A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO WILL KYMLICKA’S VIEW OF MULTICULTURALISM

A. S. M. ANWARULLAH BHUIYAN

Abstract: The objective of this article is to consider how multiculturalism, minority rights, and nation-building have been defended by Will Kymlicka. For this purpose, I will first attempt to spell out the answers to the following questions: is it possible to defend minority rights in a liberal state? What is the problem regarding this defence of national minorities? Does anybody benefit from minority rights within a nation-building process? In order to find out the answer to these questions, I will first introduce the main line of thought found in Will Kymlicka’s views on the defence of the rights of national minorities, the nation-building process, and multiculturalism. Later, I will reassess the views of Kymlicka in finding the ways to defend national minorities with the aim of providing support to the minority cultures.

Keywords: multiculturalism, national minority, minority rights, societal culture, nation-building, Heraclitean pluralism.

Introduction

Will Kymlicka, an exponent of political philosophy, wrote Multicultural Citizenship (1995) in which he integrates the view of minority rights into liberal theory. In this book, he attempts to spell out the answer to the question: how are we to understand multiculturalism? According to him, a state may be multicultural in either a multinational sense or polyethnic sense or in both senses. In order to gain a clear understanding of the problem, he explores various distinctions, i.e., national minorities and ethnic groups and internal restrictions and external protection and so on. Through these distinctions Kymlicka strengthens and clarifies the conception of minority rights. I will firstly summarize his conception on the nature of multiculturalism and then I will explore some of the drawbacks of his theory.

Kymlicka on Multiculturalism

In a broader sense, Kymlicka specifies the term multiculturalism (1995, 2002) as one of the basic theories of political philosophy that is normative in approach. Different societies use this term differently (Kymlicka 2002, 373). In Canada and Australia, for example, multiculturalism is used to refer only to the “accommodation of immigrant groups”, in the
USA the term is often used to refer to all forms of “identity politics” including ethno-cultural groups, women, gays, lesbians, and people with disabilities. But, Kymlicka uses this term as the “claim of ethno-cultural groups”, which includes immigrants, national minorities, indigenous peoples, racial groups, and ethno-religious groups (Kymlicka 2002, 373).

Ethno-cultural groups have two common features:

[T]hey go beyond familiar set of political and civil rights of individual citizens which are protected in all liberal democracies (ibid., 335);

and

[T]hey are adopted with the intention of recognizing and accommodating the distinctive identities and needs of ethno-cultural groups” (ibid., 335).

This normative approach can be supplemented by the mere fact of ethno-cultural diversity which is descriptive in nature.

In his multiculturalism, Kymlicka mentions two broad forms of cultural diversity. The first one arises from the “incorporation of previously self-governing, territorially concentrated cultures into a larger state” (Kymlicka 1995, 10). And, in the second case “[cultural] diversity arises out of individual and family migration of people who form ethnic groups in the larger society” (1997, 408). The first form of cultural diversity is a “national minority” and the second one is “ethnic groups”. Kymlicka observes a distinction between these two forms of cultural diversity. In a multinational society national minorities groups are voluntarily incorporated communities; on the other hand, ethnic groups are voluntary immigrants in a polyethnic society.

Liberal defenders of multiculturalism make a distinction between these two forms of “minorities rights”: (i) “bad minorities rights” and (ii) “good minorities rights”. The first form involves “restricting individual rights” and the second one involves “supplement[ing] individual rights”. Moreover, Kymlicka identifies two forms of “minorities rights” in relation to the following distinctions: i. internal restrictions, which involves the right of a group against its own members, ii. external protection, on the other hand, involves the right of a group against the larger society (Kymlicka 2002, 340).

Internal restrictions involve “intra-group relations”; on the other hand, “external protection” involves “inter-group relations”. Both “internal restrictions” and “external protection” are labeled as “collective rights”. According to Kymlicka, both of these ideas are problematic in practice. He argues that “internal restrictions” ignore individual rights in the name of group solidarity. For example, every member of a liberal society protects the right to attend church or to criticize. But, a society may restrict the freedom of its members by arguing that they should not have legal rights to criticize the religious values of others. Even the group can argue that “its member should not have a legal right to an education, to freedom of marriage partners, or to equality in divorce” (ibid., 341).

According to Kymlicka, all of these restrictions are internal. On the other hand, external protection is a source of unfairness among the groups. But, the liberalists find more trouble with “internal restriction”. They also opine that a group should not have legal rights to restrict the civil rights of its members in the name of protecting their culture, land claims or language right. Kymlicka’s liberal conception of multiculturalism is consistent with “external