

Should Multicultural Societies Institutionalise a Form of Group Recognition?

Written by Dionne Fitzgerald

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The status and rights of minorities in liberal countries has become a major talking point both in political discourse and in mainstream society. Mass immigration has long been transforming the ethnic makeup of western societies like the US and the UK. Similarly the progress made by women has changed the political landscape. However it is only in the past two to three decades that the idea that people from different minority groups should be treated differently has become powerful in liberal democracies. It is argued by some that the traditional liberal method of relegating differences to the private sphere, or 'difference blind liberalism', cannot satisfy the needs of plural societies. Instead what is needed, according to proponents of multiculturalism, is an institutional system that offers recognition to different minority groups. Theorists differ widely in their views on appropriate forms of recognition. However all proponents of group rights believe that in order for people to live full and meaningful lives, the cultural systems they occupy must be publicly recognised. This recognition involves giving members of particular groups certain right/exemptions that do not apply to the general public. Some such measures have already been introduced in western liberal democracies, for example Sikhs are exempt from the law that requires one to wear a helmet whilst riding a motorbike in the UK. Similarly in the US affirmative action and minority quotas are becoming quite commonplace. However not everybody supports these multicultural initiatives, some see the institutionalisation of forms of group recognition as dangerous and illiberal.

This essay will argue, from a liberal standpoint, that multicultural societies should not institutionalise a form of group recognition. It will critically analyse the arguments made for the institutionalisation of group recognition and find them to be inadequate. Firstly it will consider the idea that all cultures and value systems deserve equal recognition. It will be argued that, in light of the fact that different cultures often have directly conflicting values; the idea that all cultures deserve equal recognition is authoritarian, unjust and logically inconsistent. The essay will then consider the argument that cultures should be preserved and argue that this largely suffers from the same problems. Furthermore cultural preservation can have a damaging effect on the members within particular cultures who do not wish to see their cultures preserved, as in the case with women in patriarchal cultures. The essay will then consider Will Kymlicka's attempt to solve this problem by arguing for the recognition of cultures that can be accommodated into the liberal framework, and the rejection of those that cannot. It will be argued that his distinction between internal restrictions and external protections is insufficient because the line between them is not clear enough. The essay will then argue that the focus on group recognition assumes the existence of distinct cultural groups; however the reality is not as black and white as this makes it seem. It will be argued that the focus on the relationship between groups causes proponents of group recognition to ignore the differences within groups. This is dangerous because it empowers certain voices (the people that are seen to represent particular communities) and silences others (those who do not fit with the traditional view of their particular culture. Finally, it will be argued that the institutionalisation of group recognition can lead to increased hostility as different cultures compete for recognition. This 'divide and rule' situation benefits those who wish to maintain the status quo.

The idea that all value systems deserve equal recognition is based on the view that all such systems are equally valid. The proponent of group recognition, Tariq Madood, argues that people of ethnic minority communities should not have to 'hide or apologise for [their] origins' and that others should be required to respect their cultural backgrounds (Modood 2003 p.5). However it is difficult to see how a society can recognise all cultures

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simultaneously, when many cultural values directly conflict with each other. For example, a homosexual man is unlikely to respect Christians who believe in the inherent immorality of his sexuality. Likewise, an atheist feminist is unlikely to respect Muslims who believe she should cover her face in public. The idea that one should respect a culture whose values they completely disagree with is coercive and, as Brian Barry puts it, would require 'a great deal of encouragement from the Politically Correct Thought Police' (Barry 2001 p.271). People have the right to believe and argue that homosexuality is immoral, and that women should cover their faces in public, they are protected (at least in theory) by freedom of speech and expression in liberal societies. However they do not deserve respect for such beliefs simply because they are informed by cultural values. A society that requires a homosexual to respect the views of those who believe his sexuality makes him immoral does not seem like a just society. Moreover there are people who believe that the culture, religion, or race they belong to is superior to all others – for example, the Ku Klux Klan and certain black power movements. The idea that all cultures are equal and deserve equal recognition – even cultures that promote inequality between cultures – is logically inconsistent (Barry 2001 pp.11-12).

Furthermore Madood goes on to claim that not only should we respect different cultures (even if we find them intolerant and illiberal), we should also 'adapt public attitudes and arrangements so that the heritage they represent is encouraged rather than contemptuously expect them to wither away' (Modood 2003 p.5). For Madood then, culture is a good in and of itself. It is important to adapt institutions in a way that preserves different cultures. The liberal philosopher Brian Barry refers to attempts to actively preserve a culture as 'self-conscious traditionalism' (Barry 2001 p.259). Unselfconscious traditionalism, in contrast, is the organic tendency of cultural behaviours to be repeated over time. Over time, as Barry notes, 'cultural drift' will occur and 'unselfconscious traditionalists will tend to perpetuate the modification, along with the rest of the culture (Barry 2001 p.259). The idea that cultures should be preserved simply because they are cultures is a relatively new idea (Habermas 1994 p.132) and rightly bears problematisation. As noted above, different cultures often have values that directly conflict with each other. People from opposing cultures might argue for the preservation of their own culture while at the same time arguing for the destruction of another.

However a more serious issue arises when we look past the effect of cultural preservation on the relationship between different groups in society. The idea that cultures should be preserved through adapting 'public attitudes and arrangements' can have damaging implications for members of the particular cultures in question. Problems arise if people considered to be a member of a particular culture do not want that culture to be preserved. For example, Susan Okin writes about the effect of multiculturalism on women in minority cultures. After observing that most cultures, even liberal democratic ones, are patriarchal to some extent (Okin 1999 pp.12-13) she argues that:

"In the case of a more patriarchal minority culture in the context of a less patriarchal majority culture, no argument can be made on the basis of self-respect or freedom that the female members of the culture have a clear interest in its preservation" (Okin 1999 p.22)

Therefore cultural preservation can impact on a woman's individual rights if the culture that she belongs to does not recognise that she has equal status to men. In this sense belonging to a particular culture does not grant this woman respect, equality or justice. Instead it serves to trap her within a culture which offers considerably less benefits than the wider society that she is a part of.

However Will Kymlicka argues that we can get around these problems by only recognising cultural groups that do not conflict with liberal values. He argues that minorities that want to restrict the behaviour of their members should not be institutionally recognised in liberal democracies. However he believes that those who seek external protections from certain laws and customs should be institutionally recognised (Kymlicka 1995 p.37) Internal restrictions refer to intra-group relations where 'the ethnic or national group may seek the use of state power to repress the liberty of its own members' (Kymlicka 1995 p.36) Whereas external protections are where, 'the ethnic or national group may seek to protect its distinct existence by limiting the impact of the decisions made by the larger society' (Kymlicka 1995 p.36). Therefore the individual rights of cultural minority members will be protected if liberal societies only institutionalise forms of group recognition for those groups that do not wish to restrict the autonomy of their members. However the line between external protections and internal restrictions is not always so clear cut. Kymlicka himself notes, external protections can lead to internal restrictions, 'measures designed to provide external protection often

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have implications for the liberty of members within the community' (Kymlicka 1995 p.42). After the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (Salman Rushdie 1988) there were demands from some Muslims for group-libel laws to protect them from hate speech. However, as the Rushdie affair was an intra-community issue, not one that concerned relations between different communities. Rushdie was a member of the Muslim community, the perceived sense of the attack felt by those offended was from somebody who belonged to their cultural group. This is significant because it shows how the demand for external protection could potentially be used to apply internal restrictions on individuals within communities.

Even if there was a clearer cut way to distinguish between the kind of group recognition that can be accommodated by liberalism and the kind that cannot, the emphasis on group recognition encourages the idea that people can be put into distinct cultural boxes. For group recognition to be meaningful there has to be distinct groups in society. Whilst it is true that there are cultural and ethnic minority groups in most liberal societies, they are not homogenous and the lines between these different groups are often blurred. However, the focus on relationships between groups means that advocates of group rights tend to make light of the differences within groups (Okin 1999 p.12). This is problematic because the variation within groups is actually larger than the variation between groups (Okin 1999 p.12). The idea that there is a typical Muslim, Christian, Sikh, etc. is dangerous because it silences the voices of those who do not fit the norm. For Okin, the gendered aspect of cultures is often overlooked and this can lead to the interests of women within those cultures being overlooked (Okin 1999). As Okin argues, most cultures are patriarchal, and so a focus on the interests of groups would equate to a focus on the interests of men within those groups. This would often be at the expense of female group members because the interests of men within those groups would be to suppress women. Okin highlights a number of legal cases, such as rape and kidnap, where the individual interests of female victims have been pitted against the cultural interests of male defendants (OKIN 1999 p.18-19). Obviously this is the kind of cultural value that Kymlicka argues should not be institutionally recognised, and many proponents of group rights would not support the idea that rape can be defended as cultural practice. However the focus on group rights and recognition further empowers men in cultural groups where women are already suppressed. Furthermore, much of the suppression of women happens in the private sphere and a public affirmation of cultures can cause us to miss, and indirectly endorse, the private struggles of women (OKIN 1999 p.21).

Similarly, Malik has argued against the focus on the variation between groups, instead of that within groups. In *From Fatwa to Jihad* (2009) Malik argues that idea that there is a typical Muslim who can speak for all Muslims has encouraged the dominance of traditional conservative Muslim values at the expense of the more radical and progressive elements of the Muslim community:

"Multiculturalism transformed the character of anti-racism in Bradford. At the end of the 1970s, the main issues that concerned black and Asian communities were largely political: opposition to discrimination in the workplace, organising against racist attacks, preventing deportations and ending police brutality. By the mid-1980s, however, the focus had shifted to religious and cultural issues." (Malik 2009a p.78)

Malik explains this process with a case study looking at multicultural policies in Bradford. He argues that Bradford City Council's multicultural policies led to the Islamification of the town because they gave accreditation to religious leaders within the community. 'Once the mosques became the voice of the community', writes Malik 'then Muslim became the identity stamped upon every individual within that community' (Malik 2009 p. 75). Members of communities were then more likely to get funding for projects if they based their claims in cultural terms. Competition for council funding between different communities increased, leading to hostility (Malik 2009a p.72-79). Therefore, the institutional recognition of groups may not simply reflect the existence of diversity in liberal societies but, instead, increase it. The focus on cultural identities leads people to believe that this is the appropriate way to present themselves in the competition for resources and influence. This can lead to increased hostility between different groups if one group feels that they are not getting as much recognition as another. Malik writes that 'multiculturalism helped create new divisions and more intractable conflicts which made for a less openly racist but a more insidiously tribal Britain' (Malik 2009a p63).

This has important political consequences as it can impede the struggle for universal values such as equality, better

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working conditions, etc. Where political struggles are inclusive and have the potential to unite, cultural struggles are divisive and particular (Malik 2009a p.79). For Malik, ideological multiculturalism represents the abandonment of the possibility of common values (Malik 2009b). As Barry recognises this is beneficial to those who have interests in maintaining the status quo; "if political effort is dissipated in pressing for and defending special group privileges, it will not be available for mobilization on the basis of broader shared interests" (Barry 2001 p.12).

This essay has argued that groups should not be institutionally recognised in multicultural societies. It was argued that the idea that all cultures deserve equal respect has authoritarian implications concerning the matter of enforcement. It is also unjust to expect somebody to respect a particular culture when their lifestyle or principles are attacked by that culture. In liberal societies people should be free to promote their values, but others should also be free to criticise them. Moreover, it was argued, the idea that all cultures are equal does not fit with the fact that some cultures define themselves by their superiority to others. Second, the essay looked at the argument that cultures should be preserved institutionally. It was argued that this notion suffers from the same problems as the respect argument. However the real problem with the idea that cultures should be preserved is clear when we look at the effect of cultural preservation on its members. It was argued that women in patriarchal cultures are less likely to want to see the preservation of their culture. Next the essay considered the solution proposed to this problem by Will Kymlicka. His idea that liberal democracies should only institutionally recognise groups that do not conflict with basic liberal values is ultimately unconvincing. This is because his distinction between external protections and internal restrictions is unclear, external protections can be used to apply internal restrictions. A more fundamental problem with the arguments for group rights is that they presuppose the existence of distinct groups in society. Whilst there are clearly many different cultures and value systems in liberal societies, it is not clear where you draw the line between one community and another. It was argued that the focus on the relationship between groups causes advocates of group rights to miss the differences within groups. The idea of a typical Muslim, for example, can silence those within the Muslim community who do not fit the traditional Muslim norm. For Okin this meant the silencing of female voices and the further empowerment of male voices. For Malik it meant the dominance of traditional conservative Muslim values at the expense of the more radical progressive elements of the community. Finally, it was argued the institutional recognition of groups could lead to hostility between groups competing for recognition. This is a dangerous situation because a divided society means that the pursuit of universal progressive values is virtually impossible. Therefore, it benefits those who wish to maintain the status quo.

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