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Book Review: Equal Recognition: The Moral Foundations of Minority Rights by Alan Patten

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Patten, Alan. *Equal Recognition: The Moral Foundations of Minority Rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. vii +327 pages. Paperback, \$45:00.

Alan Patten's *Equal Recognition* is intended to revive debate on the continuously difficult issue of multiculturalism. In his introduction, Patten examines the apparent conflict between liberalism and the accommodation of cultural diversity. On the one hand, majorities contrive to model the state to reflect their own values, traditions, norms, and identity in meaningful ways in public institutions. On the other hand, cultural minorities, in consonant with liberalism's concern surrounding the tyranny of the majority, as well as commitment to tolerating difference, demand recognition and accommodation for their own distinct cultures. These different claims are expressed in a variety of contexts, including language policy, school curriculum, and design of democratic institutions. The book's primary concern is the treatment of cultural minorities in the designing of public institutions and major public policy decisions. Hence, the author's cultural rights thesis is that the state owes cultural minorities specific forms of recognition and accommodation.

The main arguments of the book are twofold: first, the liberal state has a responsibility of neutrality towards the rights its citizens assert. Second, the only way for the state to accomplish its neutrality is to expand and preserve specific minority cultural rights. In effect, Patten argues, a neutral state is one that broadens equal recognition to each culture. Nonetheless, Patten recognizes the inherent danger in granting all cultural rights claims of paralyzing the liberal state's ability to pursue and implement legitimate goals. To this end, some rule or guideline would be required to determine which cultures should enjoy full cultural rights and which should not.

Chapter two, “Rethinking Culture: The Social Lineage Account,” narrates the various ways in which culture has been envisaged, and lays out an account relevant to the author’s main argument. Patten embellishes his description in this chapter with cultural loss vignettes. This chapter explores the concepts of culture and cultural preservation. In doing so, the chapter responds to common challenges to normative multiculturalism: it considered whether the central argument proposed is reconcilable with reasons for valuing culture. Further, the social lineage account discussed explored a distinctive perspective to the debates on cultural preservation.

Chapter three tackles the question of why culture matters. Specifically, Patten is interested in understanding the disadvantage that cultural minorities and/or prospective members of that group would suffer because of impending cultural loss. As Patten explains, “members of a disappearing minority culture have less access to the majority culture’s options than do members of the majority culture themselves.... Cultural loss thus carries with it a risk of options disadvantage for the minority” (p.71). In addition, Patten argues about the possible inadequacy of the majority-culture options for minority culture members. For example, the options in the majority culture available to minorities may not be valuable to them, given the values, beliefs, and preferences held by members of different groups. Patten identifies three essential conditions: a) prejudice against minorities, b) control of positions of power and authority by the majority members, and c) discrimination based on certain conspicuous traits such as appearance, spoken language accent, or surname as reasons that might limit access of minorities to options.

Chapter four is a theoretical treatise, exploring the question of [state] neutrality and cultural diversity. Patten rejects as false the notion that government can be neutral with respect to ethnic and national groups, similar to Will Kymlicka’s arguments in *Multicultural Citizenship*

(1995).¹ Governments, mostly support this or that societal culture, in terms of official languages, political boundaries, and division of powers. Chapter five, “Equal Recognition,” contains the nucleus of Patten’s argument. In the author’s most compelling argument, he highlights that equal recognition ought to be considered an important component of liberal justice. The last three chapters focus on the important issues of language rights (Chapter six); democratic secession from a multinational state (Chapter seven); and immigrants, national minorities, and minority rights (Chapter eight). On language rights, he contrasts three different models of language rights, namely: nation building, language preservation, and equal recognition. Patten concedes that while each model poses its own set of challenges, he argues that the equal recognition model should be given a substantial role in assessing a design of language rights. In discussing secession rights, Patten argues that groups have a right to secede, if they were subjected to one of the following forms of injustices: Human rights violations, unjust annexation or violation of autonomy agreement (1997). Chapter eight examines minority rights *vis-à-vis* immigrant groups and national minorities. Will Kymlicka (1995) argued that the circumstances in which national and immigrant groups come under the jurisdiction of the state provides a moral basis to treat their cultural-linguistic claims differently. He argues that national minorities were either involuntarily integrated into the state through seizure or conquest or voluntarily joined the state with the implied or clear-cut guarantee that their cultural-linguistic rights would be respected. By contrast, immigrants chose to leave their place of origin and, hence, can be regarded as having voluntarily surrendered their cultural and linguistic rights. For Patten, he doubts whether the decision to emigrate is really voluntary. In his conclusion, Patten opines that receiving states

should seek to clearly explain their cultural and linguistic rights to potential immigrants to enable the latter make informed decisions.

Alan Patten presents a rigorous argument in support of minority rights in a cultural-diverse liberal state. While the author's style of writing is pedagogic, the book length could have been more concise, if repetitive preambles were condensed. Nonetheless, *Equal Recognition* should be recommended reading for graduate courses in political theory, political philosophy, and political sociology.

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Notes

¹ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).