



Book Reviews

Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism

B. Barry

Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001, 416pp.

Paperback, ISBN: 0-7465-2227-5/228-3.

Citizenship and National Identity

D. Miller

Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, 224pp.

Paperback, ISBN: 0 7456-2393-X/2394-80.

Brian Barry's book is an extended critique of the prevailing multiculturalist orthodoxy in anglophone political theory. David Miller's book is a collection of his pieces, most of them previously published, addressing the themes of deliberative democracy, nationality, community, and justice. Barry writes as an egalitarian liberal, Miller as a socialist communitarian. Each has reasons, albeit very different ones, not to endorse multiculturalism as a normative political programme. Both, in their distinct ways, illuminate contemporary debates in political philosophy.

Barry's book is the more substantial of the two. It is a trenchant, robust, vigorously and rigorously argued counterblast in the name of liberal egalitarianism against those, especially fellow egalitarian liberals, who defend the politics of multiculturalism. Barry's two-sided claim is simple: the politics of 'recognition' or of 'difference' are not demanded by liberal principles of equality; furthermore, the pursuit of these politics obscures and obstructs the realisation of these principles through more appropriate social and economic policies. The usual suspects — Will Kymlicka, Bhikhu Parekh, Iris Marion Young, and Charles Taylor amongst others — are rounded up and roundly chastised for their illiberalism, inconsistency, invalid argumentation, or inexactitude. The tone is headmasterly — impatient with the poor presentation of a case, quick to correct, often abrasive, and always magisterial. Charles Taylor, for instance, is indicted in passing for his 'characteristic imprecision' (p. 283).

Strictly speaking, Barry is not opposed to multiculturalism. The fact of cultural diversity is, he thinks, inescapable and ineradicable, but he is happy to 'privatise' the problem. This means that individuals are free to associate with others of a similar persuasion and indeed they can as a group engage in illiberal practices. A liberal state, however, is not required to give special recognition to groups by, for instance, granting them exemption from the burdens of



conforming to all laws or by the provision of exceptional benefits. Barry can find no liberal warrant for this kind of public multiculturalism. Liberal principles rest on universal Enlightenment tenets of reason and he deprecates those writers whose appeal to the value of culture is a poor disguise for their moral relativism.

No short review can do full justice to the richness of Barry's book. It combines erudition (it is refreshing to be reminded of exactly what the much discussed Old Amish culture amounts to), unabashed defence of liberalism, a passion for the point of liberal politics, and a finely tuned sensitivity to the idiocies of simple-minded multiculturalist apologetics. There are excellent discussions of, *inter alia*, education, 'culture', the costs of group membership, and the free exercise of religion.

More would have been welcome on one matter. Whilst prizing autonomy, Barry does not see a plurality of ways of life as a necessary precondition for its fullest exercise. The thought is that membership of a particular culture provides a context within which its members' autonomy is exercised, and thus has value, and, further, that a variety of cultures provides a broader context for the autonomy of all those within a society. This is probably the most influential liberal defence of multiculturalism to be found in Kymlicka whom Barry castigates for not being a liberal and Raz whom Barry does not consider. Moreover, both writers think of membership of a culture as a primary social good whereas Barry restricts himself to Rawls's narrower list of such goods.

Barry also owes an account of how a liberal polity can sustain the civic solidarity which is necessary if diversity is not to prove destabilising and liberal principles of justice are to be generally supported. He does not supply one in this book though he does offer an illuminating sketch of a civic national identity which is additive and not assimilationist. He does, however, need to say more about how it fortuitously comes to be that the core of a common national identity is 'a common commitment to the welfare of the larger society...and mutual trust in others to abide by that commitment' (p. 88).

David Miller, as is well-known, has developed a theory of nationality which would allow a democratic society to pursue the goal of social justice. For Miller nationality is the only remotely plausible candidate for supplying the shared and bounded identity needed to underpin citizenship and shared subscription to principles of justice. The essays published here take up this idea and consider threats to it from pluralism, globalisation, and identity politics.

Miller is sceptical about the last of these not, as Barry is, because they are not required by liberal justice, but because he thinks that they erode the common identity which is instrumentally necessary for realising justice. In a number of places he responds to the challenge of the difference theorist, Iris Marion Young, who must be doing something interesting to provoke the very different criticisms of Barry and Miller.



Miller's book contains some clear, well-ordered discussions of the claims of global justice, the limits of secession, and the nature of deliberative democracy. His discussion of 'nested nationalities' — those, such as the Scots who simultaneously think of themselves as having a narrow ('Scottish') and an encompassing broader ('British') identity — is a welcome addition to the literature of political philosophy on nationality.

Again, however, more would have been welcome on the question of how a national culture can be subject to democratic deliberation and scrutiny so that it serves, and does not hinder, the ends of justice. Miller recognises that this is a difficult subject (pp. 108–109) but does not pursue it at any length. But there seem good reasons to doubt that an identity can be collectively moulded by those who inherit it in the same way as institutions can be democratically designed.

One would also have welcomed further discussion by Miller of the extent to which his moral particularism — the content of principles of justice as rooted in the culture to which they apply — is an 'uncomfortably relativistic view' (p. 39). Miller is evidently and explicitly indebted to the work of Michael Walzer but he does not make clear how far he shares Walzer's relativism.

At the heart of both these books is a worry as to how a polity can realise principles of justice and deal with difference without betraying these principles. The arch multiculturalist Will Kymlicka has, in recent publications, declared that we are all multiculturalists now. Barry and Miller offer plausible but very different reasons for doubting that assertion.

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