

---

## Book Reviews

# Multicultural odysseys: Navigating the new international politics of diversity

Will Kymlicka

*Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, 320pp.,*

*ISBN: 0199280401*

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2009) **8**, 106–110. doi:10.1057/cpt.2008.34

In *Multicultural Odysseys*, Will Kymlicka provides a broad and deep survey of recent developments in international minority rights. His central contention is that we are witnessing an ‘internationalization’ of multiculturalism; more and more states are moving away from a traditional ‘assimilationist’ or ‘exclusionary’ rights-based approach to deal with ethnic and cultural diversity, he says, and toward an approach which affords cultural groups differentiated rights and resources in the name of respecting their particular histories and identities. This move is partly due to the increased pressure exerted on states to adopt multiculturalist policies by intergovernmental institutions and organizations throughout the world. Kymlicka suggests that organizations as diverse as the United Nations, UNESCO, the International Labour Organisation, the World Bank, the Council of Europe and the Organization of American States, have united with a growing number of NGOs, pressure groups and other voluntary bodies to enshrine group-differentiated rights for immigrant groups, national minorities and indigenous peoples on the world stage. Importantly, he says, they have done so within the universal rights framework found in international law, rather than by stepping outside of this framework and adopting some form of cultural relativism. The picture that Kymlicka presents, then, is one in which liberal multiculturalism of the kind that he has defended in his philosophical work (one which justifies the allocation of minority rights on the grounds that it is a crucial prerequisite of individual autonomy and equality) is taking hold in the world outside academia, and is actually helping to inform a major shift in the treatment of ethnic and cultural minorities throughout the world.

In emphasizing the role of what he calls International Organizations (IOs) in the internationalization of minority rights, Kymlicka challenges an important theme in contemporary political science and international relations: that the rise of a global network of NGOs, institutions and organizations, and the increased globalization of decision-making mechanisms and markets, is leading



to the erosion of particularist identities and a growth of a 'global' or 'cosmopolitan' citizenry. Kymlicka agrees that recent history has seen a rise in the importance of IOs, and an increased sense that these organizations are able to exert significant power on a global level; he also agrees that their increased prominence in world politics is tied to the increased dominance of international legal statutes and the need for non-state actors to police these statutes. But Kymlicka suggests that any claims as to the death of national, cultural or ethnic identity are premature: IOs may indeed be taking on a central role in the worldwide encouragement and policing of universal human rights, but they have been doing so in ways that have afforded formal rights and recognitions to minority group identities.

This is a fascinating argument, and one that is backed up by a great deal of empirical data, legal analysis and historical evidence. Kymlicka's interpretation of the various shifts in rights law, the role of international political organizations and the various ways in which many states have moved toward a minority rights approach in their dealings with ethnic diversity is persuasive and rigorously argued. Specialists in legal theory and political and legal historians may well find much to disagree with in his sweeping treatment of world history from 1945 onwards; his narrative is explicitly partial and driven by an ambition to prove a point which some may dispute. But Kymlicka is careful to avoid over-optimism. While he believes there has been a general move by states and IOs toward a more multiculturalist model of human rights, he is keen also to point out that multiculturalism in one particular area – immigration – has become deeply unpopular among the states and peoples of the West. 'The bloom has fallen off the rose of Western liberal multiculturalism, at least with respect to immigrant groups in some countries,' he says. 'There is a widespread perception in Western Europe that multiculturalism went 'too far' in the context of predominantly Muslim immigrants, and there has been a reassertion of more assimilationist or exclusionary policies (p. 52). This, he says, has had the effect of slowing down international efforts to 'formulate new [multiculturalist] norms and mechanisms' and has led to a weakening of resolve among many states and IOs about the ends to which liberal multiculturalism should aim (pp. 52–53). Importantly, though, Kymlicka believes that recent fears within 'Western liberal democracies' about Islam do not indicate a retreat from multiculturalism in general because there also appears to be emerging agreement on how to respond to non-immigrant cultures. The picture that emerges is one in which states, NGOs and other IOS, are largely united in the pursuit of multicultural justice for indigenous groups and national minorities, but in disagreement over the extent to which immigrant groups should be afforded similar treatment.

The majority of *Multicultural odysseys*, then, is devoted to empirical and historical explication and interpretation. What one finds in the book, therefore,



is a lot of history, and a wide-ranging summary of recent constitutional, legal and policy initiatives in many states which have sought to enshrine some form of multiculturalism. What one does not find, on the whole, is a great deal of philosophy. There are several possible reasons for this. It may just be that Kymlicka felt that, at some point, he needed to extract himself from the kind of normative arguments about matters of principle in which defenders and critics of multiculturalism have been engaged in recent years. He perhaps felt the need to move on from foundational debates about autonomy and 'social primary goods' and the role of community in liberalism in order to progress his wider argument for liberal multiculturalism, and to show the enduring quality of ethnic and cultural identities in an increasingly globalized political environment. It is fair to say that defenders and critics of multiculturalism have had ample opportunity to put their sides of the story in the last 10 years, and they have certainly done so. It is hardly unreasonable, therefore, that Kymlicka put aside the interminable arguments which divide liberals on fundamental matters of principle in order to explore other areas that build upon his philosophical work and, in particular, show the ways in which it has informed the development of human rights law in many states. However, claims made by Kymlicka over the years suggest that his motive for avoiding fundamental normative debate perhaps lie elsewhere. Far from acknowledging a need to distance himself from continuing disagreements on fundamental issues of principle, Kymlicka has suggested that there is no substantive disagreement about these things at all and, hence, has implied that further philosophical reflection on the fundamental normative case for liberal culturalism (or 'liberal multiculturalism') is unnecessary.

In 1998, Kymlicka identified an 'emerging consensus' in contemporary political theory, stating that 'liberal culturalism has arguably become the dominant position in the literature today, and most debates are about how to develop and refine the liberal culturalist position, rather than whether to accept it in the first place' ('Liberal Culturalism: An Emerging Consensus?', reprinted in *Politics in the Vernacular*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 42). A year later, in an introduction to a collection of essays on multiculturalism and citizenship co-written with Wayne Norman, he re-emphasized the point: the debate among political theorists as to whether or not liberal justice requires the replacement of difference blind institutions and policies with ones that accord specific rights or privileges to minority cultures is, he said 'coming to a close, with the defenders of minority rights having effectively made their case' ('Introduction' to *Citizenship in Diverse Societies*, OUP, 2000, p. 4). A glance at the literature in the years between 1989 and 1999 does indeed suggest the emergence of a consensus of sorts on the idea that the rights of minority cultures in liberal democratic societies was a fitting and urgent matter to be addressed. But a consensus on what the important questions for political theorists should be is



distinct from a consensus on the ways in which political theorists answered these questions. Kymlicka seems to have concluded (rather too quickly) that because many people were motivated by his earlier work to debate the issues arising out of multiculturalism, they must somehow agree with him about the supremacy of liberal culturalism as a correct response to diversity.

When considered in the light of statements like those above, Kymlicka's latest unwillingness to engage with the fundamental normative issues at stake in the debate among liberals about the appropriateness of multiculturalism seems less about the need to make progress in the face of disagreement, and more about disregarding the work of detractors in order to apply his perceived liberal consensus on a world stage. But has there ever been a consensus among political philosophers in anything like the way that Kymlicka believes? It would be difficult to identify such a consensus among non-liberals, who have approached questions of cultural recognition in a myriad of different ways, from an array of divergent historical and philosophical traditions. If there were a consensus among *liberals*, it seems fair to say that it did not (and still does not) include Chandran Kukathas, who has consistently contested Kymlicka's claims in favour of minority rights; or Jeremy Waldron, whose cosmopolitan conception of identity and citizenship is entirely at odds with Kymlicka's ideas about the importance of cultural rootedness; or Brian Barry, whose *Culture and Equality* published some years later represented a sustained and (some would say) devastating critique of the whole multiculturalist turn in liberal political theory. Similarly, if there were a consensus that liberal culturalism was the most appropriate liberal response to cultural diversity, it would seem not to include John Rawls, Stephen Macedo, Charles Larmore, Martha Nussbaum, or any of those other 'political liberals' who have over the past 15 years or so sought to rearticulate liberal political theory in a way that it is more able to establish precisely the non-differentiated, universal form of citizenship that Kymlicka thinks is anathema to liberal politics. Furthermore, any consensus on the viability of liberal culturalism cannot easily be said to include liberal impartialists like Thomas Scanlon and Thomas Nagel, whose use of contractualist devices to underwrite common impartial principles of justice in the face of diversity seem to flatly reject Kymlicka's view that cultural groups need to be politicized through the allocation of group-specific rights and provisions. If there were indeed a consensus among political philosophers on the supremacy of liberal culturalism as the appropriate response to cultural diversity now or in the past, therefore, it was a consensus which did not include non-liberals, political liberals, impartialist liberals or cosmopolitan liberals, and hence it was a thin consensus indeed.

*Multiculturalist odysseys* therefore occupies a curious position in the literature on multiculturalism and liberal thought. In its focus on recent developments in contemporary legal and political history, the book charts the



continued journey of a major philosophical thinker moving away from philosophy and toward questions of application and policy – a journey which began in *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and has become increasingly obvious in his later work, in particular his more recent edited collections applying multiculturalist arguments to specific policy areas like the welfare state and language rights, and specific regions like Asia and Eastern Europe. Consequently, readers of *Contemporary Political Theory* interested in hearing more about the nature of community and freedom, or the philosophical implications of group memberships, or the account of autonomy which lies at the heart of Kymlicka's liberal culturalism will be disappointed. Similarly, those who are interested in hearing Kymlicka's defence of liberal multiculturalism against the increasing dominance of political liberalism within liberal thought, or other fundamental critiques of multiculturalism like Brian Barry's, will not be satisfied.

There is a lot to like in *Multicultural odysseys*: its historical sweep; its engagement with live issues in public policy and legal theory; its commitment to articulating a philosophically rooted response to ethnic diversity which is practicable; and its critique of the centralized power and exclusionary practices found in many liberal democratic states. It is an alternative vision of globalization; not one that heralds the death of ethnic and cultural identities, but one that emphasizes the enduring quality of these identities in the face of a globalizing world politics, and shows that they are compatible with it. I suspect that the book will be most appreciated by practitioners, politicians and other non-academics who work among the web of governmental or non-governmental organizations that Kymlicka describes, and by those academics who are already persuaded of the normative case for minority rights. The book seems to have been written for them. However, it will hold less appeal for those inside or outside the academy who have yet to buy into liberal culturalism. Those still struggling with the fascinating and complex philosophical questions that surround debates about liberal multiculturalism will find little to help them clarify their thoughts, and those who are confident in their reasons for rejecting it, will find little to change their mind. Kymlicka's aim here, it seems, is not to offer a further defence of multiculturalism but rather to describe the many and varied ways in which existing states, international institutions and legal bodies have embraced this idea. He does this admirably.

Phil Parvin  
University of Cambridge, UK