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Author(s) / Autor(i): **Božena Konecka-Szydełko**  
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## BOOK REVIEW: JUST, REASONABLE MULTICULTURALISM: LIBERALISM, CULTURE AND COERCION

Bożena Konecka-Szydelko\*

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COHEN-ALMAGOR, R. *Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism: Liberalism, Culture and Coercion* [Spravodlivý, Rozumný Multikulturalizmus: Liberalizmus, Kultúra a Nátlak]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 396 p. ISBN 978-1108469838.

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*Multiculturalism does not mean “do what you want”,  
but: “develop your identity, interact with others and strengthen,  
through this integration, elements of supra-ethnic identity”*

Leszek Gęsiak<sup>1</sup>

The existence of multicultural societies, and thus adaptation to cultures different from the culture of the majority (or dominant culture), is a contemporary reality. For many years, multiculturalism seemed to be what everyone wanted. Cities were praised for having a diverse population. Universities sought to select a student community that would offer a multicultural experience. Corporations have tried to show that they support a multicultural workforce. Diversity was considered a cultural influence to be embraced (Berkes – Cohen-Almagor, 2021,

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\* Mgr. Bożena Konecka-Szydelko is a PhD. student at the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Kuzmányho 1, 974 01 Banská Bystrica, Slovak Republic, and she also work at the Provincial Sanitary and Epidemiological Station in Rzeszów, Poland, e-mail: Bozena.Konecka-Szydelko@sanepid.gov.pl.

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<sup>1</sup> Leszek Gęsiak is Jesuit, Doctor of Religious Studies. He studied theology in Warsaw and Paris. He was ordained a priest in 1996. He worked, among others, in Sydney, Barcelona and Zaragoza. In the years 2000-2003 he was an employee of the Jesuit Catholic Office of Information and European Initiatives OCIFE in Brussels. Author of the book “*Multiculturalism. The role of religion in the dynamics of the phenomenon*” (WAM 2007). Head of the Department of Media and Social Communication at the Ignatianum Academy in Krakow.

p. 133).

However, in recent years, the concepts of multiculturalism have gradually changed from something that was considered so positive to something perceived as requiring control and limitations because it threatened the cohesion of communities and nations. Did we all live in a bubble of intellectual and cultural elites where we thought of multiculturalism as positive contribution, when in fact many others in our societies saw it as a challenge to their identity and a problem to be faced.

Today we often hear about the crisis of multiculturalism. Images of numerous ethnic and religious conflicts are quoted, especially in the United States and Western European societies. The loud statement of the German Chancellor **Angela Merkel**, who declared that the building of a multicultural society in this country had ended in a fiasco, resounded widely. She went on to say that too little was required of immigrants in the past, who should have done more to integrate into German society, especially to learn the language in order to attend school and find a place in the labour market: *"In the early 1960s, our country invited workers from abroad. We fooled ourselves for a while, we used to say: "they won't stay, one day they will leave", but the reality is different"* (Wieviorka, 2011, p. 86). This speech by the chancellor caused an avalanche of comments. A spectacular failure of multiculturalism was trumpeted, admitted by the leader of one of the largest and richest countries in the world. But can we really talk about the failure of multiculturalism here?

While it is difficult to disagree with the statement that the German state has failed in the ethnic dialogue between the majority German society and a minority group of Turkish emigrants, it is difficult to see any signs of multiculturalism in the German experience. Germany never opted for a multicultural policy, but for a temporary adaptation of the Turkish minority with the majority society, as Chancellor **Merkel** herself mentioned. The economic migrants were supposed to return to their countries after some time, but this did not happen. Therefore, the assimilation option was chosen, which was supposed to provide them with the necessary public rights on the one hand, but it did not really assume any planned cultural policy. The effect is obvious: the Turkish minority is confined to national ghettos, but it also speaks German and, in the vast majority of its members, enjoys all public rights like any German citizen.

Cultural diversity has become the everyday reality of modern societies, which in many of them, it forces the introduction of multilateralism as a rule of order and state order in the face of the multiplicity of immigrant and ethnic (cultural) groups.

Such a policy generates both crowds of supporters and opponents. Their arguments contradict each other. It's inevitable. However, it is worth remembering that there is no turning back from multiculturalism.

Over the last quarter of a century, the crisis of multiculturalism has been triggered by both politicians and some scientists (De Waal – Duyvendak, 2022, p. 2). **David Cameron** famously called it “wrong” and “catastrophic”, and **Angela Merkel** said it was “an absolute failure”. **R. Cohen-Almagor** opens *A Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism* with the well-known and oft-quoted statements of these two former world leaders. However, while **D. Cameron** called for “muscular liberalism” in response to allegations of multiculturalism, **R. Cohen-Almagor** is trying to make a new statement about multicultural liberalism. Instead of the opposition between liberalism and multiculturalism, **R. Cohen-Almagor** sees union, productive relationships, and even some degree of synthesis.

The main thesis of **Raphael Cohen-Almagor's** book *Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism: Liberalism, Culture and Coercion* is that the apparent distance between liberalism and multiculturalism, especially in terms of individual and group rights, is actually reconcilable and bridges need to be built. In the words of **R. Cohen-Almagor**, the book aims to propose “reasonable standards for reconciling liberalism and multiculturalism, between individual and group rights” (p. 19). “Liberal-democratic societies must tolerate illiberal groups”, he states: “as long as these groups behave in a fair and reasonable manner” (p. 238). **R. Cohen-Almagor** is primarily concerned with defining a framework for specifying in detail the conditions, controls, and constraints perceived as necessary to contain the more problematic aspects of multiculturalism, along with the conditions that where the state can legally interfere with minorities.

**Kymlicka's** book *Multicultural Citizenship* (1995) is a major reference for the **Cohen-Almagor** principles dealing with issues of external and internal coercion (Orgad – Koopmans, 2022). **R. Cohen-Almagor** also makes a distinction between historical national minorities and more recent migrants, initially stating that “we should therefore allow cultural norms to be banned when individuals voluntarily migrate to a liberal state” (p. 115) and “When someone decides to come and live in a liberal world, he must accept its sacred values and laws” (p. 143).

However, he argues that “we shouldn't rule out cultural norms, however distasteful and harmful we might see them when cultural minorities lived peacefully and the liberal state expanded and imposed itself on them” (pp. 115 - 116). For example, on indigenous issues and multinational rights, he says that “I

have revised my opinion, thinking there is scope for state interference to correct gender injustice” (p. 184), and interference for the sake of ensuring human rights. Gender equality is a major topic of much discussion throughout the book.

**Raphael Cohen-Almagor's** book *Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism: Liberalism, Culture and Coercion* is divided into four parts. The first presents the theoretical basis of the book (also summarized in the introduction). **R. Cohen-Almagor** presents this in spheres which are presented in pictorial form before the introduction.

The first or primary sphere is quite simply **Rawls'** theory of justice and despite the book's perhaps somewhat misleading title, liberalism provides a normative framework and orientation, as well as points of reference and legitimacy where certain features of multiculturalism can be adjusted (Krasnodębski, 2022, p. 39). Indeed, **R. Cohen-Almagor** often appeals to the veil of ignorance to support the points he makes throughout the book. This sphere is completed by the “*most basic norms*” (p. 34) of **Kantian** ethics regarding respect for others, along with **Mill's** Harm Principle. Together they form only part of the **R. Cohen-Almagor** framework, and a concept based on individual rights. References to human rights are made frequently throughout the text, and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is invoked as “*the normative foundation of human rights discourse*” (p. 180). Multiculturalism comes in the second category, where reason is added as a “bridge” to “reconcile” liberalism and multiculturalism. Here **R. Cohen-Almagor** seeks to “*establish a golden mean between liberal reasoning and multiculturalists who see multiculturalism as an alternative to liberalism and who believe that the protection of group culture overrides common law*” (p. 46). In presenting the content of what is supposed to be reasonable, **R. Cohen-Almagor** distinguishes between moral, legal, social and political rationality. In these different dimensions, **R. Cohen-Almagor** emphasizes that rationality involves above all the application of reason and considering others to reach consensus (pp. 48 - 49). “*A reasonable governance framework would accommodate the demands of reasonable people situated in an environment of reasonable pluralism and legitimate disagreement. Reasonable people try to reconcile differences in order to achieve a stable political consensus on social principles and political*” (p. 49). Reason is constituted by respecting others and not harming others (p. 52) and thus returns to the first sphere, with **R. Cohen-Almagor** arguing that “*liberalism and multiculturalism are reconciled, provided that multiculturalism is reasonable*” (p. 48).

The third part of the book presents the “operating mechanisms” of

compromise and deliberative democracy. **R. Cohen-Almagor** distinguishes two types of compromise here, a “true” compromise based on the principles of mutual recognition and a “temporary or postponed” tactical compromise that lacks reciprocity, either because one side is more dominant and so does not need to compromise, or because one side is forced to accept something like the least bad option. I think this is an interesting distinction that could potentially be helpful in thinking about deliberative dialogue. The author adds to this a fragmented picture of coercion, in which the intention of coercion with regard to the principles established in the first two spheres is paramount. **R. Cohen-Almagor** here seeks to distinguish what may be legitimate coercion, on suitably liberal grounds and limits, from unlawful coercion, where coercion is aimed at illiberal reasons. At the same time, he develops this idea of legitimacy and deals with types of harm, distinguishing between physical and non-physical. **R. Cohen-Almagor** deals specifically with the rights of women and children, and in addition to establishing the conditions under which the state can comply interfere with the law in ensuring the observance of these rights, cares about ensuring conditions that ensure the possibility of “resigning” from the culture of upbringing. Here **R. Cohen-Almagor** makes some important distinctions that go a long way in finding a way through some very controversial and often polarizing issues.

Examples he cites include honour killings, circumcision, and FGM as cases of physical harm, and discussion of *Haredi* and *Amish Jews* as cases of (mostly) non-physical harm in relation to gender roles and children's education. **Cohen-Almagor's** careful distinctions provide a nuanced and balanced discussion of FGM and circumcision. In part because **R. Cohen-Almagor** takes an approach here that appears to be more pragmatic, one that considers various harms, including those to the group, that his distinctions are meant to take into account. There is some reflection here on the benefits of multicultural sensitivity and how these can be incorporated.

The idea of the right to “opt out” based on reason is a rather abstract concept of social processes. **Cohen-Almagor's** way out of this, and how to determine when the liberal state can interfere, is based on another distinction, namely “self-coercion” or what is later referred to as “internalized coercion”. At this point, it is recognized that the autonomy of the individual has been excessively limited, allowing him to make a properly free, autonomous and voluntary choice. However, it quickly becomes less than simple. On the one hand, *Haredi* women who assume their gendered social position are determined to explicitly represent the issue of internalized coercion (p. 201), but this is difficult to reconcile with other

statements that allow *Haredi* women to prefer to be “*queen of the house*” (p. 202) and an acceptance that the *Amish* lifestyle may actually be attractive to many of its members (similar difficulties arise in the discussion of children and education as well, again despite important points).

Liberalism appears here as the ultimate expert on the rationality of multiculturalism, especially if liberal coercion is legally applied to people, while “*tradition and historical memory can keep the internalized coercion alive, even if it is clearly unjust in the eyes of outsiders*”(p. 103). In principle, there is something important here, but also something disturbing. On the one hand, the emancipatory “neutrality” of liberalism aims to save those for whom “*specific difficulties arise when some women in the aforementioned cultural or religious group cannot fully assimilate the system of norms that discriminates against them*” (p. 103). **R. Cohen-Almagor** questions the idea of forcing women to be free (p. 263) and states, for example, that “*paternalism, which has noble ideas of freeing women from coercion, is legitimate when women complain about their subordination*” (p. 262), but internalized coercion clearly goes beyond this. Referring, for example, to bans on the hijab, niqab and burqa in France, he argues that “*people's dubious assumptions about the internalized coercion of women cannot be a reasonable justification for interference*” (p. 262). However, the discussion of *Haredi* women seems to be doing just that. Cultural justifications should not be invoked in this case (p. 106), but that does not take into account the fact that the justifications that the book itself tries to carefully outline are themselves cultural justifications, but which **R. Cohen-Almagor** sees as inalienable, as inherent, inviolable, even “*natural*”, based on “*the inherent quality of the person*” and “*the inner spark of the soul that we all possess*” (p. 36).

Part four closes the book and presents two chapters on two different case studies in each country where multiculturalism is juxtaposed with security issues.

The first is France and the veil, and the second is Israel and its Arab-Palestinian citizens. The chapter on France covers trampled territory and criticism. The discussion is interesting enough, but perhaps not much here for those who are already familiar with the debates about the dress code of Muslim women in France and the French republican concept of freedom and state-citizen relations.

The second chapter on the case of Israel covers a case much less known in this kind of discussion, and it is a welcome context for discussion here and treated with the sense of **R. Cohen-Almagor** care and concern found throughout the book.

### But is it multiculturalism?

If the above has focused on the main aspects of **Cohen-Almagor's** theoretical position on what is fair and reasonable, I would now like to explain how multiculturalism fits into this framework and discussions in the book.

As mentioned above, **R. Cohen-Almagor** says he is addressing multiculturalists who see multiculturalism as an alternative to liberalism, but the question remains: is it multiculturalism? They are rarely seen in a book other than in attacks by others or occasional court decisions. **R. Cohen-Almagor** addresses allegations against multiculturalism that it is bad for women or bad for democracy, or that it fosters terrorism to show that it doesn't have to be that way.

The aim of this kind of criticism is very often caricatures of multiculturalism created by others, and not the thoughts of multiculturalists themselves, so there is some degree of shadow boxing in places.

For example, in the discussion of the difference between arranged marriages and coercive, though interesting and important enough distinctions, it is not clear what practices tolerated in the name of multiculturalism in a liberal state are addressed. There is little in this section that the vast majority of multiculturalists would disagree with. For example, in the section on family honour killing, he seems to uphold the criticism that multiculturalism is responsible for "*unwittingly not interfering and neglecting the responsibility of the state*", repeating various caricatured criticisms. In statements such as "*I argue that intervention is justified in cases of gross and systematic human rights violations such as murder, slavery, expulsion or serious bodily injury to certain individuals or groups*" (p. 112), one wonders which multiculturalists challenges. There is, of course, a serious political and social aspect here, but a lack of theoretical content that I believe would help lead the thoughtful and theoretically insightful **R. Cohen-Almagor** discussions in interesting directions.

I think autonomy and freedom are rather too easily perceived as neutral concepts rather than formations of culture and choice. Neutrality is invoked as "*the tendency to provide individuals with the freedom and opportunity to cultivate their personalities and promote their conceptions of good as they see fit. Liberal states refrain from promoting a single, all-encompassing ideal of good*" (p. 10). But **R. Cohen-Almagor** wants to promote a concept of good, a decidedly liberal-secular concept.

To sum up, **Cohen-Almagor's** book is a welcome addition to this field. It offers some helpful analytical considerations and presents a convincing and coherent liberal framework with some multicultural sensibility. The framework is,



on its own terms, fair and reasonable, and a fresh liberal statement deserves attention. However, the main question to ask is: to what extent is it multicultural?

The solution is yet to come. Belief in equality, freedom of religion and other freedoms provide protection for cultures different from the majority (dominant culture), while states prohibit the most unacceptable practices (female genital mutation, forced marriage, etc.), they generally refrain from solutions at the community level, rather deciding on a case-by-case basis who should conform to whom through a series of court decisions. Solving problems at the individual level is easier because the general drawing of boundaries at the community level casts the shadow that it runs counter to the belief in the values that underlie Western cultures, and Western cultures are not yet ready for a paradigm shift.

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