

Are multiculturalism and a shared equal citizenship inherently in conflict?

Although diverse and mixed societies have always existed in history, the expansion of world trade, the rise of immigration, the increasing mobility of workers, and the development of mass media and interconnected telecommunication networks are now combining to exert unprecedented pressure on nation-states, themselves a relatively recent creation. On the one hand, citizenship in modern liberal democracies is intended to be universal, inclusive and unifying, equally shared by all members regardless of their sex, religion, opinions or wealth, bringing everyone together under the relatively abstract banner of the nation. On the other hand, individuals do not exist in a vacuum, but are part of a variety of groups, of cultures, which are an essential part of their consciousness and their very individuality. Should these cultures be ignored or relegated to the private sphere to accommodate citizenship, or should they be taken into account, considering that this could be seen as undermining equality between citizens? Can citizenship include multiculturalism? Despite claims of a “clash between civilisations”, is there really such a gap between liberalism and thinkers such as Rousseau or Rawls, and multiculturalism and communitarians? First, liberal concepts associated with citizenship will be analysed, especially the ideas of John Rawls and his “original position”. Then, several different critiques of this philosophy will be introduced and discussed. Finally, the possible links between these different approaches will be examined, such as the liberal communitarianism of thinkers like Kymlicka.

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau envisions the citizen as an individual actively involved in the expression of the “general will”, which results in the creation of laws. The contract, moreover, implies that “if anyone refuses to obey the general will he will be compelled to do so by the whole body; [...] he will be forced to be free” (*The Social Contract*, Book I, Ch.vii). Personal interests must yield to the common interest. Indeed, to Rousseau, when particular groups begin to influence the general will, the social tie loosens and the state might collapse (*The Social Contract*, Book IV, Ch. i). Even religion is suspicious to him, since it demands an allegiance which should only be granted to the state. Within the contract, the general will rules: there cannot be any majority or minority, and pluralism is automatically ruled out. Basically, Rousseau’s contract can only be applied to societies that are homogeneous and monocultural. He constructs a shared and equal citizenship, but at the cost of diversity. Rousseau’s thinking was one of the main influences of the French revolutionary leaders, and it is no coincidence that France, even to this day, retains that idea of a homogeneous society assimilating or integrating various groups into one relatively homogeneous nation. Recent problems, however, such as the one involving the Islamic veil, or higher than average unemployment rates in suburbs populated by North African immigrants and their children, have underlined the weaknesses of such a model. Integration does not seem to translate into equality in practice. One of the main weaknesses of Rousseau’s theory is that it can easily become the “tyranny of the majority”, and that it disregards, somewhat naively, the extent to which interest groups will pretend to serve the general will to reinforce their dominant position.

Mulhall and Swift (2000) describe in their introduction John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, and his concept of the "original position". Rawls defines justice as fairness; the way to imagine a fair organisation of society is to make the assumption of an original position in which each individual is placed behind a "veil of ignorance", which prevents knowledge of one's natural abilities, wealth, social status and even what Rawls calls "conceptions of the good", that is, one's moral outlook, the set of beliefs about how one should lead one's life. Placed in that position, then, the individuals, as rational actors pursuing their interests, enter a bargaining process to obtain the best possible deal out of the mutually agreed social organisation. The veil then guarantees that this organisation is also the fairest. According to Rawls, because the individuals in the original position have no knowledge of their social and economic advantages, it is in their interest to support equality, as well as non-discriminatory policies, since they have to ignore to which category or group of people they belong. Rawls's *Political Liberalism* later refined his arguments, as Mulhall and Swift detail (2000, Ch.5); citizens might disagree about their conceptions of the good, but they cannot use the power of the state to coerce others to agree to their view, unless they appeal to public reasons, that is, to shared values and ideas. Those are found in public political culture, and constitute, in Mulhall and Swift's expression, "reasonable pluralism". At the heart of liberalism is the notion that the state should be as neutral as possible, and respects to a certain extent the specificities of certain groups in society. These particularities can be accommodated if they are consistent with the liberal viewpoint. So Rawls's theories are based on several key concepts: individualism, autonomous and rational actors reaching an agreement, and the possibility to reason in the absence of any particular moral framework. Unlike Rousseau's ideas,

then pluralism is supported, as well as a certain cultural diversity. But in this context the different groups have essentially what Isaiah Berlin calls “negative freedoms”, that is, protection from the coercion by others or from discrimination. There is no real notion of recognition of a group as a political actor. Cultural diversity is supported as long as the liberal framework is respected.

Because it insists on equality before the law and universal rights, liberalism tends to oppose positive discrimination such as affirmative action, or political recognition involving special rights for certain groups. Fullinwider (2005) describes the details of the Supreme Court’s handling of the *Bakke* case in 1977, where a white student was refused a place on the medical course because of a quota reserved for black students. Justice Powell’s decision that “equal protection of the law” meant that discrimination on race was unconstitutional did not rule out the possibility of taking race into account as a factor. What he was against was creating an exclusive path based on belonging to a group. Miller (2000, p.62-80) is particularly critical of the politics of recognition, which he sees as misguided. To him, it is even counter-productive. He believes that a republican form of politics where group members participate as citizens and express their point of view is better than the purely liberal approach which demands that they leave their cultural identities at home before entering the public sphere. In republican politics, they can hope to reach a consensus, a compromise, which is fairer for them and for the other citizens. What Miller supports is the idea of national citizenship as a concept that, transcending the citizens’ various cultural identities, provides the best prospects of achieving social justice.

Thinkers like Iris Marion Young believe that, far from being as neutral as they claim to be, liberal democracies promoting shared and equal citizenship are essentially defending the position of a dominant group: white, male, Christian, bourgeois citizens. Young (1990), quoted by Miller (2000, p.63) contends that this group constructs its own viewpoint as the norm, and thus discriminates against groups which do not adhere to that norm, such as women, gays, or other religious communities. She demands political recognition of groups, meaning that they would act as political entities instead of individual citizens. Instead of the shared and equal citizenship promoted by liberalism which she sees as inherently biased, she describes a model in which citizens are members of a particular group first. Groups can then send representatives to debate issues at a national level. Her point of view can be described as radical communitarianism. Other thinkers also disagree with the liberal model, without necessarily going to the same extremes. Sandel, for instance, as Mulhall and Swift (2000, Ch.1) argue, points out that Rawls's conception of the person is inherently flawed, because belonging to a community is an essential component of personhood. Being part of a group is what defines individuality, and it is impossible to hide the conception of the good linked to the group behind the veil of ignorance. Moreover, Sandel sees the fact that Rawls's autonomous individuals are supposed to be able to reach agreement as a community as inconsistent. Another philosopher, MacIntyre, also quoted by Mulhall and Swift (2000, Ch.2) focuses on morality, the "conception of the good" in Rawls's theory. He insists that morality is based on virtues, and that those virtues are acquired through "practices", organised human activities conducted within traditions, or communities. An individual inherits a set of traditions, but this set is not static, and an individual's relationship with these traditions

evolves throughout life. Because they shape the moral outlook however, they cannot be dismissed, as is the case in Rawls's original position. In other words, culture must be taken into account, which might end up in a different conception of justice and thus a more focussed notion of citizenship, instead of a broadly shared and equal one.

Parekh (1997) also questions the dominant Western liberalism framework, and criticises Kymlicka's ambition to define liberal multiculturalism (which will be discussed below), by underlining that a liberal approach is necessarily biased against non-liberal cultures, although those cultures might make a valuable input in modern societies. Why, he asks, should those minorities be forced to adopt a liberal viewpoint? For instance, some cultures might not value autonomy or individualism; it does not mean that they oppose shared and equal citizenship as such, but that they do not consider it as more important than consensus within their group. By trying to impose this concept of citizenship to its members, by "liberalising" them, society would destabilise these groups and this might be considered as unjust, because the culture that they provide is valuable and provide a structure which is beneficial to its members. Parekh stresses the importance of intercultural dialogue between liberal and non-liberal traditions and the respect by liberals of some aspects of other groups which are non-liberal.

Finally, Kymlicka and Norman (2000) try to establish a framework which combines liberalism and multiculturalism. They focus on the treatment of minorities in liberal democracies, and the idea of minority rights. For them, not all minorities are the same, and they distinguish between national minorities, which have been part of the

nation-state from its inception, immigrant minorities and what could be called lifestyle minorities (religious groups, gays and lesbians...). They argue that it is better to manage cultural differences than to try to eliminate them (by assimilation or integration, for instance), but also underline that not all minorities have the same status when it comes to demanding special rights: national minorities have a stronger claim, then immigrants, and finally other minorities who should limit themselves to non-discrimination. They also make an important distinction between communities that are willing to participate in liberal society and those that challenge it. Interestingly, they point out that differentiated citizenship status does not mean the loss of equality; on the contrary, minority rights, by balancing disadvantages, can actually make society converge toward greater fairness: “far from eroding equal citizenship status, the accommodation of differences is the essence of true equality” (Kymlicka and Norman, 2000, p.33).

Instead of a conflict between multiculturalism and shared and equal citizenship, then, it is probably more appropriate to talk about a tension between several different models of society, and disagreement about what constitute fairness. Equality is based on justice and the definition of what is fair. What is clear today is that equality cannot mean uniformity, and that diversity is an essential component of functioning democracies. This tension is in itself a good thing, because it encourages citizens to reconsider their prejudices and question their paradigms. The worst threat to citizenship is to consider it as a purely theoretical, static construction, instead of a dynamic, practical process. Equality, justice, laws cannot only be Platonic ideas, but must be refined through constant debate, involving as many voices as possible.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Fullinwider, R. (2005) 'Affirmative Action'. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University. Available from: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/affirmative-action/>> [Accessed 05/11/2007]

Kymlicka, W. and Norman, W. (2000) *Citizenship in Diverse Societies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miller, D. (2000) *Citizenship and National Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mulhall, S. and Swift, A. (2000) *Liberals & Communitarians*, 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Parekh, B. (1997) 'Dilemmas of a Multicultural Theory of Citizenship'. *Constellations Volume 4, No 1*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

Rousseau, J. J. (1994) *Discourse on Political Economy and The Social Contract*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.