

The New Identity Politics

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FEBRUARY 2007

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This paper was first published in February 2007. © ippr 2007

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Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to the Arts Council England (ACE), the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and the National Museums Directors' Conference (NMDC) for their generous support for this research.

Thanks to Kate Clark, Malcolm James, Miranda Lewis, Guy Lodge, Nick Pearce, Ben Rogers, Jacqui Stearn, Lucy Stone, Professor Margie Wetherell and Michael Wills MP for their comments on this paper.

The views expressed here are those of the author, and not those of ippr. This, moreover, is a working paper – its arguments and conclusions are tentative. Comments and criticisms are welcome.

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Introduction

Issues of identity and belonging have moved to the centre of public debate. This development has been propelled in part by 9/11, the London bombings of July 2005 and the so-called war on terror. But longer-standing concerns about the effects of globalisation have also played a part. The movement and dispersion of people, commodities and information around the world have accelerated in recent decades and are currently unprecedented in scale. While this more mobile world has brought extraordinary new economic and cultural opportunities, it has led some to fear that older forms of solidarity and identity are being weakened while all too familiar tensions and hostilities have gained a new lease of life.

In response, a number of politicians, most prominently the Chancellor Gordon Brown, have begun to challenge the relatively hands-off approach that Britain has, in the past, taken to questions of citizenship and identity. By proposing a more proactive approach to these questions they hope to marry the opportunities of globalisation with the benefits of a shared sense of belonging and solidarity. As we will see, these arguments are not necessarily new, but they have been aired less in Britain than elsewhere and it is hard to deny that they mark an important turning point in British political and policy discourse about identity.

And yet this new politics of identity is still in its very early stages. Policymakers continue to have a relatively poor understanding of identity, or of what they are seeking to achieve by promoting new forms of shared identity. There has been little analysis of what shared identities can achieve that other things cannot, or of what (if anything) public policy can do in this difficult terrain.

It is in this context that ippr has embarked on a project exploring *Identity and the Challenges of Diversity*, intended to help us better understand both the limits and potential of this new identity politics.

This working paper, one of two published together (for the other see Stone and Muir 2007), aims to map the broad parameters of this debate by:

- Charting the rise of this new agenda around identity
- Exploring its potential for fostering more cohesive communities
- Spelling out some of the limitations and even dangers of approaching these questions through the lens of identity
- Exploring the links between identity and public policy, sketching out the beginnings of a progressive approach.

1. The rise of the new identity politics

The origins of this new politics of identity are relatively familiar. Events such as the disturbances in Oldham, Bradford and Burnley in the summer of 2001, the rise in support for the British National Party and the bombings in London on 7 July 2005, have caused widespread soul searching.

Opinion polls show growing concern about immigration. For example, Ipsos MORI has found a significant increase in the number of people who view immigration as a major issue facing the country, rising from less than 5 per cent in the mid 1990s to more than 40 per cent in 2006¹.

Racially-motivated hate crime remains high; in 2005 alone the police recorded 50,000 such crimes and the British Crime Survey, which includes crimes that are not reported to the police, found that there were 260,000 of these crimes that year².

What is more, residential, educational and work-place segregation is, in some parts of Britain, a stark fact of life. The Cantle Report into the 2001 disturbances concluded that:

‘Separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, place of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on a basis of parallel lives. These lives often do not seem to touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful interchanges.’ (Cantle 2001: 9)

Sociologists have found that while (contrary to much media speculation) segregation in the UK is not increasing, it does remain high for certain groups in certain parts of the country (Simpson 2004, Burgess *et al* 2005).

These and related developments have triggered a renewed debate about the state of race relations in the UK. In recent years, ‘multi-culturalism’ has been widely criticised, with commentators and politicians falling over themselves to argue that whatever its initial merits, it has been allowed to go ‘too far’. Indeed, the new identity politics tends to define itself against the older politics of multi-culturalism, which, it is argued, has encouraged an emphasis on difference at the expense of solidarity. Its critics argue that even where multi-culturalism did not – through support for minority communities and their networks, faith groups and cultural life – foster segregation, it did little to discourage it or alert us to its dangers (Phillips 2005).

We have also seen a growing affirmation, or reaffirmation, of the importance of shared national and local identities. Taking national identity first, intellectuals such as the philosopher David Miller and the editor of Prospect magazine David Goodhart have argued that the left urgently needs to rethink its approach. They claim that many of the left’s key collective goals (the redistribution of wealth, support for public goods like the National Health Service, active citizenship and greater participation in political life) depend on the kind of bonds of mutuality between citizens that only a shared sense of identity – most importantly national identity – can provide (see Figure 1). Goodhart also argues that the left will only ever win the argument for European integration if it succeeds in reframing Britishness as a more open and pluralist identity, comfortable with the country’s place in Europe (Miller 1995, Goodhart 2006).

At the same time a number of senior Labour figures now argue that the left needs to rethink its traditional approach to national identity, the most prominent of these being the Chancellor, Gordon Brown. Brown argues that if we are to prevent people falling back onto more exclusive notions of their national identity, connected to race or ethnicity, the left must articulate how all British citizens can identify with one another, based on shared values. These values include a sense of fair play, a belief in individual liberty and a sense of civic responsibility. Brown also argues that a shared sense of national purpose, based on these values, can help renew civic activism and build support for greater social justice (Brown 2006).

This growing debate about Britishness is of course challenging for the British left, which has generally opposed nationalism and tended to fight shy of patriotism of any form. Whereas in other parts of the world the left has often led struggles for national liberation or viewed the building of a national culture as a progressive project (for instance, as part of anti-colonial struggles across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean), the British left has tended to be wary of waving a flag historically viewed as symbolising empire and monarchy.

1. www.mori.com/polls/trends/issues.shtml

2. www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/reducing-crime/hate-crime

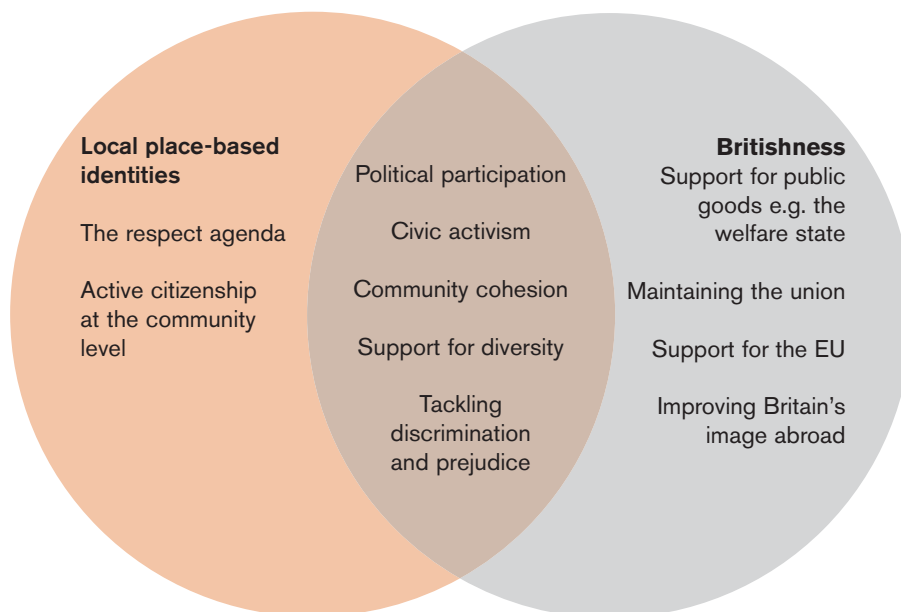
However, the events and trends set out above have not only led to calls for a greater emphasis on our common national identity, but also on shared local identities as well. Many in government and beyond, such as Ted Cantle, chair of the Institute of Community Cohesion have argued that local identities might have an important role to play in combating inter-group tensions and promoting ‘community cohesion’ – the term introduced by Cantle and now adopted by the Government (Cantle 2001, 2005, 2006, Home Office 2005).

Community cohesion is essentially a product of local relationships: it is about people being able to relate to one another in their everyday lives, in the street, in the newsagent, at the school gate. Place-based local identities may encourage community cohesion because, in ethnically mixed and diverse areas, they can allow citizens from different backgrounds to feel they have something in common because they live in the same neighbourhood.

Local identities might also play a role in promoting other progressive public policy goals. The London Borough of Hackney, for example, has recently been running an ‘I Love Hackney’ campaign, appealing to people’s sense of civic pride and identification with the area in order to deal with a number of problems that require collective effort and public participation, such as raising recycling levels and reducing anti-social behaviour.

Some studies have found that rates of local political participation are in part determined by the strength of attachment to local place, suggesting that by promoting local identities one can boost democratic engagement and the involvement of citizens in local civic affairs. Rallings and Thrasher (2003) found that areas with clear geographical boundaries, and within which there is some shared community identity, display higher turnouts in elections than those that do not.

Figure 1. Overlapping agendas: how local and national identities might relate to different public policy goals



2. Why identity?

Although shared identity is thought to contribute to a whole range of public policy objectives, public debate in general has focused on the relationship between identity and cohesion, and that is the focus of the rest of this paper.

What, then, does identity contribute to cohesion, and in particular, what does it contribute that other things cannot? In other words, if there are other ways of tackling cohesion, then why bother with identity?

There are broadly three main approaches to improving social cohesion, all of which have a distinctive and important role to play. First, there is legislation. The most critical element here is the basic framework of anti-discrimination and equalities legislation that, for instance, outlaws discrimination on grounds of religion, race, sexuality, gender, disability and age. Recent advances in this area include the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 which requires all public authorities to promote equal opportunities and good race relations, and a series of landmark moves on gay rights, including civil partnerships and the equalisation of the age of consent. Achieving legal equity and driving out discrimination and prejudice are fundamental prerequisites for social cohesion.

Second, there is economic and social policy. Socio-economic inequalities in Britain are stark, and exist along ethnic and racial, as well as class lines. The average weekly earnings of men of Bangladeshi origin are currently half those of white men, and women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin are 31 per cent less likely to be in employment than white women. Whereas 24 per cent of white children live in the bottom income quintile, 49 per cent of black children and 57 per cent of children of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin do. Black children and children of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin are much less likely than white children or children of Indian or Chinese origin to achieve five GCSE passes at A*–C in Maths and English. Black people are five times more likely than white people to be a victim of crime, and people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin are ten times more likely (Equalities Review 2006). A society cannot be at ease with itself with such entrenched inequalities in life chances.

Social disadvantage also creates an environment in which low-income families are forced to compete for scarce resources, such as jobs, childcare and affordable housing. Issues of material scarcity, and perceptions of unfairness in how such scarce goods are distributed, play an important role in generating the current atmosphere of hostility towards asylum seekers and migrants more generally (Lewis 2005). The hard social democratic graft of tackling disadvantage and promoting equal life chances is therefore a fundamental precondition of cohesion.

The third broad approach to tackling cohesion, with which we are largely concerned in this paper, relates to cultural change. By this I mean changes in people's relations with one another, affected by the beliefs and practices through which they understand themselves and organise their lives. Below three main approaches to developing cohesion through cultural change are explored: shared action, shared values and shared identity.

The first approach seeks to combat prejudice and promote positive inter-group relations by fostering interaction between citizens from different backgrounds.

The basic intuition behind this approach relies on evidence and empirical support from the findings of the contact theory school of social psychology (see Box 1 for a summary of its findings). Based on the pioneering work of American psychologist Gordon Allport in the 1950s, it proposes that, under certain facilitating conditions, inter-group contact is the best means of reducing prejudice. Contact is thought to promote positive attitudes to members of other social groups by reducing inter-personal anxiety and introducing people to the variability within other social groups, made up as they are of very different individuals (Allport 1954).

Contact, however, does not always reduce prejudice; it may be too brief, for example, to change attitudes. Social psychologists have also found that in situations of anxiety or threat, contact may be likely to reinforce stereotypes. Also, contact may fail to affect someone's attitude to a whole group, such as where disconfirming contact with just one individual is seen as exceptional: 'You're alright, you're not like the rest of them'. For contact to reduce prejudice, therefore, there are a number of facilitating conditions, set out in Box 1 below (Hewstone 2003).

Box 1. Contact theory: main findings

- Inter-group contact is the best way of reducing prejudice under certain facilitating conditions.
- This will be the case in a situation where there is:
 - equal stress
 - a scenario likely to disconfirm stereotypes
 - inter-group cooperation
 - the chance for participants to get to know each other properly
 - broader social norms stressing equality.
- Contact counters prejudice by reducing anxiety, promoting positive 'out-group' attitudes, increasing the perceived variability or internal diversity of the 'out-group', increasing inter-group trust, allowing participants to generalise from inter-personal relations to inter-group attitudes and generating affective ties.

Source: Hewstone 2003

Allport's work had significant policy implications, especially in the moves to desegregate schools in the American South in the 1960s. Contact theory also provides intellectual support for the vast range of interaction initiatives that have been launched around Britain with the explicit aim of fostering greater community cohesion. Many of these initiatives encourage mixing through participation in sport and cultural activities in which people have a shared interest, whatever their background.

For instance, the Beyond the Boundary project has brought together Asian cricket teams from inner-city Bradford to play white teams from the Yorkshire Dales. The many mixed football tournaments developed by local authorities across the country, such as the Community Cup in Southwark or the Unity Cup in Camden, are another example. In Oldham, the Unity Sports Programme is an after-school initiative that for 15 weeks a year transports children of primary-school age to sports venues where they can play sports with children from different backgrounds.

In other places, cultural activities have been put on with the explicit aim of enabling interaction across different communities to take place. The Moving Minds project has brought community groups into museums and galleries in Manchester, Leeds and Bradford, using the collections to stimulate discussion about people's lives today and in the past. In Oldham, the local authority sponsored a Party in the Park to celebrate the reopening of Alexandra Park, the site of disturbances in 2001, bringing together 30,000 from all backgrounds with a range of music. Projects exploring the diversity of local heritage have also played a role in encouraging interaction. In Oldham, children from a school in which children are predominantly of Bangladeshi origin have been paired with children from a school that has predominantly white pupils in researching the history of their ethnically diverse community (DCMS 2004, Oldham Metropolitan Borough 2004).

The second approach to cohesion at the cultural level aims to promote agreement around shared values – essentially the values of citizenship. Indeed, leading German political thinker Jürgen Habermas has argued that in so far as liberal states should aim to promote patriotism among their members, it should be a patriotism defined by allegiance to liberal democratic values. Whether it is possible to generate pride and loyalty to an essentially abstract set of values, and whether such patriotism could ever be enough to sustain a modern nation state, are two of the main points of contention in philosophical and political debates around the role of common values and identity (Habermas 1994). These issues aside, many states, including the UK, have come to take a more active approach to propagating civic values. New Labour, for instance, has made citizenship education in schools compulsory, and now requires migrants applying for citizenship to pass a new citizenship test.

The third approach to cohesion through cultural change aims to promote shared identities. What, then, does shared identity offer in terms of social cohesion? Moreover, what can identity achieve that shared action and shared values cannot? Essentially identity brings two important attributes to the table: affective attachments and easy-to-generalise, imagined solidarities between large numbers of people.

First, identification is in many ways an emotional matter: in identifying with someone one feels a sense of commonality or solidarity with them. One of the great criticisms of the values-based approach to cohesion is that values are simply too thin and abstract to foster mutual ties among citizens.

Sharing attitudes of fairness, civility and tolerance has not historically been a sufficiently robust basis for national unity. For example, despite sharing the same set of liberal values as the rest of Canada, the

Québécois continue to prefer their own system of self-government. Most citizens of the European Union share the same liberal democratic principles, but continue to prefer to live under sovereign nation states. In addition to common values, therefore, citizens must also share a sense of belonging to the community in which they live, and possess a shared desire to continue living together. Cohesion may require, in short, that we are able to identify with our fellow citizens (Kymlicka 2001).

The second contribution that identity might make is that it involves the imaginative leap of bringing people together with large numbers of others under one symbolic roof and because of this it allows us to generalise from individual encounters to a sense of solidarity with the broader community. Processes of identification do this through the exercise of the imagination and symbolic construction. Take, for example, one's identification with one's class or country. One can never actually see one's class or the population of one's country – rather, one has to imagine groups such as class and nation, through symbolically creating an image of those groups in one's mind (Jenkins 1996).

None of these approaches are exclusive: any shared identity in a liberal society will have a basis in a set of liberal values with which people can collectively identify. Moreover, interactivity and meaningful encounters at the individual level are likely to provide the basis for the development of shared civic identities. But it is clear that shared identity might, at least in principle, have a distinctive contribution to make to social cohesion.

3. The limits of the new identity politics

What are the limitations and possible dangers of this shared identity agenda?

First, social division will not be narrowed through processes of identification alone. At the most basic level, it is imperative to improve the condition and opportunities of badly off groups, ensure resources and chances are distributed fairly, and address any grievances arising from the belief, real or imagined, that some groups are getting a better deal than others. Promoting shared identities can be no substitute for the difficult task of reducing social and economic inequalities. Shared action and shared values also have a distinct and important role to play in fostering cohesion.

Second, this new agenda should not be seen as an alternative to multiculturalism. Contrary to what many recent critics of multiculturalism have claimed, respecting and being sensitive to cultural diversity is clearly not the same thing as promoting separation, either physical or psychological. Indeed as Kymlicka argues, the vast bulk of multiculturalist policies can be understood as intended to help facilitate integration (Kymlicka 2001). Multiculturalist policies such as revising dress codes to accommodate religious beliefs, redrafting work schedules to respect religious holidays or reserving places on public bodies for representatives of minority groups, all aim to improve the access of minority groups into the major social institutions.

These policies do, of course, grant recognition to minority religious and cultural identities, but they do so within common institutions. By making these institutions more accessible to members of ethnic minorities, they facilitate interaction between people from minority and non-minority backgrounds and thereby help facilitate social cohesion rather than inhibit it. Indeed, social segregation is much more likely to occur where public institutions make no effort to accommodate cultural diversity, such as by refusing to translate public service information into minority languages or enforcing dress codes that some groups would find unacceptable on religious grounds. Such practices would probably exclude many people from participating in common institutions and would erect barriers to integration and equity.

Far from there being a trade-off between multiculturalism and integration, multiculturalism is in fact one route to integration and, I would argue, a much more equitable and successful one than that offered by those who favour cultural assimilation. Rather than focusing on the much contested concept of multiculturalism, those who worry about segregation might do better to focus on the wide array of structural factors that in some parts of the country have allowed parallel lives to develop. These include the housing market, school choice and the poverty and low levels of social mobility that are acute for many minority groups.

Third, a shared civic identity cannot be conceived as a kind of master identity, trumping all other aspects of who we are. It might seem banal to point it out, but we all have multiple identities. Any progressive shared identity would sit alongside our other identities: to be British one should not have to give up being Muslim or cease to be proud of one's family's Pakistani heritage. There should be no cricket test.

Fourth, although many of our identities are relatively fixed at birth (gender and kinship, for example), we want to encourage people to reflect critically on their identities and their cultural background, to question them in relation to their own life choices and in so doing develop greater personal autonomy. A liberal state encourages its citizens to question its fundamental bases, including the very civic identity it may be hoping to foster. This inculcation of critical reason and deliberation over values, norms and attitudes should be one of the principal goals of the education system.

Finally, processes of identification do seem to involve almost inherent contrasts between something and something else, me and you, us and them. In order for an identity to be constituted, according to this logic, there needs to be some 'other' to which it is contrasted (Woodward 2002). In the real world, this rather abstract philosophical point has very often played out historically through disparagement of the out-group or outsider. Britishness has historically been constructed against, for example, the French, other Europeans generally and also those colonised by empire.

So while identity provides solidarity for the in-group, the darker side of identity is that this solidarity may have been built on the demonisation of the other. This makes identity a potentially dangerous thing. However, even if an 'other' is a necessary psychological counterpoint to identification, there is no reason, at least in principle, why the way in which we 'other' something or somebody, needs to be through demonisation or stigmatisation. We encounter difference all the time and we often approach it with positive rather than negative attitudes, such as empathy, tolerance and admiration.

4. Identity and public policy

What, then, can government practically do in this area? The final part of this paper reflects on the relationship between identity and public policy by, first, exploring how, in general terms, identities are formed. Second, it looks at how the British state has engaged in identity formation in the past, and, finally, it sketches out some of the key ways that progressive politics might go about fostering shared identities today.

What shapes our identities?

Identity is a complex process and below I draw on social psychological research to set out seven of the most important characteristics of identity formation that are relevant for policymakers working in this terrain.

1. The first thing to note is that identity is never fixed – it is a process in which meaning is constantly being asserted, contested and negotiated. Who I am today is different in certain respects to the person I was a year ago. Change is such an essential component of identity that it would be more accurate (if rather inelegant) to speak of ‘identification’ rather than identity.

When policymakers address identity questions they should bear in mind that they are in a landscape of constantly shifting sands. Over time identity-based groups may divide or amalgamate with others – what it is that has value for them and that they seek public recognition of is likely to change.

2. Another complexity about identity is that it is never determined by external forces – it always requires the exercise of agency. We invest in our identities psychologically, often to the extent of volunteering to die in their defence – this is not something that can be brought about by the state or anyone else in a simplistic fashion. If the state wishes to promote certain kinds of identity over others, these have to be identities that people find appealing and legitimate. There are numerous examples of state-led efforts at identity formation that have come to grief simply because they had no resonance with people – Tony Blair’s evocation of Britain as a ‘Young Country’, associated with media hype around Cool Britannia, being only one recent manifestation.

3. As discussed above, different aspects of our identities become salient at different times: there is no fixed hierarchy in which I always feel more of a male than I do British. The incessant talk in the media about the Muslim community has ignored the complexity and multiplicity not just of the many different sorts of Muslim communities that exist in Britain, but also the fact that people who practise the Islamic faith also have identities as men and women, as workers and business people, as young people and old-age pensioners. The cause of social cohesion – people realising how much they have in common – might be better advanced if we stopped focusing policy and rhetoric on just a single aspect of people’s identities.

4. So long as we live in a world of scarcity, hierarchy and inequality, identity will be formed in part by the interplay of power and resistance. Of course, it is not necessarily the case that the exercise of power is a bad thing. If power is democratically accountable and therefore legitimate, we often accede to its exercise in the formation of identity. However, it is important for policymakers to understand that the use of power in fostering identities, whether intentional or not, may be resisted by those who do not wish to be categorised in a particular fashion.

5. Symbols and narratives play a significant part in identity formation. Symbols, including everyday things such as clothing, hairstyles, material belongings, as well as grand signifiers such as flags and the rituals of state and nation, can all play an important role in forming identities. They simplify the world and enable us to imagine we are similar to other people who, in many other respects, may be very different from us. They also enable us to communicate our identities to one another and hence play a role in allowing identification between people to take place.

Narratives and stories also have a key role in mobilising identity. In order to understand who we are, we need to go back to our origins and construct a coherent story about our lives. It is not enough to know who we are through our contemporary relations with other people – we have a natural urge to locate ourselves in a longer chronology. This is shown by the need adopted people feel to trace their biological parents and the popularity of researching family history. At the individual level the way we make sense of ourselves and others is partly through the telling of stories. At the societal level, the way we understand ourselves as communities and nations is through an understanding of broader public stories about where we collectively come from. It is for this reason that the teaching of history and the commemoration of historical events play such a central role in arguments about identity (Woodward 2002).

6. The sources of our identity are many and varied – the state is just one of them. At the very early stages in our lives we lack the capacity to define ourselves on our own terms and our identities are much more dependent on the actions of external actors. The most important of these actors is of course the family.

In fact, the identities formed at this early stage (our ‘primary identities’) – selfhood, humanity, gender, kinship and ethnicity – tend to be those that are the least susceptible to change. That is not to say that they never change: for instance, people do change their gender – but such cases are relatively rare.

As we move into adolescence and we are more able to shape our own identity and interact with a wider range of people, our identity starts to change much more rapidly. Adolescence is the period in which we tend to be most rebellious or keen to stand out, and this is because it is the first time in our lives when we have the opportunity to experiment and distinguish ourselves from our families.

Another major source of identity is of course the human body. Again, given its own resilience, the body is a source of largely primary and relatively stable identities. These include race, sex and one’s sense of self – although all of these are given meaning by society. As the body changes so too do the identities related to it: our age, for example, and even with recent scientific advances, our sex.

Our identities also emerge from our involvement in everyday habit and institutions. For example, Tim Edensor has argued that nationality is flagged constantly in the relatively banal and everyday. It is not just formed through institutions such as flags, official ceremonies, days of remembrance and so on, but also by popular culture, familiar places, shared conventions and habits, everyday objects and the design of the built environment (Edensor 2002).

A final key source of identity is the organisational life of society. We are all participants in a number of organisations that profoundly shape our sense of who we are. These include our school, our place of work or worship and our trade union. One of the most significant of these is, of course, the state: through its organisation of our collective life as a nation, with its monopoly on the use of force, its determination of the laws under which we all live and its provision of the public services on which we rely, the state has a powerful effect on what it means to be a citizen of a particular country.

7. Finally, identities are formed through comparisons of similarity and difference. As we have seen the construction of ‘them’ and ‘us’ makes identity potentially dangerous territory for politicians. In principle, however, there seems no reason why psychologically inevitable processes of distinguishing ourselves from others requires demonisation or stigmatisation. One can appreciate and empathise with difference – indeed, this is at the heart of being a good citizen in a multicultural society. But it would be foolish to deny that identification is often accompanied by hostile attitudes to the ‘other’.

Identity and the state in Britain

The modern state has been in the business of identity formation from its very beginnings. In 1861, at the first meeting of the unified Italian parliament, Massimo D’Azeglio summed up the task facing 19th century states when he famously proclaimed, ‘Italy is made, we still have to make Italians’.

European states and those who governed them needed to articulate a convincing nationalist narrative in order to underpin their rule with popular legitimacy and, in particular, mobilise their populations for war. As Eric Hobsbawm puts it:

‘What state in the era of revolutions, liberalism, nationalism, democratisation and the rise of working class movements, could feel itself absolutely secure? [...] States required a civic religion (“patriotism”) all the more because they increasingly required more than passivity from their citizens. “England”, as Nelson told his soldiers in the patriotic song as they prepared for the Battle of Trafalgar, “expects that every man this day will do his duty”.’ (Hobsbawm 1992: 85)

So how did the British state make Britons? In this country the political class faced the challenge of binding together four existing nations under one flag. Central to their effort was the mobilisation of the population against a series of foreign enemies. At first this was Catholic, ‘unfree’ France; the enemy later became those whose lands were conquered by the expanding empire, who were depicted in racist imagery. Against these ‘others’ the white Christian tribes of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland could be united (Colley 2003).

Another method of making Britons was through the glorification of the central institution of the state, the monarchy. Kings George III and IV spent vast sums on royal buildings and public architecture,

emphasising the splendour and majesty of the imperial monarchy. Much use was made of royal public ritual, especially the celebration of the nation's military victories. As literacy and mass education spread, the state disseminated patriotic tracts in schools and the first royal spin doctors used the nascent national press to show the King as an ordinary family man (ibid).

In the 20th century, Britishness was seriously weakened as a unifying identity for its constituent nations by the decline of Protestantism and, after the Second World War, the loss of empire. The experience of the War itself gave it fresh stimulus: the self-understanding that this encouraged – of a generous, resilient and independent people, is still, arguably, influential today, shaping attitudes to the EU and reaction to terrorist attacks.

In general, however, the post-war British state took a fairly *laissez-faire* approach to national identity, with flag-waving and patriotic self-congratulation often viewed as somehow un-British. True, the monarchy remained an important national symbol, but the NHS, described by senior Conservative politician Nigel Lawson as a national religion, and other welfare state institutions became, arguably, just as important. The historian Richard Weight has argued that post-imperial Britishness was largely defined not in terms of state institutions but rather by the cultural transformation of the 1960s, based around pop music, fashion and football. The 1966 World Cup, in particular, marked the beginning of a trend, still recognisable to this day, in which national identity in Britain (and increasingly not British national identity, but rather English, Scottish and Welsh) is celebrated through cultural and sporting rather than political achievements (Weight 2002).

More recently New Labour has, with mixed success, attempted to articulate what it conceives of as a modernised notion of Britishness. The Millennium Dome was conceived as a 21st century version of the 1951 Festival of Britain, but it failed to capture the popular imagination. Talk of Cool Britannia and a Young Country, tied to the country's cultural achievements, in particular the rise of Britpop, quickly declined along with celebrity support for New Labour.

In other areas Labour has been more successful. Devolution to Scotland and Wales has been one of its most significant constitutional achievements, and has gone a long way towards meeting popular aspirations for self-government. The introduction of free admission to national museums and galleries has led to much greater engagement with the nation's cultural past and present and is one of Labour's most popular legacies.

Finally, the Government has gone further than any other in the post-war period in being explicit about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. This has included introducing citizenship classes in schools, which have been widely welcomed. Citizenship tests and ceremonies for new migrants into the country have been more controversial, but they put Britain on a par with the requirements of most other liberal multiculturalist states.

However, the state has not only played a role in fostering national identity. Strong local civic identities developed in particular during the 19th century, at a time of particularly dynamic local leadership in many of our towns and cities. Tristram Hunt has identified a number of factors that helped civic leaders at that time foster a sense of civic pride and identification with the local polity. Identification, he argues, required more than residence and employment in a particular place (Hunt 2005). Beyond that there was the existence of a vibrant indigenous urban culture, based on a strong local economy.

In those days banks, building societies and many businesses were very local beasts, before financial and commercial power was concentrated in the capital. This meant that there was a class of local entrepreneurs with a strong allegiance to their locale, who gained social status from very local philanthropy. It was that philanthropy that led to the construction of so many of the great public buildings and monuments of the Victorian period.

The new public architecture in turn played a role in fostering strong local identities and civic pride. While the Victorian town halls that dominate the centres of so many of our provincial cities were hardly designed for democratic public engagement, they did project an image of local autonomy and independence with which people could identify. None of this would have been possible, of course, without powerful municipal leaders who could raise their own revenues and organise the collective life of their towns and cities, building hospitals and schools, laying down sewers, setting up public gas and electricity companies (Hunt 2005).

Identity and public policy today

So what role could the state play today in fostering shared identity? The context is clearly very different

from that in which national and local identities were forged in the past. First, identity formation is increasingly competitive territory. The state and other national institutions (newspapers, broadcasters and so forth) no longer have such a monopoly on the production and dissemination of information, values and culture. Globalisation means that this is highly contested territory (Giddens 1991).

For example, shared national media experiences are losing ground, as people are increasingly able to choose where they get their news or entertainment from. It is much easier for new migrant communities to retain links with their homelands or fellow immigrants in other countries than was once the case. In this context the role of institutions such as the BBC or the mainstream press in helping to define our collective experience as a society is much weaker than it was in the past, when many more people watched the same programmes and read the same papers.

Second, people clearly defer much less than hitherto to state authority and are much less likely to trust what they are being told by politicians or the media. This is likely to be of concern for politicians who want to promote a renewed sense of Britishness. The credibility of the messenger is critical if people are to buy into a shared identity and as things stand, politicians are probably the least trusted messengers we have.

Finally, many of the old sources of shared national identity that underpinned Britishness appear on the wane. True, the welfare state, especially the NHS, remains a potent source of identity, and sport, especially football, has become increasingly important. But the empire is gone, church attendance is at historically low levels, and the Second World War is inexorably slipping from living memory. The monarchy retains support but that support is much more qualified than in the past, the BBC is facing intense media competition and the main political parties are facing a crisis of membership. It seems clear that if the advocates of the new identity politics are right in arguing for the importance of actively fostering shared identities, we need to look at ways of revitalising declining identities and creating new ones.

The concluding part of this paper, sketches out some ways forward for a progressive agenda that sees shared identities as being able to add value in terms of community cohesion.

What would a progressive approach to fostering shared identity look like? First, interaction between citizens is in itself a basic building block for an inclusive civic identity. As contact theory has shown, in order for people to identify with citizens from a different background to their own, meaningful contact across cultural boundaries is important.

Interaction and social capital can be fostered via a wide variety of means. Urban planning plays a significant role; evidence shows that vibrant street life can help bring people regularly into contact with one another, as opposed to wide open spaces, which tend to make contact more costly and less frequent (Jacobs 2000). In addition, schools should encourage children from different cultural backgrounds to mix. The Government should revisit the recommendations of the Cantle report, which said that faith schools should take up to 25 per cent of their children from a different faith group (Cantle 2005). There should at the very least be twinning arrangements between schools to encourage children to mix across ethnic and religious boundaries in some classes. There is also space for local government leadership in establishing the kind of interaction-based projects mentioned earlier.

Second, given the importance of symbols and narratives in identity formation, we need to reassess the way the state represents national identity. If we are to construct a genuinely inclusive and shared identity, national symbols need to reflect the multicultural nature of our society. This means, for example, addressing issues of faith, secularism and the position of the established Church of England (bishops in the Lords, the role of the monarch at the head of the Church, the Prime Minister's role in appointing senior clergy and so forth). The kind of public monuments we put up, the historical figures we commemorate and events we celebrate should also reflect the culturally diverse heritage of modern Britain.

Third, we need to find new sources of collective identity that all of Britain's citizens can share. Recent focus group work by ippr found that there is a tendency among white participants to reach for exclusive sources of national identity when asked what they would like to celebrate. In particular, participants mentioned Christian festivals such as Easter and Christmas, even though very few of them attended church or were especially religious. If we are to avoid exclusive conceptions of Britishness taking hold, such as those articulated by the BNP, we need to find sources of national identity that Britons of all classes and religions will find appealing.

This is not the place for a thorough examination of the potential candidates. However, one clear contender is furnished by Britain's democratic heritage. Democracy meets our criteria because it is one of the things

that almost everyone in our society values. Moreover, democracy is an effective way of marrying our two desirable goals of diversity and cohesion. Because it provides the space in which our various different identities can flourish, democracy is intimately connected with the celebration of cultural diversity. In appealing to democracy as a basis for shared identity, we would be fostering pride in the framework that makes cultural pluralism possible.

Democracy is also one of the most resilient sources of British national identity. This is the case despite the fact that we rarely celebrate our democratic heritage. In most of our towns and cities there are few visible representations of those who struggled for universal suffrage. Most statues in our public squares are of generals or aristocrats. Where are the statues of the Levellers of the 17th century English Revolution? Where do we celebrate the Chartists or the suffragettes? Or those who sought to abolish slavery? Apart from the isolated acts of some councils around the country, our public spaces are devoid of any celebration of the democratic way of life we almost all value.

A second progressive source of identity would be multiculturalism itself, which needs to be addressed head on if we are to win the argument against racist conceptions of Britishness. In London's Olympic bid, the capital's cultural, ethnic and racial diversity was a major source of pride and clearly central to the success of the bid. The same effort needs to go into projecting a multicultural British identity. The left has traditionally been much more attracted to cosmopolitanism, appealing to our identification with humanity as a whole, rather than with the nation. Although among younger people such a cosmopolitan identity is more popular than among older people, polls show that allegiance to such an identity remains weak (Stone and Muir 2007).

A popularly held global cosmopolitan identity seems an ambitious hope; we might better conceive of cosmopolitanism as a disposition or state of mind. Rather than persuading Britons to sign up to a global identity, the priority should be to ensure that our national identity is open, internationalist and cosmopolitan in nature.

A third source of shared identity is culture in the narrower sense of the word: music, the visual arts and drama. As Madeleine Bunting has recently argued, Britain's cultural life is currently undergoing something of a renaissance, driven by much broader public engagement in the arts than in the past (Bunting 2006). Free entry to museums and galleries means that these are no longer the preserve of the metropolitan elite. Artists themselves are putting on new forms of public art specifically aimed at engaging large audiences, such as, in 2006, the Sultan's Elephant in London or Antony Gormley's Waste Man.

Moreover it is in the cultural and parts of the sporting sphere (as opposed to the political sphere) that Britain's cultural diversity is most visible. New musical genres are emerging from that diversity, including 'desi beats' for example, which Gautam Malkani has highlighted as a distinctively British Asian product. He argues that shared national media forums such as the BBC should make space available for underground genres such as this, making it part of a shared national experience (Malkani 2006). The Capital of Culture (formally City of Culture) project has helped inject greater diversity into some local municipal identities, through making the celebration of diverse cultural activity a reference point for renewed local pride. Some of our national sports, such as football, are (partly) reflective of Britain's ethnic diversity in terms of their teams and fan bases, while they also provide an exceptionally potent source of local and national identity.

Finally, there is our natural and built heritage. Rural landscapes have always played an evocative role in shaping national identity – in particular this goes back to the Romantic urge to get back to the pre-industrial 'heart' of the nation, seemingly more authentic than the town or city. However, this has in the past been articulated for reactionary political ends, with links being made between blood and the soil.

In Britain the countryside remains a largely white place, despite efforts by the Government and the Countryside Agency to redress this, with projects such as Beyond the Boundary. In this context government efforts to improve access, through the creation of new National Parks and the Right to Roam, are welcome, but need to be complemented by a real effort to promote visits to the countryside by urban communities.

And yet there is also of course an urban natural environment: many of London's most popular places are unquestionably its great parks and green spaces. Cities are also home to a rich biodiversity in their canals, railway sidings, footpaths, small woods and scrublands. Moreover, public concerns about clean air and recycling show a tremendous desire to protect the collective good that is our environment.

And we should not neglect our built heritage: no matter where people live, there are places, buildings,

objects that are locally distinctive and therefore of great value to local people. These are sources of identification that can foster the kind of shared place-based identities described earlier in this paper. There are also places that are, of course, a source of shame and division: in many of our cities, there are buildings and places associated with the slave trade, for example. These could, however, be a valuable educational tool, as sites of conscience and reflection, linked to efforts to teach all aspects of the country's past.

5. Conclusion

The politics of identity is difficult territory, especially for the left. A new discourse around shared identity has emerged in Britain, but it is very much in its early stages. We are at the beginning of this journey, not the end.

However, this paper has sought to shed light on the potential that exists in this new identity politics, as well as its limitations and possible dangers. Our conclusions should be capable of moving the debate forward.

Shared identity has the potential to make a distinct and valuable contribution to social cohesion through its ability to foster affective ties between potentially quite large numbers of people. It can thus help us to meet people's desire for a shared sense of belonging, something that other approaches to cohesion lack. But identity can only do so much and the fostering of a shared civic identity needs to be underpinned by work to tackle prejudice and promote fair life chances. It should be seen as a complement rather than an alternative to existing approaches to reduce social inequalities, fight discrimination, foster cross-cultural contact and generate a consensus around common values.

Moreover, there are dangers in the politics of identity. Too often in our history national identity has been mobilised in opposition to some 'other', generally a series of foreign enemies. As we have seen, however, this is not an inevitable component of identity formation and one of the main reasons for the left to engage in the debate on national identity is to prevent it being captured for reactionary ends.

This paper has also argued that the 'new identity politics' should not be viewed as an alternative to 'multiculturalism'. Different groups need their religious, cultural or other identities to be recognised and a pluralist society should provide that public recognition. We need a national identity that operates at the civic level and that sits comfortably alongside the many other identities that have value for us.

Moreover, we should not be in the business of promoting 'the nation' as a kind of primary identity for British citizens – such a move would be rightly resisted by many people and be counter-productive. People will find their own way of relating to their nation or locality and some will resist identifying with these spheres altogether – this is inevitable. But if the state wishes to foster cohesion in the public interest, it has a duty to provide the framework that makes shared identification among its citizens possible.

The role of the state in identity formation is complex. It is one actor among many and globalisation and the current trend towards political disengagement pose an increasing challenge to public policy being able to play an effective role. Rather than approaching identity in a top-down fashion that would almost inevitably backfire, the state should see its role as setting the structural framework that makes it more likely that shared identities will develop.

It should ensure that the way our schools operate and our towns and housing developments are planned encourage people to mix with others from different backgrounds to their own. Where there are particular tensions, it should provide the leadership to bring people together in interaction-based initiatives to break down barriers between the groups concerned. It should ensure that our national symbols, rituals and the civic calendar reflect our cultural diversity and include the culturally diverse narratives that make up Britain's history. It should seek out new sources of national identity around which British citizens of all backgrounds can share some common ground.

I have suggested a number of possibilities: our democratic heritage, which makes our diversity and liberty possible, cultural diversity itself, which can be a source of common pride and celebration, sporting and cultural activities that are inclusive of all citizens, and the built and natural environment in which people from many different backgrounds invest value.

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