POLITICAL THEORY

# Multiculturalism

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Multiculturalism emerged as a movement dedicated to protecting the rights and liberties of marginalized sections of society within western liberal countries.

- **Origins and Adoption:** It became a popular contemporary political ideology during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1971, Canada became the first country to officially integrate the principle of multiculturalism into its Public Policy. This policy was instrumental in protecting the minority French-speaking community within the province of Quebec.
- **Ideological Stance:** As a political ideology, multiculturalism originated as a direct challenge to the concept of individualism found in liberal ideology.

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## Central Arguments of Multiculturalism

Multicultural thinkers propose several key arguments against traditional liberal frameworks:

- **Critique of the Nation-State:** The traditional Nation-State System, which promotes “One-nation One-Culture One Identity,” typically leads to the dominance of the majority cultural community. This dynamic compromises the cultural liberties of marginalized and minority sections.
- **Vulnerability of Migrants:** Liberal democratic societies fail to protect the cultural distinctiveness of migrated populations.
- **Flaws of Universal Individualism:** The universal theory of rights and the idea of individualism within the liberal democratic system pose a challenge to societal cultural diversity.
- **Relativity of Values:** Because every culture possesses different values, their corresponding ideas of equality, justice, and rights also differ significantly.
- **State Responsibility:** A state’s public policy, along with its framework for rights and liberties, must recognize and respect the cultural differences of its populace.

## Key Components of Multiculturalism

The ideology of multiculturalism is built upon five primary interconnected components:

### 1. Identity Politics and Politics of Differences

Multicultural thinkers argue that elements of cultural identity—such as gender, language, religion, ethnicity, and caste—should form the foundation for political mobilization, communication, and representation.

- To safeguard their cultural values and diversities, people must participate in political activities, including elections and law-making, as members of a cultural group.

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- These thinkers argue that democratic power-sharing is most effective when people of varying identities are given the opportunity to represent themselves in governance.

## 2. Politics of Recognition

Developed by Charles Taylor and aided by communitarian critiques of liberal individualism, the “Politics of Recognition” suggests that human identity is not defined in isolation.

- Identity is defined through dialogue and sometimes in struggle with what “significant others want to see in us”.
- Because culture is an intrinsic part of individuals in a political society, the state has a responsibility to recognize cultural variations.
- This recognition ensures that the law of the land is not universally and rigidly implemented; instead, the government makes exceptions based on cultural differences.
- *Example:* Schedule 8 of the Indian Constitution recognizes and protects 22 languages as vital components of Indian culture.

## 3. ‘Salad Bowl’ (Cultural Mosaic) vs. ‘Melting Pot’

Multiculturalism strongly opposes the ‘Melting Pot’ system and advocates for a ‘Salad Bowl’ society.

- **The Melting Pot:** In this system, people’s diverse cultural identities are “melted down” so that everyone assumes a single national identity. *Example:* In 19th-century America, the government viewed citizens solely as “Americans,” stripping away hyphenated identities like African Americans or Indian Americans.
- **The Salad Bowl:** Also known as a ‘Cultural Mosaic,’ this system allows citizens’ cultural identities to remain intact alongside their shared national identity. Just as the distinct ingredients of a mixed salad (like onion, tomato, and cucumber) remain identifiable, diverse cultural groups coexist within the society.
- *Example:* The concept represents “Unity in Diversity,” perfectly illustrated in India where people are known collectively as Indians, but simultaneously hold identities such as

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Tamil, Telugu, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu.

## 4. ‘Encumbered Self’ vs. ‘Unencumbered Self’

Drawing from communitarian thinkers like Michael Walzer and Michael Sandel, multiculturalism rejects the liberal notion of the ‘Unencumbered Self’.

- **Unencumbered Self:** Supported by liberal thinkers, this is the view of an individual existing in isolation from community and society, often framing the state and society as enemies of individual liberty.
- **Encumbered Self:** Multiculturalists champion this idea, arguing that individual identity is “culturally embedded”. Also known as the ‘Community Self,’ it suggests that individuals construct their moral frameworks and worldview largely from the culture in which they develop and live.

## 5. Differentiated Citizenship and Differentiated Rights

This concept advocates for granting specialized, group-based constitutional or legal rights to ethnic groups and national minorities.

- The term was first introduced in 1989 by Iris Marion Young.
- Will Kymlicka utilized the concept in his 1995 book, *Multicultural Citizenship*, arguing that assigning group-differentiated liberties is necessary due to people’s cultural differences.
- Kymlicka posited a profound connection between a person’s self-respect and the societal respect granted to their cultural group.

To achieve this, Kymlicka proposed three distinct types of rights:

1. **Cultural Right/Polyethnic Right:** The right to openly profess and practice one’s culture.
2. **Self-Government Rights:** The right to governance autonomy based on regional cultural features, such as the Tribal Autonomous councils in India.

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3. **Special Representation Rights:** The allocation of reserved legislature seats specifically for cultural minorities.

## Pioneers of Multiculturalism and Key Concepts

### Will Kymlicka

- Will Kymlicka attempts to integrate the concepts of cultural diversity and group-differentiated rights within the theory of liberalism.
- He argues that liberalism inherently contains a broader account of the relationship between the individual and society, specifically regarding an individual's membership within a community and a culture.
- He identifies **National Minorities** as a key ethnic cultural group, defining them as complete and functioning societies located in historic national homelands.
- He identifies **Immigrants** as a key group, describing them as individuals who desire integration and accommodation for things like food, customs, and holidays.
- He identifies **Isolationist Ethno-Religious Groups** as a key group that wants autonomy for their specific communities.
- He identifies **Racial Caste Groups** as a key group that is not integrated due to racial differences, citing African Americans as an example.
- He identifies **Metics** as a key group consisting of individuals who entered the country illegally and are not eligible for citizenship.
- His important books include *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (1989), *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (1995), *States, Nations, and Cultures* (1997), *Politics in the Vernacular* (2001), and *Multicultural Odysseys* (2007).

### Charles Taylor

- Charles Taylor is famous for his concept of the 'Politics of Recognition'.
- He argues that the integrity of cultures is essential for a good life.

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- Taylor uses the term ‘Irreducibly Social’ to describe the importance of a culture within a society.
- He advocates that society should adopt the presumption of equal worth for all cultures.
- Important books by him include *Sources of the Self* (1989) and *Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition* (1992).

## Tariq Modood

- Tariq Modood is critical of the secularization of society, stating that ‘radical secularism’ can only be achieved by using illiberal means.
- He stresses that cultural diversity is important.
- He supports the idea of multicultural theory in the face of growing opposition caused by radical Islamism and the immigration crisis.
- His notable books are *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity, and Muslims in Britain* (2005) and *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* (2007).

## Bhikhu Parekh

- Bhikhu Parekh rejects universalist liberalism and instead supports the idea of pluralism within society.
- He supports positive discrimination, or reservation, to create opportunities for cultural minority groups.
- Important books by him are *Colour, Culture and Consciousness* (1974) and *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (2002).

## Stuart Hall

- Stuart Hall is recognized as one of the most important scholars responsible for founding the field of cultural studies.
- He defined cultural identity as “a sort of collective ‘one true self’…which many people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common”.

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- He is famously known as the ‘Godfather of Multiculturalism’.
- An important book by him is *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996).

### Isaiah Berlin

- Isaiah Berlin is famous for his concept of ‘Value Pluralism’.
- He posits that different cultures possess different social values, which might lead to conflicts within a society.
- According to Berlin, conflicting ideas, cultures, and values are core elements of human life.

### James Tully

- In his 1995 book *Strange Multiplicity*, James Tully counters the idea of modern constitutionalism.
- He argues that modern constitutionalism is universalist in nature and wrongly rejects the cultural diversity and self-governance rights of the people.

## Criticism of Multicultural Theory

Several political and social thinkers have raised significant critiques against multicultural theory:

- **Amy Gutmann:** Gutmann argues that the Multicultural Theory of rights generally creates a hurdle in achieving ‘Social Justice’. She points out that cultural practices are not always perfect, and cultural values can sometimes become a source of injustice and exploitation. For example, she notes that the caste system or untouchability is part of Hindu culture; if cultural autonomy is broadly protected in the name of a multicultural society, such caste-based discrimination can never be removed.
- **Feminist Thinkers (Martha Nussbaum and Susan Moller Okin):** These scholars criticize multicultural theory for its promotion of group rights. They argue that because most cultures inherently support a patriarchal mindset, granting cultural autonomy

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becomes a direct problem for women’s liberation.

- **Chandran Kukathas:** Kukathas suggests that instead of pursuing ‘cultural integration,’ the State should adopt a ‘politics of indifference’ toward minority groups.
- **Robert Putnam:** Putnam argues that an increase in cultural diversity has created problems related to social capital (specifically social trust) and has led to a decline in democratic mobilization.
- **Brian Barry:** Barry contends that making special accommodations based on cultural differences is not an appropriate foundation for state welfare policy. He asserts that egalitarian justice should only be concerned with ensuring a reasonable range of equal opportunities, rather than ensuring equal access to any particular outcomes or choices.

## Thinkers and Key Concepts

The table below summarizes prominent thinkers associated with multiculturalism and their defining concepts:

| Thinker | Key Concept |
|---|---|
| **Will Kymlicka** | Group Differentiated Rights, Polyethnic Rights, and Metics. |
| **Charles Taylor** | Politics of Recognition and Irreducibly Social. |
| **Isaiah Berlin** | Value Pluralism. |
| **Stuart Hall** | Cultural Identity. |
| **Tariq Modood** | Radical Secularism. |

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