

Culture and Equality

An Egalitarian Critique
of Multiculturalism

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The examples considered in this section have been ones in which the case against enforcing a rule that worked to the detriment of religious or cultural minorities was strong. On the one side was a denial of equal occupational or educational opportunity, and on the other side no interest that was worthy of protection. Wearing a headscarf to work or a turban to school threatened no danger to the public or to the individuals concerned, nor could it plausibly be said to interfere with the effective functioning of the business or the school. The only question that they raised was, therefore, whether the rule-and-exemption approach was the appropriate one or whether the libertarian alternative was better. In the employment case, I argued that, if once the employer's demand for complete uniformity had been rejected, there seemed little to be said for restricting the right to wear a headscarf to certified Muslims. For this would invest discretionary power in religious officials and employers while serving no plausibly legitimate (i.e. job-related) purpose.

In the school case, there is more to be said for the rule-and-exemption approach. The headmaster's argument in favour of a school uniform is, at the very least, one that many parents find persuasive. That is, perhaps, a good enough basis for saying that parents who want to send their children to a school that enforces the wearing of a uniform should be entitled to do so. And that, obviously, entails that schools must be allowed to make the wearing of the uniform a condition of attendance. Under these circumstances, it seems reasonable to say that the breach in uniformity to accommodate minority religious beliefs or cultural practices should be kept as small as possible. This is the kind of case in which the rule-and-exemption approach comes into its own.

To sum up, the rule-and-exemption approach has a role to play in accommodating minority beliefs and practices, but it is far from being the panacea that it is commonly represented as by multiculturalists. To make sense, it requires a combination of very precise conditions that are rarely satisfied all together. It must be important to have a rule generally prohibiting conduct of a certain kind because, if this is not so, the way in which to accommodate minorities is simply not to have a rule at all. At the same time, though, having a rule must not be so important as to preclude allowing exceptions to it. We are left with cases in which uniformity is a value but not a great enough one to override the case for exemptions. The case of the Sikh boy whose turban contravened the school rules is a good example of this, but I do not believe that there are too many others.

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The Dynamics of Identity: Assimilation, Acculturation and Difference

I. *Vive la Différence?*

The thesis that public policies should not be designed to mete out special treatment to members of groups defined by their cultural characteristics has been ascribed by Charles Taylor to something he calls 'difference-blind liberalism'.¹ The differences to which Taylor refers are not those between rich and poor, employed and unemployed, well-educated and ill-educated, and so on. The egalitarian liberal conception of justice is not blind to these or to their importance: on the contrary, it will condemn as unjust much of the inequality along those dimensions to be found in contemporary societies. Taylor, in common with the other exponents of the 'politics of difference' addressed in this book, sees himself on the left. Yet, as Todd Gitlin has observed (with the United States especially in mind), 'the politics of identity is silent on the deepest sources of social misery: the devastation of the cities, the draining of resources away from the public and into the private hands of the few.'²

Specifically, there has in the past two decades been a large increase in the concentration of wealth and in the disparity of incomes – both those arising from earnings and those arising from holdings of capital – while at the same time taxes on income and capital gains have become less progressive and estate duties have become almost voluntary. These trends have affected most western countries, but Britain and the United States the most. Since 1977, three-fifths of all households in the United States have become poorer, with the poorest losing the most. Over 90 per cent of the increase in the national

income over this period has gone to those in the top 1 per cent of the distribution, and the rest to those in the top two-fifths. 'The gap between rich and poor has grown into such an economic chasm that this year the richest 2.7 million Americans, the top 1 per cent, will have as many after-tax dollars to spend as the bottom 100 million.'³ Right at the top, the gains have been even more remarkable. In 1980, 'the typical C.E.O. of a big American company was taking home about forty times the annual earnings of a typical worker on the factory floor'.⁴ By 1990, 'they took in about eighty five times as much as factory workers'. Then 'between 1990 and 1998, ... the annual "compensation" of C.E.Os. at large firms rose from \$1.8 million to \$10.6 million... Last year, big-league C.E.Os. pocketed, on the average, four hundred and nineteen times the earnings of a typical production worker.'⁵

At the same time, especially in Britain, there has been a greater spread in the quality of education and health care available to people with different incomes: as the gap between rich and poor widens, those at the top can increasingly afford to buy their way out of the system of publicly provided schools and hospitals. These public services are then liable to deteriorate further in response to pressure from wealthy and influential people for keeping down the taxes that pay for services they do not use. Within the universities, the academic multiculturalists exhaust their energies in arguing about the content of reading lists, but nobody seems to care much about the increasing inequality of opportunity to go to a university, especially the sort that offers the best prospects of entry into elite occupations. In England, not only Oxford and Cambridge but also the London School of Economics (which does not have their traditional connection with the elite private schools) recruit over half their undergraduate intake from private schools, while in the United States the increase in unequal opportunity has been even more striking: 'In 1979, a student from the top quarter of American families had four times the chance of earning a B.A. degree at the age of 24 as a student in the bottom quarter. In 1994, a student from the top quarter had nineteen times the chance.'⁶

If (God forbid!) I were inclined to engage in polemics, I might feel drawn to expressing the view that it is the multiculturalists who are blind to the ever-widening differences that are such a deplorable feature of most contemporary western societies. As it is, however, I shall accept the epithet 'difference-blind' for the position that I am defending in this book. To say that it is blind to difference is, of course, intended pejoratively. Let us recall, however, that the figure of justice is traditionally represented as blindfolded. The basis for this is that justice is supposed to be dispensed in a way that takes no account of factors that are irrelevant to reaching a just verdict. If liberalism is indeed blind to cultural differences, we should not assume immediately that this must be a fault: it may in some circumstances be precisely what is required.

The gist of Taylor's complaint is that the egalitarian liberal position is 'inhospitable to difference'.⁷ Only in the form of a 'more hospitable variant' that he favours can it be 'cleared of the charge of homogenizing difference'.⁸ I agree with Taylor that 'this form of liberalism is guilty as charged by the proponents of a politics of difference' on a number of counts.⁹ But this is a virtue: it is 'difference-blind' liberalism that gets the right answers and the 'politics of difference' that should be rejected. For example, justice demands that under some conditions state services should be offered in more than one language. (I shall take up the specification of these conditions at the end of this chapter.) But it may still be that a language becomes extinct, simply because those speaking it take decisions that in aggregate result in its disappearing. Very many languages have done just that in the past and doubtless many more will do so in future: two thousand of the world's six thousand languages have fewer than one thousand speakers, and are unlikely to survive. A liberal society cannot adopt policies designed to keep a language in existence if those who speak it prefer to let it go. Thus, Taylor is quite correct in saying that liberalism 'can't capture the full thrust of policies designed for cultural survival'.¹⁰ But why should it be expected to?

What liberalism can accommodate is precisely the kind of thing that Taylor says is inadequate: 'having the French language available [in Quebec] for those who might choose it'.¹¹ Policies that make it illegal for the children of francophone parents to attend any except francophone public schools put the power of the state behind 'those who value remaining true to the culture of our ancestors' while making it difficult or impossible for 'those who might want to cut loose in the name of some individual goal of self-development' to pursue their aspirations.¹² The notion that birth is fate – that simply in virtue of being born into a certain ethnic group one acquires the (potentially enforceable) duty to maintain its 'ancestral culture' – is continuous with a kind of ethnic nationalism that is profoundly at odds with liberalism. What we are faced with here has been decried by Gitlin as 'the cant of identity', which 'proposes to deduce a position, a tradition, a deep truth, or a way of life from a fact of birth, physiognomy, national origin or physical disability'.¹³

We may say that liberalism is, both historically and logically, the result of generalizing the proposition that it is no business of the state to enforce the observance of the true religion – however and by whomever that is defined. Conversely, the notion that the state may (and perhaps should) deploy its coercive powers to ensure the maintenance of the ancestral culture can be seen as what we get by 'culturalizing' the proposition that the legitimate tasks of the state include the enforcement of the true religion. There is, however, one important respect in which 'culturalization' changes the nature of the original doctrine. In its original form, the proposition was that the state should enforce the observance of the *true* religion, and the truth claim

was essential to the case for enforcement. In contrast, the proposal to put the state's power behind the maintenance of 'culture' does not rest on any claims about the objective value – truth value or any other value – of the culture in question. (I shall follow up the implications of this idea in chapter 7.) In practice, the idea that tradition is somehow self-validating provides a virtual *carte blanche* for the politicians who define the tradition to decide on the content of education, the arts and the media. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, if the traditions favoured by politicians turn out to promote deference to the powers that be: the 'neo-Confucianism' that scholars tell us was invented out of whole cloth at the behest of Lee Kuan Yew is exceptional only in its blatancy. Taylor himself illustrates the negotiability of the concept of the ancestral culture. True to his allegiance to Herder, he focuses on language; but the ancestral culture of ethnic French Quebecois could with equal authenticity have been defined in terms of adherence to the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁴

Liberals must stand up for the rights of those who wish to pursue individual goals of self-development. Contrary, however, to a frequently heard claim, liberals are not committed to the attempt to eradicate all traditional ways of life in order to further some ideal of free-floating personal autonomy. (I shall endeavour to lay to rest this *canard* in the next chapter.) The point here is simply that the complaint made by liberals is not against the objective of remaining true to some ancestral culture but against the coercion of those who do not share that objective. If that position makes liberalism 'inhospitable to difference', it is not something to be ashamed of. From Slovakia to Singapore, it is clear that liberal institutions are not safe in states in which the maintenance of a (supposedly or actually) traditional culture is accepted as part of the political agenda.

Taylor asks rhetorically: 'if we are concerned with identity, then what is more legitimate than one's aspiration that it never be lost?'¹⁵ The answer is, of course, that this is a perfectly legitimate aspiration. Similarly, perpetuating one's genes is a perfectly legitimate aspiration. But there are legitimate and illegitimate ways of going about it: rape, for example, is excluded. The aspiration that a collective identity should never be lost is unquestionably one that can legitimately be pursued in a whole number of ways. On the assumption, for example, that a fair (i.e. pro rata) system of state funding was already providing for the support of the French language in Quebec, enthusiasts would be able to add to it from their own pockets, participate in organizations devoted to advancing French culture and language, and so on. There are other means that would be illegitimate, some involving individual action (e.g. defacing English books in libraries) and some collective. Among the latter are the kind of 'measures designed to ensure [group] survival through indefinite future generations' supported by Taylor.¹⁶

The fundamental error, which is central to Taylor's project, is encapsulated in the title of a collection of essays edited by Will Kymlicka: *The Rights of Minority Cultures*.¹⁷ Cultures are simply not the kind of entity to which rights can properly be ascribed. Communities defined by some shared cultural characteristic (for example, a language) may under some circumstances have valid claims, but the claims then arise from the legitimate interests of the members of the group. On similar lines, Peter Jones has pointed out that

cultures are not moral entities to which we can owe obligations of fairness. Insisting that we should be fair to cultures merely as cultures is like insisting that we should be fair to paintings or to languages or to musical compositions. . . . So, if we seek to deal fairly with cultural diversity, it is not cultures that will be the ultimate objects of our concern but the people who bear them.¹⁸

What follows from neglecting this is illustrated by a case cited by one of the contributors to Kymlicka's own collection of essays. The legislature of the Province of Quebec passed legislation that violated the constitutional provision that 'a parent has the right to have his or her children educated in the minority language [i.e. French or English] of the province in which they reside, provided that the parent was educated in that language in Canada'. The legislation would have allowed the right to choose an education in English for their children 'only to those who were educated in English in Quebec'.¹⁹ In response to a legal challenge, counsel for the Quebec government argued that the guarantee 'is intended to ensure the survival of the minority group in each province. Hence, it must not be understood as conferring on every person falling within its terms an individual right to education in the minority language, but rather on the whole minority group a collective right to sufficient educational establishments to ensure its survival.'²⁰ Taylor claimed, as we have seen, that 'having the French language available for those who might choose it' is not enough if the goal is its indefinite survival – regardless of the desires of the individual speakers of the language. And this is obviously true. The impeccably Taylorian reasoning of counsel for Quebec gives us the other side of the coin. What it shows is that, if we define the objective as cultural survival, it is not even necessary that education in the English language should be available for all those who can claim their ancestral culture to be bound up with English.

This perversion of common sense is bound to happen once the goal of cultural survival is elevated to the status of an end in itself. Human beings then become mere cyphers, to be mobilized as instruments of a transcendent goal. Thus, the logic of counsel's reasoning would suggest that if – as may well happen – the anglophone community in Quebec dwindles at some time in the future (due to further emigration and increased assimilation) to the

point at which its survival is threatened, its remaining members could legitimately be compelled to use English-speaking public schools, as their francophone counterparts are now compelled to use French-speaking ones. Some may doubt if the solicitude of a Quebec government for the survival of English would really prove so great if the situation arose. That is neither here nor there. The point is simply that this is the kind of nonsense that follows from attributing an intrinsic value to cultural survival, detached from the interests of the individual bearers of that culture.

2. Liberalism and the 'Ideal of Assimilation'

A popular way of expressing the complaint that liberalism is 'inhospitable to difference' is to say that it is 'assimilationist'. This complaint can take a number of forms. The strongest version maintains that liberalism presupposes the non-existence of any differences between people. The subject of liberal political philosophy, according to this contention, is an abstract being with no distinctive characteristics such as age, sex, ethnocultural identity or nationality. This charge goes right back to the beginning of the Counter-Enlightenment: as I mentioned in chapter 1, Joseph de Maistre said that he knew about Frenchmen and Germans, and so on, but had never come across *man*. The idea that liberalism denies the existence of difference, proceeding as if its principles applied to units of undifferentiated humanity, has become something of a mantra among anti-liberals. Its truth is often, indeed, so taken for granted that it is not considered necessary to offer any evidence for it.

I hope that what has already been said suffices to give the lie to this oft-repeated claim. The liberal notion of equality before the law, so far from resting on the assumption that differences do not exist, is proposed as the fairest way of accommodating them. To rehearse the historically central example once again: demanding that churches and other religious bodies should fit their activities within a uniform legal framework that puts them on an equal footing is actually a way of responding to the importance of the role that religion may play in people's lives. It is precisely because they recognize the potential for destructive conflict inherent in religion that liberals have insisted on a legal regime that depoliticizes religious identity and is in that sense 'difference-blind' with respect to religion. Indeed, in his critique of liberal rights (mentioned in chapter 1), Marx adduced as evidence of their inadequacy the fact that freedom of religion in the United States was associated with the flourishing of religion.²¹ For a liberal, however, that provides evidence for the proposition that freedom of religion does not belittle the significance of religion.

When it is not treated as a dogma, the idea that liberalism presupposes the insignificance of difference is usually supported by citing John Rawls's theory of justice.²² The surprisingly frequent claim that Rawls's theory is designed for disembodied beings and not for real people, with particular commitments and attachments, rests on a complete misunderstanding of Rawls's motives and methods. What the critics seize upon is Rawls's proposal that principles of justice are those that would be chosen to regulate their lives together by people who were temporarily deprived of information about their identities.²³ His invocation of this so-called Original Position, it is said, shows that Rawls fails to recognize the importance to people of gender, ethnocultural identity, religious affiliation, physical and intellectual abilities, and so on. But what it actually shows is the opposite. It is precisely because such things are important to people that it is essential for a theory of justice to take account of them in the right way. To stick to my example, if religion were of trivial significance in people's lives, it could scarcely matter how the polity handled it. Even a state religion, accompanied by civil disabilities (such as lack of access to educational or professional opportunities) or criminal penalties for deviation from it, would be of little import if nobody cared much one way or the other.

What is the right way to deal with difference? Rawls's basic idea is that a sign of our having achieved a just answer is that it is one that can be endorsed as fair by each person, whatever his or her personal characteristics, endowments and commitments may be. The Original Position is put forward as a construction that can generate principles of justice satisfying this criterion. There is no need, for the present purpose, to ask if the Original Position is really well adapted to doing the work that Rawls wants it to do.²⁴ The point is simply that, so far from overlooking or wishing away difference, Rawls builds his entire structure around the assumption that the main business of a theory of justice is to deal with difference in a manner that can be shown to be fair.

A more subtle but in the end equally perverse thesis about the assimilationist impulse behind liberalism has been put forward by Iris Young. According to this line of analysis, liberalism does not actually assume away the existence of difference, but it is committed to hoping that all the differences constituting people's distinctive social identities will some day disappear. Indeed, liberal principles of equal treatment are, Young alleges, inextricably bound up with this 'ideal of assimilation'. Thus, for example, an 'ideal of assimilation' with regard to race and sex would be realized by a state of affairs in which race and sex were no longer categories with any social meaning. Such a state of affairs would have been achieved when 'the race or sex of an individual would be the functional equivalent of eye color in our society today. While physiological differences in skin color or genitals would remain, they would have no significance for a person's sense of identity or how others regard him or her.'²⁵

Where Young muddies the waters is in contrasting this 'ideal of assimilation', which she takes from Richard Wasserstrom, with what she calls an 'ideal of diversity'.²⁶ For whereas the 'ideal of assimilation' describes a state of affairs that might (or might not, depending on one's point of view) be ideal, the 'ideal of diversity' is defined not in terms of a state of affairs but in terms of a public policy: one in which group identities are given an explicit role in relation to both the inputs and outputs of political decision-making.²⁷ Without any need for argument, the effect of this categorization is to identify the liberal principle of equal treatment (which is the denial of Young's 'ideal of diversity') with the ideal of assimilation. But any attempt to make the argument for this identification explicit would immediately reveal the fallacy that arises from treating her two positions as if they exhausted the possibilities when in fact they both exclude the core liberal position. Young is right to say that, in a society that was non-racist and non-sexist in the sense required by the ideal of assimilation, it would have to be the case that 'no political rights or obligations would be connected to race or sex, and no important institutional benefits would be associated with either'.²⁸ But it would be perfectly possible for somebody to support the 'difference-blind' conception of equal treatment while regarding the ideal of assimilation as a bit of a nightmare.

Liberal societies already approximate fairly closely to the liberal principle of equal treatment in relation to sex, at least as far as public policy is concerned, and it is hard to believe that the remaining exceptions (for example the requirement that marriage must be between a man and a woman) are all that stands in the way of the full realization of the ideal of assimilation. Barring science fiction scenarios, there is obviously an ineluctable biological basis for the social recognition of difference in relation to reproduction. And even if we give whatever credence is due to the idea that the categories of heterosexual and homosexual are social constructions, that is still a long way from saying that sexual attraction might be entirely disconnected from sexual identity. Richard Wasserstrom, from whom Young took the 'ideal of assimilation', carries it through consistently at this point:

the normal, typical adult in this kind of nonsexist society would be... as indifferent to the sexual, physiological differences of other persons for all significant interpersonal relationships [as normal, typical adults are now to eye color]. Bisexuality, not heterosexuality or homosexuality, would be the typical intimate, sexual relationship in the ideal society that was assimilationist with regard to sex.²⁹

The point I wish to emphasize is that the case for a system of universal rights does not stand or fall on the attractiveness of the ideal of an assimilationist

society set before us by Wasserstrom. Advocating public policies that give equal rights and opportunities to men and women does not require any commitment to the view that these policies are desirable because they may contribute to the realization of an ideal of assimilation of this kind. For egalitarian liberals, equal treatment is required by justice. It is an expression of the equal rights to which citizens of a liberal state are entitled.

Classifying people in terms of race is inherently suspect, because it is almost inevitably tied up with bogus biology and psychology and almost always presupposes (on the part of those who create the categorization) an assumption that some races are superior to others. Often it imposes an identity on people that has nothing to do with their own self-understanding: the typical British lumping together of Afro-Caribbeans and South Asians as 'blacks' illustrates this. Anyone with an ounce of good will must therefore hope for the disappearance of 'race' as a basis of identity. However, cultural or religious identifications are not inherently objectionable in the same respects, even when the culture is closely associated with some ethnic group. Thus, it is simply false to generalize from the obnoxiousness of 'race' as a social classification to suggest that 'liberal individualism... claims that social group categorisations are invidious fictions whose sole function is to justify privilege'.³⁰

Liberals will certainly deny that in a just society members of different groups should have different 'political rights and obligations', and that 'important institutional benefits' should be available to some while being denied to others. If that constitutes being opposed to what Young calls an 'ideal of diversity' then they are against it. Yet it would be quite consistent with this to anticipate (with anything from equanimity to enthusiasm) that within this common institutional framework members of different groups would observe different customs, emphasize different values, spend their leisure time differently and perhaps have a tendency to cluster in different occupations. I have to confess myself baffled by Young's assumption that she is affirming anything a liberal has to deny when she says that people 'find significant sources of personal friendship, social solidarity, and aesthetic satisfaction in their group based affinities and cultural life'.³¹ Those who believe that this kind of differentiation is positively desirable may be said to have an 'ideal of diversity'. Liberals as well as non-liberals can hold such an ideal. What distinguishes a liberal from a non-liberal is a principled objection to any attempt to promote such an ideal by the creation of group-specific public policies – the kind of thing that Young misleadingly calls an 'ideal of diversity'. For liberals, the right amount of diversity – and the right amount of assimilation – is that which comes about as a result of free choices within a framework of just institutions.

3. Assimilation: Good, Bad or Indifferent?

Leaving behind objections to 'difference-blind' liberalism that are based on misconceptions, we can now focus on one that has more substance: the complaint that it demands assimilation of those who migrate permanently to liberal democratic societies, even if this requires a change in the culture that the immigrants have brought with them from their own society of origin. This is one of those cases in which I am quite willing to agree that there are limits to the amount of hospitality to difference that liberalism can accept. To say that liberalism is 'inhospitable to difference' constitutes a criticism of liberalism only if we have determined how hospitable any political philosophy should be and have found liberalism wanting when measured against this standard. There is, after all, such a thing as the abuse of hospitality. If I am right, the limits of liberal toleration for difference correspond to the point at which the legitimate enjoyment of hospitality turns into its abuse.

I believe that it is an appropriate objective of public policy in a liberal democratic state to facilitate the achievement of a state of affairs in which all immigrants – or at least their descendants – become assimilated to the national identity of the country in which they have settled. But I make that claim only to the extent that national identity is understood in a certain way that I shall in due course explain. I can anticipate one feature of it, however, by saying that I chose my words carefully in talking about immigrants or their descendants 'becoming assimilated' rather than about their 'assimilating'. The latter implies that it is the immigrants who have to do all the work; the former leaves it open that the task may at least as much involve the host population in having to change its attitudes and its practices.

What is it to assimilate? The *Oxford English Dictionary* distinguishes two primary meanings. The first, which is tied tightly to the etymology, is 'to make or be like'. The second is 'to absorb and incorporate', and especially to turn food into part of one's bodily substance. It is interesting that the dictionary takes social assimilation to be a figurative extension of this process of digestion, rather than simply a direct application of the idea of becoming alike. This connects assimilation to identity: for the members of a group to have been assimilated, they must have become absorbed or incorporated in some other (normally larger or more powerful) group. One way of making the distinction would be to define the process of becoming more similar culturally as 'acculturation', while reserving the term 'assimilation' for the complete disappearance of the group's identity, so that it ceases to function as a reference point either for the members of the group or for others outside the group. On this conception of the relation between acculturation and assimilation, we may think of assimilation as a state that can be

reached only when acculturation is so complete that members of the two groups have become culturally indistinguishable. This is clearly the conception upon which the following statement by the Israeli sociologist Eliezer Ben-Rafael is based:

As part of a larger society, [a culturally distinct minority] group necessarily experiences some degree of acculturation in the sense that it is influenced by its environment and becomes increasingly similar to the strata that embody the values and norms predominant in society. Eventually, the group might even undergo assimilation, which means that acculturation comes to include identity.³²

Even if we were to regard complete acculturation as a necessary condition of assimilation (in the sense of the disappearance of a distinct identity), we would still have to acknowledge that it is not a sufficient condition. As Rainer Bauböck has pointed out, 'assimilation is different from acculturation in that the former requires some ratification by the [receiving] group'.³³ Thus, if 'acculturation' is 'the process by which an individual comes to acquire cultural practices belonging to the tradition of another group', then 'assimilation' is a further step 'indicat[ing] a change of membership which makes an individual similar to a receiving community in the sense that the members recognize her as one of their kind'.³⁴ The best (and most fateful) illustration of the possible disjunction between acculturation and assimilation, understood as the merging of identities, is the case of German Jews in the interwar period. Almost all were thoroughly acculturated in that they had absorbed German culture (on average probably rather better than their non-Jewish compatriots) and many belonged to families that had been Christian for more than one generation. Despite all this, the Nazi definition of German nationality, eventually embodied in the Nuremberg Laws, made Jewish descent incompatible with membership in the German nation.³⁵

Criteria of ethnic identity vary. Racist criteria, which are obsessed with 'blood', and are imposed by the dominant racial group, normally take the form of confining membership of the dominant group to those of 'pure' descent. One Jewish grandparent made somebody a Jew in the eyes of the Nazis. In theory, anyway, anti-miscegenation laws in the American South counted as black anybody with a black ancestor, however remote. As the sheriff of Natchez, Mississippi, puts it in *Show Boat*: 'One drop of nigger blood makes you a nigger in these parts.'³⁶ In practice, some people were able to 'pass', but they were constantly at risk. In *Show Boat*, again, Miss Julie, whose father was white and her mother black, passes as white. But her less than perfect acculturation is displayed by her revealing knowledge of a song that Queenie says she 'didn't ever hear anybody but colored folks sing';

and she and her (white) husband are later denounced to the sheriff as being in violation of the law against miscegenation.³⁷ Other ethnic groups have precise rules governing the acquisition and loss of membership by marriage and birth. A widespread rule, for example, is as follows: if a man marries somebody outside the group, his wife will become a member of the group and so will their children; but if a woman marries outside the group, she ceases to be a member and their children will not be members. Obviously, this rule reflects the patriarchal notion that a man 'owns' his wife and children, so they 'naturally' acquire his ethnicity.

If ethnic or racial boundaries do not have legal force or significance, the idea that groups must have clearly defined memberships is unlikely to persist, even if ethnic or racial identities are salient within civil society. As a result of intermarriage, more and more people are likely to be regarded, and to regard themselves, as 'mixed', and this category itself will be fluid: to some extent people can adopt an identity and get it accepted by others by their choice of an accent, a way of dressing, a set of leisure activities, a place of residence, and above all a set of associates. (The obverse of the saying that birds of a feather flock together is that those who flock together will tend to count as the same kind of bird.) England is a place in which 'race' has been a salient but informal category: English colonialism was, of course, another matter; but the formalized racialism that returning colonials brought with them never infected the main body of the population. For example, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was considered rather chic among well-to-do families in London (especially if they had West Indian connections) to have a black servant or two. Scattered as they must necessarily have been by this employment, it is scarcely surprising that they long ago disappeared as a group due to intermarriage with the native population. Recently, some people have been digging into their family records and have discovered a black ancestor from this period. In the society of *Show Boat*, they would have been anxious to hush this up. In fact, however, they regarded it as an interesting fact and were happy to be interviewed by reporters about it.

Ethnic or racial criteria of group membership, even if they leave some leeway for individuals to move in and out of the 'mixed' group, present the most resistance to assimilation. Where the criteria of membership do not stipulate descent, relatively small groups may disappear into the wider population very easily. In fact, this is the most likely outcome unless the descendants consciously try to maintain a separate identity, and even then they may not succeed. For example, it is doubtful that there is now a sense of distinctive identity among the grandchildren of the Poles who were recruited to cope with the shortage of miners after the Second World War or the grandchildren of the Italian prisoners of war who chose to remain in Britain when the war ended. If we want to insist that all actions that are not carried

out under coercion or compulsion are to count as voluntary, we shall have to say that these are examples of voluntary assimilation. But to call the process voluntary is liable to mislead in as far as it suggests a transformation consciously willed. We need a third category of things that just happen, being neither deliberately brought about nor deliberately resisted. Unless we believe that there is something inherently suspect about changes in people that come about without being consciously willed by them (a view for which there seems to me little to be said), it is hard to see why anybody should deplore assimilation that occurs naturally in the kind of way I have just described.

Let us now consider voluntary assimilation in the sense of assimilation deliberately aimed at by one group and (in Bauböck's term) 'ratified' by the other. Much assimilation has always occurred as a result of groups or individual members of groups acting on the judgement that they – or perhaps only their descendants – will have better life prospects if they can shed their present identity and acquire another. What makes such voluntary choices potentially problematic, morally speaking, is the context in which they are made. Especially where whole groups attempt to assimilate, there are good reasons for suspecting that the motivation is a desire to escape stigmatization and discrimination. Then the real objection is to those conditions, not to a rational adaptation to them. But we cannot simply assume that conditions in which there are incentives for assimilation are necessarily unjust. Even if the institutional background satisfies the demands of justice, it may well still be that the culture (for example, the language) of a group puts it at a disadvantage in pursuing ends valued by its members. Linguists and anthropologists may well have professional regrets if as a result a certain language ceases to be spoken or a certain cultural trait disappears. But preferences of these kinds are surely not an adequate basis on which to force people to perpetuate the language or cultural traits against their own judgement as to where their advantage lies.

The third possibility is that assimilation may be brutally enforced, and a great deal of assimilation (religious, linguistic and cultural) has been of this kind all through history. It still goes on. Thus, in Sudan, 'the processes of state incorporation are at present extremely violent' – a rather antiseptic description of a bloody conflict amounting virtually to genocide on the government's part.

To 'become Sudanese,' an inhabitant of one of the marginalized areas of Sudan must accept a particular interpretation of Islam; adopt a certain code of dress, eating, and housing; and participate in the monetary economy. . . . 'Sudanization' was once primarily a peaceful process, but today certain peripheral groups in northern Sudan . . . face the choice between submission to this process on very unfavourable terms and a fight to the death.³⁸

Again, in Australia 'up to a third of Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970... The stolen boys were sent to sheep and cattle stations and paid in rations and pennies. The girls, who were the majority, were sent for training as domestic servants, then "indentured" to "masters" in white middle-class homes.' John Pilger remarks that, when he was growing up, 'this was known as "assimilation."' ³⁹

It is cases such as these that give 'assimilation' the negative connotations that it commonly carries and give potency to the accusation that some policy (or the absence of a policy) is 'assimilationist' in effect even if not in intent. But if it is assimilation of this kind that is objectionable – and it surely is – we should not conflate it with assimilation that occurs in the absence of coercion within a context of just institutions. The thesis of 'difference-blind' liberalism is that it would be an improper interference with individual liberty to design public policies aimed at frustrating the wishes of those who would like to assimilate under those conditions. What of cases in which the pressures on people to assimilate amount to an unjust imposition? The answer that flows from the 'difference-blind' conception of liberalism is that compulsion to prevent these pressures from being effective is at the best a very inferior alternative to taking measures aimed at ending the unfair treatment that is at the root of the problem.

To conclude this discussion, it is worth asking what is the relation between assimilation (understood as loss of distinct identity) and the egalitarian liberal conception of equal treatment. It is a necessary truth that people who are indistinguishable from one another cannot be treated differently in a systematic way. (They may individually be treated arbitrarily; but this must, in the absence of any distinguishing characteristics, be a fate to which all are equally exposed.) However grossly the rules may discriminate between members of different groups, defined along some dimension or other, they can have no discriminatory impact among the members of a single group. Suppose, for example, that the law decrees burning at the stake for everybody in the country who is not a Roman Catholic. This will not result in unequal treatment of people according to their religious affiliations if everybody who was previously anything other than a Roman Catholic has undergone conversion. I have just suggested, indeed, that much of the assimilation that has occurred in history has been precisely of this kind: a response to a situation in which the possession of a distinct identity is strongly disadvantageous. The whole point of egalitarian liberalism, in contrast with this, is to ensure that people who are different are treated equally. Assimilation is not therefore necessary to ensure equal treatment. By the same token, any assimilation that does occur cannot be objected to on any grounds recognized by 'difference-blind' liberals.

4. Varieties of National Identity

The demand that immigrants should take on the national identity of their new country is regarded by supporters of the 'politics of difference' as oppressive and perhaps counterproductive in creating loyalty to it. I wish to argue that whether this is so or not depends on what goes into the idea of a common national identity. There is, indeed, one conception of common nationality that appeals to most multiculturalists, and it is one that is also important to liberals. This is nationality as defined in passports. For this purpose, of course, a 'nation' is simply a state: to be a 'national' of some country is to be a citizen of it. Where liberals part company from multiculturalists (or should do) is in denying the common multiculturalist claim that this purely legal conception of common nationality is all that is needed.

Unquestionably, membership of this kind is of enormous significance to everybody: not to have a nationality – to be a 'stateless person' – is an international form of social death. Moreover, it is clear that a country which does not have an inclusive definition of citizenship cannot by definition be a democracy, because the set of people who have the full range of legal and political rights constitutes only a subset of those whose fates are inextricably bound up with the functioning of the country's institutions. Citizenship has to be available to all permanent residents in order to satisfy 'the basic liberal principle of equal concern and respect for everybody who depends on a government for a guarantee of her or his rights'.⁴⁰ On the same grounds, citizenship should also be available at the age of majority to those who have been born within the national borders and have lived in the country since then, even if neither parent was a citizen of the country. Some countries, such as the United States, go further than this, giving citizenship unconditionally to anybody born on their soil. But this is not required by the liberal conception of citizenship, and it is actually rather inimical to its spirit in that it divorces citizenship from any kind of attachment to the country.

My thesis is that an inclusive conception of nationality as citizenship is not sufficient to give any assurance of 'equal concern and respect', even though it is a necessary condition. To see why the formal conception of nationality is inadequate, let us consider a state whose territory is regarded by the members of an ethnically defined *Staatsvolk* as their 'homeland'. Even if citizenship is granted to those who do not belong to the ethnic group that conceives of itself as 'owning' the state, there is nothing to prevent the numerically and politically dominant ethnic group from discriminating against citizens who do not belong to it by, for example, disqualifying them from eligibility for positions that are regarded as too important to entrust to them. The justification for doing this, that their loyalty cannot be trusted, is likely to

become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The state may also, without setting it out as a formal policy, subject those who do not belong to the majority nationality to brutal treatment by the police and discriminate against them in the allocation of public housing and other services, such as roads, hospitals and schools. Where the state takes the lead in employment discrimination, it can scarcely legislate against it in the private sector. If most of the desirable jobs are within the control of the majority ethnic group, it is not likely to be inhibited in discriminating vigorously against others. (If discrimination is practised rigorously enough, especially in relation to jobs and housing, the majority may be able to achieve a certain amount of 'ethnic cleansing' without resort to violence – or, more precisely, with resort only to the violence that maintains a state of affairs in which those outside the *Staatsvolk* are reduced to such a degree of frustration and despair that they choose to emigrate.) Finally, citizenship can be reduced to a charade on the side of input to the state as well as the side of output from the state: even if those outside the majority ethnic group have the vote, its effect can be nullified if the party or parties representing the majority exclude other parties from power. Two cases that between them illustrate all of these points are Northern Ireland during the half century from its creation in 1921 until the Stormont regime was wound up in 1973 and Israel during the half century from its creation in 1947 until now.

Admittedly, the problem of ethnically based discrimination among citizens will not arise if the state territory is occupied exclusively by people who belong to the ethnic group that claims it as its homeland. In the large literature on this topic, however, there is just one example of such a state that recurs constantly, that of Iceland. With this possible exception, all countries are ethnically mixed, and the only way in which this can be changed is for the government (or private agencies condoned by the government) to engage in either genocide or 'ethnic cleansing'. (The two policies are in fact complementary in as far as the plausible threat of genocide will create the terror that results in 'ethnic cleansing'.) As Alfred Stepan has put it:

Some parts of the world's map are of course more culturally homogeneous in the 1980s than they were in the 1930s, but in Poland and in Czechoslovakia this was 'helped' first by Nazi genocide of Jewish and Gypsy minorities and later by the Soviet-backed expulsion of the Germans, an expulsion which the Allies accepted. As the millennium turns, Croatia is now nearly homogeneous, but at the cost of ethnic cleansing and the creation of an ethnocracy. These are not useable templates for the practice and theory of democracy.⁴¹

Liberal democracy is a relatively rare form of government in the world. Almost all of the countries that gained independence from a colonial power in the last half century, for example, were endowed at their creation with

impeccably liberal democratic constitutions. Yet almost every one has fallen (usually quite quickly) into dictatorship or anarchy, or some combination of the two either sequentially or simultaneously. This suggests that the conditions for maintaining liberal democracy must be quite stringent. There is certainly no guarantee that outcomes that an egalitarian liberal would salute will arise from liberal democratic institutions. But they are extraordinarily unlikely to arise from political institutions other than those of liberal democracy; and, even if they did so by a fluke in some instance, the lack of liberal democratic institutions would in itself constitute a failure to instantiate egalitarian liberal principles, because these concern the proper distribution of political authority as well as the distribution of individual rights. It follows, therefore, that the creation and maintenance of the conditions under which liberal democratic institutions will survive must be a very high priority for an egalitarian liberal. If there are further conditions that make not only for their survival but for their tending to produce just outcomes, egalitarian liberals will be keen to see these too created where they do not exist and maintained when they do.

What might be the conditions that we are looking for? To begin with, we cannot expect the outcomes of democratic politics to be just in a society that contains large numbers of people who feel no sense of empathy with their fellow citizens and do not have any identification with their lot. This sense of solidarity is fostered by common institutions and a spread of incomes narrow enough to prevent people from believing – and with some reason – that they can escape from the common lot by buying their way out of the system of education, health care, policing and other public services that their less fortunate fellow citizens are forced to depend upon. Joseph Raz has suggested, along similar lines, that limiting the spread of incomes is likely to increase empathy because it will make the experience of citizens more similar: 'restricting inequalities of income and wealth helps to limit gaps in life-expectancy, in health and in general expectations, gaps which often make people on opposite sides of the social and economic divide incapable of understanding and empathizing with one another.'⁴² This may be described as a limitation on cultural diversity, but it is very different from the kind of thing that it is usually thought to be worth protecting under that head. Perhaps, indeed, 'the very rich are different from you and me', and Ernest Hemingway was wrong in thinking that they were different only in having more money. But egalitarian liberal justice is incompatible with great inequalities of wealth and income. It is not a legitimate objection to redistribution to claim (even if it is true) that your 'culture' depends on the possession of great wealth, any more than it would be a legitimate objection to the abolition of slavery to claim that your 'culture' depends on the ownership of slaves. (I shall return to this point in chapter 7.)

More broadly, liberal democracies are very unlikely to produce just outcomes unless their citizens have certain attitudes towards one another. It must be accepted on all hands that the interests of everyone must count equally, and that there are no groups whose members' views are to be automatically discounted.⁴³ Equally important is a willingness on the part of citizens to make sacrifices for the common good – which, of course, presupposes that they are capable of recognizing a common good.⁴⁴ Moreover, citizens do not just as a matter of fact have to be willing to make sacrifices; it is also necessary that citizens should have firm expectations of one another to the effect that they will be prepared to give up money, leisure and perhaps even life itself if the occasion arises. What shall we call this cluster of attitudes towards fellow citizens? I propose to define it as a sense of common nationality, distinguishing the appropriate concept of nationality from both the formal one embodied in a passport and also the ethnic interpretation of nationality. In contrast with either of these, I shall describe the relevant sense of nationality as civic nationality.

There are, of course, dangers in appropriating the word 'nationality' for my purpose, because it is so often defined either in ethnic terms or in terms of an all-encompassing homogeneous culture. Andrew Mason, in an article whose general drift is congenial to the position argued for here, concludes that what a liberal democracy needs in order to function well is not 'sharing a national identity' but 'a sense of belonging to a polity'. He argues as follows:

a sense of belonging to a polity is needed to underpin a politics of the common good, but a shared national identity is often unnecessary. If there is a widespread sense of belonging of this kind, then citizens will feel part of the polity of which they are members, and as a result they are likely to have a sense of sharing a fate with others who are also part of it.⁴⁵

My substantive objection to this is that talking about 'a sense of belonging to the polity' is too subjectivistic an account of what is needed: it is not enough for people to feel that they belong themselves unless they also feel that others belong and those others feel that everybody else belongs. Talking about a shared identity emphasizes that there must be mutuality of recognition and not merely a lot of people who harbour in their breasts similar feelings about their personal relation to the polity. With that revision, however, what Mason wants to call 'a sense of belonging to a polity' is in essence what I am proposing to call civic nationality. Despite its dangers, this usage has the great advantage that it reflects the way in which people actually think and speak, whereas 'a sense of belonging to a polity' is unlikely to trip off the tongue of anybody who is not a political theorist.

What is involved in assimilation to a certain civic nationality? The model of assimilation that I have relied upon so far says, in a nutshell, that

complete acculturation plus ratification equals assimilation in the sense of the disappearance of a distinctive identity. But the specification of civic nationality that I have just been developing does not include any reference to acculturation. It may well be that, in order to meet the requirements that have been set out, the acquisition of some cultural traits (especially the national language) is essential. But that still leaves it open that people may be able to assimilate (or be assimilated) to the common nationality without giving up distinctive cultural attributes and – equally important – without losing a distinctive identity. The key to all this is, again, the conventional aspect of identity – what I have called 'ratification'. We have seen that complete acculturation to a group is not a sufficient condition of ratification as a member of that group. It is equally true, however, that, just because identity turns on a decision (though not necessarily one consciously taken), complete acculturation is not a necessary condition of ratification. How culturally 'thick' are the necessary conditions of identity will be one of the defining characteristics of the group. But we should bear in mind that these conditions are not fixed once and for all: they are constantly subject to renegotiation. 'In the process of inclusion, both the minority ethnic groups and the majority group can be seen to be involved in a give-and-take.'⁴⁶ As Aristide Zolberg has said, we need 'a more interactive model of incorporation'.⁴⁷

The crucial point is that, just as the acquisition of a new identity may not require complete acculturation, so it may not require the giving up of an old identity. Clearly, we are dealing here with a sense of 'assimilation' different from that discussed in the previous section. We may call the earlier one 'absorptive assimilation' and contrast it with 'additive assimilation', defining this (with Bauböck) as 'retaining a previous cultural membership while acquiring a new one'.⁴⁸ Zolberg, along similar lines, has written that we should not think of 'identity-formation as a constant-sum game, whereby the acquisition of a new identity occurs at the expense of the original one' but should rather acknowledge 'the uniquely human capacity for additive identities, as manifested by the capacity of any member of the species to learn and use more than one language, and for transforming many aspects of the self'.⁴⁹ In the next section, I shall look back over some historical examples of the development of additive identity and ask what lessons can be drawn that may be relevant to contemporary conditions.

5. National Identity in Practice

In the United States, a country formed largely by immigration, the notion that national identity is compatible with a distinctive ethnic identity is commonplace. Just as one can have a Texan identity, say, as well as an