

A theory of just, reasonable multiculturalism

Is multiculturalism incompatible with the protection of liberal values? Drawing on a new book, Raphael Cohen-Almagor presents a theory of just, reasonable multiculturalism that is capable of reconciling these two apparently competing strands.

I have been thinking and writing about religion and culture since the 1990s. However, I did not think about writing a book. I was more preoccupied with questions pertaining to media ethics and medical ethics. The turning point was 2011. Then, British Prime Minister David Cameron went as far as saying that multiculturalism had failed and that it had fostered extremist ideology and radicalisation among British Muslims.

Cameron [said](#) that under the “doctrine of state multiculturalism,” different cultures have been encouraged to live separate lives, “apart from each other and apart from the mainstream.” In his words, “we have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong” and “we have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to our values.”

I thought that Cameron’s attack on multiculturalism was not only uncalled for but also inflammatory. Those words, uttered by the British Prime Minister, divided British society more than it already was. Up until that point, I used to hear other attacks on multiculturalism, that it endangers democracy, and that it is bad for women and children, but to say that multiculturalism promotes extremism and terrorism was something that I did not expect.

I decided it was about time to write a comprehensive book on the themes of liberalism, multiculturalism and tolerance. The result is my new book, [Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism](#). The main thesis that I put forward is that *it is possible to reconcile between liberalism and multiculturalism*.

To show this, while building on scholars who inspired me (including Kant, Mill, Rawls, Kymlicka and Habermas) I have developed a theory of just, reasonable multiculturalism according to which it is possible to maintain liberal democracy and, at the same time, enjoy the beauty that the myriad of cultures and religions bring with them. The most difficult question relates to the extent of interference that it is legitimate for the liberal state to pursue when it is challenged by illiberal cultural practices within liberal society.

Reconciling liberalism and multiculturalism

Not everything can be allowed in the name of culture. The first step in my approach is to identify the theoretical assumptions underlying a liberal response to threats posed by cultural or religious groups whose norms entail different measures of harm. Once these boundaries are drawn, it is possible to detail a theoretical framework of just, reasonable multiculturalism.

The key concepts of my theory are justice, reasonableness, compromise, deliberative democracy and coercion. I examine the importance of cultural, ethnic, national, religious, and ideological norms and beliefs, and what part they play in requiring us to tolerate others out of respect. With the support of the theory, guidelines can be designed to prescribe boundaries to cultural practices and to safeguard the rights of individuals. Subsequently, I apply these to real life situations.

I balance group rights against individual rights. In delineating the limits of state intervention in minority groups’ affairs, I draw a distinction between physical harm and non-physical harm. The first category includes practices such as scarring, suttee, murder for family honour, female genital mutilation (FGM), female circumcision and male circumcision.

The second category includes arranged and forced marriages, divorce and property rights, gender segregation, and denial of education to women and children. Placing necessary checks on groups that discriminate against vulnerable third parties, commonly women and children, the approach insists on the protection of basic human rights as well as on substantive exit rights for individuals if and when they wish to leave their cultural groups.

Testing the theory

I test my theory with two country case studies, France and Israel. A key observation from these case studies is the power of security considerations in restricting claims for multiculturalism. The threat of violence and terrorism are used to justify in France the enforcement of a strict dress code, especially for Muslim women, and leads to the discrimination of the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel. From the perspective of my theory, both practices are unjustified.

My research also shows that the French understanding of liberalism is quite different than Anglo-Saxon liberalism. My research led me to believe that while the liberal motto of the French Revolution – *liberté, égalité, fraternité* – is still symbolically and politically important, its practical significance as it has been translated to policy implementation has been eroded. We have witnessed the emergence of a new trinity – *indivisibilité, sécurité, laïcité* – at the expense of the old one.

This is evident when analysing the debates concerning cultural policies in France in the face of the Islamic garb, the burqa and the niqab, which are perceived as a challenge to the French national secular *raison d'être* and to the French Republic. Preserving and maintaining the Republic is far more important than freedom of culture and religion. I conclude that the French attitude to the Islamic garb, and the restrictions it imposes on women are neither just nor reasonable.

For more information, see the author's accompanying book, [Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism: Liberalism, Culture and Coercion](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2021). The author would like to thank Gary Edles for his constructive comments.

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