
Article:
Williams, R. orcid.org/0000-0002-4295-2582 (2017) Review: Alexej Ulbricht, Multicultural Immunisation: Liberalism and Esposito. Theory, Culture & Society, 34 (7-8). pp. 265-268. ISSN 0263-2764

https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276417736366

Williams, R. (2017). Review: Alexej Ulbricht, Multicultural Immunisation: Liberalism and Esposito. Theory, Culture & Society, 34(7–8), 265–268. © 2017 The Author.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276417736366

Review of Alexej Ulbricht, Multicultural Immunisation: Liberalism and Esposito (Edinburgh, 2015), 209 pages

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Abstract

Immunity has established itself as one of the most exciting and productive conceptual lenses being used in contemporary social theory. Ulbricht's first book demonstrates why this is the case, through using the imaginary of immunity to explicate a selection of the features of liberal multicultural theory. Influenced by the work of Italian Philosopher Robert Esposito, the book traces ideas of tolerance, consensus and rights as they appear across a selection of liberal theoretical interventions. After engaging with an impressive swathe of literature throughout his book, Ulbricht's critical arrival point is an exciting use of Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis in a bid to supplant universal theories of multiculturalism with a recognition of multiculturalism as an intensely local and ad hoc human experience.

Key words: Immunity, social theory, Italian philosophy, rhythmanalysis, rights, consensus, tolerance

I started reading this book whilst sat in my garden. The sun must have been quite intense that day, as my arms broke out in *polymorphous light eruption*. My skin (according to the consensus of photoimmunologists) is allergic to too much sun. The idea here is a simple one: firstly, the sun quickly and invisibly altered my tissue. Then, my body recognised the changing tissue as Other and started to react in a bid to save me. As Ed Cohen (2009) notes, the legal notion of immunity actually predates its first medical invocation by more than two millennia. It should be no surprise, then, that 'immunity' has become a site for the expenditure of significant social theoretical energy over the past couple of decades. Well-known names like Derrida, Haraway and Sloterdijk have been for some time grappling with what the notion of immunity suggests, what it does, and what kind of use it might have for thinking about social life – particularly what we do with the categories of Self and Other.

Alexej Ulbricht's *Multicultural Immunisation* offers us a mediation on how we can understand liberal theories of multiculturalism through the immunological lens. He does so by utilising Roberto Esposito's conception of immunity as genealogically and etymologically tied to the notion of community. For Esposito, as for Ulbricht, immunity can be understood as the descriptor of those mechanisms that react when a community, ideology, state or likewise sealed-off entity reacts to an infiltration of the Other to its borders, just as my skin did to the intensity of the sun. In doing this, the boundaries and integrity of the sealed-off self are reasserted. The idea of Ulbricht's book is to locate and parse some of the moments in which liberalism as an overarching Western political philosophy repels the Other – incorporating only the select few Others who might feasibly become liberalised. As the saying goes: "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger". For Ulbricht, the measured inclusion of just a few Others is not a sincerely multicultural bid, but an attempt to reaffirm the dominant form of liberalism.

In his effort to make this argument, Ulbricht begins the book – his first, developed out of his doctoral thesis – with an overview of the place of difference, diversity and the multiculture in liberal political theory. Here, Ulbricht introduces his readers to the work of Kymlicka, Parekh and Taylor whose explorations go on to be the focus of the body of the book. This overview is followed by an exploration of immunity as a theoretical device with particular recourse to Esposito's trilogy of works, of which Ulbricht is most concerned with *Immunitas* (2011) and *Communitas* (2009), the first two instalments. This chapter in particular is useful for anybody interested in the work of Esposito (or, indeed, the Italian philosophers working on biopolitics more generally). It does a great job of capturing some of the key themes of Esposito's work – particularly the position of the Self versus the Other. It also tries – rather successfully, I would suggest – to bring Kristeva and Foucault (with their notions of abjection, and delinquency respectively) into dialogue with Esposito, which helps to make Esposito's often quite abstracted philosophy that bit more accessible and applicable to those who may be unfamiliar with his work.

It is important to note that this book does a really great job of synthesising an impressive and rather diverse corpus of literature into a singular argument. Perhaps, though, it is because of the breadth of literature that Ulbricht uses, that I felt like there could have been more use made of Esposito. This is, according to the back of the book, the first major application of Esposito's work on immunity in English, so I felt there could've have been more space to engage with Esposito in the central chapters of the book. This is perhaps something to do with the fact that this is an *application* of Esposito's ideas, rather than necessarily a dialogue *with* Esposito. This does not, however, detract from the engaging style of the central part of the book, which I want to turn to considering now.

For the sake of brevity, I'll focus just on two of the substantive analytical chapters of the book. The first of these zooms in critically on the position of 'rights' in liberal multicultural theory specifically via the work of political philosopher Will Kymlicka. A key point of this chapter, on my reading, is to excavate the inherently exclusionary nature of the notion of 'rights' that sit at the heart of liberal theory. Perhaps the most exciting moment here is Ulbricht's use of Zizek to bring this point to life. In *Desert of the Real*, Zizek begins with a joke of two men writing under conditions of censorship. They agree that red inked letters will contain lies; blue inked letters will contain truths. One receives a letter from the other, written in blue ink, detailing his happy and abundant life, but ending with the statement "The only thing you can't get is red ink" (2002: 1). Zizek's point is that we don't have red ink – we haven't got the means to assert the truth. Ulbricht brings this to life here in demonstrating that arguments like Kymlicka's (that rights should be the language through which we might solve disagreements) do not account for that rendered unsayable by the self-same language:

> *'In providing a vocabulary in which to articulate grievance and resistance, liberalism in fact immunised itself against this very resistance. Resistance is channelled into acceptable forms. Any critique that goes beyond these acceptable forms can simply not be articulated' (81-82)*

This is precisely what Ulbricht means in his use of the concept of immunity. That liberalism acts to immunise against genuine minority grievances by only acknowledging demands that can be appropriately articulated.

A similar point takes shape in the following chapter, in which 'consensus' in the work of Bhikhu Parekh is taken to task (those interested in Parekh's work should certainly focus on the final part of this chapter, where Ulbricht's critique of Parekh's use of the term 'fusion of horizons' is rather unforgiving!). It will be unsurprising to those familiar with the postpolitics literature that the key figure from which Ulbricht draws his critical energy against consensus is Ranciere, particularly his argument that consensus closes down proper politics. As political theorist Chantal Mouffe explains (perhaps more accessibly than Ranciere) there is, through the enrolment of mechanisms of locating and producing consensus, an erasure 'of the adversarial dimension which is constitutive of the political and which provides democratic politics with its inherent dynamics' (2005: 29). In invoking the immune, Ulbricht argues that piecemeal incorporations of the Other don't produce political transformation, but simply strengthen liberalism. When accused of not attending to minority needs and demands, liberal institutions simply point to the mechanisms of dialogue that preclude actual engagement.

It is here that readers might feel the need for more concrete examples than Ulbricht at times provides. This is perhaps an unavoidable feature, given the necessarily abstract tenor of this kind of book. Indeed, it is something Ulbricht is cognisant of and tries to address in the two chapters that conclude the work. I should note, though, that these final parts of the book are so far from where I thought they were headed, that I am almost loath to try and summarise it! (Writing this paragraph feels a little like revealing the twist of a good movie.) At the core of Ulbricht's closing arguing is Henri Lefebvre, the social theorist who has enjoyed a renaissance in contemporary urban studies. Lefebvre's notion of rhythmanalysis is used by Ulbricht to convey the ad hoc, intensely *local* experience of actual, lived multiculturalism. The argument here as I read it is that in lieu of producing a general theory of multiculture (as the liberal theorists he critiques try to do), we need to develop the methodological tools to recognise those moments of conviviality that constitute the momentary collisions of different cultural experiences. This is a tall order – and Ulbricht is ready to acknowledge that. Though the

conclusion can only go so far in fleshing out his suggestion, what he provides us with whets at least my appetite to see the next step he takes with his thinking here.

Ros Williams is a Research Associate on digital health and self-tracking at the University of Sheffield. She received her PhD from the University of York, and has a broad interest in the sociologies of health and race.

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