

THE RELEVANCE OF POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGIES IN MULTICULTURAL STUDIES IN THE CARIBBEAN

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This article is a critical appraisal of Anne Phillips' book titled "Multiculturalism without culture". The author uses a number of works and practical examples of ethnic, gender and class identities to debunk the myth that there is homogeneity of culture within groups accorded the same cultural status. There are interesting and sometimes insightful reviews of the concepts of culture, race and gender which force the reader to cogitate about the fallacies of modernism as a scientific paradigm in the study of social life (issues and problems).

Key Words: Multiculturalism, postmodern, culture, epistemology

Introduction

The book implies (implicitly at that) that the employment of postmodern epistemologies in the investigation of social issues in order to provide for a full ventilation of the true nature of social life. In other words, we cannot expect to adequately explicate social phenomena by mere meta-cognition and the production of meta-narratives and meta-theories. In some sense the author reminds us of the usefulness of creolisation theory which has been advanced by some Caribbean scholars for explicating cultural blending and mixing.

However, the main drawback of this book is its rather benign linguistic genre which obfuscates the reader's perception of social equality by offering some hope that social equality may be achievable in the not too distant future.

Multiculturalism without culture?

The text focuses on the necessity for examining multiculturalism without considerations of culture. The major rationale for this radical shift in the study of multiculturalism arises out of the negative consequences of labelling and stereotyping which the focus of culture dissimilarity produces in intergroup relationships. This assumption rests on the belief that culture as a social construct has been misunderstood and misconstrued to such an extent that people are lumped into discrete categories and treated in accordance to societal expectations of their cultural group.

Phillips (2007) believes that culture has been reified, that is treated as a thing devoid of dynamic energy. Furthermore she postulates that this is an unacceptable position to adopt given the cultural variations both between and within cultural groups. For example, in his study of West Indian lifestyles in Bristol Pryce (1993) found that there were four distinct adaptations to British society. These were as follows: the saints, proletarian respectables, expressive disreputable and

the hustlers. Each group responds in its own way either by taking to religion, manual jobs, criminal behaviour or informal sector activity respectively. Phillips' critique of the reification of culture is easily defended by anthropological studies such as this which show that within culture people respond differently to the same (social) stimuli- language and employment practices for instance.

Her proposed solution for this dilemma is placing individuals (not culture or cultural difference) at the centre of analysis. In this way cultural differences which give rise to claims of inequality in housing, education and health, for example, would become less problematic. Put another way Phillips opines that once people become the focus of attention (without regard to culture) then cries of ethnic and racial discrimination would be greatly minimized.

In addition, a multidisciplinary perspective from a cross section of the social sciences is proffered in this case. This would ensure that we take account of a number of perspectives from the social sciences (e.g. sociology, psychology and politics etc.) in cultural discourse.

Her critique of multiculturalism finds some support from at least two European leaders (the UK and Germany) who denounce multiculturalism as a failed state project. For instance German Prime Minister, Merkel blames the policy of multiculturalism for the rise of attacks against Islam. (Cudjoe 2011) Furthermore Cudjoe (2011) himself berates the Government of Trinidad and Tobago (GOVTT) for its establishment of a Ministry of Multiculturalism. Cudjoe (2011) quips that it is inconceivable that the pursuit of multicultural goals will not be inimical to the development of the very thing which it seeks to attain-the assimilation of diverse cultural segments into a society based on mutual respect for one another. In fact it may accentuate group difference rather than promote social consensus and inter-ethnic/group cohesion.

While the other five chapters reinforce the main issue, it is the first chapter which perhaps is the most significant in cementing the reader's perception of the inappropriateness of previous studies which make the foible of over concretizing culture. The chief exegesis of this text is, in some way, its stark resemblance to the notion of creolisation propounded by Brathwaite (1971). In particular the feature of interculturalization, that is, the development of a Creole culture as a result of the inter-penetration of two major cultural systems (of European and African heritages) is well worth noting. In all fairness to Phillips (2007) we cannot say that her arguments are directly congruent with those of Brathwaite (1971). However, she makes a point which creolisation theory has long since made that culture has been objectified to the extent that it makes for the categorization of cultural groups into hard categories which seem to be at odds with one another.

One feature of this text is that it is written in large part from a feminist perspective despite its reliance on a wide range of theories (anthropological, political and law) outside its ideological remit.

However, the reader is not over convinced that this theoretical triangulation and multiple etiological approach has done enough to detract readers opposed to feminism from attacking Phillips' (2007) stand on equality. Her optimism is commendable but remains a utopian dogma as much as Marx's communist utopia has. Phillips (2007) makes equality seem palpable and achievable. However, many do not share this optimism given the failure of capitalist modes of production to promote systems of governance compatible with different variations of socialism

far less communism.

An examination of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is a case in point. The fact that in 2000 many smaller countries (after centuries of global capitalism) still experienced widening income gaps between their rich and poor, high infant and maternal mortality, relatively low literacy rates (less than 80percent) is adequate testimony to the fact that equality for all may be difficult to attain. Functionalist pessimism of the inevitability of inequality must be acquiesced here. The ensuing quote is a fitting example of this argument:

Discussions have begun on replacing the millennium development goals (MDGs), the world's framework for fighting poverty. But that fight has not been going as well as it should. Global poverty statistics can be deployed in all kinds of ways, but the essential story of the last 15 years has two elements. Hundreds of millions have been lifted out of poverty. Yet more people – about a billion – live in extreme hunger than ever before. We are entering a new age of inequality, especially within countries and especially in the emerging powers. (Guardian, 2011)

The case of cooperative socialism in Guyana is a fitting example of the failure of equality policy especially if they are not implemented with the greatest sincerity. Hope (1973) claims that the basic principle of Burnham's cooperative socialism of 1970 was equitable income distribution and participation in decision making. Despite the significant economic and social differences between Guyana and developed societies in North America and Europe, the point cannot be underestimated that equality is attainable for all groups in all societies.

With respect to gender equality in the US Faludi (1991) identifies a number of ways in which women's employment and familial advancements are countered by male antagonism and deep personal suffering in the form of neuroses and trembling hands and depression.

One significant analytical tool emergent from Phillips' (2007) work on multiculturalism without culture is its implication of a useful framework of postmodern trajectory for analysing cultural and racial diversity in Caribbean societies such as Trinidad and Guyana. Based on M.G. Smith's (1974) work it is argued that these are plural societies since they comprise a medley of peoples who mingle and mix but do not combine. (Furnivall 1948). While everyone (Stone 1973; Leon and Leons 1977) does not support Smith (1974) the relevance of issues of multiculturalism to sociological theorizing in societies such as these (Trinidad and Guyana) must be acknowledged. In favour of Brathwaite's (1975) cultural pluralism which sees the gradual adoption of achievement universalistic model in Trinidad, we advocate that social relations in multicultural societies can be studied using a postmodernist paradigm. This would enable the deconstruction of ethnic relations in society without recourse to meta-cognition. In other words, hypothetically speaking people will be understood as individuals within their own rights devoid of the cultural and theoretical flippancy which lumps groups of individuals together in the name of grand theorization. For instance in the US the term minority is applied some segments (Hispanics, Latinos and Blacks) who are not culturally homogeneous. In Trinidad and Tobago for instance Mustapha (2007) suggests that because of syncretism all Afro Trinidadians are not the same in terms of religious practices; there are Christians, Shango Baptist and Shouter Baptist divisions among them. For this reason Phillips' suggestion (the disbanding of multicultural policies and

practices) is worth scrutinizing.

At first glance the title of the book *Multiculturalism without culture* draws the reader into an a priori falsity that the writer is attempting to go too far in her discourse by taking culture out of multiculturalism. In effect the only way to arrive at a conclusion about Phillips' (2007) intent is to read the book which will clarify any initial misconception.

In her critique of multiculturalism Phillips (2007) goes about it in a rather academic but creative manner. However there is need for her to step back and adopt a stance that is slightly more pragmatic as is suggested in the ensuing statement:

However, there is a considerable degree of confusion about 'multiculturalism,' because official government definitions have been changed regularly to portray the policy as being 'all things for all people.' Initially, multiculturalism highlighted the 'rights' of ethnic Australians. It has also come to be associated with affirmative action policies in favor of ethnic minorities and been used to describe cultural and ethnic diversity. (Rimmer 1992; 1)

Rimmer (1992) is not as pessimistic about the fate of multiculturalism as is Phillips. However, he emphasises, more than she does, the idea that it is the manner of its conceptualisation and implementation that may be causally related to all the problems which (especially) tend to depict minorities as inferior to "mainstream" cultural groups such as middle class whites in white based societies. Despite my criticism of Phillips' view of multiculturalism I may have gone too far in saying this for she perceived it as capable of promoting ideal ends for women and minorities once carefully managed.

While her point is well taken that groups of people in modern times ought to be treated equally the issue of equity must also be included in her discursive appraisal of the two aspects of multiculturalism: the theoretical and the practical. The notion that equality is desirable above all is a fallacy and must be subsumed by the philosophy of giving every one opportunity commensurate with their position in life. Much depends on the society in which cultural differences determine people's access to limited resources. By contrast in Trinidad multiculturalism is promoted as an ideal entity since it is believed to promote the ideology of an equal place for everyone in terms of education, employment, housing, and health and in general life chances on the whole.

I am rather loath to add to the chorus of dissenting voices of Caribbean critics who ascribe labels such as Eurocentric works constructed by white or European based writers. This is unnecessary since Phillips (for the most part) appears to be culturally relative or neutral in her treatise of the subject. Upon reading the book it became quite clear that it provided ample opportunity to evaluate the state of social theorising in the Caribbean (especially the more culturally diverse ones such as Trinidad and Guyana). Phillips has brought me to muse deeply about the true nature of Caribbean social structure as to whether there are one or multiple structures owing to culturally diversity.

I conclude that Multiculturalism without culture is an excellent text that makes for interesting reading and should be a great resource for teachers and all other persons interested in the study of culture and cultural anthropology.

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