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Emilian Kavalski
Loughborough University

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The Liberal Archipelago: A Theory of Diversity and Freedom by Chandran Kukathas. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 292pp.

The term “groundbreaking” is probably an understatement when referring to Chandran Kukathas’ powerful liberal challenge to contemporary liberal theory. In the space of less than 300 pages he offers probably the most perspicacious analysis of liberal political philosophy since John Rawls and Will Kymlicka. The primary concern of investigation seems to be the possible ramification of a “good society” (256) in a world marked by moral diversity. This inquiry leads the author to assert that although liberalism underwrites an assumption about human freedom it is not a theory of “how the many can be made one, but of how the many can coexist” (39). The volume therefore criticizes mainstream approaches to human rights and social justice owing to their emphasis on consensus politics and the protection of cultural idiosyncrasies. In this way Kukathas insists that liberal theorists have altered the meaning of toleration by equating it with the values of autonomy. Instead, he argues that the liberal regime of toleration first, recognizes that people think and see the world differently; second, respects individual “liberty of conscience” (113); and, third, protects peoples’ freedom of association as their conscience dictates. Thus, Kukathas’ thesis opens the field in a way that no political theorist to date would have dared to imagine. In this respect, The Liberal Archipelago is destined to guide (but not constrain) the explorations of political philosophers in the foreseeable future.

Kukathas acknowledges that his political philosophy of order—just like any other—is shaped by the circumstances and the times of its author. Consequently, his query into the conditions under which diverse human beings could coexist reflects his own biography of displacement and the current postmodern tendencies in international life. At the same time, such investigation endeavors to rescue political liberalism from the straightjacket imposed on it by Rawls and Kymlicka. Kukathas accuses Rawls that, in his attempt to suggest a liberal accommodation of diversity, he resorts to principles of social justice that will attract consensus instead of querying issues of legitimacy. Likewise, he faults Kymlicka for his advocacy of the group rights of particular cultural communities. As a result, Kukathas insists that contemporary liberal political philosophy denies individuals the freedom to associate unless they identify with distinct national communities. His criticism of mainstream liberalism, therefore, rests on its failure to imagine non-national forms of association.

In this respect, Kukathas takes issue primarily with Kymlicka’s theory of multicultural citizenship. First, he challenges its emphasis on the value of freedom of choice, instead emphasizing the importance of freedom of conscience. Second, Kukathas questions the legitimacy of the nation-state and sees it only as a transitory settlement for contending desires of human association. Third, he contests Kymlicka’s argument that the liberal state should promote the integration of groups into mainstream society. Finally, The Liberal Archipelago presents a particular vision of political liberal order, which questions Kymlicka’s comprehensive moral doctrine.

As a result of such reasoning, Kukathas proffers the metaphor of the “liberal archipelago” as the best depiction of the condition of liberal society. One of its implications is that “neither the local community nor the national community are held up as especially significant objects of value, or as worthy of preservation for their own sake” (38). The conjecture is that political communities are only one kind of possible human association, and as such they are largely accidental products

of either convention or geography and not of intentional commitment. Kukathas calls them a “conventional settlement which we should respect only to the extent that ‘innovation’ threatens to produce something worse” (210).

Thereby, The Liberal Archipelago advances a powerful liberal rejection of the idea of nationalism on the grounds that its legitimacy is counterintuitive to the liberty of conscience. Kukathas’ contention is that nationalism’s “pursuit of unity will always produce dissent, and this in turn will only encourage the suppression of those whose thinking does not fit the norm” (270). He interprets Kymlicka’s conceptualization of multicultural citizenship as part of the project of submission of difference and the constriction the liberty of conscience.

It is expected that some would object to the liberal approach advanced by Kukathas. But even detractors would have to admire the coherence and consistency with which it has been followed. His recovery of the meaning of liberal terminology tallies well with current critical approaches to the ideas of rights and justice. At the same time, Kukathas demonstrates that it is possible to adopt a postmodern stance for confronting the reality of social and political interactions without resorting to discourses of discontinuity and deconstruction.

Undoubtedly, his reasoning is not flawless, but the virtue of The Liberal Archipelago is that it does not seek to give definitive answers and impose perspectives. Instead it informs, provokes and challenges its readers to consider alternative ways for conceptualizing social identities and human associations. An additional merit is that Kukathas has written his book at a level that is going to satisfy the inquisitiveness of both his peers and students, which ensures—and inspires—additional enquiries into its issues.

*Emilian Kavalski, Loughborough University, UK
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