society, particularly American education should respond to diversity". Since then, multiculturalism has questioned the traditional conception of the US as a "melting pot" of diverse people bonded in a common culture of the "New World". The metaphor "melting pot" is seen as a cover for oppressive assimilation to the dominant or hegemonic white culture. As American society, from the very beginning has, in fact been, multiracial and diverse, there is a need to underline the separate characteristics and virtues of the different cultural groups. Instead of "melting pot", terms such as "salad bowl" and "glorious, mosaic" are preferred as they convey more as "salad bowl" and "glorious mosaic" are preferred as they convey more a sense of separateness and distinctiveness in describing a nation of immigrants.

It is true that there is no unanimity about what constitutes multiculturalism and it continues to be a contested concept. For some, multiculturalism requires reasonable changes in social and political institutions to enable cultural minorities to preserve their language and their distinctive customs. For others, multiculturalism is about eliminating racism and nurturing rather than repudiating or tolerating "difference", as differences spring from a universally shared attachment of importance to cultures, and this implies greater social transformation. A unifying theme amongst the multiculturalists is their resistance to homogenisation or assimilation which is evident in the conception of citizenship implicit in the contemporary liberal theories of justice that conceptualises justice as equal rights for all citizens irrespective of their gender, religion and ethnicity.

Kymlicka points out that the "logical conclusion of liberal principles of justice" seems to be a 'colour-blind' constitution the removal of all legislation differentiating people in terms of their race or ethnicity (except for temporary measures, like affirmative action, which are believed necessary to reach a "colour blind" society. Multiculturalists see this attempt towards a "colour blind" society as ill-founded, for it is not possible to separate the state and

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ethnicity and when the liberal state attempts to do this, it unfairly privileges certain ways of life over others. They allege that liberals do not take diversity seriously. This is despite the fact that liberals value pluralism, with Rawls stressing on "reasonable pluralism", which is why liberals defend a neutral public philosophy that entails equal rights for all citizens. Kymlicka argues that liberals, like Rawls and Dworkin, have falsely assumed that members of a political community.

Parekh observes that Rawls, like many liberals, "is sensitive to moral but not cultural plurality, and thus takes little account of the cultural aspirations of such communities as the indigenous peoples, national minorities, sub-national groups, and the immigrants". A culture has a claim to rights if it is vital to the basic interests of its members and contributes to the wider society. Multiculturalism is not merely "about difference and identity per se but about those that are embedded in and sustained by culture, that is, a body of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world and organise their individual and collective lives".

Will Kymlicka's Study of Multiculturalism: A Case Study of Canada

During the 1990s, that political theorists began to furnish the theoretical basis of a multicultural society. The first systematic theory of multiculturalism was elaborated by Will Kymlicka in his two major works: *Liberalism, Community and Culture* and *Multicultural Citizenship*. Kymlicka criticises the earlier models of unitary republican citizenship in which all the citizens enjoy common citizenship rights on the grounds that in its assumption of a more homogenous political community, it ignores cultural and ethnic diversity. He observes that liberalism with its stress on individual rights has not paid adequate attention to group rights.

Following JS Mill, Kymlicka points out that the distinctive feature of liberalism is that it ascribes to individuals the freedom to choose and revise their conception of good life. The capacity of an individual to make meaningful life choices depends on access to a culture because one is shaped by one's culture. According to him, the institutions of liberal democratic societies embody the culture of the major national group. If members of minority cultural groups are to have autonomy, freedom and characteristics and virtues of the different cultural groups. Instead of "melting pot", terms such as "salad bowl" and "glorious, mosaic" are preferred as they convey more as "salad bowl" and "glorious mosaic" are preferred as they convey more a sense of separateness and distinctiveness in describing a nation of immigrants.

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Kymlicka, in course of elaborating his theory, distinguishes three kinds of minority or group differentiated rights that are to be assured to ethnic and national groups: self-government rights, poly-ethnic rights and special representation rights. Self government rights require the delegation of powers to national minorities, such as indigenous peoples, but are not available to other cultural minorities who had immigrated into the country. Instead, their claim is for rights of fair recognition since immigrant groups choose to immigrate into a host society, they must bear some of the burdens of integration. Poly-ethnic rights are for cultural minorities as it guarantees financial support and legal and political protection from the state for certain practices associated with particular ethnic or religious groups and in particular to aboriginal people as to enable them to maintain their culture and autonomy. Poly-ethnic rights might include legislation to prevent suppression or marginalisation of cultural and identity concerns of minority ethnic groups by the deliberate, or unthinking, discrimination by the majority ethnic population within a country. Special state support for media policies and funding to address the media interests of minority ethnic groups are one particular expression of poly-ethnic rights. Both indigenous peoples and immigrant minorities might also be eligible for special representation rights which guarantee places for minority representatives on state bodies or institutions.

Of pivotal importance in Kymlicka's account of group differentiated citizenship is the distinction that he makes between two kinds of minorities: national minorities and ethnic minorities. The former are peoples whose previously self-governing, territorially concentrated cultures have been incorporated into a large state. These are "American Indians", Puerto Ricans, Chicanos and native Hawaiians in the US; the Quebecois and various aboriginal communities in Canada and the Aborigines in Australia. Ethnic minorities are peoples who have immigrated to a new society and do not wish to govern themselves, but nonetheless wished to retain their ethnic identities and traditions.

Quite significantly, Kymlicka also strongly believes that group-based protection should not violate rights fundamental to individual well-being. He acknowledges the fact that individuals might need protection from the abusive

power of their own ethnic communities. He endorses group-differentiated rights which provide for external protection for groups, but does not permit "internal restrictions" except in cases of systematic and gross human violations like slavery or genocide, in which case state intervention is warranted.

For Kymlicka, culture is important because it is the context within which individuals learn how to choose, but its value reduces when it disallows individuals to choose their lives for themselves, thus retaining the overall spirit of liberalism that it permits individual's capacity for autonomous choice. Cultural membership and cultural diversity is to sustain those options within which autonomous persons can exercise choice. Devoid of autonomy, cultural diversity is neither morally or aesthetically valuable.

Bikhu Parekh's Theory on Multiculturalism

Bikhu Parekh emphasises that members of cultural minorities must be treated as equal and valued members with the rest, as equal respect is central to individual's sense of dignity going beyond conventional notions of non-discrimination and equal opportunity, and not be given unintended discrimination in employment, housing, education, promotion, appointment a public offices. Minority communities may be allowed to run their internal affairs themselves so long as they are not internally oppressive. They should also be free to set up their own cultural, educational and other institutions, organise literary, artistic, sports and other events and to institute museums and academies, with the help of the state if they need or ask for. Cultural differences should also be taken into account in the formulation and enforcement of public policies and laws.

Bhikhu Parekh and Multiculturalism

Parekh's thesis stems firstly out of a rejection of relativism and monism and subsequently from the claim that liberal attempts to respond to the fact of multiculturalism do not take the concept of culture seriously enough. In identifying the faults of these theories he lays the ground for an argument about the nature and importance of culture to human existence and argues for a politics based on intercultural dialogue. In doing this Parekh engages with the very thorny issue of intercultural evaluation of disputed practices such as arranged marriages, polygamy, female circumcision, ritual slaughter of animals, issues of customary dress and participation in aspects of public education, all of which have aroused different degrees of concern and anxiety over the years. Parekh also addresses the relationship between minority cultures and the 'operative public values' of society. It is a comprehensive work by a contemporary British political theorist, who is also a member of House of Lords and a very senior figure in the UK Commission for Racial Equality and the chairperson of the Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain.

The very basis of Parekh's political theory is the attempt to give adequate expression to the interplay between these three features. Relativism and monism are clearly to extreme. We must not overemphasise difference and we must not overemphasise similarity. It is a balancing act that Parekh also believes that contemporary liberal responses to diversity have failed to pull off. Parekh's critique of Rawls is similar in scope and content to that offered by Kymlicka. One chief concern is that Rawls's assumption that political liberalism does not presuppose comprehensive liberalism is

unconvincing. Indeed, Parekh believes that political liberalism is 'conceptually a substantively parasitic upon comprehensive liberalism' in that presupposes a conception of human individuality that is not to be found in other traditions of thought. As a consequence of this, Parekh believes that Rawls's work is deeply inhospitable to cultural plurality. He argues that Rawls's political liberalism unduly restricts political discourse. Allowing people into society provided they leave their moral and religious baggage at the door, is to bar important resources from political debate. To offer only a unitary concept of individual citizenship is to deny cultural pluralism a voice from the outset.

From Parekh's point of view, Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism does not fare much better. Parekh explicitly picks up on the point that there appear to be no general or undisputed principles that inform Kymlicka's hierarchy of national refugee and immigrant minority rights. If culture is a primary good in that it is a necessary condition for the good life, then are we right to deny immigrants access to their culture? Parekh also believes. That Kymlicka 'absolutises liberalism'. Kymlicka's pervasive suggestion that national minorities are to be given self-government rights provided they govern themselves within certain liberal parameters fails to take cultural diversity seriously enough.

Will Kymlicka and Joseph Raz-have expressed sympathy with the demands of national minorities for self-determination. In this context, Kymlicka explicitly distinguishes between the rights of national minorities and the recent demands by some ethnic minorities for self-determination in terms of the recognition to their mother tongue and state support for separate ethnic institutions. For Kymlicka, the claims of immigrant groups to self-determination are considerably weaker than those of national minorities, because not only have immigrants voluntarily chosen to leave their own national community, but, unlike long-standing and indigenous groups, they lack viable cultural structures which they can claim a right to preserve. Hence, in order to succeed, immigrants ought to be encouraged to integrate into the wider society. However, as Parekh notes, these objections are open to question. Immigration occurs for a wide variety of reasons and the decision to leave one's country does not necessarily signify a decision to leave one's culture'. Furthermore, while immigrant cultural life may lack the cohesion and continuity characteristic of indigenous and longestablished groups' it is not 'devoid of a cohesive cultural structure. On the contrary, immigrant groups often form their own distinct communities and neighbourhoods and, even where these are absent, 'they tend to form nationwide and communal institutions to sustain their way of life'. Parekh's objections suggest that in principle the demands for self determination on the part of ethnic minorities may at least in some instances be on par with those of national minorities and hence should be given serious consideration.

Instead of relativism, monism and the attempts of liberals such as Rawls and Kymlicka to develop a minimum universalism, Parekh's theory takes the form of 'pluralist universalism'. Pluralist universalism entails a particular view of human nature, of culture and of morality itself. We share certain attributes as members of the same species and this has some normative force but it is very thin. We share a physical and mental structure, have the same basic needs and common condition of growth. But our nature is formed

not merely from these basic characteristic but in tandem with our active participation in nature.

This is what Parekh means when he says that humankind are culturally embedded. It is important to note here that because of the important place of culture in this dialectic, and because culture is by definition a social/group concept and therefore, people should not be perceived merely as individuals but as part of a collective group/groups. The rights of cultures are, in the view of Parekh, essentially collective rights.

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