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Paper Title: The Limits of Liberalism: A Case Study of Muslims in America

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Bio: I am currently a first-year M.A. candidate at Georgia State University having received a B.S. in Anthropology from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. My main philosophical interests include social/political philosophy, feminist philosophy, critical race theory, and existentialism. Specifically, I am currently interested in the social construction of identities and the ethical questions this entails.

Abstract

Liberalism’s focus on negative freedom and its commitment to the rule of law creates many issues for populations that are deemed “illiberal” or exist outside the mainstream populations. Specifically, groups whose practices or values conflict with the majority views of liberal societies are often subjugated, both formally and informally, as a result of these two liberal principles.

In this paper, I use the situation of Muslims and Muslim-Americans in the United States since September 11, 2001 to illustrate the role popular conceptions of liberalism often play in contributing to the discrimination and disenfranchisement of minority groups in so-called liberal societies. Utilizing Falguni Sheth’s (2009) conception of the “unruly” and her discussion of the role US law has played in controlling Muslim existence in the US, I hold that US liberalism may have done more to harm Muslims in the US than to help. However, I also argue that Sheth’s critique does not go far enough as it ignores the potential liberal values have to control minority populations through informal means.

Working from a Foucauldian conception of power as both repressive and creative, I contend that liberalism’s focus on the individual and negative freedom neglects the force public discourse can have in shaping interactions between minority and majority populations, as well as its influence on individuals within those minority groups. Arguing from the social construction view put forth by Clare Chambers (2008), I maintain that liberalism fails to account for the manner in which the state can influence the way persons think and act in relation to certain groups. Again, drawing on the Foucauldian conception of power, I argue that public perception of Muslims in America has been greatly determined by the policies and rhetoric of the War on Terror initiated by the Bush Administration. As power also has the ability to create or determine aspects of identity and behavior, the War on Terror’s influence on public perception translates to a modification of thought and behavior, both in the majority population and in the Muslim population in America.

The final section of the paper expounds on the idea of creative power by addressing two examples of its ability to informally control minority populations: the majority’s allowance of state violence and the behavioral self-regulation of Muslims in America. Employing Mahmood Mamdani’s (2004) discussion of “Culture Talk,” I posit that the rhetoric of “good vs. evil” and “with us or against us” propagated during the War on Terror structured public thought in a manner that resulted in the demonization of the Islamic faith. Not only has this had the effect of numbing the majority population to injustices committed against Muslims in the United States, it has also influenced how Muslims in the US act in both the public and political sphere.

I conclude that mainstream liberalism’s inability to account for the creative nature of power adversely affects populations outside the majority by allowing the rule of law and public discourse to shape the way persons think and feel about minority populations.