The paradox of hegemony and the “Multiculturalism of the individual”

**Abstract**:

Widely popular social ideals often manifest a paradox of hegemony, a vulnerability to a particular type of erosion that occurs when opponents abandon their explicit attacks, seeking instead to blunt and transform the ideal through an ostensible conversion to it.

Christian Joppke's *Is multiculturalism dead?* is a case in point. Having long proclaimed the “retreat” of multiculturalism, Joppke now advocates a “multiculturalism of the individual,” while repeatedly suggesting that this is not multiculturalism at all. His account misunderstands human beings and the profound group-based dimensions of their identity, thus obscuring the group biases of the supposedly neutral liberal state and undermining the normative underpinnings of multiculturalism.

To guard against the paradox of hegemony and to sustain multiculturalism as an equality-seeking ideal, we need, not vague slogans, but practices of careful normative deliberation, both among scholars and in society as a whole, in order to reinforce our always tentative understanding of what a just multiculturalism does and does not entail.

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There are many ways in which a social ideal may weaken, even die. This obviously occurs when its discouraged or disillusioned supporters drift away. Paradoxically, an ideal may also weaken when former opponents come to embrace it, or appear to do so. Having failed to bury the ideal, these opponents opt for a strategy that might be called “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em... sort of.” A Canadian example of this occurred when the Harper Conservatives abandoned their long-standing explicit opposition to multiculturalism. With this “ambiguous triumph” of multiculturalism, the ideal was decisively divorced from any commitment to address racism and ethnic inequalities, becoming a simple bludgeon with which to attack policies such as same-sex marriage or land claims negotiations with First Nations (Ryan 2010).

Once in power, the Conservatives prolonged this strategy. Multiculturalism was never explicitly rejected, but incremental policy shifts brought the government “closer to the original Reform Party objective of 1996-97 of abolishing multiculturalism,” as former high-ranking civil servant Andrew Griffith documents (2013, 100). Anti-racism and -discrimination policy, for example, was reduced to measures targeting anti-Semitism (33), which itself was conflated with criticism of Israel’s actions in the Occupied Territories. When the government did speak of racism, it near-invariably targeted racism *within minority communities* (Winter 2015, 649-50). All this points to what might be termed the “paradox of hegemony”: a social ideal may be vulnerable to this form of unravelling precisely because it remains stubbornly popular despite concerted attacks. Canada’s Conservatives, after all, performed their “dementors’ kiss” on multiculturalism after more than a decade of vainly attempting to abolish it.

Scholars, like political parties, can embrace the “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em... sort of” strategy. A case in point is Christian Joppke’s *Is multiculturalism dead?* (2017). Joppke has a long record of pointing to a supposed global “retreat” from multiculturalism (2004; 2014). It is fair to say that his writing has generally *celebrated* this retreat, rather than lamenting it. Now, however, Joppke appears to endorse a variant of multiculturalism, a “multiculturalism of the individual” (2017, 3). Is this a conversion? Or the theoretical analogue to the Canadian Conservative strategy? Strikingly, a blurb on the back cover of *Is multiculturalism dead?* gives the game away: “Did he change his mind? Spoiler: not really.”

Part one of this critique will document Joppke’s own waffling over what he is up to: advocating a variant of multiculturalism, or burying it altogether. The next part will examine the second component of his slogan, “the individual.” We will see that Joppke’s misunderstanding of human beings helps obscure the realities that made multiculturalism necessary in the first place. Part three will argue the futility of attempting to divide a “multiculturalism of the individual” from a “multiculturalism of groups.” The conclusion will reflect on the practical implications of Joppke’s position, and suggest how supporters of multiculturalism might best respond to the muddle that arises from the “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em... sort of” strategy.[[1]](#endnote-1)

**1** Multiculturalism?

Does Joppke himself believe that the multiculturalism of the individual is really a form of multiculturalism? Most likely not, though on this rather vital point, *Is multiculturalism dead?* is a muddle. On the one hand, Joppke accepts Stanley Fish’s observation that multiculturalism is “not one thing but many things,” and that it is thus “futile” to try to define it (Joppke 2017, 42). And yet, throughout the book, Joppke repeatedly proceeds as if multiculturalism has a fixed meaning. Thus, he asserts that the “new language of diversity” is not multiculturalism, because it is “too individual-centered to be multicultural” (2017, 72). In the same way, he claims that American antidiscrimination policies oppose “orthodox multiculturalism and its groupist politics of recognition” (124). Antidiscrimination “is individualistic and symmetric, protecting everyone.” Multiculturalism, in contrast, is “a collectivistic and asymmetric variant of antidiscrimination, protecting only specific groups” (116). Even policies that go well beyond an individual-centred approach – such as Germany’s funding of Islamic faculties at some state universities or France’s state subsidies for mosque construction – are not *really* multiculturalism but merely a “prolongation of long-established ways of dealing with religious diversity” (45).

This is puzzling. Will Kymlicka at one point uses the phrase “really-existing multiculturalism” (2007, 108), echoing Soviet-era references to “actually-existing socialism.” The latter phrase was coined to contrast Soviet-style state socialism with a vision of “true” socialism supposedly sketched out in certain canonical texts (e.g. Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha program*, or perhaps Lenin’s *State and revolution*). The obvious difference in the case of multiculturalism is that there are no canonical texts, no authoritative vision of “true” multiculturalism.[[2]](#endnote-2) Joppke, to the contrary, is willing to grant canonical status to some authors: “What multiculturalism *is* has been canonically formulated by Charles Taylor as a ‘politics of recognition’ that compensates for past injustice and starts with the assumption of the ‘equal value’ of the culture of the groups that were once denigrated. In the liberal conception of Will Kymlicka, multiculturalism is state support for maintaining the ‘societal culture,’ which immigrants and national minority members need much like majority people in order to be free and equal individuals” (2014, 287). Joppke here misunderstands both Taylor and Kymlicka. In his “Politics of recognition” essay, Taylor distances himself from a simple equality of cultures claim, offering instead a much more modest “presumption” that “all human cultures that have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human beings” (1994, 66).[[3]](#endnote-3) As to Kymlicka, Joppke simply ignores his key distinction between national minorities and immigrant groups. Unlike national minorities, Kymlicka argues, immigrant groups “have typically accepted the expectation that they will integrate into the dominant societal culture. They have not objected to requirements that they and their children learn an official language, and that they participate in common institutions operating in that language” (1998, 35). This misunderstanding is not trivial. For more than a decade, Joppke’s writing on multiculturalism and its supposed “retreat” has been shaped by a problematic understanding of the nature of “true” multiculturalism, grounded in a misreading of these two authors.

In any case, Joppke offers no reason why this or that author should be accepted as *the* sacred scripture on multiculturalism. Further, if he chooses to designate Taylor and Kymlicka as his canonical sources, he turns “multiculturalism of the individual” into an oxymoron, given his “groupist” reading of both authors. How, then, does he come to present that oxymoron as *the* legitimate form of multiculturalism? In the preface to his 2017 book, Joppke writes: “Many will doubt that the ‘multiculturalism of the individual’ advocated in these pages is ‘multiculturalism’ at all, because any groupist element is purged from it. But I would still insist on calling it thus to fend off a contemporary tendency of liberalism to be hostile to difference and to thicken into a substantive ethic or ‘fighting creed,’ as Charles Taylor (1994) put it memorably” (Joppke 2017, vii). For Joppke to uphold “difference” by saying that policies that he has always distinguished from multiculturalism will henceforth be considered to be multiculturalism is an odd line of defence: why not simply make the case for “difference” directly? Joppke suggests no reason to believe that abandoning his long-standing view of multiculturalism is *required* to defend difference: so why do so?

Moreover, Joppke’s strained defence of his 2017 approach points to a serious concern: he wishes to “fend off” the tendency of liberalism to become a “fighting creed.” Now Taylor introduced that phrase in connection with the *Satanic Verses* controversy, which showed that “For mainstream Islam, there is no question of separating politics and religion the way we have come to expect in Western liberal society. Liberalism is not a possible meeting ground for all cultures, but is the political expression of one range of cultures, and quite incompatible with other ranges” (1994, 62). So does Joppke *oppose* that view? Does this mean that people should *not* have condemned the Ayatollah’s fatwa? Does such condemnation in itself constitute hostility to “difference”? Does he believe that liberalism should offer a neutral meeting ground for *all* cultures, including that associated with the Ayatollah and his fatwas? This suggests a serious confusion in Joppke’s understanding of the normative implications of the social model he is promoting. I will return to this problem below.

So, in the end, is Joppke advocating a tweak of multiculturalism or its abandonment? However important the question, it cannot be answered on the basis of the book. At one point, he writes: “If multiculturalism becomes another word for liberalism in a pluralistic society, its added value is more symbolic than substantive, and we might as well do without it” (2017, 42). Near the end, however, he returns to the question “Could we do without the m-word?” (160), and answers that “we need the notion of multiculturalism as a corrective to the possibility within liberalism itself to turn illiberal” (161). Historically, Joppke argues, “an illiberal impulse has haunted liberalism, in terms of the irresolvable problem of how to handle illiberal people” (161). So the “multiculturalism of the individual,” which in Joppke’s long-standing framework of analysis is an oxymoron, appears required to somehow resolve what, for Joppke at least, is an “irresolvable problem.”

Whether or not Joppke actually believes his multiculturalism of the individual to be multiculturalism, it is clear that his line of argument goes a long way to eliminating the normative premises of actually-existing multiculturalism, as we will now see.

**2** The individual?

Jürgen Habermas argues that people typically enter discussion with “the unavoidable and also counterfactual supposition that all participants involved use the same expressions in a semantically identical manner, for, without this idealizing precondition, they would not be able to enter into dialogue in the first place” (1991, 217). This tacit assumption has bedevilled debates on multiculturalism, as the word is used in a variety of ways by different writers. I wish here to focus on a less obvious case of semantic confusion, concerning “the individual.” The word “individual” can operate cognitively in different ways: it may refer to real flesh-and-blood people, with all their hopes and fears. Or it may refer to something quite abstract. The individual, for example, may simply be a placeholder for a concept within an author’s theoretical structure, as when Marx treats individuals as “the personifications of economic categories” (rpt. 1954, 21), or when neoclassical economics lets the individual stand in for *homo oeconomicus*, that “lightning calculator of pleasure and pains, who oscillates like a homogenous globule of desire of happiness under the impulse of stimuli that shift him about the area but leave him intact,” as Veblen put it (1919, 73). And Joppke? Despite an earlier comment that “it is always fleshy agents with interests and identities that people the public sphere” (2004, 250), there is something quite “un-fleshy,” quite abstract, about Joppke’s individuals. To understand this requires some context.

In Will Kymlicka’s influential formulation, multiculturalism is about “renegotiating the terms of integration” (1998, 39). A key support of that view is his rejection of the claim that liberal states are culturally neutral. To the contrary, “the state is deeply and inextricably involved in shaping the ethnocultural identities of its citizens through its efforts to promote a very definite form of cultural integration” (25). Joppke has long dismissed this argument: “liberal nation-states are marked by a thorough de-ethnicization, in which the various national labels are only different names for the same thing, the liberal creed of liberty and equality” (2004, 254). This, for Joppke, justifies the “growing sense that ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’ has not been outlived as a maxim of immigrant integration, precisely because the contemporary ‘Romes’ are polyglot places in which the ties that bind are increasingly procedural and universalistic” (255).

It is the way Joppke re-asserts the cultural neutrality of the liberal state in *Is multiculturalism dead?* that provokes perplexity concerning his concept of the human person: “It is always the same tired examples of public holidays, official language, and so on, that serve to validate the claim that states are irrevocably particularistic, incapable of becoming differentiated from majority culture.” This, for Joppke, constitutes a “fixation on paltry, at best symbolic, matter” (sic) (2017, 164). It is astonishing to see official language questions, which have been a vital motor for so many nationalist movements, dismissed as “paltry, at best symbolic.” This clearly raises a puzzle concerning the “individual” of the “multiculturalism of the individual”: if this is a person for whom issues such as language policy are “paltry,” just what *is* important for that individual? On language at least, Joppke’s individual sounds much like Swift’s Houyhnhnms. Swift’s Gulliver tells us that the Houyhnhnms could not understand the idea of lying, because: “the Use of Speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts; now if anyone *said the Thing which was not*, these Ends were Defeated” (rpt. 1985, 195). That is, language had no relation to interpersonal competition, relative status, personal dignity, and so on.

Such a conception is suggested by Joppke’s comment that “Host states’ emphasis on language adoption is instrumental and pragmatic, reflecting a basic need to communicate and function in a shared idiom” (2017, 26-27). In truth, official language questions are never *purely* “instrumental and pragmatic.” Pragmatism cannot explain, for example, the resentment of a Canadian critic of multiculturalism towards “Chinese students congregated behind a wall of Cantonese” at his university (Bissoondath 1994, 21), or the intensity of opposition to bilingual education and other accommodations for linguistic minorities in the U.S. One quite non-pragmatic factor at work was expressed by a Trump supporter days before the 2016 election: “Look around you, half the signs are in Spanish... This doesn’t feel like my country any more” (qtd. in Saunders 2016). Hannah Arendt comments that the Romans “used the words ‘to live’ and ‘to be among men’ (*inter homines esse*)... as synonyms” (1958, 7). Language is at the heart of this being among others, and thus an essential determinant of our feeling at home in the world, or homeless. Neither citizens nor policy-makers can generally be expected to approach an issue of such existential importance in a purely pragmatic spirit.[[4]](#endnote-4)

It is easier to make a case for the relatively trivial nature of Joppke’s other example of a “paltry, at best symbolic” issue, public holidays. Even here, though, we see recurring expressions of anger from majority groups at various adaptations to cultural pluralism: the use of “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas,” or the artwork on Starbucks’ December coffee cups, which led a conservative American evangelical to declare that “The cup is symbolic of a larger war against Christianity in this country. The policemen of political correctness have demanded that the silent majority bend its knee to a vocal minority” (qtd. in Moyer 2015). It would appear that, under the right conditions, almost any change can be read by anxious members of majority groups as a sign that their country is slipping away from them. That is the sort of passion that is easily aroused among flesh-and-blood humans, as opposed to Swift’s (and Joppke’s?) Houyhnhnms.

Joppke’s dismissal of the importance of “paltry” issues is not a minor feature of his argument: it is required to uphold his claim that the modern liberal state is free of majority-ethnic traits. And this, in turn, underpins his “multiculturalism of the individual,” which is supported by the view that there is no real majority group, in the sense that the majority is only a statistical abstraction, having no significant embodiment in state practices. But if this were true, *what reason would there ever have been to develop multicultural policies in the first place*?

When we put real flesh-and-blood people at the heart of our analysis, as opposed to Joppke's shadowy constructs, we recognize the importance of our multiple group identifications, and the wide variety of ways in which we can relate to different types of groups. Taking this into account is essential for identifying the group dimensions of ostensibly individual-level policies, and vice-versa. To this matter we now turn.

**3** Groups and individuals

Joppke claims that “all ‘groupist’ elements” have “painstakingly been removed” from Canadian (and Australian) multiculturalism (2017, 33). “How little space there is for ‘groupness’ in Canadian multiculturalism,” he goes on, “is visible in the early-millennium row over the introduction of ‘sharia tribunals’ in Ontario” (35). But what exactly was the group whose claims were rejected by this decision? Not Ontario Muslims as a whole, certainly. The initiative began with the “Canadian Society of Muslims,” which did not emerge through some collective decision of the Canadian Islamic community as a whole, any more than did the “Canadian Islamic Congress,” the “Muslim Canadian Congress,” or, for that matter, the “Canadian Council of Muslim Women,” which strongly opposed the private arbitration proposal. All these organizations might be viewed as *moves* by specific individuals to be seen (internally and externally) as legitimate representatives of a community.

In such a situation, “group rights” that explicitly or tacitly involve internal restrictions effectively give some individuals power over others. In the Ontario case, there was a legitimate fear that authorizing sharia tribunals would involve a shift in power from vulnerable women to men, and to apparently self-appointed arbitrators. Power could also shift from public institutions responsible for protecting the rights of children in divorce cases, to the arbitrators, and through them to men as well. So the Ontario decision was not a simple matter of individual over group: the specific nature of the group was relevant. Its origins, legitimacy, probable biases: all these weighed in the decision. To think clearly about the complex interaction between group- and individual-oriented policies, we always need to consider the specific nature of the relevant group(s).

One type of group in particular must be taken into account in order to assess the claim that state policies are “procedural and universalistic.” We may begin with a question: when politicians engage in “dog-whistle politics,” who precisely are the “dogs” at whom the appeals are aimed? The target is clearly some generally unorganized group of citizens that the politician believes is marked by shared interests and prejudices. Take, for example, amendments to Canada’s Citizenship Guide introduced by the Conservative government in 2009 to include a denunciation of “barbaric cultural practices that tolerate spousal abuse, ‘honour killings,’ female genital mutilation, or other gender-based violence” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2009).[[5]](#endnote-5) The Conservatives doubled-down during the 2015 Canadian election campaign, promising to set up a snitch line that Canadians could phone to report neighbours engaging in “barbaric practices” (Andrew-Gee 2015). One could defend this policy from a liberal egalitarian perspective, arguing that the practices singled out are deeply wrong, and universally so. Yet we may still ask why the Conservatives picked out *these* particular practices for censure. The answer is obvious: in the eyes of the party’s base, the practices in question are all associated with particular ethnic-minority groups. There was no question of denouncing the “barbaric practices” of the ethnic majority, such as widespread physical-assault-on-ice (a.k.a. professional hockey). Nor were the Conservatives inviting people in wealthy neighbourhoods to use the snitch line to report on their CEO neighbours if they suspect the latter’s companies to be guilty of pollution or tax evasion: “barbaric practices” associated with widespread capitalist practices were outside the purview of the policy. The carefully tailored nature of the sub-set of targeted practices is also evident in the tip-toeing around persecution of homosexuals. Thus, political appeals can be made to a particular group that on the surface appear strictly limited to the universal values of “liberty and equality” (Joppke 2004, 254).

There is, however, no reason why the politician should limit their appeals to the majority ethnic groups to those couched in the language of universal values. They will also make use of a different type of political appeal, of the “When in Rome...” type. We may thus find the *same* politicians appealing to the *same* constituency on the *same* issue, using ostensibly universalist language at one moment, and explicitly group-oriented language at another. Canada’s Harper government sought to ban women from wearing niqabs at their citizenship ceremonies. Why? Prime Minister Harper offered both the ostensibly egalitarian reason that the niqab is “rooted in a culture that is anti-women” (House of Commons, *Debates*, 10 Mar. 2015); *and* the claim that “it is offensive that someone would hide their identity at the very moment where they are committing to join the Canadian family” (qtd. in Orwin 2015).[[6]](#endnote-6)

The group “interpellated” by the sorts of political appeals just examined, however, is not a fixed *thing*. I am using “interpellation” in a sense derived from Althusser (1971). This usage starts from the fact that all of us have multiple aspects to our (real and imagined) identity. Political actors “interpellate” –“hail”– groups of citizens in ways that seek to make one dimension of their identity more salient, and highlight their supposed common interests with others who share that identity-dimension.[[7]](#endnote-7) Thus, Conservative party rhetoric “hailed” members of majority group(s) *as* decent people who share decent values that are under threat from “barbaric cultural practices” and the wimpy liberals who tolerate them.

The practice of interpellation itself *creates* fluid political groups, which can be simultaneously relevant for some issues and irrelevant for others. The national “family,” for example, is very selectively invoked, *against* some Muslim women, but not *for* poorer citizens. Despite the fluid nature of such groups, many politicians evidently consider it good political tactics to aim at them a type of political appeal that undercuts the belief that only “procedural and universalistic” (Joppke 2004, 255) bonds exist in modern liberal societies.

Many groups, of course, are much less fluid. “Civil society” is comprised of thousands of organizations, each of which claims to speak for some group or other. In the vast majority of cases, such organizations did not arise directly from a collective decision process of their corresponding groups. Nevertheless, such an organization may enjoy a great degree of legitimacy among members of the group, many of whom see the organization as *theirs*, speaking for them and promoting their shared interests. In other cases, an organization’s claim to speak on behalf of a group will be contested, often by other organizations (as we saw in the case of Canadian Muslims). But civil society organizations don’t merely *represent* particular groups: in many cases they work to *solidify* them. That is, they too “interpellate” group members, seeking either to effect or to sustain a sense among them that the group is a central component of their identity. This is true of many ethno-cultural organizations and, certainly, of religious ones, with which members can have an intensely identity-shaping relation.

Ethno-cultural and religious organizations form a backdrop to two group dimensions of any “really-existing multiculturalism.” The first concerns accommodation. Flexibility around dress codes, for example, will be requested and sometimes granted precisely because the variant form is *not* an expression of a simple individual idiosyncrasy. Canada’s RCMP, for example, granted the controversial accommodation of allowing male Sikh officers to wear their turban, rather than the traditional stetson, when in dress uniform. The organization would never have allowed – had anyone ever requested it – a member to wear a wizard’s hat or jester’s slippers. It was the rooting of the turban in the practices of a group that gave weight to the accommodation request, as it led the individual to interpret its wearing as vital to their identity and integrity. The point can be generalized to other typical multiculturalism policies. Accommodations for religious holidays, cultural diversity training, affirmative action, funding of minority-language media: all of these reference identifiable social groups without whom the policies would not make sense.

Joppke acknowledges this to some extent: “the individualism prescribed by anti-discrimination is still latently groupist” (2017, 117). Similarly, there is “a groupist element” in recognition of minority religious, “but it derives from the individual, through her right to practice religion” (156). The difficulty with this attempt to save the thesis that the multiculturalism of the individual is “the variant that remains” (156) is that we must recognize that the individual in turn “derives” from a range of groups, in myriad ways. The identity-shaping language(s) we speak, our sense of what is most important in life, our metaphysics: all these are profoundly shaped by current and former group affiliations. If we ignore this relation of reciprocal “derivation” between individuals and groups, a commonplace insight of sociology, we render the history and practices of multiculturalism unintelligible.

Individual-level accommodations, in turn, have important implications for groups. As a byproduct of accommodations around dress codes, for example, a group can be strengthened, simply because the tension between membership in the group and participation in mainstream institutions is to some degree attenuated. But this occurs only because individuals are committed enough to some group practices to fight for the accommodation. We thus have a dialectic in which individuals are shaped by (various) group loyalties, yet in which groups themselves only survive owing to individual choices.[[8]](#endnote-8) This dialectic was evoked in the Canadian government’s original statement of multiculturalism policy: “aid to cultural groups must proceed on the basis of aid to self-effort. And in our concern for the preservation of ethnic group identity, we should not forget that individuals in a democracy may choose not to be concerned about maintaining a strong sense of their ethnic identity.” Thus, “the government cannot and should not take upon itself the responsibility for the continued viability of all ethnic groups” (Government of Canada 1971). Does that describe an “individualist” or “groupist” policy? Both, clearly.

A second dimension of multiculturalism policy that necessarily involves civil society groups is government consultation. Why “necessarily”? Why not consult by polling individuals randomly selected from relevant constituencies? Two interrelated objections to that involve deliberation and legitimation. On the first: neither polling nor externally-controlled focus groups allow a space for deliberation among those who share a certain set of interests and perspectives, a “safe space” in which they can discuss their shared concerns together and develop a deeper understanding of those concerns, free from the judgmental glare of mainstream society. As for legitimation: governments need to be seen to have consulted in ways that are considered meaningful within relevant communities. Often, the government can expect some help from consulted groups in selling a policy, or at least that the groups will be less vociferous in their criticisms, than they might be if the only consultation were an opaque polling exercise. Thus, as Joppke concedes, consultation with ethnocultural and minority religious groups remains a widespread practice, even in countries, such as Germany and the U.K, that have ostensibly “retreated” from multiculturalism (2017, 45, 50).

Though the objectives of deliberation and consultation both require state engagement with civil society groups, they have different implications for the *nature* of those groups. To promote authentic group deliberation requires that “all relevant voices are heard” (Habermas 1992, 260). This conflicts with the common reality that “the more powerful, male members are those who are generally in a position to determine and articulate the group’s beliefs, practices, and interests” (Okin 1997). A government intent on legitimation through consultation may be little concerned with the internal power imbalances of its civil society interlocutors, and may even prefer to give priority to long-established patriarchal groups over more democratic upstart competitors. Consultation with groups can thus affect the relative power of individuals, reminding us again of the interrelations between group- and individual-level effects.

To summarize: the foregoing reflections suggest that we should not cavalierly slot policies and discourses into “group-oriented” and “individual-oriented” pigeonholes. Sharia law tribunals, portrayed in the Ontario controversy as an assignment of rights to a particular group, would have entailed a marked shift in power between individuals. Political parties can use an ostensibly individual-rights oriented discourse that is in truth aimed at particular majoritarian groups. Appeals for accommodations will be taken more seriously because of the group commitments of the individuals concerned. And government consultation with groups may also affect power relations between individuals in those groups, for better or worse.

**4** Conclusion

We have just seen that it is no simple matter to pin down just what might identify a specific set of policies as a “multiculturalism of the individual.” The practical import of Joppke’s position is thus unclear. One possible interpretation is that his approach leaves realities on the ground pretty much as they are. Near the end of his book, Joppke asks how his multiculturalism of the individual differs from Kymlicka’s position. He answers that “it would be preposterous and misleading to build up too strong a line” between their respective approaches (2017, 162).[[9]](#endnote-9) This is striking, since it is reasonable to summarize Kymlicka’s decades-long project as an attempt to give a theoretical grounding to “really-existing” liberal multiculturalism. So perhaps Joppke’s “multiculturalism of the individual” is simply an attempted re-description of existing practices. This provokes a question: if a so-called “multiculturalism of groups” has died, *where was it ever alive*? Was it a really-existing multiculturalism in some country or other? If so, where? Or did it exist primarily in the heads of some commentators on multiculturalism, among them Christian Joppke? Perhaps all this dramatic talk of death and survival is the sort of “unparalleled revolution... in the realm of pure thought” mocked by Marx and Engels (rpt. 1976, 33).

But if Joppke is engaged in a re-description of actually-existing multiculturalism, the re-description is not harmless. As we have seen, his account misunderstands human beings and the profound group-based dimensions of their identity. This facilitates his misunderstanding of modern liberal states, attributing to them a cultural neutrality that exists only in the pages of some philosophy books. Joppke thus hollows out multiculturalism’s normative foundations.

The conclusion that Joppke is advocating a normatively defenceless multiculturalism is reinforced when we consider the rhetorical flourish that ends his book: “once the individual reigns, her ethical choices stand to be respected. This is what the multiculturalism of the individual is all about” (2017, 165). *What on earth can this mean?* Does the respect he advocates embrace, for example, respect for individuals’ choice to withdraw their children from sex-ed classes, because they teach students that girls should be treated with respect and gay people aren’t evil? Early in the book, Joppke approvingly quotes Brian Barry’s view that one cannot “simultaneously affirm everybody’s culture” because cultures have “propositional content” (Joppke 2017, 19). But so too do ethical choices. Respect for same-sex rights, for example, entails certain assumptions about the way the world *is*, and the way it *should be*. So too does homophobia. So too do feminism and misogyny. These are all “ethical choices” with “propositional content.”

It is helpful here to recall Joppke’s discomfort with the notion of liberalism as a “fighting creed.” Given the provenance of that concept, as we saw, Joppke’s discomfort leaves the strange impression that he believes Western societies should not have opposed the ayatollah’s injunction to murder Salman Rushdie. Coupled with his undifferentiated call for respect of the “ethical choices” of individuals, this suggests that Joppke recoils from the exercise of careful normative judgment that must be an ongoing part of any just multiculturalism, indeed, of any just society.

I am making no *substantive* claim about the nature of a just multiculturalism, but simply noting that it will not run on auto-pilot: it will require ongoing social practices of careful normative deliberation. Such deliberation will start from a truism that seems to perplex Joppke: any just society requires limits. In 1790, Mary Wollstonecraft offered a classic definition of justice, anticipating by two centuries John Rawls’s first principle of justice: each person has a right to “such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact, and the continued existence of that compact” (rpt. 1993, 7; see Rawls 2001, 42). Freedoms must be limited, so that all may enjoy equal freedom and society may endure. Thus, a just society simply cannot “respect” all ethical choices. It is not, for example, “illiberal” for a just society not to tolerate practices that subordinate women, or that treat children like property. To the contrary: intolerance of such practices is a *requirement* of justice.

Another question is whether the limits that actually exist in any given society are just. A key contention of advocates of multiculturalism is that many traditional limits were *not* just: even when their *form* appeared egalitarian, their *content* reflected the traditions of majority groups.[[10]](#endnote-10) Just limits can only be formulated through an ongoing process of social deliberation that is sensitive to traditionally marginalized perspectives (e.g. those of ethnic or sexual minorities). The defence of multiculturalism today, in a world of increasingly aggressive right-wing “populism,” involves, *inter alia*, advocacy of such inclusive deliberation, an advocacy that can appeal to the sense of fairness of many fellow citizens, even among those uncomfortable with multiculturalism. We can hope that ongoing deliberation, in society at large and among scholars of multiculturalism, should: yield precision, rather than confused slogans such as “multiculturalism of the individual”; bring to light the suffering and injustice that can arise when public policy ignores the importance of group affiliations for many fellow citizens; and, in sum, strengthen our always tentative understanding of what a just multiculturalism does and does not entail.

**Endnotes**

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1. These supporters of multiculturalism need not endorse every aspect of current multicultural policies. But we recognize the importance of continuing to combat racism and discrimination, and we believe that the death of multiculturalism would seriously undermine the struggle for equality. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For Canadian multiculturalism at least, one might try to attribute canonical status to the 1971 policy declaration. But this would require a naive view of the status of official policy statements, viewing them *exclusively* as frameworks to guide state action, and ignoring their inevitable public relations dimension. In any case, the 1971 declaration would not serve as a canonical definition beyond Canada’s borders. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Note the “whole societies” qualifier, which Taylor deliberately chose so as to exclude “partial cultural milieux within a society” (1994, 66). So Taylor’s presumption is not even concerned with multiculturalism, when this is understood as a policy pertaining to the coexistence of ethnocultures within a given society, unless one makes the dubious assumption that such minority cultures are clones of national cultures that have existed over a “considerable” period of time in various home countries. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. That the national language is “rarely a pragmatic matter,” argues Eric Hobsbawm, is demonstrated by the energy with which various countries *invent* traditions for those languages, projecting them backward in time and papering over their often-recent development (1992, 95). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The analysis here follows Ryan (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. At the time, the government held confidential polling data showing that almost none of those who supported the niqab ban did so for even arguably egalitarian reasons. Far more common were reasons linking the niqab to “disrespect for our cultural norms”; the need to show “that one adopts Canadian culture,” and so on (http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tpsgc/por-ef/privy\_council/2015/047-14-e/tables.htm). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Just after the 2016 American election, novelist Zadie Smith eloquently expressed this idea: “individual citizens are internally plural: they have within them the full range of behavioral possibilities. They are like complex musical scores from which certain melodies can be teased out and others ignored or suppressed, depending, at least in part, on who is doing the conducting. At this moment, all over the world—and most recently in America—the conductors standing in front of this human orchestra have only the meanest and most banal melodies in mind” (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This dialectic parallels that seen between actors and established social practices in approaches such as Giddens’s structuration theory (1984), or Bhaskar’s critical realism (1979). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The key difference, he suggests, is that his “multiculturalism of the individual” takes up issues concerning sexual minorities, which somehow gives his theory more “empirical leverage” (2017, 163). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. To take a current example: a rule that no public servant may display an “ostentatious” religious symbol is egalitarian in form, but not in spirit or effect. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)