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de Waal, T.; Duyvendak, J.W.

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de Waal and Duyvendak
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The majority oppressed? On asymmetrical multiculturalism and majority rights

Tamar de Waal[1*] and Jan Willem Duyvendak[2]

*Correspondence:
t.m.dewaal@uva.nl

[1] Amsterdam Law School, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[2] Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam (UvA), Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

There has been an increase of academic publications that argue in favor of 'majority rights,' 'majority precedence,' or 'white identity,' claiming that the (cultural) interests of majorities in liberal-democratic countries have been ignored due to 'asymmetrical multiculturalism.' This article critically examines this academic trend. In particular, we question the claim that liberal-democratic and multicultural theories to date have ignored the importance of the majority (culture). We observe that liberal-democratic and multicultural theory in fact strongly promote and privilege the majority culture, although in ways that do not violate core individual rights and accommodate minorities. In addition, we explore several more empirical issues regarding the claim that the interests of majorities are under threat in liberal-democratic countries today. Among other things, we observe that pro-majority theories tend to work with specific understandings of who embodies the majority. These theories rest on the idea that immigrants and their descendants (may) 'dilute' majorities, as they are (culturally) 'not native.' As a result, majority rights theorists 'freeze' the majority culture claimed to be worth protecting in ways that it, first, neglects ongoing processes of integration and, second, disregards possibilities for social and political change and emancipation, particularly if triggered by immigrant groups. Finally, we wonder why majority rights theories currently seem to resonate. We discuss the possibility that certain pro-diversity voices, such as those who claim that Europe has become superdiverse or who defend multiculturalism, might have (unintentionally) enabled alarmist defenses of majority rights.

Keywords: Majority rights, Minority rights, Multiculturalism, White identity, Superdiversity, Majoritarianism, Equal citizenship

Introduction

Over the last quarter of a century, political parties and movements around the globe that warn for the dangerous 'dilution' of current majorities and their cultural identities have been remarkably successful. Examples are the supporters of Brexit in the UK, Jaïr Bolsonaro in Brazil, Donald Trump in the US, the Swiss People's Party in Switzerland, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, and strong majoritarian forces in Hungary, Poland, Russia, Turkey, and India. Within this global political tendency, the main endangerment of the majority culture is claimed to be a coalition of 'mainstream' media, academics, politicians, activists standing up for

diversity, and legal and political arrangements, such as strong minority protection and the rights of migrants, including refugees.

The proposals put forward by these voices, most often (but not solely) belonging to the radical right of the political spectrum, touch upon a wide range of topics: banning the construction of (visible) mosques, opposing gender-neutral toilets, fully closing the border for (Muslim) migrants and refugees, combating 'the war on Christmas,' and dismantling the European Union and international law, and more. Nonetheless, the base of virtually all their proposals can be traced back to one underlying point: the preferences, anxieties, and demands of the cultural majority should not be up for discussion (anymore). Indeed, defending the cultural identity of the majority appears to be a contagious political frame; increasingly, almost all possible political topics have been put forward as unjustifiably threatening majority cultures.

In addition, a growing number of academic publications argue in favor of increased protection of (white) majority identities or (cultural) 'majority rights,' echoing these political discourses. These publications claim that the interests of majorities have been ignored, not only in practice but also in academic liberal-democratic scholarship. Naturally, not all these academic analyses—which we label here as 'majority rights theories'—are exactly the same or argue in favor of the same solutions. Yet our key aim is to respond to the underlying claim that these academic voices share, which is that over the last decades, academic scholarship has been one-sidedly concerned with the positions, needs, and rights of minorities—with the result that our normative and political thinking has swung too far in one direction (e.g., Koopmans & Orgad, 2020; Kaufmann, 2018; Koopmans, 2018; Bouchard, 2010; Koopmans and Orgad, forthcoming). In these publications, it is therefore argued that a new balance should be found, and more academic attention should be given to the interests and sensitivities of majorities, for example, in relation to concerns about the erosion of their culture and identity.

Given that these publications to date concentrate on Western countries, this literature—and our response to it in this article—focuses predominately on the concerns of current white majorities. However, the presented underlying normative analyses in principle can also apply to non-white majorities and to other countries. In any case, these publications suggest that the present, characterized by the global rise of the radical right and populism, requires new normative thinking that takes the concerns of 'native' populations seriously. Majority rights theories therefore present themselves as cutting-edge and reasonable forms of political liberalism. Or more precisely: they claim to supplement and enhance our current liberal justice theories and promise to better appease the revolting majorities around the world that want to protect their cultural ways of life and increasingly vote for (illiberal) radical-right populist parties that promise to do exactly that.

This article critically examines this academic trend and the core arguments that underlie it. Based on our research, we question the claim by majority rights theorists that liberal-democratic and multicultural theories to date have ignored the importance of the majority (culture). Instead, we show that liberal-democratic and multicultural theories strongly promote and privilege the majority culture, although in ways that do not violate core individual rights and are, as much as possible, minority accommodating. On that account, our main contribution to the growing debate on the alleged necessity

of extending majority rights engages with the normative-theoretical side of this debate. Indeed, the first half of this article aims to show that the normative reasoning that multiculturalism lacks symmetry is incorrect.

In the second half of the article, we discuss several more empirical issues regarding the claim that the interests of majorities are under threat in liberal-democratic countries today. Among other things, we observe that pro-majority theories work with a specific understanding of who embodies the majority. These theories rest on the idea that immigrants and their descendants (may) 'dilute' majorities, as they are (culturally) 'not native.' As a result, majority rights theorists 'freeze' the majority culture claimed to be worth protecting in ways that it, first, neglects ongoing processes of integration and, second, disregards possibilities for social and political change and emancipation, particularly if triggered by immigrant groups. Finally, we wonder why majority rights theories currently seem to resonate. In this context, we explore the possibility that certain pro-diversity voices, such as those who claim that Europe has become superdiverse or who defend multiculturalism, might (unintentionally) have enabled defenses of majority rights.

Our key ambition is to show that recently emerging theories of majority rights have not convincingly shown that more extensive majority rights are a necessary correction for current liberal theories of justice. Attention to *minority* rights in the last decades of the previous century was needed to enhance liberal justice theories to uphold equal citizenship in diverse societies. However, the present day calls for more attention to *majority* rights would modify liberal justice theories in ways that would jeopardize liberal-democratic values.

Assessing majority rights: setting the stage

Given the wide range of political issues and subjects that recent majority thinkers are concerned about—national identity, immigration, secularism, gender discussions, diversity, the Dutch figure of Black Pete, and more—and to avoid erroneously conflating normative issues that should be discussed separately, it is important to demarcate the scope of our argument here. In this article, we mainly focus on the concept of 'asymmetrical multiculturalism' that majority rights theorists often use as the theoretical stepping stone for defending that majority rights are required. A prime example of this type of thinking is the work of Ruud Koopmans and Liav Orgad on this asymmetry (2021). They, on the one hand, explicitly expound on and praise Will Kymlicka's work on multiculturalism (Orgad and Koopmans 2021: 14). However, on the other hand, they argue that Kymlicka overlooks that his arguments in favor of minority rights—that is, to protect individuals' societal culture and, with that, their autonomy—also apply to majority rights. For this reason, they reach the conclusion that 'the cultural demands of majority groups' have been ignored and that 'the equilibrium between majority and minority rights needs to be adjusted' with theories of majority rights (21). Put differently, according to Koopmans and Orgad, the solution for the (alleged) asymmetry of multiculturalism is that 'moral justifications for cultural minority rights should also apply to majority groups' (3).

Koopmans and Liav get the term asymmetrical multiculturalism from Eric Kaufmann, who coined it in his book *White Identity: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities* (2018). He uses it to describe a form of liberal politics that disregards

protecting the majority identity while carefully protecting the identities of minorities (see, e.g. Kaufmann, 2018: 516–521). Within asymmetrical multiculturalism, he is especially concerned about, he writes, *white* majorities who are required to identify with cosmopolitan identities—and asked to transcend and even reject (being proud of) their ethnic identity—while minorities are urged to embrace and honor their heritage, including their ethnicity. Accordingly, he writes: 'At present, what happens is that minorities set out identity-based concerns which many whites reject as divisive because they have been forced by left-modernism to repress their own ethnicity' (Kaufmann, 2018: 519). For this reason, he advocates what he calls 'multivocalism,' a political system in which white majorities can (also) express their ethnically distinct versions of the common national identity.

More implicitly, concerns related to asymmetrical multiculturalism that would hamper the ability of majorities to protect their identities and cultures can also be found in the writings of other academic commentators. For instance, Marc Elchardus argues in his recent book *Reset* (2021) (in Dutch) that, on the one hand, liberalism and, on the other hand, communities and identities are opposites because human rights undermine democratic self-determination. On that account, he rejects the work of Kymlicka as 'cosmoquatsch' (cosmopolitan rubbish). Furthermore, although evidently much less radical than Elchardus, the contribution of Gérard Bouchard to the multiculturalism–interculturalism debate is also a good example of the type of academic majoritarian thinking we discuss—in his case in the context of Canada and Quebec. He writes: 'While seeking an equitable interaction between continuity and diversity, interculturalism allows the recognition of certain elements of ad hoc (or contextual) precedence for majority culture' (Bouchard, 2010: 451). He stresses that he does not want to formally or legally enshrine forms of second-class citizenship. However, he does explain that interculturalism differs from multiculturalism in the sense that the majority culture, *because* it is the majority culture, has a principled precedence over minority cultures—which is indeed a viewpoint that multiculturalists would not endorse in this way. Lastly, there are publications on specific discussions and political events that echo this analysis. For example, David Miller wrote on the minaret ban in Switzerland that 'the equal treatment in principle can be triumphed by considerations of national identity' if majorities want this to be the case, as long as this identity 'remains open to democratic deliberation' (Miller, 2016: 437). Indeed, Miller concludes that, for example, 'precedence' can be given to 'a particular religion' (Miller, 2016: 454) in a political community for historical and majoritarian reasons.

Given that we primarily focus on the claim that liberal and multicultural theories suffer from structural asymmetry regarding how the (cultural) interests of minorities and majorities are weighed, we do not engage with all possible uses of majority rights. For instance, Liav Orgad wrote on the need for majority rights in the context of border control in his book *The Cultural Defense of Nations: A Liberal Theory of Majority Rights* (2015). He writes that asking immigrants to accept 'some structural liberal-democratic principles as a prerequisite for state admission' (see also Orgad, 2009: 719) can be seen as invoking 'majority rights.' However, this is a different argument than claiming that domestic liberal justice theories should be structurally expanded with more majority rights. In political philosophy, questions of border control are, in principle, separated

from questions of domestic justice (e.g., Fine & Ypi, 2016). Moreover, it must be noted that within the ethics of migration scholarship, it is not an uncommon argument that countries may selectively close their borders to secure, for example, the required degrees of liberal attitudes in society or forms of social cohesion (e.g., Miller, 1995: 24–29). 'Even' Kymlicka, with his focus on liberal minority rights, has argued that political communities cannot be expected to admit immigration in such (massive) ways that it would disrupt certain foundational structures of society (e.g., political, economic, social, and cultural) (Kymlicka, 2001: 166). For this reason, to use a label of 'majority rights' is perhaps new in this context, but the argument as such is not—and in any case, topics of border control are not part of our argument here.

We also do not build upon the valuable reflections of Allan Patten on majority rights, who tries to take the idea that majority rights exist 'as seriously as possible' (2020: 539). He concludes that there are 'three special cases' in which (additional) majority rights can be said to exist: situations of (historic) unequal recognition, problems of collective action, and matters of discretion. Patten concludes that 'these rights and permissions are grounded in very specific social circumstances and normative considerations and thus face very significant limits' (2020: 539). Although this work is astute and seems to be in line with our directions of thought, we will not engage further with it here. Instead of exploring under which circumstances majority rights may *temporarily* exist, our ambition is to respond to the claim that due to asymmetrical multiculturalism, our justice theories should be *structurally* supplemented with majority rights.

Lastly, we do not engage with the argument that forms of (cultural) majority rights might exist in the context of globalization—say, in response to the dominance of Hollywood over local cultural arts or the rise of English master's programs at European universities (e.g., Koopmans & Orgad, 2020: 9). We can, however, note that, prima facie and in general, it seems to us that if processes of globalization threaten the legitimate cultural interests of majorities, adopting policies that neutralize that threat may be defendable (e.g., subsidizing local cultural industries and arts). Yet, as our reflections below will show, multiculturalism does not ignore but in fact strongly emphasizes the importance of national majority cultures and their interests. Therefore, we doubt whether an additional vocabulary of 'majority rights' is required to address this issue of globalization—though the topic as such warrants careful academic debate. Under which conditions are local majorities, so to say, global minorities that may legitimately defend their culture and language?[1] However, in this article, we thus do not focus on such 'external' cultural threats to majorities, as observed by majority rights thinkers. Instead, we focus on their claims that there are 'internal' threats as well, particularly asymmetrical multiculturalism and the culture and languages of (immigrant) minorities. For now, we just want to signal here that supporting minority rights, as in multiculturalism, is compatible with supporting the cultural rights of majorities in the face of globalization.

We hence argue that majority rights are not forgotten by established liberal theorists and multiculturalists advocating minority rights. Again, this does not mean we argue that (cultural) majority rights do not exist *tout court.* Instead, we aim to show that the

[1] If the forthcoming collected volume of Orgad and Koopmans (2022) on nationhood and minority and majority rights includes discussions on this issue, we would welcome them.

identities and interests of the majority are well secured in current liberal-democratic theory, although a lexicon of 'majority rights' is not used. Indeed, upholding majority culture is a central part of liberal and multicultural theory (along with the cultures of minorities). Our analysis therefore concurs with what Avigail Eisenberg writes about the increase in majority rights theories (2020). She concludes that these theories are 'unlikely to offer a helpful response to so-called anxieties of majority groups,' that 'majority interests are already protected in societies dedicated to protecting minority rights,' and that majority rights theories contribute to 'encouraging the chauvinism of majority culture' (Eisenberg: 326). We fully agree and build upon her argumentation, although our approach is different: while Eisenberg convincingly illustrates that majority rights theories 'carry risks' to transform into a license to restrict minority rights based on real-world political developments in Quebec and Switzerland, we aim to show that this is not merely a *risk* but an inherent *logical outcome* of majority rights theories, if these are based on ideas of 'asymmetrical multiculturalism' entailing that currently only minority identities and cultures receive normative and political attention and concern.

Minority rights versus. majority culture

To understand why the idea of asymmetrical multiculturalism is incorrect, we must first discuss what multiculturalism is within the academic scholarship on liberal justice. Only then can it be understood what is wrong with normatively mirroring it with majority rights, as majority rights thinkers propose.

First, we want to briefly mention that individual constitutional core rights should not be seen as minority rights, as discussed in academic scholarship on liberal multiculturalism. For example, wearing religious clothing in public or having access to houses of faith (freedom of religion) or gay marriage (equal treatment) are not protected because this would accommodate cultural diversity or support just minority–majority relations (Duyvendak et al. 2013).[2] Instead, these rights are individual core rights that all citizens possess equally. Of course, core rights limit the power of (potentially tyrannical) majorities. However, they also limit, for instance, how minorities treat members internally and how minorities treat other minorities. This is the case because they limit the power of all citizens toward each other—in addition to, perhaps most importantly, that they limit the power of the state toward its citizens. On that account, discussing individual core rights as if they primarily disadvantage the cultural majority (Elchardus, 2021; but also to a degree, e.g., Koopmans and Orgad: 7–8; Miller, 2016) is only one step away from the illiberal claim that core rights, in certain instances, may yield to appease cultural majorities. For this reason, our first observation is that for (liberal) justice theories to be

[2] One example of this: Koopmans et al. (2012, p. 1210) consider the right to wear headscarves as a 'cultural and religious right that applies to the immigrant because of his or her belonging to a particular ethnic or religious group'. They seem to assume that exemptions from dress codes have to be considered as special cultural group rights beyond individual rights. By doing so, the authors give a very specific interpretation of religious rights and the state–church relations in the Netherlands. We do not have space here to summarize the history of state–church relations in the Netherlands and the nature of 'religious rights', but since 1798, the Dutch Constitution contains equality provisions for religious expression, and in 1815, it stated that any person in the Dutch territory is entitled to public religious practice. This has again been explicated in 1983 with the declaration of Article 6.5. Any person in the Netherlands can rely on his right of freedom of religion to invoke his rights for exemptions from dress codes in accordance with his religious beliefs. This is an individual right that is conserved and protected ever since the eighteenth century. The fact that a Muslim woman has the right to wear a headscarf is her individual right founded on religious rights that are valid for all Dutch citizens. Exemptions from dress codes are not 'special rights' implemented for minorities to maintain their distinctive identities. At least in the Netherlands, there have never been policies developed that grant 'special group rights' for dress codes.

convincing—including majority rights theories—if it comes to the protection of these individual core rights, the most relevant question is not how majorities 'culturally' tend to look upon them. Rather, core rights and equal constitutional protection should simply not be up for discussion.

If we then turn to academic debates on liberalism and minority rights—so rights that indeed apply to certain *groups* according to multiculturalists—we see that these debates pertain to how liberal democracies with diverse citizenries should undertake nation-building practices, inculcate citizenship, and promote collective belonging. Naturally, as we observed in relation to majority rights theorists, not all minority rights theorists argue entirely the same, even though we lump them together here (e.g., Kymlicka, 1995; Modood, 2007). On a fundamental level, however, multiculturalists who advocate for the protection of minorities and minority rights agree that the norms, attitudes, and skills of democratic citizenship are not innate but must be learned, socialized, and practiced. For this reason, liberal democracies have legitimate interests in engaging in practices of 'nation-building' (Kymlicka) and all types of strategies to uphold inclusive equal citizenship (Modood) and to consolidate common national language(s), national (historical) narratives, national symbols, national education curricula, national media, common institutions, and so on. The idea is then that if citizens are living together in an 'ethical community' (e.g. Miller, 1995: 23)—or a similar term—resulting from these processes of nation-building and citizenship, they are more likely to fulfil their obligations of justice toward each other. They will be better able to participate as equals in democratic deliberations and societal life in a shared historical and intergenerational political community (Kymlicka, 2002: 265).

However, multiculturalists reject that within these practices of nation-building and citizenship, the promoted nationhood and citizenship ideal should solely exist of (or unreasonably privilege) the identity, language, and culture of the majority. Instead, it should be communicated that the state does not merely belong to the dominant group but to all citizens equally, and that all citizens should have equal access to state institutions and to political and social life. What this exactly entails in terms of minority rights and minority accommodation varies greatly between countries because the histories (of injustice), presence, and cultural characteristics of minorities (and majorities) differ. For example, some countries must accommodate sizable groups that are concentrated on a (more or less) historic territory, have retained their language, and have historically governed themselves. In such cases—say, the First Nations in Canada and national groups, such as the Flemish in Belgium—this can require replacing unilingual states with multilingual states or forms of (quasi-)federal territorial autonomy.

It must be noted that the recent majority rights theories that we focus on pay surprisingly little attention to the potential limits or risks of protection for these types of minorities (e.g., indigenous people and national groups), considering that the forms of cultural, linguistic and political rights, and protection granted to them by multiculturalists can be extensive and strong. Instead, majority rights theorists focus exclusively on minority protection for *immigrant* groups. Yet, given that immigrants inherently have no historic territory in their new country and no history of self-government and are often small and dispersed, multiculturalists conclude that upholding equal citizenship in relation to them should mostly involve fighting stigmas, racism, discrimination, and other

barriers that prevent them from being fully accepted and participating as equal citizens (Modood & De Waal, 2021). Indeed, under multiculturalism, immigrants are asked to learn the national language and 'integrate' into the broader society in a liberal fashion. The minority rights that immigrant citizens have, according to multiculturalism, hence concern forms of broader inclusive accommodation as equal citizens.

As such, within multiculturalism, minority accommodation regarding immigrant groups requires long-term and systematic attempts to examine all public institutions and policies to see if they contain (hidden) biases that disadvantage members of immigrant groups and their descendants. Relevant public institutions are, for instance, the courts, schools, universities, media, hospitals, and more (Kymlicka 2003: 152). Moreover, multiculturalists stress that all citizens should be acknowledged in the state-promoted national identity, meaning that their histories should be included in 'the national story,' which is, for example, part of school curricula. As such, it involves a constant remaking of national citizenship and keeping the national identity 'open' so that all citizens can see themselves in the national identity and achieve a sense of collective belonging (Modood, 2014).

Questionable claims

This brief overview of the tenets of multiculturalism, we believe, makes it intelligible that several (interconnected) foundational claims of majority rights theories are questionable. The most important ones are:

1. Multiculturalism (in the scholarship on liberal justice) has forgotten the needs of majorities to maintain and protect their culture;
2. Multiculturalism (naively) assumes that majorities can take care of themselves for empirical (numerical) reasons;
3. Since minority rights exist, majority rights must as well.

The first claim we want to discuss is that theories of justice, especially those focusing on diversity and multiculturalism, only pay attention to the rights of minorities (or even 'over-cater' them), while they neglect the interests of cultural majorities. For example, when Koopmans and Orgad refer to Kaufmann's asymmetrical multiculturalism argument, they suggest that, according to multiculturalists, majority cultures 'should be neutral, or be universal, while minority cultures are allowed to preserve their religious particularity' and that this 'creates asymmetric political and normative realities' (Orgad and Koopmans, 2020: 18; see also Kaufmann, 2019: 516–521). The culture of the majority would therefore be vulnerable, stuck, and powerless between 'universalism' and 'minority rights' (see also Koopmans, 2018).

However, multiculturalists observe that no state can be culturally neutral—that is, in fact, theirs starting point—and their theories are rooted in the acknowledgement that liberal states are no exception; they also advocate promoting national identities, historical narratives, and official languages. Yet, multiculturalists are concerned that nation-building projects do not sufficiently accommodate (different types of) minorities and protect equal citizenship (see the previous paragraph). For this reason, claiming that theorists who advocate for minority rights ask the majority to remain culturally neutral

and universal while protecting the cultures of minorities is making a strawman of multiculturalism. Indeed, remarks such as that 'it is perfectly legitimate' (e.g., Bouchard, 2010: 438) for majorities to have an interest in perpetuating and maintaining their culture are, in principle, not at odds with multiculturalism at all. For multiculturalists, the normative crux of the matter is that given that the nation-building practices by the state—which, in principle, are legitimate to uphold an 'ethical community' needed for a functional liberal democracy—cannot be culturally neutral, they should be as fair as possible in terms of accommodating just majority–minority relations and cultural differences.

It is true that within these practices of nation-building, majorities should be vigilant not to overpower minorities, given their numerical and factual position of advantage (also see the next paragraph). However, the need to protect majority cultures is *not* only an empirical matter for multiculturalists but also, and even mainly, a normative one.

This brings us to the second questionable claim of majority rights theories that multiculturalism allegedly assumes that the majority, for numerical reasons, 'can take care of itself' (e.g., Orgad and Koopmans 2020). This is not correct because within multiculturalism, the culture of the majority—its language(s), cultural reference points, symbols, history, etc.—is *constantly* actively educated and promoted by the state within its nation-building practices (for example, in schools, on national TV, and during memorial days), given that it is the dominant culture. It is therefore a misunderstanding that within multiculturalism only minority cultures are protected and promoted. Moreover, as we explained, in the context of post-migration minority protection—where majority rights proponents are most strongly worried about—the majority particularly has a strong position of cultural hegemony. According to multiculturalists, in response to immigration, states should remain unitary; no forms of territorial or other forms of political power sharing between dominant groups and immigrant groups are required. There is also no need to adjust the official languages. Of course, multiculturalism, given its liberal principles, does emphasize that immigrants should not be required to assimilate fully into the cultural majority to be regarded as equal citizens and to avoid stigmatization. As others citizens, they can retain, within the boundaries of liberal democracies, their own cultural characteristics and outlooks. However, again, according to multiculturalists, the idea is that immigrants learn a national language, participate in mainstream public institutions, and 'integrate' into broader society.

This leads us to the third questionable claim of majority theories we want to highlight—that is, the argument that 'because minority rights exist, majority rights must as well,' as otherwise, multiculturalism is asymmetrical. Apropos, to be able to claim this, one would expect majority rights theorists to support minority rights, but this support is in fact ambivalent. For example, some have argued in earlier publications that multiculturalism should be rejected as it would be infeasible (e.g., Koopmans, 2010) or mention that protecting the majority culture requires at least 'fewer minority rights' (Koopmans & Orgad, 2020: 19). However, in their arguments advocating 'symmetrical multiculturalism' the normative justification of minority rights is accepted. It is in fact used as the theoretical steppingstone to prove that majority rights should exist: if minorities have a right to their culture, surely majorities have this, too. What majority rights theorists overlook is, again, that within multiculturalism the majority culture is constantly inculcated, promoted, and upheld by the state. Moreover, they do not acknowledge that

minority rights are public arrangements that are installed as safeguards to (somewhat) counterbalance the position of cultural, linguistic and political hegemony of the majority, in particular in relation to the national identity and equal citizenship. Considering this, it is unconvincing to state that majority rights exist, *because* minority rights exist. The same logical problem underlies the line of argument that 'Straight Prides' should be organized *because* 'Gay Prides' exist. The mobilizations of Gay Prides around the globe are a counteraction; they have been a response to the permanent hegemony of heterosexuality (in practically all layers of politics, law, and society). For this reason, it is logically implausible to argue that Straight Prides must be organized simply *because* Gay Prides exist.

Within multiculturalism, especially in the work of Kymlicka (1995) as discussed by Koopmans and Orgad, minority rights are also *reactive*. They exist and are legitimate in response to the fact that virtually all state practices promote majority culture. For this reason, the conclusion (especially if it is based on Kymlicka's work) that multiculturalism is asymmetrical and the claim 'since minority rights exist, majority rights must exist as well' are puzzling and, more importantly, bound to lead to illiberal outcomes. These claims justify taking measures against policies that enable equal citizenship and equal access of minorities to society and its common institutions. In other terms, majority rights theories paradoxically argue that there are legitimate reasons to *increase* the power imbalance between majorities and minorities by installing majority rights, in response to minority rights that are legitimate because they *decrease* illiberal domination of majorities over minorities.

Empirical concerns

We hope, so far, to have demonstrated that the cultural rights and interests of majorities are not forgotten but in fact strongly protected in present-day liberal-democratic and multicultural theory and that there is no inherent normative-theoretical asymmetry in multiculturalism. In addition to this conceptual argument, we also want to explore several empirical issues revolving in the claim that within liberal-democratic and multicultural countries, majorities currently would be under threat and unable to culturally maintain or even defend themselves. To be sure, we do not present full empirical theories on diversity and integration here.[3] Our focus is to show that those who warn that majorities might currently be replaced or 'diluted' seem to overlook relevant empirical mechanisms in the context of immigrant integration.

To begin with, Eisenberg (2020) illustrates well that accommodating diversity in a multicultural fashion, in practice, often still strengthens the dominance of the majoritarian group. For example, she shows that assessments of what 'reasonable accommodation' of minorities vis-à-vis the majority entails often has built-in biases toward the majority. In short, the standard of 'reasonableness'—an assessment of the costs and benefits of certain accommodations for the status quo—is strongly governed by existing power

[3] More theoretically seen, an enormous influx of migrants might influence cultural dynamics in such ways that this might trigger questions of immigration. Yet, as we mentioned in our reflections on Orgad's work on border control and majority rights above, minority rights thinkers acknowledge that in certain (extreme) circumstances, this might be the case. We explain here that we are not convinced by majority rights thinkers that Western countries are currently confronted with such circumstances.

relations in a historically grown context (Eisenberg, 2020: 317–318). Moreover, the majority has what Tariq Modood calls a 'sociological privilege,' which involves that they have all sorts of cultural capital and cultural power to reproduce the majority culture (e.g., in art, media, school, politics, and public life), more easily than minorities ever can (Modood, 2014: 309).

Furthermore, Alba and Duyvendak (2019) have demonstrated that the vast majority of immigrants eventually 'integrate' into the country of arrival—not the other way around such that they would fundamentally change the receiving society—broadly in the way multiculturalists envision. However, this process may take time and is rarely linear. To be sure, this point does not imply that it is necessarily undesirable that newcomers or citizens with immigrant backgrounds question existing hegemonic norms, values, and practices—culturally or otherwise—and should (fully) assimilate into the majority. Instead, the point is that in the context of immigrant integration, the majority culture—in terms of language, values, and cultural reference points—empirically appears very powerful.

That said, majority rights theorists tend to mention immigration numbers to support their claims, for instance, highlighting that in certain cities, no group holds the majority status (anymore) in numbers (see also below, where we discuss Orgad and Koopmans in more detail). In this image, immigrant groups and 'natives' are seen as statically and 'horizontally' living side by side, and the observation is that the demographic percentage of 'natives' declines. However, Alba and Duyvendak (2019) argue that for a fuller understanding of the integration processes of immigrant minorities in multicultural societies, we have to take into account the 'vertical' dimension of social power. This vertical dimension overlaps with state-backed nation-building and citizenship processes, as discussed earlier in this article, and is also reinforced in many other powerful institutions (including local schools, hospitals, and civil society). Its power becomes visible in cultural adjustments, such as fluently learning national languages or identifying with national reference points, made by members of immigrant-origin minorities, particularly those who aspire to social mobility. Importantly, this power axis is not strictly dependent on the demographic distribution of ethnic groups, given that the cultures of 'natives' remain very powerful, even when they are a numerical minority. For this reason, we think that mentioning demographic percentages does not empirically show *as such* that additional majority rights are required; instead, majority rights theorists should present academic evidence that, for instance, fluency of national languages, support for liberal-democratic values, or attitudes of belonging and identification, are dangerously declining in current liberal-democratic countries.

However, given the focus of majority rights theorists on migration statistics and demographic percentages, we think an explanation for their alarmist empirical analyses entailing that cultural majorities are problematically disappearing is that they (mistakenly) concentrate on maintaining *current* majorities in Western countries in the face of immigration. However, as long as arriving immigrants and the 'already residing' citizens constantly adapt and integrate together in a constantly emerging liberal-democratic society—which is the normative ideal of multiculturalists in relation to diversity caused by migration—there is no need to install special majority rights for static and currently existing majority. If this does happen, this static majority, and who belongs to it, is essentialized or potentially even racialized.

Kaufmann is the most outspoken representative of this idea (see our overview of his 'multivocalism' above)—and parts of his work indeed come close to 'replacement theories' of the radical right (e.g., Ford, 2020; Holmwood, 2020). Instead of acknowledging processes of adapting and integration among migrants and the rise of mingling and intermarriage (e.g. Alba & Reitz, 2021), he explicitly aims to keep the majority 'white.' In his book *White Shift: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities* (2018), he argues that majorities in the West have the right to claim their culture in terms of protection of *white* culture against 'dilution.' Kaufmann justifies this need to protect white culture on the basis that any attempt to create a shared culture that transcends ethnicity has failed. Apart from this questionable claim, his work suffers from the logical fallacy expounded above. Instead of trying to understand why black and other non-white citizens have to mobilize and struggle for equality based on their ethnic identity (*in reaction* to the oppression they experience due to their ethnicity and in response to the hegemony of whiteness), his solution is that white citizens should also mobilize based on their—white—identity, as if that identity is not hegemonic (and as if they are systematically discriminated against for being white). He mistakenly takes affirmative action policies—meant to improve the situation of non-whites—as proof that whites are discriminated against in exactly the same way as other groups: 'The history of white oppression is real' (2018: 518).

If we then turn to Orgad and Koopmans, we see that although they explicitly do not focus on keeping the majority white, they do emphasize the need for majority rights because the percentage of 'people with migrant background' (defined as being born abroad or having at least one parent born abroad) is 'between 20 and 25% of the population in several European States' (Orgad and Koopmans 2020: 8). Insofar as these groups do not 'adopt the political and cultural values that are the core of the majority self-understanding of society,' they write, 'the majority may end up feeling culturally 'strangers in their own land' (8–9). Thus, Orgad and Koopmans claim, on the one hand, that 'blood and place of birth are irrelevant' in determining who belongs to the majority because 'what counts is identification' (2020: 17). Yet on the other hand, in their argument, they introduce a distinction between those who are perceived as natives to the country and 'others.' Therefore, if we closely read their argument, the place of birth turns out to be relevant. Indeed, in their theory, only immigrants and their (first-generation) children are perceived as a potential threat to the majority culture if they do not adopt certain liberal-democratic 'political and cultural' values. They do not discuss the possibility that 'natives' might (also start to) reject these values and seem to simply assume that they can never be a potential threat to the 'majority culture' that is protection-worthy. Furthermore, based on the distinction they introduce, Orgad and Koopmans conclude that there should be a legal right for majorities 'from changes imposed against its will, that is, a right to avoid certain types of unwanted changes by *external* forces' because when it comes to cultural change, 'it *is for members of the majority to generally decide* the content of their cultural essentials, and the process/pace of the change' (2020: 19, emphasizes added).

There is ambiguity here because in a democracy, majorities can surely decide upon a lot of things, including national cultural practices. However, given the distinction that Orgad and Koopmans make, 'natives' seem conflated with 'the majority' that would

have a right to protection against 'external forces,' which then are naturalized citizens and their (first-generation) children. This suggests that these migrant citizens (and their descendants) are, in principle, seen as foreign to 'the nation' (Kešić and Duyvendak 2019). This has two consequences. First, this analysis jeopardizes equal citizenship. Why would 'foreign' citizens 'with a migrant background' not have an equal, but a more conditional, voice in political matters, including matters regarding certain cultural norms of the majority or the national identity (De Waal, 2021: 104–110)? Why do they form an 'external force?' This implies that immigrant citizens have less equal standing to comment on political issues, especially if it involves protesting against certain national traditions or parts of national identity. Moreover, at times, it appears that this unequal civic standing also applies to citizens who struggle for gender or sexual rights, given that Koopmans mentioned this as a threat to the majority culture as well (Duyvendak & De Waal, 2019).[4] In any event, from the perspective of equal citizenship and democracy, there is no reason to say that certain (migrant) citizens must wait to hear what an essentialized and static 'majority' thinks of the cultural changes they propose.

Second, Koopmans and Orgad have no conception or theory of how cultural changes come about in national identities, values, and (majority and minority) cultures—except that the majority culture may be threatened in its existence by 'external forces'. Yet, how does social and political change happen within their (allegedly) homogeneous majority? This reasoning implies, for example, that activists for gay rights and feminism in the past should first have consulted the 'majority,' when majorities in most European countries were still against equal political rights for women and 'gay marriage.' However, the attitudes of the majority are simply not frozen like this: political and social changes happen, and new majorities emerge, often gradually, but certainly at times in response to minority activism. However, in majority rights theories, it remains unclear under which conditions cultural changes should be seen as (positive) processes of emancipation and when they are threats to the majority culture. The majority culture seems to be 'fixed,' especially if minorities would comment on or propose changes of parts of the national identity and majority culture.

Pro-diversity theories and cultural fears

The last question that we want to raise is: Why do majority-right theories seem to resonate in this day and age? The book by Kaufmann, for example, received broad media coverage. There are many answers to this question, for instance, regarding current-day developments in politics and what type of academic work receives the most media attention. In this last section, we explore the possibility that certain academic pro-diversity voices may have (unintentionally) contributed to the rise of majoritarian thinking.

In the wake of both public and academic debates on the failure or even death of multiculturalism over the last three decades, analyses of 'superdiversity' have emerged (De Waal, 2018). These analyses provided, among other things, an influential discourse to discuss public policies, especially at the city level in Europe. However, parts of the critique of Alba and Duyvendak (2019) on majority rights theorists are also applicable to

[4] Koopmans mentioned 'gender neutral toilets' as a threat to the majority culture in a certain Western liberal state during the conference 'Majority and Minority Rights', 25–27 April 2019.

the claims of influential superdiversity scholars, such as Steven Vertovec (2007). His claim that cities in Western countries became superdiverse is mostly based on increased diversity as a result of migration. For example, while in European cities, immigrants first tended to be male in their 20 s and 30 s living together in certain neighborhoods, the identities and characteristics of citizens with immigrant backgrounds are much more diverse in contemporary Europe today. However, while Vertovec correctly observes that migrants have become more diverse in terms of education, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, and living area, he overlooks that these citizens in fact have become 'more similar' with citizens without migration backgrounds in these regards. They increasingly form families, become older, hold a wide range of political opinions, vary in sexuality and gender, are higher educated, live in all neighborhoods, and attain citizenship rights.

Although Vertovec has recently given more attention to the importance of the vertical dimension of social power (2021), in his earlier work on super-diversity, he also perceived groups predominately living horizontally together in very diverse settings. As a result, Vertovec and other superdiversity thinkers glossed over the increasing similarities among citizens with different backgrounds. In that sense, this type of superdiversity thinking and advocates of majority rights both seem to miss integrative processes in relation to post-immigration minority groups. However, taking these integration processes into account is crucial to understanding that the warnings of majority rights thinkers for the dilution of majorities seem—at least based on the empirical data they tend to mention—unwarranted (see the previous paragraph). Of course, the appreciation of minority cultures by those embracing superdiversity and majority rights proponents could not be more different: the first perceives them as an enrichment, while the latter as a threat. However, majority rights theorists might have based parts of their work on the image that minority and majority cultures are frozen, stable, and hardly overlapping or 'integrating.' They look at a picture instead of looking at a movie—at processes over time—in which most newcomers become part of hegemonic mainstream society.

For different reasons, it can also be argued that proponents of multiculturalism perhaps have not been sensitive enough to fears of cultural loss by contemporary majorities in liberal democracies. In short, multiculturalists have not explicitly warned that the required multicultural changes they sketch—say, to promote inclusive national identities or fight stigmas to secure equal citizenship for immigrant citizens—most likely will trigger forms of struggle and conflict. For example, Kymlicka writes that multicultural liberal-democratic societies should have a 'thin' national identity, meaning that they should be inclusive of citizens from different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds (Kymlicka, 2002: 265). This 'thinness' is relevant, for instance, within the selection of historical and cultural reference points that are promoted within processes of nation-building. Modood broadly concurs but writes that instead of framing it as 'thinning' the national identity, it is better to speak of 'pluralistic thickening' it. This entails constantly reshaping the national identity by incorporating the identities, in the broadest sense of the word, of all citizens into it so that all citizens can identify with it and with each other (Modood, 2018).

These multicultural suggestions sound benign—and they are—but they may, in practice, be much more uncomfortable for majorities in receiving societies than is (explicitly) acknowledged in this multicultural scholarship. For instance, 'native' majorities might

be confronted with critical public debates on aspects of their national identities and cultures that they have treasured for long periods of time. Moreover, most probably, they must experience that (at least some of) these aspects will change over time in response to these debates. To be sure, societies and their (cultural) attitudes and identities always change over time in response to democratic scrutiny and fractious political struggles, even if they have little migration. Therefore, in a sense, it is also important to emphasize that immigration brings nothing fundamentally new to democracy. However, citizens with immigrant backgrounds tend to stand up against specific forms of exclusion and injustice that they experience and find important, often related to colonial histories and racism.

In any case, our point is that some parts of multicultural theories may not fully acknowledge that upholding equal citizenship in the face of migration and making sure that national identity is not exclusionary is most likely not an easygoing and enjoyable process. Moreover, it does not involve simply *adding the* identities and histories of different groups to 'thicken' the national identity. Rather, post-migration diversity might trigger and create certain highly politicized debates that might be unwelcome for (previous) majorities, such as the Black Pete discussion in the Netherlands (e.g., Koopmans, 2018). Changing the skin color of this fictional national figure is not, and cannot be, the result of a mere sum of the perspectives of different groups in the Netherlands on him; it involves changing how this figure is promoted as a shared national symbol for all citizens (after many decades, in which his skin was black-faced). The same is true for the growing debate in the Netherlands on whether the 'Golden age' (1568–1648) should be re-labeled, given the transatlantic slave trade characterizing this period. If this debate continues, it is possible that the (previous) majority eventually has to 'give up' this term.

Modood wrote that multiculturalists (including him) have 'not addressed the issue of the majority enough' (Modood, 2014: 307). If he means with this remark that it is debatable whether multiculturalists have written carefully enough about, or anticipated on, potential feelings of cultural loss at the side of the majority, we agree with him. However, importantly, this does not imply—and Modood would, we think, concur with this—that liberal theories of multiculturalism require fundamental normative adjustment in the sense that more extensive majority rights should be added, as majority rights theorists suggest. Instead, multiculturalists would agree that, for example, in the aforementioned Dutch cases in relation to the figure of Pete or the Golden Age, it is incorrect to claim that these would pose threats to the majority culture. These examples are perfectly legitimate (potential) results of inclusive democratic struggle and debate. Indeed, accepting immigrants as equal citizens requires letting go of the idea that previous majorities would retain some sort of privilege to an exclusive right, or a weightier political voice, to decide upon cultural change—that is, not democratic equality. Instead, majorities and immigrant minorities should adapt together and constantly 'remake' the national identity, majority identity, and minority identities.

Conclusion

In this article, we critically discussed a tendency in academic publications that argues for more extensive majority rights in liberal justice theories. Most of these publications base their arguments, explicitly or implicitly, on ideas of asymmetrical multiculturalism,

entailing that the (cultural) interests and rights of majorities to date have been overlooked. We aimed to show that liberal-democratic and multicultural scholarship, in fact, strongly promotes and privileges the majority culture, especially in the context of post-migration diversity, although in ways that accommodate minorities, protect equal citizenship, and do not violate individual rights. In addition, we explored different empirical mechanisms that majority rights thinkers seem to overlook. Lastly, we discussed the possibility that proponents of superdiversity and multiculturalism might have (unintentionally) enabled alarmist defenses of majority rights.

To end with a bit of a punch, based on our analyses, we believe that majority rights theories should be careful not to provide unjustified legitimacy to the troublesome worldwide rise of nativism, in which cultural majorities consider themselves entitled to inherently deserving special treatment in comparison with minorities, particularly in matters of culture, gender, and religion. Current times assuredly ask for increased attention and vigilance regarding the protection of liberal democracy. However, if majoritarian ideas take further root, it would be a step in the wrong direction.

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Author's information

Tamar de Waal is assistant professor legal theory at the Amsterdam Law School of the University of Amsterdam. She is director of the Amsterdam Honours College of Law.

Jan Willem Duyvendak is Distinguished Research Professor of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). He is director of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (NIAS-KNAW).

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