

Debating an Agenda for Cohesion

At the end of May the Runnymede Trust, with the support of the LSE Centre for the Study of Global Governance, hosted a conference to further illuminate what social cohesion means. The conference, entitled 'Cohesion, Community and Citizenship', gathered together leading academics from the UK, Europe and the USA to reflect on concepts of cohesion and belonging from a range of perspectives. **Rob Berkeley** considers some of the major themes to emerge from the day and the challenges for theory, policy and practice laid out by the speakers.

The Old Theatre at the LSE provided the venue for an exchange of new ideas, bringing together leading thinkers from a range of perspectives on the issues of cohesion, community and citizenship. The concept of cohesion has slipped easily into the policy debate around race equality, in large part due to the government's response to asylum and immigration and last summer's riots in northern mill towns. Yet, as highlighted by the Runnymede/Industrial Society conference in March of this year, there appears to be little consensus about the implications of a cohesion agenda. Indeed, there is little consensus about what a cohesion agenda should include or might exclude.

Since March there have been attempts to better define what cohesion might mean for policymakers, namely through the Home Office Community Cohesion Unit, the Cohesion advisory panel lead by Ted Cante, and the Local Government Association guidance. While their attempts are laudable, they do not pay credence to the levels of complexity and real challenge to existing structures and conceptual frameworks that many of the speakers at the conference argued for.

Key Concepts

The conference began with a keynote address from **Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh**. Lord Parekh, as the chair of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, began not with a defence of the commission's report but an elaboration of the concept of cohesion that formed a major part of the vision for the future of multi-ethnic Britain as outlined therein.

'Britain certainly needs to be "One Nation" – but understood as a community of communities and a community of citizens, not a place of oppressive uniformity based on a single substantive culture. Cohesion in such a community derives from widespread commitment to certain core values, both between communities and within them; equality and fairness; dialogue and consultation; toleration, compromise, and accommodation; recognition of and respect for diversity; and – by no means least – determination to confront and eliminate racism and xenophobia.'

The Parekh Report (4.36 p. 56)

Lord Parekh stressed the importance of cohesion to any stable political community. Cohesion, i.e. a sense of belonging, is necessary for three reasons:

First, to define that community as a community of individuals bound to each other in a way that they are not bound to others; a mutuality of claims and obligations.

Second, in order that they may share a 'fellow-feeling', a sense of mutual concern.

Third, for individuals to be able to share a common loyalty to the well-being of that community.

It is only with a common sense of belonging that individuals in communities will make sacrifices for that community, e.g. agreeing to pay taxes, respecting and obeying the law, and, at the extreme, demonstrating a preparedness to die for a country.

Professor Parekh went on to argue that it is through possessing a common sense of belonging that communities learn to be able to cope with difference and diversity. It is a sign of insecurity and instability for a society to see difference as undermining. Belonging is a concept too large and too subtle to be captured by crude nationalism or patriotism.

Nationalism and patriotism are exclusive and holistic, based on a mythical history and tied to territory, thus making land more important than human life. By contrast, belonging is open and expansive, based on mutual relationships between individuals rather than any myth. Professor Parekh noted that great thinkers in the past such as Plato and Gandhi have not used the concept of nation. Gandhi used a word meaning 'love of my people', and Tagore 'constant concern for the well-being of my people', rather than making any reference to nation or the mother/fatherland.

Common values

Given this ambitious vision for a sense of belonging the question remains: what is its basis and how can it be fostered? Having rejected common ethnicity, common religion and common culture as possible options, Parekh argued for common values. Yet even basic common values are contentious and have limits. Common values are not available in all areas, are often interpreted differently, and have to be prioritised. This said, a minimal set of public common values is the best basis for a common sense of belonging. This body of common values should be coupled with equal citizenship (equal rights and equal opportunities), socialisation for all into the way of life (an acknowledgement of the emotional aspects to belongingness), and respect for legitimate moral and cultural differences.

Professor Parekh concluded that the challenge for cohesion is to re-imagine Britishness – to create the post-nation state. The cohesion agenda needs to respond to the question whether a sense of belonging is possible without a sense of nationhood based on ethnicity, culture or religion. He also reminded the participants that social cohesion cannot be resolved once and for all; it is dynamic and therefore needs to be capable of re-creation and constant re-definition.

The Morning's Panel Session

This series of challenges presented the audience and other speakers with a large and fundamental series of questions to return to throughout the course of the conference. The first panel of the day looked at different aspects of social cohesion for the UK. Professor Alan Wolfe developed an alternative view of what social cohesion might mean, drawing heavily from his experiences in the USA; Professor Lola Young gave her views on the effectiveness of policy in delivering cultural change; and Professor Jagdish Gundara shared his concepts of intercultural education in a multi-ethnic society.

The politics of citizenship

Professor Wolfe gave a stimulating paper that challenged the audience to re-think their concepts of social cohesion. He discussed the political preconditions of citizenship, arguing that it is not a natural right because there is no citizenship in nature. Unlike the right to life, the right to citizenship is political in nature; it requires a state in order to come into existence. Some rights, such as the right to free speech, are violated by the state. But citizenship is not like that. Generally speaking, those who have sought the expansion of citizenship have also sought the expansion of the state, as the history of the modern welfare state suggests.

He argued that immigrants who move to a new society are entitled, and ought to be encouraged, to apply for citizenship. Nativists usually oppose such an idea; they want to keep their society committed to one language or one culture and thus want to limit the number of immigrants and to restrict their ability to claim full citizenship. Alas, multiculturalists also oppose citizenship too frequently. They insist that immigrants should be able to retain their language, their customs, or their morality. But citizenship is not a free good. It requires a strong state and that state can, to further citizenship, insist on some basic requirements that all citizens, including immigrants, must fulfil. (We were able to hear Professor Parekh's response to these challenges when the speakers shared a platform for the question and answer session.)

Policy in a time of strategy

Professor Young suggested that we needed to be wary of over-estimating the power of policy, especially given the current policy-making processes. From her unique position of poacher turned gamekeeper; academic critic of policy to cultural strategist and policymaker at the Greater London Authority, she argued that it was important to keep sight of longer-term strategies such as the promotion of diversity within the workforce and all areas of cultural life, even as new policy frameworks such as cohesion are developing. She also highlighted the importance of making the links between theory, policy and practice.

Cohesion through education

Professor Gundara, recently appointed as a commissioner of the CRE, shared his vision of the power and effectiveness of education in providing a milieu in which social cohesion can thrive. He noted that now was a key opportunity to discuss citizenship and social cohesion, given the settling in of the devolved assemblies and serious political discussion about the best response to regional government in England. He rejected the notion that Britain had become multicultural with the arrival of the SS Windrush – pointing instead to a long history of a multi-faith, multi-lingual collection of peoples inhabiting Britain.

Building on the theme of intercultural education, Gundara argued for a role for political literacy and active citizenship to be taught in schools. He reflected however, that what is important in schools is not what is taught but what the pupils learn. This learning is taken from the very structures through which schools operate – hence the need for schools to be democratic and open institutions in which young people can contribute as active members of the school community. Further, since young people also learn outside of the school gates, it is clear that there is a role in educating the wider community about active citizenship through lifelong learning. He reminded the audience of the African adage; “it takes a whole village to educate a child”, if this is the case then the ‘village’ needs to openly consider what exactly it is teaching.

Three Views from Continental Europe

The afternoon panel considered international perspectives on social cohesion.

Obstructions of nationalism

Jytte Klausen focused on obstacles to integration and accommodation that middle-class immigrants experience. Arguing that, given powerful class structures, some of the exclusion of immigrants of lower socio-economic status can be understood, whereas this is more difficult to understand for professionals and other middle-class status groups, her paper drew on examples from across Europe. Focussing especially on Scandinavian countries, she argued that :

'The association of rights and obligations of citizenship with the national [ethnic/cultural/religious] community is an obstacle to the integration and accommodation of immigrants.'

Church–state relations provided good examples of the kind of rights and obligations afforded to majority ethnic communities. For instance, the Danish People's Church is 100 percent financed by the state, its clergy are civil servants. Germany has three recognised religions – Lutheran, Catholic and Judaical – whilst Islam is not recognised, not formally represented, and therefore not able to benefit from the services that other faiths receive public money to deliver.

Common values and collective identities

Rainer Baubock reflected on immigration and asylum from an EU and specifically Austrian perspective. He noted the effect of far-right populist parties in Austria and across Europe, and the 'securitization' agenda's influence on immigration policies. He went on to argue that while common, democratic values are necessary for social and political cohesion they are not sufficient in themselves:

'I would describe the task as reformulating democratic citizenship in a context where political communities are increasingly nested and overlapping. While there is a need for general principles; how to resolve conflicts of rights, obligations and loyalties in such complex multilevel polities, there is also a need for collective identities that support pragmatic solutions and consensual accommodation. Against the discourse of national populism we need a counter-discourse that affirms diversity as a basis for cohesion. For this it is not enough to respect cultural difference and minority rights. The task is to transform national identities associated with the present states of Europe in such a way that majority populations will include national minorities and immigrant communities as well as the larger European polity in their self-descriptions. Such post-nationalist narratives about political identities in Europe cannot be focused only on universal democratic values but must be constructed from the various building blocks provided by the recent history of different European societies.'

Civic individualism and conformity

Christophe Bertossi delivered a paper considering the French approach to social cohesion – describing what he termed to be a 'French dilemma'. French citizenship is based on civic individualism which

'means that only abstract individuals can be recognized as citizens . . . citizenship depends on the extinction of all idiosyncratic identities in the public realm . . . French politics of citizenship simply ignore probable ethnic, regional or religious minorities. Only individuals are citizens, citizens are equal, therefore all individuals are equal citizens'

Bertossi described the challenges to this conception of French citizenship posed by immigration, political mobilisation of minority ethnic communities in the public realm, and European integration. He considered the past 20 years of reform and development in the French politics of citizenship and noted a profound shift at policy level, even if not in the understanding of the French public at large. During the term of the previous French government, legislation had been passed which recognised and engaged with equality of opportunity.

'In direct contradiction to the received understanding that all differences must disappear from the public realm, these new perspectives [on citizenship and equality] provide a niche for the recognition of ethnic and religious minorities in France. Even if the policies have not gone that far since 1998, at least diversity has stopped being apocryphal.'

Summing Up

Professor David Hollinger responded to the speakers, offering a summation of the day's presentations. He noted a number of themes to arise, specifically, common values, religious disestablishment, citizenship, multiple identities, devolution and supra-national politics, and the interpretation, ownership and understanding of national histories. He also noted the wide-ranging nature of the debate and the complexity of issues involved in discussions about what are increasingly widely used words such as community, cohesion and citizenship. He also noted some issues that did not appear on the agenda but might be worthy of consideration, such as the measurements of cohesion, the instances and experiences of couples from different ethnic groups, the experiences of those of mixed heritage, the role of the welfare state in an immigration-based economy, and examples of approaches to cohesion from further afield than Europe.

The conference certainly highlighted the complexity of the concepts of social cohesion which are in currency at the moment. Approaching the topic in this way, it became clear that what may seem to some to be rather esoteric political philosophy debates have a direct and real effect in terms of the way we live together as a society. Further, it showed that the British do not have a monopoly on critical reflection about the nation state, and that the need to find a means of defining a multi-ethnic Britain remains as crucial as it was in 1997 when the Commission began its work.

Attendance at the conference surpassed our original forecasts, which suggests that the concept of cohesion is one of interest to a large number of people. The opportunity to begin to unpack some of the agenda on cohesion was welcome. Yet in unpacking it became clear that this is an agenda with far-reaching implications and a propensity to overlap in a large number of policy areas. The links between cohesion, equality and diversity referred to in the report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain were revisited a number of times and at a number of levels: diversity in terms of curricula, national identities, political communities, and civic identity; equality in terms of access to representation in culture strategies, discrimination legislation, religious life, and educational provision; cohesion in terms of common values, political identities, public-spiritedness, challenging racisms, and power structures.

Although this huge range of issues and ideas may seem daunting, this conference represented some measure of progress from earlier events as concepts of social cohesion begin to crystallize. Using the input from political and sociological theory, coupled with academic research from a range of countries and politics, the conference has helped to extend our thinking. The next stage is to utilise these tools to revisit existing policies and develop new ones which will measurably improve cohesion, i.e. promote a sense of belonging, deliver racial equality and support the evolution of a more successful multi-ethnic Britain.