

***Freedom from Culture*¹**

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1. ‘Patriotism’, exclaimed the 18th century sage Dr Johnson famously, ‘is the last refuge of a scoundrel’. What he meant, perhaps, is that justifying an action in terms of what its agent is – an Englishman, say – is no substitute for a rational defence of it, and may well cloak an ulterior motive. Johnson was essentially an Enlightenment thinker, sharing David Hume’s view that ‘mankind are so much the same in all times and places that history informs us of nothing new or strange’². But an idea of cultural nationality was already developing in his day, and, indeed, Johnson’s own *Lives of the Poets* was itself part of a Europe wide trend for histories of national literature. It was in Germany, however, that this type of trend took a decisively anti-Enlightenment turn. Writing at about the same time as Johnson, Johann Gottfried von Herder notes that ‘every region of the earth has its peculiar species of animals’, and he asks rhetorically, ‘Why should it not have its own kind of men? Are not the varieties of natural features, manners and character, and particularly the great differences in language proof of this?’³ In the Herderian vision what I am can justify how I act, since we should not, in Enlightenment fashion, expect any universal standard for judging people’s actions.

¹ This paper is largely a summary of parts of my book *Cultural Identity and Political Ethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010)

² *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) sec.65

³ Quoted R.R. Ergang *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1931) pp. 90-1

Herder held that cultures are objectively distinguishable, so that the self-identification of members is based on a recognition of their cultural distinctiveness, rather than cultural distinctiveness being the result of their self-identifications. Furthermore, he held two further theses to account for the radical differences which he discerned between cultures. First, he took these differences to consist in part in divergences in values. Second, he believed that the different languages of separate cultures gave rise to different world views. Both these contribute to the notion that members of different cultures will at least have difficulty in understanding and socialising with one another, and consequently that this should be recognised in the political arrangements made for them.

It was Herder's vision that provided the intellectual support for the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century. Notoriously the problem for nationalists has been to provide an agreed criterion for national identity. Race, religion, language, common interests, geography and so on all prove inadequate, as Ernest Renan showed⁴. Rather, proponents of one national identity plump for one criterion because it suits their case, while proponents of a different identity plump for another. Yet, however it is taken to relate to such different criteria, national character can supposedly play an agreed role in individuating separate nations. Thus Herder's idea that the people of separate nations have different characters proved indispensable to nationalists. Furthermore, it served better than the different criteria mentioned to justify the nationalist project of separate statehood, and for two reasons. First, because the same sort of laws might seem appropriate to those with the same sort of characters. Second, because if character involves the pursuit of particular values then shared statehood can conduce to their satisfaction.

Much more could be said about the notion of national character, but by the middle of the 20th century it had become discredited. Theorists could find no greater differences between the characters of members of putatively separate nations than between the characters of those within them. Insofar as there were differences in national stereotypes, these were subject to sudden change and susceptible to political manipulation. However, this reaction did not lead to the abandonment of Herderian ideas. While the kind of cultural

⁴ 'What is a nation?' in A. Zimmern (ed.) *Modern Political Doctrines* (London: OUP, 1939)

homogeneity on which talk of national character was predicated could no longer be assured in an era of immigrant minorities and increasingly vocal indigenous ones, the idea that members of such groups might differ in deep psychological ways has persisted. It has been intellectually revived by followers of Herder like Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor, and the broader notion of cultural identity that has emerged from the wreckage of national character has become the common currency of groups in different circumstances and with consequentially different concerns and political goals – not just the separate statehood of nationalists but other kinds of separate treatment.

2. There are two ways to take the idea that cultural identity is a deep going feature of individual identity. One of them should be uncontroversial, for no one should doubt that the language we speak, the religion we espouse, the values we hold dear and so on shape who we are as individuals. An individual cultural identity in this sense may well be unique to its possessor, with her particular mix of cultural characteristics, just as her character may be. The controversial move is to suppose that there are collective cultural identities, shared by members of a group, of a correspondingly deep going sort – just as it was controversial to move from the idea of an individual's character to that of a shared national character. But it is on the basis of such a supposedly deep collective cultural identity that the political claims of groups are commonly defended. While there are many ways of elaborating such a defence, a common thread is that people are damaged psychologically if their collective identity is not recognised in the way demanded by their political claim. My self-esteem, my sense of who I am or my capacity for coherent choices are severally cited as vulnerable to such misrecognition, and this presupposes the depth of the collective identity for which recognition is sought.

In view of the political importance and philosophical significance of these kinds of defence it is, perhaps, not surprising that theorists are not agreed on what constitutes collective cultural identity. While some fasten on shared values, others fix upon a common language and the shared view of the world which it supposedly provides, and yet others emphasise the importance of a common narrative into which individuals can fit their particular lives. In the case of cultural identity, then, we meet some of the same problems that beset

the search for an agreed criterion of national identity, and again with the conviction that, whatever it was, such a criterion would pick out psychologically different kinds of people. But arguably none of the cultural characteristics mentioned need go deep with people in order to serve the purpose of sorting them out into groups to be organised for political ends. Nothing inner needs to be postulated to explain adherence to putatively shared values, for example. English people queue for drinks rather than jostle for them. This sort of thing is all that is required, just as only lip service to a religion is. And similarly, I claim, for other cultural features. What is required is something to identify group members by and that need not go deep at all.

The picture I am rejecting is that of pre-political differences of a psychological kind for which various kinds of political recognition are sought. The onus of proof is on those who maintain that they exist, since nothing pre-political needs postulating for us to understand the politics of cultural identity. One way to see this is to follow David Miller⁵ in contrasting the Herderian ‘crooked timber of humanity’ picture with an alternative account that Berlin also offered, without apparently noticing its divergent implications. For Berlin also attributes nationalism to people ‘being confined and contracted in their universe; they were like Schiller’s bent twig, which always jumped back and hit its bender’.⁶ On this ‘bent twig’ story, expressions of national identity stem, not from pre-existing internal forces, but from external and contingent constraints. What I shall argue is that it is not only nationalist movements but the politics of cultural identity generally that follow the bent twig model. Thus divisions into separate cultural groups and the shape of such groups are to be explained by the material and political circumstances in which people find themselves.

There are three aspects to Berlin’s bent twig story to notice. First, a group of people are placed in a similar position by the actions of others. Second, their reactions are entirely understandable. Third, these reactions are potentially dangerous. In Berlin’s own example the rise of German nationalism is imputed to the humiliation Germans experienced through being regarded as culturally inferior by the French and others. But not all nationalisms or other

⁵ ‘Crooked timber or bent twig? Berlin’s nationalism’ in G. Crowder and H. Hardy (eds.) *The One and The Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007)

⁶ *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001)

expressions of cultural identity seem to involve such a reaction. Our aim will be to distinguish different kinds of political circumstance which possess the three features mentioned so that we can classify the different types of national and cultural identity that flow from them. I hope to persuade you that there is no unitary notion of cultural identity, including national identity; that the different types of identity we shall discern as resulting from different sorts of circumstance go by the same name – ‘cultural identity’ – only because they are appealed to in similar ways politically. In just the same manner, I suggest, different kinds of identification count as national identity only because it is separate statehood, or something similar, that an appeal to them is used to justify.

3. If we ask what someone who asserts an identity might be concerned about lacking or losing then we should not expect what supplies this lack or loss to be the same when the lacks or losses are different. But the way that the external circumstances which give rise to the assertion of an identity are experienced is as revealing a lack or threatening a loss, for, on the bent twig model, without something that is so experienced the twig would, so to speak, remain straight, without the potential energy for a political reaction. What we are looking for are thus different types of insecurity which people might feel in different circumstances, so that those who feel the same sort of insecurity come to identify with each other and share a view of themselves that helps to counter this insecurity.

The case of the Germans that Berlin cites can be our first type. What the Germans felt that they lacked or might lose is, we may say, their standing. They were insecure in their sense of dignity, in view of the lack of respect shown them by others. To recover it they adopted a type of cultural identity to which values like that of honour were central. Thinking of themselves as moved by honour they experienced the self-worth of which the contempt of others threatened to deprive them. This is the shape of the twig bent by this kind of wind. But not all identities have this shape, and it is wrong of Berlin’s follower Charles Taylor, and others, to assume that they do. They are misled, perhaps, by thinking that the demand for recognition which cultural groups make is always a demand for respect. But political recognition does not

require respect, only acknowledgement of difference, and, anyway, the respect of others whom one does not respect oneself may not be worth having.

Contrasting with identity as standing is identity as centre, where the adoption of certain values as crucial to identity is differently motivated, namely by the threat of hollowness, of anomie, of the lack of principles in accordance with which one can guide one's life. This is typically the type of identity asserted by indigenous peoples exposed to the value system of settlers, so that what needs protecting is a clear action-guiding framework. Having no adequate norms is a quite different anxiety from having no norms which command respect, so that it would be wrong to conflate the two types of identity just because both involve values. Cultural identities, on the account I am offering, are not individuated by their content but by the sorts of circumstance to which they are a reaction.

A type of identity that need not involve values at all is what I call identity as face. It is a reaction to the fear of facelessness, as we say, of becoming an anonymous individual without any distinguishing marks. This is an insecurity characteristically experienced when assimilation threatens, and the type of identity this evokes involves stressing whatever can be seen as marker of difference – a language, perhaps, a mode of dress and so on. Here, we may notice, nothing inner or deep is even relevant to the required identity, for it has to be something external that plays the identifying role.

A yet different type of identity is a reaction to the fear of homelessness, of having no place in the world; and identity as home collects people together as having a shared relation to a common location, real or imagined, or to a common history. Here the kinds of cultural material involved are typically different from those in other types of identity though not necessarily so. For a people can find a metaphorical home in their literature or music, say, which are not in this case to be construed as markers of the cultural difference that identity as face requires.

4. There are, I believe still other types of identity corresponding to the multifariously unsatisfactory situations in which people find themselves, but I shall say no more about this now. Instead I want to reiterate that we should not think that even identities like identity as centre are deep identities. They

are what I call surface identities, but not because they all function like identity as face, since they lack its constitutive aetiology. Rather there must be features in virtue of which members of a cultural group can recognise each other, and it does not matter what, if anything, lies behind the lifestyle whereby they can do this so long as it is practised consistently and spontaneously. I recently saw a photograph of Muslim women demonstrating against the French ban on the veil. ‘Shame on France’, read one placard, ‘Hijab is our identity’. Identity here is a purely surface phenomenon. But the French reasons for the ban, that the veil is ‘incompatible with the essential values of the French community’, make the quite unjustified assumption that one has to look for something behind it and thus betrays the mistaken view that all identity is identity as centre. But a shared social practice produces only a surface collective identity, however deep going someone’s individual reasons for engaging in it may be.

The surface character of cultural identities yields, I believe, the interesting consequence that what we should focus on is the aesthetics of identity. A shared identity must be made attractive to its intended bearers so that they have a common attachment to the ways in which it is publicly expressed and thereby identify with fellow bearers of the identity. Dress and behaviour, buildings and landscape, music and literature – all such things can be the focus of aesthetic appreciation that is special to members of an identity group. A shared aesthetic of this kind can convey a sense of the inwardness of the identity as common enthusiasms are evoked. But the sort of collective self-identification that people might make on the basis of sharing an aesthetic may be mere lip service, and while this may be sufficient for political purposes it is insufficient to give such a cultural identity the importance for members that is claimed for it in support of these purposes. For self-identification produced by aesthetic enthusiasms may reflect no serious common feelings, such as a common life in shared circumstances can create. It can be, and often is, purely delusory, in the sense that no ethically significant relationships between members of the group underlie their avowed identity.

5. I turn, then, to looking at the value that is often claimed for cultural identity. I do not believe that such an identity, qua membership of a cultural

group, has the kind of value which is often claimed for it. If it is not a deep going feature of people then they have no need for it so far as their psychological functioning is concerned. The Herderian notion that there is such a need, which is used to justify the political recognition of cultural identities and their protection and preservation, falls away. No doubt individuals need the languages, values and so on that they have, and this may need to be acknowledged in political and legal arrangements, but none of this implies membership of a cultural group that furnishes a collective identity, failure to recognise which is damaging to them.

Writers who claim that people need an identity tend to confuse the idea that it is valuable for them with the actually quite different idea that it is valuable to them, in the sense that they attribute value to it. The latter idea often goes with the notion that an identity is needed to confer self-respect, and that is why one values having the identity one does. But this is mistakenly to take all identities to be identity as standing, the result of undervaluation by others. In those circumstances one might take comfort in the relevant type of identity, but this is not a universal need. Nor, to take but one more example, is 'the quest for cultural identity...a central human concern', because we need to know 'where we belong and feel most at home'.⁷ Again the identity as home which may provide an answer to such questions is a reaction to particular anxieties, not a 'central human concern'. The value an identity might have to people depends upon the circumstances they are in, and what answers to their concerns differs from case to case.

It is, however, the disvalue of cultural identity which should strike us, once general arguments for its value are called into question. In particular, it seems to me that the Herderian picture underlying the politics of cultural identity gives the impression that the compromises necessary for harmonious coexistence with others are either difficult or disreputable. For adjustments to one's values or worldview will now seem to require deep-down changes in who one is or to demand that one is untrue to oneself. A compromise will be perceived as a loss of inner coherence or of integrity. But, though seeing another's point of view or grasping his evaluations may not be easy, it is a threat to one's identity only if one insists on making it so, or if one cannot see

⁷ As Bhikhu Parekh glosses Samuel Huntington, *A New Politics of Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p. 53

things otherwise, not because of the nature of the case. It is because of a willed, or perhaps an unimaginative, inflexibility, not because one's identity somehow restricts one's options here. But innumerable demands for separate political arrangements for different cultural groups would have us think otherwise; and in doing so they induce a rigidity in the face of the lifestyles of others which, at the worst, can lead to exclusion and even violence.

A chairman of the British Arts Council once said, 'One of the basic freedoms of the Englishman is freedom from culture'. He said it sarcastically and probably meant 'high culture', like opera and the like, rather than the commonplace cultural characteristics we have been talking about. But even about such lowlier cultural characteristics he had a point; for it has always been notoriously difficult to fasten on features which mark out an English cultural identity, not least because of its uneasy relationship to Britishness, which British governments have found equally hard to pin down. All this is, I suggest, a happy situation, so long as it lasts. One might hope for a similar freedom from culture for as many people as possible. But what I believe to be the confused and pernicious notion of cultural identity is now so deeply entrenched in politics that this hope is, it seems, a forlorn one.