

Book Review

Multiculturalism without Culture by Anne Phillips

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Feminism and cultural relativism have increasingly been pitched against each other. Scholars and activists alike are faced with the very undesirable dilemma: should we choose gender equality and be criticized for being ethnocentric, or should we opt for multiculturalism and give up on our sisters suffering from violence masked as cultural traditions?

In this book Anne Phillips addresses this dilemma in a new light, and argues that multiculturalism and gender equality are mutually compatible. She believes that criticisms of multicultural policy have focused too much on the extremes of minority cultures, and as a result have wrongly concluded that minority cultures tend to harm women and tend to be against gender equality. She thinks that this view is a result of the selective use of the concept of culture which defines the Western individual as autonomous and having the ability to reflect moral judgments, while treating non-Western persons (especially women) as belonging to a collective and are incapable of agency. Thus, she argues, the way forward is to deconstruct culture. The central theme of the book is to review the meaning of culture, and to replace the reified notion of culture by one that places individual agency at its core. She calls this project “multiculturalism without culture” (p. 9).

The book consists of an Introduction and six chapters. The Introduction starts off with Phillips tracing how, from the mid 1990s and within just a decade multiculturalism in a number of Western countries has transformed from a representation of progressiveness to being a scapegoat for social tensions, because of concerns for terrorism and failed economic and social integration of ethnocultural minorities. Within this

sociopolitical context, Phillips observes two contradictory issues: First, “feminism was becoming prone to paralysis by cultural difference” as feminists tried to avoid cultural imperialism (p. 1), and second, “principles of gender equality were being deployed as part of a demonization of minority cultural groups” as cultural stereotypes and racism hijacked gender equality (p. 2). She believes that it is necessary to cut through these dilemmas by firmly asserting the principle of equality, which requires support for “both multiculturalism and women’s equality and rights” (p. 3, emphasis added).

In Chapter One Phillips delineates her idea of “multiculturalism without culture”. She traces the notions of culture as used in political theory and feminist literatures. For the political theorist, cultural groups assume a “quasi-legal entity that has historically enjoyed or is now claiming jurisdiction over its members. This solidifies the group into something very substantial” (p. 19), and as a result states are obliged to respect and recognize cultures that are supposed to belong to unique groups. Thus cultural politics is about maintaining group distinctness, leading to group identities that are oppositional. Likewise, in feminist literature, reducing women to a universal group or stereotyping women into regional groups have led to views that cultures are bounded and having essentialized values. Phillips believes that much of these are misguided views of culture. She stresses the importance of recognizing what is individuals’ choice from coercive preferences, that is, “understanding cultural pressures” without “assuming that culture dictates” (p. 41). This discussion of culture continues into Chapter Two which draws on anthropological research. She argues against culturalist explanations by citing examples such as ending female genital cutting in Senegal and using maternal clinics in Ecuador. Phillips believes that often culture is invoked in explaining so-called irrational behavior, and yet it is often practical problems that women have to face in their social world that has led to such behavior. She also goes into a discussion of why cosmopolitanism is not a suitable replacement of multiculturalism, both theoretically and politically.

In Chapters Three to Five, Phillips develops her argument for the case of holding on to multiculturalism as both a concept and as a political strategy. Chapter Three discusses the use of culture defence in English

and U.S. courts. Phillips finds that while many legal systems pay attention to cultural background in court cases, at the same time they suffer from the fixity of cultures that tend to overgeneralize particular groups. Chapter Four examines how culture moulds individual behavior and often serves as a constraining factor, but she notes importantly that culture does not determine behavior. That is, human agency is constantly at play. Chapter Five takes a new look at the use of “exit” and believes that without proper understanding of cultural belonging, leaving an oppressive group or family is not a satisfactory solution for individuals.

Chapter Six concludes by it making a case for a multicultural policy that is based on cultural understanding and due recognition of individual agency among ethnocultural minorities. The theme of “treating people as agents, not as captives of their culture or robots programmed by cultural rules” (p. 176) is once again reiterated, but simultaneously Phillips cautions that we must pay attention to the obstacles that discourage people from voicing their problems with cultural pressures and practices. She believes that this is precisely where governments and public agencies should step in-to remove these obstacles, so that individuals can make informed choices and decide when to abide and when to resist. She suggests, in the last paragraph, that discussion and dialogue should be the way to finding solutions to multicultural dilemmas, and that minority cultural groups should be involved in legislative and deliberative processes.

Throughout the book Phillips has proposed that the seeming contradiction between gender equality and multiculturalism can be reconciled by refuting a “group-based version of multiculturalism” in which people vested with authority have taken the voice from those whom they are supposedly representing. Phillips instead believes that we must accommodate intra group heterogeneity by allowing individuals, especially young people and women, to say what they think. While the delineation of the central theme is clear, and ample examples are given throughout the book, the reader is left with the question of “what next?” as Phillips offers little suggestion as regards the mechanism or strategy of how this new multiculturalism can be carried out. Perhaps it is the wish of the author that supporters of gender equality and cultural diversity should all contribute to this revised multiculturalism project by

coming forward as problem-owners and making themselves heard on what they think should be done?

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