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Minorities and the National Ethos

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This essay focuses on the question of how to curb the tension between the rights of members of minorities and the particularistic values of the national community. The essay first examines a radical multicultural treatment of this issue and shows it to be unattainable and inadvisable. The essay then proposes an alternative treatment, Diversity Within Unity, a societal design that combines the nurturing communities of minorities and of the majority and is more conducive to human flourishing. Diversity Within Unity assumes that all citizens will embrace a core of values while being welcomed to follow their own subcultures on other matters.

The relationship between minorities (whether native or immigrant) and the national community raises numerous issues that have been often explored, with various positions carefully spelled out. This essay focuses on one key question: how can the inevitable tension between the rights of members of minorities and the national particularistic values (or national ethos) be curbed?

On the context of these deliberations

It cannot be stressed enough that at issue here is not whether the rights of the members of these minorities should be fully respected or whether they should benefit from some kind of government-led affirmative action programmes, be compensated for past injustices or even whether minorities as groups ought to command some additional rights (Kymlicka, 1989). One can readily favour the minorities in all these regards and still not necessarily hold that the national community should significantly attenuate, let alone give up, its national ethos.

The term national ethos refers to the particularistic values, traditions, identity and vision of the future (or 'destiny') of the given nation. The term 'nation' implies a community invested in a state. Communities are social collectivities whose members are tied to one another by bonds of affection and at least a core of shared values (Etzioni, 1996, p. 127). The term is best contrasted with the notion of national character, which tends to imply that all the members of a given nation have the same basic psychological profile and the same behavioural traits. In contrast national ethos merely suggests that the relevant collectivity has the said attributes, but many members may not internalise them nor view them in a positive light. Hence, the fact that in a given nation there are some groups – say Native Americans in the US or Kurds in Turkey – who do not see themselves as part of the national community, or who may seek to form a nation of their own, does not belie

the fact that most citizens' first loyalty in political matters is devoted to 'the' nation. However, if there is no sizeable majority that is committed to the nation, if for instance most citizens of Belgium see themselves first as Walloons or Flemings, it follows that Belgium is not much of a nation. The same is true for the Kurds, Shia and Sunnis in Iraq and for the various groups that make up Afghanistan. (The phrase 'not much of a nation' may seem too colloquial, but it serves to capture the thesis that being a nation is variable and not a dichotomy. The extent to which a state has the features of *a* community, and hence is a nation, varies from one state to another and over time. Thus the US became much more of a nation after the American Civil War and the post-war reconstruction period than it was before.)

The context of these deliberations is nations because despite strong arguments and major efforts to form more encompassing communities, especially in Europe, the nation continues to be the community that often commands the loyalty of the overwhelming majority of the citizens in cases of conflict between the nation and these more extensive communities. As Anthony Smith of the London School of Economics put it, 'who will feel European in the depths of their being, and who will willingly sacrifice themselves for so abstract an ideal? In short, who will die for Europe?' (Smith, 1995, p. 139) In contrast, Alasdair MacIntyre's statement that to ask people to die for their country is like asking them to die for the telephone company (Horton and Mendus, 1994, p. 303) seems sociologically particularly uninformed.

True, less encompassing communities, especially ethnic groups, such as the Basques, Scots and Walloons, often command even stronger loyalties than the nation. However, given that the matters at issue are sorted out largely in national courts and legislatures and more generally in national politics, the nation is for many countries the arena in which the issues at hand are worked out.

Practically all the examples and evidence cited below are from nations considered as constitutional democracies because only in such nations – ones that respect rights (by definition) – can one explore the relationship between rights and the national ethos. However, this normative analysis applies equally to other nations, although of course they must first develop their commitments to rights before they face the tensions such commitments pose for the relationship between rights and the national ethos.

Abolish the ethos?

The thesis

Radical multiculturalists advocate resolving this tension by abolishing the particularistic values of nations, that is, those values which differentiate the one national community from another. This entails 'neutralising' their distinct sense of history, identity and future, in short their national ethos. They argue that the state should strive for normative neutrality centred around the protection of rights that all share, and should not foster a distinct conception of the common good and the particularistic commitments it entails. Or, that the values to be promoted should be those that ease the said conflict, such as tolerance, diversity, rights and due process.

To illustrate: In 1999, the prominent British historian Linda Colley delivered a lecture entitled 'Britishness in the 21st Century' as part of then prime minister Tony Blair's series of 'Millennium Lectures'. She argued that given an increasingly diverse population, and the bitterness and alienation caused by the 'ancestral and visceral' idea of British identity, this identity should be discarded and replaced by a renovated 'political and functional' idea of British citizenship (Colley, 2003). A similar vision was promoted in 2002, when the political theorist Lord Bhikhu Parekh chaired the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, whose widely discussed report concluded that because the United Kingdom had become a territory which English, Scottish, Welsh, West Indian, Pakistani and other such groups inhabit like tribes resting next to each other with little in common and follow different sets of values, in order to avoid offending or injuring any of these groups, the government should avoid promoting any set notion of national identity and culture (Parekh, 2000).

Political theorists like Etienne Tassin, in an effort to reconcile social inclusion and political legitimacy, have promoted a type of 'constitutional patriotism' which 'refuses any convergence between culture and politics' (Laborde, 2002, p. 596). According to these theorists, allegiance to institutions and respect for justice and rights should be valued over a sense of shared associations, language and culture.

Jamie Mayerfeld of the University of Washington goes further than even many radical multiculturalists, stating that almost all forms of group identity are undesirable, national identity being by far the worst. He suggests that people should be motivated by a type of 'civic consciousness' in which citizens would 'be united by a commitment to a constitutional order that protects individual rights, authorizes a fair scheme of social co-operation, and establishes procedures for democratic decision-making' (Mayerfeld, 1998, pp. 576–577). According to Mayerfeld, 'principle, not identity, should be the glue that binds the polity' (Mayerfeld, 1998, p. 557). (Along similar lines, several liberals argue that the state of Israel must give up its Jewishness because otherwise the Israeli Palestinian minority will not feel fully at home, and they will continue to see themselves as second-class citizens.[1] One such argument can be found in Bernard Avishai's *The Hebrew Republic* (2008).)

Empirical concerns

An empirical study of this matter, I suggest, would show that although a national ethos can be edited or recast (in effect, it continually is), it cannot be abolished outright; a nation cannot avoid institutionalising one set of particularistic values or another.

The issue at hand can be readily illustrated by exploring national policies regarding the weekly day of rest. If a nation rules that all businesses must be closed on Sunday – this offends the sensibilities of those Jews for whom Saturday is the day of rest, and Muslims, for whom it is Friday. At first it may seem that the state could become neutral on this matter by allowing those who prefer it to open their businesses on Sunday as long as they close them on some other day of the week. However, given that public institutions such as the government offices, courts, mail delivery, etc. will be closed on Sunday, along with the majority of the businesses if we are dealing

with a nation in which there is a Christian majority, minorities would still feel out of place.[2] They are like those pupils in a public school in countries in which prayers are conducted who are not required to participate – which was a widespread practice in the United States until quite recently. These pupils feel awkward and are often subject to social discrimination by their peers.

Only if all shops, especially all public offices, were closed on all three days would the state come close to attaining the kind of neutrality sought by radical multiculturalists, with regard to days of rest. (That is, unless radical multiculturalists should also fight for those atheist minorities who feel offended by such stately treatment of religion.)

Even more difficult to imagine is how one would treat all holidays that have a particularistic meaning, such as Christmas, Easter, Independence Day (which in the case of Israel, Israeli Palestinians know as Catastrophe Day) and Columbus Day (which troubles some Native Americans) (BBC News, 2008; Milloy, 2004).[3] Reference is not merely to actions of the state, but to common norms. For instance, on Atonement Day – the holiest of holidays for Jews – driving is not banned by Israeli law; nevertheless, the entire Jewish population refrains from driving, including the adamant secularists. Israeli Palestinians can drive their cars anywhere they want on that day, but there is no way to make them feel that this Jewish holiday is not a special national day and that they are not outsiders in some way.

Whether a state bans or permits gay marriages, it is far from neutral. In the first case, it extends the institutionalising of individual rights, ignoring the values ands sentiments of sizeable religious minorities and its own historical traditions; in the second case, it refuses to extend the institutionalisation of individual rights, sticks to its historical traditions and refuses to heed a growing segment of its progressive citizens.

Nor can one neutralise the particularistic effects of the 'mother' tongue (or tongues). Multiculturalists correctly point out that the primary language of a given nation contains a particularistic bias. If the tongue is English, people will be more inclined to read books, magazines, follow news and even identify with nations whose primary language is English. In contrast, if it is French, Russian, Chinese or some other, their biases would run in a different direction. Hence, conflicts over which language should be the dominant one tend to be highly emotional and on occasion violent (*Washington Post*, 1986; Huntington, 2004, pp. 166–167; Reuters, 1986). Attempts to neutralise the issue by making two or more languages co-equal (e.g. in Canada and in Switzerland) still leave a particularistic bias due to those languages that are not chosen and tend to fail, as one language remains the dominant one (e.g. English in Canada, and German in Switzerland). In short, the rights of the members of minorities can be fully respected, but from an empirical perspective, the particularistic conceptions of the common good invested in the national community, the national ethos, cannot be abolished. They can only be modified and attenuated. And if one approximates such neutrality, it often means that there is only a very weak national ethos, which in turn leads to civil strife, as the ethos is a major source of sociological cohesion that keeps nations stable and one.

Prudential concerns

In addition to the empirical facts that lead one to doubt the attainability of the kind of society that the radical multiculturalists advocate, there are prudential reasons not to seek to erase the national ethos despite its particularistic normative content. Public policies which seek to abolish the national ethos are perceived as a major attack on identity and psychological well-being by the majority of the citizens (Huntington, 2004, pp. 166–167).

Radical multicultural drives seem to be one major reason a growing number of members of the majority in many countries in Europe are supporting conservative, or right-wing, or even nationalistic political parties and movements which promise to restore the traditional values and which have strong anti-minority (and/or anti-immigrant) positions. Thus, parties and policies which are perceived as attacking national identity – and more generally, the national ethos – add to other forces which are fanning xenophobia and nativism (Huntington, 2004, pp. 176–177; Pettigrew, 1998).

Given the very wide opposition to erasing the national ethos, even if such public policies were somehow introduced, they would be unlikely to be sustained. Indeed, Tony Blair, a master politician, flirted with Linda Colley's ideas on vacating Britishness for only a very short period (Buerkle, 1999; Kane, 2007; Wintour, 2000), and no other public leader of any import has picked them up in the UK in the subsequent years. Lord Parekh's report was roundly criticised and its multicultural recommendations were not adopted or even seriously considered. On the contrary, citizenship tests which assess the extent to which new immigrants at least show familiarity with the particularistic culture have been introduced in Britain, Holland and Germany, among other nations.

Normative objections

Although a national ethos can be attenuated to some extent and often to good effect (e.g. when nationalism is reduced), and it can be recast over time, by taking into account the values and preferences of minorities – if significantly eroded, the nation, as a community invested in a state, will lose its capacity to provide human nurturing and to contribute to human flourishing.

Mountains of data, recently reviewed and augmented by Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama, and long before them by Robert Bellah and his associates and scores of other sociologists, show that when communities are thin or absent, people suffer physically (e.g. are more prone to have a great variety of major illnesses as well as to recover from illness more slowly) and psychologically (e.g. are more prone to be depressed, have low self-esteem or be disoriented) (Bellah et al., 1985; Buber, 1958 and 1970; Fukuyama, 1999; Durkheim, 1961; Putnam, 2000, pp. 326–335; Tönnies, 1955 and 1957). The absence of communal bonds causes people to feel detached, alienated and powerless. Such a community deficit leads some to withdraw from society, or act out in antisocial ways. For hundred of millions of people, nations are a major source of such communal affiliation, even if they are merely imagined communities. Communitarians have long shown that individual identity – a core element of the liberal image of the person – is insufficiently

explained by liberal philosophy and is profoundly linked to community. Michael Sandel notes that we cannot understand ourselves but 'as the particular persons we are – as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons and daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic' (Sandel, 1998, p. 179).

Our capacity to act as reasoned people relies greatly on our being anchored in communities. Moreover, community-wide conceptions of the good provide criteria used in finding which shared decision-making and which public policies are legitimate. They thus help curb strife and gridlock.

Communities, importantly, also provide informal social controls that reinforce the moral commitments of their members and which in turn help make for a largely voluntary social order. The most effective way to reinforce norms of behaviour is to build on the fact that people have a strong need for continuous approval from others, especially from those with whom they have affective bonds of attachment (Wrong, 1994). Communities, thus, can strengthen adherence to social norms. Neo-communitarians see this persuasive power as a key function of communities, in part because it allows the role of the state and its coercive means to be greatly curtailed, as it is replaced by drawing on informal social controls built into communities, to promote the common good (Etzioni, 1996). Given that the national ethos helps to maintain the national community, it helps to maintain this source of human flourishing.

Theoretically, a loss of national ethos can be compensated for by providing a new community which is more encompassing, say a regional one like the EU. However, so far, all such community-building endeavours have failed to provide a new community thick enough to provide the kind of flourishing that national communities provide. Furthermore, as the EU's difficulties in making Turkey a member and in absorbing nations such as Romania and Bulgaria make clear, regional communities have a particularistic ethos of their own.

To the extent that attempts are made to replace the national ethos with those of smaller communities within one and the same state, one finds that such developments lead to difficulties in forming state-wide policies, which require shared core values and a commitment to the common good to justify inevitable sacrifices. At worst, such developments invite secession and civil war. The first situation is illustrated by Belgium; the second by the break-up of Yugoslavia, as well as the civil wars which rage among ethnic, confessional and other tribal-like communities in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, in parts of Pakistan and in other states in which the national community is weak.

Finally, it is hard to see principled reasons why the sensibilities of the majority should be disregarded as the way to address those of the minorities. This is especially true, as we shall see shortly, because there are other ways to proceed. To reiterate one more time, reference here is not to rights. The rights of all members of minority groups are to be fully respected, whether or not such observation discomforts the majority. They should not be denied the right to vote, assemble, worship, and, even if, for example, the majority fears that a given minority will use these rights to promote terrorism.[4] (Note, reference is to speaking, not acting. Minorities have no right to act violently).

Given, as we have seen, that the flourishing of all people entails nurturing communities, *societal designs which combine the nurturing communities both of minorities and of the majority are more conducive to flourishing than those which require abolishing the national ethos and which offend the sensibilities of the majority*.

Diversity Within Unity

Diversity Within Unity (DWU) is a societal design which meets the requirement just laid out (Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies, 2001). Essentially it assumes that all citizens will embrace a core of values (the unity element) while being not just allowed, but welcomed, to follow their own subcultures on other matters (the diversity elements). The DWU thus differs from both radical multiculturalism, which maximises diversity, and full-blown assimilation, which maximises unity.[5]

I already outlined in some detail the reasons why radical multiculturalism should be rejected. The same holds for full-blown assimilation, which demands that immigrants and other minority members assimilate to the point that they become indistinct from native citizens (a common expectation in France, for instance). Such a degree of assimilation is often difficult to achieve and unnecessary for social peace and community building, and it entails sacrificing the culturally enriching effects of diversity.

The images used for depicting these positions are telling. The melting pot is used to depict a society in which all differences are melted down. A salad bowl is used to depict a society in which various groups are tossed together but each maintains its original colour and flavour. Diversity Within Unity is akin to a mosaic which is richer for the difference in size and colour of its pieces but which also has a shared frame and glue, which can be recast but not abandoned. (In the United States, in numerous ethnic events, both the American flag and that of the country of origin are displayed, and the national anthem of both countries is sung. If one overlooks either element, one tends to arouse considerable consternation as either not being a 'good American', or as not loyal to one's subgroup. The very widespread use of a hyphen to indicate both one's origin and one's Americanism is another expression of the DWU design.)

Next, a list is provided as to which elements belong in the unity element of the DWU design and which to the diversity element. However, it is important to keep in mind that: (1) even if one divides this list in a different manner, the approach itself may be still of merit. (2) The elements that are considered essential for the unity part itself can be recast over time. (3) Finally, one should acknowledge that although I suggest that DWU is a preferable societal design compared to the others already cited, it is likely not to satisfy fully either the minorities or the majority, as it seeks adaptations from both.

The next step is to sort out which elements are part of the framework, and which can be particularised or remain particularistic. On the unity side: minorities must accept the core values of the society (including respect for individual rights, mutual tolerance and civility and respect for the environment); obey the laws (until they are changed, if a given minority considers them a violation of their values); learn the nation's language(s); and share not only in the assets history has bequeathed to

the nation, but also in its burdens. For example, as an immigrant to America I cannot claim that I had nothing to do with slavery and hence have no need to concern myself with making up for past injustices, and yet also claim that I am entitled to the rights that the Founding Fathers institutionalised. Similarly, a new German cannot pride himself on the achievements of Kant, Goethe and Bach without also sharing responsibility for the Holocaust. In short, minorities cannot reject the national ethos, although they can seek, and often succeed, to modify it. (The ways this can be achieved – as well as the difficulties involved – can be studied when various national states undertake to rewrite the textbooks used in schools, which include parts that offend various minorities, and when debates take place as to which works colleges should include in their 'core' curriculum (Carlson, 1995, pp. 407–431; Gillespie, 2003; Huntington, 2004, pp. 173–177; Snyder, 2003).)

On the diversity side: there is no sociological reason to prevent people from practising their own religion or studying a second language that appeals to them either as the language of the country of origin (in the case of immigrants) or to which they have historical attachments (e.g. native minorities such as the Catalans). Similarly, differences in cuisine, dance, arts and music enrich the national community rather than undermine it. Personal legal matters and personal disputes can be settled by various ethnic/religious/tribal authorities, including marriage, divorce, burial and mediation, as long as (1) all parties involved truly consent to submit to these authorities, and (2) no individual rights are violated. (This is a common practice regarding Jewish minorities in Europe, and it is being extended to Muslim ones.)

DWU favours allowing minorities institutionalised opportunities to promote changes in all these elements through actions from seeking to change the laws to reconstructing and revising the national history (for instance, by changing the textbooks used to teach it); from adjusting their new nation's relationship to other nations of particular interest to fighting for social justice. However, as long as such changes have not been adopted, the relevant laws and public policies must be heeded.[6]

At the same time, every group in society is free to maintain its distinct subculture – those policies, habits and institutions that do not conflict with the shared core – as well as a strong measure of loyalty to its country of origin, as long as this does not trump loyalty to the society in which it lives if these loyalties come into conflict. Cuisine, by itself of limited import, serves as an effective symbol for my point. A generation ago, there was a national cuisine in many nations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, although there were always local variations and changes over time. One still can identify the national cuisines today, but in most cities a large variety of other cuisines are prepared and consumed both privately and in public places such as restaurants, conferences and banquets. There is no reason to suggest that anything was lost in the process, or that all citizens should be expected, say in Britain, to enjoy warm beer and eat shepherd's pie. In short, the diversity of cuisine enriches a society rather than threatening its unity. The same holds for many other diversity elements already listed.

The *addition* of ethnic holidays to the national, 'unity' holidays also enriches; for instance, the celebration of St Patrick's Day and Cinco de Mayo (Bloom and Etzioni,

2004, pp. 18–19). Ethnic minorities can also 'sit out' national holidays, as Israeli Palestinians do, and a fair number of African Americans did, in the days when they celebrated Kwanza and not Christmas. (Kwanza used to be much more of a withdrawal and protest holiday than it has become in recent years (Bloom and Etzioni, 2004, pp. 19–20).)

It is true that if the DWU design is applied the members of many minorities will tend to exhibit some sense of deprivation, based in whole or in part on societal realities. These realities can be addressed, for instance by certain kinds of affirmative action, as well as various rituals and even reparations (ranging from apologies for slavery or for the injustice done to Japanese-Americans to including imams in opening prayers of public events). However, one should recognise that although these societal realities – and sentiments they generate – can be treated, they may persist to some extent for considerable periods of time. Similarly, there are likely to be differences at the margins about exactly where the line lies between the diversity and the unity elements, for instance regarding animal rights. (For example, ritual slaughter as practised by various religious groups is considered a violation of animal rights by some authorities but not by others. In the United States, the line was partially drawn after a minority religious group brought a successful case to the Supreme Court (*Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye* v. *City of Hialeah*, 1993, 508 US 520).)

Applying the DWU design to schools raises many complex questions concerning the balance between required and elective courses, parallel school systems (for instance Jewish and so-called Koran schools as well as bilingual education), public financing of private schools and many other issues that have been explored elsewhere and cannot be treated within the limits of this essay (Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies, 2001; Etzioni, 2007, pp. 186–192; Etzioni, 2006, pp. 279–281).

The DWU design often benefits when considerable local autonomy is granted to those minorities that are concentrated in given areas. Examples include British devolution to the Scots and Welsh, Canadian devolution to the Quebecois, and Spanish devolution to the Basques and Catalans. However, this assumes that these minorities will refrain from violence, not secede (as the Slovaks did in Czechoslovakia) and will embrace the unity elements. Attempts to form separate sovereign territories for minority groups within the nation state in which they constitute a minority – for instance as Henry Milton did with his call for the Republic of New Africa (Wilkinson, 2006) – violate the basic DWU design.

The DWU design is familiar to Americans to the point that it may be considered a natural part of social reality, although the design has been criticised from both multicultural and right-wing perspectives (Huntington, 2004; Swain, 2004 and 2007). Moreover, a fair number of limited attempts have been made in the United States to break away from this design and to move towards other ones. Other nations, including most European ones and Japan, find the DWU design much more alien, one that may suit 'immigration societies' like the United States, but not their nations. They tend to favour strong assimilationist designs, especially in France, where even collection of information along racial lines is illegal and minorities are given little autonomy. However, growing immigration and increased minority membership is forcing these nations to consider changes in their societal designs and move towards the DWU one, whether or not they welcome these changes. At

the same time, attempts to treat the problem at hand by trying to abolish the national ethos have practically died out, a loss – for reasons laid out in the first part of this essay – that should not be mourned.

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Notes

1 Reference here is to those million or so Israeli Palestinians who live in what is considered Israel proper and who have shown no intention of joining a Palestinian state, not to those on the West Bank and Gaza.

2 This matter had still not been settled by 2008. For instance, citizens of a Catholic part of Brooklyn, New York, have lodged complaints against a flea market which is open in their neighbourhood on Sundays. They suggested that it should be open on Saturday instead (Konigsberg, 2008).

3 Columbus Day is a holiday celebrated in the United States in honour of explorer Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas.

4 As the solution this article proposes rests on the assumption that the basic rights of minority groups will be fully respected, those who live in constitutional democracies will more easily relate to it than people in theocracies. Regardless, this is a normative article, and should apply to all peoples.

5 Diversity Within Unity is not to be confused with unity in diversity, which is one of those oxymorons only a politician could love. It implies that increased diversity by itself will lead to greater unity, which is at the least a very different idea from the one advanced here.

6 I leave for another day the question of the difference between native minorities and immigrants (immigrants are not to be confused with asylum seekers, who have fewer rights).

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