

Multicultural Nationalism as Ethics of Membership

Will Kymlicka, Queen's University

Debates over the compatibility of nationalism and multiculturalism raise a number of complex issues, but Kymlicka argues that one important disagreement concerns the role of what he calls “an ethic of social membership”. Social-democratic politics in the 20th-century was often tied (in T.H. Marshall’s terminology) to the idea of “loyalty” to a “shared society” which is seen as a “common possession” of its members. When citizens view society as their common possession, they will feel a sense of loyalty and commitment to it and to their co-citizens, and this sense of loyalty to society as a common possession generates the solidarity that underpins the democratic welfare state. Social democrats therefore viewed it as essential to nurture this sense of forming a shared society. Recent theories of liberal nationalism can be seen as a restatement of this broadly Marshallian idea: shared nationhood creates the sense of membership in and loyalty to a shared society that enables the democratic welfare state. Critics however argue that when politics is organized around the idea of loyalty to a shared society, minorities will be excluded or marginalized.

In his presentation, Kymlicka will cite evidence that this is the case: Marshallian politics generates systematic “membership penalties” for minorities. He proposes that for some defenders of nationalism, this may simply be the price we need to pay for a solidaristic welfare state: if so, this leads us in the direction of a majoritarian nationalism. But for those who are unwilling to sacrifice minorities at the altar of social democracy, Kymlicka proposes we have two options for a more pro-minority politics. One option is to reject the very idea of using politics to generate loyalty to a shared society as a common possession, which leads us in the direction of a postnational cosmopolitanism. A second option is to pluralize our idea of the shared society to be more inclusive of minorities, which leads us in the direction of multiculturalism, or more accurately, a multicultural nationalism. These three broad options – majoritarian nationalism, postnational cosmopolitanism, multicultural nationalism – are in a sense familiar protagonists. But Kymlicka will argue that it is illuminating to view each of them as a response to the underlying question of an ethic of social membership, suggesting that this framework allows us to better identify the strengths and weaknesses of each of these options.