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COMMENTARY

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# The ties that blind us - the hidden assumptions in the 'new progressive's dilemma': Comment on Will Kymlicka's article: "Solidarity in Diverse Societies"

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While remaining firmly anchored in political theory, Will Kymlicka has increasingly taken on questions in empirical political science, especially the study of 'trust' and 'social solidarity' in multicultural societies, and how these may relate to prevailing social welfare regimes. These are the ties that bind us. Where previously such work has focused on whether public policies of multiculturalism had 'misdiagnosed', 'crowded out' or 'corroded support' necessary for social solidarity (e.g., Banting & Kymlicka, 2006), in the present intervention he widens the aperture to take in the 'new progressive's dilemma'<sup>1</sup> more broadly. That is, the alleged tension between ethnic diversity per se and the social solidarity required for redistributive public policy.

In typically eloquent, considered and stimulating fashion, the current intervention offers a wide-ranging account of the issues at stake. I do not think that his core argument needs to be restated here, other than to observe that its normative thrust rests on the 'elective affinities' view of the relationship between social justice and territorialised social formations. What characterises Kymlicka as a multiculturalist is his desire to pluralise the terms of membership therein.<sup>2</sup> Be it national identity, citizenship or other forms of common membership, the multiculturalist challenge is to redress what Iris Marjan Young (1990, p. 165) has termed 'coming to the game after it is already begun, after the rules and standards have been set, and having to prove oneself accordingly'.

The argument Kymlicka's thesis supports however is that since an alternative neutral state organised by liberal principles alone is impossible,<sup>3</sup> the best means of achieving liberal goals – including personal liberties, autonomy, freedom for cultural diversity, liberal constitutionalism and most notably for our discussion the welfare state – is through the stable basis of an inclusive nation or a nation-state or a multi-nation. This is a view shared by a cluster of scholars whose works bear a family resemblance and can be described – even while they may deem the framing a little clumsy – as 'liberal nationalism' (cf Miller, 1995; Mason, 2000). In Kymlicka's own terms (2015, p. 3):

[W]e need to somehow combine diverging preferences about policy with converging preferences about units. This peculiar combination of diverging policy preferences and converging unit preferences is the structural presupposition of democracy... Nationhood provides a sense of belonging together and a desire to act collectively. Ideas of belonging together, collective agency and attachment to territory... Nationhood, in short, generates converging preferences on units.

In this brief response, and in the spirit of context sensitive political theory, I would like to consider the implications of Kymlicka's argument from a UK perspective, one of his case references (Kymlicka, 2015, p. 11), though I hope this also has some wider resonance for other cases too.<sup>4</sup> My core argument is that the anxiety over the 'new progressive's dilemma' relies on notions of solidarity that mislead us: these are the ties that blind us.

One point to begin with is to register that it is not entirely clear what Kymlicka's (2015, p. 3) account means for our understanding of the retrenchment of welfare state regimes more broadly. Given the prevailing status of neo-liberalism as a contextual feature of his account, and the relationship this bears to welfare chauvinism, I think more needs to be said here. This is especially relevant following the global financial crisis, where what has become known as 'austerity' has been vigorously pursued, certainly by the UK Government since 2010. Of course, and as Van Oorschot (2000, p. 34) summarised in an early paper over a decade and a half ago, restricting access to universal protection schemes has been underway for some time,<sup>5</sup> and is especially characterised by a 'new conditionality' (2000, p. 34) of which *shared identity* is but one feature.

Perhaps to put the problem more directly, the relationship between nationhood and support for social welfare also rests in a wider question of political economy, and the scope for shared solidarities cannot stand outside this. Even Miller (2006, p. 338), who perhaps more than most insists on the capacity of shared national identity to underpin social welfare, seeks to remind readers of the countervailing pressures of political economy, in so far as 'there is still a big question about how to maintain democratic support for redistributive policies, in circumstances where nation states are increasingly constrained by global [economic] forces'.

This might also herald new possibilities for social solidarities that articulations of the 'progressive's dilemma' choose to overlook, especially around a multi-ethnic social collectivism (see Bhattacharyya, 2015), but also through the cultivation of what we might call a 'shared fate', and which 'comes by virtue of being entangled with others in such a way that one's future is tied to theirs' (Williams, 2003, p. 208).

Paradoxically, elements of this are found in the restriction as well as expansion of welfare regimes and in his account, Van Oorschot (2000, pp. 34–6) suggests that the neoliberal impulse has elevated the criteria of 'deservingness', something Kymlicka registers in passing in his reading, but not in a way which brings the 'new Progressive's Dilemma' in line with a set of longstanding social policy concerns. It is worth dwelling on what van Oorschot's understands this to reflect because it broadens the sets of criteria we might be concerned with to include: (1) control – peoples control over their neediness – the less control, the more deserving; (2) need – the greater the level of need, the more deserving; (3) identity – the identity of the poor – the closer to

“us” the more deserving; (4) attitude – people’s attitude toward support – the more compliant the more deserving, and (5) reciprocity – having earned the support – the more reciprocation, the more deserving.

I would suggest that each of these five items can at different time be important, such that when we look at British Social Attitudes data, for example, we find that people invoke versions of each of them. Listing these criteria serves as a corrective to the view that the prevailing tension between social solidarity and social welfare provision turns primarily on shared identity. This is certainly what advocates of the dilemma would have us believe but the claim remains unproven. More broadly respondents in the UK seem to be increasingly concerned that austerity touches them and so are more pessimistic about their own future, not necessarily about who that future is shared with. For example, more people answer ‘increasing’ to a question about the perceived trend in poverty in Britain during the past decade (Baumberg, 2014) (something that sets the findings on the UK of Cavaille and Trump (as cited in Kymlicka, 2015, p. 10) in some context). This isn’t to suggest that the ‘progressive’s dilemma’ has no traction. The United Kingdom’s multinational composition has meant that nationhood and cultural diversity have been matters of considerable historical concern. With devolution for Scotland and Wales, a process has been set in motion to accommodate claims to political and cultural self-determination among Britain’s constituent nations. Yet the set of ‘diversity challenges’ that have assumed prominence in the ‘progressive’s dilemma’ as it has been articulated in the UK, centres mostly on ethnic and racial minorities and the multicultural reality of British life.

Perhaps most obviously, David Goodhart’s, 2004 essay “Too Diverse?” and subsequent iterations, which maintained that compared with the immediate post-war consensus, ‘the difference now in a developed country like Britain is that we not only live among stranger citizens but we must *share* with them.’ David Goodhart is a former editor at large of the centrist political magazine *Prospect* (between 1995 and 2010), and current director of the London based think tank Demos and has been very influential in arguing that immigration undermines national solidarity and presents a threat to social democratic ideals about a welfare state. The key parts of Goodhart’s dilemma might be distilled in the following steps:

1. The basis on which you can extract large sums of money in tax and pay it out in benefits is that most people think the recipients are people like themselves, facing difficulties which they themselves could face.
2. If values become more diverse, if lifestyles become more differentiated, then it becomes more difficult to sustain the legitimacy of a universal risk-pooling welfare state. People ask, ‘Why should I pay for them when they are doing things I wouldn’t do?’
3. You can have a Swedish welfare state provided that you are a homogeneous society with intensely shared values. In the US you have a very diverse, individualistic society where people feel fewer obligations to fellow citizens.
4. Progressives want diversity but they thereby undermine part of the moral consensus on which a large welfare state rests.

Of course, and as Kymlicka has registered, one feature of this formulation is how ‘the US haunts this debate, as if its experience confirms some natural law that diversity

erodes solidarity' (Banting & Kymlicka, 2006, p. 1). No less relevant is how Goodhart's thesis is not purely focused on social and value diversity per se – but in contrast is precisely concerned with ethnic and racial diversity only. Indeed, it does in fact employ what others have observed as a type of 'banal majoritarianism' (Fenton & Mann, 2010) in which the 'we' are not re-made over time.

I would make three observations here that I think have implication for 'the new progressive's' dilemma more broadly. Firstly, it is a reading that relies on highly contestable empirical assumptions about past solidarity. Amongst others, Harris (2004, p. 5) argues that Britain has never experienced the levels of social solidarity measured in terms of 'shared values' that Goodhart's iteration of the 'progressive's dilemma' assumes. While there might have been less ethnic diversity upon the post war creation of the UK welfare state, there was greater class and gender inequality, something compounded by fractured nationalism and strong localisms – precisely the historical diversity that is overlooked by Goodhart. Or as Parekh (2004, p. 7) puts it: 'even if all immigrants were to leave the country, deep diversity would remain and continue to pose challenges to a strong view of solidarity'. Deep diversity is not therefore the preserve of ethnic and migration relation difference, but part of the evolving story of a territorialized social formation. Indeed, as the late Bernard Crick (2004, pp. 1–2) put it, 'the fallacy of the excluded middle is hard at work here: it is not either solidarity or loss of identity - our identity lies in our political sense of living with dual identities'.

Secondly, and as Parekh (2004) elaborates, the dilemma more broadly assumes that solidarity is a necessary pre-condition of redistribution, and insufficiently explores how solidarity comes into existence in the first place – and specifically confuses contingent connections for causality. For example, from a historical perspective it could be argued that it was the free access to migrants from the Commonwealth into post-war Britain that facilitated the necessary reconstruction of Britain from which welfare was an outgrowth. In this respect, 'instead of treating diversity as an independent variable that affects the welfare state, we can invert the question to ask how the welfare state shapes diversity' (Smith, 2009, p. 837). A more historically informed response may equally show how English working-class history in particular, has a long and productive relationship with ethnic and racial difference in a manner that forged the conditions for the universal welfare, and which some struggling with the 'progressive's dilemma' overlook. For example, in *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*, Virdee (2014) makes visible the 'racialized minorities in socialist movements who played an instrumental role in trying to align struggles against racism with those against class exploitation' (Virdee, 2014, p. 164). Another, more social theory, way of addressing this is to think about solidarities and the ways in which race became 'the modality in which class [was] lived, the medium through which class relations [were] experienced the form in which it [was] appropriated and "fought through" (Hall, 1980, p. 341)' (Virdee, 2014, p. 163). In this respect, we might argue that the kinds of cleavages that can erode social solidarity required for the welfare state has less to do with immigration, 'rather, it depends primarily on the level of immigrant economic and political incorporation' (Myles & St-Arnaud, 2006, p. 353).

Thirdly, Goodhart's iteration of the progressive's dilemma conflates ethnic diversity with immigration. Where a cornerstone of 'shared values' might be an attachment to or

self-identification with Britishness (whatever this may entail), settled post migrant ethnic minorities are consistently found to have the same as if not greater attitudinal affinity to British nationhood (Heath & Roberts, 2008, p. 14; Rheault, 2011; Wind-Cowie & Gregory, 2011, p. 41). Equally, there is less hostility from majorities to established ethnic minorities – including more affinity and less social distance - than there is to recent migrants (Evans, 2006). This is further reflected in the considerably high levels of inter-marriage between white and settled ethnic minority groups. Indeed, by mapping the empirical terrain through the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) and British Election Studies (BES), Evans (2006, p. 173) forcefully argues that ‘there is no evidence that negative attitudes toward minority rights provision have become more closely linked to the rejection of welfare’.

So where does all this leave us? We should begin by treating the ‘new progressive’s dilemma’ with some empirical caution, or more precisely, and if we are serious about grasping how and why solidarities are forged and broken over time, try to delineate the three way interaction between markets, states and diversities. This means not conceding the framing in advance to those who view the ‘new progressive’s dilemma’ as a given social fact. We must not let the ‘new progressive’s dilemma’ become an account that blinds us. This is not least the case, because transnational forces (such as globalization) and domestic forces (such as devolution) affect social welfare delivery in ways that have very little to do with shared identity. We can observe an example of the former in the shift from the onus on the state itself, which means that statutory social services are planned and administered by profit seeking parties who are operating according to their own transnational imperatives. And we see an example of the latter in the devolution of social care, which invites us to re-think the status of solidarity in devolved provisions where the national is a background feature. Finally, the ‘new progressive’s dilemma’ is sometimes expressed as a reactionary hope against the revision that comes with re-making common membership, and seeks to re-state a majoritarian ‘we’ through a sleight of hand (not of course in Kymlicka’s expression). This is therefore primarily a political argument that needs to be replied to, which is perhaps best done through the concepts realised through the multiculturalist tradition, and for which we owe Kymlicka a great deal.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>There are many different framings of previous ‘Progressive Dilemmas’. Readers in the UK will be most familiar with that discussed by David Marquand (1991), and which considers how despite the fact that the British people have repeatedly asserted their adherence to the achievements of ‘progressive’ governments, they have historically been reluctant to vote for the parties to make up these governments.

<sup>2</sup>If liberal democracy had not entered the world tied to ideas of nationhood, he writes, ‘it is possible that we would not need multiculturalism, at least not in the form we know in the West. But in our historical situation, some remedy was required for the unjust and exclusionary consequences of the privileging of nationhood and its associated ideologies’ (Kymlicka, 2015, p. 3).

<sup>3</sup>And other alternatives such as ‘Habermas and Benhabib’s accounts of postnational democracy, or Connolly’s account of agonistic democracy’ tend to “smuggle back in the very assumptions of nationhood that they purport to reject’ (Kymlicka, 2015, p. 3).

<sup>4</sup>Which is not to imply Kymlicka would share this articulation, but instead to show one expression of the ‘progressive’s dilemma’ and take up Kymlicka’s challenge to interrogate this.

<sup>5</sup>‘Outside moments of rupture’, maintains Baumberg (2014, p. 5), ‘the possibility of change is greater in the long run than in the short run’.

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