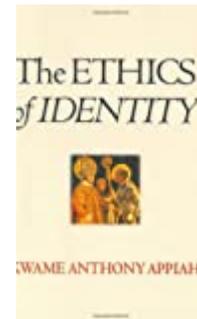


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kwame Anthony Appiah. *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. xviii + 384 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-12036-2.



Reviewed by Eric Kaufmann (Lecturer in Politics and Sociology, Birkbeck College, University of London)

Published on H-Nationalism (June, 2006)

Kwame Anthony Appiah is very much a figure of our time. A Ghanaian immigrant of Ashanti and English ancestry, he is also a member of three other key “outsider” communities in America: gays, liberal Democrats and African Studies scholars. If the personal is the political, one would expect Appiah to make a perfect multiculturalist. But no multiculturalist can take solace from this book. Appiah’s sophisticated tour de force is sensitive to the bonds of community, but reads as a paean to John Stuart Mill, individual autonomy and the western Enlightenment. In short, this book demonstrates just how far the ethical goalposts have moved in the past decade.

Multiculturalism can mean several things. For many, it simply refers to the demographic fact of having many different cultural groups inhabiting one space. Most scholars, however, know it as a public policy which assigns rights, recognition and privileges to individuals differentially, based on their group membership. A final form of multiculturalism is ideological. The flipside of postmodernism, orthodox multiculturalism is offered as a relativistic political philosophy which emphasizes the toleration of non-western values (even if illiberal) and the preservation of traditional cultures. These are considered liberating and authentic when held against the dry backcloth of a globalizing western modernity.

The period from the late 1960s through the late 1990s

represents multiculturalism’s high-water mark. During these decades, western populations became more diverse through increased immigration from non-white sources and the increased participation of repressed minorities in public life. Demographic fact soon led to public policy change as the “equal opportunities” focus of the early civil rights movement (associated with Martin Luther King Jr.) gave way to quota-based social programs, like affirmative action, and federal contract compliance in the early 1970s. Ethnic Studies Heritage programs, bilingual education and Afrocentric curricula followed in the 1970s and 1980s. Introduced into American life in an attempt to advance the socioeconomic standing and self-esteem of racial minorities, most progressive thinkers sincerely believed that such programs were needed in order to further liberal goals. The civil rights agitation of black Americans also shaped ethnic minority movements from Northern Ireland to Quebec. Nationalism and ethnic identity, long associated with backwardness or reaction, were now seen as ingredients in the progressive *oeuvre*. Once again, politics influenced policy, and Canadian public policy embraced first “biculturalism” (in 1966) and then “multiculturalism” in 1971. These public policies involved recognizing the political autonomy of French and aboriginal Canadians, providing funding for the cultural activities of immigrant minorities and defining the nation’s identity as constituted by its diversity.

In Europe, developments lagged somewhat behind, but by the 1970s and 1980s, most EC nations had moved beyond anti-racism to multiculturalism. Though policies differed by country, immigrant minorities were generally now part of the “multicultural” identity of their nation. Their collective rights to language and culture were often financially supported through grants to parallel ethnic/religious institutions, with their socioeconomic advancement sometimes backed by quotas or targets.

The 1980s brought Reagan to power in America, and his five Supreme Court appointments of 1981-92 dealt a blow to the public policy advance of multiculturalism. The landmark *City of Richmond v Croson* (1989) case proved pivotal, with the new Rehnquist court striking down a 30 percent quota for minority contractors on a public project. Meanwhile, in just twenty years, the Official English movement made English Only the constitutional watchword in over half the states of the Union. State referenda which rejected affirmative action culminated in two 2004 Supreme Court cases involving the University of Michigan, which ruled out quotas and watered down the degree to which minorities can be favored in admissions policies.

Intellectual trends seemed to follow, rather than presage, political developments. Thus the political ferment of the sixties touched the imagination of post-modern social theorists like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault in France. The older ideas of modernization, based on the Enlightenment touchstones of rationality, de-traditionalization and individualism were tarred with the brush of Eurocentrism, racism and domination. These “grand narratives” were to be surpassed and in their place a multiplicity of difference was to reign, even if—as with illiberal traditions—distasteful to the western palate. Postmodern ideas gained currency within the humanities and “softer” social sciences in universities throughout the West and dominated left-wing political thought. In political philosophy, the abstract liberal-egalitarianism of John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* (1971) was subjected to a withering attack in the eighties and nineties by communitarians like Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor, and liberal-multiculturalists like Will Kymlicka.

Taylor and Kymlicka, two Anglo-Canadians whose ideas were inspired by the example of Canada’s multiculturalism policy, argued that Rawls’s conception of the “neutral” individual was unrealistic, and failed to take into account the way people’s particularistic attachments shape their ethics. Rawls’s “archimedean point,” a neutral high ground from which the universal individual was to

make ethical decisions, met with especially harsh treatment. The kernel of the communitarian critique was that individuals do not come to know themselves and develop their individuality by simply reflecting inward (like Rene Descartes) or musing in alienated isolation in cafés (like Jean Paul Sartre). Instead, we learn about ourselves by getting out there and interacting with individuals, groups and collective identities like ethnicity. Sociability and group attachments are not layers to be peeled away to reveal an inner core, but constituent elements of our individuality that should be cherished. In short, we should embrace our ethnicity, not escape it. Rawls largely accepted these criticisms, demonstrating how thoroughly the new communitarianism had influenced the course of western philosophy. More radical voices within multiculturalism like John Gray, Bhikhu Parekh or William Galston built on Taylor’s work to argue that universal human rights and the ideal of being an autonomous individual were western liberal prejudices which could not be sustained.

Since the 1990s, though, currents have begun to move the other way. The change is particularly acute since it is championed by elements of the Left (conservative intellectuals have long opposed multiculturalism). In France, as Rogers Brubaker recently noted, *droit À la difference* reigned as a leading progressive intellectual paradigm in the 1970s and 1980s. Le Pen’s electoral victories, however, exposed the dangers of ethnic exclusivity and rehabilitated the ailing Republican tradition. Leading intellectuals like André Taguieff and Emanuell Todd spearheaded a neo-Republicanism which consigned *droit À la difference* to obscurity by 1990. More recently, Brian Barry’s *Culture and Equality* (2000) drove home a similar message to English-speaking audiences. Barry castigated multiculturalism as a potentially dangerous neo-Romantic ideology which has also managed to frustrate social reform by dividing the working class. In Britain, the shift in the ideological pendulum has shown itself in various guises, not least in the hostile reception of the Parekh report (2000) and the rise of an integrationist mode of thinking associated with Trevor Phillips of the CRE (2004).

Appiah’s book enters this fray with a polished preface and, from then on, adroitly blends hair-splitting logic with literary verve and a cornucopia of examples from around the world. Appiah’s book will undoubtedly stand the test of time, distinguished by its elegant prose and insuperable thoroughness. Its first two chapters are mainly concerned with the idea of autonomy, namely that liberalism should be concerned not only with “negative”

procedures to regulate behavior, but should promote a “positive” ideal to which we can aspire. This foregrounds the difference between a relativistic multiculturalist liberalism based on tolerance of diversity and an Enlightenment liberalism which holds forth the ideal of the rational, emancipated individual. Appiah identifies John Stuart Mill as a bridge between these two species of liberalism, and the shadow of Mill haunts many parts of the book. Here Appiah seeks to rescue Mill’s reputation from the clutches of his communitarian critics, contending that Mill managed to balance the competing claims of autonomous choice and our diverse identities within his conception of individuality.

This is not to say that Appiah goes as far as Rawls. Far from doing so, Appiah accepts the importance of relationships and identities in constituting our individuality and criticizes the schizophrenic obsession with choice that can be found among existentialist thinkers. On the other hand, Appiah’s “peacemaking” account can veer toward stretching the concept of individuality to its breaking point in order to make it an inclusive club. For instance, Appiah introduces Kazuo Ishiguro’s character of Mr. Stevens the butler as an example of an unsung individuality simply because the man upholds received standards of professional dignity. At other points, Appiah is at pains to convince us that the stories of collectives like ethnic groups provide narrative models for us to enhance our individuality or that social opprobrium can lead us toward individuality. Even received wisdom is occasionally touted as superior to reasoning! Will Kymlicka tried to provide a similar “win-win” solution to the liberal-communitarian dilemma by suggesting that cultures provide contexts whose options enhance rather than restrict individual choice. I am convinced by neither Kymlicka nor Appiah on this. Though one may agree with Appiah’s ontology, it may be more useful to work with a narrower definition of individuality and accept that there are real tradeoffs between individuality and community which individuals need to make.

Appiah’s work moves on to navigate the choppy waters of identity and here are some of the best chapters of the book. He argues that identities matter, but endorses what he calls “neutrality as equal respect” in which the state accommodates difference where it can, but is not bound to preserve particular cultures. Appiah takes Charles Taylor to task for his insistence that groups like the Quebecois need to be able to violate the individual rights of non-French Quebecers in order to preserve the French language. For Appiah, Taylor’s politics of recognition “gets things the wrong way round”

and fails to appreciate the constructed and fluid nature of ethnic identity. Appiah’s next chapter on culture provides a much-needed corrective to the literature: for too long, normative political theory has conflated “culture” (as a set of symbols, beliefs and practices) with ethnic group—an identity which uses culture but is largely independent of it. This sleight-of-hand allows many multicultural theorists to weave liberalism into their arguments. Appiah neatly separates these two usages, drawing on an impressive array of cases from Africa to North America to illustrate his point that multiculturalists reify culture. At times, the tone is uncompromising, as with “you may indeed ensure that the dispossessed enjoy a stable and distinctive cultural community ... the most efficient [method] goes by the name of segregation” (p. 127), or “culture talk is not so far from race talk” (p. 137).

The text then returns to questions of individuality which Mill mulled over in the mid-nineteenth century. In what promises to be a contentious chapter on “soul-making,” Appiah proffers his view that the state has a role to play in shaping the “souls” of its population. This may sound like a libertarian’s nightmare, but much of it goes on already under the guise of liberal education or safety guidelines which aim to make us think and behave more rationally and independently. Appiah suggests that illiberal groups should reform their practices to conform to liberal standards and individuals should be exposed to the virtues of autonomy, i.e. self-criticism, tolerance, dialogue, openness to change and self-control of one’s life. Certainly the state must respect people as they are, but it can legitimately try and improve them through a non-intrusive civic education. The book concludes with a call for a “rooted” cosmopolitanism, based on a common humanity which we express through shared understandings of narrative, local attachments and experience as much as through the universal reason highlighted by Stoic or Enlightenment cosmopolitans. Even so, Appiah correctly argues that most critiques of the Enlightenment (i.e., its Euro-centrism) are really arguments that it was “insufficiently Enlightened” and hence cannot sustain throwing the rationalist baby out with the racist bathwater.

Overall, Appiah’s work is impressive in the way it digests competing authors and debates to produce a streamlined defense of individuality which in turn exposes many of the fallacies of liberal multiculturalism. On the other hand, Appiah fails to lock horns with some of the thornier issues of affirmative action, assimilation, ethnic conflict regulation and civic nationalism. To excuse oneself from this charge, as Appiah does, by claiming the role of explorer, does not make the task any less

urgent. There is also room for a legitimate communitarian counterattack. Appiah's cosmopolitan background and easy acceptance of constructivist theories of ethnicity can blind him to the fact that many people are strongly attached to concrete ethnic boundary markers like language. They gain a measure of existential stability by believing in the intergenerational continuity of these symbols. This, much more than a hazy attachment to an ethnic proper name, is what underpins identity. It seems to me that any philosophy of individuality which takes

community seriously needs to accept that the desire to preserve particular symbols in perpetuity need not be an illiberal illusion.

Whether you agree with Appiah or not, his work will stand as a magisterial contribution to political theory. This is a serious rebuke to multiculturalism which heralds the return of Enlightenment universalism to the center of western philosophy after a hiatus of more than thirty years.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism>

Citation: Eric Kaufmann. Review of Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *The Ethics of Identity*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11868>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.