

Book Review

# Andrew Shorten's Multiculturalism: The Political Theory of Diversity Today

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**Bibliography of the reviewed book:** Shorten, A. (2022). *Multiculturalism: The political theory of diversity today*. Polity Press.

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## Introduction

Andrew Shorten's *Multiculturalism: The Political Theory of Diversity Today* (2022) delves into the realm of theory, in democratic societies and how they manage cultural diversity effectively over time. Shorten's work examines the evolution of theories over three decades. In it, his aims are to shed light on the different perspectives within multicultural political theory and the challenges posed by diverse viewpoints on aspects, like language, national identities and religious beliefs.

In today's interconnected world, where cultural differences are acknowledged and meaningfully addressed, multiculturalism plays an integral role. Exploring how democratic systems may accept diverse backgrounds without enforcing conformity is crucial in light of our society's growing diversity. Shorten's observations align with opposition to multiculturalism in both the intellectual and political spheres. His research explores the essence of multiculturalism and highlights the intricacies involved, providing insights that challenge both its supporters and opponents.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, this book's insights offer valuable implications for the education sector. Understanding the interplay between cultural diversity and democratic systems is particularly relevant for shaping inclusive educational policies and practices. By exploring these themes, the review emphasizes the critical role education plays in fostering social cohesion and respecting cultural differences.

This book contributes to political theory discussions by challenging the notion that a single normative theory can successfully address all difficulties pertaining to cultural diversity. Shorten advocates a strategy that recognizes the importance of context and diverse viewpoints. He prompts readers to reconsider how multicultural political philosophy could meet the needs of democratic societies.

## Review

Andrew Shorten begins his book with a scrutiny of the core idea of liberalism, elucidating how this theory serves as a mechanism to embrace cultural diversity and resolve the disparities between autonomy and tolerance within that paradigm. He explores in depth Kymlicka's point of view, which focuses strongly on the autonomy of minorities regarding cultural rights, while Kukathas' focus is on tolerance, since not all cultures value autonomy in the same way—such as in collectivist and individualist societies. Therefore, his focus is more on tolerance without interruption by government intervention. The main critique Shorten raises is that tolerance without any governmental supervision, or namely without government advocacy, could lead to unintentional discrimination among minorities, such as with women's rights in close-knit Muslim societies. A significant feature of the chapter is its juxtaposition of these intellectuals, expounding on the complex discourse surrounding cultural integration and the limits of political intervention. Nonetheless, the chapter may be critiqued for its lack of clear examples that effectively demonstrate the application of these theories to real-world political circumstances. For instance, France's 2004 law banning conspicuous religious symbols in public schools exemplifies the tension between cultural autonomy and institutional policies promoting uniformity.

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This legislation, rooted in the republican ideal of *laïcité*, has sparked significant debate about its disproportionate impact on Muslim students, particularly young women who wear the hijab. As Fredette (2015) argues, such policies highlight the practical challenges of reconciling tolerance with autonomy within liberal democracies, where institutional efforts to ensure neutrality can inadvertently marginalize certain groups. This example underscores the complexities Shorten explores but could have been further developed in his analysis to connect theory with practice. Shorten's research clarifies the issues by offering a thorough analysis of tolerance and autonomy in liberal settings.

Shorten builds up his arguments by engaging with Taylor's and Parekh's frameworks about recognition and connecting them to liberal theories in Chapter Three. Taylor's theory emphasizes how recognizing cultural identities in politics is essential, as its absence can make people feel marginalized and disconnected from the broader community. While the author delves deeper into this theory, there is a notable gap in addressing potential issues, such as the possibility of reinforcing positive stereotypes that could perpetuate, rather than resolve, cultural challenges. Additionally, the author discusses Parekh's approach to intercultural dialogue, which promotes discussions across cultural lines. Yet, he falls short of thoroughly examining whether genuine dialogue can succeed when there are significant power imbalances between different groups. In Chapter Four, the author inspects in detail the criticism of multiculturalism, with a particular focus on the critique of cultural essentialism. He explains these criticisms very precisely, especially stressing the concern that multiculturalism could potentially and unintentionally strengthen patriarchal systems within minority groups. However, while these critiques are concisely explained, the examination of the essentialism critique has not been studied totally. Providing real-life cases and practical aspects might have made this chapter stronger. This critique resonates with real-world educational challenges, such as ensuring gender equity within culturally specific practices in schools. For instance, policies addressing the rights of female students in minority communities can reveal the unintended consequences of essentialist approaches to multiculturalism. To sum up, while both chapters serve as a strong source for those who study the topic, they provide sweeping explanations of the theories and their connections to liberalism.

Shorten looks into the relationships between multiculturalism and intercultural discourse in chapters five and six, while also critically analyzing the criticisms of these concepts with depth and clarity. One notable aspect of these chapters is Shorten's thorough analysis of the resistance against assimilation. He meticulously analyzes how the prioritization of freedom often conflicts with the preservation of traditions. For instance, he suggests that without precautions in place, multiculturalism could unintentionally maintain division and disparity, highlighting the importance of examining the balance between independence and acceptance more closely. Shorten also explores how state multiculturalism encounters resistance in nations like the UK and France, providing a balanced view on the topic by considering opinions from both supporters and opponents of multiculturalism, and giving a neutral summary of governmental measures and societal attitudes towards it. One crucial issue he addresses is that diversity may inadvertently foster inequalities if not implemented with a strong focus on understanding. The assertion that multiculturalism may exacerbate divisions by fostering authentic integration via the establishment of a "community of communities" spotlights a critical problem of this paradigm. His comparison to interculturalism is insightful, although it might be overly hopeful in its potential to address the underlying problems associated with multiculturalism.

One of the flaws in Chapters Five and Six is the use of terminology without fully analyzing the underlying philosophical premises of interculturalism. Although Shorten acknowledges the disadvantages of multiculturalism to some extent, he does not fully engage with its critics. These discussions are particularly relevant in educational contexts, where fostering intercultural dialogue among students from diverse backgrounds can either bridge divides or reinforce existing differences. For example, Banks (2017) emphasizes the importance of intercultural competence as a foundational principle in multicultural education, arguing that it enables students to critically engage with diverse perspectives while promoting equity and understanding. Policies promoting peer learning and structured intercultural activities in schools align closely with these values, offering practical applications of Shorten's theoretical insights. Furthermore, this chapter focuses on ideas rather than giving more actual evidence of these policies' present impact on excluded groups. Altogether, Shorten's work shines in its clarity and investigation of difficulties, but it may benefit from more in-depth consideration of whether interculturalism is a viable answer. The persistent fight between conserving distinctions and encouraging togetherness continues without resolution, and while Shorten's ideas are keen, they fall short of properly addressing this complicated conundrum.

In Chapter Seven, one notable thing is the acknowledgment of the contradiction that arises when empowering communities with self-rule, as autonomy can shield minority groups from assimilation pressures

while simultaneously creating hierarchies within these communities that may erode individual rights. Shorten references Will Kymlicka's concept of federalism and Wayne Norman's criticism of "nation building," adding depth to the discussion. However, his exploration is somewhat cautious in questioning the assumption that national groups require territorial autonomy to thrive. The text points out the risk of divisions within groups and suggests that Shorten could have examined the concept of national autonomy more critically in the context of today's interconnected cultural identities. Chapter Eight expands on this by addressing fairness towards minorities and new immigrant communities, with Shorten questioning policies that prioritize established minority languages over immigrant languages, raising concerns about fairness. His interaction with Alan Patten's approach to language rights, which allocates resources based on the number of speakers, sparks a discussion on how language rights should be managed. While Shorten critiques the assumption that democratic processes naturally lead to fair language outcomes, his analysis could go further in speaking to the challenges of implementing language rights in diverse societies, particularly the risk of marginalizing smaller linguistic groups in the pursuit of efficiency. Chapter Nine continually explores these concepts; however, it inadequately confronts the influence of the era and globalization in reshaping notions of nationhood, autonomy, and language. The two previous chapters have been criticized by Shorten for failing to discuss how traditional approaches to multiculturalism could be enhanced to face the challenges of a world where preserving territorial autonomy and linguistic uniformity is increasingly difficult.

Shorten's perusal in these sections is thorough and insightful; however, it does not go all the way in questioning the core beliefs of theory. Mostly focusing on criticizing frameworks by examining linguistic and national independence, the text misses out on delving deeper into other possible models that could more accurately portray the ever-changing nature of contemporary cultural identities.

### Conclusions

Andrew Shorten's book on Multiculturalism delves into the realm of theory by offering a defined analysis of important discussions within liberal multiculturalism that have a substantial influence not only on political philosophy but also on areas like education in practical terms. The book aids in connecting concepts with real life scenarios by examining the application of ideas such as autonomy and cultural rights, in societies where toleration is key. It is evident, in its presentation of conflicting viewpoints—like the conflict between preserving culture and respecting freedom—that opportunities arise for more in-depth exploration into how these ideals can be implemented in practical policies, within educational frameworks.

His work brings a new perspective by highlighting the real-world impact of multicultural theories and the delicate balance between honoring cultural diversity and practically supporting individual freedom. This leads to thought provoking inquiries in research such as, how schools can embrace variety while safeguarding student freedoms for self-determination and growth. Furthermore, it prompts exploration into the boundaries of accommodating practices within an environment. These queries are poised to spark investigations into how education plays a role in nurturing both cultural acknowledgment and personal independence.

This work holds significance for teachers and policymakers working in education, and for researchers in the field. This book is a resource for individuals shaping programs and policies in diverse cultural contexts as well as academics exploring the convergence of political theory and education. Understanding the concepts talked about in this book is paramount, for those aiming to establish inclusive education systems that embrace diversity rather than simply tolerating it, by integrating it into the educational framework while still upholding a dedication to individual rights. Shorten's efforts play a role in a dialogue regarding the purpose of education, in preserving cultural richness and advancing equality. In conclusion, his exploration of multiculturalism offers valuable insights into the complexities of cultural diversity in democratic societies. His ability to balance theoretical depth with critical engagement makes this work a significant contribution to the field of political theory. Ultimately, it provides a critical structure for educators and policymakers striving to create inclusive systems that celebrate diversity while addressing its inherent challenges. By applying these theoretical insights, educational institutions can better support individual and collective identities within multicultural societies.

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