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## BOOK REVIEW: MULTICULTURALISM: THE POLITICAL THEORY OF DIVERSITY TODAY

John Carroll\*

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SHORTEN, A.: *Multiculturalism: The political Theory of Diversity Today* [Multikulturalizmus: Politická teória diverzity súčasnosti]. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022. 210 p. ISBN 978-1-509-55175-0.

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Multiculturalism has come under attack in recent times. For example, in 2010 the German Chancellor **Angela Merkel** remarked that attempts to build a multicultural society had “*utterly failed*” (Merkel says..., 2010). A year later, French President **Nicholas Sarkozy** stated that: “*We have been too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not enough about the identity of the country that was receiving him*”, also declaring that multiculturalism had been a “*failure*” (Sarkozy declares..., 2011). What is more, the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue of 2008 argued that: “*multiculturalism frequently shared the same, schematic conception of society set in opposition of majority and minority, differing only in endorsing separation of the minority from the majority rather than assimilation to it*” (White Paper...).

In the book *Multiculturalism: The Political Theory of Diversity Today*, **Andrew Shorten** attempts to show that despite such recent criticism, there still remains an important place for multiculturalism as a normative political theory today. By primarily focusing on modern-day cases concerning “*language, religion and nationality*” (p. 17). The author hopes to show how multicultural political theories have not only influenced debate concerning claims made by cultural minorities in the past, but also continue to influence contemporary debates in both rewarding and instructive ways.

In the introduction to the book, **Shorten** argues that it is not an accurate

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assumption to state that multiculturalism as a political theory has completely failed; one must rather understand that its methodology and analysis have been utilised and absorbed by other disciplines in contemporary studies. Connected to this point, another aim of the book is to show just how diverse the multicultural discipline can be, and how it has, and is able to continue to contribute to *“our most basic political concepts such as freedom, equality and sovereignty”* (p. 17).

As has been mentioned, one of **Shorten's** main objectives of the book is to emphasize the continued relevance of multiculturalism as a contemporary normative political theory. One of the key functions of multiculturalism, that of considering how democratic societies should best respond to the cultural differences that exist between their citizens, is today arguably more pertinent than ever. And, despite criticism to the contrary, the author argues that multicultural arguments from different backgrounds are able to be and continue being a *“fertile and instructive source of inspiration for societies confronted by different forms of diversity”* (p. 2). That being said, **Shorten** doubts that it is possible for an individual multicultural approach to be satisfactory in the contemporary political environment, and therefore argues that it is perhaps more intellectually instructive to understand contemporary multicultural political theory *“as a set of overlapping responses to a series of interrelated, but distinctive issues”* (p. 1). Indeed, the author promotes the central idea that instead of the singular “multiculturalism”, it would be preferable to use “multiculturalisms” in the plural, in order to emphasize the myriad of theories and policies that have been utilized to address particular cases of cultural diversity in contemporary societies.

**Shorten's** book is organised to first of all provide a historical chronology of multicultural political theory from its heyday in the 1990s and the 2000s up to the present day. The final chapters provide evidence of how exactly multicultural theories are able to contribute to contemporary debates.

The second chapter of the book begins by examining the political theory of liberalism in relation to multiculturalism. The author considers this to be a logical starting point not only because of the dominance of liberalism as a political theory in the contemporary West, but also because **Shorten** aims to consider the questions of *“how liberals ought to respond to cultural diversity”* (p. 19), as well as *“whether liberalism is the most appropriate theoretical framework to address the issues raised by multiculturalism”* (p. 19). **Shorten** is successful in succinctly explicating some of the main tensions that arise in contemporary liberal theory. For example, freedom is obviously a central tenet of any liberal position, but different conclusions to practical challenges involving cultural diversity may arise

depending precisely how one believes freedom should be respected. To illustrate this point, **Shorten** draws upon a famous American court case from 1972, *Wisconsin v. Yoder*. This case involved the *Amish* community and their rights to remove some of their 14- and 15-year-old children from high school education, which was at the time compulsory up to the age of 16. The central issue of freedom in this instance revolves around how exactly the parents' demand is to be interpreted. Does freedom demand that the majority society respect the minority's particular culture and therefore leave them alone? Or does the parents' request constrict the individual choice of the children and therefore prevent them from being "*authors of their own lives*" (p. 21)? Connected to this point, **William Galston** argues that such disagreements provide evidence of "*two quite different strands of liberal thought*" (p. 22): 1. advocated by commentators such as **Chandran Kukuthas** and **Galston** himself, maintains that individual freedom is best served through toleration and diversity; 2. promoted by such thinkers as **Will Kymlicka**, holds that individual autonomy is the central goal of the liberal state.

In response, chapter 3 examines some criticism of the liberal position. One such example is liberalism's neglect of the background conditions upon which its assumptions are based; particularly the roles that inclusion and exclusion play in multicultural societies. Another is its claim to be both neutral and objective regarding private matters, assuming that its theoretical framework is somehow capable of being placed above other competing viewpoints. This assumption, according to many liberal critics, is both arrogant and erroneous, being as it is one worldview among many. This chapter also considers some of the alternatives that have been advanced in relation to addressing cultural diversity, in particular the politics of recognition and intercultural dialogue. 1. The former argues that "*promoting equality and inclusion requires not only a fair distribution of goods and resources, but also that the state publicly recognize and affirm differences related to such things as language, race, gender, religion, sexuality and disability*" (p. 49). Although some commentators use these arguments in opposition to liberalism, such as ideas that draw on the work of both **Hegel** and **the Frankfurt school of critical theory**, some scholars, for example **Charles Taylor** and **Anna Elisabetta Galeotti**, believe that such claims can successfully be reconciled within a liberal position. 2. The second approach, intercultural dialogue, starts by acknowledging the challenges of reaching an understanding "*between and across cultures because each of us is already immersed within a particular framework of meaning, giving us a vantage point from which it can be difficult to*

*comprehend the value or significance of beliefs and practices rooted in unfamiliar ways of life*" (p. 49). This position, promoted by **Bhikhu Parekh** among others, argues that being able to have a valid form of dialogue between cultures should prove beneficial to most citizens. By considering different interpretations of what it means to live a good life, individuals should be able to reflect upon and recognize the possible limits of their own ideas and life philosophies. They should therefore be able to adjust these for the better, and ideally be able to reach "*a genuine consensus about how a multicultural society should arrange and regulate its shared institutions*" (pp. 49 - 50).

Chapter 4 considers four different philosophical criticisms of multiculturalism that are united in their belief that "*multicultural political theory is based on faulty premises or risks taking society in a dangerously mistaken direction*" (p. 79). 1. The first criticism that **Shorten** considers is an egalitarian one, most notably put forward by **Brian Barry**, who was concerned that "*multiculturalism threatened the principle of equality before the law by calling for various forms of special treatment for cultural and religious minorities*" (p. 80). 2. The next objection is a feminist one that was first formulated by **Susan Okin**, and also posits that a major shortcoming of multicultural theory is its opposition to equality. She is particularly critical of multiculturalism "*for focusing too much on the relationships between cultural groups and not enough on those within cultural groups, leading them to neglect the risks of extending supports to patriarchal cultures*" (p. 80). 3. The third philosophical objection is the essentialist critique. This was expressed by thinkers such as **Anne Philips** and **Seyla Benhabib**, and basically argues that multicultural theories are based upon an erroneous notion of culture; one that emphasizes the differences between cultures and yet neglects differences within them, thereby "essentializing" the main characteristics of particular cultures. This is a mistake, argue critics, because cultures are not homogenous or concrete entities, but are much more fluid and nuanced than multicultural theories would have us believe. 5. The last criticism that **Shorten** evaluates in this chapter is the cosmopolitan objection which questions the claim made by several multiculturalists that an agent must remain fixed in a single culture to be able to enjoy a constructive and beneficial life. **Jeremy Waldron** is a staunch advocate of this position.

Following on from this, the fifth chapter considers some of the more recent alternatives to multiculturalism that have been proposed by governments in order to address topics such as the public concern of rising immigration. These include

loyalty oaths, citizenship tests and civic integration programmes. However, instead of becoming complete substitutes, **Shorten** argues that such concepts are in fact “*better understood either as continuations of multicultural policies in a new form or as broadly compatible with it*” (p. 105). Another alternative to multicultural theories has been the notion of “interculturalism”. But, again, the author argues that many of these ideas “*belong to the broad family of multicultural political theories, rather than in opposition to them*” (p. 106).

Furthermore, in chapters 6, 7 and 8, the author illustrates how theories of multiculturalism are able to contribute to more specific contemporary debates surrounding claims put forward by cultural minorities connected to religious differences, the idea of self-government and the nation-state, and linguistic justice for national minorities, respectively. All of these topics have contemporary real-world relevance, and **Shorten** posits that multicultural political theory is still able to contribute to such debates. For example, the concepts of toleration and accommodation play a fundamental role in many multicultural theories; concepts that have proven instructive in discussions surrounding religion in contemporary diverse societies, as is detailed in chapter 6. Such ideas may help to address the tensions that exist between questions such as whether western states should support secularist policies, or whether minority faiths should be given preferential treatment in order that they may be preserved. **Shorten** examines the question as to whether such accommodations can be made without contravening liberal principles of state neutrality. In connection with such challenges, the notions of meaning-giving beliefs and commitments, integrity, equality and belonging are all considered. What is more, many contemporary multiculturalists believe that the idea of identity plays a central role in discussions concerning religious diversity, a concept that has taken centre stage in recent debates, providing yet further evidence of how multicultural political theory may prove instructive in such debates.

In chapter 7, **Shorten** highlights how multicultural political theory is able to contribute to the issue of collective autonomy for both national and religious groups. For the former, matters such as identity and territorial self-government rights are of obvious contemporary relevance in areas like Catalonia in Spain, Scotland in the United Kingdom and Quebec in Canada. **Shorten** explores a number of different options that might be applied to such cases, for example, secession, devolution and the establishment of multinational federations, ultimately emphasizing the fundamental place that substantive and respectful

dialogue should have in order to arrive at satisfactory outcomes. Similarly, some religious groups have desired the attainment of rights to be able to conduct their own affairs, without the interference of a secular state. One of the arguments that is explored in this chapter promotes the idea that religious institutions should be considered as having sovereign rights, similar to those of a nation-state, in order to protect their collective autonomy. The second acknowledges the claims that a liberal secular state may have on religious institutions, but argues that special exceptions should be made in certain cases.

Finally, chapter 8 explores the idea of multilingualism within states that contain long-settled language communities, such as Scottish Gaelic in the United Kingdom, English and French in Canada and Catalan in Spain, as well as languages used by more recent migrants or refugees. Issues are raised such as to what extent should minority languages be catered for in culturally diverse societies. Should the liberal state remain neutral to the concept of minority languages or should policies be supported that actively promote them, so that every citizen is able to access societal opportunities equally? What is more, is it valid to discriminate between the acknowledgment of language rights for national minorities and immigrants; and if so, how exactly should this be done?

Although **Shorten** is adamant to note that one must recognise the limits of multiculturalism as a political theory, he also argues that it would be unwise to discard political theories of multiculturalism altogether. Using them in combination with other political theories is a profitable exercise in providing as thorough and precise an analysis as possible. The book *Multiculturalism: The Political Theory of Diversity Today* is a significant contribution to the field, first of all because of how it traces the development of the discipline; providing a succinct yet precise summary of how ideas and arguments that were framed mainly within a multicultural narrative in the past. A further contribution is that of illustrating how such methods have evolved into and influenced other more particular topics in modern day culturally diverse societies, and therefore continue to be relevant. For example, it is argued that multiculturalism can provide instructive analysis for debates concerning identity politics: “*Locating multiculturalism within this wider context of identity politics is certainly not inappropriate, since there are clear parallels between the experiences, interests, struggles and strategies of the groups identified by each term*” (p. 185).

In conclusion, **Shorten** provides an instructive overview of the historical developments of multiculturalism as a political theory. By doing so, he argues that despite arguments to the contrary, it can continue to contribute to contemporary debates concerning cultural diversity. Indeed, he questions the accuracy of critics who have signalled its demise, arguing that; “*opposition to multiculturalism even within Europe has arguably been more of a phenomenon of political rhetoric than policy reality*” (p. 105). He calls for an understanding of separate “multiculturalisms” that should be able to continue to provide valuable research and policies by appealing to the disciplines wide variety of seemingly separate debates; contributing to and supporting arguments from other branches of contemporary political theory.

What is more, in answer to the criticism that it has been seemingly on the decline as an academic discipline, **Shorten** suggests that particular debates and ideas surrounding multiculturalism have merely taken different forms, such as interculturalism, that deal with more precise and distinct issues. A convincing argument is provided to advocate the position that multiculturalism remains relevant, highlighting the fact that many contemporary topics are the descendants of multiculturalism as a normative political theory. Although it is doubtlessly important to accept the limits of multicultural political theory, it would be unwise to discard it completely. Ultimately, multicultural arguments “*can only provide tentative guidance for real-world politics, and will need to be supported by ideas drawn from other branches of political theory*” (p. 186). Concepts such as autonomy, toleration, recognition, cultural integrity, belonging and intercultural dialogue remain as relevant as ever in contemporary societies. *Multiculturalism: The Political Theory of Diversity Today* is a timely reminder of the contributions that the normative political theory of multiculturalism is able to continue providing in these debates.

In sum, **Shorten's** book provides an interesting and detailed collection of criticism of multicultural theories, and yet ultimately concludes that many of the topics that have been dealt within the field of multiculturalism are still able to provide constructive analysis in contemporary, diverse societies. What his work achieves, as well as proving to be an instructive genealogy of the discipline, is to provide evidence that many of the central topics within multiculturalism are still relevant in contemporary societies.



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