

Anne Phillips, *Multiculturalism without Culture*.  
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*Multiculturalism Without Culture*, a book by Anne Phillips is yet another voice in the feminism vs. multiculturalism debate famously initiated by Susan Moller Okin. Okin asked her provocative question “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” as early as in 1996 and stopped close from answering it in the affirmative. She claimed that all cultures are ultimately patriarchal, but some cultures are more patriarchal than others, thus there is no reason why such cultures should be promoted by the state as a result of the politics of multiculturalism. Her essay received vociferous criticism and some rather cautious support.

A decade later, Anne Phillips, a feminist and a political scientist holding a professorial position at the London School of Economics, is trying to reconcile the respect for cultural diversity with the idea of equality of women and men. Phillips is committed to feminism, yet believes we should not throw baby out with the bath water, but try to save multiculturalism, even if we need to remould it, bearing gender equality in mind. Her main criticism of multiculturalism is its reification of culture, hence the title. However, she does not propose to get rid of the concept of culture as such but rather to employ a different understanding of culture, one that is more informed by notions of human agency, heterogeneity, internal dissent, constant cross-breeding and evolution of cultures.

The book is consistent with her academic interests, and political orientation: professor of gender theory and political sciences, she has always been a person of the Left and has published extensively on the issues of democracy, equality, as well as dilemmas of culture and gender. Her research on tensions between gender and culture equality in British courts carried out in 2002–04 provided a vast background for the present book.

Phillips claims that the idea of culture is most often employed to explain the behaviour of members of cultural minorities, which is problematic for two reasons. First, it gives an impressions that in contrast to the members of the dominant groups who are guided by free will and rationality, minority people act under cultural compulsion. Whereas, according to the author, their behaviour is an expression of their agency. Second, such an approach conceals the level of diversity as well as conflicts within

cultures, and assumes that all members of a cultural group should behave in the same way according to what their culture dictates them. In other words, a conception of culture that is coherent and primordial forces members of a cultural groups into a regime of authenticity.

Phillips pays tribute to the vast body of feminist literature that documents the harm that can be done to women as a result of the adoption of multiculturalist policies, which “shore up the power base of the older men within the community and encourage the public authorities to tolerate practices that undermine women’s equality” (2007: 12). She also draws on an impressive range of sources including law, feminist theory, anthropology, political science and philosophy to illustrate the tensions between gender equality and multiculturalism. She, however, is particularly preoccupied with “cultural labelling” that leads to treating women from minority cultures as lacking agency. In consequent chapters she focuses on the cultural defence in the American legislation; on various attempts to vindicate oppressive cultural practices such as genital mutilation, forced marriages, veiling of women; on the meaning of exit from oppressive cultural communities; as well as on voicing dissent.

Since the criticism of the reification of culture has, in fact, become a must-do in the multicultural literature, yet few authors go beyond enumerating reasons why such an understanding is wrong, Phillips should be commended on her attempt to actually try and employ her criticism within the model of multiculturalism she proposes. She argues that autonomy and equality are political rather than cultural. What is more, when people make authoritative interpretations of culture, they in fact often have a political agenda. Against the view of participation in cultural practices as dictated by culture, she provides a definition of autonomy 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 own” (2007: 101). In other words, she believes that culture cannot just be discarded by scholars and policy-makers because individuals are deeply entangled in their cultures. Yet, she grants the freedom to define how significant culture is and what form cultural expression takes to culture-bearing individuals. Thus, what is deemed significant and essential to a particular representative of a cultural group, say an elderly male, may be not only unimportant, but utterly unacceptable to a young female. Yet, this dissent should not exclude this young female from her cultural group.

After criticising the “culturalist” version of multiculturalism, Phillips devotes the remaining part of the book to the discussion of what multiculturalism would look like without this essentialised culture. Despite all the dilemmas posed by cultural traditions in respect to gender equality, Phillips is committed to the idea of multiculturalism and respect for cultural diversity. Since she sees the main problem with multiculturalism in the mistaken understanding of the role and nature of culture, she comes up with somewhat surprising conclusions: “refusing the determinist understanding of culture... will sometimes commit us to policies that are more multicultural than less” (2007: 101). This is possible due to her insistence that participation in cultural practices as expressions of human agency. For example, according to her line of reasoning, if we assume an essentialised vision of culture that determined people’s

choices, “it becomes much easier to generalise from evidence that some girls and women are being coerced to the conclusion that pretty much all of them are” (2007: 125). However, as she emphasises, participation in cultural practices for many women is the expression of their human agency, which should be given as much respect as to anyone else. In other words, equality means people have a right to exercise their capacity for autonomy.

She believes that the deployment of this new conception of culture will allow us to reframe multiculturalism in a way that avoids assuming that treating all people equally means applying the majority norms and practices to everyone. Yet, it will also help establish limits of toleration of the behaviour mandated by a given culture that should stop at violence, both physical and mental or harm to children. Significantly, she emphasises that mere right of exit is not enough, as it places the burden of such a decision exclusively on the person who decides to leave the group. She also discusses the conditions that are necessary for the right of exit to be exercised without excessive cost to the individuals. The main solution that Phillips sees is reshaping too illiberal cultural groups from within, thanks to the initiation of internal debates by community members. The emphasis on agency and dissent or rather “voice” sets Phillips aside such liberal multiculturalists as Will Kymlicka, who believes that autonomy and culture are reconcilable as long as individuals have the right of “exit.” Phillips believes that “voice” can be much more important. She invokes her concept of politics of presence to emphasise the need for deliberation between the government and minority groups. Ultimately, her solution to the dilemmas of gender and culture is more deliberation.

*Multiculturalism Without Culture* is a stimulating, well-researched and well-written book. It is difficult not to agree with the main thesis that a non-essentialist view of culture is vital for the formulation of multiculturalist theory and practice. Moreover, the author is right to criticise the paternalistic approach to minority women as well as the fact that the current criticism of multiculturalism is often fuelled by a general animosity towards the “other,” rather than genuine preoccupation with gender equality: “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” (2007: 25). Indeed, all too many contemporary attacks on multiculturalism come from critics of the liberal democratic society and its greater sensitivity to gender, race, age or ability differences, who use concerns about women as a ploy for fighting the “horrors of political correctness.” In this context, a defence of politics of equality and multiculturalism in its broad sense that comes from a feminist may be well-timed.

However, the problem with Phillips’ argumentation is that although she attempts to de-essentialise culture, she never postulates equality politics that is free from “culture.” Thus, while she supports a non-essentialist view of culture, she still wants to respect other people’s view of their culture as having certain essential properties that should be defended and replicated, what is significant, with the assistance from the state. As a consequence, she ends up with an assumption she set out to criticise, namely that Westerners are guided by moral values, and cultural minorities’ members—by their culture. Her discussion of multiculturalism without culture and

politics of presence she has been advocating for some time, is somewhat erratic and underdeveloped and so, disappointing.

Finally, she does not seem to answer the vital question she poses herself: “how to differentiate choice from coercion”? She does realise that it is a very difficult task by providing an example of Muslim girls who wear scarves because otherwise their parents would not allow them to go to school. For her, it is not clear whether an act of wearing a headscarf as a condition to go to school is an act of choice or coercion. Yet, I believe, in a situation where available choices are so limited, one can not sincerely speak about free choice and agency. Thus the main question remains how to make sure that members of minority cultural groups have a variety of available choices that are not limited by cultural community gate keepers and can make well-informed authentic decisions. Phillips argues that the solution to this problem is promoting deliberation within cultural communities. However, in order to have an open and meaningful dialogue that involves all the members of a cultural community, a considerable level of liberalisation is mandatory, yet this is precisely what many such communities resist. Ultimately, we have come full circle without giving an answer to the main question of the book, that is how to effectively reconcile women’s autonomy and respect for claims of culture. But we are certainly better off with regard to broadening our understanding of dilemmas and challenges of gender and culture.

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