

Book Reviews

JUSTICE, GENDER, AND THE POLITICS OF MULTICULTURALISM

Sarah Song
New York: Cambridge University
Press, 2007

REVIEWED BY WING HIN LEE

In *Justice, Gender, and the Politics of Multiculturalism*, Sarah Song eloquently argues for a reframing of present multiculturalism debates in the West. This is a two-part project: she proposes new theoretical approaches to culture-based conflicts and applies these approaches to three case studies set in the United States. The book opens with a comprehensive discussion of the existing political theories on the conceptions of “culture” and “multiculturalism” in Western politics, popular media, public policy, and academia. Song believes that these views are misguided and pushes for shifts in these prevailing discourses from “what cultures are to what cultures do.” She defines “culture” as a product of “specific and complex historical processes” of “intercultural interactions” and constant internal contestation. Thus, Song rejects conceptions of “cultures” as clearly-defined wholes and independent from each other; instead, she emphasizes the diversities of practices and beliefs within cultures, especially among internal minorities.

Through rereading contemporary realities of multiculturalism, Song proposes “a semi-contextual” two-step approach to resolving cultural conflicts. Firstly, she introduces an evaluation process that relies on the criteria of present discrimination, historical injustice, and state establishment of “normative” culture to

determine whether culturally-based oppression has taken place and whether state intervention and accommodation are necessary. Then, Song advocates context-specific democratic deliberations in individual cases to chart the extent and nature of accommodation, with special attention given to the rights and voices of internal minorities such as women. Song calls this combination of context-sensitive and democratic approaches “rights-respecting accommodation.”

In the second half of the book, she uses the examples of “cultural defence” explanations for male violence against women in America, tribal sovereignty of mixed-raced children in the Santa Clara Pueblo tribe, and polygamy in American Mormon fundamentalist groups to further her proposals. In these case studies, she points to the urgent need to illuminate simultaneously the variety of interests at stake within minority communities and acknowledge the majority culture’s own imperialist history and ongoing patriarchal and racist norms. The majority culture’s oppressive history and norms, Song argues, have contributed to the development of patriarchal “cultural traditions” that the majority have denounced hypocritically as alien to their own communities. For example, Song effectively investigates the political and judicial persecutions of American Mormon fundamentalist groups as instances where the American majority accuses the Mormon polygamists of eroding Mormon women’s rights, while at the same time non-Mormon America ignores the inferior status of women within its own society.

Although Song focuses on cultural conflicts in the United States, she attempts to expand the scope and relevance of her theoretical and methodological arguments by including European and Canadian examples.

She discusses the controversies surrounding headscarves for Muslim schoolgirls in France in recent years and the fight for Indian status for all mixed-Native and non-Native children in Canada in the 1980s. At first glance, Song’s work seems especially timely in our Canadian context as cultural arguments and tensions saturate discussions on same-sex marriage and “reasonable accommodation” proposals in Quebec in recent times. However, her conceptualization of multicultural conflicts in her “rights-respecting accommodation” approach falls short and remains reflective of the American, rather than the wider international, context. Song’s understanding of multicultural tensions is framed around existing or potential conflicts *within* cultural and religious traditions, such as polygamy and tribal membership. Hence, she recognizes the extent and form of state accommodation as the fundamental source of controversies arising from multiculturalism. Yet contemporary multicultural realities are rarely unidirectional. Alongside cultural conflicts that may require state involvement, cultural and religious communities often also actively participate in political and legal decision-making. The latter phenomenon is evident in the rapid and large-scale mobilization of many ethnic minorities alongside religious communities against the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada in the late-1990s and the early 2000s.

In addition, closer investigation of a variety of cultural conflicts reveals that cultural and religious groups frequently align and realign among themselves depending on their different stances on specific policy decisions at various times. Consequently, Song’s conceptualization of the state as the body of power which accommodates, complicates, and resolves conflicts *about* cultural and religious minorities may be oversimplified,

since the demarcations of “majority” and “minority” in multicultural realities are rarely constant, marked, and universal. Nonetheless, Song’s work is a welcome intervention in contemporary conversations on diaspora, indigeneity, and multiculturalism that frequently exoticize or vilify non-white and non-Christian cultural and religious communities, all the while leaving the dominant norms uninvestigated.

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WOMEN’S HEALTH IN CANADA: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THEORY AND POLICY

Marina Morrow, Olena Hankivsky, and Colleen Varcoe, Eds.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007

REVIEWED BY DEBORAH MCPHAIL

Women’s Health in Canada comes at a time when the use of the word “women” in “women’s health” is suspect, and (some) feminism has been critiqued for employing a monolithic understanding of women’s experiences. Despite its title, *Women’s Health in Canada* does not gloss over differences among women. Rather, the book provides a collection of articles that highlight women’s diverse health issues related to health policy, healthcare access, and women’s own experiences of and in their bodies.

Divided by the editors into four subject areas, named “Locating Our-

selves,” “Theory and Methods,” “The Social Determinants of Health,” and “Key Issues in Women’s Health,” the articles in this anthology make three major theoretical contributions to the women’s health field. First, authors show the continuing viability of the category “women” to health issues and health policy. While maintaining an intersecting analysis, authors show that health is a gendered experience. Such authors as Sue Wilkinson, who writes about breast cancer, and Olena Hankivsky and Colleen Varcoe, who discuss violence against women, demonstrate that some health issues remain particular to women. In the same vein, authors argue that women, both categorically and individually, continue to experience gender discrimination in the healthcare system, often with disastrous effects. Lynne E. Young, for example, maintains that cardiovascular disease (CVD) is articulated by medical researchers and practitioners as a male disease because of the imagined “economic implications of the effects of atherosclerosis on working men.” As a result, and in spite of evidence indicating that “males and females have equal rates of CVD,” women are the victims of under- and mis-diagnosis.

Though the articles in *Women’s Health in Canada* demonstrate the continuing relevance of “women” in feminist health research, the authors also recognise that “women” is a social construction that is often reproduced by health rhetoric. This is the second major theoretical contribution of the anthology. Writing about the gendered politics of homecare in “Relocating Care,” Pat Armstrong shows how government policies create and re-create patriarchal solipsisms between femininity and domestic work. In relying upon the unpaid and under-paid reproductive work of women, government health policies re-position women as biologically nurturing, and women’s femininity is re-defined by the domestic work that governments expect and fall back on when making neo-liberal cuts to healthcare funds.

For some authors, this constructionist approach to “women” spills out into their discussions of health and illness, as writers argue that states of health and illness, themselves, are constructed categories. It is on this point, the third major theoretical contribution made by the collection to the women’s health field, that the authors are in tension. Lisa Diedrich is a particularly notable example of an author who argues that illness and health are socially constructed categories. In “Cultures of Dis/Ability,” Diedrich maintains that “we cannot understand disability as a state of being.” Challenging the bio-medical categorisation of disability as a static illness, and indeed as an illness at all, Diedrich argues that both the meanings and embodied experiences of disability differ according to time and place. She points to the notion that illnesses are malleable, produced in and by historically-contingent categories of gender, race and class. For Diedrich, biomedical definitions of health and illness are ubiquitously questionable.

Diedrich’s essay contrasts with other authors’ articles, in which health and illness are regarded as extra-discursive states that, while moulded by social factors, are biologically static in essence. Hankivsky and Friesen, for example, use obesity to point out flaws in cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA), an analytic popular in current health policy and research. Because they fail to take in all “environmental, economic and social forces” which cause obesity, the true costs of obesity are under-estimated by CEA studies. While Hankivsky and Friesen put obesity and its ostensive spread into a social context, the usual bio-medical definitions of obesity, in which obesity is always and forever a pathology, remain intact. Whether or to what degree obesity may be a discursive problem, one which, in its construction, not only interacts with but also *produces* gender, race, class, patriarchy, racism, and capitalism, are questions left unexplored by the authors.