



Democracy and Difference

Anne Phillips

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A new emphasis on diversity and difference is displacing older myths of nation or community. A new attention to gender, race, language or religion is disrupting earlier preoccupations with class. But the welcome extended to heterogeneity can bring with it a disturbing fragmentation and closure. Can we develop a vision of democracy through difference: a politics that neither denies group identities nor capitulates to them?

In this volume, Anne Phillips develops the feminist challenge to exclusionary versions of democracy, citizenship and equality. Relating this to the crisis in socialist theory, the growing unease with the pretensions of Enlightenment rationality, and the recent recuperation of liberal democracy as the only viable politics, she builds on debates within feminism to address general questions of difference. When democracies try to wish away group difference and inequality, they fail to meet their egalitarian promise. When yearnings towards an undifferentiated unity become the basis for radical politics and change, too many groups drop out of the picture.

Through her critical discussions of recent feminist and socialist theory Anne Phillips rejects this democracy of denial. She also warns, however, of the dangers on the other side. The simpler celebrations of diversity risk freezing group differences as they are, encouraging a patchwork of local identities from which people can speak only to themselves. Her arguments then combine in a powerful restatement of the case for a more active and participatory democracy. It is only through enhanced communication and discussion that people can respect and learn from their differences.

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