Multiculturalism, citizenship and national identity

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About the author

The relationship between ethnic, religious and social communities in some western European states is surrounded by a sense of crisis. The atmospherics of this crisis - immigration, visible difference, tension over "trigger issues" such as women's apparel or icons of faith, the pervading fears of the post-9/11 world - are easier to identify than its actual character. In this circumstance, where evidence of conflict is readily available but a view of the whole picture is harder to achieve, it is not surprising that many people - seeking to make meaning from apparent confusion - look for scapegoats. In media, academia and much public discussion in the first years of the millennium (particularly in Britain, with which this essay is mainly concerned), one of the principal scapegoats has been and continues to be multiculturalism.

The extent of the "backlash [11]" against multiculturalism - the political accommodation of post-immigration minorities - will be familiar to many with even a passing interest in the subject. True, multiculturalism has always been controversial and contested [12]; and its critics are far from sharing a single view of what is wrong with it. But two additional factors have coalesced to make their critique more powerful and more important to address today: its association with Muslims, and its linkage to arguments about national identity.


Also by Tariq Modood in openDemocracy:

"Muslims and European multiculturalism [14]"
(15 May 2003)

"Remaking multiculturalism after 7/7 [15]"
(29 September 2005)

"The liberal dilemma: integration or vilification? [16]"
(8 February 2006)

Blaming multiculturalism, blaming Muslims
The aspect of the critique of multiculturalism that focuses on Muslims has a longer history than is often realised. It predates the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and their aftermath, though in Britain at least
2001 is a pivotal year. The late spring of that year saw urban disturbances in a number of northern English towns and cities in which young Muslim men (mainly of Pakistani origin) played a central role. The dominant political response was that the riots were due to a one-sided multiculturalism having facilitated, even encouraged, segregated communities which shunned each other.

Many subsequent events - from legal disputes over schools' dress-codes to the London bombings of 7 July 2005 - have been interpreted as pointing in the same direction. For example, Gilles Kepel [17] observed that the 7/7 bombers "were the children of Britain's own multicultural society" and that the bombings have "smashed" the implicit social consensus that produced multiculturalism "to smithereens" (see Gilles Kepel, "Europe's answer to Londonistan" [18], 24 August 2005).

I would like to respond to this critique by restating a conception of multiculturalism which clearly distinguishes it from certain narrow forms of liberalism, but which places it squarely within an understanding of democratic citizenship [19] and nation-building.

Multicultural citizenship

Just as social democrats have a notion of positive equality around socio-economic equality (what might be called social citizenship), a parallel case can be made for positive equality in connection with the symbolic dimensions of public culture. This is based on the understanding that citizenship is not just a legal status and set of rights but is amplified by a certain kind of politics. In particular, citizenship should be seen as possessing the following three features, each of which exemplifies why citizenship and multiculturalism are not antithetical:

- **Citizenship is non-transcendent, and pluralist**

Citizens are individuals and have individual rights - but these rights are not uniform, and their citizenship contours itself around groups of people with specific cultures and histories. Citizenship is not a monistic identity that is completely apart from or transcends other identities important to citizens, in the way that the theory - though not always the practice - of French republicanism demands. The creation [20] of the United Kingdom created new political subjects (for my purpose "citizens", with due qualifications about legal status and nomenclature) but did not eliminate the state's constituent nations. So the creation of a common British citizenship was quite compatible with being Scottish, English, Irish or Welsh, thus allowing for the idea that there were different ways of being British. This idea, moreover, was and is not confined to constituent nations but is capacious and flexible enough to include other group identities. The plurality, then, is ever present - and each part of the plurality has a right both to be a part of the whole and to speak up for itself and for its vision of the whole.

Among openDemocracy's many articles on multiculturalism are:

Paul Gilroy, "Melancholia and multiculture" [21]
(3 August 2004)

Neal Ascherson, "From multiculturalism to where?" [22]
(19 August 2004)

Ruben Andersson, "Multiculturalism at work" [23]
(16 June 2006)

Rajeev Bhargava, "India's model: faith, secularism and democracy" [24]
(3 November 2004)

Theo Veenkamp, "After tolerance" [25]
(24 November 2004)

Paul Kelly, "Multiculturalism and 7/7: neither problem nor solution" [26]
(20 October 2005)

Sarah Lindon, "Diversity in question" [27]
Citizenship is multilogical

The plurality speaks to each other and it does not necessarily agree about what it means to be a citizen. There can be a series of agreements and disagreements involving cross-cutting areas of consensus and schism, and shifting alliances across the issues. But there is enough agreement and above all enough interest in the discussion for dialogues to be sustained. As the parties to these dialogues are many, not just two, the process is more aptly called "multilogical" than bilateral. The multilogues allow for views to qualify each other, overlap, synthesise, be modified in the light of having to coexist with that of others, hybridise, permit new adjustments to be made, new conversations to take place. Such modulations and contestations are part of the internal, evolutionary, work-in-progress dynamic of citizenship.

Citizenship is dispersed

If citizenship is not monolithic, it follows that action and power are not monopolistically concentrated - and that the state is not the exclusive site for citizenship. We perform our citizenship and relate to each other as fellow citizens, and so get to know what our citizenship is in all its dimensions in relation not just to law and politics but also to civic debate and action across the social field (initiated through voluntary associations, community organisations, trades unions, newspapers and media, educational and religious institutions). State action, laws, regulation and prohibition may effect much reform; but public debate, discursive contestations, pressure-group mobilisations, and the varied and the (semi-) autonomous institutions of civil society also contribute to shaping change. Moreover, when we say that citizenship is a public not a private identity it is important to clarify what we mean by "public". If citizenship involves concern for issues such as poverty or the qualities of prime-ministerial leadership, this can take place in a trade-union meeting or a mosque or in reading a novel or watching a television documentary in the privacy of one's home. It is the concern for the civic condition that is the issue - not the how and where. So the idea that, for example, religious spaces - mental and physical - are inherently "private" and non-civic is unnecessarily restrictive and purist.

Muslims and identity

How does this relate to Muslim identity politics, one of the central sources of anxiety and disillusionment about multiculturalism? British Muslim identity politics was virtually created by the Satanic Verses affair of the 1989 and beyond: that is, in the protests against Salman Rushdie's novel and the counter-reaction against them (see Tariq Modood, Not Easy Being British: Colour, Culture and Citizenship [28], London: Runnymede Trust/Trentham Books, 1992). This event led many to think of themselves for the first time as Muslims in a public way, and to think that this choice was important in their relation to other Muslims and to the wider British (and international) society.

This process is movingly described by the author Rana Kabbani, whose Letter to Christendom begins with a description of herself as "a woman who had been a sort of underground Muslim before she was forced into the open by the Salman Rushdie affair" (see Rana Kabbani, Letter to Christendom, Virago Press, 1992).

Such shocks [29] to Muslim identity are hardly a thing of the past. The present situation of some Muslims in Britain is nicely captured by the young professional (and aspiring New Labour parliamentary candidate) Farmida Bi, who had not particularly made anything of her Muslim background before 7/7 but was moved by the bombings to claim a Muslim identity and found the organisation, Progressive British Muslims [30]. As a self-described member of the group of "integrated, liberal British Muslims" who were forced to ask "am I a Muslim at all?", Bi writes: "7/7 made most of us embrace our Muslim identity and become determined to prove that it's possible to live happily as a Muslim in the west" (see Farmida Bi, Alienation, in "The London bombs, one year..."
This sense of feeling that one must speak up as a Muslim has nothing necessarily to do with religiosity. Like all forms of difference it comes into being as a result of pressures from "outside" a group as well as from the "inside". But in this particular case, each location has a powerful geopolitical dimension. The emergence of British Muslim identity and activism has been propelled by a strong concern for the plight of Muslims elsewhere in the world, and reinforced by a double perception: that opposition to this plight is a form of anti-imperialist emancipation, and that the British government, in its tolerance of (or worse, complicity or active engagement in) the destruction of Muslim civilian lives, is part of the problem.

British, American and Australian (perhaps to some extent most western) Muslims are engaged in an extremely daunting task: having to develop a sense of national citizenship in, and to integrate into, polities which are at war with or occupying some Muslim countries (and have adopted a confrontational posture against others) - in what is perceived by all sides to be a long-term project. Moreover, domestic terrorism, as well as non-violent political opposition, has unfortunately become part of this large political context. The danger of "blowback" from overseas military activity remains considerable, and capable of destroying the movement towards multicultural citizenship.

At the same time, one reason why I think we should persevere with this ambitious political goal is that I am impressed by how many British Muslims have and are responding to these difficulties: by standing up for their community through civic engagement, and by refusing to surrender either their Muslim identity or their slice of democratic citizenship. Despite this dependency on overseas circumstances outside their control (which might be expected to induce passivity and self-pitying introspection), many British Muslims exhibit a dynamism and a confidence that they must rise to the challenge of dual loyalties and not give up on either set of commitments.

Ideological and violent extremism is indeed undermining the conditions of and hopes for multiculturalism; but - contrary to the multiculturalism-blamers I began with - this extremism has nothing to do with the promotion of multiculturalism but is coming into the domestic arena from the international.

Also in openDemocracy on British Muslim identity:

Mohammed Sajid, "The gap between us: British Muslims and 7/7" [35] (18 July 2005)

David Hayes, "What kind of country?" [36] (28 July 2005)

Maruf Khwaja, "Muslims in Britain: generations, experiences, futures" [37] (2 August 2005)

Ehsan Masood, "British Muslims must stop the war" [38] (30 August 2005)

Abdul-Rehman Malik, David T, Max Farrar, S Sayyid, Mohammed Sajid, Sami Zubaida, "In search of British Muslim identity: responses to Young, Angry and Muslim" [39] (28 October 2005)

**National identity and "being British"

This leads me to the second potent factor in recent arguments about multiculturalism: its linkage to discourses of the nation. Here, although multiculturalism does not deserve to be scapegoated for current problems (nor indeed to be deserted by the political centre-left), some of its advocates can be seen to have overlooked or at least underemphasised a point that is integral to its core idea.
This, put simply, is that one can't just talk about difference. Difference has to be related to things we have in common. The commonality that most multiculturalists emphasise is citizenship. I have argued that this citizenship has to be seen in a plural, dispersed and multilogical way and not reduced to legal rights, passports and the franchise (important though these are). I would now like to go further in suggesting that a good basis for or accompaniment to a multicultural citizenship is a national identity.

We in Europe have overlooked that where multiculturalism has worked and been accepted as a state project (Canada, Australia and Malaysia, for example) it has been integral to a nation-building project (to creating Canadians, Aussies and Malaysians). Even in the United States, where the federal state has had a much lesser role in the multicultural project, the incorporation of ethno-religious diversity and hyphenated Americans has been about country-making, civic inclusion and making a claim upon the national identity.

The importance of the point is twofold. First, the tendency in Europe has been for some advocates of pluralism and multiculture (whether or not the vocabulary of multiculturalism is used) to put aside other fundamental disagreements and argue as if the logic of the national and the multicultural are incompatible. Partly as a result, many Europeans have come to think of multiculturalism as antithetical to rather than as a reformer of national identity.

Second, it does not make sense to encourage strong multicultural or minority identities and weak common or national identities: strong multicultural identities are a good thing - they are not intrinsically divisive, reactionary or subversive - but they need the complement of a framework of vibrant, dynamic, national narratives and the ceremonies and rituals which give expression to a national identity.

It is clear that minority identities are capable of exerting an emotional pull for the individuals for whom they are important. Multicultural citizenship, if it is to be equally attractive to the same individuals, requires a comparable counterbalancing emotional pull. Many Britons, for example, say they are worried about disaffection amongst some Muslim young men, and more generally about the lack of identification with Britain amongst many Muslims in the country. Yet surveys over many years have shown that Muslims have been reaching out to identify with Britain (in one, a Channel 4 / NOP survey of spring 2006, 82% of a national sample of Muslims said they very strongly or fairly strongly felt they belonged to Britain).

True, there is a lot of anger and fear around these issues, especially in relation to terrorism and aggressive Anglo-American foreign policies. I do not feel that we are at all close to undoing the mess that these actions and policies have created, but alongside them is clear evidence of support among Muslims in Britain for a sense of national belonging - and this is a valuable opportunity to create an obvious counterweight to the ideological calls for a jihad against fellow Britons.

In this light, the interest by politicians of the left in British national identity is to be welcomed. A leading example is Gordon Brown, the imminent successor of Tony Blair as Labour Party leader and prime minister. He has argued for the need to revive and revalue British national identity in a number of speeches, most notably at the 2006 annual conference of the Fabian Society: "Who Do We Want To Be? The Future of Britishness".

Brown wants to derive a set of core values (liberty, fairness, enterprise among them) from a historical narrative of Britain's development. The problem is that such values, even if they could (singly or in combination) be given a distinctive British take, are too complex, and their interpretation and priority too contested, to be pressed into the service of meaningful definition.

After all, every public culture must operate through shared values, which are embodied in its institutions and practices (and also may be used to criticise these for falling short). But to be effective such values cannot be uniform or one-dimensional; and their meaning needs to be discursively grasped as old interpretations are dropped or as new circumstances unsettle one consensus and another is built up. To declare that freedom or fairness is a core British value is unlikely to settle any controversy, far less to clarify, for example, what is hate speech and how it should be handled.
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Such definitions of core values tend either to be bland or (if they are too narrow and prescriptive) divisive. In the context of my argument, moreover, the idea that there has to be a schedule of value statements to which every citizen is expected to sign up to is not in the spirit of a multi-logical citizenship. This holds that national identity is not reducible to a list but should be woven in debate and discussion; and that the citizenship which is central to this national identity carries the right to make a claim on it - challenging negative difference and supplanting it by positive difference. Indeed, a sustainable intellectual or political vision of social reform and justice in the 21st century cannot afford to omit these aspects of multicultural citizenship. Rather, the turning of negative difference into positive difference should become a key test of social justice in coming decades.

I cannot conclude on a clear note of optimism. But we do need some optimism and self-belief if we are even to limit the damage that is currently being done to our multicultural politics and current prospects, far less to create more enriching ones. The 21st century is going to be one of unprecedented ethnic and religious mix in the west. In the past, multicultural societies have tended to only flourish under imperial rule. If we are to keep alive the prospect of a dynamic, internally differentiated multiculturalism within the context of democratic citizenship, then we must recognise that multiculturalism is not the cause of present discontents but part of the solution.

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