

British citizenship, gender and migration: the containment of cultural differences and the stratification of belonging

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Abstract

Debates about integration, British values and identity, who can belong and who can become a citizen have been fuelled by concerns about growing cultural diversity in the UK. To promote a shared sense of national identity and claim a universal and normative citizen subject, the UK Government, along with many other Western nations, has introduced compulsory citizenship and language testing. This paper traces and critiques the evolution of the British citizenship test since its introduction in 2005 and argues that the regime fails to recognise the gendered and segmented nature of migration, and functions as a silent and largely invisible mechanism of civic stratification and control. Drawing on Home office data it is argued that citizenship testing enables the Government to cherry pick migrants who conform to an idealised citizen subject, while containing cultural difference by excluding others, particularly women, who are tolerated but remain symbolic non-citizens.

Key words: citizenship, citizenship test, gender, migrants, national identity, belonging

Introduction

In the decade since the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005 concerns about the extent and quality of cultural diversity in the UK have deepened and intensified. Along with other Western states, high profile debates have been taking place about integration, about values, about who can belong and claim citizenship, and who is to be excluded. The construction of such boundaries is what Yuval-Davis (2011) refers to as the politics of belonging. These constructions are contested and requirements for belonging can and do change over time such that the meanings and conceptions of 'national identity' are in constant flux. The way in which certain collectives, in this case migrants, are understood and positioned changes as these constructions change. In the UK Yuval-Davis (*Ibid*) identifies New Labour's shared common values as the most recent political project of belonging for migrants. First articulated in 2002 after the riots in the North of England and amidst concerns about social segregation between different ethnic communities, the UK Government expressed the need for 'common values' and 'a shared civic identity to unite around' (Home Office 2002: 10) . Here belonging is constructed out of solidarity and loyalty to Britain, and in particular to a set of shared and normative values.

This most recent project of belonging was articulated in the *Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act* (Home Office 2002) which introduced language and citizenship testing for immigrants who wish to apply to become British citizens. It can be seen as part of the Government's attempt to

stabilize and secure collective identity in the face of rapid social change and growing public and media concern with immigration and Muslim 'extremism'.

The UK, along with other states in the global north, operates an intricate system of immigration statuses with attendant entitlements and exclusions. The increasing differentiation of migrant categories – labour (skilled and unskilled), family, asylum seekers, refugees and students) has given rise to a hierarchy of civic stratification with, on entry, each category being afforded different rights and levels of protection by the state (Kofman 2002; Morris 2003). I suggest here that the citizenship regime operates as an additional mechanism of stratification which is activated where immigration controls have failed to limit the entry and settlement of migrants that the state does not wish to acknowledge or to recognise as politically belonging. It represents the third entrance in Hammar's (1990) typology of gateways through which immigrants must pass on their journey to citizenship. The first gate is the regulation of immigration which represents control at the border, for example by granting work or study visas and residency for short periods. Migrants in this category risk being forced to leave if they become unemployed or when their studies finish. The second is the regulation of the status of permanent resident which gives individuals the right to legally remain without time restrictions or the need for prolongation. The third and final gateway is to naturalisation and the granting of full citizenship; this entitles successful applicants to the right to a British passport, unrestricted travel to and from the UK, the right to vote and right to hold public office. The introduction of citizenship testing represents a restriction on who can pass through this third gateway, and the construction of what Hammar calls 'denizens': a category who have legal and permanent residence status, but who remain 'aliens' or foreign citizens. Denizens do not enjoy full membership of the state and are denied the formal political belonging which accompanies becoming a British citizen. Since their introduction in 2005, the UK language and citizenship requirements have changed quite significantly, further narrowing the door to formal citizenship and enabling the Government to cherry pick which migrants can become citizens.

Below I trace the evolution of these measures and how stratified belonging has been constructed through changing the language and literacy requirements, the nature of the test and through the promotion of particular modes of citizenship. I will support my argument by drawing on Home Office data showing the impact of recent changes to the test on the pass rates of different nationality groups. The final section considers migration and citizenship as deeply gendered processes which both produce and reproduce inequalities. I develop and deepen the critique of citizenship articulated in the citizenship regime to argue that it marginalises and excludes the identities, experiences and citizenship practices of migrant women.

The evolution of the British citizenship test

Since November 2005 all applicants¹ wishing to settle permanently in the UK (Indefinite Leave to Remain) or to become naturalised British citizens must successfully demonstrate English language proficiency and knowledge about British culture, institutions and traditions. When first introduced the Knowledge of Language and Life (KoLL) requirement could be achieved through one of two ways. One involved completing the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) speaking and listening qualification at Entry levels 1, 2 or 3 using specified citizenship based teaching materials. The applicant must have studied at an accredited institution and demonstrated progression from one ESOL level to the next. Alternatively, the requirement could be achieved through passing the computer based *Life in the UK* test, based on an official handbook and set at an English level equivalent of B1/Entry 3 (intermediate level) on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). The first option offered English language teaching which included 'teaching material based on the concept of citizenship' (Home Office 2004: 5). The curriculum included topics such as British history and constitution, women's changing role in society, immigration, multiculturalism and practical information about living in Britain such as, housing and finance. Acquiring citizenship via this route involved demonstrating progression in learning English, rather than achievement of a pre-defined standard. However, from 28 October 2013 the requirements for both indefinite leave to remain (ILR) and citizenship changed: the ESOL and citizenship certificate route was removed and instead all applicants must now pass the computer based *Life in the UK* test and must meet more stringent English language requirements, i.e. have a speaking and listening qualification in English at B1/Entry 3 CEFR or higher (Home Office 2013b).

The test costs £50 and comprises 24 multiple choice questions which must be answered within 45 minutes; 75% of questions must be answered correctly in order to pass. It is available through test centres operated by *learnirect* on behalf of the UK Home Office. The third edition of the official handbook, *Life in the UK: A Guide for New Residents*, was launched on 25 March 2013; this latest edition is significantly different from the earlier two versions. There is

¹ All adults between 18 and 65 applying for settlement, whether as main applicant or dependant are expected to meet the requirement. There are some exemptions, e.g. those who have a mental or physical condition which 'severely inhibits' their ability to communicate, spouses of British citizens who have been the victims of domestic violence and refugees. However, the requirement for naturalisation as a British citizen only exempts those over 65 and those with a physical or mental condition. All other individuals who wish to become British citizens must meet the requirements.

comparatively little substantive difference between the first and second editions; the second edition published in 2007 mainly consists of updated and revised content and a new final chapter which presents the official understanding of good citizenship and how to become a 'good citizen' (Home Office 2007: 107-108). This reflected the Government's increasing emphasis on the duties and responsibilities of citizenship which later emerged in the notion of 'earned citizenship' (Morrice 2011). The third edition, however, is substantially different. Although all three editions contain information about British history, culture and law, in the earlier two editions this did not form part of the test and was included for its 'interest and practical value' (Home Office 2007: 4). There was also explicit acknowledgment that historical knowledge is contested and subject to interpretation; so the first edition stated that: '[a]ny account of British history is, however, whether long or short, an interpretation. No one person would agree with another what to put in, what to leave out, and how to say it' (2004: 17). The statement in the second edition is somewhat weaker: '[h]istorians often disagree about what to include and what to exclude in historical accounts' (Home Office 2007: 7). By the third edition all reference to possible alternative accounts or dialogue is removed and instead, under the chapter heading of '*A long and industrious history*', one single and enduring national narrative is presented as universally shared and undisputed. There is also considerably more detail about British history, historical figures, arts and culture, all of which are now subject to forming a part of the multiple choice questions which make up the test.

In the earlier editions the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen and the notion of common values is set out relatively tentatively in the final chapter: '...most people believe that there should be a set of shared values with which everyone can agree.' (2007: 107). Reference is made to surveys that suggest what the majority of people think about the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen, and this section is not included in the test. In contrast, the third edition sets out values and principles in the opening pages, and in much stronger, normative language: 'British society is founded on fundamental values and principles which all those living in the UK should respect and support' (2013b: 7). The other main difference is that the first two editions contained sources of practical information and a large glossary of terms to help readers understand the meanings of key words and expressions. The sources of information were about education such as types of schools, the national curriculum, qualifications and universities, the system for getting overseas qualifications recognised in the UK; information about healthcare such as how to register with a GP, also information about money and credit, public utilities, accessing public libraries and Citizens Advice Bureaus. The first edition claimed that the handbook is 'essentially a compendium of useful information helpful to those new arrivals settling in to this country' (Home Office 2004: 10). It then repeats this aim 'to be helpful to

integration, not to set a rigid task, still less one designed to fail any definite percentage' (ibid: 13). This contrasts starkly to the information statement in the third edition which states that the handbook '...will help you to integrate into society and play a full role in your local community. It will also help ensure that you have a broad general knowledge of the culture, laws and history of the UK' (Home Office 2013a). The glossary in the third edition is correspondingly significantly smaller.

In launching the new handbook and test the UK Home Office claimed that it aims to put 'British culture and history at the very heart of its revised curriculum' (Home Office 2013c). The Immigration Minister, Mark Harper MP announced the new test stating:

We've stripped out mundane information about water meters, how to find train timetables, and using the internet. The new test rightly focuses on values and principles at the heart of being British. Instead of telling people how to claim benefits it encourages participation in British life. (Harper 2013, cited in Home Office 2013c)

As the quote from the Minister suggests the new handbook also includes guidance on approved forms of participation and citizenship.

The creation of denizens and non-citizens

The citizenship regime can be seen as an influential articulation of British national identity and stands at the third gateway in Hammar's framework, restricting the doorway to belonging and the claim to British citizenship and identity. As outlined above, it is a technology which has become increasingly more severe over the past decade, with less room for critical engagement or debate, and with the knowledge of UK history, culture and institutions demanded generally recognised to be above and beyond that possessed by the majority of the long term resident population. History and culture have been distilled to one simple story and diversities have become reduced to imagined commonalities. The expectation of engagement with written text and what has to be rote learnt has increased greatly, raising the bar for settlement in the UK ever higher. The eligible citizen must now demonstrate that they can read and interpret English texts, not just 'hold a conversation on an unexpected topic, that is workable, though not perfect' (Home Office 2004: 11); they must demonstrate that they are responsible citizens who 'play a full role in [their] local community' (Home Office 2013a: 7).

The UK Government website (Home Office 2014a) offers practice tests which underscore the class bias and nature of the cultural understanding and also the language skills required. For example, candidates might be asked to select which of the following statements is correct:

- Gilbert and Sullivan were a comedy double act
- Gilbert and Sullivan wrote many comic operas

Or they could be asked to identify legislation or events in a particular time period, for example: Which TWO developments are associated with the 'Swinging Sixties'?

- Children's rights law reform
- Abortion law reform
- Divorce law reform
- Decimal currency

There are no preparatory classes for the test, and the assumption is that applicants will have access to IT equipment and the necessary IT skills to enable them to practice using the online practice tests. Data gathered between 2005 and 2010, and therefore prior to the changes, showed significant variations in pass rates by nationality; English-speaking countries had the highest pass rates, and within this group there was considerable variation depending on the level of economic development of the country (Ryan 2010). More recent Home Office data released under a freedom of information request (Home Office 2014b) shows a breakdown of pass rates by nationality between 2009 and 2014 and again indicates that citizens from non-English speaking, low income countries and countries with low literacy rates are disadvantaged in the test. What is also clear from the data is that the recent changes to the citizenship test have affected citizens from some countries more than others. *Table 1* sets out the pass rates for nine countries between January 2013 and February 2014. During this time period the third edition of the handbook was introduced (25 March 2013) and the new test was implemented (28 October 2013). Countries have been selected for comparison on the basis of numbers of test applications, the wealth of the country (high, medium or low income as defined by the World Bank), literacy rates and whether or not English was an official language.

Table 1 – *Knowledge of Language and Life in the UK pass rates between January 2013 and February 2014.* (Figures rounded to the nearest whole number)

Insert Table 1 here

Source: Home Office (2014b)

The countries with the highest pass rates are Australia, Canada and the US (group 1). The average pass rate for these countries remained between 95% and 98% during the time period. The pass rates were also relatively high for middle income countries where an official language

was English such as Ghana, India and Nigeria (group 2). Although the pass rates dropped significantly over the period, nationals from these countries still averaged 68% to 89% pass rate. However, other nationalities with large number of migrants taking the test included Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Somalia (group 3); of this group the pass rate was predictably significantly lower: on average just 47% of Afghan applicants, 57% of Bangladeshi and 57% of Somali applicants passed the test between January 2013 and February 2014. This latter group of low income countries also have some of the lowest adult literacy rates in the world 32% (Afghanistan), 58% (Bangladesh) and 38% (Somalia) (UNESCO 2014). Female rates of literacy are lower than male rates in all of these countries, and although information on gender and pass rates is not available, it is likely that women are even more likely to struggle with the language and literacy requirements of the test.

The graph below combines the monthly pass rates for each of the groups of countries. While the results for group 1 show very little change over this period – a drop of just 3%, the pass rates for the latter two groups drop significantly after the introduction of the new handbook in March 2013. The pass rates improve slightly and then drop again with the introduction of the new test. Group 2 pass rates show a much smaller dip and quickly appears to pick up, whereas group 3 shows a continual decline in pass rates. Between January 2013 and February 2014 the pass rates for group 2 dropped by 21% and for group 3 by 28%.

Figure 1 *Knowledge of Language and Life in the UK test results from January 2013 to February 2014*

Insert Figure 1 here

Source: Home Office (2014b)

Information on immigration category and pass rate is not available, but each of the countries in group 3 is either a country in which partner migration (most often women) is a significant share of settlement (Bangladesh), or has been a refugee-producing country in the recent past (Afghanistan and Somalia). These 3 countries were amongst the ten nationalities most likely to have relied upon the ESOL with citizenship route (Ryan 2010). The ESOL route acknowledged that ESOL learners are extremely diverse and learning for those with little or no educational background is a much longer and slower process as they are learning how to learn and how to become literate at the same time as learning a language. For some learners, their own language may not even use the Roman alphabet and they are learning a new script, and some may be learning that print conveys meaning. A range of other factors such as age, amount of study time and exposure to language outside of class time also come into play. This diversity gives rise to

wide variation in the number of hours and levels of support required to complete an ESOL qualification: for a learner starting at approximately Entry level 1 it can take more than a year to progress through each level (Kings and Casey 2013), and therefore over 3 years to reach Entry level 3, the benchmark required before citizenship can be applied for. Highly educated and proficient learners can reach this level in a fraction of this time. There has been a significant reduction in Government funding for ESOL and changes to the mechanism used to determine funding which do not reflect the diversity of needs of ESOL learners (Kings and Casey 2013). This has made it more difficult for ESOL providers to deliver lower level classes which meet the needs of learners who require more time and support to complete a qualification (*Ibid*). In addition, changes to eligibility for concessionary fees have made women and low paid workers particularly vulnerable to being unable to afford classes (NIACE 2011), placing restrictions on the ability of some migrants to access classes and undertake the sustained learning in order to reach Entry level 3. A consequence of all of these changes to the citizenship test and the language requirements is that the educative purpose enshrined in the original intention of the KoLL has been removed, and this has had greatest impact on the most vulnerable migrants and women.

Finally, it should be noted that meeting the language requirements and passing the citizenship test is the first stage to acquiring British citizenship. Once these requirements have been met the migrants must pay a fee to submit their application, and answer a range of questions to evidence that they are of 'good character'. The application cost has increased substantially since its introduction, from £200 prior to 2007, to the current fee (April 2014) of £906 per person, plus £80 for the costs of the citizenship ceremony. Levesley (2008) in his research report for Lord Goldsmith's review of British citizenship found that the cost of applying for citizenship was the single most frequent obstacle to citizenship (2008: 36), and is likely to discriminate against women and low income migrants.

Migration and citizenship as gendered processes

Liberal citizenship regimes treat migrants as a homogenous group and, by default, assume that those who are eligible to apply for citizenship can do so from a level playing field. As argued above, this fails to recognise the global hierarchy of nation states and the inequalities this creates for different nationalities. In addition, within the global stratification of migration men and women do not circulate in the same way and gender is also an important dimension in explaining how citizenship rights are distributed (Tastsoglou and Dobowolsky 2006; Piper 2009). More specifically, women are more likely to enter the UK as family migrants and to experience dependent status (Kofman 1999, 2004; Castle and Miller 2009), they are more likely

to be employed in precarious and informal sectors (particularly domestic and care work), in asylum claims they are more often treated as the dependent of the principal applicant (Kofman 2008). Migration is therefore a deeply gendered process: migrants leave gender segmented societies, on entry to the UK stratification and inequality is further produced through different migrant statuses; these intersect with other social divisions to shape the citizenship experiences, opportunities and outcomes for women, including their opportunities to successfully apply for citizenship.

The *Life in the UK* handbook underscores the state's power to define the ideal citizen, the practices and meanings of citizenship, and consequently, how citizenship is differentially experienced by different subjects. It reflects liberal Western modes of citizenship which stress membership of a state, rights, responsibilities, equality and participation, particularly participation in the workforce, as being fundamental aspects of citizenship (Coare and Johnston 2004). The normative practices and dominant discourse that define mainstream culture are presented through citizenship ideals as not only being stable, but also culturally and gender neutral; it is assumed that all individuals are acknowledged and experience themselves as equally valuable citizens, regardless of social identity locations, and that all can and should participate in the public sphere on an equal basis. The two later editions of *Life in the UK* emphasise the importance of being a 'good citizen' and participating in the community through volunteering (Home Office 2013a: 153-161). The underlying presumption is that simply by declaring participation in the workforce or community as a 'good thing' and an important aspect of being a citizen, that it is attainable and will naturally follow (Masoor-Mitha 2005). This conceptualisation skates over existing and deeply embedded power differentials in society, and as suggested earlier, it ignores that some migrants might need more support to improve their English language, to navigate the employment market or to volunteer. It also fails to recognise that citizenship may be understood and practiced differently; consequently, migrant women may not recognise their own civic labour in the citizenship ideals promoted, and the citizen subject articulated may fail to have relevance or meaning for their lives.

Feminist scholars have demonstrated the contested nature of citizenship and the need for an expanded notion which recognises the differential experiences and practices of citizenship based on gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, class and other social divisions (e.g. Lister 1997; Yuval-Davis 1997a and b; Tastsoglou and Dobrowsky 2006; Abraham, Chow, Maratou-Alipranti and Tastsoglou 2010). In particular they have challenged the assumption of an abstract, undifferentiated universalism, and instead have put forward notions such as 'differentiated universalism' (Lister 1997), which point to the need for a framing and understanding of citizenship which encompasses an analysis of the reality of differences in praxis (e.g. Abraham

et al 2010; Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky 2006). Attention has been drawn to the ways citizenship has been essentially male defined, privileging the male sphere and marginalising women and other modes of citizenship (e.g. Lister 1997; Yuval-Davis 1997a; Arnot 2009). Abraham et al. (2010) highlight the artificial binary between the public and private spheres and the importance of recognising the interdependence and interaction between these spheres, and coupled with this, the need for an expanded notion of care in the conceptualisation of citizenship, particularly in relation to migrant women.

The citizenship practices set out in the handbook include examples such as helping in schools, becoming a blood or organ donor, volunteering with local services and charities. Participation in the community is presented largely in individualistic and secular terms, and yet studies have pointed to family, kinship, ethnic and community as key sites of agency and participatory citizenship for migrant women (Tastsoglou, 2006; Ralston 2006; Williams 2010). Such studies highlight that civic identity and civic participation is not necessarily located in the spheres of volunteering for local charities or services and that approved modes of practice may fail to connect or appear relevant to women's lives. Of further relevance to migrant women's identification with citizenship practices is the articulation of religion as a private matter and the public sphere as avowedly secular. One of five 'fundamental principles of British life' is '[t]olerance of those with different faiths and beliefs' (Home Office 2013a: 8); religion and religious identity are accepted, but examples of volunteering or collective activities through a faith based community are not included in the handbook, suggesting that they are not regarded as an equal or valued part of citizenship activity. Yet over the last two decades faith-based identity has become a more salient reference point for many in Britain, most evidently for Muslims, but also for other minority ethnic groups such as Sikhs and Hindus (Modood 2010; Zavos 2009). Modood points out that what being a Muslim² means varies from person to person and over space and time: the religious dimension is not necessarily the most prominent; it could be community, heritage, sense of family or collective political advancement which makes the identity more or less salient for an individual. It can also simply be some basic precepts about self and how to live one's life; moreover, the separation between these different dimensions is not always clear cut in the lives of individuals (Modood 2010; Moosa-Mitha 2009). However, the British citizenship discourse puts forward one secular model of the good citizen to which all are expected to conform; Modood argues instead for a differentiated citizenship which recognises cultural difference and embraces plural ways of belonging (Modood 2005, 2007). He challenges

² Modood traces the development of British Muslim identity politics to the *Satanic Verses Affair*, an event which marked a key moment when many Muslims began to think of themselves as Muslim in a public way. For a fuller discussion of the controversy, and the tensions between religious and cultural minorities and state secularism, see Modood (1990)

the neutrality claimed by the state to argue that such state secularism represents ‘an arbitrary, if historically grounded’ bias against one kind of minority’ (Modood 2010: 123). The point is that for many citizens, whether newly arrived or long term resident, ethnic and faith based activity can be a major source of community participation and an essential part of being a ‘good’ or responsible citizen. Ethnic, faith and faith-based ties can also provide the surest sense of being, of collective strength, pride and belonging; these loyalties give rise to strong civic identities and moral obligations. Recognition of these different layers – local, ethnic, national and transnational – requires what Yuval-Davis argues is a multi-layered construct of citizenship (1999). Citizenship discourses which fail to recognise the ties and community activities based on faith, ignore the different ways that participation is perceived and enacted by different individuals and groups; ultimately this restricts the state’s ability to recognise and address the social needs of faith based communities, but also does not allow certain groups to make themselves visible in a way which is most meaningful to their sense of self (Moosa-Mitha 2009).

It may not only be secular and individualised citizenship discourses which causes disidentification and disrupts migrants’ sense of affinity and belonging to the UK. Migrants live transnational lives and affective belonging is at the same time local, national and transnational (Yuval-Davis 1999; Tastsoglou 2006). Global politics and the role of powerful states in conflicts, both past and present, impact on sense of belonging and how migrants connect to historical narrative and discourses of citizenship. Gordan (2010) vividly describes the struggles of Laotian women refugees to connect their historical memories (which included US bombing of Laos), and their complex understandings of citizenship with US narratives of citizenship. Identification and sense of belonging may be difficult to achieve where different historical memories compete with selective historical narratives; such as in the *Life in the UK Handbook* where the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq are narrated from a single and uncontested UK Government perspective.

Conclusion

Drawing on Yuval-Davis’ notion of belonging as politically constructed I have argued that the citizenship regime has been incrementally tightening the borders around who can acquire British citizenship and in doing so is constructing stratified tiers of belonging for migrants³. In addition to an immigration policy which enables the Government to cherry pick the most skilled and highly educated workforce from around the globe (Yuval-Davis, Anthias and Kofman 2005), the citizenship regime, while appearing to be inclusive and open to all, is a silent and largely

³ In this paper I have only been concerned with migrants who have been recognised as having a right to remain in the UK. There are of course asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who do not have even the most basic of rights, but who are beyond the scope of this paper.

invisible filter enabling a second round of selection. This has given rise to a stratification of migrants from those at the top who experience least resistance and difficulty becoming British citizens; they are from the most privileged and wealthiest parts of the globe: they are the most literate, well- educated and are most likely to be from a westernised socio-cultural background where modes of citizenship are broadly similar. Then there are the less-deserving migrants at the bottom who have the right to stay in the UK and are eligible to apply for formal citizenship, but whose entitlement cannot be realised in practice. These migrants, whose cultural differences cannot be reconciled, remain in an anxious liminal space of exclusion and non-citizenship: tolerated but not rewarded with the coveted status of citizenship. These are the most vulnerable migrants from the poorest parts of the globe, who have had the least education and opportunities and whose social and cultural background has not prepared them for the cultural specific nature of the test and the rote learning of written texts. Alongside this cultural bias, the regime has a largely unacknowledged gender bias which makes women particularly vulnerable to exclusion as they not only have the lowest literacy levels, but tend to occupy the most vulnerable migrant statuses, are less likely to be able to access ESOL classes, have fewer financial resources and are more likely to be engaged in unrecognised and unacknowledged citizenship practices.

The citizenship regime speaks to the fears and anxieties running through public discourses that British national identity is under threat from without, and in particular from growing cultural diversity. This is clearly seen in the way in which migration has become a major policy issue and was one of the single most important issues in the UK general election in May 2015. The discourse of Britishness is articulated by politicians and policy makers in an attempt to reassure a concerned public that action is being taken, that there a set of fundamental values and a shared civic identity that the long term settled population is already united around and that newcomers can be required to sign up to, and yet have no role in shaping. This entrenchment and essentialist notion of national identity is far removed from the discourses and debates sparked by the Parekh Report at the cusp of the millennium in which Britain was imagined and celebrated as being inherently multicultural and even a hybrid nation (Runnymede 2000). In these debates it was argued that Britain needed to revise its national story and its identity in order to move towards a more inclusive society which recognised its diverse cultural communities.

The forms of citizenship and values promoted are Western ones of individuality, personal sufficiency and an independently orientated self which contrasts with other cultural understandings of self and social context which stress more collective, community and family orientated modes of self and of being a good citizen. These identifications and engagements give

rise to different spheres of civic agency and types of action; they do not conflict with the more impersonal and secular civic identities set out in the official handbook, but are not recognised within the model of good citizenship set out. The argument presented here suggests there is a need to recognise these contested understandings and to engage in debate, rather than overlay a veneer of shared and imaginary understanding in an attempt to iron out socio-cultural differences, divisions and inequalities. After all, the act of taking and passing a test does not guarantee that individuals will feel integrated, will not hold extreme views or that they will not feel alienated. It merely confirms that they can read and memorize certain facts, ideas and modes of citizenship.

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