

“Justifying Liberal-Democracy in Multicultural Societies - the Role of the Agenda Phenomenon”

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Abstract

Multicultural societies are likely to contain a wide range of opposing views not only on the good life, but also on political governance, the content and limits of politics, how issues are to be dealt with in the political agenda, on what conditions opinions can enter the public sphere etc.

In light of this, what I call “the Agenda Phenomenon” (AP) points to a difficulty for liberal-democracy to fulfill its own criteria of fair procedures.¹ Its permissibility with regard to conceptions of the good life still admits that effective political influence is an option only for citizens using the ways to adjust the agenda offered by the agenda itself. Rejecting this agenda requires conformation to, and confirmation of, the democratic rules and norms one opposes. Thus, in multicultural settings, liberal-democracy impedes certain citizens from openly arguing against democracy since their basic outlooks are denied access to the public sphere.

The response to AP given by the theory of Political Liberalism² is that acceptance by the “unreasonable” is not required for the legitimacy of liberal-democratic procedures. In order to maintain social stability, citizens who are unwilling to cooperate on mutually acceptable terms may legitimately be excluded from equal political influence. However: (i) Other than liberal-democratic governmental principles, derived from competing ideologies within multicultural societies may equally well maintain stability. (ii) The exclusion of citizens from equal political influence undermines the values of freedom and equality that legitimate governing principles must be consistent with, according to the theory of Political Liberalism. (ii) It is an open (empirical) question whether such exclusion promotes or counteracts social stability.

Since the same ideal or procedure can have different outcomes in different contexts, empirical circumstances – such as what follows from the exclusion of citizens that AP may result in – have to be considered in arguments for the appropriateness of trying to attain (i.e. founding a society on) liberal-democratic, rather than non-liberal and/or democratic, ideals.

In the multicultural case, this moves the justification of democracy out of efforts to justify the liberal-democratic ideology itself: rather it should proceed on a case to case basis.

In light of the overarching interest of keeping society together, appeals to legitimacy must consider the actual effects of citizens being more or less excluded from political influence. If the exclusion comprises many citizens or social groups of a certain sort, social stability may be jeopardized at some point. Whether there might be pragmatic reasons for policies to be based on less liberal ideals (by virtue of being more likely to remain social order or approximate other more or less liberal values) is thus a philosophical matter to be settled in collaboration with empirical research on the concrete accomplishments of existing democracies.

¹ I.e. an inclusive demos exercising both all-embracing and efficient control over the agenda. (Robert Dahl 1989. *Democracy and its Critics*. New Haven, Yale Univ. Press)

² (2005). New York, Columbia University Press.