Postnationalist Democratization

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Postnationalist Democratization: Rethinking Nationality, Trust, and Accountability

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If nationalists are right to argue that there is a special link between national identity and democratic politics, then schemes for transnational, cosmopolitan democracy must be misconceived. I cannot defend a detailed blueprint of cosmopolitan democracy in this chapter for the simple reason that I do not possess such a blueprint. What I hope to do, however, is to refocus the debate about nationality and democracy away from the idea that democratic accountability requires a unified national identity and onto the idea that all democratic politics, domestic and transnational, should approach this issue with a view of the demos as plural and decentred. Far from strengthening democratic accountability and fostering civic trust, I argue that a concern with national identity embodies a misunderstanding of collective self-determination and has the potential to expose citizens to elite manipulation.

I. Why Postnationalist Democratization?

The argument for cosmopolitan or postnationalist democratic institutions does not turn on the opposition between some heroic cosmopolitan vision of

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a world emptied of troublesome partial attachments and an alternative vision of a richly diverse social world in which individuals associate and affiliate with others in pursuit of their various personal and common projects. If anything, a postnationalist world would, perhaps does, resemble more nearly the latter vision; it is not a world without communities and associations, but one in which these are not subordinated to the nation-state. While national identity undoubtedly features in the background of most people’s lives, albeit rarely distinguished clearly from their formal civic identities, the number of people who make this the primary focus of their lives is quite small, outside very specific circumstances (discriminatory treatment leading to secessionist struggles may provide a relevant context for such a move). The nation struggled to establish itself as the organizing framework for pre-existing patterns of identities and affiliations and is now under pressure from social and economic forces cutting across the boundaries of both nation and state. There is no reason to suppose that these identities and affiliations will not survive any reconfiguration of our civic identities, for the simple reason that they are not dependent on the nationalist version of those identities in the first place. Indeed, some of these identities and solidarities – regional identities, for example – have struggled to survive the centralizing pressures of nation-states and are not obviously placed in danger by the decentring processes of postnationalist democratization.

My argument takes its bearings from the idea that where our actions affect others, we may be called upon to offer them some justification for
those actions and engage in collective reasoning with them should this be necessary (Elster, 1997). This basic idea underlies standard accounts of deliberative democracy and provides the justification for the move towards a postnationalist model of democracy, in which such deliberative exchanges are neither confined primarily to the domestic politics of nation-states, nor to the elite deliberations of national governments engaged in narrowly international negotiations. This latter model must give way to an alternative in which collective reasoning flows across national and institutional boundaries and wells up in a multiplicity of locations, regardless of national frontiers. On this view, the only legitimate way to limit the flow of political deliberation across the borders of the nation-state would be to limit our interactions with others beyond our borders. A nationalist might well argue that this is insufficient to motivate a move beyond an international form of political organization, but as there are good (Condorcetian, for example) reasons to prefer more open, inclusive forms of collective political deliberation over exclusive forms, I suggest that opening up spaces for transnational deliberation is ultimately likely to produce better collective solutions to collective problems (Goodin, 2003, pp. 91-108; Sunstein, 2003). The move to postnationalist forms of democratization is motivated by the scope of our practical engagements. To the extent that we have an interest in protecting ourselves from domination (Pettit, 1996), whether from political elites or the destructive effects of the global financial system, and a corresponding duty to avoid participating in an institutional order which exposes others to the possibility of domination, then we have reason to explore the possibility of postnationalist democratization.
I cannot hope to offer anything like an adequate defence of these arguments here, but I do want to address an important challenge to this project regarding its ability to ensure democratic accountability. The nationalist charge that any move in the direction of cosmopolitan democracy will weaken democratic accountability, because there is a special link between national identity and democratic self-determination, merits serious attention. In the following, I consider two sorts of argument which present the nation-state as a precondition of democracy, one focusing on the need for a shared linguistic background and the other on the idea that national identity supplies the civic trust necessary for democratic cooperation. I argue that underlying these arguments is an assumption that democratic self-determination rests on a unified identity, an assumption I believe we should reject in favour of a decentred understanding of the democratic public and of democratic accountability.

II. Decentred Publics and Democratic Accountability

There is a long tradition within democratic thought of supposing the demos to be a unified collective agent. It underlies the views of direct democrats, like Rousseau, on one hand, who condemn representative institutions as undemocratic because they divide the people into rulers and ruled, as well as the views of representative democrats, on the other hand. The latter, with Mill (1991, p. 428), believe the ‘united public opinion’ on which democracy rests can be supplied by a shared language and nationality, rather than
through the geographical centralization of politics within a city-state.

Kymlicka articulates a version of this argument for civic unity in response to David Held’s defence of cosmopolitan democracy, although, of course, he rejects the traditional nationalist claim that national identity must be co-extensive with civic identity in a given state. In his liberal multicultural model, legal-political citizenship is a shared umbrella under which a plurality of cultural and national identities may shelter within a given state. Nonetheless, he worries that cosmopolitan forms of international or transnational governance may pose a threat to the sort of democratic accountability currently enjoyed within states.

The argument centres on the idea that the dealings of political elites will increasingly become opaque to the national publics whose interests they are to advance on account of the absence of a shared language at the transnational level. Kymlicka (1999, p. 121) argues that a shared language has been essential to the success of nation-states in securing the accountability of elites to their publics and that the absence of this common medium on the international stage will have the effect of diminishing democratic accountability. While this is not, of course, an argument that a thick national culture is required for democratic accountability to be realized, it does pose a genuine challenge to transnational democratization: if there are linguistic limits to effective democratic accountability, then any good democrat has reason to prefer inter-state negotiation to transnational forms of global governance.

It is a little surprising to find Kymlicka taking this line, since it appears to link democratic accountability to precisely the sort of centralizing
linguistic assimilation that has traditionally made the nation-state an inhospitable home for minority cultural groups and speakers of minority languages. That said, the accommodation of linguistic pluralism within federal political structures, permitting the formation of relatively linguistically unified political units, will clearly satisfy the view that linguistic unity is a condition of democratic participation within multilingual states. In addition, multicultural states can plausibly expect that a measure of multilingualism will increase communication across linguistic publics. The resulting picture, then, is one of at least partially overlapping linguistic publics within a multicultural state, rather than of discrete publics existing alongside one another with limited communication between them. We cannot, however, imagine that such multilingualism would be broad enough in scope to be relied upon in any postnationalist democratic order.

Of course, this picture of overlapping spheres of communication, in place of the traditional nation-state model of a public sphere constituted by a single unifying national language, is one already familiar from Habermas’s (1996, 1998) account of the postnationalist public sphere. Democratic legitimacy depends on the flows of communication between the informal public sphere and the formal, parliamentary sphere which has the task of formulating laws. In Habermas’s view, however, it no longer makes sense to talk about a single public opinion-forming public sphere within modern democratic states. Instead, it is more accurate to think in terms of a plurality of overlapping public spheres within which citizens come to form and express their opinions. These are not only geographically dispersed, but also
vary according to the particular groups of citizens who participate in them, as Fraser (1997) indicates in her account of ‘subaltern’ publics. There is no single public sphere in which all citizens simultaneously interact on the model of the Athenian *agora*. Rather, there is a collection of uncoordinated publics, some involving face to face interactions, others involving the consumption of traditional mass media, and yet more involving the new media world of blogging, twittering, *et cetera*. Habermas (1996, p. 301) argues that a unified public is unnecessary for discursive control over the formal public sphere, provided there is communication between these publics – that conversations take place across their boundaries and between these publics and the formal, parliamentary sphere. Indeed, it is not hard to see that behind the image of a unified, centred public sphere, based initially in the eighteenth century on the consumption of print media, there was already a plurality of dispersed publics, publics that fed into an ‘imagined public’ in which the same political affairs could be argued over in localities throughout the state by actors who never personally interacted with one another. While the technologies have changed and the flows of communication speeded up and intensified in density and variety, it is plausible to maintain that the unified public sphere was already in fact constructed out of a plurality of partially overlapping, intersecting publics.

As is well known, Habermas believes the success of postnationalist democratic institutions depends not on the possibility of forging a new unified national identity corresponding to these institutions, but on the strength of the interactions between the various publics, which must exercise discursive control over formal democratic institutions. From this
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Perspective, democratic politics does not require citizens to participate in the same way, in the same context, at the same time, or in the same language in order to generate the public reasoning sufficient to ensure the appropriate responsiveness from formal political institutions. The linguistic uniformity aspired to by the traditional nation-state has, of course, only ever been imperfectly realized in practice, and if one were to insist on a strong version of this argument, with linguistic uniformity viewed as a necessary prerequisite of democratic accountability, then we would be forced to deny that such accountability is possible within multilingual states.

All this talk of dispersed, overlapping publics may do little to allay suspicions that our political autonomy is under threat. How can we hold elites to account when the public is itself plural in this way? In what manner can such a public be said to exercise proper democratic control over the formal political institutions of society? Underlying my analysis of the public sphere is an argument about the nature of democratic self determination. The nationalist argument sketched above belongs to the populist strand of democratic thought, which is based on the supposition that the demos is a unified collective agent possessing a collective will prior to any formal political institutions, and which depicts these institutions as instruments for translating this pre-formed will into action. This view typically regards legal restraints upon the sovereign as diminishing democracy in the name of individual liberty. By contrast, many republican and deliberative democrats reject this populist model, arguing that the idea of a unified agent with a collective will independent of formal institutional decision-making
structures is mistaken, as is the idea that legal defences of individual rights represent restraints on democracy enacted in the name of the independent value of liberty (Habermas, 1996, p. 298; Pettit, 1999). On this alternative view, it is the institutional structure of contemporary democracy itself that constructs a collective will, and, as such, this structure cannot be reduced to a mere vehicle for some pre-existing collective will. Strictly speaking, then, any talk of national self-determination, independent of political institutions, is misplaced: collectivities of this sort do not possess a will at all (which need not exclude the possibility of collective intentionality, however).

Pettit (1999) argues that if we are serious about affording all citizens an equal share in collective self-determination, then we must adopt a pluralist, contestatory model of democratic institutions, one that operates with an expressly decentered model of democratic accountability and embraces not simply the traditional ideal of electoral accountability to majorities of voters, but also a range of oversight bodies, such as constitutional courts and other institutional agents, which perform vital ‘editing’ functions on legislation in order to protect minorities from domination. Only on implausible populist assumptions are such ‘contestatory’ mechanisms an external restraint on democracy. Rather, they are constitutive of democratic will-formation itself, conceived as an ongoing process involving citizens who are understood as a plurality, not a unified subject.

The nationalist fear that we are exchanging the accountability of the nation-state to a unified popular will, exercised unproblematically through periodic elections, for a complex world of dispersed publics in which it is
unclear to whom political institutions should respond, is premised on a flawed model of collective self-determination. There is no unified popular will to respond to, but only a plurality of democratic institutions for constructing collective decisions and taking collective action, each performing its particular role in shaping and constraining this process. As the *demos* of contemporary democracy is plural, so too are the mechanisms available for ensuring democratic responsiveness, and only a plurality of mechanisms can deliver this responsiveness. This is not to deny that there is much work to be done on how to design institutions to effectively perform democratic editing functions, but if this account is sound, such work must be focused on the institutional intersection between informal publics and formal decision-making institutions, rather than on shoring up national or linguistic identities in the name of civic unity (Bohman, 2007).

Even if we abandon the link between populist notions of democratic self-determination and linguistic unity, we may still worry that linguistic barriers to communication pose a problem to democratic communication. However, it is important to get this problem in perspective as just one among a range of challenges facing democracy, domestic as much as transnational. The ability of elites to coordinate their actions while their dealings remain opaque to ordinary citizens does not require linguistic differences, but only the standard differences in education, wealth, and cultural capital. That aside, a still more difficult problem for populist accounts of democratic accountability is that of epistemic differences, that is, the degree to which collective decision making must be informed by
scientific evidence which the ordinary citizen will never be in a position to
evaluate. This all suggests that the argument from linguistic uniformity
offers weak reasons to suppose that citizens can exercise more effective
democratic control over domestic, national elites than over transnational
elites. Instead, all democratic institutions face the same problems of
enabling adequate communication between democratic publics and of
ensuring the accountability of elites to their various constituencies.

III. Nationality, Trust, and Democratic Cooperation

David Miller has expanded on Mill’s arguments for the necessity of national
identity to democratic politics, and has argued against multiculturalist-
inspired accounts of the public sphere on the grounds that they weaken the
commitment to the public good which democratic politics requires. Miller’s
(1995, pp. 89-90) claim centres on the idea that democratic politics cannot
be successful if citizens do not trust one another sufficiently to cooperate on
collective projects. The need for trust, he insists, is greater still for
deliberative conceptions of democracy of the sort he subscribes to, for while
minimalist conceptions can get by (or at least claim to do so) with the bare
idea of party competition and majority voting, the deliberative view requires
citizens to reason with one another in good faith about collective problems,
and this enterprise requires a measure of trust to get off the ground.

Nationality, Miller argues, supplies this civic trust, the shared embrace of a
common nationality serving to strengthen citizens’ trust that their fellow
nationals can be relied upon in cooperative ventures.
One could respond that Miller’s account of the link between nationality and identity is simply too demanding and that we should be content with a more competitive, minimalist model of democracy. As I broadly agree with Miller on the need for a deliberative account of democracy, I shall take a different tack and question, first, the extent to which nationality delivers civic trust or solidarity, however this is to be understood, and argue, second, that trust is not in any case an asset to democratic politics, so that its absence need not be a cause for concern. I should note, however, that there are reasons to be sceptical of the more general idea that deliberative democracy requires civic unity to thrive. Deliberation can be undermined rather than strengthened if the bonds of reciprocity between participants are too strong, for these may intensify the pressure on participants to maintain a reputation for reasonableness by suppressing unwelcome opinions and engaging in preference falsification, thereby diminishing the quality and inclusiveness of public deliberation (Kuran, 1995; Grogan and Gusmano, 2007; Sunstein, 2003).

In pointing to the threat to social cooperation of a general lack of trust between citizens, Miller touches on a deep seated concern about the individualism of modern life shared by many social commentators (Putnam, 1995) and participatory-inclined democrats (Barber, 1984, pp. 213-60). However, it is not immediately obvious that efforts to strengthen national identities will necessarily produce the civic solidarity that is said to be required. Few states actually conform to the classic nationalist nation-state model, with very many states containing multiple nationalities and
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ethnicities within their borders, some marked by linguistic differences, as indicated above. Contemporary liberal nationalists, sensitive to the severe dangers posed to political stability by the traditional nationalist doctrine of self-determination, have typically insisted that civic versions of nationalism need not provoke orgies of secession and annexation. This is because it is possible, they maintain, to satisfy the desires of minority nations for national-self-determination within the borders of existing states through the use of federalist mechanisms, et cetera (Miller, 1995, 2000; Tamir, 1993, pp. 140-5). Yet, against this, it is difficult to see why minority nationalities should readily settle for something less than the statehood held by the majority nationality they find themselves closeted with. If national self-determination matters, then it is hard to see why a minority nationality should settle for a smaller share of it, when secession might secure for them the same status as the currently dominant nation. The doctrine of national self-determination does not appear to contain any principled restraint on the pursuit of secessionist projects and its wide acceptance seems likely to encourage such schemes.

Also, besides stoking secessionist pressures on the part of national minorities, a policy of strengthening national unity would seem more likely to provoke division and disaffection amongst the citizen body in general, than a policy which takes a more relaxed attitude to such ideas and allows a plurality of self-understandings to flourish within the various publics which constitute the public sphere of that particular demos. The UK government’s attempts to foster a stronger sense of Britishness amongst new citizens, by introducing a new citizenship test for immigrants, immediately ran into
controversy when it became clear that the ministers appeared to be identifying British citizenship with speaking English – to the annoyance, if not surprise, of Welsh-speaking Britons (Mann, 2007). Jokes to the effect that the most existing citizens would probably fail the test themselves touch on an important truth: contemporary national identities are not constituted by clearly defined criteria, as if we possessed a checklist of the properties all genuine nationals must exhibit in order to qualify as members. Rather, taking our lead from Wittgenstein, the robustness of these national identities depends on their ‘family resemblance’ character. That is to say, there is no consensus on the necessary and sufficient conditions of Englishness, Irishness, Scottishness, et cetera. Instead, there are a range of partially overlapping variations on these themes, not necessarily possessing a common core, but reflecting the diverse self-understandings characteristic of any modern social identity and embedded in the plurality of publics present within the state. Given the plurality of publics noted above, we should not be surprised that this plurality sustains a corresponding pluralism in the ways in which we can be English, Irish, and so forth. This structure permits widely divergent understandings of nationality to co-exist, which in turn contributes to the persistence of diverse national identifications.

Thus, seeking to codify this plurality in order to better promote civic solidarity, even in the limited way proposed by Miller, which attempts to restrict consensus to the nation’s ‘public culture’, would most likely produce the opposite effect (Osler, 2009). Multicultural theorists have persuasively argued that the cultural baggage exemplified in the ‘Anglo-Conformity’
model of citizenship has historically served to marginalize minority citizens (Kymlicka, 1995). There is every reason to suppose that a policy, however well-intentioned, which aims at foregrounding these cultural accretions, rather than adopting a critical stance towards them, will marginalize rather than unify. Indeed, it is worth remembering that the rhetoric of national identity can be brought into play against any group of citizens in order to delegitimize their position in the eyes of the public (Smyth, 2005). If we are concerned with strengthening civic inclusiveness and fostering a shared sense of ownership of political institutions amongst all citizens, then we should seek to further liberate common institutions from divisive historical baggage. Of course, the norms and institutions of democratic citizenship can never be wholly disconnected from any socio-historical context whatsoever. Yet, logically, an attempt to build and promote a normative account of national identity must create exceptions and exclusions regardless of questions of the content of such an account. Civic unity, I suggest, is better defended by refraining from such projects and embracing the idea that national self-understanding is irreducibly plural.

The nationalist agenda is faced not only with the problem that few states conform to the ideal type in which the bounds of the nation align tidily with the borders of the state, but also with the problem that it is hard to think of any nation which is free from internal disagreement as to the nature of its identity. While this does not entail that there is no such thing as national identity, it does mean that states which seek to impose a particular understanding of identity are unlikely to achieve their goal of strengthening civic trust and solidarity. But suppose we were to grant the (dubious) claim
that nationality fosters civic trust, rather than social division. Would we be right to think that this is of central value to democratic politics? I want to suggest now that nationalist accounts of democracy are mistaken in placing such a high value on trust in the first place, and that therefore it does not count as a serious objection to postnationalist democratization that it does not appeal to a unified social identity capable of generating such trust.

The idea that there is a link between democracy and social identities is not confined to nationalist political theory - it also has feminist and multicultural variants in arguments for special representation and federalism (Young, 1990; Phillips, 1995). The strongest version of this view is, of course, the nationalist one, for while these other accounts ultimately envisage marginalized groups enjoying a share of collective self-government with others who do not share their identity, nationalists insist that collective self-determination is not really possible unless participation is confined to one’s fellow nationals. To be sure, liberal nationalists soften this claim by seeking to blur the lines between nationality and citizenship, so much so that it can be difficult to discern how much work the notion of a cultural, pre-political, national identity is really doing in their arguments by the time they have finished (Barry, 1996). Be that as it may, the idea that one’s interests will be ill-served by a government that contains no-one from your particular social location is a powerful and not at all implausible one. In such circumstances, it will be difficult to dispel the suspicion that one is being ruled over, rather than participating on an equal footing in collective self-government. It is natural to fear that unfavourable policies will be
visited upon you and people like you because they do not bear on the social
groups represented in the government in the same way. Nationalist
movements have plausibly taken this line in struggles against rule by
imperial and colonial powers, and, indeed, it is a concern familiar to class
and gender politics also.

How are we to understand this apparent link between social identity
and self-determination? In her argument for the ‘politics of presence’, Anne
Phillips (1995) reveals how problematic this connection is, suggesting that
we cannot endorse the strong claim that our interests can only be
represented by someone who shares our social identity. At best we can say
that someone who shares our social identity, our social location, is simply
more likely to press our interests in the public sphere than someone who
does not, because for the latter person the stakes are much lower. Phillips
goes on to acknowledge, however, that even where one’s representative
does share one’s social identity, this is no cast-iron guarantee that they will
in fact defend one’s interests.

It is not hard to see why this may be so. There are two sorts of
complexity at work here. First, whether it be a class, gender, racial, or ethnic
group, the interpretation of a group’s interests will be no easy matter.
Merely possessing the identity in question will not solve the problem of
interpreting just what that group’s interests are, for this depends upon
complicated assessments of a vast array of relationships between the group
and other social actors, institutions, and events. Second, for any politically
salient social identity there are likely to be a plurality of competing
interpretations of how membership of that group is to be understood –
which bears on the former problem to the extent that we always interpret a
group’s interests *under some description* – and there may be rival
descriptions which give very different readings of the group’s interests. For
any individual member of that group, then, their personal identity will be a
complex arrangement of social identities the configuration of which may
differ significantly even amongst people who nominally share the same
social identity, such that it may not, on its own, be an entirely reliable
predictor of their behaviour, even in a fairly well defined domain. Indeed,
we might say that the expectation that a particular social identity – race,
religion, or ethnicity, for example – is a reliable predictor of behaviour right
across the various domains of social life is the hallmark of the bigot, an
unhelpful prejudice rather than an asset in our ordinary epistemic toolbox.
The upshot is that we cannot be sure that a representative who shares a
social identity with us will understand it in the same way, or where we share
this understanding that they will interpret our shared interests in the same
way, even if they are determined to represent us as best they can.

This shows the link between self-determination and social identity to
be problematic, to say the least. Nonetheless, Miller (1995, p. 92) argues
that:

> ties of community are an important source of such trust between
> individuals who are not personally known to one another and who
> are in no position directly to monitor one another’s behaviour. A
> shared identity carries with it a shared loyalty, and this increases
confidence that others will reciprocate one’s own cooperative behaviour.

The virtue of shared nationality is that it can encompass everyone in a given state and so promote cooperation by fostering trust that others will reciprocate, even where these are distant others with whom one does not otherwise interact. The ‘imagined community’ of the nation thus underwrites social cooperation. Certainly, when the ‘national interest’ is evoked by politicians and other actors, this is the sort of thing they must have in mind, and there is no doubt the idea has the power to enjoin cooperation, or at least compliance, even when the proposed course of action is deeply unappealing to the public at large.

However, while nationality may often grease the wheels of social cooperation in this manner (bearing in mind the caveats entered above), it is not clear that democrats in particular should be especially reassured by this. As Russell Hardin (2002) suggests, it may be a mistake to place too high a value on trust in general, and on the idea that citizens should normally trust their governments in particular. It is common to bemoan the fact that modern societies appear to suffer from a deficit of trust, but Hardin (1999) argues that trust in itself is of little value – what we should be concerned with is rather trustworthiness. Indeed, it is clear that trust, in the absence of any corresponding trustworthiness, is a positive danger to the interests of the trusting person. Hardin (2002, pp. 74-8) claims that a common defect of the literature on trust is its treatment of trust as a moral ideal – as if it is morally praiseworthy to exhibit trust and blameworthy to withhold it – whereas instead we should properly regard it as a cognitive concept. This means that
we trust others when we form the belief that they are trustworthy, a belief which can be true or false, having weak or strong evidential support. While we can form such beliefs about actors we interact with regularly and about whom we possess adequate knowledge, Hardin maintains that ordinary citizens are never in this position with respect to their government. Its operations are too complex and removed from the citizenry for them to be in a position to form beliefs about its trustworthiness. Yet this is no great defect in our democratic institutions. Rather, we should give up the unrealistic expectation that citizens should normally trust their governments (which is not to say that they should necessarily mistrust them, for this too would require evidential support which is not readily available). Against this backdrop, it would seem the argument that a unified national identity serves to sustain trust between citizens relies on the idea that nationality can serve as a proxy for more detailed information about others’ beliefs and interests, supplying a cognitive basis for cooperation which might otherwise be lacking. Nationality, it seems, is supposed to offer us a useful epistemic short-cut which promises to relieve us of the burden of having to gather more individualized information about others’ interests and likely intentions.

Is it really plausible that nationality can perform this function for us? If not, we may conclude that, to the extent that nationality succeeds in encouraging trust in the absence of sufficient information about the basis for this trust, namely, trustworthiness, it should be viewed rather as a threat to the self-determination of democratic citizens. If, following Phillips, social
identity is not a reliable predictor of behaviour, insofar as it is open to a wide range of interpretations on the part of the actors concerned, then its general, encompassing nature, which is typically presented as its great virtue, would seem to constitute a significant weakness. Its very compatibility with every other social identity within the state in question, save for alternative national identities, suggests that on any significant matter of public concern it will be no guide whatsoever as to an actor’s likely behaviour. In short, it tells us so little about the possibility that our fellow citizens may defect from any cooperative venture, that it provides no basis for making any remotely defensible judgements about trustworthiness. Social cooperation motivated by faith in one’s fellow nationals, simply because they are one’s fellow nationals, threatens to expose citizens to domination by elites who can encourage compliance by deftly playing the national card to damp down class politics, or to sideline internal critics of a state’s foreign policy, for example.

This is not at all to suggest that we should not care about trust or social cooperation, but rather to focus our attention on the basis for trust – adequate knowledge about the interests of those we cooperate with. To the extent that we may trust our political elites to respond to our interests, or our fellow citizens to successfully cooperate with us, it should not be because we speak their language or share their national identity, but rather because there are institutional mechanisms which give us a relatively clear sense of the incentive structure within which any cooperative action takes place. This is not to say that we need not rely on a whole repertoire of proxies or epistemic short cuts of various sorts when detailed information is lacking,
since uncertainty is a fundamental feature of social life. It is simply to say that these function best when they are relatively constrained by the various domains in which they best apply – the more general these are, the less reliable they are likely to be. The less we know about the persons concerned, the more we will be advised to rely on the formal legal framework of society to perform its coordinating role, rather than on faith in the unacceptably weak constraints of national identity. With sufficient knowledge we may be justified in trusting our elites with our interests, but it is an open question whether the ordinary citizen is well-enough informed or properly placed to make such judgments with much reliability. We may, therefore, justifiably worry about the degree to which our domestic political institutions do indeed secure us from domination and make collective self-determination possible, and we should reject the suggestion that shared nationality can do much to supply trustworthiness, even where it can help to supply trust.

IV. Conclusion

I am conscious that I have not indicated how postnationalist institutions might deal convincingly with the sorts of questions about democratic accountability raised in this chapter, and that the thrust of my argument has been largely negative, rather than constructive in this sense. What I hope to have indicated, however, is the direction we must take in the search for democratically accountable institutions in a postnationalist world – that we
must look to institutions rather than identities, and that we must give up the populist, nationalist picture of collective self-determination which relies on the notion of a unified public and a correspondingly centralized vision of accountability. To this extent, any vision of cosmopolitan democracy that seeks to extend the model of nation-state democracy to the global stage, pursuing some vision of a global electorate calling a world-government to account, must be misconceived. What should be clear by now, too, is that I also reject two-level accounts – the suggestion that we should think of transnational democratic accountability in ways that are distinct from domestic accountability. Instead, the model of plural public spheres and decentred democratic accountability sketched here is one which must inform all democratic politics, at all levels. We should not ask whether we can ever enjoy the same degree of collective self-determination in a postnationalist world that we enjoyed within nation-states, but whether we ever had reason to think that the nation-state afforded us the possibility of collective self-determination, rather than its mere the appearance.

References


