

## Book Review

*Multicultural Odysseys: Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity*. Will Kymlicka (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. pp 316. ISBN 978-0-19-928040-7

In this book Will Kymlicka, staunchest defender of contemporary liberal political theory and perhaps its most resourceful and lucid advocate, aims to expose the many theoretical and practical pitfalls of current attempts by international organizations to diffuse multiculturalism around the world. As he states, he does this in order to remedy the shortcomings of these attempts, which he in principle believes are both *desirable and beneficial*. Using primary documentations (like international organizations' declarations and global policy networks research), engaging with alternative views on a number of salient issues of the book and referring significantly to his previous theoretical works in the areas liberalism and multiculturalism and his experiences of participating in helping internationalize multiculturalism, Kymlicka sheds light on the inner workings of what is a burgeoning concern of 'international community': the diffusion of multiculturalism.

Kymlicka organizes the book around in three core parts. His main goal is to assess the internationalizing of multiculturalism and he approaches his subject matter methodically. So, in the first part he gives a rich account of the history of the emergence and development of multiculturalism in the West and on the global stage. Opening with a summary of the present state of affairs, (the flurry of activities promoting multiculturalism, the organizations and agencies that are involved in it and a summary of the shortcomings of the efforts) he goes on to give an account of the *shifting international context*. After post-war settlement of respecting human (*individual*) rights – as opposed to protection of minority (*collective*) rights and its natural corollary multiculturalism – reigned until about the 1980s, the latter came to be recognized as legitimate concern of *international community*. This was motivated primarily by fear of the potentially destabilizing effect of ethnic conflict in many parts of the world and the hope of arresting conflicts of this nature through multicultural policies, which seemed to have worked well in the West.

The second part focuses on the predominantly success-filled story of multiculturalism in the West. He begins by making a very useful delineation within multiculturalism: indigenous, sub-national and immigrant multiculturalisms. He superbly discusses the ways in which each has sufficiently distinctive history (i.e. with its own sources, evolution and aspirations) thus requiring nuanced understanding and appropriately varied responses. And yet he goes on to show that multiculturalism is rooted in the history of what is called the *rights revolution*, the revolution in the West that brought civil, political and economic *freedom* to all, at least freedom in the formal sense. And then Kymlicka assesses whether multiculturalism has been successful or not. He holds that although this is a question to which a clear, decisive answer is not *a propos*, there has been evidence that multiculturalism has had positive effects, such as the way in which recognition of various ethnic (through multicultural policies) groups has mitigated potential conflicts and enriched democracy and liberalization.

The third part hinges on Kymlicka account of practical difficulties in promoting multiculturalism. He discusses the European experiment with multiculturalism and finds there what is true of the global multicultural challenge in general. First, the attempt to publicize and disseminate the virtues of multiculturalism is based on Western liberal multiculturalism without the necessary due attention to the differences between countries that have long and unique experiences and the countries to whom it is being disseminated. Second, the endeavors made to address specific cases of ethnic conflict through multicultural policies ended up appeasing the ethnic groups that were the source of the problem in the first place. Kymlicka notes in conclusion that he is not altogether optimistic about *the way forward*, given the real world of internationalizing liberal multiculturalism.

This book is superb; it is well-argued, resourceful and covers a lot of ground. Its biggest virtue perhaps is that it opens discussion on a very important topic, i.e. the internationalization of multiculturalism, and does so with synoptic verve that has come to characterize Kymlicka's works. The author has the unique gift of writing clearly, in jargon-free language without somehow compromising subtlety in addressing intricate issues. His book is also sober in its assessment of both the successes multiculturalism in the West and the attempts to internationalize it. He also has pointed out many valuable insights about what is wrong with the current attempts at globalizing multiculturalism and has through his diagnosis indicated the ways in which they may be ameliorated – and this is a great contribution to the field.

But the book has few fundamental problems as well. To begin with, Kymlicka's defense of multiculturalism as a *liberal* project is at best suspect. Kymlicka seems to hold that the reason people seek and appreciate multiculturalism is because it is a means of securing individual rights. Thus, the idea that multiculturalism is deeply, may be even intractably, linked to rights revolution does not ring true. Contrary to this, the alternative view that multiculturalism is a way for people to assert their identity through their cultural belonging is more cogent and true to experience. This latter view has the following logic: To understand me and to treat me with equal concern give my culture recognition and due consideration.

Second, Kymlicka does not give sufficient attention to the importance of understanding the degree to which different cultures respond differently to different political concepts, for example the whole idea of rights. He seems to take it for granted that liberal conceptions of 'rights' are the most cogent way of attaining a just social order. In a work on *multiculturalism*, Kymlicka ironically pays almost no attention to the importance of communal attachments, the idea that cultures are essential means of forming identities – no concern to different epistemologies and their compatibility to liberalism, which is the foundation of liberal multiculturalism.

And although Kymlicka's book is intended to be cautionary about global diffusion of multiculturalism, it does not go far enough. It assumes that the diffusion can be made successful through proper education and adaptation of the history and practice of liberal multiculturalism in the West. One is in the end left thinking the book's implicit message is that what is required is a *Western* education. Kymlicka asserts that one of the two main levels at which multiculturalism is being spread is through such educational activities like holding seminars and publishing reports that extol the virtues of multiculturalism and share 'best practices' intended to help train experts, advocates

and educators. What is conspicuous by its absence in this discussion and in the tenure of the whole book in general is a serious engagement with the question of whether such kinds of educational endeavors to spread multiculturalism have chance of success without sufficient understanding of indigenous ways of understanding, learning and living. It does not address if any such educational possibilities may be realized without making contact with, understanding and building upon local understandings of fundamental concepts like justice, community, freedom. Given the lack of attention to this issue it is difficult to resist the conclusion that current attempts to spread multiculturalism, even the corrective types like Kymlicka's, may be destined to reproduce dominant discourses and practices of the West. These two points render his project somewhat suspect. Nonetheless, his major points survive and provide insights about the challenges of the project to internationalize multiculturalism and suggest ways, albeit inadequate ones, of overcoming them.

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