

Relationship between multiculturalism and liberalism



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In the context of political thought, it would be so hard to think of multiculturalism separate from liberalism. Beyond the scope of political theory, the internal and external dynamics of the countries, the relationship between state and the society have been built on the values of democracy and liberalism. This essay aims to explore and explain the relationship between multiculturalism and liberalism –especially liberal egalitarianism within the frame of minority rights.

Multiculturalism started to manifest itself in the political realm after 1980s. There are two main events that triggered the rise of multiculturalism: Firstly, after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, nationalism has become the prominent element of the democratization process. Secondly, a new wave of nationalism has risen among some groups in Western democratic countries. It has been observed that even the Western states that built on liberal values could not completely overcome the problems regarding ethnic and religious groups in their societies. Now, we live in more and more diversified and multicultural societies. Immigration and minorities have been an imminent part of the debates of everyday politics for a very long time. The politicians include their views and policies in their electoral campaigns, surveys are held to get more information about public opinion and more importantly political theorist are looking for new ways and perspectives as coping or integrating strategies. For instance, the question of the illiberal minorities and the risk of them to violate the liberal principles was always there as a problematic and debatable one. Thus, this case brings us two important questions to discuss: To what extent should we protect the minority rights and how should we recognize the minority identities?

For many, it is an undoubtedly accepted fact that liberal state should be neutral but what should be the attitude of this neutral state when it comes to the clash between the values of majority and minority?

If we ever need to take one thing for granted in liberal state, it would be the strong idea that each individual should have the necessary rights and opportunities to follow the ways which lead them to a good life. Moreover, individuals should be free while deciding on their own understanding of good life and should pursue their goals freely. Therefore, this principle requires that individuals who are coming from different backgrounds from the majority and having different religious and cultural customs and values should also pursue their understanding of good life without giving up their own. Another important aspect of liberal ideology concerning individual rights is that no state or government has the right to conceptualize a project of good life and impose it upon its citizens. (Kukathas, 1992: p. 108) Thus, in my opinion any attempts stepping out of this line could be easily labelled as assimilative regarding religious and cultural minorities.

At this point, it would be notable to remind that, in the liberal state, an individual's realm of freedom ends when another individual's begins. This is accepted as another important principle of liberal state regarding individual freedom which is also seen as a guarantee of the individual freedom of each member in the society. In this case, the rights that groups have been entitled could go as far as that they would threat or violate the human rights and values. What should be the attitude of the liberal state about an intervention? Do individuals choose to be a part of these groups and communities?

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The Proper Attitude of the Liberal Egalitarian towards Multiculturalism

Liberal egalitarians favour a system in which state treats its citizens equally and creates such an environment that each member of the society gets a fair share from the resources and available opportunities. Although, this might seem as a clear principle at first sight, two conclusions can be driven from this principle. First, the state should not intervene with the distribution of resources or try to balance the gap its citizens and second, liberal egalitarian attitude requires that each religious and cultural community should have equal chance to survive and continue to practise their customs in the society. In contemporary modern democratic states such as UK, France, USA and Canada we see that states spare necessary social, political and financial resources for the survival and continuity of different religious communities and minority cultures. The reason for that is culture is considered as an important aspect in shaping one's own identity and his/ her own interpretation of good life.

The second point of view acknowledges that the state should be neutral and acts within the frame of laissez faire liberalism. Otherwise, the state can create inequalities among its citizens by implementing redistributive policies or entitling minority groups with special rights. Thus, the state should take the minimum part in the affairs of different cultural and religious groups and by nothing or minimum it allows citizens to be treated equally. (Patten, 1992, p. 1-3)

Kymlicka and Multiculturalism Debate

Kymlicka locates his whole ideas on liberal theory and he is an important successor of liberal tradition. Thus, he places individual autonomy prior to the community and communal values. As a political philosophy, liberalism has often been seen as “ primarily concerned with the relationship between the individual and the state, and with limiting state intrusions on the liberties of citizens” (Kymlicka, *Liberalism* , p. 1).

For some scholars, this component of liberalism is seen as a strong one about multiculturalist affairs. In my opinion, this can be easily seen as one of the weaknesses of liberalism when it comes to the deal with the problems regarding minorities and minority rights. If we are stuck with the idea that liberal ideology is the only roof under which both majority and minority values can be represented and peoples can live happily together. In one of his essays, *Two Models of Pluralism and Tolerance*, Kymlicka also argues against Rawls’s ideas about individual rights and defends the capabilities of group rights.

Whereas Kymlicka believes that a well-functioning model can be built on the idea of group rights, some scholars like Kukathas argue that there is no necessity for abandoning the liberal ideology’s individualist principles and create new inequalities. (Kukathas, 1992: p. 4) Thus, this part will be focused on this second form of tolerance which is named as group rights by Kymlicka. (Kymlicka, 1992: p. 1)

Kymlicka’s theory is also famously known for his distinction between different types of minorities based on their cultural aspects. According to him, there are societal cultures of national minorities and the cultures of poly

ethnic societies. National minorities are the ones who continuously claim for their self-governmental rights. It is hard for them to get satisfied just by being entitled to some special rights. For them, self-government is the only option for their survival in multicultural society which is composed of a majority and different minority groups. Kymlicka argues that poly ethnic groups would always be weaker and less demanding in their right claims because of the fact that they are immigrant communities. Their right claims would be about practicing their cultural and religious customs. These communities should always bear in mind that they come from another country and culture to be hosted in a new one and they also have some duties such as learning a new language or integrating with the local community.

In his book, *Politics in the Vernacular*, Kymlicka frequently uses the term 'societal culture' and states that societal culture should be considered as a fundamental basis for the modern state. It is a concept consisted of both private and public spheres of life which is composed of a common language which has historical roots on a given territory, common educational, political, legal institutions. Moreover, societal culture is mostly the result of a national building process and it includes linguistic standardization and institutional integration. (Kymlicka, 2000: p. 53) Thus, he goes one step further from the idea that culture is an important aspect of self-respect and self-recognition which paves the way for self-realization i. e. a good life. He adds institutionalization and certain functioning administrative mechanisms to the shared history and values. National minorities mostly have certain tragic events, massacres or genocides in their history and they always feel or face

the threat of assimilation or discrimination in the nation building process. This is why Kymlicka makes certain distinctions between immigrant groups and national minorities. National minorities face with the results of the events that they did not have no say in the decision making process in the most undesirable ways whereas immigrants mostly (here he seems to forget that some immigrants are forced to leave their countries because of wars or other terrific events) leave their country, in which they could practice their culture in the ways they want, voluntarily for the sake of better economic opportunities.

What Kymlicka understands from citizenship based on group differentiated rights is that ensuring the justice between members of different groups. Thus, the idea behind establishing group rights are not only about the idea of that communal rights are prior to individual ones but also about the need for establishing different rights for different groups according to their needs and vulnerabilities in the society. (Luoboyck, p. 9)

Tolerance vs. Recognition

I think in the most of the relevant literature, scholars did not pay enough attention to the distinction between tolerance, acceptance and recognition. Specifically, for the followers of the liberal tradition, the emphasis has always been on the rights, equality, equal rights, equal opportunities, equal treatment and so on without even asking the people that ' is that what you really want?' It is observed that these ' different' people are not only in the need to be differentiated but also recognized as who they are. The special rights that they are entitled to by liberal democratic state do not always give

them to chance of being recognized or accepted in the eyes of the members of the society or even before law. This is why the ideas of Taylor is really important in the multiculturalism debate. (Taylor, 1994: p. 25)

In the history of politics, there has been an important shift from honor to dignity which has also come with the emphasis on the equalization of rights and identities. The age of the ' more privileged' citizens has come to an end, at least in the eyes of the state and before law. It would be very optimistic to claim that all inequalities have been disappeared in this way. As Taylor argues, for many people this equalization only brought an equality for civil rights and voting rights. There are also others who claim that it also has affected the socioeconomic aspects of life but I would not agree with them. It requires more than changing votes to shape public opinion and regulate everyday life which contains many social and economic inequalities like equal pay or integrated settlement policies. Although, there are still many problems to overcome, equal citizenship has been accepted as an universal value.

Thus, in the new age of politics of difference, liberal egalitarians should be ready to reconsider the classical understanding of the principles of liberal democratic state in order to give more than they used to. They should be ready to present a lot of rights and immunities in order to recognize and accept the differences and try not to create a melting pot.

Some still might argue that individual rights come before communal or group rights but the implications of this idea is mostly seen in Anglo- American world. (Taylor, 1994: p. 32) I think this is one of the major reasons for why in

Anglo- American world, there is always an on-going effort for creating a common identity, one nation, one language for all on the one hand, and promoting the ' self' and the individualism on the other. In my opinion, from the perspective of Taylor, they can easily be accused of implementing assimilation strategies in the name of creating a melt pot. This would be a dangerous trap that the liberal state should carefully avoid. The equal use of resources, equal rights and treatment and state's ' hands off' laissez faire policies may lead to the danger of extinction for some cultures and identities.

In today's political realm, the functioning of state mechanisms prove that the state cannot isolate itself from the decision making process of cultural affair. As Kymlicka and Taylor also mentions, the state still has the power of making decisions about official language, some religious ceremonies, official languages that are used in education, public radio and television broadcasting. Thus, the state still remains as a powerful figure to decide which cultures and religions continue to exist in the society. Thus, the liberal state should be ready to intervene when and where there is a necessity.

When it comes to the features of these special rights for minorities, Lubbock indicates some principles. First, he states that all the members of the community in question have to accept the culture as it is acknowledged and there must always be an open door for anyone wants to exit in necessary cases. Moreover, a liberal democratic government can never adopt an attitude which tolerates illiberal actions of minority cultures or their customs.

The basic principles of human rights are always prior to other policies and special rights. Second, liberal democratic governments have the

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responsibility to keep the religious and special cultural practices of minorities at a minimum acceptable level which would be 'sufficient enough'. If a minority group is able to practice their customs at a sufficient level, then there would be no part to take for government. Otherwise, government should intervene and try to create a balanced situation in order to make sure that the minority people in question are able to practice their culture and religion. Thus, while polyethnic groups are being protected by some special rights within the boundaries of existing laws and regulations, this should not allow these groups to have internal restrictions. The intention behind establishing polyethnic rights is to protect these groups from external suppressions and the danger of extinction or assimilation. Thus, it would not be so rightful to allow polyethnic groups to have the right to make regulations and restriction on its members' individual rights and freedoms.

(Loobuyck, p. 8-9)

New Challenges

Kymlicka believes in the supremacy of societal cultures over immigrant groups and more importantly lesbian and gay community. It appears to me that Kymlicka and his contemporaries do not give enough importance to LGBT community as a minority group which has serious right claims. In many books of Kymlicka, there is nearly no words about LGBT people and recently he tackled the issue with respect to the Québécois gays and lesbians and his use of language gives the impression of he is not quite familiar with the gender studies literature – he does not even use the term LGBT. "Gay separatism would involve cutting oneself off from the culture one was raised

in, and relinquishing one's sense of national identity and cultural membership. Thus gay nationalism is neither feasible nor desirable for most gays. The task, therefore must be fight homophobia within the larger society, to gain recognition and acceptance for gays and lesbians within its schools, media, courts, businesses and so on" (Kymlicka, 1992: p. 90- 95)

Although, Kymlicka continues to produce valuable ideas and theories, it should be accepted that there are some challenges that he could not foresee. The liberal democratic state would also be challenged by the problems or right claims that come from contemporary political movements and groups which do not have to be ethnicity based. Now there are the questions of the right claims of non-ethnic groups particularly LGBT community, forced migration, refugees and new generations of immigrant communities who did not choose to migrate but their parents made a decision to migrate like the Turkish people in Germany. In these situations, it becomes harder to talk about a matter of choice. In these cases, is it still possible to claim that societal culture and the minority groups that are based on societal culture are more valuable than the others? This could be one question that the liberal state had to answer.

These ideas blur the line between integration and assimilation. It should be considered that the members of these groups are also political subjects that can influence the legislations through their political power. Thus, the leading elements of liberal state should consider the option of recognition rather than mere inclusion and integration with the majority.

Conclusion

This paper has opened the debate with the strong relationship between liberalism and multiculturalism to elaborate the question of “ How far should liberal egalitarians be prepared to countenance the special rights claims of minority cultures?”.

References