Nation: the missing piece of the debate on citizenship

There is an important missing point in the whole debate about citizenship. As evident in the questions asked by the Select Committee, the focus is on civic participation, active political engagement, citizenship ceremonies, pride and values. Yet, nation, the main social glue that brings people together, is missing. It is not mentioned in any of the twelve questions. This is even more surprising if one considers that nation is the most powerful force that can drive people together... as much as it can drive them apart. And this is maybe why the Select Committee, like many other academic scholars who have been trying to answer the question of how to live together with difference (Antonsich and Matejskova, 2015), seems to have deliberately eschewed ‘nation’. This register is in fact often treated as a site of oppression, discrimination, and marginalization of religious, ethnic, racial and regional differences. And yet, other scholars (Billig, 1995; Edensor, 2002) have shown how the nation is also a mundane, banal register which intervenes in people’s everyday life as a silent background, organising both temporally and spatially their activities in terms of shared habits (e.g. queuing, left driving, school time) which produce a sort of national synchronicity beyond their intersectional differences.

My argument is that policies targeting citizenship alone will not succeed in generating a cohesive society unless citizenship is also sustained by a vigorous and open debate about ‘who we are’ and ‘who we want to be’ as a nation. In Britain this might be even more difficult than in other countries, given the co-existence of multiple nations. The risk, as feared by many, is that this debate might lead to further divisions, as people increasingly start identifying themselves in terms of distinct nations. Yet, one should not forget that the existence of distinct nations is not necessarily conducive to national separatisms.

Until now, the debate about the future of Britain has been largely dominated by a civic national project, best represented by Gordon Brown’s (2004) vision of a weak, civic national identity made by common values (passion for liberty, sense of duty, commitment to tolerance and fair play), shared interests and a set of common institutions (the Monarchy, the Parliament, the Armed Forces, but also the National Health System, the BBC, National Insurance, etc.) – for a revival today of a similar project see Denham (2017). Yet, if today the Select Committee is asking for evidence
that could promote civic engagement, values and participation, it might legitimate to question the effectiveness of such a civic project.

No more successful seems to have been the communitarian approach proposed by Lord Bhikhu Parekh (2000), the Chairman of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain. His idea of Britain as a ‘community of communities’, although based on the commendable principle of putting all religious, ethnic and racial groups on an equal footing, has encountered resistance from the beginning (Uberoi and Modood 2013) and, in times, has fallen prey of the so-called ‘multicultural backlash’(Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010), which has simplistically equated communitarianism with ethno-religious self-segregation.

As much as the Race Relation Acts, which have confirmed and protected Britain as a multicultural nation, are to be cherished and safeguarded, both the idea of Britain as a civic nation or as a ‘community of communities’ struggles to buy the minds and hearts of various people. The recent upsurge of a predominantly white nationalism, calling for a return to the past, when Britain (or England) was more white and Christian and less open to global flows and to Europe, seems to confirm the limits of any project of governance which would put citizenship at its centre. To reiterate again my point: it is not a question of citizenship, but of nation, of how people think of themselves and of the others. Thus, any public intervention aimed at social cohesion and integration should find a way to tackle the nation question.

So, what can be done? Any concrete action in this direction is a matter of political decisions, but here a few suggestions:

- Any citizenship debate should also incorporate a question about ‘who we are’ and ‘who we want to be’. Questions about the nation, however directly or indirectly framed, should be central and not outflanked by a focus on civic engagement, participation or values. These alone will not suffice to bring a diverse society together.
- The nation debate should be encouraged as openly as possible. Avoiding this debate due to a fear of dissolution of the Union is a short-sighted policy. On the contrary, people should be encouraged to talk about the nation they feel they belong to and the nation they would like to belong to, however this debate might bring forward issues of race, religion or ethnicity. Dismissing this debate as mere racism would do little to address the anxiety of a white majority who feels displaced and disoriented in what they believe is ‘their’ nation.
(Kaufmann, 2017). There clearly is more than a ‘civic’ nation out there. Finding platforms where this debate can happen and a plurality of views can be shared is essential to avoid that ‘nation’ becomes the monopoly of one part of the population against the others.

- Although some voices in this debate might be expressed in the name of ‘communities’, such a communitarianist approach to nation should not be promoted. This might be the most revolutionary change to adopt in the nation debate, as Britain has historically relied on the notion of ‘community’ as a way to channel and manage diversity. Yet, the nation debate should be among individuals, whose diversity can be declined via a plurality of intersectional affiliations (e.g., gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class). Minority cultures can be part of the debate as much as they contribute to the background of an individual, but neither ‘communities’ nor individuals who speak in the name of ‘communities’ would help advancing the debate about the nation we are and we would like to be. To this end, Britain might look at other cases (e.g. Italy - see my research on this case at http://newitalians.eu/en/), where the nation debate is not framed in communitarianist terms.

- Never forget that ‘nation’ is never a status achieved once and for all, but any nation is an ongoing project: the coming together of different people discussing what they want to be is per se a very national act.

References:


http://politics.guardian.co.uk/labour/story/0,9061,1256550,00.html


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