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Liberal citizenship and multicultural Europe

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ARTICLE

I want to take as my starting point the view that liberal citizenship is a dynamic settlement, one that is ideally modified and adjusted over time and spans both civil society and state political arenas. This would seem a modest and sedate claim when set against the one famously made by the late Ernest Gellner that liberal citizenship is a miracle; not easily explained, it is neither a natural state of being nor a divine gift; moreover, it is something which frees us from both the "tyranny of cousins" and the "tyranny of ideocrats". This is Gellner in modest combative mode, contrasting the west with – in the title of his book – "Muslim Society" (in the singular).

Gellner took the view that when it comes to discerning what kinds of authority are sovereign, there is a common (secular resistant) pattern of social organisation across Muslim societies born of Islam's alleged over-reliance on scripture, in contrast to Christianity's dualism (between church and state). I have never found that remotely persuasive, and either way my view here is that those who find in Gellner a kind of muscular liberal citizenship tend to confuse Gellner's "miracle" with old-fashioned ideology.

Instead, if liberal approaches to citizenship are to be persuasive then they must furnish us with a principled pragmatism; pragmatism because it is responsive to social change and principled because it is able to show the ways in which new thinking reflects foundational liberal values.

So we point to Bernard Williams' posthumous book "In the Beginning Was the Deed", which cautions us never to suppose that we have a settled answer to Thomas Hobbes' very first question: how do we live together in mutual security? If we understand this question as one that citizenship strategies are minimally appealing to, then we can show how liberal citizenship is a success. But it seems like an absurdly low threshold because liberal citizenship has to be about much more than "civil peace", which is where multiculturalism comes in.

I suppose my prevailing assumption is that Citizenship and Multiculturalism are intertwined and probably have been for longer than we have been using and now rejecting the term. Multicultural citizenship sits firmly within a "matrix of principles that are central to contemporary liberal democracies," in a manner that – quoting the series co-editor and our colleague Tariq Modood – establishes multiculturalism as "the child of liberal egalitarianism but, like any child, it is not simply a faithful reproduction of its parents."

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But that is what an advocate says. What about a serious scholarly detractor? There is no one more scholarly or detracting than the late Brian Barry, who was formidable in his opposition to multicultural citizenship. He argued:

"Liberals have had to recognise that they need to create a better account of what equal treatment entails under conditions of diversity… If we take a broad definition of multiculturalism so that it simply corresponds to the demand that cultural diversity be accommodated, there is no necessary conflict between it and liberalism. [...] But most multiculturalists boast that they are innovators in political philosophy by virtue of having shown that liberalism cannot adequately satisfy the requirements of equal treatment and justice under conditions of cultural diversity. It is at this point that my tribute to multiculturalism reaches it limits."

Note here that Barry uses equal treatment intentionally. He would not be in favour of group specific measures in order – in Ronnie Dworkin's terms – to treat people equally. He thus took a very disapproving view of the aggravating clause on the incitement to racial hatred legislation.

Nonetheless, what I would say is that even Brian Barry concedes that as an approach, multicultural citizenship is a partial outgrowth of liberalism. In Jim Tully's terms, it establishes a third generation norm of legitimacy, namely respect for reasonable cultural diversity, which needs to be considered on a par with the [first and second generation] norms of freedom and equality, and so to modify policies of "free and equal treatment" accordingly.

Our interest is with the political implication of this "third-generation norm of legitimacy" for a concept of citizenship, which includes the recognition that social life consists of individuals and groups. As Amy Gutmann said two decades ago, "It is hard to find a democratic or democratizing society these days that is not the site of some significant controversy over whether and how its institutions should better recognize the identities of cultural and disadvantaged minorities." So just as the argument for social democracy relies on more than liberal citizenship, so does the argument for multiculturalism.

One implication of this recognition is that integration is not a one way process; on the contrary, it means re-forming citizenship and related modes of meta-membership such as national identities. But here we quickly encounter a plurality of pluralisms, in so far as it becomes apparent that "Multiculturalism is a portmanteau term" describing: (i) the fact of pluralism; (ii) a moral stance (that it is desirable); and (iii) ways in which the state could recognise it. But it is also "polysemic" in both theoretical and policy discourses.

In Federal Canada it applies to groups with territorial claims (who want to be treated as nations rather than ethnocultural groups in a mononational state). In the EU, while Catalans and Scots are nations, multiculturalism has a more limited meaning of post-immigration politics. In the US, language-based ethnicity is the major cultural claim; in Western Europe, the conjunction of the terms "immigration" and "culture" now often invokes Muslim populations.

As Tariq Modood has argued: "It is much better to acknowledge that the 'multi' in multiculturalism will encompass different kinds of groups and does not itself privilege any one kind, but that 'recognition' should be given to the identities that marginalised groups themselves value and find strength in, whether these be racial, religious or ethnic." But of course a broad set of critiques persist which might be summarized as follows: social fragmentation, displacement from economic issues, moral hesitancy, and of course international terrorism.

Beneficiaries have included a number of competing political orientations concerned with promoting unity, variously conceived: the discovery or rediscovery of national identity, notions of civicness, a resurgent liberalism that allegedly proves, in the final analysis, to be "neutral", but also "diversity" approaches too. Here we encounter a kind of anti-multicultural cosmopolitanism. For example, the late Ulrich Beck escalated this argument by applying the idea of Zombie categories to multiculturalism.

These are categories that are said to have been forged in earlier "horizons of experience" that in the present serve to blind us to a "second modernity'' that has the hallmarks of a "non-nation-state modernity", and which is alive to "the rapidly changing realities inside the nation-state containers, and outside as well."

What is remarkable is how this criticism takes multiculturalism on the terms of its critics, rather than on its own terms, or with reference to multiculturalism scholarship or policy.

I suppose the elephant in the room here is Islam and Muslims. The emergence of Muslim political mobilisation has led some multiculturalists to argue that religion is a feature of plural societies that it is uniquely legitimate to confine to the private sphere.

This prohibiting of Muslim identity in the public space has so far been taken furthest in France, where in 2004 the Parliament passed, with little debate but an overwhelming majority, a ban on the wearing of "ostentatious" religious symbols, primarily the hijab (headscarf), in state schools.

This is accompanied by a "multiculturalism is dead" rhetoric that has led to, or reinforced, policy reversals in many countries, even pioneering ones such as in the Netherlands.

The perceived end of multiculturalism is most marked by the fact that a new assimilationism is espoused not just by the political right, but also by the centre-left and by erstwhile "liberals". The sentiment people like Joppke espouse in liberal terms taps into a well-established vein of animosity to the place of Muslims in Europe.

Clearly I think it is an error to view Muslims – as practitioners of Islam – as being any more incapable of making peace with liberal democratic values than are Christians and Jews, amongst others. Most liberal democracies have accommodated some religious pluralism within existing church-state relations. If we take three prominent examples you will see why I favour what Modood calls a moderate secularist approach. So where does this leave us? Firstly, that

the work undertaken by different kinds of multiculturalists in debates over remaking national identities across different national contexts, including in terms of common membership and meaningful forms of integration, should be recognised as on-going tasks. If, as some Cosmopolitanists argue, European societies are becoming even more plural (or "super-diverse"), then advocates of pluralist modes of integration will need to build on past successes rather than seek to erase them.

Secondly, in both theory and practice, equality and diversity go hand in hand. Liberals cannot advocate programmes of equal treatment without registering and accommodating features of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. Recognising diversity alone, however, is an insufficient means of socioeconomic and political disparities. Liberals therefore need to better register that disadvantage is sometimes experienced differently by different groups. Moreover, this cannot be overcome by way of policies configured towards individuals alone, in a manner that ignores how disadvantages occur at a group level. Experience throughout the EU shows that the most effective public policies are those that take the community context into account. A genuinely democratic public sphere can only thrive if minorities (as well as majorities) feel confident enough to participate and audible enough to contribute. This includes religious minorities too.

So this brings us to the role of religion. Europe is an increasingly religiously diverse continent which, more often than not, has given religion a place within the public square. Newer religious minorities should not therefore be deterred from developing publically recognised infrastructures. This can generate forms of civil society capital that are able to contribute to the well-being of society as a whole.