

Book Review: Linguistic Minorities in Democratic Context by Colin H. Williams

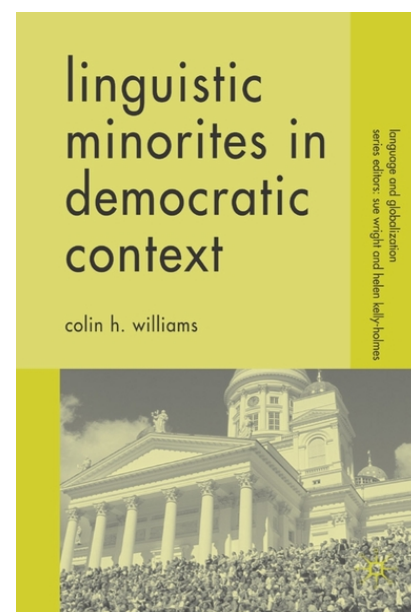
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Linguistic Minorities in Democratic Context aims to blend a discussion of the role of language minorities in politics with a detailed understanding of applied language policy in a variety of contexts ranging from Quebec, the Basque Country and Wales to Gaelic Scotland and Northern Ireland. **Zalfa Feghali** writes that this book lays the foundations for more work to be done on a hugely relevant and entirely fascinating issue: the need for the state – and the very ideas of “nation” and “sovereignty” – to be recalibrated at a political moment when cultural misfires take place before language even takes the stage.



Linguistic Minorities in Democratic Context. Colin H. Williams. Palgrave Macmillan. October 2013.

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In *Linguistic Minorities in Democratic Context*, [Colin H. Williams](#) skilfully negotiates several disciplinary areas to consider the evolving role of minority communities and their languages in the transformation of the modern nation state. Using case studies from Spain, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and Québec, this book effectively “offers an interpretation of how such gains and responsibilities impact on language policy in relation to democratic theory and practice” (p.1).

From the outset, Williams recognizes the conflicting forces at work when language and the political intersect. As he notes, “Clearly the incorporation of minorities is a significant threat in the developments of modern states in Western Europe and in North America” (p.2). But he rightly observes that “the interesting question is to what extent such minorities can now play a more active role in determining their own future” (p.2).

While the first four chapters establish the bases of Williams’ argument about the role of linguistic minorities in the context of the modern state, it is perhaps chapter three that is of most relevance to those whose interests lie in understanding how nationalist and ethno-linguistic groups must develop in the face of what Williams sees as three hugely important factors in the 21st century: globalisation, regionalisation, and state adaptation. “Who counts”, Williams asks, “as ‘we, the people’” (p.16)? Ultimately Williams’ question is one of linguistic citizenship and belonging in the context of the changing terrain of modern statehood. Using France as an example, Williams suggests that “despite the difficulties of participation and recognition, ethnic minorities in France are actively involved in the democratisation of memory”(p.16). This, Williams believes, can “strain and ultimately strengthen liberal democracy” (p.16).

Particularly interesting in this chapter is Williams’ approach to answering the most intuitive of questions: “Why is a common language so often seen as essential to ‘nation-building’ or state development” (p.50)? And this question makes sense: why *not* recalibrate the practices of nation-building and state development to account for the cultural and linguistic variety that *undeniably* exists in Europe and North America? Williams’ argument is incredibly upbeat while remaining realistic as he reminds us that “language choice is [...] a battleground for contending discourses, ideologies, and interpretations of the mult

ethnic experience” (p.50). Ultimately he suggests that “it is both advisable, and feasible, to construct a political framework in Europe, which acknowledges the positive virtues of cultural pluralism on the basis of equality as a necessary prerequisite for democracy and freedom of action in an increasingly multicultural world order” (p.50). This argument both takes into account the need to transform a now increasingly obsolete international political system that was designed in the late 19th century as well as recognizing that such a transformation is “among the most taxing of political issues facing modern Europe” (p.51).



Francisco Molina, leader of Valencia's CCOO union, holds a banner demanding that the Valencian language be recognised. Credit: [Marc Sardon](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Williams continues this line of argument in the final section, chapter 10, where he suggests that although there are tangible steps being taken to transform political frameworks in order that they be more essentially inclusive of linguistic and ethnic minorities, there are several factors hindering this transformation. Once again, these factors hinge on the very logic of the state and how legislation intended to be “inclusive” can simultaneously function as exclusionary.

In this chapter, a few areas of Williams’ analysis that can be interpreted as quite radical: for example, while he suggests that the Catalans, the Welsh, and the Québécois are able to exercise “a real degree of political autonomy, economic purchase, and success in language policy terms” (p.362), which is certainly the case, he also recognizes that he calls a “real degree” is not as easily quantifiable as we might think. In the case of Canada, for example, this does not take into account the power dynamics that provide the framework for the dismissal of First Nations/Indigenous languages on a national level. And this, as he puts it, “raises interesting questions about the complex linkages between language policy and national autonomy” (p.366). This explains, for example, why there is enormous popularity of official bilingualism in Ireland and Wales, even, among those “who have no serious desire or intention of increasing their competence or use in Irish or Welsh” (p.366).

Williams identifies, however obliquely at times, is the need to recognize that despite the urgency of change in the way the modern state operates, there must also be a recognition that there are groups – however small or disparate – that operate a sovereign nations within larger sovereign states, that must ask or demand for their rights to be respected, but whose very existence predates and in essence should not be *contingent* on the existence of these larger states. Take for example, the Native American Iroquois Nation whose legal territory lies across the Canada-US border. In demanding the linguistic (and other) rights they well deserve within such a new (and as yet non-existent), pluralist, multicultural system, the Iroquois are forced to deny their *essential* sovereignty (leaving aside for the moment the fact that “Western” ideas of sovereignty are not simply “transferable” to an Indigenous or other context). In this case, and a range of others, there exists a paradox that the modern state, no matter how transformed, will likely continue to exploit in order to avoid recognizing its own historical responsibility in the emergence of such nations.

Ultimately, *Linguistic Minorities in a Democratic Context* lays the foundations for more work that needs to be done on a hugely relevant and entirely fascinating issue: the need for the state – and the very ideas of “nation” and “sovereignty” – to b

recalibrated at a political moment when cultural misfires take place before language even takes the stage. Williams identifies just how powerful linguistic minorities can be in transforming the very idea of democracy.

Zalfa Feghali is Lecturer in Modern American Literature at Canterbury Christ Church University. Her previous research focused on the relationship between contemporary American and Canadian poetry, citizenship, and civic acts of reading and her current project traces a literary history of North American citizenship. She is an avid ukulele player and can be followed on twitter [@zalface](#). [Read more reviews by Zalfa](#).