

## BOOK REVIEWS

## Political Theory

**Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism.** By Brian Barry. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001. 399p. \$35.00.

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Barry is well known for his hard-nosed, no-nonsense defenses of traditional liberal principles, as evidenced in his *Theories of Justice* (1989) and *Justice as Impartiality* (1995). Here he turns his attention to arguments by proponents of multiculturalism in political life, liberal and nonliberal alike. The book is divided into three main sections: Multiculturalism and Equal Treatment, Multiculturalism and Groups, and Multiculturalism, Universalism, and Egalitarianism. The central argument does not so much unfold gradually as it is asserted at the outset and then defended intermittently thereafter.

Barry's task is twofold: Offer a thorough and critical analysis of recent political theory that advocates cultural pluralism, and defend core liberal principles and a conception of liberalism as equal justice for all against what the author plainly sees as the misguided efforts of multiculturalists. Barry seeks to wrest liberal principles from the hands of so-called liberal proponents of multiculturalism (such as Will Kymlicka and Chandran Kukathas) as well as to show why efforts to discredit liberalism as inadequate to the demands of culturally plural societies are mistaken. Rather than eschew liberal norms or reform them beyond all recognition, Barry argues, we need to seek solutions from within liberalism. Specifically, we need to extend equal rights and treatment to all, and we must rectify the pervasive social and economic disadvantages that multiculturalists wrongly impute to groups' distinctive cultural identities.

Barry makes no attempt to obscure his thoroughly skeptical view of this literature. Indeed, he states at the outset that, in his "naively rationalistic way, I used to believe that multiculturalism was bound sooner or later to sink under the weight of its intellectual weaknesses and that I would therefore be better employed writing about other topics" (p. 6). Only multiculturalism's inexplicable persistence persuaded him to undertake the task of rebutting the arguments of leading proponents. As befits this motivation, his central aim is to demonstrate that much of the normative argumentation underpinning proposals for greater accommodation of cultural minorities in liberal democratic states is fundamentally flawed. Barry also seeks to show that many if not most of the specific proposals advanced by contemporary political theorists for special rights, exemptions, and other arrangements for cultural minorities are poorly defended and potentially disastrous from the vantage point of politics.

Among the thinkers Barry takes on in his thorough and highly critical survey of the literature are Bikhu Parekh, Chandran Kukathas, Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, James Tully, and Iris Young. In his discussion of the various arguments of these and other proponents of cultural pluralism, Barry brings his analytical skills to bear in exposing vague, contradictory, and poorly argued aspects of their work, and he employs his political savvy to speculate about the potential effects of concrete proposals for accommodating cultural minorities. At times this strategy is remarkably insightful, as in his exploration of the implications of the suggestion (which he attributes to Iris Young) that liberal cultural minorities should have disproportionate power in shaping the public policies that apply to their own practices (p. 303).

At other times, Barry too readily engages in sarcastic dismissal of the works he discusses. His writing style is highly rhetorical and often witty, but the witticisms frequently come at the expense of authors whose arguments or political visions are forced through Barry's analytical grinder. Examples include Iris Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), which Barry discusses at length and whose central arguments he rejects on the basis of some very persuasive reasons. Nonetheless, punctuating his analysis are derisive asides—Young ultimately advances a "perverse thesis about the assimilationist impulse behind liberalism" (p. 69)—and he twice quotes a passage from Young's book that discusses an idea he finds particularly absurd, namely, the notion of a distinct women's culture as including traditional women's arts and rituals deriving from witchcraft (pp. 94 and 278).

Similarly, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Barry is merely poking fun at a central aboriginal image from James Tully's *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (1995)—the black canoe, employed by Tully as a metaphor for his vision of constitutionalism amid diversity—even though Barry hastens to assure readers that "there is nothing intrinsically absurd in any of the argumentative strategies that Tully attributes to the mythological bear" (p. 262). References to the Politically Correct Thought Police (p. 271) and the Commissioners of Political Correctness (p. 328) abound, reinforcing Barry's view that cultural pluralism as a political strategy is the concoction of a handful of posturing intellectuals who rely on dogmatism to support their cause.

As ever, Barry's strong suit is his talent for articulating the essence of liberal principles and presenting persuasive (although not, in my view, ultimately convincing) arguments to support his case against self-styled liberal and postliberal theories of multiculturalism. A key strength of the book is Barry's knack for demonstrating that often political theorists who purport to amend flaws within liberal theory simply misconstrue or fail to understand what liberal norms, principles, and conceptual distinctions actually entail. For example, the liberal distinction between public and private has, Barry argues, been profoundly misconstrued by critics. Urging us back to John Stuart Mill (whom he discusses at length), Barry persuasively argues that such a division is indispensable for justice.

Barry also unpacks and holds up to critical scrutiny much of the rhetoric of recent political theory that endorses cultural pluralism, sometimes in quite useful ways. His discussion in the final chapter, "The Politics of Multiculturalism," effectively demonstrates the dangers of the presumption that liberal democracies should move toward a conception of the "special interests" of ethnic and cultural minorities, in part because such a conception obscures the ways in which public institutions and resources (like education) are a matter of critical concern for all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity.

Barry's claims that "a politics of multiculturalism undermines a politics of redistribution" (p. 8) and that "pursuit of the multiculturalist agenda makes the achievement of broadly based egalitarian policies more difficult" by "diverting political effort away from universalistic goals" (p. 325) combine to shape a provocative and sobering thesis. The book is, however, a bit short on solutions to the very social and economic disadvantages and inequalities that are, Barry claims, misattributed (by proponents of multiculturalism) to culture and group identity. It is hoped that a follow-up book is in the offing, in which Barry will address precisely these problems from his trenchant liberal social justice perspective.