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Phillips, A. (2007) *Multiculturalism without culture*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 180p.

Evidence proves that because of a great deal of fear of radical Islam, public opinion on multiculturalism has changed over the last several years. In *Multiculturalism without Culture*, Anne Phillips attempts to indicate how critics misrepresent culture as the justification of everything minority group members or non-Western groups carry out. She defends a multiculturalism that dispenses with notions of culture and places individuals at its centre. Given that, in recent years, multiculturalism has been blamed and criticized for encouraging the oppression of women, critics have, in turn, taken this as an opportunity to deploy gender equality as a justification for the retreat from multiculturalism. Anne Phillips's argument draws on a feminist insistence to consider women as agents using a broad range of literature. She argues that both critics and proponents of multiculturalism exaggerate the unity and distinctness of culture that considers men and women as members prescribed and dictated by culture. Believing that multiculturalism can still have a key role in achieving social equality, she develops a new way of answering dilemmas of justice and gender equality in multicultural societies.

Two simultaneous preoccupations cut across the entire book. Firstly, it considers the notion that feminism was becoming prone to paralysis by cultural differences with concerns about cultural imperialism, thus producing a relativism that made it difficult to represent any belief or practice that is at odds with gender equality. Second, it takes into account the perception that outside of feminist debates, principles of gender equality were being utilized as part of a demonization of minority cultural groups. In this work, Anne Phillips has hoped to engage with and transcend these dilemmas with a normative commitment to the principle of equality, demonstrating that this can in fact work to support both multiculturalism and women's equality.

Anne Phillips's former work had explored the relationship between equality and difference, as well as the practicality of group representation as a way of decreasing imbalances

of power between women and men and minority and majority ethnic groups. In *Multiculturalism without Culture* she draws from these former insights in ways that would mediate the persistent opposition between either feminism or multiculturalism, making it possible to pursue these important components of an equality agenda together.

She begins with a reading of feminism as a politics of gender equality that, at times, requires policies that treat women differently from men while multiculturalism, she asserts, is as policy developed to lessen the unequal handling of cultural groups and the “culture-racism” to which members of minority cultural groups are exposed. She first addresses the potential conflict between these two socio-political fields in terms of their shared challenges to equality claims arguing that, given multiculturalism’s and feminism’s similarities in dealing with inequality, it would be inappropriate to consider one more essential than the other. That is, both address inequality (multiculturalism in relation to cultural minorities and feminism in relation to women) and both projects draw on a shared obligation to equality. Therefore, the two must be balanced in circumstances where they appear to collide.

Against the backdrop of increasing national concerns about the economic and social integration of cultural minorities, rising world tensions over terrorism, the failure of the peace process in the Middle East, and the invasion of Iraq, these conditions rapidly metamorphosed into a retreat. Multiculturalism became a supposedly misguided approach to cultural diversity that encouraged men to beat their wives, parents to abuse their children, and communities to erupt in racial violence. Critics have suggested that the “managers of ethnic diversity” deliberately avoided public debate, preferring to negotiate the practicalities of multiculturalism “behind closed doors” (Barry 2005:95). More recently, there has been much talk of the death of multiculturalism, the bigotries of multiculturalism, or multiculturalism turning into “a dangerous form of benign neglect and exclusion” (*ibid.*).

This retreat from multiculturalism provides the political context of Phillips’s book, which should be considered as arguing for a different kind of multiculturalism. She does not stress neither the one-sided integration that preceded talk of multiculturalism, nor the more generous cosmopolitanism that has followed it, claiming that neither satisfactorily addresses the power inequalities that provides the normative case for multiculturalism and insists that the strident assertions of national identity that have characterized the post-September 11 world, make the

case more urgent than ever. Her object, however, is a multiculturalism without culture: a multiculturalism that dispenses with the reified notions of culture that feed those stereotypes to which so many feminists have objected, yet retains enough robustness to target inequalities between cultural groups; a multiculturalism in which the language of cultural difference no longer gives hostages to fortune or sustenance to racists, but also no longer paralyses normative judgment. She maintains that those writing on multiculturalism, both supporters as well as critics, have exaggerated not only the unity and solidity of culture but the intractability of value conflict as well, often misrecognising contextual political dilemmas as if these reflected deep value disagreement. Though there are important areas of cultural disagreement, most do not involve a deep diversity with respect to ethical principles and norms, and many run parallel to the disputes that take place within cultural groups.

In developing this argument, she queries what she sees as one of the biggest problems with culture: the tendency to represent individuals from minority or non-Western groups as driven by their culture and obliged by cultural dictates to behave in particular ways. Widely employed in a discourse that denies human agency, culture is used to define individuals and is treated as the explanation for virtually everything they say or do. This sometimes features as part of the case for multicultural policies or concessions, but it more commonly appears in punitive policies designed to stamp out what have been deemed as unacceptable practices. She argues that a more careful understanding of culture provided a better basis for multicultural policy than the overly homogenized version that currently figures in the arguments of supporters and critics alike. A defensible multiculturalism will place human agency much more at its centre- it will dispense with strong notions of culture.

Further, Phillips focuses on areas of contestations where either a sensitivity to cultural traditions has been employed to deny women their rights, or where principles of gender equality have been used as a reason to ban cultural practices, drawing on a growing feminist literature that sees the deconstruction of culture as the way forward in addressing tensions between gender equality and cultural diversity. Her own approach is closest to those who have noted the selective way culture is employed to explain behavior in non-Western societies or among individuals from racialised minority, and the implied contrast with rational, autonomous Western individuals, whose actions are presumed to reflect moral judgments, and who can be held individually

responsible for those actions and beliefs. This binary approach to cultural differences is neither helpful nor convincing. The basic contention throughout is that multiculturalism can be made compatible with the pursuit of gender equality and women's rights, so long as it dispenses with an essentialist understanding of culture.

Structurally, the author sets out the chapter 1 to the main themes by reference to the notions of culture employed in the political theory and feminist literatures, and identifies the main normative issues. Chapter 2 provides a detailed exploration of the concept of culture, drawing on debates in the anthropological literature, and confronts the most obvious alternative-cosmopolitanism. Chapter 3 focuses on cultural defense, based mainly on cases from the English and U.S. courts. Chapter 4 addresses notions of culture as restrictions that shape in the case both for and against multiculturalism. A central part of the argument in both chapters 3 and 4 is that culture needs to be treated in a more nuanced way than has become available for class and gender: that is, as something that influences, shapes, and constrains behavior, but does not determine it. Chapter 5 looks at questions of exit, suggesting that the right to leave an oppressive family or group does not provide enough protection for "at-risk members" partly because it does not attach enough significance to cultural belonging. Chapter 6 pulls together the various threads of Phillips's argument regarding the relationship between the individual and the group, and spells out its implications in terms of some specific policy questions.

In general, the evidence included indicates that national arguments about the politics of diversity represent an exaggerated opinion about cultural differences. In her book, Anne Phillips successfully managed to show her disagreement by incorporating a realistic and useful picture of the politics of diversity. Arguing against a conception of culture as one that is bound and static, she instead develops a politics that combines the goal of gender equalities with multicultural ones. She also believes that minority cultural values are contextually diverse and that the fact that minority group members are agents rather than culturally-programmed robots, affords them a visibility which has not yet been granted. *Multiculturalism without Culture* is a timely and significant incursion into the contemporary debates on cultural differences and social policy, integrating a great deal of legal, philosophical, and political theory material in order to develop a new framework from which to approach social justice in multicultural societies.

## References

Barry, Brian (2001) *Culture and Equality: an Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism*,  
Cambridge: Polity Press.