

IMAGINING MULTICULTURAL NATIONALISM? REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF TARIQ MODOOD

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Tariq Modood has been an ardent and consistent advocate for multiculturalism for more than a quarter century. In the 1990s this was a relatively straightforward proposition since theories of multiculturalism sat comfortably within social theory's then prevailing disposition towards pluralistic conceptions of identity, post-national forms of belonging, and a generalized celebration of difference. However, this trend waned in the first decade of the new millennium, with post-9/11 anxieties and the initial impulses of what we recognize today as populist nationalism generating a renewed focus on states and borders as well as skepticism towards multivalent identities and the political accommodation of their claims. One by one over this period the conservative leaders of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom declared multiculturalism to be dead, or described it as a failed project. Yet this was the moment when Modood chose (with the release of *Multiculturalism* in 2007) to double down rather than abandon the embattled paradigm.

In addition to his admirable mettle and intellectual consistency, Modood's approach to the subject has always struck me as more compelling and forward leaning than the models offered by other prominent theorists of multiculturalism such as Will Kymlicka (1995). Modood's brand of multiculturalism, while maintaining an amicable and mostly affirming dialogue with liberalism, has always left open the possibility of other-than-liberal or post-liberal solutions to questions of recognition, belonging, and membership. Moreover, against a prevailing tendency among most theorists of multiculturalism to constrain for sake of parsimony the nature and range of group-specific claims that might reasonably be accommodated, Modood has generally argued for a more expansive and inclusive model of group accommodation – no doubt a function in part, as G. B. Levey (2019) argues, of his own identity and position on the frontlines of racism and discrimination in the UK during the second half of the twentieth century.

Modood's latest book, *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* (hereafter *Essays*), gathers together a dozen essays published between 2005 and 2018 that deal with the intersection of religion and secularism in multicultural theory. Some of

the most illuminating pieces here involve the author engaging several of the most prominent public controversies around religion – and Islam in particular – through the prism of multicultural theory. For example, the author carefully parses the Salman Rushdie affair, the Danish cartoon crisis, and the shari’a controversy surrounding former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. As a whole *Essays* serves as a useful overview of how Modood’s thinking on secularism and religion has evolved over the past 20 years against a backdrop of increased attention and debate about the place of religion in public life.

My primary interest in *Essays*, and the purpose of my response here, lies less in direct engagement with any specific arguments or points its author makes in traversing so admirably this varied and complex terrain, but rather in treating it as a text that lays the groundwork for how we should think about religion and secularism in the context of Modood’s most recent work on what he calls “multicultural nationalism” – which he covers briefly in the introduction to *Essays*. It is the concept of multicultural nationalism that I would like to interrogate here; or perhaps put more accurately, it is the question of the possibility of multicultural national practice that I would like to probe and explore. I take seriously and appreciate Modood’s desire to offer in his work “feasible, contextually sensitive solutions”, and in that spirit I want here to raise some questions about how, practically speaking, it might be possible to move towards greater multicultural nationalism. Just as Modood is always careful to point out when his theorizing is grounded in idiosyncratically British experiences and expressions of multiculturalism, I will own up front that my provocations here are informed very directly by the acute crisis currently facing my own immediate context in the United States.

As an academic struggling to make sense of America’s ruptured social fabric, surging populist nationalism, and sharply polarizing debates over the nature of the United States polity and who belongs in it, Modood’s (2019) model of multicultural nationalism seems very appealing. More specifically, as I try to imagine pathways out of the present American quagmire, an approach that “unites the concerns of some of those currently sympathetic to majoritarian nationalism and those who are pro-diversity and minority accommodation” (Modood 2019: 233–4) perhaps offers a conceptual platform for dialogue. To be clear: I am not looking (and presumably neither is Modood) to enable engagement with, take seriously, or indirectly validate the claims of e.g. racially exclusivist visions of the United States, or conceptions of Americanness premised on devaluing, negating, or excluding from the country specific religious or ethnic groups. Rather, I am concerned with the question of whether and how Modood’s paradigm of multicultural nationalism might be used to rebuild some center ground for reimagining the boundaries of American national identity.

Let me begin by briefly summarizing the crux of multicultural nationalism as I understand it. Modood’s starting point here, as in much of his work, is to lean away from the strictly individualist basis of liberal nationalism due to its inability to

recognize difference or afford space to group-based claims. However, recognizing that nationalism must be formed from some kind of cultural basis, Modood allows that we might reasonably expect that its core parameters will be set by a majority culture. He then proceeds to explicate a model of multiculturalism which moves beyond a narrow emphasis on minority rights in favor of valuing all groups in society: “I argue that multiculturalism is a mode of integration that does not just emphasize the centrality of minority group identities, but rather proves incomplete without the re-making of national identity so that all citizens” – majority culture included – “have a sense of belonging” (Modood 2019: 233). It is precisely the *re-making of national identity* – what that might mean, how it could be accomplished – that I would like to explore here.

At first glance it may appear that Modood is making an argument about the importance of recognizing and attending to the needs of the dominant group, with the concomitant assumption that this would likely redound to the detriment of minorities. However, he is careful to specify that “the predominance that the cultural majority enjoys in shaping the national culture, symbols, and institutions should not be exercised in a non-minority-accommodating way” (Modood 2019: 235). In other words, rather than viewing recognition, respect, and accommodation in zero-sum terms, Modood is arguing for a conception of national culture that makes space for non-majority identities and cultures. For example, Modood argues that, as an established religion with a specific historical valence, the Church of England should enjoy a “rightful precedence” with respect to the representation of religion in the public sphere and in its civic functions (e.g. episcopal presence in the House of Lords; the ceremonial aspects of monarchical transitions). The all-important flip side of this lies in a rather subtle point that Modood makes about how the legitimacy of a majoritarian cultural institution’s preeminence is a function of its capacity to aid and abet the process of making space for minority groups (Modood 2019: 239). Here he cites the Church of England’s significant commitment and contributions to multi-faith engagement. His broader thrust here, and one that returns us to some of the central themes addressed in *Essays*, relates to the idea that a multicultural nation does not need to be strictly secular in the sense of a complete separation between the state and religion in order to make space for religious diversity. Rather, the presence or proximity of religion (including one particular, dominant, or “official” religion) in the historical construction of national culture can, under the right circumstances, serve as a resource for widening the vista of national culture to other faiths. But to this I would say – and here begins my pivot – it’s wonderful that the Church of England is advocating on behalf of religious minorities . . . but is anyone listening?

Somewhat glib, yes, but let me make clear that I highlight Modood’s propositions with respect to multicultural nationalism not because I disagree with them; to the contrary, I find the ideal very compelling. What I wish to gently push him

on is the question of how, practically speaking, we might instantiate the modalities of “national identity re-making” (to use his words) needed to realize multicultural nationalism as a lived reality. More specifically, I am inclined to feel that the mechanisms required to affect the remaking of national cultures are increasingly less available to us as time goes by. I use the term “mechanism” here very deliberately because my skepticism about the possibility of multicultural nationalism in a country such as the United States arises not from its current, seemingly intractable and intense political polarization or the recent empowerment of voices promulgating a conception of America premised quite specifically on the exclusion of racial and cultural minorities. Rather, in asking about mechanisms I want to raise questions about the enabling infrastructure of multicultural nationalism. Here I return to insights offered by the late Benedict Anderson (1983) in his classic work *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Central to the account of modern nationalism offered by Anderson are the social technologies that made it possible for geographically, culturally, ethnically, and sometimes linguistically diverse peoples to arrive at some shared conception of themselves as a national *people*. Anderson pointed to the importance of national newspapers (as a manifestation of what he terms “print-capitalism”) and public education as vital crucibles of national consciousness. What cognate mechanisms exist today that might facilitate greater multicultural nationalism?

It is by now conventional wisdom in the sociology of communication that national public spheres, if they ever existed, have fragmented into thousands of mostly insular and self-reinforcing sphericules organized around specific communities, worldviews, and conceptions of the good – a process radically accelerated by the advent of information and communications technologies and, most recently, social media. Beyond the problem – already recognized close to two decades ago – of a citizenry stuck in bubbles of groupthink unwilling (and, increasingly, thanks to algorithmic determinants of information flow, technically unable) to engage with other views, cultures, and communities, we today find ourselves in a dire situation of epistemological chaos generated by strategic and willful mis- and dis-information. Restated in terms of Robert Putnam’s (2001) categories of social capital, it seems that we possess today infinite resources for the production of bonding (“within group”) social capital but almost a complete absence of mechanisms capable of producing meaningful or effective bridging (“between group”) social capital.

I want to conclude by declaring myself an advocate for Modood’s multicultural nationalism. I greatly admire the middle ground it finds between the homogenizing effects of liberal individualist nationalism and the groundless, ethereal limbo of radical cosmopolitanism. Something like multicultural nationalism is the best thing I can currently imagine us possibly being able to achieve. But as the symbols and institutions that might serve as platforms for remaking national identities

fade in terms of their social relevance (e.g. the Church of England) or, as in the American case, become themselves the primary sites of contesting national narratives, I find myself at a loss to imagine how we might get there.

Works Cited

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