

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

HASSAN MAHAMDALLIE (ED.). *Defending Multiculturalism: A Guide for the Movement*. London, U.K: Bookmarks Publications. (2011). 231pp. (£8.99) (ISBN 978-1-90519-284-7).

Defending Multiculturalism: A Guide for the Movement is a reaction to British Prime Minister David Cameron's early 2011 speech on the failure of multiculturalism (Cameron, 2011). This speech proved to be incendiary and led to a number of reactions, including petitions, responses published in British daily, *The Guardian*, a rally and, of course, this collection. Using essays, poems, photographs and artwork from activists, scholars, politicians, and poets, *Defending Multiculturalism* is a determined and impassioned critique of Cameron's speech itself. The subtext of this compilation exposes oft-reinforced trends of Islamophobia and class discrimination currently present in the West. This book illustrates how Cameron's critique of Britain's current multicultural policy is the manifestation of larger social and political climates that have emerged since 9/11. While the immediate goal is to respond to Cameron's statements, this collection provides a larger critique of the misuses of, as well as the misunderstandings surrounding, multiculturalism. In this short review, I will discuss how this text illustrates and examines the concept of multiculturalism itself.

In his introduction, Hassan Mahamdallie states that the book's purpose is to promote multiculturalism as a public policy that shapes multiple cultural realities, as expressed by the diversity of genres included. He outlines the aftermath of Cameron's speech and explains why so many communities and individuals saw it as a clear cause for concern. While this chapter sets up the political context for the reader, it does not clearly define multiculturalism itself. Clearly, Britain's multicultural policy has similar tenets to other forms of multiculturalism; however, the specific brand of multiculturalism is not made clear. The meanings attached to the term "multiculturalism" are slippery: the word itself is heavily context dependent, manifesting in different ways based on its social, political and historical milieus. Scholars Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood (2011) clarified, "in both theoretical and policy discourses, multiculturalism means different things in different places" (p. 179). Conceptually, it

can signify anything from mere tolerance to fostering cultural exchange. As such, the multiculturalism(s) that emerge can differ substantially from one context to another. In *Defending Multiculturalism*, Modood (“Multiculturalism and integration”) offered another hypothesis for why this concept remains blurry, “This is partly because ‘multiculturalism’ is too often defined by its critics, whose sole purpose is to create a straw man to knock down. But its [sic] also because there is more than one form of multiculturalism and they relate to integration in different ways” (p. 64). The lack of conceptual clarity surrounding multiculturalism in general calls for perpetual clarification of how the term is being taken up at specific times and in specific spaces. While I would be leery of the inclusion of a one-size-fits-all definition, I do believe that a working definition of how multiculturalism is being conceptualized and worked through within the confines of this book is necessary, offering the reader a firmer grasp of its theoretical frame (this would be particularly helpful to those readers living outside of Britain).

That said, the multiplicity of definitions offered by the authors create a very nice juxtaposition that allows the reader to piece together various interpretations of the concept. Multiculturalism is defined in multiple and complex ways; these definitions unfold throughout the collection, each author adding a further layer of understanding to how multiculturalism is being interpreted. For example, Zita Holbourn (“The freedom to express who we are”) dismisses the notion that multiculturalism can be defined in strictly political terms, adding that it

is ever-changing and ever evolving as we embrace traditions that are ancient, handed down to us through generations while adopting, adapting and experiencing new ones so the two fuse together to create an eclectic explosion of religion, culture, music, food, language and lifestyle. (p. 53)

Holbourn’s position is that multiculturalism is a form of expression that binds citizens, thereby creating an ethos of exchange. Modood (“Multiculturalism and Integration”) characterizes this exchange as a form of social, cultural and political integration that has less to do with recognition of minority groups and has more to do with “civic consultations, political participation, institutional policies (for example, schools and hospitals, etc.)” (p. 71). This account of multiculturalism focuses on state interventions that might formalize exchange and growth between members of diverse communities. In his chapter on why trade unions must defend multiculturalism (“Don’t give an inch”), Billy Hayes contends that racism, class discrimination and Islamophobia are “damaging to the economic development of our society” (p. 202). From an economic perspective, Hayes suggests that in a globalized society, multiculturalism offers tangible advantages. These are only three of the lenses used to illustrate the many incarnations of multiculturalism – and these demonstrate a deep compatibility rather than mutual exclusion. This compatibility is indicative of the two main themes running throughout the book: that multiculturalism carries with

it a deep commitment to inclusion, rather than simply recognition. Secondly, that multiculturalism ought not be divisive, indicating that there is a richness to be gained through mutual understanding, creation and partnership.

A refreshing change from typically sterile academic writing, this collection includes articulate and emotional language to communicate not only the position of this particular text but also an important political stance. For example, in his introduction, Mahamdallie (“Introduction”) is quick to point out that “We all know that the Tories like nothing more than a spoonful or two of bigotry with their politics, but Cameron’s speech marked a step-change in racism” (p. 17). Similarly, Ken Livingstone (“In praise of multicultural London”) discusses Cameron’s speech in the context of political strategy and does not hesitate to offer his own analysis of Cameron’s tactic: “he was not responding to a genuine set of political concerns. He was using a time-honoured tactic of right-wing politicians whose policies are undermining people’s standard of living, destroying jobs and creating insecurity” (p. 32). A combination of punchy language, moving photo-essays, and poetry offers the reader a strong dose of both content and conviction.

Defending Multiculturalism is helpful for an academic audience in that it offers an interdisciplinary, twofold, discussion: first, it sheds light on the many reverberations that attacks on multiculturalism create. These reactions are widespread and include many facets of the population, not simply those identified as ethnic or cultural minorities. Further, it speaks to the intensely complex and multifaceted nature of multiculturalism in that it underlines and exemplifies how discussions on culture cannot be limited to questions of ethnicity. Conversations around multiculturalism must include issues surrounding socio-economic class, religion and sexual orientation. This collection exemplifies how discussions on multiculturalism must include a broader understanding of “culture” to include a wider spectrum of issues, perspectives and allegiances. An academic crowd might benefit from the refreshing constellation of mediums that bring together multiple elements of multiculturalism. This same crowd might, however, be tempted to wonder about the conceptual foundations of the term and crave further clarification.

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