

More multiculturalism - but the right sort

**A response to 'Nation on Test: Identity and belonging
after the EU referendum'**

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We are a divided and fractious country and Brexit has laid some of that bare and made it worse. As Ash Amin and Patrick Wright conclude '[t]here is a lot of national rebuilding to be done, but the situation also demands that we learn how to face the future through and with, rather than against, diversity.' I share the view that our search for unity – for many overlapping unities, woven together to be more than the sum of its parts – must not be at the expense of diversity. Indeed, it should be respectful of diversity. Their analytical framework however makes it difficult to achieve that outcome in its fullness.

They argue that 'there is a strong case for differentiating between 'civic' articulations of nationalism, concerned with developing effective forms of political and institutional representation, and more 'cultural' forms, which can indeed be recidivist, xenophobic and exclusive' (p.x). But these are not the choices before us. Civic nationalism always comes with a culture; so the question is of fostering a culture that supports and enhances equal citizenship.

A polity must use a language, draw on moral, ethical and/or religious traditions, have a memory and self-consciousness, have stories to tell about its self and cultivate a sense of belonging together as a people – in short it must be connected to a living, historic culture or cultures.

There are all sorts of good functional, say employment based, reasons for why schools should teach English but not why they should teach Shakespeare. An argument for the latter could be that it is part of the national culture. But if so, that is to say that the national culture cannot just be a political system and a language, i.e., civic – there must be a cultural component. We should indeed make our national public culture less monocultural and more multicultural; but this means going beyond the civic-cultural distinction.

Civic nationalism is often taken to mean a 'thinning' of this national culture. Whilst sometimes this will be true, it is not necessarily so. For example, to disestablish Anglicanism is to thin the national public culture; but to move from an Anglican monopoly to a multi-faithism in which we institutionally recognise – in national ceremonies and local policies – a number of religions as part of what it is to be British is to thicken rather than thin religion in the national story. Similarly, with the funding of faith schools and the teaching of religion in state schools.

A composite or multicultural national story requires a more ambitious connexion between diversity and national identity than Amin and Wright envisage. For them national diversity is about 'rub[ing] along' with other urban dwellers in a 'civility of indifference' so that there may be 'peaceful co-existence'. But a shared public culture rests on our attitudes and sentiments, of images and narratives – of shared stories and myths that are bigger than the banalities of everyday experience. What we need to aim for is a sense of country not simply despite our differences but because our differences become part of the British story.

Amin and Wright rightly emphasise the need for new, generous, inclusive narratives. But that is in tension with celebrating rubbing along and peaceful co-existence. It is turning one's back on the more ambitious ideas of equality as respect and recognition, of identity through belonging and intercultural dialogue for the modest goal of cultural peace.

Multiculturalism is the idea that equality in the context of 'difference' cannot be achieved by individual rights or equality as sameness but has to be extended to include the positive inclusion of marginalised groups marked by race and their own sense of ethnocultural identities. It is a re-working of the idea of national citizenship which emphasizes the importance of respecting diverse identities. One of the best statements of multiculturalism is the report of the [Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain \(2000\)](#), better known as the Parekh report after its chair, Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh. It made national identity and 'retelling the national story' central to its understanding of equality, diversity and cohesion. This involved a critical engagement with top-down and simplistic ideas of national identity, but also argued that a shared national identity, no less than the elimination of

racism, was important in giving all citizens a sense of belonging. It argued that citizenship, and especially the acquisition of citizenship through naturalisation, was – in contrast to countries like the USA and Canada – undervalued in Britain and it was the first public document to advocate the idea of citizenship ceremonies.

The multiculturalist project of fostering a British national identity amongst the ethnic minorities – something that the anti-racists of the 1970s and 1980s would have thought impossible – has been so successful that ethnic minorities in England, Scotland and Wales are more affirming of a British identity than their white co-nationals. So, a challenge now is to relate those who primarily think in mono-nationalist terms with those who think of themselves in bi-nationalist terms – e.g. English and British – or whose sense of Britishness is a union of multi-level and crosscutting differences. Multiculturalism, having fostered identities such as Black British and British Indian, here offers not only the idea that English national consciousness should be developed in a context of a broad, differentiated British identity. It is no small irony that minority groups who all too often are seen as harbingers of fragmentation could be exemplars of the union and a source of differentiated unity.