

Commentary

Multiculturalism, Liberal Fundamentalism and Banal Nationalism: Dilemmatic Aspects of *Dissolving the Diaspora*

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary I point to some inherent tensions within the article *Dissolving the Diaspora*. First, I suggest that the author may be in danger of underestimating the extent to which the values of the multiculturalism promoted in the article rely upon an acceptance of the incorrigible status of culturally-specific ideologies of liberalism. Second, I point to the way in which the author adopts a banal nationalist frame of reference whereby constructs such as ‘society’ and ‘polity’ and understood to be coterminous with ‘nation-state’. I suggest that, in this respect, the author may be in danger of overlooking the ways in which the same liberal values which underpin an advocacy of multiculturalism might also be associated with utopian visions of transnational or cosmopolitan forms of solidarity and polity. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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The article, *Dissolving the Diaspora* presents a detailed and spirited defence of practices of ‘deep’ and ‘critical’ multiculturalism as a means by which to achieve ‘well-functioning and unified political communities on the basis of a broad range of ethno-religious cultures, discourses, identities and sensibilities’, using the example of ‘the Muslim experience in Canada’ as an exemplary case. From a social psychological point of view, this article represents an intellectual breath of fresh air. Issues concerning cultural diversity, acculturation and social integration have, of course, been widely rehearsed in social psychology. However, the scope of theoretical discussion and empirical research has been somewhat restricted due in part to the fact that social psychological work tends to take place within a disciplinary vacuum, seldom acknowledging debates taking place within sociology, political science and cultural studies. In this respect, the publication of Paul Nesbitt-Larkin’s article,

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Dissolving the Diaspora within a mainstream social psychology journal represents a welcome example of cross- and hopefully eventually trans-disciplinary exchange.

Some of the limitations of current social psychological perspectives on cultural diversity may also be traced to sub-disciplinary apartheid. Cultural psychology typically adopts a relatively 'thick' understanding of culture, which is generally consistent with the ways in which culture is understood in *Dissolving the Diaspora*. In contrast, social psychological theory and research tends to adopt a relatively shallow notion of culture, as an adjunct to collective 'identity'. This kind of perspective often neglects the essentially cultural aspects of social cognition and action, and instead tends to treat culture as something that can be donned and doffed by any individual according to context, or as a matter of personal choice or collective strategy.

A third way in which *Dissolving the Diaspora* differs from most social psychological accounts is in the author's adoption of an explicitly normative voice. This kind of moral and utopian rhetoric is notably absent from most social psychological writing, in which discussions about the relative value of multiculturalist versus assimilationist policies tend to be rehearsed through arguments concerning the competing claims of general theories of group processes. This is well illustrated in recent meta-analytic studies which seek to compare the weight of statistical evidence in support of the 'common in-group model' as opposed to social identity theoretical perspectives stressing the importance of distinctive 'sub-group identities'. This kind of approach effectively translates a range of complex ethical issues concerning civility, community and citizenship into the amoral language of disinterested empirical science.

Having considered some ways in which the arguments presented in *Dissolving the Diaspora* might widen the remit of current social psychological debates concerning cultural diversity and social solidarity, it is also worth considering how social psychological constructs and knowledge might, in turn, contribute to inter-disciplinary dialogue. From a social psychological perspective, one immediate difficulty with the account of inter-community dialogue presented in *Dissolving the Diaspora* lies in the author's adoption of the Habermasian model of the ideal speech situation, and of the 'non-coercively unifying, consensus building force of a discourse in which participants overcome their at first subjectively biased views in favour of a rationally motivated agreement' (Habermas, 1987 p. 294). The idea that cultural pluralism may be translated into a deep social solidarity through the process of public dialogue rests upon a gamut of questionable assumptions about individual and collective psychology which do not square with the current state of social psychological knowledge concerning the cognitive and discursive aspects of political attitudes and values (e.g. Zaller, 1992), collective behaviour (Tajfel, 1978), argumentation and dialogue (e.g. Billig, 1997) and the inherently dilemmatic quality of everyday liberal reasoning (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, & Radley (1988).

In *Dissolving the Diaspora*, Nesbitt-Larkin argues that deep multiculturalism 'avoids discourses of closure, finality and pre-emptive categorization'. It is, then, somewhat ironic to note that his own argument in favour of deep, critical multiculturalism as a means by which to develop political community itself involves a measure of conceptual and discursive closure. From the perspective of rhetorical social psychology (Billig, 1987), and the ideological dilemmas approach to liberal thought (Billig et al., 1988), it is possible to identify two forms of rhetorical 'black-boxing' present in this article. The first pertains to the way in which the author tacitly circumscribes the terms and remit of 'respectful and caring dialogue'. The second pertains to the ways in which the author tacitly presumes particular, circumscribed, boundaries to his utopian notion of political community.

THE BOUNDARIES OF THE TERMS OF DEBATE

Various commentators both within and beyond academic social psychology have noted the essentially dilemmatic and ambivalent quality of liberal beliefs and values, apparent both in formal political discourse and also in ordinary social actors' everyday moral reasoning and sense-making practices. In particular, liberal ideology is characterized by an uneasy tension between two different orientations to the constructs of value pluralism and of democratic dialogue. On the one hand, tolerance of cultural diversity and the process of respectful dialogue may be understood in procedural terms, as the means by which to establish peaceful coexistence between peoples who, at base, adopt fundamentally incommensurable *modus vivendi*. On the other hand, liberal ideology is inclined towards the view that tolerance of value pluralism and the process of respectful dialogue constitute universal moral and political principles in their own right, and as such represent political objectives as well as the procedural means to an end (Billig et al., 1988; Condor, 1997; Gray, 2000; Lukes, 2003). This tension is endemic in liberal reasoning concerning social diversity, and it is hardly surprising that it should also appear in *Dissolving the Diaspora*. However, without an explicit awareness of this dilemma as a dilemma, there is a danger that any particular attempt at 'respectful and caring' inter-cultural dialogue could lay itself open to the charge of unreflexive ethnocentrism.

In this respect, we may note that there are, in fact, clear limits to the kind of mutually respectful dialogue outlined in *Dissolving the Diaspora*, and that there are clear limits to the ways in which (Canadian) receiving society is enjoined to question 'its own core values' or to 'turn itself upside down'. Whatever else may be open to debate, to the 'frank articulation of voices', to contestation, and to 'intellectual playfulness', 'core liberal values' are not among them.

Clearly, any *a priori* commitment to core liberal values would, of necessity, limit the possibility of entirely open, respectful and critical political dialogue. In his argument in *Dissolving the Diaspora*, Nesbitt-Larkin uses two forms of rhetorical manoeuvre to distract attention from the fact that liberal pluralism might, itself, be understood to constitute a form of Western ethno-logic. First, he sets up a dualistic contrast between the constructs of liberalism (associated with the positive value of rationality) and 'fundamentalism' (depicted as being motivated by irrational psychological forces such as 'panic'). Second, he uses the process of reporting selected quotations from his interviews with selected 'Canadian Muslim leaders and Muslim youth' (glossed as 'the Muslim experience in Canada'), and from selected reported 'voices' from selected 'Muslim women', in order to forge an image of value pluralism and community dialogue as universal human values (see Condor, 1997 for an analysis of the ways in which critical social psychologists also enlist the 'voices' of research participants to construct an image of the author's claims as consensually endorsed, and, in particular, as consistent with 'the view from below').

A second attempt to close off a potential avenue of mutually respectful dialogue may be identified in the way in which Nesbitt-Larkin treats (Canadian Muslim) diaspora as essentially and non-controversially problematic. He establishes Muslim diaspora as a suspect category by casting it as an ascribed identity which effectively prevents minority community members' full inclusion in the host political community. What this overlooks is the fact that diasporic identities may be asserted, maintained and reclaimed by community members themselves (Safran, 1991). In so far as diaspora represents a category used by community members to encapsulate a particular sense of collective experience, solidarity and interest it should follow that, far from requiring 'eradication', diasporic consciousness

should, itself, constitute the subject for inter-community dialogue. Further, it would follow that members of receiving society should be prepared to ‘respect’ and ‘recognize’ diasporic identities and subjectivities, and should be willing to turn their own understandings of global belonging upside down.

DELIMITING THE COMMUNITY WITHIN WHICH DEBATE MAY TAKE PLACE

A critical reconsideration of the diaspora problematic draws attention to a second form of rhetorical closure in *Dissolving the Diaspora*. Throughout this account, Nesbitt-Larkin invokes the utopian image of various ethno-religious communities acting together as ‘one unified political community’. However, the question of precisely where the boundaries of this political community should be drawn, and of who should be accorded or denied membership, is never addressed. On the contrary, it is simply taken for granted that the construct of ‘a coherent if diverse and internally dynamic political community’ can be understood as synonymous with ‘nation state’,¹ and that membership will be a matter of formal citizenship status.

At the start of his article, Nesbitt-Larkin suggests that the political challenge of ethno-religious diversity may be understood with reference to ‘three core terms’: *diaspora*, *multiculturalism* and *dialogue*. By focussing solely on the ways in which these constructs may be applied *within the geopolitical space of Canada*, his account effectively represses other potentially relevant constructs, including *cosmopolitanism*, *globalization*, *transnationalism* and—in relation to the Muslim faith communities which constitute the focus of his account—*umma*. In view of the fact that a good deal of the argument presented in *Dissolving the Diaspora* relates specifically to *religious* diversity, the unproblematic adoption of a nationally bounded frame of reference is somewhat curious. As Rudolph (1997, p. 1) noted, religious communities are not typically encapsulated within nation-states, but on the contrary are ‘among the oldest of the transnationals; Sufi orders, Catholic missionaries and Buddhist monks carried work and praxis across vast spaces before those spaces became nation states or even states’.

This implicit—what Billig (1995) would term ‘banal’—presumption that the geopolitical world can, and should, be understood primarily and ultimately as a ‘world of nations’ has a number of potentially important implications for the form of deep and critical multiculturalism outlined in *Dissolving the Diaspora*. In the first place, it allows the author to bracket the fact that diasporic identities and sensibilities may be treated as platforms for post-colonial consciousness precisely because they unsettle hegemonic discourses of political nationalism (Tölölyan, 1991). Critical theorists have often emphasized the ways in which diasporic experiences highlight the possibilities for what Clifford (1994, p. 302) called, ‘non-exclusive practices of community, politics and difference’, which are not circumscribed *a priori* by existing categories of territory, nationality or formal citizenship status.

¹The construct of ‘nation-state’ is widely used, but is itself essentially problematic. In practice, the boundaries of nation, civil society and of polity rarely coincide (Urry, 2000; Walby, 2003), and the ‘national’ status of many established states—including Canada and the UK—represents a highly contentious issue. For present purposes, however, I shall retain the use of the term ‘nationalism’, due to its resonances with existing formulations including in particular, Billig’s (1995) construct of ‘banal nationalism’.

The kind of banal nationalist frame of reference adopted in *Dissolving the Diaspora* also tacitly limits the contexts in which mutually respectful inter-cultural dialogue can and should take place. First, in so far as relations of rights, duties and respect are understood to operate only between individuals with common national citizenship status, the implication is that refugees, guest workers and in the UK context people with residency rights but without British citizenship status (including any individual from another EU member state), would not be included in the idealised process of mutually respectful dialogue. This is not simply a pedantic consideration. On the contrary, discourses which treat 'social inclusion' as synonymous with common citizenship or nationality automatically—if inadvertently—legitimate the exclusion of individuals and groups who do not possess the necessary credentials (Kundnani, 2001).

Second, the kind of mutually respectful dialogue that Nesbitt-Larking advocates in *Dissolving the Diaspora* is limited to exchange within, rather than between, nation states. This is most apparent at the point where Nesbitt-Larkin treats 'Canadian multiculturalism' as a form of symbolic national capital (Berbrier, 2004). The superiority of Canadian policies involving a 'finely tuned balance between universalistic individual rights and the needs and requirements of defined communities', over public philosophies of citizenship and social integration currently employed in France and the Netherlands is treated as self-evident and uncontroversial. What is notably absent is any consideration of the possibility that Canada, France and the Netherlands might be understood as exemplifying qualitatively different political cultural traditions, each with their internal logic, each deriving from different historical conditions, and each consequently worthy of mutual recognition and respect (cf. Favell, 1998). More generally, at no stage in *Dissolving the Diaspora* does Nesbitt-Larkin orient to a need for caring, respectful inter- or trans-national dialogue in the interests of developing a well-functioning and unified global political community.

The liberal utopian vision of a deep and critical multiculturalism based in an ongoing mutually respectful dialogue may not be ultimately, or absolutely, achievable. Nevertheless, we may still choose to treat this as an ideal template for a good society. Nevertheless we should also be aware that however inclusive, multiethnic and multi-faith a national community is understood to be, it remains nevertheless exclusively national. As Beiner (2003, pp. 21–22) noted, liberalism is

'a philosophy concerned with upholding the dignity and inherent rights of individuals, understood as instantiations of a *universal* humanity, and so it is unclear why this philosophy would accord any special moral status to the claims of citizenship. Why concern ourselves with the quality of civic life within *our own* national boundaries...?'

On this basis, it would follow that any commitment to deep multiculturalism which does not also embrace a broad cosmopolitanism is in danger of representing a liberal contradiction in terms.

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