

## Theoretical Foundations of Multiculturalism

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### *1 The problem of multiculturalism*

Most modern states today are, at least to some degree, culturally diverse. Trade, tourism, international dialogue among scholars, scientists and artists, and the movement of skilled labour – as well as migration – have ensured that few countries do not contain within them significant numbers of people from alien cultures. The one cultural minority found almost everywhere is the international frequent-flyer. Many societies today are multicultural because they are open to a diversity of peoples who come and go and, sometimes, stay.<sup>1</sup>

It is the fact that many seek to stay in the societies they have entered, however, that gives rise to the problem of multiculturalism.<sup>2</sup> For it gives rise to the question of the degree to which cultural diversity should be accepted or tolerated, as well as to the question of how cultural diversity should be accommodated. When people from diverse traditions have to co-exist within a single society, a number of issues have to be settled so that the ground rules governing their common life are clear and generally accepted. There has to be some clear understanding not only of what kind of conduct is acceptable or required in public, but also of what kinds of matters are matters of legitimate public concern. This means that it has to be clear, for example, what is the language of public discourse, what kinds of holidays are recognized, what customs

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<sup>1</sup> One matter I do not address explicitly (for reasons of space) is the question of the nature of 'culture'. For an excellent discussion, however, see Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp.142-178.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that many societies contain what are referred to as 'indigenous' populations, and so are multicultural even without the inclusion of migrants. Nonetheless, it remains true that it is the arrival of the first outsiders that has created the cultural diversity. Subsequent visitors have simply added to the complexity of the picture.

are to be tolerated, what standards of public conduct and appearance may be expected, and what rights and obligations individuals and communities enjoy or owe.

The fact of cultural diversity has often given rise to conflicts because these issues are not always easily settled. People often have strong views about what is right and wrong, or about what is good and bad, and they are consequently unwilling readily to modify their behaviour or change their thinking. Thus, for example, Muslim parents in France and (more recently) in Singapore have challenged the legality as well as the moral justifiability of state school regulations forbidding the wearing of head-scarves favoured by Muslim girls (or their parents). Defenders of animal rights in Britain have questioned exemptions given to religious minorities to allow them to disregard laws governing the humane slaughter of animal (to ensure that meat is kosher or halal). And in many western societies the practice of female genital mutilation insisted upon by some immigrant parents from East Africa has led to vigorous debate as authorities have struggled to find solutions that respect minority convictions without departing from more widely held social values.

In these circumstances, to seek the theoretical foundations of multiculturalism is to ask if there is any set of general principles that might guide our reflection on such issues as the ones raised above. What are the principles that govern a multicultural society?

In this paper I shall argue that the best answer to this question is to be found within the theory of classical liberalism. The question of what is liberalism, however, is nothing if not controversial, so it ought to be made clear at the outset that what will be presented here is a particular understanding of classical liberalism, and a particular view of what it has to offer. There are others, however, who take a quite different view of what it is that liberalism requires or has to offer. In my own presentation I

will therefore try to make clear where it is that I differ from other liberal views prominent today.

The paper is presented in several parts. In the section that follows I begin by considering five possible responses to the problem of cultural diversity. These are labeled isolationism, assimilationism, weak multiculturalism, strong multiculturalism, and apartheid. In section three I suggest how these different positions are related and identify some of the theorists of multiculturalism and locate them in the schema described there. In section four I argue that the third of the responses to the problem of diversity is most consistent with classical liberalism, and offer reasons why it is to be favoured. Section five considers a number of arguments offered in defence of other versions of multiculturalism, and particularly other liberal versions, and explains why they should be rejected. And section six concludes with some general remarks about the nature of a multicultural society, the nature of political society, and the limits of the liberal theory of multiculturalism.

## 2 *Five responses to diversity*

Societies may respond to the fact of cultural diversity in a variety of ways, not all of which involve an acceptance of the idea of a multicultural society. There are five responses that might usefully be distinguished.

### (a) Isolationism

The most obvious response a society might make would be to try to prevent any kind of cultural diversity from emerging by excluding outsiders from entering or making their homes within it – particularly if the outsiders are different. Both Japan and Australia have, at different times in their histories, adopted this particular approach. In Australia, the White Australia Policy came into being with the first Act of the

Commonwealth Parliament, the Immigration Act of 1901. The original aim of Australian immigration policy was to assimilate migrants into the predominantly Anglo-Celtic population. Migrant selection was carefully controlled to ensure that the ethnic composition remained white and culturally British. Those most preferred were Britons, followed by Northern Europeans. Southern Europeans were considered less desirable, and Asian and other non-whites were regarded as altogether undesirable. Migrants from the desired categories were thus offered financial inducements to move to Australia, while those from Asia were excluded.<sup>3</sup> It was not until the 1960s that steps were taken to dismantle the policy, which was officially ended in 1973.

There are many reasons why a society or its rulers might choose the path of isolationism in a policy of excluding all outsiders but the select few. Sometimes it is because of a desire on the part of some to protect or preserve their established advantages or privileges. A predominantly Muslim elite, for example, might not want to see the growth of the substantial non-Muslim minority if this might reduce the size of its support base. Or the labour movement might be wary of immigration from poorer nations because it would threaten to lower wage levels by expanding the size of the market for unskilled labour. But a particularly important reason for isolationism in immigration policy is the fear of cultural transformation.

The problem with isolationism as a policy is that it is difficult to sustain, for the costs of the policy are greater than most people are willing to bear. If the aim of the policy is to preserve a kind of cultural homogeneity, the difficulty is that it will not be enough simply to try to maintain a restrictive immigration policy — one that keeps

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<sup>3</sup> See Mark Lopez, *The Origins of Multiculturalism in Australian Politics 1945-75* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), p.43. Of course, there already existed a certain amount of ethnic diversity in the Australian population. Apart from the indigenous peoples, there had been substantial Chinese migration to Australia in the nineteenth century (particularly during the gold rush period), and other Asian peoples had come into the country in small numbers.

out people from particular cultural, ethnic, religious or linguistic groups; or keeps out would-be immigrants altogether. There are many ways in which a society might come under the influence of foreign cultures besides through interaction with immigrants. Trade and tourism alone will bring the domestic society to awareness of other ways of life. And any kind of openness to foreign artistic and literary traditions will exert its own influence on the local population, encouraging imitation and cultural borrowing. The importing of foods will change dietary habits. Participation in international activities, from World Cup football to international science conventions will also bring home ideas and attitudes from other parts of the globe. To preserve cultural homogeneity it would not be enough to restrict immigration. It would also be necessary to limit contact with the outside world by restricting the freedom of the domestic population to travel, to trade, and generally to communicate with outsiders. Thus far, no nation has been able or willing to do this, and so no nation has been able to escape the forces of cultural transformation.

(b) Assimilationism

One alternative to isolationism is a policy of admitting outsiders but with a view to assimilating them into the existing society, thereby limiting the extent of domestic cultural transformation. This is a policy that seeks to acculturate newcomers, though it might also be adopted with respect to, say, a minority indigenous population. For much of the era of the White Australia Policy, the Aboriginal population of the country was seen as one that needed to be assimilated into the mainstream of a predominantly Anglo-Celtic and European society. In this regard, Australian social policy for much of the twentieth century was marked by assimilationist aims on two

fronts, looking to make both newcomers and the original inhabitants conform to a particular cultural standard.

The problem with the policy of assimilation, however, is that, like isolationism, its chances of success are limited even if one is prepared to pay a very high price to pursue it. First, assimilation<sup>4</sup> is a two-way street: even as newcomers are being assimilated, they will be exerting their own influence to modify the practices and attitudes of the host-society. This, coupled with the other sources of cultural influence to which the society is subject, makes it fairly likely that it is not only newcomers or minorities who will change. Second, not all cultural minorities want to assimilate to the degree sought by the makers of social policy. In Australia, the turning point came when it became clear that many immigrants who had lived for some time in their new country began in the 1960s to consider returning to Europe because they saw their own cultural traditions and beliefs as unwelcome. This was one of the factors that prompted a change in government policy away from assimilation towards a more pluralist outlook. But even if cultural minorities are not willing to go so far as to leave the country, many will resist attempts to assimilate them. At the extreme, this may generate separatist tendencies if resistance leads to a hardening of attitudes on all sides. Third, assimilation may be difficult policy to pursue in a society that has strong traditions of respect for individual freedom, since such a policy may require restrictions not only on newcomers but also on native-born citizens.

(c) Weak multiculturalism

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<sup>4</sup> This discussion of assimilation ignores many of the complexities that a more careful and thorough analysis would have to deal with. The classic discussion of assimilation is Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). See also my 'Liberalism, Multiculturalism and Oppression', in Andrew Vincent (ed.), *Political Theory: Tradition and Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), pp.132-153.

While assimilation may be difficult to enforce, it is also difficult to avoid. In any society in which there is a reasonable degree of freedom, people will associate with and imitate one another. There is a tendency to conformity that is as difficult to eradicate as is the inclination of some individuals to go in a different direction. And for reasons of expediency or prudence, newcomers or minorities in any society will be inclined to follow the dominant norms simply because it makes life easier, less costly, or more enjoyable. It is easier to learn the language that most people speak than to wait for them to learn our own. It is easier to make friends with people with whom we share something in common. And it is better to have a wide range of people with whom to speak or form friendships than to be confined to the company of a few who are like-minded in every way.

The multiculturalist response to the fact of cultural diversity is neither to try to prevent diversity from emerging in society by isolating it from others, nor to try to prevent diversity from taking root by assimilating minorities into the whole. Early immigration policy in Australia was concerned — alarmed — by the prospect of non-Anglo-Celtic minorities making their homes in Australia. In 1971, the then Minister for Immigration, Phillip Lynch, while willing to continue the new policy of accepting European and Asian immigrants, expressed a concern that Australia would be home to a large number of ‘undigested minorities’.<sup>5</sup> The multicultural outlook, however, is both willing to accept a diversity of newcomers to a society, and untroubled if they remain undigested. The doors should be open to anyone who wishes to enter society; and the extent to which anyone assimilates should be determined by the desire and capacity of each individual to do so.

(d) Strong multiculturalism

One characteristic of the weak multiculturalist view, however, is that leaves open the possibility that some people will assimilate into a society less because they wish to do so than because they have little other option. It leaves such people, members of minority cultures within the wider society, either unable to enjoy their separate cultural identity because the costs of sustaining it are too high, or unable fully to participate in the society because their particular cultural beliefs or traditions. The strong multiculturalist view is that society should take positive measures not only to enable such people to participate as full members of society but also better to enable them to maintain their separate identity and traditions. Diversity should not only be tolerated but also fostered or promoted, and supported – both financially (if necessary) and by special rights for minority cultures.

The difference between the strong and weak versions of multiculturalism is a matter of degree. Both variants have their roots in liberal political theory, with strong multiculturalism characteristic of modern liberalism, and weak multiculturalism characteristic of classical liberalism. In this paper I shall defend weak multiculturalism against strong multiculturalism by defending classical liberalism against its modern competitor.

(e) Apartheid

There is a fifth response to the fact of diversity that ought to be mentioned for the sake of completeness: apartheid. This response does not seek to exclude cultural minorities (usually because it is not possible to do so) but forbids them to assimilate

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<sup>5</sup> See *Australian multiculturalism for a new century: Towards inclusiveness: A report of the National Multicultural Advisory Council* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1999), pp.22-3.

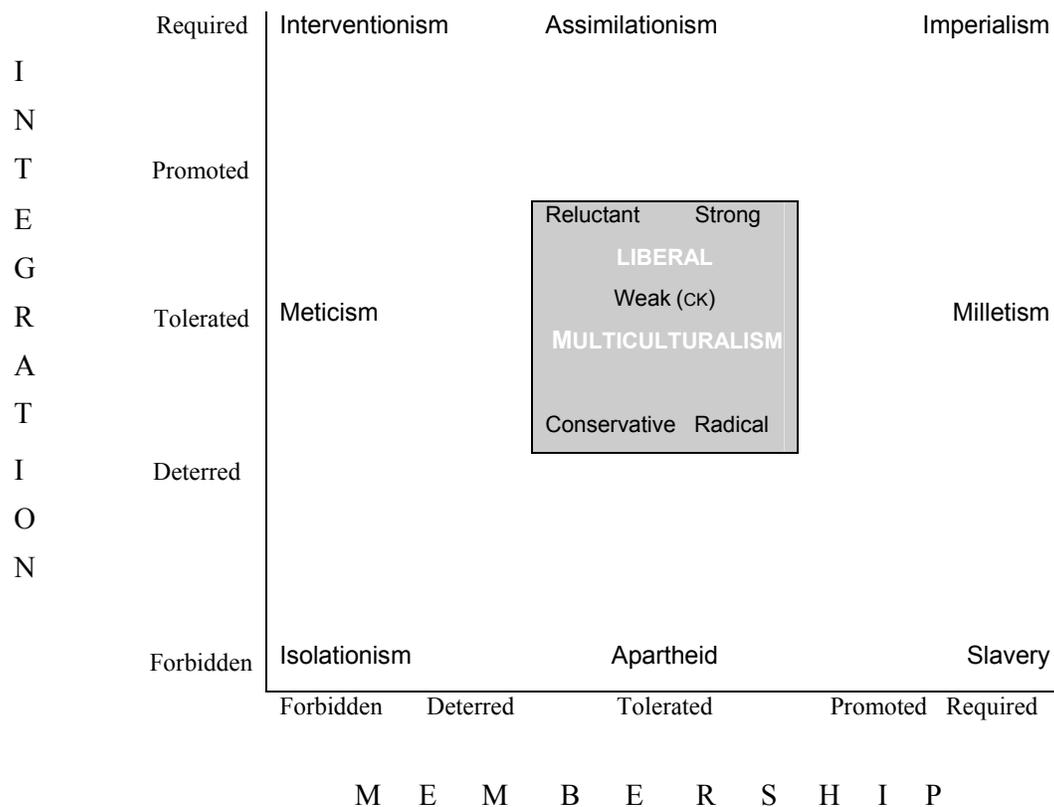
to any degree. South Africa under white minority rule supplies an example of such a regime, though in this particular case the groups denied the right to participate fully in the society themselves formed a majority of the total population.

The problem with this response to diversity is that is hard to sustain given people's propensities to associate. It suffers from the same difficulties that beset the isolationist response. In some ways, however, it confronts problems that are even more intractable since the people it seeks to keep apart co-exist within the same national boundaries. It is difficult to maintain such a regime without creating a polity in which different citizens have different and unequal rights and duties. It may be impossible to sustain such a form of political order without resort to repression.

### 3 *A Model of Responses to Diversity*

This typology of responses to diversity might usefully be presented on a graph illustrating their relations to one another. Responses towards cultural diversity might be plotted on a graph whose vertical axis measures the polity's attitude to the *integration* of diverse peoples into society, and whose horizontal axis measures the polity's attitude to the *membership* of different peoples in the polity. At one extreme, a polity might simply deny minority cultures or communities within it the right to become a part of the society, refusing to allow them to integrate into the society. Equally it might deny outsiders the opportunity to join the society by forbidding them to enter or to become members; it might even expel minorities from the polity. At the other extreme, a polity might require that some groups of people integrate into the society even if they have no wish to do so. Equally, a polity might require that a group of people acquire or retain membership of the polity whether or not they wish

**Figure 1: Responses to Diversity**



to do so. But political societies do not have to take extreme positions. They might try either to deter or to promote integration, or they might simply tolerate those who wish to integrate without let or hindrance. And they might respond in similarly moderate fashion to those who seek membership of the polity. A number of political positions can be identified along these dimensions. These are noted on the graph in figure 1.

Societies that try to restrict membership by forbidding entry by outsiders, and also to enforce conformity within their boundaries by denying those who are different the opportunity to integrate, fall into the corner labeled 'isolationism'. Though it is difficult to find examples of societies that fall neatly into any category, Uganda under Idi Amin might fit here, since it not only restricted entry into the country but also

expelled the Asian population rather than let it integrate or assimilate into the native population. Less extreme, in some ways, is the position labeled ‘apartheid’. In such a society, the membership in the polity of diverse groups is accepted, but particular groups are forbidden to integrate into society. A more extreme position would be one which forced some into membership in a society while denying them any opportunity to integrate. Slavery in the United States falls into this category, since Africans were forcibly brought to America but, by virtue of being enslaved, were forbidden to integrate into society.

Some societies are less hostile to others integrating into their way of life but remain unwilling to allow them fully to become members of the polity. A society might, for example, welcome guestworkers, and willingly allow them to live as a part of society, but deny them full rights of membership. Germany’s attitude toward Turkish residents, or Malaysia’s attitude to Indonesian and Filipino workers supply possible examples here. To identify this position I use the term *meticism*, after the *metics* or foreign residents of city-states of ancient Greece.<sup>6</sup>

Societies that want to see other peoples conform to their way of life but are unwilling to allow them to become a part of that society occupy the top left-hand corner of the graph. These are labeled ‘interventionist’ societies. Crusading states would come into this category. They differ, however, from imperialist states, which are distinguished by a concern to incorporate other societies into a greater polity, expanding the membership of a highly integrated state. These states occupy the top right-hand corner of the graph. Not all imperialist states, however, seek full integration of subjugated peoples. The *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire required

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<sup>6</sup> Found in most city-states except Sparta, *metics* occupied an intermediate position between foreigners and citizens. They enjoyed the protection of the law, but were subject to restrictions on marriage and had a limited right to own property. They did not enjoy any rights of political participation.

societies within the empire to remain members but tolerated a diversity of cultural practices and traditions.

States that tolerate or permit the admission of outsiders without seeking forcibly to enforce membership, but nonetheless require all members of society to integrate fully into the ways of the dominant culture, are 'assimilationist' polities. These fall into the top centre section of the graph. Modern France comes close to falling into this category, since it admits a diversity of peoples but strongly requires that they conform in various ways to French traditions; indeed it requires that they become French.

Finally, those political societies that fall in the centre of the graph are what might be called 'liberal multicultural' societies. In general, they admit outsiders without either encouraging or deterring them from seeking membership, and tolerate their ways whether they seek to integrate into the new society or elect to hold on to their separate traditions and beliefs.

The various positions plotted in this scheme are highly stylised, and it would be hard to find any state that fell precisely into one of the corners or spaces identified. And the place a state occupies would be changeable to some degree depending on the policies pursued at any one time. This scheme is intended to be suggestive rather than indicative of any permanent or enduring set of relations among political societies. Nonetheless, this scheme is intended to make one claim clear: that the liberal attitude to cultural diversity seeks a medium among extremes. It is also intended to suggest that the differences among liberal multiculturalists reflects the way in which liberals are pulled in different directions. The position I wish to defend, however, is to be found squarely in the centre of the conception of liberalism described by this construction.

#### 4 *Classical liberal multiculturalism*

Liberalism is a doctrine that is profoundly sympathetic to multiculturalism because it is a doctrine which proclaims the importance of individual freedom to live a life of one's own, even if the majority of society disapproves of the way that life is lived. According to liberalism's traditions, minority ways, or difference, are to be tolerated rather than suppressed. By implication, this means that minority cultures are accepted within a liberal society: people are not required to live by values they cannot abide, nor forbidden to live by values they cherish. The fundamental liberal concern, therefore, is to find some way in which those who hold to different values might live together without coming into conflict. This is a serious problem, since the potential for conflict is high in a society in which all seek, and in principle are granted the right, to live by values they cherish – or at least, not to live by values they cannot abide. Liberals have therefore argued vigorously among themselves about the basis upon which people's pursuit of their different, and potentially conflicting, purposes should be regulated. Perhaps the most famous liberal attempt to specify a basis for such regulation is John Stuart Mill's harm principle: only the prospect of *harm to others* can justify the restriction of individual freedom to pursue particular ends. As is well known, however, the principle is problematic because the definition of 'harm' is itself dependent on one's understanding of what ends are desirable.

In spite of such difficulties, however, the virtue of the liberal view is that it takes seriously the idea that, when people disagree about what is good and what is right, the issue should not be settled by the exercise of power to enforce the dominant view.<sup>7</sup> In the face of disagreement or difference what should be sought is peaceful coexistence. This is why it is, in principle, sympathetic to the idea of a culturally diverse society,

for in such a society people may associate freely with whomsoever they choose without being required to conform to standards they do not recognize or cannot abide. But this is only possible provided each respects a similar freedom for others. And it is the content of this proviso that liberalism tries to articulate.

What this requires, in the end, is a regime of toleration. And in the version of liberalism sometimes described as ‘classical liberalism’, that toleration calls for what I have labeled ‘weak multiculturalism’. In a society in which weak multiculturalism is the norm, people’s freedom to associate produces an open society of which others may readily become members by associating with those who already belong to it. It neither forbids outsiders from entering nor forces them to join. Equally, those who are a part of the society are free to live by their own traditions, whether as part of a cosmopolitan whole, or as members of minority cultures who associate with others to a minimal degree. The presence of different cultures or traditions is tolerated, even if those traditions do not themselves embrace or sympathize with liberalism or liberal values. A classical liberal multicultural society may contain within it many illiberal elements. Yet it will try neither to expel nor to assimilate them, but will simply tolerate them. What such a regime is most hostile to are isolationism, interventionism, imperialism, and slavery.

A classical liberal multicultural regime such as this could be described as a maximally tolerant regime. It is so tolerant it will even accept within its midst those who are opposed to it. At the same time, however, it will not give special protection or advantages to any particular group or community. It will not deter anyone from pursuing particular goals or from trying to sustain particular traditions; yet neither

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<sup>7</sup> The dominant view need not be the majority view. It may simply be the view of the most powerful minority.

will it promote others, or subsidise ones that are specially preferred. This is multiculturalism without fear or favour.

### 5 *Modern liberal multiculturalism*

To some liberal thinkers, however, this kind of multiculturalism is implausible, because it does not maintain a strong enough commitment to values that are central to liberalism. Some liberals are reluctant to embrace any form of multiculturalism and argue strongly that liberalism requires that all communities or cultures within the liberal state be liberal to some degree – perhaps even to a considerable degree.

Brian Barry, for example, is highly critical of multiculturalism from a liberal point of view, arguing that the liberal state should not tolerate illiberal practices. This means that the state should, among other things, assume responsibility for the education of children to ensure that cultural or religious communities cannot inculcate implausible beliefs in the minds of the young. It should also ensure that the standards maintained within families properly recognize the rights of women, and take steps to prevent cultural communities from disadvantaging those who withdraw or defect from such groups.<sup>8</sup>

Other liberal theorists, like Will Kymlicka, however, defend a strong version of multiculturalism, arguing that a multicultural state should recognize group-differentiated rights, and offer special protections to minority cultures.<sup>9</sup> For

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<sup>8</sup> See Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). See also my critique of Barry: ‘The Life of Brian, or, Now for Something Completely Difference-Blind’, in Paul Kelly (ed.), *Multiculturalism Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), pp.184-203.

<sup>9</sup> Kymlicka’s views are defended in numerous works, most notably: *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). I have taken issue with

Kymlicka, the liberal state should take active steps to ensure that groups have the resources they need to sustain themselves. This means not simply subsidizing their activities but also ensuring that legal and political arrangements do not discriminate against or disadvantage cultural minorities. Equally, however, the state should also make sure that cultural groups respect certain basic civil rights to which all individuals are entitled in a liberal order. For Kymlicka, the stance of 'weak' liberalism offers a policy that amounts to little more than 'benign neglect'; and such a policy, he argues, ultimately fails properly to address the crucial questions that confront a multicultural polity.

Both of these thinkers resist the classical liberal call for the state to be less interventionist and more 'neutral' on cultural issues, though Barry is inclined to push the state into greater efforts to liberalize cultural minorities, while Kymlicka prefers that the state take stronger measures to ensure that minorities can be secure in their effort to maintain their cultural independence. Other modern theorists, however, are resistant to classical liberal multiculturalism because they push away from it in quite different directions. For 'cultural conservatives', what is needed for a sustainable polity is a society which is culturally homogeneous to a considerable degree. This means that the state, including the liberal state, has to be wary of admitting people who are culturally different and likely to dilute the cultural homogeneity of the society, so membership has to be deterred. Equally importantly, however, it is necessary that the state not be too quick to encourage those already within its boundaries to integrate into society, because not everyone is suitable for citizenship. Those who are not culturally similar ought not to be encouraged to integrate, for the

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Kymlicka's ideas in 'Multiculturalism as Fairness', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 5 (4) 1997 pp.406-427.

result will be a polity that is more heterogeneous. In this respect, it ought not to be easy for residents to become citizens – for diversity ought to be discouraged.<sup>10</sup>

Other thinkers, who might be labeled postmodernists or radicals, push away from classical liberal multiculturalism for different reasons again. For them, the liberal vision is too individualistic and too homogenizing. A good polity ought to welcome diversity by admitting outsiders readily; but it ought positively to encourage them to preserve their own traditions. Far greater recognition needs to be given to the importance of cultural identity to minority groups struggling to maintain a worthwhile life in modern political society. Such groups need to be included as members of political society, but also helped to preserve their identities as independent cultural communities.<sup>11</sup>

The conservative and radical thinkers I have identified here might not be willing to regard themselves as part of the liberal camp. I place them there, nonetheless, because they do not resist or depart from liberal principles in many respects. In general, they are advocates of a constitutional order in which individuals enjoy a significant measure of freedom under the law, and which is, to a considerable degree, open to the outside world. What they share with the reluctant and the strong liberal multiculturalists is a rejection of the stance of classical liberalism. Where they differ, however, is in the level of their commitment to liberal values. Conservatives and radicals, in the end, are at best sceptical about liberalism and about the individualism they see at its heart. The theorists I have labeled ‘strong’ and ‘reluctant’

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<sup>10</sup> On this see Noah M.J.Pickus, ‘Creating Citizens for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’, in Noah M.J.Pickus (ed.), *Immigration and Citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), pp.107-139.

<sup>11</sup> An important defence of the view is offered by Monique Deveaux, *Cultural Pluralism and Dilemmas of Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). The most important and influential advocate of a position such as this is Charles Taylor, particularly in his essay, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in Amy Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp.25-73.

multiculturalists, however, are liberals who profess a serious commitment to liberal principles or liberal values. It is this commitment that is the source of their disagreement with the ‘weak’ liberal position.

For thinkers like Will Kymlicka and Brian Barry, who differ quite significantly in their attitudes towards multiculturalism, a liberal society must be one whose communities or sub-groups themselves respect liberal values – at least to some degree. For Barry, they can only depart from liberal norms if they are associations that are fully voluntary associations of free adults.<sup>12</sup> And such groups ought not to be given any particular encouragement to maintain their separate, illiberal, forms of association. For Kymlicka, on the other hand, it is important that minority cultural communities be helped partly because it is only if they receive assistance that their members will be able to enjoy a measure of the autonomy which, in his view, is a value liberalism particularly commends. If they are to be helped this means that they must be given assistance in their efforts to integrate, but also in their efforts to maintain their separateness. This means that they must be helped, in the first instance, by being given legal and political dispensations that will better enable them to survive and prosper in society. This may mean giving them special political representation, recognizing their cultural beliefs (say by incorporating them into the structure of national symbols or allowing the setting of public holidays to reflect minority as well as majority religious practices), and allowing some groups exemptions from certain legal requirements. But it also means helping groups, in the second instance, by making laws that enable them to protect themselves from outside influences. In the case of indigenous peoples in particular, Kymlicka advocates allowing and enabling groups to establish systems of self-government. In these respects, Kymlicka differs

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<sup>12</sup> See *Culture and Equality*, esp. ch.4.

significantly from Barry; but they share a conviction that independent groups in a liberal polity should respect some basic liberal values. Groups may not be wholly illiberal.

The classical liberal position, as it is understood in this essay, is characterized by a far more significant degree of tolerance insofar as it is willing to put up with illiberalism within its midst. Classical liberal multiculturalism is thus willing to accept that, in a multicultural society, there may be groups or communities of people whose basic traditions or beliefs or practices are not only disapproved of by the majority but are even hostile to liberal values. Modern liberals reject this position because it is too tolerant of illiberal values. Some radical critics of liberalism reject it because it offers nonliberal communities no more than toleration. And conservative critics reject it because it fails to embrace particular nonliberal values. But from a classical liberal point of view, these other perspectives should be rejected because they demand too much of a political regime, for they demand that the regime conform to particular substantive moral commitments. In the face of cultural diversity, this can only be a demand that a political society conform to the moral and cultural values of a particular – dominant – political group. The strength of the classical liberal view is that it resists such calls because, in the end, they can only amount to a demand that dissenting traditions be suppressed. If anything is characteristic of the liberal tradition it is its wariness of the concentration of power and of the efforts of the powerful to suppress dissent. Liberal regimes have been notable for their commitment to the dispersal of power, and to the toleration of dissenting ideas – be they conservative, socialist, fascist, theocratic, or simply anti-liberal. If the liberal tradition accepts

anything, it is that toleration is of fundamental importance, and that toleration requires a willingness to put up with what one dislikes.<sup>13</sup>

## 6 *The limits of classical liberal multiculturalism*

The theoretical foundations of multiculturalism, from my perspective, lie in the political theory of classical liberalism. Yet the plausibility of this view will surely be questioned for at least one reason: that it presents what can only be an impossible standard for any regime to meet. In its purest form, a classical liberal multicultural regime seems at once to demand an impossibly high standard – a standard of complete tolerance – and, at the same time, no standard at all, since any kind of cultural community or tradition would have to be accepted as a part of the polity. Can such a position possibly be sustained, either theoretically or in practical political terms?

In theoretical terms, classical liberal multiculturalism is a perfectly coherent position. If the analysis in this paper is sound, it is a position that is readily identifiable, and may be plotted quite precisely in relation to a number of other liberal multicultural views, and in relation to other political positions more generally. But in practical terms, it is a position that is unlikely ever to be found in the real world of politics. For there cannot be such a thing as a political regime that is morally or culturally neutral. The world described by classical liberal multiculturalism is a world in which there is, literally, no political regime. We might call this anarcho-multiculturalism. Yet that is not only a highly improbable world, but also very definitely not the kind of world in which we live.

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<sup>13</sup> I have argued this more fully in 'Tolerating the Intolerable', *Papers on Parliament*, March 1999 33: *The Senate and Good Government*, pp.67-82

The obvious question this leads to is: what is interest or relevance of this analysis of the theoretical foundations of multiculturalism, and of classical liberal multiculturalism more generally? The answer is that the idea of multiculturalism, insofar as the term identifies a philosophical stance rather than merely a political policy, and insofar as it bespeaks a commitment to accommodating rather than suppressing cultural diversity, is an idea that pushes away from the various other attitudes towards a conception of an open society. The classical liberal conception of multiculturalism presented here describes the terminating point of multiculturalism. And while no actual regime may be willing, or able, to reach (let alone sustain) such a form of society, it may be useful to see exactly where the theory of multiculturalism leads. This may be useful because it makes clear that a decision to stop anywhere else along the road to multiculturalism will reflect the influence of peculiar cultural values which, in some contexts, have great practical and political significance; but, from a multicultural point of view, no particular theoretical warrant.

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