Multiple languages of belonging in the metropolis

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Abstract
Discussions about belonging and national identity are part of a broader European debate concerned with a perceived homogeneous national identity. One concern is that many immigrants and ethnic minorities are not integrating into the receiving societies, which is thought to undermine a sense of belonging to the nation. In this paper, I question whether this fear is valid by exploring the relationship between the individual and society through the notion of ‘sense of belonging’ - to a community, to a polity and sense of belonging to the nation. Networks of solidarity and sense of belonging can be constructed around different identities including religion, ethnicity and locality, transcending national boundaries. What does this mean in terms of national identity? Do we have to have a shared sense of belonging to the nation to be responsible citizens? Firstly, I explore some of the theoretical debates about belonging to the nation, and secondly, by analysing immigrant narratives on belonging, I argue that ethnic minorities who do not have a sense of belonging to the nation, or who have a sense of belonging to more than one symbolic or material locality, can still have a sense of belonging and commitment to the common good.

Introduction
Discussions about belonging and national identity are part of a broader European debate that emerges from a number of concerns, mainly to do with identity and specifically with ethnic or religious identities versus the perceived homogeneous national identity. One major concern is that many immigrants and ethnic minorities are not integrating into the receiving societies. This perceived lack of integration is coupled with the fear that these immigrants
lack a sense of belonging to the nation. Such a scenario is seen to threaten social cohesion and what is frequently perceived as a uniform national identity (Vasta, 2008). There is a trend in public and policy discourses based on the idea that migrants have not met their responsibility to integrate, thus segregating themselves from the receiving society (Koopmans, 2003; Phillips, 2005; Koopmans, 2006). An extreme argument is that multiculturalism supports a form of tribalism and that it segregates ethnic minorities and immigrants from the mainstream society. The perceived lack of integration creates fears about whether newcomers are developing a shared sense of belonging because without this common sense of belonging to national identity it is feared that social cohesion and indeed the very basis of liberal democracies are under threat.

What, then, do we mean by belonging? Crucially, it is formed through the interplay between the subjective self, collective agency and structural positioning. Belonging is multi-faceted - people can have a sense of belonging as individuals as well as collective belonging; they can belong to a community, a locality or a nation; or they can have a transnational sense of belonging. Belonging can refer to the material, symbolic and emotional dimensions of life (Parekh, 2008; Vasta, 2010).

In this paper, I explore the relationship between immigrants and ethnic minorities and the society they have moved to through the notion of ‘belonging’ – to the nation, to communities, and to a polity. Sense of belonging may have emotional, symbolic, spatial or local meanings that transcend national boundaries. Some people have a sense of belonging to more than one polity, conduct their politics in transnational locations, or they may have emotional or symbolic attachments to two or more spheres of life. This paper will examine what this means in terms of national identity. It will also consider whether we need a shared national identity or sense of belonging to the nation in order to be a responsible, participating citizen, and whether a commitment to the common good sufficient.

**On Belonging**

Questions of belonging are often raised about immigrant integration and transnationalism. If immigrants are perceived as not integrating, then alarm bells are raised about whether immigrant cultures or their religions are too diverse from our own. An associated perspective is that if immigrants retain their transnational ties and cultures, then they are unlikely to
develop a sense of belonging to the national identity of the receiving country. Indeed, some fear that immigrants might develop divided loyalties and that multiple belongings will undermine a healthy liberal democracy (De Haas, 2005; Snel et al., 2006; Hamaz & Vasta, 2009). Up until recently, the prevalent view in Europe, North America and Australia has been that immigrants would migrate from one country to another, would settle for good in the receiving country, whilst integrating into the dominant society’s economic, political and socio-cultural institutions (Guarnizo et al., 2003). At the same time, they would progressively disengage from loyalties and attachments of their home countries. Research in the US revealed that due to this loss of status in the receiving country, men are more likely to maintain or initiate political transnational engagements with their home country (Jones-Correa, 1998). Koopmans and Statham (2003) in quantitative comparative content analysis of newspapers found that in Germany, for example, the high homeland political claims-making could be explained by the restrictive immigrant incorporation policies in Germany. In the aftermath of the 2001 riots in northern UK cities, Hussain and Bagguley’s research investigated how British citizenship functions as a source of identity and belonging for British Pakistanis. They found that second generation British Pakistanis draw upon citizenship rights to assert their identity and sense of belonging. Nevertheless, their sense of identity differed from mainstream ideas about national identity and they ‘develop their own concept of national identity as citizenship which accommodates the idea that a person may have multiple identities, for example, British/Pakistani/Muslim’ (2005, 415). Nevertheless, their sense of Britishness is constantly negated by their experience of racism especially since 9/11 which has focused mainly on Muslims (Hussain & Bagguley, 2005, 416).

**Theoretical discourses of national identity and belonging**

In this section, belonging and national identity will be considered more comprehensively through an overview of three relevant theoretical positions. The *first* position, often referred to as liberal nationalism, is based on an assumed solidarity of the people of a nation who need to see themselves as members of a territorially bound and overarching community. For the proper functioning of the state - to ensure social justice, commitment to the common good and to avoid alienation – its citizens need to have a shared sense of belonging to each other (2000, 32-33). They would need a shared national identity. This means that where there are different cultural histories that come from different geographical locations within a nation,
then Miller leans towards the need for an assimilative state. Iris Young (1990) reminds us that even mild forms of assimilation can have oppressive outcomes.

A second theoretical approach focuses on national identity as the identity of a multicultural political community. ¹ It is based on the idea that national identity is territorially bound and that an optimal position would be where its citizens can be bound to the rest by a common sense of belonging, where they share common interests as well as rights and obligations. Baubock, for example, rejects what he calls liberal cultural nationalism which suggests that individuals belong ‘fundamentally, to one and only…culture and that political arrangements should be tailored to protect and preserve homogenous national cultures (Bauböck, 2007, 99). Similarly, for Parekh the national identity of a political community is also territorially bound. It includes ‘language or languages…formative historical experiences…traditions, deep-seated tendencies, beliefs, values and ideals…legal and political institutions’. Parekh links a national civic identity to a sense of common belonging (Parekh, 2008, 87). This second approach provides an expanded notion of national identity that nonetheless requires a common sense of belonging to the nation – it requires an emotional pull. But what if the emotional pull is not there?

A third approach provides some answers to these questions. While sympathetic to diversity and multiculturalism, this approach deviates in so far as it distinguishes between what Mason calls a ‘sense of belonging together’ and a ‘sense of belonging to a polity’. The reasoning here is that people belong to a polity if they identify ‘with most of its institutions and some of its central practices, and feel at home in them’ (Mason, 2000, 127). In this approach, the citizens of a state might in principle have a sense of belonging to a polity without having a sense of belonging together, to what is usually a perceived homogenous national culture. This is similar to Melissa Williams’ idea of belonging to ‘communities of shared fate’ where what connects individuals to one another ‘is not necessarily a shared identity, a shared sense of membership, or a shared commitment to common values, but a system of social interdependence…’ (Williams, 2007,243).
The Research Projects
The research presented here draws on interviews from two projects conducted among 170 Londoners between 2004 and 2009, including respondents of Ghanaian, Portuguese, Romanian, Turkish and Moroccan heritage and 3 participants were of ‘mixed’ heritage – Irish/Indian, English/Spanish and Irish/Egyptian. Semi-structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews were conducted.

Hierarchies of Belonging
Having set the scene with the three theoretical approaches to belonging and national identity, I will now illustrate through the results of my empirical work conducted in London, how migrants and ethnic minorities respond to questions of national identity, loyalty, integration and sense of belonging. Some have a clear sense of belonging. For others, the issue of interdependence is complex and ambivalent. The examples that follow reflect the three theoretical approaches to belonging and national identity outlined above.

Belonging to the nation

Tom – English man
In our interview with Tom, he complained that migrants, and in this particular case, Muslims, should conform to the dress, lifestyles and values of the English: ‘I think, when in Rome, you do as the Romans do. Right. But they walk around, slits in their eyes [referring to the niqab], they’re driving big Mercedes they can’t see the end of the bonnet, right? They should conform with our way of life’. Belonging for those not considered ‘natives’ becomes, a matter of assimilating into the predefined mainstream culture and the ideals of the nation (see Hamaz and Vasta, 2009).

Common sense of belonging to the multicultural nation

(a) Integration and belonging

Maria - Portuguese Woman
Maria has lived in London for ten years, lives in the midst of the Portuguese community in south London, runs a successful construction business with her husband, though she also works as a cleaner in private households. She does not speak English, buys Portuguese
products, goes to Portuguese cafés, and watches Portuguese television. Maria seems to spend quite a bit of time among the Portuguese community, though does socialise with an English and an Italian family who work in the construction industry with her husband, who does speak English. Although Maria is ambivalent about her Portuguese community solidarity, she is quite clear about her sense of belonging and integration into British society. When she was asked if she feels integrated in the UK, she responded, ‘Yes, I feel at home here. Because of my work’.

Maria feels a greater sense of belonging in England than she did in Portugal where her hardship was a source of shame. She went on to say that she thinks it will be better for her children to stay in the UK even though she may retire to Portugal. Thus, we might ask ourselves how Maria can feel integrated into UK society when she doesn’t speak English and has very little to do with people outside her Portuguese community. People can feel integrated or feel a sense of belonging in terms of work and locality, they may have a good understanding of their rights and obligations, but may not necessarily feel integrated into the cultural ways of the majority ethnic group or society.

(b) Transnational belonging

_Nadia – Moroccan-British Woman_

Nadia arrived at the age of twelve, in the early seventies, in an area of London where she continues to work in an NGO that provides services for Moroccans. When speaking about belonging she points to the various lines of belonging and non-belonging she experiences amongst self-identified Moroccans – ethnic, gendered, age, regional, political. She feels passionately attached to Morocco and holds a strong sense of belonging to this area of London in which she grew up and works. Through her NGO in London she has been working with women’s groups in Morocco to protect the human rights of Moroccan and British-Moroccan women. Through her participation in civil society in London, her globally-oriented work has added another layer to the notions of belonging and commitment across national borders. In her political work in the UK and in Morocco, she displays the idea of a community of shared fate – related to a set of human beings with whom she has a past and future imagined relationship (Williams, 2007, 246).
Belonging only to the polity

(a) Belonging to the polity

Ama - Ghanaian Woman

Respondent: British? I can’t be British! (pause) I don’t think so. I don’t think I’ll ever feel (pause) well maybe…I have a British passport but I am not British. Whatever I do I know I can never become a British so I know I am not British. But then because I sort of live in their community or I live…And I try to do everything that is done within the community for the good of the community so I sort of live not in control to be like their culture their rules. There are certain things of the culture that I would not like to take like things like smoking (pause) or disrespectful behaviour, being rude to the elderly things like that are not common in Ghana and it’s not part of us so it’s not something that I will be able to adapt to in any way… But then the basic thing that once you are British you should be doing, I try to do them. I make sure…as much as possible I don’t over-speed and put people in danger. Pay my basic tax and everything that a proper British should be doing. Do all the necessary thing to sort of (pause) because I have a passport and I am here so I try to do everything I can do to live like a British but I am not British. And recently there was a show on TV on who’s English and who’s wherever and one of the comments was that a British can never be black. So I don’t actually think I am British. I am not British. I just have a British passport.

Interviewer: Do you feel integrated into the UK society?

Respondent: Uhhmm yes I do feel integrated (my italics) because I try as much as possible to (pause) to start with I didn’t really like their food but I am trying to be eating whatever like the British would eat and I am trying to do everything right, I’m paying tax, I am doing everything that I have to do. So I think I am integrating well.

Ama says she will never feel a sense of Britishness, mainly because of the racism she experiences. Her identity, as a migrant and ethnic minority, continues to be contested and undermined. But she does have a strong sense of community and makes an effort to integrate and indeed, does feel integrated. In a similar account to Ama’s, Nadia, in the quote below, reveals how belonging, as mentioned earlier, has both a subjective component and a structural one. Structural position is the objective aspect of identity and can refer to someone’s class position, their skin colour etc. Unlike Ama, however, Nadia describes herself
as Moroccan and British. She talks about loyalty - not to Britain, nor to the British, but to British traditions. Earlier we noted how she is immersed in some of these traditions through her political work, but here she uses a cultural example to illustrate her ‘Britishness’.

When we compare the two, one feels British and the other doesn’t, but in varying ways they are both responsible citizens, committed to the common good. Both have a sense of identity to some of the central institutions and social practices (see Mason), as well as having a sense of belonging to a system of interdependence (see Williams).

_Nadia - Moroccan-British Woman_

‘On a personal level I think I am very comfortable with my multiple belonging. I don’t like unfairness, I don’t like injustice…My loyalty is to the great British traditions. Funnily enough, when I go to Morocco I hate going to public space or the bank because I think oh my god, people don’t queue! So there is a tremendous amount of me that is so British, that I think I do belong here. And I am very comfortable with it… I think there are two sides to this. One side is, as a migrant you lose that migrant identity vis a vis ‘you’ when ‘you’ decide. The other side to it is, would the indigenous native English ever see me different? No they won’t. Because I don’t have the blue eyes. Because I have tanned skin. Because I have brown hair’.

Nadia no longer sees herself as a ‘migrant’. She has lost that identity, but will always be reminded of it. Thus for Nadia, belonging is full of contradictions. She thinks of herself as British but there is an ambivalence. Her sense of belonging constitutes a hybrid identity – it is transnational, multicultural, symbolic and localized. Yet, as she reminds us, her sense of belonging will always be contested and undermined by the ‘native English’.

(b) **Belonging only to the local, the symbolic**

Some people have a stronger sense of belonging to their neighbourhood community than they do to the nation as in this following vignette where this Moroccan man also has a symbolic attachment to a football team:

_Hicham - Moroccan Man_

Hicham arrived in the UK as a child and grew up in an estate in West London. Although he no longer lives in this neighbourhood, he spends most of his time here working in his café. He feels a sense of belonging to this neighbourhood and to a British football team (located
outside of London). But otherwise he says he has no sense of belonging to Britain. When asked about how he would describe his identity, he says he feels he’s Moroccan - only Moroccan. Why? The main reason is that he has experienced much racism when he was growing up for being ‘Arab’ and he was told often enough to ‘go home’. When asked what integration means to him – he replied, ‘Integration is the wrong word. Of course people settle and work and make this place their home. So why do they need such a policy. Fairness is more important’.

Conclusion
Our research lends empirical support to all three approaches on belonging and illustrates that immigrants and ethnic minorities have multiple identities and multiple layers of belonging. Significantly some do not have a shared sense of belonging to the national identity. Racism, other forms of exclusion and the coercion of cultural assimilationism not only contribute to the negation of a shared sense of belonging for some ethnic minority groups, but it also acts as a major destabilizing force for the majority ethnic population. In this sense, the argument of the liberal nationalists that a shared sense of belonging is necessary to ensure social justice remains meaningless in the face of racism and exclusion by the majority culture. Nevertheless, the sense of a shared future or of a shared fate motivates people about the importance of the common good, in the sense that our respondents demonstrated their capacity for participating in civic society and contributing to the well-being of the society as

References


