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**Minoritization and Group-Based Injustice:**

**Defending Cultural Pluralism Without Defending Cultures**

The way we talk about “minority groups”, collectively, suggests that these groups have something in common. While this phrase is mostly used to refer to “cultural” and “ethnic” groups that are relatively fewer than the so-called majority, it is not uncommon to talk of other kinds of groups as “minorities”. Members of LGBTQx are often grouped under the heading “sexual minorities”. Smaller religious groups are also thought of as “minorities”. Even women can count as a “minority group” if we understand the term “minority” as referring to more than just numbers (Hacker 1951). Clearly, then, culture, ethnicity, perhaps even numbers, are not decisive factors in determining whether a social group counts as a “minority”.

Despite this apparent diversity, philosophers and social scientists seem content to talk about “minority groups” collectively as if they shared something socially meaningful, whether this similitude be cashed out in terms of demographic make-up, common interests, behavioural patterns or based on some socio-economic indicators. In other words, “minorities” or “minority groups” act as social categories that somehow help us describe and explain the social world. Still, it is difficult to know just what makes a social group a “minority”. This difficulty becomes even more pressing when the fact of “minority” somehow carries normative weight. Indeed, the fact that phrases like “minority rights” are used in normative and political claims forces us to decide who counts as a “minority” and who doesn’t or, to put in another way, who counts as the *relevant kind* of minority and who doesn’t.

My goal in this paper is to determine the normatively salient characteristics that make minorities part of a distinct kind of social group – a social group of social groups – who is entitled to particular political concern, over and above the basic liberal rights. In doing so, I explore potential traits that would allow us to treat minority groups as a distinct social group for the purposes of normative multiculturalism.[[1]](#footnote-1) The main contenders for these criteria are: (1) numbers; (2) institutionalized culture and ethnicity broadly speaking[[2]](#footnote-2); and (3) being subjected to *minoritization*. My thesis, broadly stated, is that the usual criteria to decide who counts as a minority for the purposes of normative theories of multiculturalism – numbers, culture, and ethnicity – do not accurately track the kind of social phenomena multiculturalists are opposed to, are not properly connected with our deepest normative commitments and, as such, do not help in the broader struggle for equality. Minority cultures, nations and ethnic groups are not the proper subject of multiculturalism (Song 2009). This means that the goal of multiculturalism cannot be to protect cultures, as such.

Following Sally Haslanger, I argue that when we ask the question “What is a minority group?”, we should “consid[er] more fully the pragmatics our talk employing the ter[m] in question” (Haslanger 2000, 33). Thus, the question is not only “What do we mean when we say “minority group”?” We also have to ask the following questions: What do we want to concept to track? What normative work do we want the concept to do? and What political purpose do we want it to serve? In the spirit of Haslanger, I argue that our concept of “minority group” should track what is wrong with our world and should help us achieve justice and political equality (Haslanger 2000; Haslanger 2012).

My view is that multiculturalism and multicultural policies (MCPs) should not be understood as instantiations of the ideals of liberal justice. They should be conceived as responses to actual problems of non-ideal politics. This methodological commitment may not be shared by most multiculturalists, but still, those who see their theory as part of a broader struggle for equality – Kymlicka and Patten are certainly part of this group – should care deeply about the kind of injustice people suffer as “minorities”. When political actors, social scientists and political philosopher use the concept of “minority group”, they aim to track a certain kind of social reality. This reality is one in which certain people are oppressed, exploited, dominated or simply marginalized because they are members of particular groups. Most multiculturalists like Kymlicka and Patten focus on oppressed national minorities, dominated indigenous groups, and marginalized immigrants; their theory is designed to respond only to these particular injustices or at least to help design institutions that will not foster these injustices. However, as the examples of women and sexual minorities show, this kind of social phenomena encompasses more than cultural and ethnic diversity. Moreover, there seems to be some groups who would qualify as cultural “minorities” – e.g. American immigrants to Sweden, Anglophones in Québec –, but who do not suffer injustice *as* minorities. Therefore, the problem with a concept of “minority” defined in terms of number and culture only is that it does not accurately track the kind of social realities egalitarian multiculturalists should care about.

My contention is that a concept of “minority group” reduced to cultural and ethnic groups does not help us achieve the goal of multicultural egalitarian justice. Thus, following Haslanger, I argue we should work with a concept of minority that is directly related to a broad normative commitment against group-based injustice. As such, the proper subjects of multiculturalism, “minorities”, are just those groups that are pushed and/or maintained in what I call situations of minoritization.

In sum, my position is that “minorities” do, in fact, share enough of *something* to count as a particular kind of social group. This similarity is what allows us to view their specific rights as a special case for theories of justice. In other words, we use the concepts of “minorities” or “minority groups” as normatively salient social categories for the political project behind liberal multiculturalism. What they have in common, however, is not the fact of being culturally or ethnically defined. The common feature of “minority groups” is that they are or have been *minoritized*.

I recognize that these minoritized groups may include minority cultural groups, but I argue they do not reduce to them. Indeed, there are many more kinds of social groups that suffer injustice because they are identified as “outsiders”. All of these groups share with “minorities” the fact of being singled out for unfair treatment. Culture remains relevant to multiculturalism. Indeed, reducing injustices lived *qua* member of a culture requires that policy-makers be sensible to cultural claims. These policies will be different from those designed to reduce injustices lived *qua* women or disabled person. Nonetheless, in both cases, the justification for implementing specific policies stems from the fact of minoritization and not directly from the fact of culture. I also recognize that this might push certain “minority groups” like certain religious groups outside the purview of multiculturalism; this is a bullet I am ready to bite in the name of normative consistency.

**What is a Minority?**

The way we categorize social groups matters for multiculturalism. If ‘minorities’ are understood to be the proper subject of multiculturalism, we need to establish how we can categorize a set of people as a ‘minority group’. It matters especially in a context where minority groups, understood collectively, are viewed as deserving some form of specific political attention. When a state aims to make its public policy amenable to the claims of minorities, it must be careful about what it calls a ‘minority’. Indeed, if classifying a social group as a minority group grants it some claim to special recognition, it is crucial for philosophers to know what justified this classification in the first place.

In the opening lines of this chapter, we saw that people commonly think of ‘minorities’ collectively as a specific kind of social group, but it is not clear what justifies this. Thus, a discussion on the reasons for which ‘minorities’ can be viewed as social group, by my definition, is in order. We will see that it is not always obvious which criteria people refer to when they group together different social groups as ‘minority groups’.

**A quantitative categorization?**

One of the first thing that comes to mind when we think of ‘minorities’ is numbers. The term minority, after all, is a quantitative term and this is what the articles I cited insisted on. The Québécois, African-Americans, Canadian Muslims, Romas and most indigenous groups are all numerical ‘minorities’. Could minorities simply be social groups that are smaller than at least one majority group? Being fewer may not be sufficient to count as a minority, but at the very least, the term ‘minority’ as it is used in ordinary language *necessarily* refers to a quantitative component. As we will see, this is not obvious.

If numbers were necessary and sufficient to count as a ‘minority’ everything and anything would be included in this category. Many of these social groups would not be particularly socially meaningfulness. For example, people with blonde hair are a minority, but this social group is not particularly meaningful. Indeed, being fewer in numbers does not, on its own, create similar behavioral patterns, lived experiences, or social relations. Numbers are not always socially trivial. For example, numbers matter in democratic settings. But despite this, quantification only is not the only thing people have in mind when they talk about ‘minorities’. Libertarians may be an electoral minority in the United States, but they are certainly not ‘minorities’ in the usual sense.

**Minority as a *Social Status***

The term ‘minority’ is often used to refer to a group’s status. On this understanding, all groups whose members share some non-trivial and objective characteristic and who occupy a lower status in a society potentially count as ‘minorities’. An early example of this position comes from sociologist Louis Wirth, who writes that:

a minority group is any group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination (Wirth 1945, 347).

Notice that this definition does not treat the quantitative criterion as a necessary and sufficient condition to treat a group as a ‘minority group’. As we will see, this definition entails that the quantitative criterion is not even necessary. But first, let us see why Wirth’s definition is useful for social science and political philosophy.

Wirth’s ‘minority groups’ are, first and foremost, defined with reference to shared experiences that are fundamentally social, historical, and relational. A person is not part of a minority simply because she has certain physical or cultural characteristics. One is a part of minority group – whether she wants it or not – if she finds herself in specific kinds of social relations that are causally related to her group belongings.

Following Wirth, Helen Hacker argues that women, who generally form a little more than half of any given population, should be understood as a minority group. Women indeed suffer “differential and unequal treatment” because they have some shared “physical (...) characteristics” (Hacker 1951). However, in terms of number, women are not in minority. This problem is not as damning as it may seem. As I have argued social groups are theoretical constructs. The concept of minority we are working with can very well be a stipulative use of the term ‘minority’ which often, but not always, coincides with numerical minority. Moreover, women historically have been and are still a statistical minority in the political and public realm. If ‘minorities’ are so because they are “intractable democratic minorities”, then saying that women are ‘minorities’ is so not so far from being a numerical minority in this problematic sense.

We should not Wirth’s definition implies that self-categorization is necessary. What if most women do not view themselves as “objects of collective discrimination” (Hacker 1951, 62)? The same could be said about any group. Should we force the category of ‘minority’ upon people who do not identify with it? Should we treat women as minorities, against their will? And thus looms the dangers of reification, of creating social categories by theoretical fiat...

Once again, we can rely on the stipulative and analytical nature of the concept of social group. Since I do not rely only on self-categorization to identify social groups, I can simply say that data suggest that women have similar life experiences, behavioural patterns and socio-political relations. Of course, I could be wrong, but this is largely an empirical matter and it does not commit me to the existence of some kind of essence that would cause women to be constituted into a social group.

The last issue some people may have with Wirth’s definition is more closely connected with the theory of multiculturalism. Once you understand the concept of ‘minority groups’ as reflecting social status and social relations, as opposed to some intrinsic features of said groups, it seems reasonable to assume that the discussion of minority rights should include many other groups that do not immediately come to mind when one thinks of multiculturalism (*e*.*g*. the Deaf, LGBTs, people with disabilities, etc.).[[3]](#footnote-3) This, I argue, is not a problem.

Multiculturalism has long been conceived as applying to all cases where people’s “cultural identity” in the broad sense of the term is at issue. As Kymlicka notes in his introduction to contemporary political philosophy, “‘multiculturalism’ is often used to refer to all forms of ‘identity politics’, including not only ethnocultural groups, but also women, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and so on” (Kymlicka 2002, 373, n.8). Given the intuitive appeal of Wirth’s definition, it is not surprising that those who fought the rights of ‘minorities’ came to view multiculturalism as applying to more than just ethnocultural groups.

However, during the last 25 years or so, multiculturalists argued their views applied only specific kind of social injustice for which culture *and* numbers are normatively significant: national minorities and ethnic groups. Only those groups are covered by mainstream multiculturalism. In the following I argue that this way of thinking about the subject of multiculturalism is misguided. Those groups that are relevant for multiculturalism, I argue, have something other than culture in common, something that puts the emphasis on another normatively salient feature that is not necessarily linked the cultural character of a group. This feature is minoritization. But first let us see how mainstream multiculturalist think we should define ‘minorities’ for the purposes of multiculturalism.

**Multiculturalism’s “minorities”**

I suggested that if multiculturalism wants to continue to talk about the rights of minority groups, it should operate with a precise definition of what it means to be a minority. We saw that the quantitative criterion is insufficient. Faced with this problem, many multiculturalists would argue that, in order to count as a minority, a group must be socially identifiable as a distinct cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic, national, or racial group (Song 2009).

As we said, one strategy for coping with the ambiguity of the term ‘minority’ is to work with a stipulative definition. For Kymlicka, only ethnic and national minorities count as minorities for the purposes of multiculturalism. This means that “minority rights” effectively stand as a shorthand for “the claims of the members of ethnic and national groups for group‐differentiated rights, powers, status or immunities, beyond the common rights of citizenship” (Kymlicka 1995, 206, n.19). Will Kymlicka is careful to point out that his theory is designed to include only issues that pertain to “national and ethnic differences” (Kymlicka 1995, 18). Multiculturalism, at least as defined and defended in *Multicultural Citizenship*, is not to be understood as an “umbrella term for every group-related difference in moral perspective or personal identity” (Kymlicka 1995, 19). The multiculturalist challenge, then, is to show that minority cultures are entitled to more than the basic liberal rights required by justice (Patten 2014, 10).

Will Kymlicka’s multiculturalism stresses that the value of cultural membership for individuals justifies treating “cultural groups” as a specific kind of ‘minority’ that requires a distinct kind of normative attention (Kymlicka 1995, 84–93, 199, n.10). He also recently argued that the focus of multicultural theory should be on the relationships operating between “*minority* cultures” and States. In other words, multicultural policies should be “crafted to remedy the chronic risks that modern nation-states grounded in popular sovereignty pose to each of these minorities [who are not seen as belonging to the nation]” (Kymlicka 2017). So, for Kymlicka, there are at least two requirements to count as a minority. First, a social group must be a cultural group different from the one making up the majority in a nation-state and it must be susceptible to this chronic risk of cultural and political oppression. Attending to *cultural* minorities, in this sense, is the heart of the contemporary multicultural project. For multiculturalists, cultures are valuable because they provide their members with a “meaningful context of choice” or because they are “consequential for the options that individuals have at their disposal” (Kymlicka 1995, 82-84; Patten 2015, 65). If a culture is unable to provide such a context of choice or meaningful options because of external pressures, then it must be protected and accommodated or equally recognize (Kymlicka 1995, 35-44; Patten 2014, ch. 5).

In spite of this, it is not clear that the cultural criterion is sufficient for a specific group to count as a ‘minority’. There are privileged cultural (statistical) minorities and other small cultural groups that are not particularly at risk of being subordinated to a majority group. Anglophones in Québec were once clearly privileged and they are not currently at risk of being subordinated to the Francophone majority.[[4]](#footnote-4) Afrikaans constitute a minority national group in South Africa, but it’s not clear that their situation is analogous to national minorities who count as such. It is not clear either if privileged voluntary immigrants, like say American immigrants to Sweden, should be thought of as minorities. All of these groups seem able to resist external pressures and do not seem to suffer particular injustices that MCPs would compensate. We could say that these so-called “privileged minorities” are rare and grant that Kymlicka’s goal is to found principled arguments to defend minority rights. If his approach does not apply to all cases, this may not discredit the whole enterprise.

Kymlicka and Patten pay some attention to actual circumstances that make certain MCPs impracticable or temporarily unjust – immigrants are not, in principle, forbidden to view themselves as national minorities, but, in practice, they lack the resources to sustain national institutions (Kymlicka 1995, 15); White South-Africans would unfairly benefit from a veto power (Kymlicka 1995, 110); etc.. But Kymlicka and Patten focus on the legitimacy of MCPs “ethnocultural groups” – immigrants and national minorities – independently of the injustice they might suffer. In other words, their theories are ideal theories of multicultural justice. The cases they focus on are arguably the “most common, the most successful, and the most relevant for future-oriented decisions” (Kymlicka 1997, 80). However, they are certainly not the *only* cases in which people suffer injustice because they belong to a socially identifiable group. Kymlicka’s definition of institutionalized culture is unnecessarily restrictive.

**Problems with the cultural criterion**

I admit the cultural criterion is important for multiculturalism, but I contend this is not because, as most people assume, the goal of multiculturalism is to protect and promote ‘minority’ *cultures* (Song 2009, 177). In fact, as we will see, I do not think the cultural criterion is necessary to achieve the normative desiderata of multiculturalism. Protection of culture is important, because members of cultures often see themselves (rightly or wrongly) as *minoritized*, as experiencing injustice *because* of their culture. They also see their culture wane *as the result of injustice* – they may seek to protect their cultures, but the real issue is the history of injustice that explains their culture’s endangerment. Culture is therefore relevant at some point, but it does not have to play the crucial foundational normative role it plays in mainstream multiculturalism.

The main problem with the cultural criterion is that even if multiculturalists had principled arguments to support the claim that culture is only a necessary, though insufficient criterion to count as a minority for the purposes of multiculturalism[[5]](#footnote-5), many people worry about the implications of making culture morally significant. Notably, the focus on the cultural criterion has opened multiculturalism to accusations of cultural essentialism (Appiah 2005, 110, 151–52; Benhabib 2002, 4, 68; Fraser 2001; Kymlicka 2015; Patten 2014, chap. 2; Phillips 2009).[[6]](#footnote-6)

The suggestion that the cultural criterion could be a necessary and sufficient condition for a group to count as a minority is problematic mainly because culture is an extremely difficult reality to circumscribe. It is also hard to see what is so special about culture if we do not know what a culture really is. Seyla Benhabib calls Kymlicka’s conception of culture “sociologically naïve” – the things he calls ‘culture’ do not exist as such and, thus, cannot sustain multiculturalism’s normative commitments (Benhabib 2002, 67-68). Brian Barry claims that most serious injustices faced by so-called minorities are in fact socio-economic – “‘culture is not the problem and culture is not the solution’” (Barry 2002, 317). If being a “cultural”, “racial” or “religious” group is sufficient to claim minority rights, then it seems to make most of the common objections to multiculturalism much stronger (*e*.*g*. it allows ethnic ‘entrepreneurs’ to illegitimately benefit from public funds dedicated to “ethnic” activities (Barry 2001); it is divisive Gitlin 1995), it erodes the Welfare state (Wolfe and Klausen 1997), etc.).

But even if we assume that cultures are identifiable, there may be problems with the very idea of a ‘cultural’ right. Anne Phillips, Seyla Benhabib, and Nancy Fraser, whom Kymlicka calls “post-multiculturalists” (Kymlicka 2015b)[[7]](#footnote-7), all argue that multiculturalism promotes, in one way on another, cultural/religious/racial/linguistic essentialism by focusing only on “culturally” defined groups. Essentially, by defining the subjects of multiculturalism *qua* culturally, racially, ethnically, linguistically, or religiously defined groups, liberal multiculturalism

exaggerates the internal unity of cultures, solidifies differences that are currently more fluid, and makes people from other cultures seem more exotic and distinct than they really are. Multiculturalism then appears not as a cultural liberator but as a cultural straitjacket, forcing those described as members of a minority cultural group into a regime of authenticity, denying them the chance to cross cultural borders, borrow cultural influences, define and redefine themselves. (Phillips 2009, 14)

The essentialism problem is a serious one. Essentialist conceptions of race, nation, and culture have long been used to foster and justify domination and oppression. Some peoples were said to be meant, in their essence, to be dominated and others to be dominator. Essentialism actually contributed to what Kymlicka calls the “chronic risks” faced by minorities in the modern nation-state (Kymlicka 2017). Moreover, the multicultural framework should not force individuals to voice their claims in ways that misrepresent their experiences and identities by attributing legitimacy only to claims that are deemed authentic according to a naïve conception of culture. Cultures are internally heterogeneous, and identifying specific features or practices that require protection is at the very least practically infeasible and at worst conducive to the reproduction of unfair power dynamics *within* groups (Shachar 2001; Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev 2005). If multiculturalism operates with a naïve conception of culture and forces cultures to adopt these conceptions to make valid political claims, it is doubtful that the normative commitments it elaborates will be sound.

Kymlicka thinks that post-multiculturalists have “misidentified the nature and goals of multiculturalism, and hence misdiagnosed the challenges we face, and prematurely closed off theoretical and practical options that deserve attention” (Kymlicka 2015, 244). Ultimately, Kymlicka does not make much of the anti-essentialist argument, because he does not think these critiques successfully show that multiculturalism’s “emancipatory impulse” is actually subverted by its alleged essentialist tendencies (Kymlicka 2015, 219). This argumentative strategy is important because it shows Kymlicka thinks the emancipatory impulse behind multiculturalism is what really counts. His point is that defending culture does not necessarily subvert this goal.

Alan Patten, however, seems more interested in showing that liberals should value culture as such, over and above basic principles of liberal justice. He does, however, take the problem of essentialism seriously. Thus, he is at pains to show that we can protect cultures *as such* without falling into the essentialist trap. The dilemma, according to him, is as follows:

*either* culture is understood in an ‘essentialist’ way, in which case multiculturalism is empirically and morally flawed; *or* culture is understood in a nonessentialist way, but then the concept no longer supplies multiculturalism with the means of making empirical judgments and normative claims that matter to it. (Patten 2014, 39)

Patten claims that his “social lineage account” of culture provides a concept of culture that picks out the kinds of groups multiculturalists have in mind when they make their normative claims and which helps us to see why culture is important for people (Patten 2014, 39). The ‘social lineage account’ defines culture a “*the relation that people share when, and to the extent that they have shared with one another subjection to a set of formative conditions that are distinct from the formative conditions that are imposed on others*” (Patter 2014, 51. Emphasis in the original). Patten puts the emphasis on formative institutions and conditions; members of a single culture will be subjected to “*enough*” similar – not necessarily *identical* – formative processes to count as such (Patten 2014, 56).

Patten’s definition of culture is not susceptible to the anti-essentialist challenge. It admits of internal heterogeneity and external overlap, where people are influenced in different ways by a single culture and influenced by more than their own culture (Patten 2014, 53). Patten focuses on “shared socialization experiences” (Patten 2014, 53). But there is an important gap in Patten’s argument.

Patten claims that “cultures matter normatively to their members because they are consequential for the option that individuals have at their disposal.” (Patten 2014, 65). But, obviously, cultures are not the only kind of social groups that are consequential for the options of their members. The social group ‘women’ matters normatively, not necessarily because belonging to this group is important *for women*, but because members of that group have unequal options in many contexts and because members share experiences of oppression; the social group ‘Black Americans’ matters for the same reason. Yet, Patten would mark a distinction between these two social groups and cultural groups, but I do not think he is justified in doing so.

According to Patten there is a distinction between two formative processes by which different people can “end up receiving distinct forms of socialization.” (Patten 2014, 57). Here it is worth quoting him at length.

It may be that they [individuals] participate in different practices and institutions and thus receive a socialization that is colored by those practices and institutions and by the participants in them. Or it may be that they participate in a common set of practices and institutions, but those practices and institutions socialize their participants in a differentiated manner. It may be integral to the beliefs, values, and norms that are encouraged by a given set of practices and institutions that persons with different ascriptive characteristics are assigned to different roles or treated in different ways. In the social lineage account, only the first of these mechanisms implies the division of people into multiple cultures. The second mechanism is compatible with the generation of a single (gendered, racialized) culture. (Patten 2014, 57)

The gist of this quote, as I understand it, is that men and women, Whites and Blacks, can be socialized differently within the same culture. It is easy to see that members of two different cultures are socialized differently because they are members of *different cultures*. However, Patten gives us no reasons to believe that gendered and racialized formative processes that apply to all members of a culture result in more normatively important social groupings than the specific formative processes that result in gendered social groups. If formative conditions and processes are what makes ‘culture’ a special kind of social group, then gendered and racialized formative conditions *also* make women and racialized individuals part of a special kind of social group. If this special kind of social group matter normatively because they are linked to their members’ options, then the social groups ‘women’, ‘Blacks’, ‘sexual minorities’, etc., also matter normatively.

Patten’s normative project is not to respond to differentiated formative processes that have adverse effects on individual members of specific social groups. His goal is to find *principled* *basic* *rights* for cultural minorities *as such* (Patten 2014, 11). To do so, he is forced to rely on the concept of culture. For him, the main task is to present a definition of culture that is not essentialist, that is open to internal heterogeneity and that properly targets *those groups* that “multiculturalists have in mind” (Patten 2014, 39) – I think he is generally successful in doing so. However, relying on the concept of culture and determined to limit his account to groups “multiculturalists have in mind”, he is forced to protect his account from a problem of proliferation. It is crucial for him that his account does not “identify too manycultures*.*” (Patten 2014, 56). And to do so he has to make a normatively significant distinction between those formative processes associated with cultures and those that only affect specific social groups within a culture.

I contend it is the project of protecting cultures *as such* that forces Patten to deal with the problem of essentialism. If you want to protect cultures as such, you are forced to justify the special status that cultures confer on practices or ways of life. This poses the difficult question of exactly *what* is the culture worthy of protection and, perhaps more important, *who* is to say which practice is necessary for a given culture. However, if we focus on differences in options and other inequalities between groups we avoid this problem. This may indeed extend the scope of multiculturalism to groups that are not obviously *cultures*, but we can still identify something in common with those groups who count as minorities for the purposes of multiculturalism that would make the whole multicultural edifice more coherent. Before I show what these minorities have in common, I need to say a few things about the notion of social groups.

**‘Minorities’ as social groups**

I opened this paper with the hypothesis according to which a ‘minority group’ is constituted of individuals who share *something* meaningful. As such, ‘minority groups’ count as social groups. However, it also seems that ‘minority groups’ share something, *qua* social groups. This something, I assume, is what makes talk of ‘minority rights’ *prima facie* meaningful. Before I show how ‘minorities’ form a distinct social group, we must determine whether a single ‘minority’ constitutes a social group under my account.

Social groups are social categories that are supposed to track something in the real world. This categorization is useful to explain and describe the social world. Many people have worries about the reifying power of social categorizations. These people would claim that we should be wary of categorizations that assumes too much homogeneity in collectivities, especially in culturally defined collectivities. As we saw, talking of “cultures” as discrete entities is rife with problematic essentialist assumptions (Benhabib 2002; Phillips 2009). Minorities, they would say, are too internally diverse to count as a distinct social group. Similarly, we should talk of women as a group encompassing all women because are too different within cultures and between cultures.

While I understand these worries, I think they overstate the issue. Saying that “race”, “ethnicity”, “language” and “religion”, “culture” exist in the social world and constitute useful social categorization does not necessarily entail ontological reification and it certainly does not mean that we do not acknowledged internal diversity. Social groups, as Young aptly puts it, are real “not as substances, but as forms of social relations” (Young 2011, 44). These social relations tell us something about the world and to understand them we must work with constructed social categories like ‘minority groups’. To understand group-based prejudice, for example, it is necessary to know the kind of features people identify (wrongly or rightly) with certain ‘minority groups’. There may be limit cases where the line between a socially inert aggregate of ethnoculturally similar people and a socially meaningful minority group is hard to draw. My goal is not to draw this line. For now, then, I am just going to stipulate that each individual ‘minority group’ is a socially meaningful category.

**Social Groups, not Necessarily Identity Groups**

Iris Marion Young defines oppression as “structural phenomena that immobilize or diminish a group” (Young 2011, 42). The fact oppression affects social groups is important for Young because social groups constitute individuals (Young 2011, 45). Black Americans, for example, form a social group, not so much because they share goals or certain objective features, but because they share a common identity and common life experiences of oppression and racial prejudice. Young thus focuses on ‘identity groups’, groups that may or may not present objective attributes, but which play a constitutive role in their members’ self-identification and identity (Young 2011, 44-45). These collectives are not arbitrary since they represent subjective self-categorizations that represent observable, albeit socially constructed, social relations.

I am sympathetic to Young’s work in general and I see why she would focus on identity groups for her purposes – identity groups may indeed suffer the brunt of group-based injustices and politics designed to recognize and include oppressed social groups in deliberative should pay attention to people’s identities. I also agree with her response to people who focus only on associations that can be thought of as “social agents”. Like her, I believe belonging to a group sometimes “constitute individuals” (Young 2011, 44-45). I also think this matters. Indeed, including ‘social groups’ in our analysis of social justice is necessary properly identify systemic and structural inequalities (Young 2001).

However, I resist reducing social groups to groups to which individuals can and do “self-identify” and to groups in which members “have a specific affinity with one another” (Young 2011, 43). A first issue I have with this approach is that many ‘social groups’ include individuals who do not self-identify as members, who do not have this “special affinity” and, yet, still suffer *qua* members of that group. For example, it is not at all clear that all women self-identify as members of the samesocial group ‘Women’, even if they objectively have similar life experiences. It does not mean, however, that ‘Women’ does not constitute a useful category to explain and describe their reality. Another concern if that the language of ‘identity’ is slippery and sensitive (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). ‘Identity’ is associated with the much maligned ‘identity politics’ where, too often, ‘identity’ takes the form of a non-negotiable feature in political claims. Too often, people seek to justify their demands simply on the basis of their ‘identity’ – ‘It is a question of identity!’ (Weinstock 2006)[[8]](#footnote-8) In a democratic context where compromises must be made, making such a vague notion trump all other considerations is rife with conflict.

Where Young puts the emphasis on a sense of identity, special affinity and common lived experience, I put the focus on the broader social significance of social groups. I am not saying that identity groups are not socially meaningful – far from it. But I want my work to be protected from the charges laid out against ‘identity politics’. It is for these reasons that I relinquish, for now at least, the language of ‘identity’ in favour of the more neutral ‘social group’. The main criterion to identify a group of individuals as a group is thus the more neutral social meaningfulness of the category.

**Minoritization**

I the remainder of this paper I argue we can circumvent the anti-essentialist criticisms entirely and provide a solid basis for multicultural claims by centering our normative and empirical analysis on groups who are ‘minorities’ in different qualitative sense. A sense for which culture does not play a significant role, *a priori*. This qualitative criterion to count as a ‘minority’ is what I call minoritization.

The concept of minoritization is often used in social science, especially in socio-linguistics, but it has never caught the attention of philosophers and theorists working on multiculturalism. Minoritization’s reference is simple enough. It suggests a process that somehow makes something or someone a ‘minority’ – it minoritizes. But this is not saying much if we are unsure about what ‘minority’ means. Unfortunately, the concept of minoritization, as it is discussed in the literature, suffers from the same equivocations we have been discussing throughout this paper. Minoritization has quantitative *and* qualitative dimensions. The literature is particularly messy as people use “minorization”, “minoritization”, and even “minoration” to refer to similar, yet different phenomena. For example, it is not clear whether we should use the word minoritization to refer to processes by which a group acquires a lower social status, to processes that allow the emergence of a collective identity akin to a cultural identity, or to situations where a group’s numbers decrease (Blanchet 2005).[[9]](#footnote-9) Furthermore, it is not clear whether minoritization affects currently existing social groups insofar as that see their status change or whether it can directly contribute to the constitution of specific social groups we call ‘minority groups’. Both processes have a ‘minority group’ as their end result, but they seem to relate to different kinds of ‘minorities’.

For my purposes, I will use the word minoritization only to refer to the phenomena that sees a group acquiring an inferior status in a given historical and political context. As such, the group of individuals can exist prior to minoritization, but it will become a “minority group” only after being minoritized. The group’s internal constitution may not differ, only its meaning *qua* category. The converse can also be true. We could say that certain groups that were “minorities” *acquired* equal status or at least became indistinguishable from the majority. Examples of such groups are the Irish in the U.S. and, to some extent, the Catholics. What I am saying is that minoritization “creates” minority groups. The fact that a group diminishes in number – either through extermination, deportation, or “natural” demographic decline – may contribute to this change in status, but a decreasing population is not necessary nor sufficient to count as being minoritized. Minoritization is thus, first and foremost, a question of status.

**Minoritization and Minorization?**

A good portion of the literature that uses and discusses the concepts of minori(ti)zation is found in the field of socio-linguistics and sociology of language (Atkinson 2000; Duquette and Morin 2003; Hambye 2009; Léglise and Alby 2006; Patrick 2010). The concept is often discussed in parallel with the notion of “language dominance” (Grillo 1989; Gal 1989; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). According to many socio-linguists, the dominance of a language confers power and prestige to its speakers. A language becomes dominant as a result of social, political, economic and ideological processes that create a hierarchy on top of which stands a ‘majority’ (those that speak the dominant language) and at the bottom of which stand ‘minorities’, who speak ‘minority languages’.

This phenomenon can happen on various scales, in different settings, and a language can be dominant in one context and minori(ti)zed in another. It is also a matter of degree (Atkinson 2000, 191). For example, English is globally dominant, but its dominance is felt more strongly in places like Québec where it is seen as the language of the conqueror. French, on the other hand, was and still is a dominant language in many African countries, but it is a minority language in North America. Other cases like the relationship between *castellano* and *català* in Catalonia are harder to assess – it is not clear which language community is minori(ti)zed; it depends on what basis you evaluate this phenomena (Atkinson 2000). Minori(ti)zation more generally can thus be understood as a process, mirroring language dominance, that “constructs minority groups with less political, economic, and social power than some dominant group.” (Patrick 2010, 176). These processes are often, but need not be, part of a voluntary and active “*tentative de subordination de la part d’un groupe social qui tente d’exercer une forme de contrôle social sur les locuteurs d’une variété linguistique*.” (Labrie 2002, 15).[[10]](#footnote-10)

While socio-linguists and sociologists of language who talk about minori(ti)zation understandably focus on the minori(ti)zation of *languages* (Atkinson 2000, 186), as opposed to say the minori(ti)zation of ethnic groups, the phenomena they highlight can easily be seen to “[involve] an intersection of social categories marking difference, including class, race, ethnicity, and gender” (Patrick 2010, 176). It is not surprising, then, that the concept(s) of minori(ti)zation is used in studies of social work (Chappell and Cahnmann-Taylor 2013; de Finney et al. 2011; Drolet, Garneau, and Dubois 2010; Lucassen 1991. These authors will often talk of double minori(ti)zation when individuals face two kinds of social pressures (e.g. living with a disability and being an immigrant (Mahele-Nyota 2010) or being part of a minority within a larger immigrant minority like Algerian Berbers in Québec (Montgomery et al. 2010).

An important facet of this complex social phenomenon is that it may actually contribute to the construction of so-called minority groups. This phenomenon was already discussed by Leo Wirth in the 1950’s. If a group is oppressed, it is likely that its members will see themselves as different from the majority. The processes of minori(ti)zation can thus play a significant role in the way individuals understand themselves. When individuals are constantly told that they are lesser for being a member of a certain group, belonging to this will become a crucial part of their identity. The boundaries of a group will also be drawn by this relationship of oppression and domination. Minori(ti)zation can also trigger acts of resistance, which can be expressed collectively or individually. These expressions of resistance can become part of a group identity (Wirth 1945, 348). In other words, various processes, including processes of minoritization, can contribute to the construction of what people call “minority groups”.

While most people who talk about minori(ti)zation understand the concept as applying to social groups that are already identifiable as such, at least some see ‘minorization’ and ‘minoritization’ as the process through which an aggregate of individuals *becomes* a ‘minority’ *qua* social group (Chaudhuri 2012; Lee 2008; Lucassen 1991; Petchesky 2009). For example, Leo Lucassen argues that the ‘Gypsy minority’ found in the Netherlands was actually “constructed” by various processes of stigmatization and “labellization” throughout the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century. According to Lucassen, the so-called ‘Gypsy minority’ was in fact constituted by at least five “gypsy groups” (Lucassen 1991, 89). Most, but not all, of these groups happened to share some characteristics like travelling in large groups, engaging in certain trades, dressing in certain ways, and originating from the same region (Lucassen 1991, 85-86). However, prior to the processes of minoritization (stigmatization and ‘labellization’), these groups did not see themselves as part of a larger social group and outsiders did not immediately group all members of ‘gypsy groups’ as Gypsies (Lucassen 1991). To use an expression used earlier, ‘Gypsies’ were not identifiable as such. According to Lucassen, the ‘Gypsy minority’ therefore came about as the result of processes of minoritization. As Labrie argues that “[*la*] *représentation collective de l’existence de telles communautés linguistiques* [a linguistic minority] *émane soit du groupe social cherchant à exercer sa domination, soit des locuteurs de la langue minoritaire eux-mêmes en réaction à la marginalisation dont ils font l’objet*” (Labrie 2002). In other words, minoritization contributes to the definition of a group’s identity in the eyes of both the majority and minority. Therefore, we could argue that minoritization *minoritizes* social groups – prior to minoritization aggregates of people are simply not seen as a social group.

**Minoritization for other kinds of social groups**

For my purposes, I extend the term ‘minoritization’ to more than just language. By minoritization I mean the various social processes by which a socially identifiable group is subordinated, marginalized and singled out for unfair and unjust treatment in a given society. This process is observable empirically and it has clear normative implications. Minoritized groups do worse economically, are marginalized, are discriminated against, etc.. There is also dimension of prestige and symbolism that should not be forgotten. A group is minoritized when the group as a whole or certain features associated with the group are under-valued by, or simply invisible to, the mainstream society. The latter dimension of minoritization is nicely captured by Iris Young’s concept of ‘cultural imperialism’. According to her, “[to] experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other” (Young 2011, 58-59).

One need not *actually* be treated unfairly to understand oneself as part of a minoritized group. One can even be, at least for some time, part of a group that is objectively well-off economically, but still feel insecure. On this topic, Philippe Hambye notes the strange fact that the Dutch-speaking majority in Belgium is much more insecure about immigration and linguistic assimilation, despite their emergence as the dominant political and economic linguistic group of Belgium. To explain this, Hambye offers an interpretation according to which “[*c*]*e renversement de domination économique ne s’accompagne pas d’un renversement équivalent au niveau* symbolique*,* niveau où se joue sans doute ce qui fait le propre de la minorisation” (Hambye 2009, 43. My emphasis.) The core of this definition is the notion of power differential and relations of subordination and domination between dominant groups and minoritized groups, *not* numerical weight. Patrick sums this point nicely: “Dominant or minority status is thus attributed not on the basis of numbers of speakers, but rather on the basis of the social positioning of particular social groups within hierarchical social structure.” (Patrick 2010, 176).

**A Focus on Minoritization**

I argue the terms ‘minoritized’ and ‘minoritization’ provide us with a principled way to differentiate between those groups that require the succour of multicultural policies and those that do not require them or the cases in which multicultural policies would actually increase injustice. Of course, privileged cultural minorities are rare – Anglophone in Québec are probably an example and maybe the Belgian Francophones, though this is probably changing fast. Often the privilege of these cultural minorities is the result of colonial efforts that are themselves unjust. But after a certain time, it might be the case that their culture will be at risk. I claim that for the most part, people are convinced by multiculturalism because they see it as a solution to problems of justice that go beyond the fact of statistical or ‘cultural’ minority.

Multiculturalism is about redressing wrongs, addressing injustice, promoting equality in a context where some groups are more equal than others. Minoritization emphasizes the relational and processual nature of the phenomenon of group inequalities. A group is not a ‘minority’ only in virtue of some its characteristics (low numbers, inferior status, etc.); it *becomes* a minority because of its historical and ongoing relation to a society’s norm or “mainstream”. Groups *become* ‘minorities’, in the status-marker sense, because they are *minoritized*. We could say, schematically, that what we call ‘minorities’ are really the end-products of a process of minoritization. These processes are historical, contextualized, and evolving. Multiculturalism has to account for this history of minoritization and it cannot do so if it concentrates only on features like culture and numbers that get their normative weight from ideal theorization.

The term ‘minoritized’ allows us to avoid the ambiguity associated with the concept of ‘minority’. It also puts the finger directly on what is at stake in multiculturalism. In other words, it provides us with a social category that refers to something in the social world and it highlights why this social category is normatively significant. This may not make the identification of actually minoritized groups easier; this will always be a contentious issue. But, at least, the concept we would be working with would track what is at stake more directly by embedding power differentials between dominant groups and dominated groups within the concept that constitutes the subject of multiculturalism. Small population is only one of many factors that contribute to a group’s minoritization; it is a crucial factor in many cases, but it is not the only one and certainly not the most normatively weighty. Culture is also important, but it is only one way in which minoritization becomes manifest. In other words, the use of the term ‘minoritized’ instead of ‘minorities’ highlights the fact that multiculturalism is and should be much more than a numbers game, even if, sometimes, numbers do make a difference in power relations.

The term minoritization, though related to these other concepts, should not be assimilated to subordination, oppression, domination, or discrimination. These concepts do not carry all the significance I think is necessary to properly highlight the specificity of multiculturalism. A social group does not need to be subordinated to another group in some of kind of hierarchical relationship to be treated unfairly. Sometimes, a social group can be marginalized, or simply invisible to members of the majority. As Young argues, a group’s specific interests and particular outlook on the world is often invisible to members of the majority. Members of this group are only rarely present in the public sphere; when they are present it is either as manifestation of stereotypes or as the exception that proves the rule. This phenomenon – non- and mis-recognition – is also something multiculturalism should prevent.

By focusing on this alternative qualitative criterion to identify those groups that are entitled to be the subject of one or more multicultural policies we circumvent the essentialism problem. The real point of multiculturalism is no longer to protect cultures, but to foster economic and symbolic equality and reduce group-based injustice in culturally diverse societies. It also clearly establishes multiculturalism as part of a broader struggle for equality (Song 2009). Because of this broader commitment against minoritization, those groups that ought to be considered ‘minorities’ for the purposes of multiculturalism are not *necessarily* culturally defined, or, more precisely the cultural element does not play a significant normative role in establishing the legitimacy of multicultural policies. What truly matters is that so-called ‘minorities’ are, or have been, subject to historical processes of *minoritization* that contributed to their current unequal status and socio-economic situation. Groups relevant to the multicultural project are, for lack of a better word, *minoritized* groups and not merely small groups or cultural groups.

It is true that cultural minorities are indeedparadigmatic cases of groups of individuals that are singled out for unfair treatment by nation-states. I am not denying this. We live in deeply pluralistic societies and the public philosophy should be one in which individuals identified with any given culture can safely flourish without being singled out for unfair treatment. However, culture, or ethnicity, is not a necessary and sufficient reason to include a socially identifiable group in the purview of MCPs. This does not mean that we should eliminate culture from our analysis. However we look at it, “cultural minorities” broadly speaking are paradigmatic examples of groups of individuals who are targeted for unequal and unjust treatments because of their group-belongings. But this is what is at stake, not culture.

Multiculturalism protects culture only because cultures (whatever they are – my task as a political philosopher is not to define what cultures truly are) happen to matter to people and because individuals are dominated and oppressed because they belong to a particular cultural group. For important but contingent reasons, social conflicts affect statistical minorities disproportionately. For equally important and contingent reasons, these vulnerable minorities are often identifiable ethnocultural and/or religious minorities. But, while it is true that, in standard cases, cultural minorities take the brunt of group-based injustice, other groups, which are not cultural minorities or even, strictly speaking, minorities, are targeted for unequal treatment.

**Conclusion**

There has always been and there will always be diversity: of ways of life, of culture, of ethnicity, of religion, of opinion. Some of these various trends inevitably coalesce into what we call “social groups” – these groups are sometimes more “natural” than others (e.g. ethno-linguistic groups, clans, families, etc.) and other times it seems like they are socially “manufactured”, but here is not the place to have a debate on the exact processes which result in the concatenation of a series of individuals into “social groups”. This social reality, which we can call deep cultural pluralism, is often the theatre of severe conflicts between groups of different sizes and with different amounts of power and resources. These conflicts range from all-out civil war to benign prejudice, passing through ethnic cleansing, genocide, and assimilation policies.

The phenomena described here have always existed and, thus, saying “cultural diversity” is a new phenomenon is a misnomer. It is true, however, that philosophers’ and politicians’ views on diversity and cultural pluralism have changed in the last decades. Many of them came to think the best way to limit conflicts between cultures within a state, while protecting minority cultures, was to promote multiculturalism and minority rights. Many people defended this view by arguing that “cultures” are intrinsically valuable and that we need to protect them at all costs. But we saw that the cultural essentialism linked to this kind of argument should be avoided.

Minoritization helps us to steer multiculturalism away from cultural essentialism. Second-generations and First Nations *should* be protected under regimes of multiculturalism, at least intuitively, not because they form distinct cultures, but because they suffer from the effects of minoritization. Other groups, like African-Americans, who are even further from the standard “cultural” groups with which Kymlicka works could also be thought to deserve special attention in MCPs. The fact these groups do not have some of the standard characteristics of “cultural groups” should not undermine their claims. This is because these “standard characteristics” are contingent. Our non-ideal world is a world of social conflict between social classes, genders, ethnocultural groups and religious groups. It is a competition for prestige, resources, and, too often, survival. For important but *contingent* reasons, social conflicts affect statistical minorities disproportionately. For equally important and *contingent* reasons, *vulnerable* statistical minorities are more often than not identifiable ethnocultural and/or religious minorities. But, while it is true that, in standard cases, cultural minorities take the brunt of group-based injustice, other groups, which are not cultural minorities or even, strictly speaking, minorities, are targeted for unequal and unjust treatments; women are probably the best example, but in many other contexts vulnerable groups which form the majority of a population are *minoritized* – they are treated like “minorities”. What is at stake from the point of view of justice is not cultural diversity per se, but the processes of minoritization and the fact of vulnerability that put these groups of people in dire straits.

The motivation for multiculturalism and minority rights should not be that ideal justice demands the protection of this or that cultural group’s practices or certain important cultural institutions because these are deemed, in principle, essential for the existence of this or that cultural group which is itself deemed essential for personal autonomy. Of course, multiculturalism is about justice. But our main motivation should be that, in our non-ideal unjust world, members of certain groups are disproportionately the target of unjust practices simply because they belong to these groups. Of course, these unjust practices can indeed undermine personal autonomy by forcing vulnerable cultural groups in states of cultural decline. These situations do call for cultural rights. But multiculturalism should be thought beyond the mere attribution of specific cultural rights protecting access to culture. Tolerating or recognizing certain cultural practices, protecting cultural institutions, or recognizing a group’s sovereignty on its traditional lands are simply the marks of the *equal respect* due to all citizens regardless of their groups.

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1. For the remainder of the paper, whenever I use the phrase “to count as a ‘minority’” it should be read as “to count as a ‘minority’ for the purposes of normative multiculturalism” (i.e. as a proper subject of multiculturalism). By multiculturalism I mean a normative theory which tells us how societies should deal with the fact of deep cultural pluralism. For reasons that will be clearer soon, my account of multiculturalism is much broader than current “mainstream” multiculturalists. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I use institutionalized culture here as a short-hand for group affiliations, communities, and identities that can be described as cultural, ethnocultural, religious, national. I add “institutionalized” to focus on groups that are sufficiently institutionalized to have a broad impact on people's lived experiences and identities (Christman 2009; Schechtman 2007; Taylor 1985) and to endure through several generations. This criterion is largely inspired by Kymlicka's “stipulative definition of 'culture' and 'multicultural'” that makes 'culture' synonymous with 'nation' or 'people' or “an intergenerational community, more or less institutionally complete, occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language and history” (Kymlicka 1995, 18-19). This definition does not include “lifestyle enclaves, social movements, and voluntary associations” (Kymlicka 1995, 19). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. By “the Deaf”, I mean the group of people who identify and seek recognition as members of the Deaf culture and who refuse the “medicalization of deafness” that treats deafness as a defect that must be fixed. For more on this: (“Deaf Culture vs. Medicalization” 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This does not mean that their situation is completely safe. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My view is that mainstream liberal multiculturalism does not have such an argument. For the most part, group-differentiated rights are justified in ideal theory – cultural minorities are entitled to group-differentiated rights in virtue of their being “cultural minorities”, in a theoretical sense. That is to say, cultural minorities are entitled to MCPs because they have certain features that make them worthy recipients. When there are non-ideal considerations that would reduce the legitimacy of a group's cultural claims (e.g. the South-African apartheid regime; impracticality of certain policies in some contexts), Kymlicka simply puts *ad hoc* pragmatic dampers on certain cultural claims (Kymlicka 1995, 94–101). Patten’s approach is less susceptible to this charge because he merely justifies *pro tanto* cultural rights. Still, culture is what justifies these *pro tanto* rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ann Phillips's book's title would have us think that she defends a multiculturalism *without* culture, but in fact she means “a multiculturalism without particular *notions* of culture [she has] found unhelpful” (Phillips 2009, 52). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Post-multiculturalists, as opposed to anti-multiculturalists, because these authors express some sympathies toward the multicultural project that seeks to reduced culturally-based inequalities. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Most defenders of “identity politics” do not have such a simplistic approach to political demands, but my goal is merely to shield my thesis from easy and rhetorically powerful, if a little simplistic, argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Blanchet actually uses three words to describe this “complex” phenomenon: *minoration*, *minorisation*, and *minoritarisation*. I have tried to use these three words, but it makes the reading unnecessarily obfuscated. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. My translation: “an attempt to subordinate on the part of a social group that tries to exert some form of social control on the speakers of a linguistic variety.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)