Comments on *Multicultural Odysseys*

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Multicultural Odysseys is a textbook example of how to effectively integrate empirical research and philosophical analysis. It is carefully researched, extremely well-constructed and the writing style is accessible without sacrificing intellectual depth. The book's project is to assess when, why and to what extent liberal multiculturalism, understood both as a set of moral arguments and as a set of institutions, can successfully travel. This project has implications for topics that have come to occupy a significant chunk of space in academic journals and the op-ed pages of newspapers: Are the principles of justice to which Western democracies subscribe really universal? What are the limits of democratization? Are democracy and security inherently at odds? Is it realistic in the international realm to pursue both justice and peace? And so the project is of interest for a wide audience, both non-academic and academic. However its very topicality also makes the book's project fraught with danger. There are a number of ways in which a book about when multiculturalism can and cannot travel could go horribly wrong. Will Kymlicka avoids all of these. Instead, Kymlicka offers a measured and scrupulously honest assessment of what he takes to be both the potential and the limits of liberal multiculturalism as a model for democratization. The resulting book rewards the skeptical reader and not just the fellow traveler, a rare enough accomplishment with any topic, let alone one as controversial as the global potential of liberal institutions.

Multicultural Odysseys, then, is a very good book. It is also very important. Kymlicka is a central figure in contemporary political philosophy and theory, and in this

book he further develops his views on the role of multiculturalism in liberal democracy, giving them greater nuance and depth. Part of the reason that *Multicultural Odysseys* is so successful is that Kymlicka does not seek to defend his views on multiculturalism in this book so much as try to understand them. In particular, he seeks to understand how his views on multiculturalism can be correct in the context of Western democracies (as he does not doubt they are) and yet be limited in their potential for export. In approaching his project in this way, Kymlicka raises a number of questions about multiculturalism, about theorizing across borders, and about the nature of Western democracy that he does not directly address, but toward which the reader is inevitably spurred. One especially important question is the focus of my comments below: What does the analysis of this book imply about the future prospects for ideal theorizing? In the wake of Kymlicka's treatment of the limits on liberal multiculturalism's exportability it is difficult to imagine that ideal theorizing can occupy the same central place in normative analyses of multiculturalism, minority rights, liberalism, democracy, and global justice. For, without the author intending or necessarily foreseeing it, *Multicultural Odysseys* has made the world of political philosophy a much less hospitable place for such theorizing, at least as it has traditionally been understood.

John Rawls describes ideal theory as "realistic utopianism": what principles would characterize institutions such that these were actually realizable under conditions in which people were able to recognize what justice requires of them and act in accordance with that recognition most of the time? [1] On this understanding, ideal theories seek to develop accounts of what can be justified for and via our institutional

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[1] John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Erin Kelly, ed. (Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA, 2001), p. 13.

arrangements given a realistic theory of human psychology and a scientifically sound understanding of how institutions operate. In contrast, non-ideal theories ask: What principles should characterize institutions under conditions in which it is difficult for people to recognize what justice requires, and the costs of acting in accordance with those requirements are such as to be beyond what we may realistically expect individuals to bear? In this, non-ideal theory is about the world we actually encounter: what principles and institutional arrangements ought we to accept as justified given the institutions we have, and a psychologically sound theory of what we can expect from people under the conditions those institutions create?

There is a long-standing set of worries about whether it is actually possible to engage in ideal theorizing, and whether, even if it is possible, such theorizing can tell us anything interesting about justice between actual people. These worries have picked up steam in recent years, as political philosophers have turned in greater numbers to subject matter for which the methods and assumptions of ideal theory are ill-suited. In many ways, then, *Multicultural Odysseys*, which is a work of non-ideal theory, is the product of a strengthening undercurrent in political philosophy pushing theory to be more empirically situated, less broadbrush and more reflective about the historical and intellectual origins of the concepts and institutional forms on which analysis relies. However, in most cases, theorists engaging in non-ideal theorizing either explicitly absolve themselves of taking a stand on the value of the ideal/non-ideal distinction by simply declaring that they are engaged in non-ideal theory, or explicitly reject the value of the ideal/non-ideal distinction, either in general, or with respect to the topic at hand.[2]

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[2] For examples of the former see Larry May, *Crimes Against Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For examples

In *Multicultural Odysseys* Kymlicka does neither. Questions about the relative merits of ideal *versus* non-ideal theorizing are not central to the book's project; and so, he does not take them up. Interestingly, however, this makes the questions that the book's analysis raises about ideal theorizing more pointed and more difficult to ignore than if Kymlicka had explicitly taken them up. Questions about the value and viability of ideal theorizing emerge from Kymlicka's analysis once we step back and ask what, precisely, we ought to take away from his observations about the limits of liberal multiculturalism.

The liberal multiculturalism that Kymlicka discusses in *Multicultural Odysseys* is a normative theory (it's a theory of what ought to be true), but it's a normative theory of states that are liberal in the non-ideal rather than the ideal sense. Liberal multiculturalism as taken up in this book is a set of moral arguments regarding the organizing principles and institutions that can be justified for states that are liberal in the sense of exhibiting the features that are typically taken to be central to identifying members of the (empirical) set "Western democracies". It is not (or, at least, not necessarily) a set of moral arguments for states that are liberal in the sense of exhibiting the features that qualify a state as liberal according to some defensible version of philosophical liberalism. Kymlicka is investigating the potential for export of the multiculturalism that can be justified to people in Western democracies for Western democratic institutions. The central question of the book is when, why and to what extent *this* (non-ideal) multiculturalism is appropriately held out as a model for democracies. In other words, it is the question of

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of arguments rejecting ideal theory generally see Alessandro Ferrara, *Justice and Judgement* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), Katherine Eddy, "Against Ideal Rights", *Social Theory and Practice* 34:3 (July 2008), 463-481. For examples of argument rejecting ideal theory with respect to a specific topic see Allen Buchanan, *Justice, Legitimacy and Self-determination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Cindy Holder, "Preventing Humanitarian Crises" in *War: Essays in Political Philosophy*, L. May, ed with E. Crookston (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 85-104.

when, why and to what extent it is reasonable to expect that the features that justify the practice of multiculturalism in Western democracies will also justify its practice in other contexts.

That is a very interesting question. And Kymlicka has a series of very interesting answers. But, it is difficult to know what we are supposed to make of those answers because of a deep ambiguity in the normative logic by which liberal multiculturalism is supposed to have been established as an appropriate model for justice within Western democracies themselves. Liberal multiculturalism as a philosophical position was developed as an ideal theory; and so it is justified for people characterized by a realistic human psychology whose assumptions and expectations have been formed by reasonably just political institutions. Liberal multiculturalism as a normative theory of (non-ideal) liberal states is justified for people whose psychology has been strongly influenced by the bad elements of Western European culture as much as by the good, and whose assumptions and expectations have been formed by institutions that are not just. The liberal multiculturalism whose application outside of Western democracies the book takes up is of the latter sort; and this leaves it unclear what, precisely, we are to make of the tensions that Kymlicka identifies between human rights versus stability as justifications for minority protection, and between general versus group-differentiated approaches to minority rights. Do these tensions reflect something inherent to the situation of minorities? Do they reflect something distinctive about states as a form of political organization? Do they reflect something about the structural logic of Western democracy?

To see the full extent of the challenge this ambiguity poses, it is useful to take a step back and consider Kymlicka's project in *Multicultural Odysseys* against the background of the widespread charge that liberalism in general, and liberal multiculturalism as one of its manifestations, are parochial in one or both of two ways: they are the product of a specific historical, cultural, and economic experience; and they are the product of an inability to imagine a history, culture or economics that has been experienced in any other way. Most of us recognize the need to take the charge of parochialism seriously in the sense of having to come up with a serious answer. Very few of us, however, have accepted the need to take this charge seriously in the sense of having to seriously consider the possibility that it is true. In *Multicultural Odysseys* Kymlicka takes the charge of parochialism seriously in both senses. And one of the conclusions he comes to is that, at least with respect to its historical, cultural and economic specificity, the value of liberal multiculturalism is tied to a particular kind of experience. One of Kymlicka's arguments in *Multicultural Odysseys* is that many of the reasons that liberal multiculturalism effectively describes and justifies the moral claims of minority groups in Western democracies are specific to those democracies' historical, cultural and economic conditions.[3]

However, once we accept that the principles and institutions of liberal multiculturalism are normatively justified in part because of the historical, institutional and empirical conditions specific to Western democracies, a serious question arises as to why we would think it at all probable that such institutions will be normatively justified anywhere else. In the absence of a plausible scientific or moral reason to expect or desire that all political systems and societies will eventually develop or exhibit the historical,

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[3] See, for example, *Multicultural Odysseys* (Oxford University Press: 2007), pp. 180-196, 252-264.

institutional and empirical conditions that make liberal multiculturalism justified in Western democracies, why would we expect that such multiculturalism will successfully travel? The real puzzle appears not to be why liberal multiculturalism doesn't always succeed in contexts other than Western Europe and its settler states, but why it doesn't always and inevitably fail.

One very simple answer is that human beings are ingenious creatures who can recognize a good trick when they see it. On this explanation, preconditions such as human rights guarantees, regional security, and favourable demographics are significant not so much because they create space for moral argument, but because they create opportunities for social movement entrepreneurs and lower aversions to risk for both groups and individuals. But if we think that such preconditions contribute to liberal multiculturalism's success by making it easier for people to experiment with a really good trick, then liberal multiculturalism should be understood as a practice people engage in rather than as a set of principles for which they advocate, or a set of institutions that they desire. One of the things that makes a good trick good is not just that it is useful, but that it is versatile. And so maybe the language and institutions of liberal multiculturalism are a really good trick, not just because they can be used to make the moral arguments and secure the moral interests that people in Western democracies invented them for, but because they can be used to make a variety of moral arguments and secure a variety of interests, some of which may not even appear as moral or as interests in the context of a Western democracy.

Good trick, persuasive moral argument; perhaps ultimately, they amount to the same thing. But if we accept Charles Mills's argument in "Ideal Theory as Ideology" that

what distinguishes ideal theorizing is not the generality or abstractness of its analysis, but the perspective from which it proceeds, then there might be reason to think that what the tensions that Kymlica identifies in liberal multiculturalism reflect is something about the situation of dominant groups.[4] According to Mills, to engage in ideal theorizing is to describe social and political structures from the perspective of those that such structures privilege, to the exclusion of the perspectives of everyone else.[5] On this description, ideal and non-ideal liberal multiculturalism are not that far apart; non-ideal liberal multiculturalism is simply more explicit about and more aware of the perspective from which the theorizing is done: dominant groups, or those who currently dominate the state and for whom its construction works relatively well. From the point of view of those groups, liberal multiculturalism asks, what is a morally justifiable response to the claims of minorities?

Recognizing that the theory operates from this perspective makes it obvious why there would be tension between human rights and security as motivations to minority accommodation, and why there might appear to be incoherence between general and differentiated approaches to minority accommodation.   As Kymlicka points out in his discussion of nation-building, the reason that minority groups pose a problem is that many state structures were specifically designed to privilege members of some groups or to penalize members of others.[6] From the point of view of a dominant group, then, it is obvious why stability and human rights might be competing considerations with respect to minority accommodation. In many cases, precisely those features in virtue of which dominant groups are served well by existing state structures are what have to change in

[4]Charles Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology", *Hypatia* 20:3 (Summer 2005), 165-184.

[5] Mills, *op cit*., p. 172.

[6] Kymlicka, *op.cit*., pp. 62-66.

order to address minority concerns. Often then, addressing the claims of minority groups will necessarily involve disrupting, in some degree, the dominant group's relationship to the state.

Similarly, from the perspective of a dominant group, minorities by definition deviate from the normal relationship between group and the state. And this is what makes minorities, in general, a source of problems. However, insofar as each minority deviates in a different way, the specific problems that arise with respect to each minority differ. So, there is a general problem that the state faces: some groups deviate from the norm. But the forms of deviation are particular, and so, it seems, there is no general solution. This creates a tension between general and group-differentiated approaches, as attempting to address the problems posed by minorities by altering the structures of the state will in some cases fail to address the problems of a specific group, while addressing the problems of a specific group may leave intact features of the state that generally disempower or create problems for minorities.

But of course the point of view of dominant groups is not the only point of view relevant to thinking about the principles and institutions of liberal multiculturalism. And so we should ask: how do human rights and security as motivations to group accommodation, and general versus group-differentiated approaches to minority rights appear from the point of view of minority groups? Are these still in tension with one another? Or might the fact that they have the potential to dissolve tensions that liberal states otherwise produce be part of the secret of liberal multiculturalism's success? From the perspective of an indigenous group, for example, are the authority structures of a liberal state a source of stability and security in their own right? Or does the extent to

which such a state provides stability and security appear to depend on the peculiarities of the individuals who occupy its offices, the interests of third parties in the outcome of interactions with it, the ability to establish personal relationships with high-ranking officials, and sheer luck? Again, from the perspective of a national minority is a liberal state consistent in its responsiveness to the needs of its citizenry? Are its standards for participation and success coherent and rational? Or is such a state experienced as fundamentally inconsistent in its responsiveness to citizens? Is it experienced as irrational in its criteria for participation and social benefit?

The lesson here is to continually remind ourselves to ask who we take ourselves to be theorizing about and who we take ourselves to be theorizing for when we engage in normative analysis. Although Kymlicka does not explicitly take up these questions in *Multicultural Odysseys*, his analysis forces his readers to grapple with them, both in connection with the book's main topics, multiculturalism and minority rights, and with respect to related topics, such as global justice and democratization. This feature makes the book not only important and distinctive, but potentially transformative of the literatures to which it speaks.