Making multiculturalism and nationhood compatible

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ABSTRACT

The author argues that multiculturalism and national identity are indeed compatible. Finding areas of commonality is a process that may take on a variety of forms, and public policies can be made to encourage cultural diversity and to promote its value. Nations have the ability to adapt, so that a multicultural identity can become the basis of what a political community has in common. Uberoi points out that Canada is a good example of this.

In this article I aim to show how it is possible to combine nationhood and multiculturalism. By multiculturalism I simply mean the protection of cultural diversity and the promotion of its value,[1] and by nationhood I am writing in particular about national identity. Traditionally it has been believed that the goals of multiculturalism can not exist, at least not in any coherent fashion, within a political community that possesses a national identity. This is because a national identity acts as the shared identity of a political community and serves an important purpose in that it cultivates unity.

A national identity cultivates unity by defining and reflecting what the political community as a collective is. In doing so, it emphasizes and focuses on the commonalities of those who comprise the community, acting as a constant reminder of what community they belong to and why they belong to it. Because national identities achieve unity by focusing on commonalities it is thought that they tend to work best when a political community is mono-cultural. The rationale applied here is that if all members of the nation share the same culture, there will be more areas of commonality that can be emphasized in the national identity, and thus there is likely to be more unity. National identities are thought then to not only define and reflect the political community, but also to exclude minority groups, or force their assimilation, in order for them to gain acceptance.[2] This is because in a political community that is culturally diverse, or where minority groups have the distinctiveness of their cultures protected, there are very few commonalities upon which the national identity can focus. By comparison, multiculturalism aims to protect cultural diversity and promote its value, and in doing so it is unfathomable to possess a shared identity that would exclude some minority groups or force their assimilation. The aims of multiculturalism and nationhood have therefore traditionally been seen to be antithetical.[3]

Other than Bhikhu Parekh, few can claim to have offered a means to navigate a way around the traditional view that multiculturalism and nationhood are antithetical.[4] This is true despite the fact that most political theorists of multiculturalism would recognize that any multicultural society needs to foster reciprocal attachments – or as Will Kymlicka would call them, the mutual 'ties that bind' – between at least most of the individuals and groups that comprise a political community so as to avoid fragmentation and instability.[5] I will attempt to follow in Parekh's footsteps by describing a form of nationhood that is compatible with multiculturalism. I will proceed in two stages. Firstly, I will discuss the definition of national identity. This is important because, in order to understand how to make the aims of multiculturalism and national identity compatible, we first need to understand precisely what a national identity is. Secondly, I will move on to describe a form of national identity that is compatible with the aims of multiculturalism.

What is a national identity?

In attempting to define what a national identity is, we must first understand what a nation is. At the conceptual level, national identities are cognates of nations and therefore it is impossible to understand the former without first understanding the latter. In attempting to define a nation, I am cognisant of the fact that many in the past have found this task notoriously difficult. Max Weber claimed that part of this difficulty lay in the fact that no two nations appeared to possess the same objective features. Definitional discussions regarding the word 'nation' are further complicated because scholars tend to disagree about how nations emerged and what precursors were necessary for them to become so widespread and established. However, to dwell on all such definitional discussions and to then sort our way through them would require a separate paper. For reasons of brevity I will address the two dominant paradigms that attempt to explain what nations are.[6]

The first paradigm is that of Modernism, which emerged in the 1960s under the influence of Elie Kedourie[7] and Ernest Gellner.[8] Kedourie dates nationhood to the emergence of the Enlightenment philosophy of Kant, which was skewed by Romantics like Fichte. In terms of its intellectual history, nations are modern entities based on modern philosophies. Ernest Gellner saw nations as emerging in the industrial epoch to aid the rise of industrialization. Nations are said to be literate expressions of high culture trained through a compulsory education system, to support industrialism. For Gellner,

nations are entirely modern, constructed in the industrial age, before which the 'loyalties and solidarities' necessary for nationhood were not possible.[9]

As a reaction to Modernism, the Ethno-Symbolic school of thought emerged. Ethno-symbolists like Anthony Smith are critical of, amongst other things, the modernist paradigm[10] for failing to account for pre-modern ethnies and collective sentiments that make nationhood possible.[11] In short they claim that modernists place too much emphasis on elite or overpowering structural forces that turn men into nationals. If the nation is to evoke the necessary sentiments of solidarity and be responsive to institutional/structural or elite forces, there must be at least some common sentiment that existed prior to nationhood. This is an important point, for at times many modernists take the responsiveness of people to nationalist ambitions for granted, as if people are incapable of identifying what is obviously spurious. If people are to be responsive to the drumbeat of nationhood, it is because, at minimum, they recognize the tune. Ethno-Symbolists then look both up (to elites and intellectuals) and down (to the people) when assessing how nations are constructed. They do not disregard the fact that nations are modern, they simply pay more attention to the historical roots, symbols, traditions, and values that allowed the nation to emerge.[12]

Ethno-symbolic definitions provide a more cogent understanding of nationhood because they are able to explain why nations have such a unifying effect. It is for this reason that Anthony Smith's ethno-symbolic definition of nationhood seems more convincing. Smith describes the nation as: "A named human community occupying a homeland, and having common myths and a shared history, a common public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members."[13] Further, Smith describes a national identity as: "The continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identification of individuals with that pattern and heritage and with its cultural elements."[14]

There are four points to note here. Firstly, whilst at the conceptual level national identities must always be understood as cognates of nations, at the practical level national identities help to shape nations. A national identity defines, produces, and reproduces the nation, and in particular the values, memories, myths, and traditions that shape the nation. A national identity is a collective identity that all members of the nation share, and it seeks to define what that collective is. Secondly, nations and national identities are not cast in a mould that can never be reshaped; they are fluid and changing entities.[15] Changes to the nation are usually instigated at the political level, but by whom? This then is the third point, for historically the shapers of nations have been the political class, by which I simply mean politicians, government officials, and intellectuals of the day. From one generation to the next the political class separates the important from the redundant and the necessary from the extraneous. How does the political class do this? What means do they have at their disposal to shape and mould the nature of the national identity? The tools that the political class have are the tools of the state which is understood in the Weberian sense as the legal and political institutions charged with the legitimate powers of coercion within a given territory.[16] State-led endeavours on education, citizenship, media, and so on alter the national identity and the way that the nation is understood.

How to make nationhood and multiculturalism compatible

Now that we understand what a national identity is, we are in a position to understand the nature of the difficulty that most advocates of multiculturalism have in relation to national identities. Broadly speaking, there are two criticisms that multiculturalists might raise. Firstly, if we consider my definition of a national identity we see that it is premised on mono-cultural terms and thus prone to the homogenizing of the political community and either the assimilation or the exclusion of minority groups. Yet if we look at Smith's definition we must also note that nations have a 'chameleon like' quality, in that they are capable of adapting to different contexts and different circumstances. They change because the political class has the power to shape and mould, over a generation of course and within certain limits, the nature of the national identity and thus the nation. Is it then impossible to imagine a national identity and then a nation in which cultural diversity is protected and promoted as a value? If the nature of a nation can be altered, does it have to be incompatible with multiculturalism?

The usual answer given at this point leads me to the second criticism. Advocates of multiculturalism, or at least critics of nationhood, usually claim that history illustrates that nationalists in the political class secure areas of commonality by homogenizing the political community and either assimilating minority groups into the shared understanding of what the nation is, or excluding them. Even John Stuart Mill was guilty of this charge. His advocacy of nationhood is not to be confused with "a senseless antipathy to foreigners; an indifference to the general welfare of the human race… a cherishing of bad peculiarities because they are national, or a refusal to adopt what has been found good by other countries."[17] However, even he claimed that "inferior and more backward sections of the human race" should be absorbed and assimilated into larger more cultivated groups under the banner of nationhood.[18] Homogenizing the political community is the means by which areas of commonality are found and unity is secured. How else could a nation operate?

This is an important observation, but it comes unstuck when one considers that the homogenization of the political community and the exclusion or the assimilation of minority groups is a *process* of finding areas of commonality. There is nothing intrinsic to a national identity that compels the assimilation of minority groups. Furthermore, the *process* by which areas of commonality are found are determined, to some extent, by the political class. The *process* can then be changed, such that areas of commonality are formed in a manner compatible with the aims of multiculturalism.[19] But how can this be accomplished? How might a nation create areas of commonality that are enshrined in a national identity as a means to secure unity but also protect cultural diversity and promote its value? My suggestion is to make one of the areas of commonality multiculturalism itself. I then advocate the formation of a multicultural national identity, which I define as:

The definition and redefinition of the nation as multicultural, such that the values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions

that compose the distinctive heritage of the nation are premised on the reflection and protection of the nation's cultural diversity and the promotion of the value that this diversity serves.

Through a multicultural national identity, the multicultural nature of the nation is accepted, reflected, and asserted to be positive. It would be inimical to a multicultural national identity to homogenize a political community, because that is not how the political community defines itself. Minority groups could not be assimilated for the same reason and neither could they be excluded.

There are four points to note here. Firstly, a multicultural national identity is a type of national identity. The word 'multicultural' is merely the adjective that describes this type of national identity. What is being discussed here is not a form of political community that is categorically different. Nonetheless, it is a type of nationhood that varies from any other that may have preceded it. Secondly, what is new about this type of national identity is that it attaches positive value to the cultural diversity of the nation and seeks to foster a sense of nationhood through it. Thirdly, it is not a type of national identity that must be prior to other types of identity such that there is created some sort of hierarchy. Indeed the creation of such a hierarchy would be inimical to the very nature of a multicultural national identity. Equally, it is not a type of identity that crowds out any other type of identity. The multicultural national identity is simply one of the many identities that all individuals and groups, regardless of cultural origin, possess. Unlike other identities, however, it is one that all members of the nation share. Finally, multiculturalism does not need to be the one and only area of commonality and hence way in which the nation is defined. There will be other areas of commonality enshrined in the national identity; however, they must be compatible with the aims of multiculturalism.

But how is a multicultural national identity created? As discussed, the political class can through state-led endeavours shape and re-mould a national identity. Education, citizenship, media, race relations, immigration, and a panoply of other policy areas can be used over a generation to alter the nature of a national identity. Indeed, much can be learned from how Canada – which admittedly is not a perfect model of a multicultural national identity, but is the closest approximation to one – has over the years attempted to re-shape the Canadian national identity from visions of Canada as a 'Britain of the north,' to Canada as a nation of 'two founding races,' to being a nation that is partly defined in terms of multiculturalism.[20] Canada's 1988 Multiculturalism Act is instructive: "It is hereby declared to be the policy of the government of Canada to… recognise and promote the understanding that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity and that it provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada's future."[21]

Conclusion

In conclusion let me say that multiculturalism and nationhood can indeed be made compatible. They both serve essential roles in a political community, and should not be understood in mutually exclusive terms. A political community, if it is to serve the best interests of those who comprise it, must protect cultural diversity, but also promote unity. It is hoped that a multicultural national identity will help towards securing those ends.

Notes

1 I adopt a Parekhian view of what multiculturalism is. I have discerned this view from Parekh's discussions on the political structures that a multicultural society must possess. See B. Parekh's *Rethinking Multiculturalism,* (Macmillan Press Ltd 2000), p. 196-236. For a different view see Will Kymlicka, *Finding Our Way,* (Oxford University Press, 1999). Also W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship,* (Oxford University Press, 1995). For further reading see C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism,* (Princeton University Press, 1994). See Also I.M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference,* (Princeton University Press, 1990). For a procedural liberal, anti-multiculturalism approach see Bryan Barry's much commented upon book, *Culture and Equality* (Polity Press, 2001). Barry also comments upon Parekh's work in 'Muddles of Multiculturalism' in *New Left Review* 8:1 2001, p. 49-71. Also see J. Rawls *Political Liberalism,* (Columbia University Press, 1996).

2 See R. Scruton, 'Authority and Allegiance', The meaning of Conservatism, (Palgrave, 2001) p. 17-37. Also, *England an Elegy,* (Pimlico, 2001) and 'In Defence of the Nation' in *Philosopher on Dover Beach,* (Caranat, 1990).

3 David Goodheart's recent article in *Prospect* (Issue 95, 2004) is good recent example of this the alleged antithetical nature of nationhood and multiculturalism. It is a premise that is fundamental to his ill thought through argument.

4 B. Parekh *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain,* (Profile Books, 2000) p. 2-107. More recently, see B. Parekh, 'Being British, in *Government and Opposition,* 37:2, 2002, p. 301-317. B. Parekh, 'Defining British National Identity', in *Political Quarterly,* 2000, p. 1-14.

5 Parekh, in his most recent book, *Rethinking Multiculturalism* recognizes that each political community needs to nurture both diversity and unity. Kymlicka also recognises this in *Multicultural Citizenship.*

6 For a discussion of two older paradigms see A. Smith, *Nationalism* p. 49-57. Also see A.Smith, 'The Nation Modern or Perrenial?' in *The Nation in History,* (Polity Press, 2000) p. 27-52. Also see A. Smith, 'Primeordialism and Perrenialism' in *Nationalism and Modernism,* (Rouledge, 2001), p. 145-169.

7 E. Kedourie, *Nationalism,* (Blackwells Publishers, 1998).

8 E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism,* (Blackwells Publishers, 2001). Also see E. Gellner's *Nationalism,* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997).

9 Other important modernist versions of nations and nationaism are Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780,* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). Hobsbawm works with Gellner's basic definition. See also B. Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1991). J. Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State,* (Manchester University Press, 1993). For modernist empirical studies on nations see L. Greenfeld's *Nationalism, Five Roads to Modernity,* (Harvard University Press, 2001). M. Keating, *Nations against the State,* (Palgrave, 2001).

10 A. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations,* (Blackwells Publishers, 1996). See also A. Smith, *National Identity,* (University of Nevada Press, 1991).

11 An exchange between Ernest Gellner, and Anthony Smith exists in the form of the Warwick Debates available at http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/gellner/Warwick2.html

12 Ethno-symbolists also tend to adopt a more sanguine approach to the future of nationhood. See A. Smith *Nations and Nationalism In A Global Era,* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2002).

13 Anthony Smith, *Nationalism,* (Polity Press, 2001), p. 13.

14 Anthony Smith, *Nationalism,* (Polity Press, 2001), p. 18.

15 Obviously there are limits within which a nation can be re-shaped or moulded, and those limits reflect, to some extent, the popular beliefs of the people.

16 Variants of this definition of the state are replete in the social scientific and philosophical literature, however, its intellectual lineage dates back to Max Weber. See 'Politics as a Vocation' in *From Max Weber, Essays in Sociology,* (Routledge, 1997), p. 77-78.

17 John Stuart Mill 'Coleridge' in *John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham-Utilitarianism and Other Essays* (Penguin Books Ltd, 1987), p. 195.

18 John Stuart Mill 'Of Nationality as connected with Representative Government', in Considerations of Representative Government in *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 431. See also R. Scruton, 'Authority and Allegiance', *The meaning of Conservatism,* (Palgrave, 2001), p. 17-37. Also, *England an Elegy,* (Pimlico, 2001) and 'In Defence of the Nation' in *Philosopher on Dover Beach,* (Caranat, 1990).

19 Certainly nationhood is more prone to mono-culturalism, yet it is by no means essential.

20 See E. Mackey, The *House of Difference,* (University of Toronto Press, 2002). See Will Kymlicka, 'Canadian Multiculturalism in Historical and Comparative Perspective: Is Canada Unique'? in F*orum Constitutionnel* 13:1 2003. See Also, Will Kymlicka, Politics of Identity II, 'Being Canadian' *Government and Opposition,* in pending.

21 Canadian Multiculturalism Act 1988.