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Multicultiphobia

Phil Ryan

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. 279 p.

Written in a clear and succinct manner, this book provides an overview of the history of ideas and events that gave rise to, and which continue to influence, Canada's official policy of multiculturalism and the modes of reasoning that have been implemented both in favor of, and against, this policy. Explaining philosophical concepts in a clear and straightforward manner, constantly drawing connections between theoretical ideas and practical affairs, Ryan's book will be of interest to a variety of readers, from political scientists and philosophers to policy-makers and the general public.

Ryan is not simply attempting to dissect and refute what he views as unfounded fears regarding Canada's policy of multiculturalism; he is also attempting to allay the fears that this policy's critics have vehemently expressed. Ultimately, Ryan remains committed to multiculturalism and argues in favor of the types of multicultural theorizing and policies currently in place. Beginning with what he dubs the "classic" "multicultiphobists" of the 1990's, he critically analyzes and dissects their arguments, tracing their influence on a variety of anti-multiculturalism movements and critics in parliament, the media, and the general public. Ryan demonstrates that much of the logic and argumentation of multiculturalism's original intellectual critics has permeated contemporary discourse and given rise what he refers to as "multicultiphobia." Always keeping a keen eye toward the "official policy," Ryan engages the arguments of classic and contemporary critics, demonstrating that many of their fears do not necessarily follow from the theories that gave rise to, or the official positions of, Canada's multiculturalism.

According to Ryan, the conservative "Primitive Ontology" inherent in the positions of multiculturalism's earliest critics continues to haunt present day discourse. This perspective, which "implies that a culture is 'preserved' only if every last piece of it is left unchanged," tends to lead multiculturalism's critics to neglect the fact that official multicultural policies do not explicitly endorse the preservation of all cultural practices, and often overlook the emphasis such policies place on social integration (44). The result is specious claims made by these critics regarding the "sacredness of cultural practices" that multiculturalism is accused of promoting and the slippery slope toward relativism that multicultural policies are charged with enacting (44). Furthermore -- and contrary to what the critics' might lead us to believe -- Ryan claims that multiculturalism does not necessarily entail the eradication of a shared Canadian

identity. Rather, he argues that a shared identity based on citizenship, regardless of one's cultural background, ought to inform how one self-identifies as a "citizen" of a given nation. This model of "citizen identification" is, and should be, promoted by multicultural policies and principles in order to maintain a "good" society in which mutual respect may be had.

I would like to note an interesting feature of Ryan's analysis that speaks to many of the contemporary debates regarding the accommodation of religious immigrant groups and attempts to uphold what are said to be "Canadian values;" Ryan notices a shift that occurred in the political debates in the decade between 1995 and 2005 regarding the endorsement and support of multicultural policies. During this period, the Bloc Québécois continued to oppose the official position of multiculturalism while conservative Anglophones, who were once multiculturalism's staunchest critics, came to adopt the rhetoric, though not the ideals, of multiculturalism. Ryan argues that this change of heart occurred because of the realization -- of certain critics -- that the traditional values of many immigrant groups were actually quite commensurable with those of the conservative party, and therefore an arm should be extended to those potential party members, rather than a cold shoulder. This speaks to the fact that questions regarding social unity and disagreement over norms and values are not exclusively limited to the domain of cultural difference. Canadian citizens have long debated questions concerning the social cohesion of the nation and have often held incompatible views on a myriad of issues, long before multiculturalism emerged as either a policy or an ideal in society at large.

In conclusion, Ryan's book sets out to clarify precisely what multiculturalism is, as a public policy, and to clarify which critiques of multiculturalism he considers valid and which he believes are unjustified and simply founded upon misconceptions. I recommend this book to anyone interested in the debates regarding multiculturalism in Canada. I believe it could also be a useful class textbook for courses that deal with issues of multiculturalism, immigration, and accommodation in the context of Canadian socio-political discourse because it takes a variety of perspectives into consideration, including those of history, policy, theory, the media, and everyday politics.

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