The Changing role of the State; national identity and the case for interculturalism

TED CANTLE 16 April 2013

The state remains a very powerful force in the lives of many people and is the most significant unit of democracy in the developed world. For many, being a citizen of a particular state, having absorbed the traditions and cultures, being subject to its laws and economic regulation and taking part in the polity, a sense of belonging is still very evident. But the role of the state has changed profoundly in recent years and it is under threat from above and below. Consequently, national identity has also been weakened and is now just one of a number of significant ways in which people think about themselves.

While states attempt to assert their relevance in a global age through both multiculturalism and top-down nationalism, new models of identity and strategies of participation need to be developed to deal with the co-existing phenomena of national experience and cosmopolitanism.

The state remains a very powerful force in the lives of many people and is the most significant unit of democracy in the developed world. For many, being a citizen of a particular state, having absorbed the traditions and cultures, being subject to its laws and economic regulation and taking part in the polity, a sense of belonging is still very evident. But the role of the state has changed profoundly in recent years and it is under threat from above and below. Consequently, national identity has also been weakened and is now just one of a number of significant ways in which people think about themselves.

There are two particular powerful trends which have thrown the role and nature of the state into question and both result from globalisation. The first is the growth and ease of transnational communications and the movement of people on an unprecedented scale. The relative homogeneity of the state has given way to an era of 'super diversity' in which the composition of western societies has become far more dynamic and complex. Ideas about personal and collective identity have inevitably begun to change as a consequence. Secondly, states have become much more interdependent and are no longer able to able to regulate political, economic and social processes within their borders, despite a continuing pretence of sovereignty.

These trends are explored below, but first, it is worth noting that the nation state is a relatively recent phenomenom and has been in a constant state of flux. From a global perspective, the era of nation building began in the late 19th Century when few countries had a shared common language or anything approximating to shared

culture, let alone accepted borders and a system of national governance. There was little by way of an established polity, with mass enfranchisement emerging in the first quarter of the 20th Century and not being fully completed (generally for women) until much later - the 1960s for countries like France and Belgium. Borders have continued to be in flux until the present day but with major changes particularly evident after the two world wars and following the collapse of empires.

Consequently, notions of national identity are also in flux with various attempts to 'make' and re-make nations through the development of a national story, which purports to express the uniqueness of one group (and in relational terms, suggests the lesser nature of a different national group who become the 'other').

The state and population diversity

Population mobility is accelerating and, across the globe, people have become far more able and willing to re-locate in search of better employment prospects and a higher standard of living; or increasingly as a lifestyle choice where borders have remained open to them. In 2010 there were 214 million international migrants and if they continue to grow in number at the same pace there will be over 400 million by 2050 (IoM 2010). Forced migration, where people have to move as a result of climate change, conflict and war, threaten to dwarf these numbers.

There are now 20 cities with more than 1 million foreign-born people and another 59 cities worldwide with a presence of 100,000 or more foreign born residents. These include 11 cities with an immigrant presence of between 500,000 and 1 million people, for example in Argentina, Canada, USA, Russia and Israel (Clark, 2008, p27). This is not simply about numerical growth however, migrant communities are also increasingly diverse and this inevitably leads to much greater complexity within nation states, particularly in the Western economies, which are often the target countries for migration. The extent of population movement is such that all western economies are now characterised by 'super' or 'hyper' diversity with cities, like London, Stockholm, Toronto, New York and Amsterdam with over 300 language groups. This is beginning to re-define our notion of multiculturalism which had previously been seen as the then essentially White countries coming to terms with migrants from a limited number of former colonies. Relationships are now much more complex and community relations are multi-faceted, no longer simply revolving around majority/minority visible distinctions underpinned by distinct socio-economic positions (Cantle 2012).

The impact of the diversity resulting from global patterns of migration and the rise and importance of diasporas means that the homogeneity and distinctiveness of national and regional identities is also seen to be under threat as external influences become more accessible and persuasive. Far Right groups in many countries are increasingly exploiting the fear of the erosion of a simple national identity to build substantial popular support. Groups have used this approach to gain an increased level of popular support across most of Europe, including France, Switzerland, Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece and Italy. Even the traditionally 'liberal' countries of Scandinavia have seen an unprecedented growth in Far Right support with parties in Norway, Finland and Denmark growing to around 20% of the electorate. Marine Le Pen the new French *Front National* leader sums this up as

"now the real divide is between nationalism and globalisation", and complains that "France's sovereignty has been 'sucked dry by the EU", with "cultural identity under attack through massive immigration" (Le Pen, 2011).

The concerns of the Far Right are borne out by a number of studies, Castells (2006) draws upon the research of Professor Norris of Harvard University who has analysed the *World Values Survey* to show that regional and local identities are trumping national loyalties. Professor Norris calculated that for the world as a whole, 13% of respondents primarily considered themselves as "citizens of the world", 38% put their Nation-State first, and the larger remainder put local or regional identities first. These changes are viewed negatively by the Far Right but simply demonstrate the inevitable impact of globalisation and cosmopolitanism has inevitably grown. But identity has also become more multi-faceted and, whereas multiculturalism has been firmly rooted in racial constructs, ideas about difference has developed in other directions. Sexual orientation, gender, faith and disability and other aspects of identity are now firmly in the public sphere and contributing to notions of personal identity alongside national identity. People are thus able to draw upon their heritage, faith, language, diaspora and new national identity to create hybrid or multiple identities. Identity is increasingly complex and, as well as the now routine hyphenating of nationality, faith and ethnicity, the consequence of people from different identity groups sharing the same society has also led to the growth of 'mixed race' or multiple identities. This is now the fastest growing minority in Britain and many other countries.

Any pretence of a homogeneous national or cultural identity in the past has always been open to challenge. In the present era of globalisation, it is now clearly untenable.

The state and political sovereignty

The second trend is clearly related to the first and the past reliance on multicultural policies has also meant that governments have not only been slow to recognise the impact of fluidity of population change and the development of transnational communications including social media and diaspora influences on solidarity, but have hardly begun to consider the implications for national governance. States – and especially their political elites – have inevitably tried to cling to the idea of clear national boundaries and governance and any suggestions of the loss of sovereignty or the advent political plurality are quickly contested. Rather than reflecting the process of globalisation, they feel threatened by the inter-connectivity of the modern world and are not prepared to acknowledge, let alone argue for, a more collaborative approach based on internationalism.

It also has to be said that, whilst people are themselves increasingly crossing borders, inter-marrying, building new virtual networks, and creating real and tangible personal relationships at all levels, they too are often fearful about the impact of globalisation on their communities and collective identity. 'Identity politics', whether on the basis of narrow national, ethnic, faith or regional basis, often holds back the transition, rather than supporting and inspiring a new and inter-connected world.

More tangibly, globalisation has also brought many new international agencies and structures into being and fundamentally altered power relationships within and between states. These new agencies have responded to a range of common issues from international finance, crime, climate change, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and many more. The European Union perhaps stands out most in this regard. Castells (1997) supports the view that the state has been bypassed by networks of wealth, power and information and lost much of its sovereignty. This, together with the process of Western de-industrialisation, the growth of global business and brands and international migration on a new scale, has created a popular sense of powerlessness and alienation. This has also had a profound impact upon the way people see themselves and the claim of nationalistic identities has inevitably been weakened.

Part of the response to this has been the growth of regional and separatist movements – and identity - as people 'hunker down'. There are indications of a rising number of divisions, where people no longer feel able to even share the same land or government as they attempt to cling to some clear element of their identity. Around 20 nations have been created in recent years, which stem partly from the break-up of previously constructed federations in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, or divisions have been turned into separation, for example in the recently divided Sudan. More divisions are possibly on the way with states like Belgium becoming virtually ungovernable as a single entity and there are around twenty secessionist movements in Europe alone, with Scotland and Catalonia being the most notable. Where we might have expected more collaboration across borders and the separate identities of regions and states to give way to common or globalised identities, the opposite seems to be true. Barber (2013) takes this argument further and believes that nation states might be replaced by cities as the main instrument of the polity (and are more capable of responding to cross-border challenges than are states).

None of this should necessarily mean that national identity could or should be downplayed. In fact, there is a great danger in suggesting that the one area of identity that some people, especially the least mobile from lower socio-economic groups, feel able to cling to in a time of uncertainty should be wiped away. The reality is however that national and cosmopolitan identities now also need to sit alongside each other – they are not opposed – something that multiculturalism has never acknowledged.

The sense of collective identity has changed profoundly in all Western societies, but it is inevitably interpreted and understood in different ways by minority and majority groups. This is reflected in the changing nature of personal identities, with the separate components shaped by increasing diversity in terms of faith, present locality, and ethnicity – as well as an apparently declining sense of nationality. In Britain, a recent Searchlight Educational Trust report (SET, 2011) found that whilst many ethnic groups saw themselves in a similar way, 'Asian' and 'Black' groups differed significantly from 'White' groups in certain respects. The three components of 'country' – nationality, country of birth and domicile were most important for White groups (67%) compared to Asian (46%) and Black (21%) and minorities were also more likely to regard religion and ethnicity as the most important element of their identity.

In the face of this broader diversity and changing patterns of identity, Governmental responses have been ambivalent. For the most part, they have attempted to reinforce their view of national identity through such measures as the teaching of national history and promoting national citizenship and identity. By steadfastly retaining the pretence of the integrity of national borders and governance, and by attempting to deny the interdependence brought by globalisation, they reinforce a fear of 'others'. They then appear to lag behind the current reality of multi-faceted identities within their communities and may well find that the new phenomenon of social media will begin to create new transnational relationships which transcend traditional power structures. Already there is clear evidence of a decline in traditional democratic traditions across Europe, with election turnouts and political party membership in decline. There is also some evidence of the growth of new political movements from the *indignados* in Spain to that led by the comedian Grillo in Italy and the current lack of trust and disconnection from mainstream parties suggests that these movements could grow still further.

States have responded to the perceived threat by trying to re-create or reinforce a 'national story' and develop more active and meaningful notions of citizenship. In the UK, along with many other countries, there have been attempts to restrict immigration and to ensure that those immigrants that do come are able to speak the native language and past various tests based on attitudes and knowledge of customs and history (Cantle, 2008).

There has been little by way of any systematic attempt to engage with globalisation through intercultural education and to enable people to become more at ease with diversity and globalisation. Identity remains promoted on the basis that it is fixed and within boundaries. Sen suggests that conflict and violence are sustained today, no less than the past, by the illusion of a unique identity (Sen, 2006). He agues that, the world is increasingly divided between religions (or 'cultures' or 'civilizations'), which ignore the relevance of other ways in which people see themselves through class, gender, profession, language, literature, science, music, morals or politics. He challenges 'the appalling effects of the minaturisation of people' and the denial of the real possibilities of reasoned choices.

Much of this is sustained by embedded programmes of education and socialisation. For example, Cannadine (2013) has recently set out to show how history has been taught from an exaggerated 'them and us' perspective. He also sets out at length the way in which national identities have been created and reinforced through a Manchiean concept of a 'divided past', which has ignored the elements of collaboration and exchange between nations.

States now need to come to terms with the new circumstances that confront them. Interculturalism should be part of this response and has been proposed on the basis of a progressive vision (Cantle, 2012) to support the necessary changes, replacing multiculturalism which became completely out of step with this new world order. The era of transnational relationships, the growth of diasporas, new and pervasive international communications and travel, mean that such policies are no longer tenable. 'Interculturalism' can provide a new positive model to mediate change across regions and nations and recognise the multivariate relationships across all aspects of diversity.

References

Barber, B. (2013). *If Mayors Ruled the World* Forthcoming (New Haven: Yale University Press)

Cannadine, D. (2013) *The Undivided Past: History Beyond Our Difference* (London: Allen Lane)

Cantle T., (2008) *Community Cohesion: A New Framework for Race and Diversity*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan)

Cantle, T., (2012) *Interculturalism: for the era of cohesion and diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan)

Castells, M. (1997) *The Power of Identity: The Information Age, Economy, Society and Culture*. Revised Edition 2010 (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell)

Castells, M (2006) 'Globalisation and Identity: A Comparative Perspective' in *Transfer, Journal of Contemporary Culture* 01 Nov.2006 (Barcelona: VEGAP)

Clark, G (2008) *Towards Open Cities*. (Madrid: British Council)

Goodwin, M., (2011) *New British Fascism – The Rise of the British National Party* (London: Routledge)

International Organisation for Migration (IOM)(2010). *World Migration Report 2010*. (Geneva: IOM)

Le Pen, Marine interviewed in the Guardian 22nd March 2011

Searchlight Educational Trust (SET) (2011). *Fear and Hope* Project Report. (London: SET)

Sen, A., (2006). *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. (New York: W.W. Norton)