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My current work in the field of ethnicity and democratic governance focuses on the role of the international community in promoting particular models of state-minority relations, and in particular, on the recent efforts by various intergovernmental organizations (such as the UN) to diffuse a distinctly 'liberal' model of multiculturalism. These efforts have grown dramatically over the past 15 years. We are witnessing a clear trend towards the "internationalization" of issues of state-minority relations and minority rights claims. However, this process of internationalization has run into a number of obstacles, both political and conceptual, and my goal is to identify them in a relatively systematic way, and to suggest possible ways of responding to them.

This current project emerged out of two more long-standing projects, so I will first say a bit about my earlier work, and then explain how it has led to my new focus on the international dimension.

1. Theorizing "Liberal Multiculturalism"

My first work in this area was straightforwardly normative. My goal was to develop a liberal conception of multiculturalism – that is, I wanted to determine which forms of public recognition and accommodation for ethnocultural groups are consistent with, or indeed required by, the familiar values and principles of liberal-democratic theory. When I first started working on this question in my doctoral dissertation in the late 1980s, it was widely assumed that liberalism, by definition, was hostile to any ideas of multiculturalism or minority rights, since liberalism rested on 'individualistic' premises whereas multiculturalism reflected 'communitarian' values. One problem with this simple picture is that it couldn't explain why so many Western liberal democracies had embraced ideas of multiculturalism and minority rights – indeed, had embraced them precisely in periods of intense liberalization and democratization (e.g. in the 1960s and 1970s). It seemed clear to me that in the real world of liberal democracies, there were ongoing practices of liberal multiculturalism, even if these practices had not yet been understood or theorized by liberal philosophers. Currently, these practices include a wide range of policies relating to many different kinds of ethnocultural diversity — from accommodation rights for immigrants, to official language status and regional autonomy for substate nationalist groups, to land claims and self-government rights for indigenous peoples. (I will use the term 'liberal multiculturalism' as a short-hand for all of these practices; a more accurate, but more cumbersome, phrase would be "liberal policies of multiculturalism, minority rights and indigenous rights"). These practices of liberal multiculturalism emerged out of the broader human rights revolution and civil rights struggles that have reshaped Western societies in the past few decades, and were informed and inspired by the same liberal impulses that underlay other contemporary struggles for civil rights and human rights. The standard contrast between "liberal individualism" and "communitarian multiculturalism" seemed hopelessly inadequate to understanding the origins and ongoing functioning of multiculturalism in the West.

My first project, then, was to make theoretical sense of this "actually existing" liberal multiculturalism, and to show how various forms of minority rights could be seen as extending liberal values of individual autonomy, fair equality of opportunity, and effective democratic participation. Of course, not all claims by ethnocultural groups promote these liberal values, and so part of this project was also to identify the limits of a distinctly liberal model of multiculturalism. But in general, I believe that the sorts of multiculturalism policies and minority rights that have been adopted in the West are broadly consistent with, and indeed promote, liberal values. This, at any rate, was the argument I made in my "liberal theory of minority rights"



in earlier works, and several other scholars in the past fifteen years have embarked on similar projects to develop distinctly liberal theories of multiculturalism.

2. The Diffusion of Liberal Multiculturalism

Having persuaded myself that there was a real world phenomenon of liberal multiculturalism that was worthy of our allegiance, a new question arose: what are the prospects for liberal multiculturalism to be adopted more widely? Liberal multiculturalism emerged within various Western democracies since the 1960s, but it has been a very uneven emergence, both across different countries and in relation to different groups within the same country. And it has faced even greater resistance in much of the post-communist and post-colonial world (in many countries it is illegal for minorities to even raise such claims).

There is a widespread tendency (particularly in the media) to explain this resistance to liberal multiculturalism by reference to the persistence of illiberal beliefs and attitudes. If liberal multiculturalism is unpopular in Eastern Europe, this shows that people in the region remain caught in a pre-modern form of “ethnic nationalism” that is inherently xenophobic. If liberal multiculturalism has made few inroads in sub-Saharan Africa, this shows that people in the region cling to pre-modern forms of “tribalism” that entail relations of antagonism between “us” and “them”. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) contrast is with the allegedly more sophisticated attitudes found in some Western countries, where people are said to have embraced a more modern (or post-modern?) understanding of multiple, fluid and overlapping identities, and to have embraced a more tolerant and open-minded attitude towards the ‘other’.

My own view, however, is that the variable fate of liberal multiculturalism around the world has little to do with these attitudes. If people in Bosnia or Sri Lanka are more fearful of implementing liberal multiculturalism than people in Canada, it is not because they have pre-modern beliefs about the other. Rather, they are more fearful because liberal multiculturalism in their contexts really is more risky. The costs and dangers associated with implementing liberal multiculturalism vary enormously across different countries, or indeed in relation to different groups within a country. Any plausible account of the prospects for diffusing liberal multiculturalism needs to take these costs and risks into account.

Put another way, whatever its philosophical credentials, liberal multiculturalism depends on a number of facilitating conditions that help to reassure people that it is not just legitimate in principle, but is safe in practice, and carries few risks of abuse or perverse effects. So a second project has been to identify the sorts of risks that people fear regarding the implementation of liberal multiculturalism, and the sorts of facilitating conditions that ameliorate these fears. To take one simple example, states are unlikely to adopt liberal multiculturalism if the minority seeking recognition is viewed as a disloyal fifth-column that is likely to collaborate with a neighbouring enemy. Another risk factor is the extent to which states are seen as being in control of their borders. Yet another risk factor is the perception that minorities are likely to be economic burdens rather than contributors to the welfare state, or that minorities might abuse the rights and powers granted under liberal multiculturalism in order to perpetuate illiberal cultural or religious practices.

We can quickly come up with a long list of these risk factors, and the facilitating conditions that help reduce their salience. Such an investigation would reveal that Canada is quite unique, not in its level of tolerance and sophistication, but rather in being blessed by a number of propitious conditions that help reduce fears of liberal multiculturalism. This suggests, on the one hand, that liberal multiculturalism is unlikely to face the same sort of backlash and retreat in Canada that we have witnessed in other countries. But it also suggests that attempts by the Canadian government (and Canadian academics!) to promote “the Canadian model” to other countries are unlikely to succeed if they are not attentive to the presence or absence of these facilitating conditions. Or so I have argued in my recent work on the preconditions and prospects of liberal multiculturalism.

Attending to these risk factors is important for explanatory purposes, if we wish to explain or predict the prospects for liberal multiculturalism in any particular context. But it also raises an important normative question – namely, is it appropriate to promote ideas of liberal multiculturalism in contexts



where it carries higher risks of abuse or perverse effects? To what extent can we reasonably expect countries in more difficult geo-political or economic circumstances to accept these risks in the name of achieving justice for ethnocultural minorities? Are there any minimal standards for the treatment of minorities that should be seen as “rights” that all states should respect whatever the risks, while other aspects of liberal multiculturalism can be left to the discretion of states? If so, how do we draw the line?

These are not merely academic questions. In fact, the international community has been engaged in precisely this debate over the past fifteen years, as it attempts to formulate “international standards” regarding the treatment of minorities. And so my most recent project has been to examine this international debate.

3. The Internationalization of Liberal Multiculturalism

Since the end of the Cold War, a number of international intergovernmental organizations have adopted declarations, conventions and recommendations regarding the treatment of minorities and indigenous peoples. These include the UN, the World Bank, the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, and the International Labour Organization, to name a few.

In each case, these organizations are implicitly or explicitly promoting a model of liberal multiculturalism – that is, they are affirming the need for states to acknowledge and accommodate ethnocultural diversity, but within the framework of an underlying commitment to human rights and liberal-democratic constitutionalism.

This is a new phenomenon. Prior to 1990, the international community did not take much interest in the question of how states treated their minorities, and in many cases tacitly encouraged states to engage in assimilationist nation-building policies that denied any recognition to minorities. Yet, today, there is a widespread consensus within international intergovernmental organizations, at least at the rhetorical level, that some form of liberal multiculturalism is the preferred option.

It's an interesting question why these international organizations have become persuaded by the virtues of liberal multiculturalism, given that it remains deeply contested amongst scholars and policy-makers around the world. My main interest, however, is in exploring how these organizations have conceptualized the very task of promoting liberal multiculturalism. To what extent is it seen as a matter of justice and rights that minorities can claim, and to what extent is it seen as a matter of pragmatic policy-making that falls within the discretion of states? It seems to me that international organizations have been operating at both of these levels. On the one hand, they identify and monitor certain “minimum standards” of minority rights that all states should respect, regardless of the risks; and on the other hand, they also identify and publicize certain “best practices” that exemplify the ideal of liberal multiculturalism, but which are recognized to depend on a number of facilitating conditions that may not exist in various countries. This distinction between minimum standards and best practices is pervasive within the work of international organizations, but raises a number of difficult questions. What aspects of liberal multiculturalism are truly universalizable in the form of minimum standards? And how are ‘best practices’ chosen (and by whom)? To what extent do these minimum standards and best practices take into account the widely varying geo-political and economic circumstances in which liberal multiculturalism is being promoted?

In my view, the recent efforts of the international community to define minimum standards and best practices of liberal multiculturalism offer a wonderful laboratory for exploring some of the most interesting questions about ethnicity and democratic governance. These efforts combine normative theory with realpolitik analysis, and combine the search for universalizable norms and principles with respect for local circumstances and contingencies. I suspect that many of these international efforts to promote liberal multiculturalism will prove, in the long run, to be a failure, but as always we learn as much by studying failures as by studying successes.