

British Multiculturalism and the Politics of Representation

Lasse Thomassen



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© Lasse Thomassen, 2017
Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road,
12(2f) Jackson's Entry,
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Typeset in 11/13 Sabon by
IDSUK (Dataconnection) Ltd,
and printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4744 2265 9 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 2266 6 (paperback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 2267 3 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 4744 2268 0 (epub)

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*For Aitana and Carmina, master negotiators of
identity and inclusion*

Acknowledgements

This book was written across several years, countries and institutions. I started working on it during a research fellowship at Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales in Madrid, and I finished writing it when I had returned to the School of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary, University of London. A lot of the book was also written at Universidad de la Rioja. I am most grateful to all three institutions and, especially, my colleagues there for providing an inspiring and productive working environment. In the School of Politics and International Relations, I am fortunate to be part of the TheoryLab, a welcoming and open environment for thinking about the world through theory. The School funded a workshop on a draft manuscript for the book; I am very grateful to J. F. Drolet, Eric Heinze, Kim Hutchings, Mike Kenny, Margarita Palacios and Mark Wenman for taking time to read and comment on the draft. At Universidad de la Rioja, I thank Raúl Susín Betrán, Head of the Department of Law, and José María Aguirre Oraá for their hospitality, and David San Martín Segura and Sergio López González for sharing their office, intellectual conversations and coffee breaks with me. In addition, I would like to thank the following people for reading and commenting on what eventually became book chapters: Peter Bloom, Clayton Chin, Lincoln Dahlberg, Sam Dallyn, Mary Dietz, Elena García Guitián, Ghufraan Khir Allah, Beatriz Martínez Fernández, Sean Phelan, Marina Prentoulis, Ángel Rivero, Yannis Stavrakakis and Lars Tønder. I would also like to thank Miri Davidson for applying her excellent copy-editing skills to the manuscript. I dedicate this book to Aitana and Carmina, two small master negotiators of identity and inclusion and exclusion.

An earlier and shorter version of Chapter 4 was published as Lasse Thomassen, '(Not) just a piece of cloth: *Begum*, recognition and the politics of representation', *Political Theory* 39: 3 (2011), pp. 325–51. I thank Sage for permission to reuse this material here.

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Introduction: Identity, Inclusion and Representation

Identity, inclusion and representation

In a much-cited speech at a security conference in Munich in February 2011, then British Prime Minister David Cameron identified the roots of extremism and terrorism as ‘a question of identity’ (Cameron 2011a).¹ The identity in question was that of ‘young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam’. In the background lurked another identity: that of Britishness. The solution to the identity confusion of the young male extremists was, Cameron argued, to be found in Britishness, in ‘a clear sense of shared national identity that is open to everyone’.

In the course of his speech, and in other speeches on Britishness and immigration, Cameron introduces a number of distinctions (see Cameron 2011b; Cameron 2011c; Cameron 2011d, Cameron 2014; Cameron 2015).² There is a distinction between Islam as a religion and Islamist extremism as a political ideology; a distinction between Muslims and extremists who use Islam as a justification for terrorism. There is an implicit distinction between whites and the others.³ There is a distinction between us – and ‘our way of life’ – and those others who share our political values, but are nonetheless different from us. ‘We’ are positioned as at home, opening the door to others who are marked as different when they are welcomed to share in our identity. They are included, but in a way that establishes a hierarchy, positioning some at the centre and some at the margins of the inclusive identity of Britishness.

And there is a distinction between the old answers to multiculturalism and Cameron's 'muscular liberalism'. Among the old answers, 'the hard right' as well as 'the soft left' treat all Muslims as the same, the hard right by associating all Muslims with the violence of political extremism, and the soft left by blaming terrorism on the discrimination of some Muslims. Cameron associates multiculturalism with a 'weakening of our collective identity': 'the doctrine of state multiculturalism' has left cultures and communities to lead 'separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream'. Cameron's alternative is 'a much more active, muscular liberalism', one that is articulated around certain values that it actively promotes: democracy, freedom of speech and worship, equality and the rule of law. In Cameron's words, 'this is what defines us as a society: to belong here is to believe in these things'.

In Cameron's speech, identity and inclusion are closely connected, and this book sets out to examine how we think about identity and inclusion and the relationship between them. The book intervenes on the scene I will call 'British multiculturalism'. I will have more to say about this scene below; suffice it to say for now that the key questions on this scene – as also evidenced in Cameron's speech – are questions regarding the meaning and future of Britishness, liberalism, the politics of race, ethnicity, culture and religion, and, of course, multiculturalism. The concept of identity looms large here, and I will argue that identities are constituted in the terrain of representation. As a result, we need to pay particular attention to two questions: *which* representations of an identity are dominant? And *whose* representations are they? For instance, to say that representation is constitutive is to say that there are no 'real' Muslims out there independently of representations of Muslims. Identities are representational in this sense. Consequently, we need to examine which and whose representations become dominant in any given historical place and time, and to trace the evolvment of those representations. For instance, how Muslims have been and are represented, both by agents identifying as Muslims and by agents who do not identify as such.

The other concept, apart from identity, that looms large on the scene of British multiculturalism is that of inclusion. There has

been a lot of talk about inclusion over the last couple of decades, and inclusion has its own history, often linked to ‘community’ and often in juxtaposition to equality and solidarity. In Cameron’s speech – and more generally, I shall argue – inclusion and identity are intrinsically linked. Consider for instance the way Cameron represents British identity, and how he wants to include some and exclude others from that identity. British identity is made possible through the exclusion of extremists. But identity and division are more than a division between us and them. While Cameron divides a space in two between those who are included and those who are excluded, the space of the included is graded. Cameron says: ‘let us give voice to those followers of Islam in our own countries – the vast, often unheard majority – who despise the extremists and their worldview. Let us engage groups that share our aspirations.’ The ‘followers of Islam’ are at once included, part of us and yet cast as different and in the role of ‘them’ who can share ‘our’ values. Cameron only manages to include Muslims by branding them as different, and different from ‘us’, thus also identifying ‘us’ as non-Muslim. Inclusion of someone is only possible by identifying – that is, differentiating – them (Minow 1991).

There is no identity without exclusion, but inclusion and exclusion are not just matters of either/or. Inclusion is inclusion into a particular identity; and exclusion is exclusion of particular others. Identity and inclusion are closely connected then, and, since identities are representational, this complicates how we think about identity, inclusion and exclusion, and how we think about critique. For instance, we might oppose Cameron’s more muscular than liberal, more exclusive than inclusive, British identity with a more inclusive identity, one more open and less insistent on the differentiation between us whites and them Muslims. But, if there is no inclusion without exclusion and the representation of identities, then we must also analyse how, in each case, inclusion, exclusion and identity are articulated together. And if exclusion is constitutive of inclusion, then we cannot oppose exclusion in the name of universal inclusion, not even only as a critical ideal. The task is then to examine how the relationships between inclusion and exclusion, and between inclusion, exclusion and identity are negotiated or, with a term I shall use in the following, articulated.

The scene of British multiculturalism

This is a book about how we conceptualise identity and inclusion and the relationship between them. There is no identity or inclusion in the abstract, and so I examine them in the context of what I will call the scene of British multiculturalism. By ‘scene’ I mean context, but I use the term scene because I want to stress how this scene – like any context – is one that is staged (see Ulbricht 2015: 1–4). The characteristics and limits of the scene are by no means given or self-evident. They are the result of decisions by the researcher.⁴ In the theoretical terms I will use later in the book, British multiculturalism is a representational space, or a discursive terrain, but it is a space that is not easily individuated. For instance, when does British multiculturalism begin? If it has changed, is the British multiculturalism we recognise under that name the same as the one people recognised as such in the 1970s? And, with all the talk of the end of multiculturalism, do we still live under something we can call multiculturalism in Britain today? Even if British multiculturalism could be distinguished in time and space, the next problem would be to identify which articulation of it to use as representative of British multiculturalism as a whole. Multiculturalism is not a coherent representational space. Within this space there exist a number of competing articulations of the ideas and practices said to define British multiculturalism. Those articulations compete with each other on a common ground taken as given: the already sedimented representational space of British multiculturalism. But they also try to articulate that space in their own particular way and to hegemonise it. This is why we cannot simply take that space as given: any analysis or interpretation of multiculturalism invariably takes sides in the hegemonic struggle over the meaning of multiculturalism. The task of the researcher is double: to identify British multiculturalism as an object that can be analysed *and* to pay attention to the ways in which the characteristics and limits of that object are constantly put into question.

Earlier I wrote that I take representation to be constitutive of identities. In Chapter 1, I shall develop this idea, but it also applies to the attempt to characterise and delimit multiculturalism. To say that representation is constitutive of identities means

that representation does not simply reflect a non-representational reality. Rather, representation performatively constructs identities. There are identities – they are real, they exist – and, when represented, these identities are at once reflected in and constituted by the representations of them (see Derrida 1997; Derrida 1982; Laclau 2014: ch. 6; Thomassen 2007a). Similarly with multiculturalism. When Cameron says that state multiculturalism has failed, we should treat this as a representation of something (state multiculturalism) that refers to, and reflects, already existing representations of multiculturalism. What (state) multiculturalism *is* consists of those representations, where representations are not restricted to talk and writing and images, but also include practices, institutions and structures. Multiculturalism is real enough, but not extra-representational. We then have different representations of British multiculturalism, but no extra-representational British multiculturalism to compare them with. *Any* representation of the scene or representational space of British multiculturalism will be a particular representation of it, vying for legitimacy among other representations within and on the edges of that representational space. The representational space of British multiculturalism consists of many different scenes, all of them part of that space, but also particular prisms through which British multiculturalism takes on a certain shape. Often, the more you look at and research a representational space, the more it appears riddled with tensions and the less it appears as one space.

British multiculturalism is, to use the words of Davina Cooper (2004: 35; see also 5, 15) from a slightly different context, ‘not a single, unified perspective but a discursive terrain organised around particular questions, premises and concerns’. I will start from a working definition of British multiculturalism as a representational space that emerged from the late 1960s in the UK, but especially in England, and spans different partly overlapping sectors of society: law, public policy, ideology, everyday social interactions, some social and economic structures, the arts, and so on. Within this representational space the dominant view is that culture matters and should matter, and that the UK is a society consisting of different cultures, where the content of ‘culture’ varies (race, ethnicity, culture, religion, nationality, language, among others).

I will use the following working definition of multiculturalism from Bhikhu Parekh: multiculturalism refers to the fact that there is a multiplicity of cultures within society and to the normative non-assimilationist response to this fact (Parekh 2006).

Overview of the book

This book takes British multiculturalism as its object in order to examine the concepts of identity and inclusion and the relationship between them. I draw on post-structuralist theory broadly conceived. In particular, I draw on the works of Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Derrida. From Derrida, I take a deconstructive way of reading texts. Although there is no deconstructive or Derridean ‘method’ as such, there are nonetheless a number of themes and quasi-concepts – for instance, ‘iterability’ and ‘hospitality’ – that lend themselves to the analyses in the following. I do not claim to apply deconstruction as an already established method, understood as a technique or set of tools and concepts; instead I take some of Derrida’s readings as well as others’ deconstructive analyses as examples and exemplary of deconstruction (see Derrida 1997: 157–64; Derrida 1988; Derrida 1992a; Thomassen 2010a). From Laclau, I take his theory of hegemony as articulation as well as his ideas of contingency and discourse (representation) (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1990; Laclau 1996a; Laclau 2005; Thomassen 2005). I develop the post-structuralist approach, and Laclau’s theory of hegemony in particular, in Chapter 1.

Drawing on post-structuralism, I start from three theses. The first thesis is that there is no inclusion without exclusion. Among post-structuralists, broadly conceived, it is a long-established truth that there is no inclusion without exclusion: any inclusive procedure, space or identity will be constituted through certain exclusions. This does not mean that there cannot be more or less inclusive institutions or spaces, but it does mean that there is always some exclusion. It is then a matter of analysing the ways in which particular institutions and spaces of inclusion rest on explicit or implicit exclusions. While we may agree that exclusion is unavoidable, we do not have to accept any particular exclusion.

With another phrase from post-structuralist theory, particular exclusions are contingent.

The second thesis is that inclusion and exclusion are intrinsically linked to identity. This works both ways. From a post-structuralist perspective, identities are constituted through relations of difference. Identities are relational, and they are contingent; there is nothing essential about them, and they are open to rearticulation, even if they may appear sedimented and fixed. Britishness, for instance, is constituted through relations of difference with other identities: English, Scottish, French, Muslim, and so on. Because identities are constituted through relations of difference with other identities, any identity is constituted through some element of exclusion, even if this does not necessarily take the form of antagonism. To take the example of Britishness: this identity is articulated in many competing ways at any one point in time. Sometimes it is articulated as different, sometimes as excluding another identity, and sometimes as both different from and overlapping with, and including, other identities. So, no identity without exclusion.

Inclusion always takes place through a particular identity. Difference is included in something: an identity, whether a national identity, a religious community, a class, or whatever. The space of inclusion is represented in a particular way and as different from what is outside it; it is shaped by images of home and belonging, by laws and institutions determining the status of those who can be part of it, and by social and economic structures making the inclusion of others more or less likely. So, inclusion and exclusion are made possible by particular articulations of identities, of the including party and of the included and the excluded. The upshot of the second thesis is that we must examine inclusion and exclusion through the ways in which identities are articulated, and that we must examine identities through the relations of inclusion and exclusion they establish.

The third thesis is that, because identities are constituted in the terrain of representation, we need to analyse identity and inclusion as what I will call the politics of representation. That means, among other things, that we must always ask *which* and *whose* representations are hegemonic. In short, identity and inclusion should be studied as the results of hegemonic struggles over representations.

The task is then to examine the ways in which practices of inclusion rely on particular representations – explicitly or implicitly – of the kind of subject that can be included. For example, discourses on equality may be based on an explicit reference to the human and on implicit images of what it means to be a human being. To be clear: saying that representation is constitutive does not mean that representations are not real, let alone not material; rather, it means that reality is itself constituted on the terrain of representation, and therefore that politics must be analysed at this level. There really is only one level (representation) and not two (reality and representation).

Saying that representation is constitutive also means that representation is not taken as a distortion of a non-representational reality. There is no non-representational beyond on which to base critique of, and resistance to, representations. Although we do not have to take any particular representation as given – they are contingent after all – all we are left with are attempts to posit one representation against another and to challenge them in this way. We may – and I will – criticise the ways in which identities are represented. However, those representations cannot be opposed as misrepresentations to a non-representational reality, for instance a more complex reality that has been reduced and, thereby, misrepresented. Representation is constitutive, and representations cannot be opposed as false or wrong on the basis of a reference to some non-representational reality. Put differently, representations cannot be reduced to ideology understood as the distortion of reality (intended or not). Representation frames what can be seen as true and false, and the framing always excludes something, but there is no extra-representational way of assessing the truth of the frame itself. The question is then how inclusion, exclusion and identities are negotiated through this political struggle over representations.

Although a book about identity and inclusion, this book contains no analyses of identity and inclusion as such. What it does contain are analyses of the ways in which identity and inclusion have been articulated. Taking the representational space of British multiculturalism as my object, I structure the book around four concepts and practices of inclusion: equality, recognition, tolerance

and hospitality. Scholars identify important differences among these concepts and practices, but, as I will try to show, they also share important structural similarities. Equality, recognition and tolerance are all concepts that have been widely debated in conjunction with British multiculturalism. Most often they have been taken as concepts and practices of inclusion, even if multicultural inclusion is sometimes seen as at odds with equality, and I return to this in Chapter 2 when discussing the liberal egalitarianism of Brian Barry. Looking at hospitality allows me to examine another important part of the scene of British multiculturalism, namely liberalism. In each case, I examine particular, but representative, representations and discourses of equality, recognition, tolerance and hospitality.

The first chapter lays out Laclau's theory of hegemony as the theoretical framework that, together with Derrida's deconstruction, guides the analyses of the cases studied in this book. To help illustrate the implications of this framework, I use Gordon Brown's discourse of Britishness.

Chapter 2 then turns to equality. I begin with the legal case *Mandla* from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The decision in that case played a pivotal role in rearticulating the meaning of Sikhism, race and ethnicity, and, as such, it plays an important role in British race relations legislation because it redefined the meaning of 'race'. The discussion of the case takes me to a discussion of the debate between the liberal multiculturalist Bhikhu Parekh and the liberal egalitarian Brian Barry. The discussion of *Mandla* and of the Parekh-Barry debate both show that equality is articulated through identity, which is to say that we need to pay attention to the way identities and categories are represented: 'Sikh', 'race', 'human', and so on. Equality is always connected to particular images – representations – of what it means to be, for instance, a Sikh or a human being. The politics of equality is a politics of representation.

Chapter 3 turns to the concept and practice of recognition so often associated with identity politics and multiculturalism. I show how recognition and representation are mutually implied. Representations must be recognised and taken up in order to have force; and recognition is always recognition of particular representations. I develop this through a detailed discussion of *Begum*,