



Identity, Politics and Public Policy

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Challenging ideas – Changing policy

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Please see www.identities.org.uk for further information about the research studies described in this paper and for a list of the publications from the ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme.

1. Introduction

Questions of identity arise continuously in contemporary public debate. In the last year we have seen controversy sparked by the appearance of the leader of the far right British National Party on the BBC's *Question Time* programme. An attempted protest against British involvement in Afghanistan at Wootton Bassett provoked outrage and led the Home Secretary to proscribe the group responsible. Even popular television programmes like *The X Factor* and *Strictly Come Dancing* have recently generated public rows about race, age and gender.

The growing salience of identity in public discourse, and the range of identity-related questions being discussed, is a consequence of major transformations to the way we live and work. The last decades of the twentieth century saw a massive expansion in the movement of labour, goods and capital. Many have benefited from the wider range of cultural experiences now available and from the economic prosperity that more open markets have delivered. At the same time older cultures and solidarities based around neighbourhood, work, class and nation have been weakened in a world that is much more mobile and less predictable. These changes have brought with them increased tensions and insecurities, which have been played out in new forms of identity politics.

Why are questions of identity so important? What, if anything, should politicians be doing about them? Should policymakers leave people's identities alone or, given their importance to our shared life as citizens, help shape them in some way? If policymakers should act in this terrain, how should they do so and what challenges do they face?

This paper addresses these questions by surveying new evidence from five years of research under the Economic and Social Research Council's Identities and Social Action programme (see www.identities.org.uk). This programme sought to understand new trends in identity formation, their causes and their wider implications for society. The outcomes of this research programme are the subject of two edited volumes published last year, *Identity in the 21st Century: New Trends in Changing Times* and *Theorizing Identities and Social Action* (Wetherell 2009a and b)¹.

The 25 projects that made up the programme worked with over 12,000 participants across the UK and employed a wide range of methodological approaches, using quantitative surveys, in-depth qualitative interviews, focus groups, ethnography, oral history, textual analysis and studies of natural interaction. The programme crossed numerous disciplinary boundaries, involving psychologists, sociologists, geographers, anthropologists and social policy experts.

The purpose of this short paper is to understand what this substantive body of new evidence can tell us about some of the most important public policy questions that involve questions of identity – and what, if anything, politicians and our wider society should be doing about them.

1. Palgrave, the publisher of the two volumes of programme findings *Identity in the 21st Century: New Trends in Changing Times* and *Theorizing Identities and Social Action*, is offering a discount of £20.00 off each book to readers of this report and also £20 off Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor's monograph *Moving Histories of Class and Community* on the findings from their research on English estates. These discounts can be accessed using the promo code WIDENTITY2009a when ordering from palgrave.com. Further information on the books can be found at: www.palgrave.com.

2. What is identity and why is it so important?

In giving things identities we gather together characteristics about the world so that we can make better sense of it. In naming or identifying things, we create generalisations and connect meanings to symbols and representations in a way that helps guide us through a complex world. It seems evidently difficult to lead a human life without making use of these general markers: ‘she is a woman’, ‘he is a man’, ‘that is a dog’ and so forth. The practice of identity plays a crucial role in making our lives intelligible.

Identity is best understood as a process, rather than a thing. Each day we are involved in the practice of ‘identification’: ascribing names and labels to people and things. Identities are both contingent, and organised and predictable. Judith Butler expresses this insight well in her notion of ‘performativity’ as a ‘practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint’ (Butler 2004: 1). Some sources of identity are difficult to change, such as the colour of our skin or our sex, and tend to lead to rather resilient understandings of ‘who we are’, formed through constant repetition and interaction with others. Other sources, such as our sporting allegiances or musical tastes, are more open to personal crafting and design.

In social science research a distinction is sometimes made between the study of personal and social identities. In truth this is a rather arbitrary distinction: identity is always both about ourselves and about how we are positioned in relation to the world. Our identities are always formed both by our own agency and by our interaction with others. Identity is always about our own personal biography and the wider collective practices in which we participate. For this reason, identity is studied by a wide range of social science disciplines, ranging from ethnographic studies of individual lives to large-scale quantitative surveys encompassing the attitudes and behaviour of thousands of people.

The knowledge and psychological functions of identity are clear: we identify people and things so that we can make a complex world – and our own subjective experience (our selfhood) – intelligible and coherent. But identities are also important because of the ways they affect human behaviour more widely. Identity is a personal matter but it is also a collective force in the world.

Some of the great political challenges of our day come down to questions of identity. Sometimes we worry that identities are too weak: for example, we are concerned that the old bonds of community have been weakened, making our lives less neighbourly and connected. We are worried about a world in which fewer people participate in public affairs, by voting or taking part in the associations of local civic life, and this is in part related to a concern about the weakening sense of allegiance we feel to national and local communities.

At other times we worry that identities are too strong: the rise of radical political Islam, the growing vote for the BNP, postcode wars between urban youth gangs. It worries us that there are people who feel too intensely attached to their identities and are willing to bring harm to others as a consequence. It seems that identity becomes a political problem when there is both too much and too little of it.

In the following sections we survey some of the most important identity trends that have emerged in recent years in the UK and discuss their wider implications. We then go on to discuss what role, if any, public policy should play in the realm of identity and set out those characteristics of identity-making that pose particular challenges for policymakers. In so doing we hope to help enable policymakers to act in more informed and nuanced ways in this complicated terrain.

3. New trends in changing times

British society has undergone significant change in the last quarter of a century. There are two important trends that help to frame this brief survey. First, there is the trend towards what social theorists like Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck have described as 'individualisation' (Beck 1992, Giddens 1991). The so-called 'individualisation thesis' holds that neo-liberal labour markets, the casualisation of work, the decline of heavy industries, the changing nature of family life and patterns of cultural globalization have uprooted people from older communal ways of life. Individualisation is thought to cut through old bonds of common fate, mutual dependence and trust, as well as long-standing political and social commitments linked to neighbourhood, nation and class. This has resulted in identities that are looser, more negotiable and more autonomously fashioned. The flip side of this greater freedom is more insecurity and risk as life becomes less certain and predictable.

Beck went as far as to state that in this new world 'community is dissolved in the acid bath of competition' (Beck 1992: 94). One does not have to sustain that rather extreme generalisation to accept the important kernel of truth contained within it. Most of us would recognise that we live in a more mobile society than that of previous generations and indeed empirical studies show that many indicators of social capital such as inter-personal trust and civic participation have declined (Halpern 2000).

The second general trend that provides an important context for this discussion is the shift towards much greater cultural diversity, largely due to the great upswing in migration that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the process of economic globalization. Whereas in the 1970s more people were leaving Britain than migrating to it, in recent years we have seen sustained and high levels of net immigration. Partly as a result of that, Britain's ethnic minority population increased from just 4 per cent in 1981 to 8 per cent in the 2001 census, and is expected to rise to a higher level in the next census. Moreover, the profile of Britain's new migrant populations is much more mixed than that of the past, with continued migration from Commonwealth countries like Jamaica and Pakistan, but also many arrivals from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Some cities, such as London and Birmingham, have been described as not simply diverse but 'hyper-diverse' because of the vast range of communities that now reside there (Vertovec 2006). More than 300 languages are spoken in London's schools and more than 100 in most of our principal cities (Cantle 2005).

In many ways Britain has adapted well to such change. A 2005 survey found that only 25 per cent of Britons wanted to live in ethnically homogenous areas: that may seem high but it is much lower than most other European countries, with only four countries coming out with higher support for living in diverse communities (Rogers and Muir 2007). The casual open racism of the past has largely gone or is at least a major social taboo. Britain does seem to have successfully re-imagined itself as a multicultural nation: most people say that cultural diversity has made Britain a better place to live and when asked what it means to be British most people share a civic rather than an ethnic understanding of British national identity (ibid). Another positive sign is that the largest growing ethnic minority in Britain is mixed race, demonstrating a steady rise in the number of inter-racial relationships.

And yet as Britain has changed there have been signs of tension. The BNP, until now very much on the far right fringes of politics, won almost a million votes in the 2009 European elections, has two members in the European Parliament and dozens of councillors around the country. Opinion polls show that most people believe the Government's immigration policies are too permissive, which has led to a hardening of policy in recent years. In some parts of the country, notably the North West, some communities have been found to be living 'parallel lives', with very little daily contact between them. This has helped breed mutual suspicion and undermine community cohesion (Cantle 2001, Communities and Local Government 2009).

We now turn to how these two processes of individualisation and cultural diversification have affected identities in the UK and discuss what the wider implications of these changes might be.

Class and community

We can expect that the economic and social transformations described by Giddens and Beck in the late 1990s have inevitably had an effect on the old kind of class solidarities that used to mark British society: many heavy industries have gone, the labour movement is much weaker than it once was and work has become less of a common carrier of identity as people have moved into more diverse and less stable patterns of employment.

Remarkably, in this context Heath *et al* (2009) find that British people remain almost as able to allocate themselves into middle or working class categories as they were in the 1960s (see Table 1). The proportion of people being able to identify their class location without prompting was 48 per cent in 1964 – and it is still 45 per cent today. There are more middle class identifiers than there were, which would make sense given the decline in the number of manual occupations over that period. But at the level of simple class recognition, we seem to be as class conscious a society as we were 50 years ago.

	1964	1970	1974	1983	1987	1992	1997	2005
Unprompted: Middle class	14	16	17	20	16	16	20	20
Unprompted: Working class	34	25	25	33	30	29	31	25
Total unprompted	48	41	41	53	46	45	51	45
Prompted: Middle class	16	17	17	14	18	18	17	17
Prompted: Working class	31	38	38	27	31	30	30	32
Did not identify with any class	4	4	4	6	5	6	2	6
<i>No.</i>	832	731	2329	3637	3795	2672	2906	2102

The 'individualisation thesis' seems to hold more sway when we examine how class cashes out into people's wider attitudes. Heath *et al* find that people feel 'less close' to their social class than they used to: in 1963 more than half of people felt close to their social class, compared to around two fifths of people today (Heath *et al* 2009). Class also seems to be less important now in shaping people's political attitudes than it was, at least as measured by which political parties they vote for. While it is still true that working class people are more likely to vote Labour than any other party, they are less likely to do so than before and there has been a corresponding rise in the number of middle class people voting Labour.

The individualisation thesis is also qualified by research showing that people continue to search for sources of community and solidarity even following processes of economic dislocation. Valerie Walkerdine studied the lives of people in a post-industrial South Wales town following the closure of its traditional steel industry (Walkerdine 2009). Far from

finding the kind of atomised situation predicted by Giddens and Beck, she saw a strong desire among residents to stay in the town and build a better future there. Despite the loss of opportunities for work, and in particular a shared culture of work and therefore class, a sense of local allegiance remained strong. People pursued new employment opportunities locally, rather than going further afield, and there was a strong desire to rebuild a sense of town pride through renewed civic activism. Long-standing community loyalties may be more resilient than the individualisation thesis has posited.

The individualisation thesis also posited that changes to traditional family life would leave us with a more atomised society. However, while family may have been de-centred from our lives, other interpersonal relationships may have replaced it, in particular the growing importance of friendship groups. Christine Griffin *et al* (2009) found that friendship groups have become increasingly important as sites of collective identity, community and mutual support, as well as fun and enjoyment. In research into young people's drinking practices they found that young people strongly disavowed drinking alone (a sign of alcoholism and a social taboo) and were motivated towards sessional heavy drinking binges in large part by a desire to be in a community of friends who go out regularly, look after each other and 'have a laugh' together.

Ethnic conviviality

One important positive trend identified in the research is the emergence in Britain's large cities of what Paul Gilroy has described as a 'convivial culture'. As Gilroy puts it: 'in this convivial culture racial and ethnic differences have been rendered unremarkable...they have been able to become "ordinary". Instead of adding to the premium of race as political ontology and economic fate, people discover that the things which really divide them are much more profound: taste, lifestyle, leisure preferences' (Gilroy 2006: 39-40).

This is not to say that racism has ceased to exist in these places or that there are not ethnic penalties in terms of economic opportunities. But it is to say that in these hyper-diverse cities a cosmopolitan and open frame of mind seems to hold sway, with people from different ethnic backgrounds mixing seamlessly and ordinarily. This in turn produces its own self-fulfilling political dividend: an ordinary, everyday anti-racism.

There is much evidence from the research to back up this contention. Roxy Harris and Ben Rampton studied the everyday conversations of school pupils in an ethnically mixed London comprehensive. What is noticeable about these conversations is not the absence of race from their world – the school students do frequently reference racial and ethnic characteristics among their peer group. However, these references are banal and largely non-problematic (Harris and Rampton 2009).

Rod Earle and Coretta Phillips found that race operated at a largely banal level in a young men's prison in Kent. Again, this is not to say that there was no racism or evidence for systematic ethnic disadvantage in wider society, but there was a high level of mixing and prisoners from all backgrounds tended to share attachments to music and aspects of popular culture that reach across traditional ethnic categories. Instead of racial and ethnic points of reference, Earle and Phillips found that young prisoners' primary identifications were often around the localised spaces in which their lives had been lived before prison. There was a kind of 'postcode pride', based around particular estates, streets or neighbourhoods.

This 'neighbourhood nationalism' might be due to a desire to 'own' a locality, and especially the public spaces within it, which has been found in other research to be integral to young male sub-cultures. This manifests itself in 'gangs' or 'crews' who engage in territorial disputes with rivals. It has been argued that symbolic ownership of these areas helps otherwise disadvantaged young men to demonstrate status among their contemporaries and may also provide them with an important source of local belonging (Earle and Phillips 2009).

Englishness, immigration and cohesion

This convivial culture in our large cities exists in contrast to the emergence of inter-ethnic tensions elsewhere. Recent research for the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has found that community cohesion is low in a number of concentrated regional areas of England. The Government measures the level of community cohesion in an area by looking at the proportion of people who agree that 'in this area people from different backgrounds get along well together'. The results show in eight of the 325 areas the proportion of people supporting that claim falls below 60 per cent. Some of these regions have also seen rising support for the BNP in recent elections (CLG 2009).

Simon Clarke, Steve Garner and Rosie Gilmour looked at public attitudes in a number of largely ethnically white communities and found that there was widespread opposition to government immigration policies.

The authors found that opposition to immigration was rooted in a sense of both material and cultural injustice. There was a perception that immigrants are given an unfair preference in the allocation of housing and other aspects of the welfare state. This was combined with a sense of cultural injustice: the strong and vibrant cultures of minority groups (immigrant and minority groups tend to get conflated in these discussions) tend to be contrasted to a more weakly understood traditional white English culture. This majority culture was felt not to receive sufficient recognition or support from public authorities.

This brings us to the question of Englishness and how it has evolved in the context of a multicultural Britain. ippr's previous research has found a growing popularity of English as opposed to British national identity (Stone and Muir 2006, Lodge and Kenny forthcoming). In part this is a consequence of devolution and the rise of Scottish and Welsh national sentiment. In many realms, such as football or cricket, Englishness is given a largely civic rather than ethnic cast. However, it is also true that Englishness is a much more ethnicised national category than Britishness and that many people are articulating a sense of ethnic disadvantage through the prism of Englishness. There is a danger that for some, English national identity could morph into a kind of 'Alamo identity', a badge of resistance to a perceived elite-driven 'multiculturalism'.

These sentiments are also connected to a widely shared concern about the decline of traditional patterns of community life, affected by the processes of individualisation and economic restructuring discussed above. People often contrast how we live now with a time when you didn't have to lock your door, when people took care of each other's children and looked out for each other (Clarke *et al* 2009).

How we are able to respond simultaneously to both the rise of convivial cultures in some places, and greater insecurity and opposition to immigration in others, is one of the main contemporary challenges facing policymakers. It is to that policy response we now turn.

4. Identity and policy

How should policymakers act in the terrain of identity? One position would be to say that the state should remain neutral when it comes to identity formation and let people choose their identities for themselves.

Although this is an attractive argument, it is difficult to sustain under scrutiny. First, it is not really plausible. All states, even liberal ones, are inevitably involved in shaping our identities in various ways and can never be wholly neutral. Governments make decisions that have an important impact on our understanding of who we are: from what is taught in schools to which public holidays we should have, from how we mark historical events to our relationships with other countries. Whether they adopt a multi-culturalist approach or seek to foster a stronger sense of national identity or a combination of the two, they are actively involved in the business of identity-making.

Second, given the rise in various problematic forms of identity politics, whether this be radical forms of political Islamism or highly ethnicised understandings of English identity, it has become increasingly difficult to argue that the state should leave this question for others. For example, as ippr will argue in a forthcoming report on the place of England in a devolved UK, by remaining silent on questions of English national identity, politicians may have created a vacuum in which ‘Englishness’ can increasingly be defined as ‘whiteness’ and as a social identity that is perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be disadvantaged in relation to others (see Lodge and Kenny, forthcoming).

So, if there is a legitimate role for policymakers in this space, what does research in this area tell us about how they might act more or less effectively?

Diversity

The first point that emerges from the research is that identity is a scene of tremendous diversity and variation – and this makes policymaking fraught with difficulty and prone to unintended effects, such as the emergence of conflicting parallel trends, as we discussed above. For example, some parts of the country are ever more at ease with diversity and a more cosmopolitan way of life, while for others change brings insecurity. Addressing the identity concerns of both these audiences simultaneously is difficult.

Moreover, everybody possesses multiple identities, meaning that generalisations about individuals and groups very often fail to engage with how people actually experience their identities. So, for example, British public discourse since 9/11 has been full of talk about the ‘Muslim community’. In fact we know that there are many different Muslim communities in Britain – and within those communities not everyone walks around primarily thinking of themselves as a Muslim most of the time. The same could be said of ‘the white working class’, a group that tends to be caricatured endlessly in media commentary. This group is spoken of as if everyone who falls into this category shares a cohesive world view, distinct to that of other ethnic and class-based groups.

The complexity and diversity of identity patterns creates gaps between policy and practice at all levels. Identity talk in political speeches and policies aimed at various identity-based groups tend to assume homogeneity, making overly simplistic assumptions about people and therefore adopting policies that fail to gain traction with people and at times backfire.

Agency

A second important point is that identity is not a policy area in which the state can simply pull a lever and expect something to happen down the ‘production line’. Of course most policymaking is not like that: it is rarely as simple as passing a law here or spending some money there and then you get the outcomes you hoped for. This is because in most areas of policy, the public itself has to participate in delivering the outcomes governments want –

whether in terms of reducing the numbers of teenage pregnancies, cutting obesity rates or increasing the amount households recycle.

This difficulty is even more pronounced in the area of identity simply because identifying with something always requires the exercise of individual agency. We invest in our identities psychologically and we have to want to do so – this is not something that can be brought about by the state or anyone else in a mechanistic fashion.

This is another reason why top-down approaches to fostering identity tend to fail. Take, for example, Gordon Brown's initiative to promote Britishness. The Government has talked of establishing a British Bill of Rights and Responsibilities, the subject of a recent green paper. One of the objectives of this Bill would be to help promote a common understanding of what it means to be British, giving Britons of all backgrounds a common source of political identity. The Government clearly has its eye on the American approach to patriotism: a relatively inclusive civic identity that can bind together people from different backgrounds because it has its source in a constitution based on universal values.

However, the difference is that the American Constitution was forged during a period of revolutionary upheaval and it is a document for which many Americans gave their lives. A British Bill of Rights that has been devised in Whitehall and subject to a brief consultation with various focus groups is unlikely to lead to a step change in community cohesion in Bolton or Barking.

Identity's Janus face

A third difficulty in this territory is that policymakers often ignore the 'Janus face' of identity, which means that well-intentioned interventions can have unintended consequences. Social psychology tells us that there are always two sides to identity: me and you, them and us. Identities are always formed through comparisons of similarity and difference. Research by Schmid *et al* (2009) in Northern Ireland has found that solidarity within a group is often correlated strongly and perhaps in part caused by hatred, prejudice and rejection towards those outside the group. Often the best way of decreasing hostility between two groups is to find a third group that they dislike even more than each other – thus setting off a whole new round of problems.

In Schmid *et al's* studies in Belfast, for example, neighbourhoods that were either all Protestant or all Catholic had enviable levels of within-group cohesion but the people living in more mixed neighbourhoods expressed much less prejudice to other religious and ethnic groups. The social psychology of solidarity within groups and the social psychology of good relations between groups can pull forcefully against each other.

In the final section we look at what policymakers can learn from this analysis.

5. Conclusions: approaches for policymakers

The characteristics of identity-making discussed above – diversity, agency and identity’s Janus face – mean that clunky and top-down interventions should be avoided. But what can policymakers do in this difficult territory, where careful nuance and balance seem to be required?

The first point is that there is a need to recognise the complexity and variation that is inherent in this terrain. For example, an appeal for a stronger sense of British national identity might well be motivated by a desire for some kind of encompassing identity to help bind society together, but it may be heard differently by different communities. What looks balanced and thoughtful in the text of a ministerial speech can come across very differently when reflected through the prism of a sensationalist media headline.

It should be stressed, however, that recognising the complexity of these matters is not a reason for not intervening at all. But it is a reason to be sceptical of top-down efforts to build identities that can be rather clunky, and, unless they go with the grain of public sentiment, be met with indifference or resistance. Something like this has happened to Gordon Brown’s ‘Britishness’ agenda, which never caught on with the British public.

The case for recognising complexity is made stronger by findings from Northern Ireland that show that those people with more complex and multiple identities are also those who are much less likely to be prejudiced against others. This is true not just in terms of prejudice towards Catholics or Protestants, but also for those from different backgrounds more widely (Schmid *et al* 2009). In other words there are empirical grounds for believing, as Amartya Sen has argued, that the less we ‘homogenise’ and simplify identity talk the better (Sen 2008).

This leads us to a second point: the best interventions may well come from ‘scaling up’ from the grassroots. Jane Wills’s study of the case of the London Citizens movement in the capital is relevant here (Wills 2009). London Citizens is a movement of church groups, mosques, temples, trades unions and other community organisations in London that has successfully united to campaign around issues of common concern. For example, they have successfully applied social pressure on big financial and public sector institutions to pay a living wage, over and above the statutory minimum. They also secured a commitment from the main mayoral candidates to support an amnesty for undocumented migrant workers – which is now the position of the current mayor Boris Johnson.

In building such a movement London Citizens had to directly address one of the major contemporary challenges discussed above: in places characterised by high levels of cultural diversity – which in London’s case is ‘hyper-diversity’ – how can you build a sense of shared citizenship and community? London Citizens did this not by ignoring difference, but by building it into a campaign with cross-community objectives. Its activists participate through their church, mosque or trade union, the places where they feel most comfortable and with which they have a strong sense of communal allegiance. But they then become part of a common campaign for change that fosters real meaningful relationships between members from very different backgrounds: evangelical Christians campaigning alongside left-wing trade unionists, for example, to secure a living wage for cleaners.

Wills found that over time an encompassing ‘London Citizens’ identity – the kind of civic identity politicians are so keen to promote – began to emerge out of those relationships and campaigns. This is an example of the scaling up of multiple and diverse identities into something that bridges difference.

What might this mean in policy terms? Better than broadcasting identity talk from Whitehall, civic identities are more likely to take hold when they are constructed through civic activism on the ground. Government, local and national, can encourage an active public realm and a

healthy democracy in the places that are close to people, where they can most easily participate. None of this is new, of course – nor easy, given the trend towards individualisation described earlier. Despite being challenging, the process of civic and democratic renewal is perhaps the best route we have available to constructing civic identities of an ‘encompassing’ reach.

It also puts much more emphasis on the role of local government than is generally done in this debate. Particularly in the hyper-diverse settings we are discussing, civic identities built around our towns and cities may have more traction than national identities (see a recent speech on the future of the city-region – Cox 2009). In this context it is interesting to note that identification with one’s locality (as distinct from region or larger area) increased between 1990 and 2000, the period of the intensification of economic globalization. Although this is in line with international trends, there has been a much larger increase in the UK than elsewhere. Most individuals in the UK identify most strongly with their locality or town in preference to a regional, national or global identity. 56 per cent of the population identify with their locality first, compared with 25 per cent that identify with the nation. All generations choose local identity as the most important (Stone and Muir 2006).

There are a number of ways local authorities can act in the terrain of identity. Schmid *et al* (2009) have shown how fostering meaningful relationships between people from different backgrounds is crucial in reducing prejudice. Contact is also an important condition for allowing common cross-cutting identities to develop in conditions of diversity. Local and national authorities should clearly pay close attention to the degree of segregation that exists in our communities, whether this be in terms of housing, employment, education or recreation – and aim to reduce it.

Local government also influences the civic spaces where we live and work, which have historically been sites of contestation between different identity claims. Dominic Bryan and Sean Connolly found that political conflict in Northern Ireland was generated, and later in part defused, through the design of civic spaces and the way different identities were given expression within them (Bryan and Connolly 2009). So many of Britain’s town centres, with their civic squares and Victorian town halls, were designed to symbolise an assertive public culture and ambitious schemes for urban improvement. In thinking about monuments, signature buildings and the staging of public events, local authorities can play a role in fostering civic identity.

Our call in this paper is for a public discourse around identity that is more nuanced and public policy responses that work at the grassroots and from the bottom up, rather than clunky interventions from the centre. There is no ‘magic bullet’ that will sort out questions of identity and politicians and policymakers should resist the simple fix. There is a need to celebrate successes such as the appearance of new convivial multicultures where these are emerging in UK cities but also to begin the hard work of thinking through the complexity and contradictions of current identity trends and providing the local conditions for productive and benign mobilizations of the passions identities arouse.

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