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Title: Beyond Cosmopolitanism: The Nation, Citizenship and Convivial Culture

As we proceed through the twenty-first century, it would seem that conceptions of cosmopolitanism have become a primary part of cultural and political discourse. A fact epitomised by Barack Obama's inaugural speech in 2009 when he declared,

We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus - and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself.

As this quote demonstrates, at the heart of cosmopolitanism's popularity is the sense that it acknowledges cultural, religious, national difference whilst recognising that simultaneously there is a layer of shared moral imperatives that unite people throughout the world. So, cosmopolitanism invites us to think of citizens of the world, of global citizens and 'common humanity' alongside identities more locally specific to geographical placement or individual subjectivities.

Cosmopolitanism under threat

However, there are some theorists who argue that cosmopolitanism has become a contested term hijacked by what the British sociologist and political theorist,

Paul Gilroy calls a 'brand of ethical imperialism' in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004, p.69). He argues that attempts to form a coalition of willing national states to fight for the *universal* human rights associated with the spread of liberal democracy and capitalism smacks of neo-imperialism.

In the names of cosmopolitanism and humanitarianism, these particular moral sensibilities can promote and justify intervention in other people's sovereign territory on the grounds that their ailing or incompetent national state has failed to measure up to the levels of good practice that merit recognition as civilized (Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* 2004, p. 66).

Within nations he argues that recast global conditions such as the 'war on terror', panic about asylum seekers and fear of Muslim orchestrated terrorism means that 'the desire to presume the equal worth of alien cultures and to offer equal respect in proliferating encounters with otherness is thought to be misguided or out of date' (p. 65). Instead he draws attention to how the nation state is, once again, being strengthened by the priority attached to national security, enforcing national borders and evicting national and non-nationals that pose a threat to the national fabric. Dissatisfied with the association of cosmopolitanism with an elitist, politically narrow and imperial agenda, in *After Empire* Gilroy turns his attention to within the nation and suggests that there is potential in what he refers to as a more 'vulgar' or 'demotic' cosmopolitanism. To this end, Gilroy offers up the potential of *conviviality* as a way of extending and strengthening the application of multicultural and cosmopolitan ideals in daily national life and cultural practice.

Cosmopolitan conviviality

In particular, Gilroy pits the term *conviviality* against *melancholia*, claiming it could act as a therapeutic counter to the collective *melancholia* afflicting Britain in

the wake of its imperial history, turbulent race relations, the 'war on terror' and current cultural crisis around what 'Englishness' and 'Britishness' mean. But I think we can utilise the term beyond Gilroy's focus on racial difference to consider other inequalities rooted in class, gender, regionalism and sexuality, for instance. Whilst, at the same time, being mindful of Gilroy's point that 'the radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification' (2004, p. xi). Hence, for me this means, that fixed bunkers of identity are destabilised and instead cultural practices arising out of cohabitation, cultural slippage and interaction across national boundaries and ethnic cultures take on primary significance.

There is another point about conviviality that is worth stressing. In contrast to cosmopolitanism, which stresses universal rights, global co-existence and a sense of common humanity, conviviality offers the potential for viewing the nation that is not about eradicating hostility or antagonism but about being open to it and providing spaces for debate, dissent and a coming together of multiple perspectives, modes of being and behaving. In this sense there is much in common between Gilroy's critique of cosmopolitanism and another British sociologist Kenan Malik's critique of multiculturalism which he argues has locked people into their ethnic bunkers and led to people tip-toeing around questions of difference in the name of diversity. Instead, Malik, like Gilroy, argues that the British should embrace the fact that 'the world is a messy place, full of clashes and conflicts' because this is the 'stuff of political and cultural engagement'. Indeed, the way conviviality opens up terms such as inclusiveness, hospitality and sociability, places greater stress on encounters between different people. It is not just a respectful recognition of the moral obligations global citizenship opens up but about embracing rather than hiding away from or ignoring the messy, conflict-ridden aspects that characterise diversity in terms of different races, cultures, religions, sexualities, class, age and national identifications.

So, what might convivial culture encompass?

Using 'conviviality' as a frame, this paper asks what a convivial culture might encompass. In particular, Gilroy writes that **convivial culture 'glories in the ordinary virtues and ironies – listening, looking, discretion, friendship – that can be cultivated when mundane encounters with difference become rewarding' (2004, p. 75)**. This paper considers cultural practices that open up these kinds of 'convivial' spaces and the potential for an inclusive, democratic, yet resolutely heterogeneous national citizenship. Whereas Gilroy draws many of his examples from the popular music scene, I would like to extend this reach to two examples: the popular cultural project and global phenomenon, the 'Got Talent' brand and the British sculptor, Anthony Gormley's one hundred-day public art project *One and Other* (Trafalgar Square, London, 2009), which plays with the potential for democratising public space as a mode of internal national conviviality. Let me say from the outset, that I'm not in any way suggesting that these works have the capacity to address deep structural inequalities – however, I do want to suggest a few ways that each of these open up interesting discursive spaces where people come together to contribute to cultural works that rely on the collision and integration of different perspectives and skills and where the qualities of listening, looking and responsiveness are highly regarded activities. For me, they offer the potential to interrupt daily life and urban living that fosters a form of conviviality in the manner that Gilroy promotes. I will also discuss the ways that technology and communication networks enable these cultural practices and the citizenship they foster to play out on the wider international stage.

The 'Got Talent' Brand

Created by the *X-Factor* and *Pop Idol* originator, Simon Cowell, since 2006, 'Got Talent' has become a global phenomenon with franchises in America, India, South Africa, New Zealand and the Philippines, amongst many others across

Europe and South America. Each of these franchises provides a site for live performances by singers, dance troupes, circus acts, comedians and musicians, which transmit to millions of homes nationally and internationally via television and global media networks. But, importantly, unlike other global franchises such as McDonalds and Starbucks that largely thrive on sameness and familiarity wherever they are, each version of 'Got Talent' is inflected through its national context in a way that underscores the persistence of a particular cultural image of the nation in an age of globalisation. So, in India, where the show first aired in 2009, the finalists included Aslan Khan, a traditional folk music group and Mandeep Singh with his Bhangra Punjabi Folk Dance. And of the final winners, the Prince Dance Troupe who created a dance based on episodes from The Mahabharata, one of the judges Shekhar Kapur noted:

There was something so emotional and completely Indian about their acts, but on par with the best international traditions of modern group choreography that made us all proud to be Indian. And to know that some of the participants of this group were brick kiln labourers, who normally come to our attention more because we read stories about how this class is completely exploited by the Kiln owners, and earn bare subsistence wages. (Shekhar Kapur, India's Got Talent judge)

Actually, this narrative of poor rural labourers winning the 5 million rupees prize echoes to some extent the winners of BGT's 2009 contest – another young, all male street, self-trained dance act. And actually, the style and execution of the winning acts was strikingly similar in many ways.

I think it's very interesting that 2 street dances pieces won – an aesthetic that defies national boundaries (whilst still retaining a national flavour).

Yet, simultaneously, the 'Got Talent' brand provides a popular space for highlighting the changing state and status of individual nations due to the influence of new technologies, migration and globalisation.

Why is 'Got Talent' potentially convivial?

- **Wide popular appeal and promotes conversations with strangers**

For the past three years, *Britain's Got Talent* has embedded itself in the social life of the nation. The first broadcast of the 2009 series attracted 49% of the British viewing public, which amounted to over 11 million viewers and the final broadcast on 30 May 2009 attracted nearly 20 million viewers to become the most watched television show in Britain for five years (www.talent.itv.com). At the level of daily life, I have been struck by the number of casual encounters initiated by reference to this show in shops and petrol stations and the level of conversational traffic on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. This extends to other contexts. For example, India's Got talent has its own section on the Apnicommunity website, a networking and discussion site for 'desis' (South Asian diaspora) across the globe interested in Indian TV and Bollywood. (and, interestingly, I am able to initiate this conversation with you on the basis of a shared cultural phenomena).

- **Model of 'horizontal national citizenship'**

Britain's Got Talent exhibits and celebrates many of the values Britain likes to project about itself as a nation: patriotism, democracy and eccentricity to name a few. The premise of the show is that anyone resident in Britain, regardless of their age, race, gender, sexuality or country of origin can audition for the show with whatever 'talent' they possess. Hence, it promotes a model of horizontal national citizenship where everyone has the right and opportunity to participate. Dancers, singers, ventriloquists, comedians, drag and 'novelty' acts compete to

be voted Britain's best talent for the series. This democratic impulse extends to the fact that from the semi-final stage progression is determined by a public vote – the nation decides. Interestingly, as a cultural example of 'people power' it has served as a point of reference in news items on the recent scandal over politician's expenses in Britain, with one commentator observing the public are keen to vote out their members of parliament like the infamous talent contest.

- **Unruly, haphazard and openly embraces eccentricity**

According to Gilroy, convivial culture is marked by its unruliness, a haphazard quality whereby literature, art and above all popular culture is capable of generating 'emancipatory interruptions' through moments of clash and rupture that force us to see the nation and its citizenship in a new light. In BGT's case there is certainly something in the way that the playful, the ridiculous and the eccentric is allowed a space to break through the veneer of safe, middle-England corporatism. As Tim Walker writes, 'Eccentricity is our forte, and Britain's Got Talent celebrates it' (2009). As farmers dance with wheelbarrows, owners cajol their dogs to dance, a 73-year-old grandfather break-dances and an elderly group of women embark on extreme knitting as a spectator sport it is hard to disagree with Walker. Britain's Got Talent's pleasures are as much about the collision between the sublime and the ridiculous as virtuosity and talent.

- **Porosity: Moves between the national and the international**

The programme oscillates between a heightened performance of the British nation and moves beyond national boundaries to an international arena. The patriotism inherent in the show functions on an explicit symbolic level. The title of the show asserts that Britain *has* got talent and the 3000-strong live audience going to shout about it. The show's logo features a prominent Union Jack flag on trailers, the show's backdrop and its website. Its blatant recourse to national iconographic figures and symbols frames the show as a quintessentially British

product, but many other things destabilise the homogenising coherence of *Britain's Got Talent's* visual onslaught, including the global response to the 2009 audition of Susan Boyle, an unassuming forty-seven-year-old unemployed Scottish charity worker.

- **The technological 'third space' and conviviality**

Boyle's rendition of 'I Dreamed a Dream' from *Les Miserables* (Barbican theatre, London, 1985) immediately became a global internet sensation through the power of YouTube. Within days of her audition, over 40 million people worldwide had seen the video clip of Boyle singing. She became the hot subject of discussion on the social networking site Twitter, where one message claimed, 'And in the news today, stockmarkets surged to pre-Sept highs as Susan Boyle returns optimism and inspiration to the world over' (Holmwood, 2009). Journalists from around the world descended on Boyle's hometown, *The Washington Post* published a front-page story on her, and the American chat-show hosts Larry King and Oprah Winfrey interviewed Boyle for their shows. The triumph of an individual defying expectations garnered by her initial appearance is a globally appealing story that, by the power of international communications systems, reached millions worldwide.

- **Alterity, difference and 'Diversity'**

The profile of the acts publicly voted into the final also speaks volumes about the diverse, multicultural character of Britain and gives credence to Paul Gilroy's assertion that there is a need to discover value in Britain's 'ability to live with alterity without becoming anxious, fearful, or violent' (p. xi). Yet, before this gets too rosy a glow, it is clear that this kind of cultural conviviality does not mark the end of racism or the triumph of tolerance. Indeed, the election of two far-right British National Party candidates to the European Parliament in June 2009 provides a salutary reminder of this fact. Nonetheless, a middle-aged Scottish

woman, an all black urban dance troupe; a seventeen-year-old rugby playing soul singer; a twelve-year-old Welsh boy, a Greek-Cypriot father and son comedy dance act called Stavros Flatley, all competed in the final. As Piers Morgan, one of the three judges, claimed, 'collectively they represented an almost perfect snapshot of what real Britain is like – creative, imaginative, dynamic, funny, eccentric and patriotic' (talent.itv.com). What Morgan fails to identify is the striking picture of ethnic and cultural diversity these contestants projected. This performance of plurality, of cultural blurring and mixing is testament to the reality of the contemporary British nation. And, when the judges are confident to tout a young boy, Shaheen Jafargholi, as the Welsh successor to Tom Jones, the iconic Welsh singing sensation with the quintessentially Welsh name – it is clear that something in the state of the nation is changing. The final winners of the 2009 contest, 'Diversity', an 11-strong, multi-racial, all-male street dance group aged twelve to twenty-five epitomised Gilroy's optimistic acknowledgement of 'radical openness', a far-cry from his seminal *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), which brutally dissected the failure of Britain to embrace the presence of racial difference.

Anthony Gormley - *One and Other* (2009)

I want to argue that Gormley's one hundred-day public art project *One and Other* begun on 6 July 2009, had a great deal in common with BGT. Echoing Morgan's assertion that BGT provided a 'perfect picture' of Britain, Gormley claimed that the piece had the potential to create a 'composite picture' of Britain (Higgins, 2009, p. 1). Gormley's work explores the body and its relationship to public space, memory, history, the collective body and the environment, but whereas Gormley normally uses sculptures of bodies cast in hard materials such as bronze, iron and stainless steel, *One and Other* used the live human form. This is crucially important – prior to *One and Other*, Gormley's bodies had a sense of commonality – he used his own body as the model for his casts, but has recently begun to take casts of different communities for site-specific pieces, but in *One*

and Other the bodies represented were diverse, flawed and live. Commissioned by the Mayor of London and produced by Artichoke, the creative organisation behind large-scale public events such as *Telectroscope*, La Machine's fifty-foot spider, *La Princesse* (Liverpool City, 2008) and Royal de Luxe's visit to London with *The Sultan's Elephant* (Nantes, 2005), this was another kind of spectacular intervention in the cityscape. The piece involved members of the public applying to spend an hour on the empty fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. Since 1998, the fourth plinth, originally designed by Sir Charles Barry and built in 1841 to display an equestrian statue that never materialised, has been used to house temporary artworks.

Gormley decided to give this public space in the heart of London over to the nation in the form of 2400 participants, representative of every region of the UK, chosen randomly from tens of thousands of people who applied to be part of the art work. Anybody over sixteen could apply to go on the plinth and, if selected, the participant could decide exactly how they used the time and space. Designed to offer a democratisation of art and public space, Gormley wanted to replace the political, military and royal figures who traditionally occupy the plinths in Trafalgar Square, with ordinary citizens and to celebrate the creativity of the everyday citizen. He explained his rationale in the following terms,

In the context of Trafalgar Square with its military, valedictory and male historical statues, this elevation of everyday life to the position formerly occupied by monumental art allows us to reflect on the diversity, vulnerability and particularity of the individual in contemporary society. (www.antonygormley.com)

There are some interesting things about scale here. Responding to this in a literal sense, Alex Needham found 'something very poignant about the sight of a single human on a space designed for a massive statue' (p. 6). The extraordinary gets

reduced to everyday human scale and the human is invited to 'scale-up' their 'act' to meet the occasion or not.

Rather than trying to present a homogeneous picture of the nation, Gormley invited a rampant polyvocality. This project provided a 'elevated frame', on which people claimed a space and a vehicle to express themselves, their views and concerns. It provided an inclusive, non-judgemental space on which 2400 people staked their claim on what they wanted the nation to see, hear and encounter. Technology also made the project available to a wide audience through live twenty-four hour web-streaming and a weekly round-up on the SkyArts channel. As living artworks, participants used their hour to dance, to read, to play instruments and to hula-hoop. They deployed bubbles, balloons, placards, loud hailers and costumes. Some approached their hour in silence, whilst others used the hour to promote themselves, a product and various causes or to protest against issues such as the war in Afghanistan; the BNP; climate change; female genital mutilation and homelessness. The project moved between modes and concerns that embodied the personal and political; introvert and extrovert; local and the global, the national and international; the low tech and high tech and the playful and serious. However, in the sum of the 2400 parts, Gormley created a unique composite, a snapshot of the nation, but underlined by the fact that given another 2400 participants the picture would have been completely different.

Through his *One and Other*, Gormley did not try to impose his version of what should occupy a national monument in the heart of England's capital beyond a concern to see a broad cross-section of 'ordinary' citizens represented. He did not, beyond demanding equal gender and regional representation, dictate who should have a national platform. He did not try to assert a national narrative or agenda. Gormley's convivially opened a platform for national citizens, diverse in age, race, culture, gender, sexuality and regional affiliation, to express themselves as individuals, but also, as the title of the piece suggests, in relation to each other. They cohabited the fourth plinth and the eclectic picture that

emerged highlights the impossibility of unifying the national image. Also, the various audiences for this piece including friends and relatives of participants, passers-by, tourists or those tuned into Sky Arts or the internet, relied on the nexus of inter-personal and geographical interconnectivity that exists in the contemporary world. And the project extended its embrace of conviviality beyond the national shores as the following blog testifies:

At 07:51, Wednesday, 14 October 2009 **Scott** wrote:

Thank you to all the plinthers who brought this project to life. And all those who worked tirelessly behind the scenes. Absolutely the highlight of the last few months watching from here in America. And the project finally inspired me to visit London! Loved seeing the plinth and the way it brought London together. Will never forget dancing with strangers in Trafalgar in the middle of the night...all thanks to One & Other.