The Open University

Multiculturalism Bites
Anne Phillips on the Multiculturalism and Liberalism

David Edmonds:
If one person has a perm, another a crew-cut, a third a bob and a fourth a mullet, we don't say these people are from different cultures. Individuals may differ in many ways – including hairstyle. But only some differences are treated as *cultural* differences. The term 'multiculturalism' is made up of two components: multi, meaning many, and 'culture'. So what do we mean when we say that in a liberal society, multiple groups of different *cultures* should be allowed to coexist? Anne Phillips, of the London School of Economics, is critical of the concept of 'culture', implying, as it does, that cultures are somehow fixed, homogenous, immutable. The term 'culture' she believes, is a distraction. What's important is that in a democracy all citizens be treated equally, and be free to choose how to live their lives. Like all liberals, though, she has to confront the slippery notion of 'freedom'...what counts as a 'free' choice?

Nigel Warburton:
Anne Phillips, we're going to talk about multiculturalism and liberalism. What's the connection between the two?

Anne Phillips:
I think the obvious point of connection is that liberalism, if it means anything, involves a kind of critique of state-imposed conformity. I mean if you're a liberal then presumably you don't think that everyone should be dragooned into a certain kind of homogeneity and that that seems to imply a kind of recognition of the claims of cultural diversity. My own sense is that I think it's kind of slightly problematic in stressing the connection between multiculturalism and liberalism too much because what that does is it frames multiculturalism as a project of tolerance: majorities tolerating the strange and potentially deviant behaviour of minorities, and I think that's a rather problem understanding of what multiculturalism is.

NW:
So liberalism with it's emphasis of freedom wants to allow freedom for people to have their own way of living, it's a kind of 'live and let live' attitude. But at the same time if you merely tolerate somebody that implies a power relationship which is almost pejorative about what it is that you tolerate.

AP:
I think that's right. For myself, I would rather frame the case for multiculturalism in terms of notions of democracy and equality. Now obviously that's compatible with liberalism, but I think it brings out the argument much more clearly to my view. If you live in societies of considerable cultural diversity, there is an obligation that derives from democracy and equality for the society to ensure that it's not unfairly favouring certain groups within that society. I think all of our political, legal, social institutions tend to presume a certain kind of homogeneity, and that that leads to all kinds of bias. It very often leads to a class bias; it almost always leads to a gender bias; often a regional bias; it would be very odd if there weren't also some cultural bias.

So to me the basic case for multiculturalism derives from that obligation in a democracy, which is supposed to presume the equality of citizens, to address areas where existing political and legal institutions have built into them some kind of covert advantaging of particular groups within the society.

NW:
So does that mean we should jettison the liberal defence of toleration in respect to

multiculturalism? Because a lot of us are persuaded by that, I mean it seems to be a good argument that you don't have to agree with other people, but the best way of living is to allow people to make their own mistakes, make their own choices about their own lives, not, if at all possible, impose your own views on them from outside.

AP:
Yes. But I think the important thing in framing that in terms of democracy and equality is that it constantly reminds us that this is something we're claiming for ourselves as well as claiming for others. And I think one of the biggest difficulties that arises in the discourses around multiculturalism is the kind of asymmetry that gets written into them: the way in which the very notion of culture has come to be seen as linked to minority culture, as if we don't all have culture, as if we aren't all enormously shaped by cultural preferences around us. We all of us have the need for toleration, right, the claim to be allowed within certain limits to make our own mistakes and get on with our own lives; and I think some of the problems in the ways in which multiculturalism gets framed is that it gets framed as though it's a toleration of the oddities of particular members of society. We're all pretty odd, right? We all have our strange practices that we engage in, we all make terrible mistakes. What I would search for is a way of framing the arguments for and the understanding of multiculturalism that's cutting through that kind of asymmetry that I think distorts it.

NW:
One of the issues that arises for multiculturalism is the sense that sometimes people make bad choices for themselves, and they seem to be making them freely. But if only they knew a bit more they wouldn't be doing that. I'm thinking of cases where, for instance, somebody might willingly enter into an arranged marriage that from my perspective looks like a bad mistake. What do you think about those sorts of cases?

AP:
Well, again, I would want to stress the symmetry between what have falsely represented as kind of very different majority and minority cultural experiences.There are lots of decisions that we make about our lives that if you track them back don't really seem to be our decisions, that they're made in a context in which we have a very kind of limited sense of what the alternatives are and what the options are. And maybe 10 years on we'd think back and we'd think, 'How on earth could I have willingly chosen to do that?' It was one of the experiences of the early women's movement, I mean, I remember very much having this experience myself: talking about the process of realising that they were oppressed, which is a kind of odd notion. You'd think if you're oppressed you'd know you're oppressed, right? But in fact the process of realising that certain kinds of experiences or practices that you had just accepted as a norm actually were pretty oppressive or inegalitarian. So that to me is something that, yes, is a feature of the human condition. Now, that poses a problem.

NW*:*
So if you recognise that somebody is making a mistake, and it's going to lead to bad consequences for them, what do you do?

AP:
OK, well, bearing in mind the first point that I wanted to stress, which is that this is something that affects all of us, right, so let's not make the mistake of thinking that this is something that only arises for what we describe as minority cultures, right. To the extent that I have an answer to the 'So what do we do?' question, I mean I have three what I think of as quite general criteria. One is that I would say that we have to be particularly careful when minors are involved. So when people are under age, one has to be particularly careful about assessing in what sense something counts as their own choice. Secondly, I think that things that cause physical or mental harm are problematic. Both of those, both the minor and the physical and mental harm would be the basis on which one would want to oppose female genital cutting for example. And thirdly, I'd want to say that if there is something that people are doing which is premised on people not being equals in some way, that there's a problem with it. But the difficulty with that one and with all them is in spelling out what that means. So if you take minors, at what point does somebody become of the age to take responsibility for their lives? That's something that's endlessly debated. The question about what counts as

physical and mental harm, very problematic, it's not obvious. And the question of equality, hugely problematic – I mean, do I think that a woman who chooses to devote her life to being a wife and mother, who subordinates her own wishes about which country she wants to live in to the career choices of her husband who never puts her own wishes first, do I think that she's in an unequal situation? Well, yes I do. But you wouldn't want to ban that particular relationship. So my equality condition begins to dissolve once you look at particular situations.

NW*:*
Presumably some cultures actively advocate inequality between the sexes, so it seems to be a kind of cultural imperialism to say that everybody has got to be equal because that's how we do it here.

AP:
Yes, I mean at one level I'd say all cultures advocate inequality between the sexes, though a lot hangs on your point about 'actively': in some it's more active than others. In fact, what you tend to find much more commonly is that differences focus on to what extent people think of men's and women's roles as complementary and different, and to what extent that's intention with equality. You don't actually find very often nowadays people saying that women are inferior to men, but you very often find people saying 'well, the appropriate position for a woman is…' and then it turns out to be somewhere that looks pretty inferior or pretty subordinate.

So that's your question, how much power does the equality provision carry in those kinds of contexts? Clearly anything that is put into law which gives men and women unequal rights and authority is problematic. The witness of three women was necessary to add up to the strength of one man, and you enshrine that in law: that's clearly unacceptable, right? But if you have something that's more like the kind of inequalities that might be in a relationship between one partner who goes out into the world and earns money, and another who stays at home and is responsible for caring for the children, you can describe that as unequal, but it's actually problematic to know how to operate with that one.

NW:
So are you're saying that the consequence of this is that if somebody says that that's what they freely have chosen, that we just have to take it at face value, that is their genuine choice?

AP:
No, that's not my position at all. If you took that position, you'd end up saying so long as people remain in a certain situation that's proof that there's no problem. That would completely be unacceptable. It's like saying the woman who stays with an abusive husband isn't being abused. So it's not at all that I would want to say there's no problem so long as people say that they're happy with what they want to do, that they're continuing to live in conditions that you might consider abusive or oppressive. There's a big responsibility on states to provide all kinds of options and alternatives and protections and securities. So if we went back to the example that you introduced about arranged marriage, I think there's a lot of obligation on societies to ensure that young people are well aware of the kind of support system that is in place for people who have been pressured into unwanted marriages, that they're well aware of alternatives, of people that they can turn to; in the worst possible cases, that they have access to refuges that they can comfortably live in to escape from their families. All of these things I think are obligations. But they make possibilities available to people. That's very different from telling people that if having had all of these opportunities made available to them, or all these alternatives made available to them, if people nonetheless say 'this is what I've chosen,' at that point I you have to say, 'Okay, I hear what you're saying. It's not the choice I would have made, but it's the choice you've made.'

NW:
One alternative to a multicultural society is to enforce some kind of assimilation, and that gets round all these points of conflict that we get for instance with Sikhs who both want to wear turbans and need to obey the law with motorcycle helmets. These sorts of issues can easily be got round by simply imposing a policy of assimilation. If you don't go down that route, how

do you resolve those difficult cases?

AP:
You have to have a kind of contextual answer to that. I mean, if we take your example about Sikhs and crash helmets, there was some kind of discussion about whether the Sikh turban provides any physical protection against falling off a motorbike. What I've noticed is very few Sikhs drive around on motorcycles without helmets. So it seems to me that most Sikhs have made the judgment that it's not safe. In that particular case there was a political judgment that it was better to make a concession in order to recognise the importance of the Sikh turban, but the expectation was that individuals would make sensible judgments about the safety of their transport.

NW:
Well, that has resolved the motorcycle helmet issue, but I understand that Sikhs are, by their religion, obliged to carry a kirpan – male Sikhs anyway – a little knife everywhere that they go. That creates huge problems in terms of airline security and so on.

AP:
I think that's a much more difficult one in fact. It's also true in terms of schools: it's a huge issue for schools to ensure that children are not carrying knives in schools. What that does is precisely throw up the sense in which sensible judgments have to be made which are in a way weighing up the significance to people's sense of identity, the disadvantage that they're put at if they then have to choose between airline travel and their sense of religious identity: that's a huge choice, but maybe that's the choice that people have to be offered.

The needing to address the potential disadvantages that certain kind of cultural bias introduce, the point about that is not that anything goes. Multiculturalism doesn't mean whenever anyone makes a cultural claim we then accept it. But multiculturalism has to mean that you then start a process of assessment. How that assessment is going to work out is going to be very contextual, I mean, I don't have an algorithm to resolve that one. What's important is the recognition on the one side that political, legal, social institutions almost always will contain some kind of bias, and that there's an obligation in terms of democracy and equality to try and see if there are ways of addressing that; but a recognition on the other side that that doesn't mean that anyone can make any kind of cultural claim and expect it to be acknowledged and recognised.

NW:
What do you think about education in this respect? I can see arguments both for and against having schools where people from different groups can educate their children in the way that they wish to. You might say that's a right, a basic human right. But at the same time, if you want a flourishing multicultural society, it seems to me that segregation isn't the way to achieve it.

AP:
One thing that liberalism stresses is individual rights. One of the tensions that's kind of entered into the liberalism and multiculturalism debate is that multiculturalism comes up with what look like liberal arguments for group rights or cultural rights, and that's, I think, part of what then gets worked out in terms of your example of education. The groups says as a group we're entitled to ensure that our children are brought up in particular kinds of precepts and ways of understanding the world, maybe even we're entitled to ensure that they are protected from contamination from other ways of thinking about the world, and that this is our right as a culture.

There's a bit of a tension between that and the rights of those individual children who might also have rights to engage with, enter in to dialogue with, be exposed to, a whole range of ways of being within the society. I would like a kind of multiculturalism that was more on the individual rights side rather than the kind of the cultural group right side, and I think that's part of what's played out in relation to education.

The good thing that happened in the debates about multiculturalism was the modification and

development of that classic liberalism with its emphasis on individual rights because what you got was people saying, yes, rights of the individual, but actually a lot of what matters to individuals are group identities, that's something that needs also to be thought about when we're thinking about what the rights of the individual are. That rightly expanded our understanding or rights, but I think it needs to stop short of the move into then claiming a group right, a right for a group or a cultural group. My own view is that these cultures that are then presented as having rights - in an important sense there are no such things as cultures. All the things that we describe as cultures are enormously variegated, contain a huge diversity of voices, interchange in all kinds of ways with other things we call separate cultures. So attaching rights to things called 'cultures' it seems to me is problematic. But I think moving from the classic liberal individual rights to some recognition of the ways in which for individuals the group matters, that's an important move.

NW:
Are you saying that our identities are more complex than simply membership of a particular culture? Lots of things that make us what we are our attachments to groups which have nothing to do specifically with culture, it might be to do with our gender or sex, whether we're left-handed or not. So that it's slightly arbitrary to narrow down one group type, the culture.

AP:
I very much agree with that. I mean in a way I'd like to move away from the talk of culture and back to the notion of social. All of us are very much shaped by a whole range of social influences; you've mentioned gender, class, ethnicity, religion, region of country - all sorts of things that kind of enter into our identity and can be enormously important to the ways in which we see ourselves and the kinds of lives that matter to us. Recognising the significance of those social influences and social identities is hugely important, and I don't think it enormously helps to identify some of those as the cultural ones which then get some kind of special status. What people call culture is actually social. It's back to the point about needing to challenge the asymmetry between the ways in which majorities and minorities are treated. We need to get out of this box of thinking that there are certain people who have a cultural identity and then the rest of us who have gender identities, class identities, all kinds of social influences working on us. All of us have social influences working on us and the questions in liberal democratic, egalitarian societies are to do with what are the kinds of policies, institutions that we need to develop that recognise that kind of complexity, and make sure that we're not put at a disadvantage in relation to one another.

NW:
Anne Phillips, thank you very much.

AP:
Thank you.