

H-Net Reviews

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Anne Phillips. *Multiculturalism without Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 168 pp. \$30.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-12944-0.

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Multiculturalism without Culture?

This is a very good book written in Anne Phillips's inimitable conceptually precise, theoretically acute, fair-minded, and plain English style. Phillips operates as a political theorist who seeks to clarify the quagmire of issues that beset contemporary multiculturalism. She argues that attacks on multiculturalism have been fueled by what we might call a "culturalist" conception of multiculturalism, one that privileges a group-based notion of cultural identity. A group-based notion of group identity positions those said to belong to the group as simple instantiations of the group identity. For reasons of their group membership these people seem unable to realize the possibilities of autonomy that inhere in the standing of the individual citizen within a liberal democratic type of polity. Not only does this approach to cultural difference subsume the individual within the group, it essentializes cultural identity for it is presupposed as already existent and not subject to the dissonance, incoherence, and contradictions of an identity that is negotiated within the everyday, complex, and multiple (thus not only cultural) entanglements of individuals. When cultural identity is essentialized, autonomy as a political value is transformed into the automatic attribute of a culture that is said to value autonomy. Thus, those who belong to such a culture do not have to think about or struggle for their own individual autonomy, and they enjoy the group-based privilege of rescuing others who are perceived as belonging to cultures that do not value autonomy, especially if they are that prototypical victim-women. As Phillips notes, "Activists have observed wryly that a lot of people not previously known for their

support for gender equality now seem to get very agitated about the abuse of women, so long as it is abuse of women within minority or non-Western cultural groups" (p. 25).

When culture is essentialized, the policy of multiculturalism must appear dubious for it will seem to be a policy that gives group identity a privilege it would not otherwise have. This group identity is always already a minority group identity for it makes no sense to develop a policy of multiculturalism for the majority group identity, and, accordingly, multiculturalism appears as a policy that legitimizes cultural difference that is antagonistic to autonomy. In this framework, then, multiculturalism comes under justified attack.

Multiculturalism approached in this way, then, as Phillips puts it, must appear not "as a cultural liberator but as a cultural straitjacket, forcing those described as members of a minority cultural group into a regime of authenticity, denying them the chance to cross cultural borders, borrow cultural influences, define and redefine themselves" (p. 14). Yet there is a good deal at stake here. If the attacks on multiculturalism are permitted to stand without questioning, then one of the most important achievements of liberal democracy in recent times is dismantled. Phillips's simple but brilliant conceptual intervention is to ask if it is "possible to have multiculturalism without culture" (p. 15). She argues that it is crucial to recognize that culture matters and that it enters into how power, opportunity, and status work just as class,

gender, and race also do. Her background in feminist political theory allows her to suggest that just as gender is a category that has to be used to enable a political valuing of equality, it is a contradiction in terms for such a politics to essentialize gender. The point in recognizing that those who share the gender determination of women can be disadvantaged by this aspect of their subject position is to open space for these people *as individuals* to negotiate and arbitrate what gender means, how it enters into institutional life, and how it affects their lives.

To make her argument, Phillips offers an alternative view of culture than an essentialist one and she argues that the values of equality and autonomy are political rather than cultural in nature. These arguments are linked. She argues against the classical anthropological view of culture as an “internally coherent whole” where it is also assumed that there is little mutual exchange between cultures and that the members of a culture have been successfully inducted into it such that there is consensus on its values. She might be said to be offering a political conception of culture by arguing that it is always historically contextual, always contested, and often subject to a political agenda “when people make their claims about the authoritative interpretation of their culture” (p. 45). In offering consistent advocacy of the values of equality and autonomy as political values, Phillips refuses those who reduce these values to cultural identity—that of the West understood as a hegemonic and imperialistic force. “Autonomy” she defines as “the capacity to reflect on, and within the limits of our circumstances, either endorse or change the way we act or live—thus, in some significant sense, to make our actions and choices our *own*” (p. 101, emphasis in the original). It is because autonomy is valued that equality is valued—people share

equality in their right to be treated as subjects who have this capacity for autonomy.

In making this argument, Phillips is situating multiculturalism as an emancipatory discourse. Individuals cannot be released from culture because it deeply enters into the nature of their habitus, but if they are to be “free” (autonomous), then they must be free to figure out how they want to live with this determination as with the others. From this it follows, as Phillips argues, that it is not enough for liberal theorists, such as Will Kymlicka, to propose that culture and autonomy are reconciled if individuals have freedom of “exit” in relation to the culture in which they find themselves. She suggests that “voice” may be even more important than “exit.” The rationale for multiculturalism resides in public recognition of the importance of culture to people’s lives and in the public provision of opportunities for voice especially in cases where individuals may be subject to group coercion. It also resides in public protection against discrimination on the basis of supposed cultural difference. Phillips offers this rationale in the context of consideration of how these issues play out especially in Britain at this time so that her argument acquires concrete and specific relevance to policy debates there.

The weakness in the book is that it goes only so far theoretically. As I have indicated, in effect, Phillips is pitting “the political” against culture, and this offers a splendid opportunity for re-interrogating the nature of the political. I am not sure that Phillips takes this opportunity nor do I think she shows how and why the value of autonomy is central to the nature of the political. All said, however, this is an excellent and considered argument for multiculturalism at a time when it has come under attack from all quarters.

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