ALAN PATTEN

Liberal Neutrality and Language Policy

If there is one point that the critics of liberalism almost all agree upon, it is that liberal neutrality is an unappealing and perhaps incoherent doctrine. Many contemporary liberals do not endorse the idea of neutrality, and even liberals most identified with the idea, John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, have backed off it in certain respects.[1] In thinking about the challenges posed by cultural and linguistic diversity, the idea of neutrality seems especially unpromising. Nobody has made this point as clearly or forcefully as Will Kymlicka. "The idea that government could be neutral with respect to ethnic and national groups," he argues, "is patently false."[2] "In the areas of official languages, political boundaries,

1. See Rawls's reluctant remarks about neutrality in *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 191; Dworkin still affirms a form of neutrality in *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 239, 281–82, but it is no longer as prominent in his understanding of liberalism as it was in the 1978 essay "Liberalism" reprinted in his *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 237–92.

2. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 110–11. See also his *Politics in the Vernacular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ch. 1.

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and the division of powers, there is no way to avoid supporting this or
that societal culture."[3]

The aim of this article is to challenge the widely accepted assumption
that liberal neutrality is irrelevant to thinking about cultural and linguistic
diversity. Focusing on the problem of language policy, I argue that liberal
neutrality represents a coherent position that should play a modest, but
not negligible, role in the construction of a normative theory of language
politics. A rehabilitation of the idea of liberal neutrality as part of what I
will call a *hybrid theory of language policy* points to a distinctive and ap-
pealing way of making the case for minority language rights and also to an
understanding of the reasonable limits that can be placed on such rights.

The argument for these claims unfolds in five sections. I begin by review-
ing in Section I two important social facts that provide the necessary back-
drop to any normative discussion of language policy. I then connect these
facts with the phenomenon of linguistic conflict and briefly describe two
standard positions on how such conflicts should be resolved in Section II. I
introduce in Section III the idea of liberal neutrality as an alternative possi-
ble position about how language conflicts should be resolved, and defend
the idea from the charge of incoherence. Section IV of the article offers a
brief account of the prima facie appeal of liberal neutrality and proposes an
analytic framework for deciding when the liberal neutrality model should be
compromised or abandoned. Finally, I confront the liberal neutrality posi-
tion with one of the two standard positions—the "common public lan-
guage model"—introduced earlier (leaving consideration of the second for
another occasion) in Section V. I argue that the common public language
model should partially, but not fully, displace liberal neutrality in a norma-
tive theory of language politics. The best way of thinking normatively about
language policy will involve a hybrid of these different approaches.

I

According to recent estimates there are over six thousand languages
spoken around the world today. The vast majority are spoken by rela-
tively small numbers of people, with nearly 85 percent claiming fewer

3. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, p. 113. Other authors who make the claim that
neutrality is impossible in the area of language policy include Brian Barry, *Culture and
Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 107; and Joseph Carens,
Culture, Citizenship, and Community (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 77–78.

than a hundred thousand speakers, about half having fewer than six thousand speakers, and about 30 percent with fewer than a thousand speakers. Even focusing on languages spoken by fairly large numbers of people, however, global linguistic diversity is very impressive. As many as three hundred of the world's languages are spoken by over one million people, and about eighty have more than ten million speakers.[4]

Since there are only about two hundred states in the world, it is obvious that linguistic diversity is found within states as well as at the global level. If every language group were perfectly concentrated within the boundaries of a state, and there were no international migration, each state in the world would have an average of thirty languages and an average of about five that are spoken by more than one hundred thousand people. We know, however, that the world's languages are not evenly spread amongst the different states. About 70 percent are concentrated in just twenty countries, most of them tropical countries in the developing world.

But we also know that language communities frequently straddle political boundaries and that many countries in the world regularly receive large numbers of immigrants, refugees, and international visitors. As a result, it is difficult to think of any country in the world that is not characterized by at least some degree of language diversity. There may be a few countries that can claim not to have any settled linguistic minorities—Japan, Korea, and Iceland are sometimes offered as examples—but even they are host to second language teachers, foreign military personnel, refugees, and so on, that introduce an element of linguistic diversity into their societies. And most of the world's countries are far from these extremes of unilingualism. In a great number of countries, language minorities make up at least 10 percent of the population, and in many countries they make up more than 25 percent. Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, Spain, India, South Africa, and Nigeria are just a few examples of countries in which at least a quarter of the population does not speak the majority language as its first language.

The United States is no exception to this worldwide pattern of linguistic diversity. According to figures from the 2000 census, about forty-five million U.S. residents over the age of five speak a language other than

4. The figures cited in this paragraph and the next are culled from David Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); David Crystal, *Language Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and the Ethnologue website (http://www.ethnologue.com/web.asp).

English in their homes, roughly 17.6 percent of all people surveyed. This figure represents a spectacular 41 percent increase from the 1990 level (thirty-one million, or 13.8 percent of those surveyed), which was itself up 38 percent from the figure recorded in 1980 (twenty-three million, or 11 percent of those surveyed). The principal minority language of the United States is, of course, Spanish, which, in 2000, was spoken in the home by almost twenty-seven million people, or about 11 percent of all people surveyed. Even in the absence of Spanish-speakers, the United States would be a fairly linguistically diverse place. From 1990 figures, we know that twenty-five languages other than English or Spanish are used in the home by at least one hundred thousand U.S. residents and four are used by at least one million people.[5]

If we took a snapshot of the world, then, or indeed of most individual countries in the world, and examined the picture for patterns of language use, our overwhelming impression would be of the pervasiveness and importance of language diversity. This is the first social fact to which I wish to draw attention: the fact of language diversity.

A dynamic picture of the world's languages, on the other hand—one that examined patterns of language use over time—would leave a quite different impression. A characteristic feature of people everywhere in the world is that they have, and often exercise, a capacity to learn new languages and to adopt new habits of language use. As a result of people exercising this capacity, some language communities go into decline or even disappear altogether. Others grow in size and importance as an ever greater number of people see utility in adding a particular language to their own, or to their children's, linguistic repertoires. Linguists refer to this process of transition, in which the speakers of some language gradually integrate into another language community, as the phenomenon of "language shift."[6]

According to one estimate, about half of the world's languages have disappeared in the last five hundred years.[7] With so many of the world's

5. The 2000 figures for the United States are from the U.S. Census 2000 Supplementary Survey, accessed at http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/census03. htm. The 1990 figures are from the 1990 U.S. Census and are cited in Carol L. Schmid, *The Politics of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 46.

6. Joshua A. Fishman, *The Sociology of Language* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1972), sec. vii; John Edwards, *Language, Society, and Identity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), ch. 3.

7. Nettle and Romaine, p. 2.

languages spoken by relatively few people—including, as we saw, some two thousand or so that are spoken by fewer than one thousand people each—everything points to an acceleration of this trend. As a recent article in the *Economist* magazine put it, with only a little hyperbole, "of the world's six or seven thousand languages, a couple go out of business each week."[8] It is true that new languages and dialects also appear from time to time—consider the various Englishes that are now spoken around the world—but it is unlikely that these new forms of speech will be sufficient to offset the global loss of languages.

Even where entire languages are in no danger of disappearing, particular language communities often are. This tendency is sometimes referred to as "linguistic genocide," but only in the most horrifying cases does it involve the members of these communities literally being killed.[9] Typically, instead, language communities disappear because their members have a tendency either to adopt new habits of language use or to move to parts of the country or world where their language community is relatively secure. Social scientists have for some time now described a process of territorialization in patterns of language use.[10] Languages have a tendency to concentrate themselves into well-defined territories and to disappear from regular use outside of these places. Following Ernest Gellner, Philippe Van Parijs has compared this tendency to a move from Kokoschka to Modigliani. Where a linguistic map of many parts of the world would once have resembled a Kokoschka portrait in which diverse threads of colors are woven together in every corner of the canvas, increasingly such a map looks like a painting by Modigliani: a patchwork of neatly separated and clearly demarcated areas of uniform color with little shading or overlap.[11]

The phenomenon of language shift is perhaps most apparent among immigrants. Taking a closer look at some of the U.S. statistics cited earlier,

8. "A world empire by other means," *The Economist*, December 22, 2001, 65–67.

9. For the broad use of the term "linguistic genocide" see, e.g., Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, *Linguistic Genocide in Education—Or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* (Mahwah, N.J.: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), especially pp. xxxi–xxxiii.

10. Jean Laponce, *Langue et Territoire* (Quebec: Les Presses de L'Université Laval, 1984), ch. 5; Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular*, pp. 212–13.

11. Philippe Van Parijs, "Must Europe be Belgian? On Democratic Citizenship in Multilingual Polities," in *The Demands of Citizenship*, ed. Catriona McKinnon and Iain Hampsher-Monk (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 235–53, at p. 239. For the original comparison, see Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), at pp. 139–40.

one quickly notices that a strong majority (about 76 percent) of people who speak a language other than English in their homes also report that they can speak English either "well" or "very well." Only about 4 percent of all U.S. residents say that they speak English "not well" or "not at all." These figures are in line with a typical pattern of language shift that sociolinguists have identified among immigrant families in the United States. The first generation arrives with limited facility in English and never achieves full fluency. The second generation speaks their parents' language in the home but fluent English outside the home. And the third often does not learn the language of their grandparents at all and lives a life entirely in the English language. If it were not for the fact that immigration was continuously replenishing the ranks of non-English speakers, the United States would over time become a much less linguistically diverse place.

One way in which the fact of language shift expresses itself, then, is in the gradual decline or disappearance of whole languages or of particular language communities. A different, and in some ways more striking, aspect of language shift is the tendency for certain languages to become marginalized. Although communities of people continue to use their own languages in certain areas of life, they increasingly turn to some second language in other contexts of communication. A typical pattern, which linguists refer to as *diglossia*, sees the speakers of a marginalized language using their own language in contexts of intimacy, with family, friends, and close associates, but switching to some other, higher status language in more prestigious public domains.[12]

The most obvious sign of language marginalization is the growing use of English in certain areas of life by nonnative English-speakers. English has rapidly established itself as the international language of business, telecommunication, diplomacy, education, pop culture, science, scholarship, and travel. Since so many day-to-day activities take place in a context of global interconnectedness—from listening to the radio, to reading a college textbook, to holding a meeting in a corporate office—English impinges on the lives of people in non-English-speaking countries on a regular basis, even if a great deal of everyday life still takes place in local languages. Teaching English as a second language is now

12. Charles A. Ferguson, "Diglossia," *Word* XV (1959), pp. 325–40; Fishman, *Sociology of Language*, pp. 91–92.

a vast global industry worth billions of dollars a year and employing tens of thousands of people.[13] According to the *Economist*, as many as one billion people are learning English and perhaps half the world's population will have some proficiency in it by 2050.[14]

II

Disputes over language policy are a part of the political life of communities around the world. In the United States, in recent years, "English-only" activists have campaigned to eliminate bilingual education programs and to make English the official language of particular states and of the country as a whole. In the European Union and in many developing countries, efforts to construct common institutions and a shared identity have been severely complicated by the demands for recognition made by numerous language groups. And in Quebec, Catalonia, Belgium, the Baltic States, and elsewhere, local linguistic majorities have sought to normalize the use of their languages in the public sphere, often to the protests of other language groups.

The two facts that I have described—the facts of language diversity and language shift—provide the backdrop against which many of these conflicts are played out. Harking back to the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, some people regard language diversity as, above all, a problem, one to which the phenomenon of language shift offers a possible solution. Those who hold this view emphasize the ways in which linguistic diversity can divide and ghettoize people. It can frustrate efforts to establish a shared dialogue among citizens and between citizens of different countries. It can prevent the formation of the common identity necessary for the success of a liberal democratic state or of supranational political enterprises such as the European Union. And it can mean that certain people are excluded from the social, economic, and political benefits of a common citizenship.

For those who look at the fact of language diversity in this light, language shift is a good thing when it means convergence on a common public language. It is fortunate that people are fairly adaptable in their

13. According to Robert Phillipson, the English teaching business was worth six billion pounds per year to the British economy in the 1980s ("Global English and Local Language Policies," *Language Problems & Language Planning* 25 [2001]: 1–24, at 11).

14. *The Economist*, 65.

linguistic practices, that they are able and often willing to learn a common public language of citizenship or international communication. Public institutions should not encourage people to remain isolated in linguistic ghettoes. If anything, they should actively encourage convergence on a common public language by making sure that such a language is used in as many public contexts as possible.

Other people look at the facts of language diversity and language shift in a very different light. It is true that everyone benefits in certain ways when there is a common public language. But it is also the case that people have a stake in the recognition and success of their *own* language. In part, this is for the straightforward reason that at any given moment in time some people will lack fluency in any language other than their own. If public institutions do not recognize and accommodate their own language, these people may be severely disadvantaged. They will have trouble communicating with public officials and accessing the government services that they need.

Even if the speakers of some language can speak a common public language, or could easily learn it, they may still be deeply attached to their own language community. They may identify with their language community and believe that their culture is uniquely expressed through their own language. People often derive considerable pleasure from using their own language and encountering others who are willing to use it. They are proud of their language and the cultural achievements that have been expressed through it. As a result, many people value their language community and want to see it survive and flourish into the indefinite future. And they think that their language and culture should be shown respect through public recognition and accommodation.

From this point of view, language shift is an alarming and threatening phenomenon. For many it means being assimilated into a speech community in which their own culture and identity are lost. For those who view the facts of language diversity and language shift in this way, the principal task of public institutions should not be to accelerate convergence towards a single national or global language. Rather, public institutions should adopt rules and practices of language usage that give threatened language communities the tools and resources they need to resist the tendency towards uniformity.

Many of the world's language conflicts involve a clash between these two quite different ways of responding to the facts of language diversity

and language shift. In the United States, for instance, critics of bilingual education regard it as an obstacle to the full and rapid mastery of English by non-English-speaking children.[15] These children, they argue, are in danger of being excluded from the full benefits of American citizenship, and American citizenship itself risks being fragmented into a patchwork of ethnolinguistic communities. Defenders of bilingual education respond not only by disputing the empirical claims made about the efficacy of bilingual education but also by asserting a right on the part of linguistic minorities to maintain their own languages and cultures through programs such as bilingual education.[16]

A similar dialectic is at work in the language policy dilemmas facing the European Union. Since it is extremely impractical to recognize all of the languages spoken within the fifteen countries of the European Union, the designation of a single European language (or even of several) could advance the cause of European citizenship considerably. But most member states would be very reluctant to agree to any such measure unless their language was one designated for European-level communications. They perceive the advantages of linguistic rationalization, but they are also aware of the stake that their citizens have in the success and recognition of their own languages.[17]

Other language conflicts have a more complicated structure but some of the same issues are in play. In Quebec, for instance, proponents of French-language unilingualism stress both the vulnerability of the French language in Quebec to language shift and the goods associated with establishing a common public language for all citizens of Quebec. Similar kinds of claims are characteristic of language debates in Catalonia, the Baltic states, Belgium, and elsewhere.

15. For two statements of this position by prominent political philosophers, see Thomas Pogge, "Accommodation Rights for Hispanics in the U.S.," in *Hispanics/Latinos in the United States: Ethnicity, Race, and Rights*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Pablo de Greiff (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Barry, *Culture and Equality*, pp. 103–08, 215–20, 226–28, 324.

16. See, e.g., the discussions in James Crawford, *At War with Diversity: U.S. Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety* (Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 2000); Ronald Schmidt, Jr., *Language Policy and Identity Politics in the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); and Stephen May, *Language and Minority Rights* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), ch. 6.

17. See, e.g., David Laitin, "The Cultural Identities of a European State," in *Politics and Society* 25 (1997): 227–302; and Peter A. Kraus, "Political Unity and Linguistic Diversity in Europe," in *Archives Européennes de Sociologie / European Journal of Sociology* XLI (2000): 138–63.

Stepping back from these conflicts, then, we might distinguish two different models with which people often approach language conflicts. The first model, which I will call the *common public language model*, views language policy as primarily a tool for nation building. Language policy decisions, on this approach, are made with the goal of reaching a specific outcome in mind: an outcome in which there is a common language shared by all citizens. Decisions about language use in public schools, in the delivery of public services, in the courts, the ballot booth, and so on, are all calculated to achieve this objective.

The second model, the *language maintenance model*, is oriented around a quite different objective. For this approach, the main priority of language policy should be to preserve particular language communities that are vulnerable to decline or marginalization because of language shift. The rules and practices regarding language use in public institutions, and the minority language rights that people can claim, are all calculated to achieve this outcome. Charles Taylor has called this general approach to cultural diversity the "politics of difference." Public institutions show due recognition for particular cultural groups by providing them with the tools they need to survive as distinct cultural entities.[18]

III

Both the common public language and language maintenance models understand language policy making to be primarily a question of what might be called *language planning*. The policy maker, or institutional designer, identifies some desirable outcome—language convergence or language maintenance—and then determines how public institutions can best help to realize these outcomes.[19] In this section, I will introduce

18. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and the "Politics of Recognition,"* ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994 [1992]), pp. 25–73, at 37–44, 51–61.

19. Sociolinguists often use the term *language planning* in a somewhat broader sense to denote "organized efforts to find solutions to societal language problems." See Fishman, *Sociology of Language*, p. 186. Even under the rubric of this broad conception of "language planning" there is a tendency to think of these organized efforts in an outcome-oriented way. For instance, Fishman writes that "[a]s a result of language planning, policies are adopted and implemented in order to foster (or hamper) and to modernize (or, more rarely, to archaicize) one or more languages of a community's repertoire." See Fishman, "Sociolinguistics," in *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 152–63, at p. 157.

a third approach to language policy: the *liberal neutrality model.* As will become clear, the distinctive feature of this approach is its rejection of language planning. The task of language policy is not to realize some specific linguistic outcome but to establish fair background conditions under which speakers of different languages can strive for the survival and success of their respective language communities.

To understand the nature and significance of the liberal neutrality model, it is helpful to step away from language politics for a moment and consider the idea of neutrality in the context of religion. In doing this, however, we should keep in mind the skepticism about neutrality mentioned at the beginning of the article. For Kymlicka, the incoherent attempt to apply the idea of neutrality in the context of linguistic and cultural policy stems from a mistaken analogy between religion and language / culture:

> The analogy does not work. It is quite possible for a state not to have an established church. But the state cannot help but give at least partial establishment to a culture when it decides which language is to be used in public schooling, or in the provision of state services.[20]

Since I agree with Kymlicka that public institutions cannot simply disengage from linguistic and cultural choices, I need to explain what I mean by "liberal neutrality" and why I think it is instructive to compare religion and language. My argument shall be that it is important not to elide the ideas of neutrality and disestablishment. Once these ideas are pulled apart, liberal neutrality turns out to be a coherent option.

Even if there are certain parallels between the ways in which a polity might respond to language diversity and the ways in which it might deal with religious diversity, we must be careful about what we conclude from this comparison. Supposing for the sake of argument that liberal neutrality is the preferred response to religious diversity, it would not follow that neutrality is the most suitable way of dealing with linguistic diversity. There may be reasons for rejecting neutrality in the language case that are less salient for the case of religion. On this view, neutrality may be a coherent position to adopt with respect to language politics but not a very appealing one. I shall consider this possibility in the next two sections and accept it in part. Still, I shall argue that the idea of liberal neutrality can

20. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship,* p. 111.

contribute in a modest, but not negligible, way to a hybrid normative theory of language policy. Before getting to this discussion, however, let us set out the liberal neutrality alternative to the two planning models.

The facts of language diversity and language shift have their analogs in the realm of religion. A more or less settled fact about the world, and about most individual countries in the world, is the presence of a number of different religions and religious viewpoints. This diversity is hardly static, however. With great regularity over the course of history new religious movements have appeared out of nowhere, risen to levels of considerable social importance, only to stagnate or even to disappear altogether. In the past few decades, for instance, religious denominations such as the Mormons and the Southern Baptists have enjoyed great success in attracting new adherents, while many of the more traditional denominations have struggled to avoid decline.

A historically important set of questions for political theory concerns how public institutions should respond to these facts of religious diversity and religious shift. Should the state enforce laws against heresy, apostasy, blasphemy, and proselytization? Should it subsidize the activities of organized religions or give them tax breaks? Should it "establish" certain religions by giving their rituals or officials an official public role, or by making particular religious affiliations a condition of various rights or privileges?

One way in which these questions might be answered is by reference to an objective of establishing a common public religion. Public institutions could adopt rules regarding religious freedom and religious establishment that seek to bring about this outcome. Alternatively, the aim of public policy with respect to religion might conceivably be to maintain or protect religions that are vulnerable to decline or disappearance. Committed members of vulnerable religious groups presumably wish to see their religions survive into the indefinite future. In the spirit of Taylor's "politics of difference" it might be thought that due recognition for these individuals requires adopting policies of religious maintenance.

I take it that many would find both of these approaches objectionable, and that even those who are sympathetic to one or other of them would acknowledge that there is an important third alterative. According to this third view, it is not the business of the state to promote some specific outcome with respect to the success or failure of the different religions adhered to by its citizens. Instead, the appropriate response to religious diversity is for the state to establish a framework of rules that is fair to all

individuals, and then to permit individuals to develop their own religious convictions, and choose their own religious affiliations, within the space left to them by these rules. Depending on what convictions individuals develop, and which affiliations they choose, some religions will flourish and others may decline or even disappear.

This third way of responding to diversity and shift is perhaps best articulated by Rawls in a section of *Political Liberalism*.[21] Considering the objection that certain ways of life and conceptions of the good may not flourish, or even survive, in the political order that he defends, Rawls responds by questioning whether public institutions should have as their aim the promotion or maintenance of any particular form of life. Instead, he argues, public institutions should establish "a just basic structure within which permissible forms of life have a fair opportunity to maintain themselves and to gain adherents over time" (PL, p. 198). On this view, the key requirement is not to achieve a particular outcome such as convergence or maintenance. Rather, the responsibility of public institutions is to ensure that different ways of life, and conceptions of the good, struggle for survival and success under "background conditions" that are fair (PL, p. 199). This requirement that public institutions be fair to conceptions of the good is one part of a larger view about what it is to be fair to the individuals who adopt and pursue those conceptions.

Rawls uses the term *neutrality* as a label for this "fair background conditions" response to the facts of diversity and shift. For Rawls, the state is neutral when it does not intentionally set out to promote or maintain any particular conception of the good or way of life but instead directs its attention at establishing fair background conditions under which different forms of life can strive for success.[22] This understanding of neutrality, it should be emphasized, is compatible with some ways of life declining or even disappearing, since they may not be able to attract many adherents under fair background conditions.

Rawls believes that fair background conditions would be established by the familiar liberal principles and institutions that he defends elsewhere

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21. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 190–200. (Hereafter PL.)

22. For the first part of this proposition, see PL, pp. 192–94; for the second part, see pp. 195–99. There are indications in the text (e.g., at the top of p. 196 where the two parts are linked) that the two aspects of neutrality are not meant to be independent requirements. A departure from fair background conditions, on this interpretation, would be indicative of an intention to encourage or discourage a particular conception of the good or way of life.

in his political theory. Even if we bracket this claim, however, it should be apparent that this whole way of dealing with religious diversity reflects a liberal temperament. Historically, many liberals have believed that the best way to manage religious conflict is through what Brian Barry calls a "strategy of privatization."[23] This strategy rests on the assumption that, by taking the promotion and maintenance of particular religious outcomes out of the hands of the state, religious conflict could be brought under control. Instead of directly and intentionally aiming for some specific outcome, the state would establish conditions of religious liberty and equal treatment that are fair to all parties, and then let the cards fall where they may. Today, most defenders of liberalism seek to supplement the modus vivendi justification of liberal institutions with arguments based on principle. But the idea that the state should not become involved in directing particular religious outcomes remains an important and recognizable part of the liberal position.

The idea of religious disestablishment represents one possible interpretation of how liberal neutrality could be realized. According to this view, disestablishment helps to create fair background conditions because it means that no religion or religious viewpoint is given any help by public institutions. As Barry and others have pointed out, however, disestablishment is not the only conceivable way of meeting the fairness requirement. Another possibility would be for public institutions to adopt a stance of *even-handedness.*[24] This approach seeks to establish fair background conditions by offering some roughly equivalent form of assistance or recognition to each religion or religious viewpoint found within the community.[25]

23. Barry, *Culture and Equality*, ch. 2.

24. Ibid., p. 29. To my knowledge, Carens, in *Culture, Citizenship, and Community*, ch. 1, is the first person to use the term "even-handedness" in this context.

25. To avoid confusion, it is worth distinguishing two different ways in which public institutions might be considered "fair" to different conceptions of the good. (1) institutions are fair to a conception of the good when they are fair, all things considered, to the bearers of that conception of the good and to all other participants in those institutions; (2) institutions are fair to a conception of the good when they accord that conception the same treatment that is given to other comparable conceptions. Fairness in sense (2) does not entail fairness in sense (1). To see this, consider the case of religiously motivated parents who believe that the public schools should not teach their children about their basic rights. Accommodating the beliefs of the parents could conceivably be regarded as a way of establishing parity of treatment between their way of life and other (e.g., secular) ways of life. But even if accommodation does promote fairness in sense (2) it plainly does not satisfy (1) since it would not treat the affected children fairly. I use "fairness to conceptions of the good," and hence "neutrality," in sense (2). Clearly, then, "fairness to conceptions of the good" and "neutrality"

The distinction between disestablishment and even-handedness can be seen in the area of public education.[26] Under disestablishment, religion is kept out of the schools entirely. An approach based on the idea of even-handedness, by contrast, would allow religion into the schools, and could even allow sectarian schooling, but would insist that all religions be afforded some roughly comparable time or space in the curriculum or school system. Although the two approaches have quite different institutional implications, both are forms of liberal neutrality. Neither aims for a specific religious outcome, such as convergence on a common national religion or the maintenance of vulnerable religions. Instead, the idea shared by each approach is to specify certain conditions that treat the members of different religions equally and that are in this respect fair.[27] In the context of these fair conditions a range of different religious outcomes are possible, depending on the convictions and choices of ordinary people.

Returning now to the problem of language, it should be possible to articulate the liberal neutrality model of language policy. The key idea is that public institutions should not respond to the facts of language diversity and language shift by seeking to promote or maintain some specific outcome such as a common public language or the survival of vulnerable language communities. Instead, the aim of language policy, on this model, is to establish fair background conditions under which speakers of different languages can each strive for the success and survival of the language communities with which they identify. Certain linguistic outcomes may predictably arise out of the decisions people make under

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are not always good things on my account (as will become clear, in the case of language policy, in the next two sections). Public institutions should not be "fair" or "neutral" towards *all* conceptions of the good and ways of life. Rawls tries to steer around some of these complexities by restricting his claims about fairness to "permissible" conceptions of the good (PL, pp. 190–99). This solution to the terminological problem does not seem quite right for the case of language policy, since sometimes (as we shall see) the balance of reasons tells against neutrality in situations where there is nothing evidently "impermissible" about the wish to see a particular language or language community thrive.

26. Both Carens, p. 13, and Barry, p. 29, illustrate the distinction this way.

27. Here I am assuming for the sake of simplicity that fairness is a matter of the relative treatment of different religious perspectives. A fuller treatment of this issue, but one that is not required for the comparison with language, would allow that questions of fairness also arise with respect to the relative treatment of religious and nonreligious points of view. At a first glance, it seems that the distinction between "disestablishment" and "even-handedness" ways of publicly dealing with difference would still play a major role in thinking about fairness in a context where there are both religious and nonreligious perspectives.

these conditions, but public institutions do not directly and intention-
ally aim to realize these outcomes.

To be sure, "the state cannot help but give at least partial establishment"
to one or more languages.[28] Public institutions can refrain from interfering
with the freedom of individuals to make certain choices about language
use, but they cannot avoid making decisions about which languages to
offer public services in, or about the languages in which public business will
be conducted. But disestablishment is just one possible way of establishing
fair background conditions. An alternative, as we have seen, is some form of
even-handedness. Public institutions might offer some roughly equiva-
lent form of assistance or recognition to each of the various languages
spoken by their citizens. In this way, a kind of equality of treatment can be
achieved without the evident absurdity of linguistic disestablishment.

I take it that there could be different accounts of the precise institu-
tional implications of the liberal neutrality model of language policy,
corresponding to different views about the fairness of particular institu-
tional conditions. To illustrate the content and distinctiveness of the lib-
eral neutrality approach, I will briefly describe a scheme, *prorated official
multilingualism*, that I believe satisfies the requirement of even-
handedness in a central range of cases.[29] Although there could be other
schemes that satisfy this requirement, I will content myself with laying
out this one and pointing to the sense in which it represents a distinct
alternative to the two language-planning models.

Under official multilingualism, each language spoken in the commu-
nity enjoys the same recognition.[30] For instance, if a particular public
service (e.g., advice about tax matters from a government office) is

28. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, p. 111.

29. A complexity that I am glossing over here is the possibility that *fair* treatment may not
always involve *equal* treatment or even-handedness. If the participants in a particular way of
life are burdened by the lasting effects of an historical injustice, for example, then there may
be nothing particularly "fair" about a policy of according the same treatment to that way of
life as to more historically advantaged ones. A full account of the liberal neutrality approach
to language policy would need to consider various amendments to the proposition that fair
background conditions are established through equality of treatment in the light of various
possible kinds of historical and economic injustice. I do not think that these amendments
would affect the basic contrast I wish to draw between neutrality and the two planning models.

30. The idea of an "official languages" rights regime is discussed further in Alan Patten
and Will Kymlicka, "Introduction—Language Rights and Political Theory: Contexts, Issues,
and Approaches," in *Language Rights and Political Theory*, ed. Will Kymlicka and Alan
Patten (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 1–51, at 27–29.

offered in one language spoken in the community, then that same service is also offered in other languages spoken in the community. Or, if a particular piece of public business (e.g., filing a suit in a court of law) can be conducted in one language, then it can also be conducted in the others. Moreover, on the official multilingualism scheme as I shall understand it, there are no significant restrictions on who can access a public institution in a particular language. A minority X speaker would, for instance, have the right to send his child to a school instructing in the X language even if he and/or his child were perfectly fluent in the majority language Y. The aim of the official multilingualism approach is not to provide special transitional accommodations for those who lack fluency in the majority language but to establish a form of equality—equality of treatment—between speakers of different languages. It is by establishing equality in this sense that official multilingualism seeks to satisfy the requirement of even-handedness associated with liberal neutrality.

In a scheme of *prorated* official multilingualism, some account is taken of the number of people demanding services in each recognized language. Liberal neutrality directs public institutions to be fair to individuals who speak different languages, not to be fair to the languages themselves. Fairness to individuals would arguably require offering the same per capita level of assistance to the different languages those individuals speak.[31] Where there are significant economies of scale in the provision of public assistance, equivalent assistance cannot be provided in less widely spoken languages without departing from this norm of fairness. Thus, a more restricted set of official language rights may be offered in less widely spoken languages, or speakers of such languages might be expected to travel further to find services in their own language, or the eligibility of such people to receive services in their own language may be constrained by a "where numbers warrant" proviso. Again the underlying principle is equality of treatment, but, with the prorating refinement, this form of equality is said to be realized when people receive services in their own language equivalent in value to their fair claim on public resources rather than when they receive equivalent services.

A scheme of prorated official multilingualism might conceivably be implemented by a planner guided by one or other of the planning

31. Barry, p. 29, suggests (for the case of religious schooling) that equal treatment requires that parents get the "proportional share" of the total school budget dedicated to the religious schooling they prefer.

models. The planner might judge that, in a particular social context, the (prorated) equal recognition of the different languages would have the effect of producing the outcome associated with the planning model being adopted. It should be obvious, however, that, in many social contexts, official multilingualism would not be the right policy for a planner interested in either convergence on a common public language or in language maintenance. Equality of recognition will often offer too much recognition of minority languages for a planner interested in promoting convergence on the majority language and/or not enough recognition of minority languages for those interested in preserving those languages. It is in these empirical contexts that liberal neutrality shows itself to be a distinctive alternative to the planning models. Liberal neutrality is the model that a policy maker is implicitly or explicitly appealing to when she affirms a commitment—on grounds of equality—to (prorated) official multilingualism, even in the face of evidence that such a policy will lead neither to convergence nor to maintenance of vulnerable minority languages.

One final aspect of the liberal neutrality model worth remarking upon is its connection with the idea of minority rights. The idea of neutrality is often associated with an attitude of indifference or "benign neglect" towards minority rights.[32] On the view of liberal neutrality I have been outlining, however, this is not at all the case. Indeed, the liberal neutrality model represents a way of defending minority language rights that has generally been ignored in the literature. Minority language rights will often turn out to be a necessary part of the institutional framework that establishes fair background conditions under which members of different language communities can each strive for the survival and success of their respective language communities. Unless certain minority language rights are acknowledged, for instance, in the areas of education, public services, and so on, members of the minority language community could reasonably complain that they do not have a fair opportunity to realize their language-related ambitions.

IV

How plausible an alternative is liberal neutrality to the common public language and language maintenance models? In considering this question, it

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32. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, pp. 108–15.

will help to return once again to the case of religion. As I cautioned earlier, we cannot assume that the plausibility of neutrality in one domain would transfer automatically into the other. But focusing on the religion case for a moment may help us to see both what is appealing about liberal neutrality and what is distinctive about the language case.

What then, if anything, would be objectionable about "religious planning": about the state pursuing a common public religion or seeking to maintain religions that are vulnerable to decline or disappearance? One obvious concern would be that the pursuit of these objectives might require the curtailment of certain core individual freedoms. Imagine that people have fairly sticky religious convictions and affiliations, so that it is not easy to induce them to adopt the religious commitments necessary to achieve the desired outcome. Under these circumstances, the only way to achieve the outcome may be to restrict certain individual freedoms. It might be necessary, for instance, to curtail freedom of religious association or to enforce by means of the law religious norms regarding blasphemy or heresy.

Of course, these restrictions may be insufficient to achieve the desired outcome, but that is not the point that I wish to stress here. Rather, the point is that even these restrictions are likely to strike most people as unacceptable. For liberals, at any rate, the state should seek to protect a framework of individual liberties, even if it is predictable that people will exercise their liberties in ways that subvert the realization of religious outcomes that some might regard as desirable. And to accept this is to accept at least in part the liberal neutrality model. It is to attach greater priority to establishing a set of background conditions that are respectful of individual liberty than to achieving various religious outcomes.

Opponents of neutrality might respond by conceding that respect for certain individual liberties ought to be given strict priority over the realization of desirable religious outcomes. Since coercion is just one of the tools in the hands of the state, they could argue, this concession still leaves plenty of room for religious planners to promote specific religious outcomes. The state can also seek to effect specific outcomes through various forms of preferential treatment that fall short of interfering with individual liberty. It might privilege the ideas of a particular religion in the curriculum of the public schools, offer tax breaks or public subsidies to that religion, or incorporate the symbols and rituals of the religion into public events and spaces.

In response to this moderate form of religious planning, an advocate of liberal neutrality would point to the various costs associated with preferential treatment. A policy of noncoercively promoting Christianity in the schools, for instance, imposes a variety of burdens on non-Christians.[33] Non-Christians presumably wish to see their own ways of life flourish, but a pro-Christian school curriculum may make it harder for those ways of life to attract adherents. Policies that involve subsidies impose financial costs on members and nonmembers alike, and arguably any state preference for a particular religion could reasonably be construed as a symbolic slight by nonmembers. For the proponent of liberal neutrality, it is unfair to impose these various costs on everyone so that a religious faith that is adhered to by some but not all citizens can survive or become predominant.

To defeat these considerations, religious planners would need to offer a reason why the outcome they are advocating should be realized, a reason that is sufficiently plausible and urgent to warrant imposing the costs associated with the policy being proposed. Two main categories of reasons that might be advanced are perfectionist reasons and reasons of social utility. Although neither kind of reason strikes me as a particularly promising way of defending religious planning, it is worth briefly describing each in anticipation of the discussion of the merits of language planning.

The perfectionist regards some particular religion as having the capacity to make a direct contribution to individual well-being (e.g., because well-being is partly a matter of salvation, and salvation is partly a question of participation or belief in the religion in question). The burdens associated with religious planning policies are thus justified by the claim that an opportunity to raise individual well-being would be lost or restrained if the state did not set out to protect or promote the religion in question. On the religious maintenance version of this view, a particular religion is deemed to be of sufficient (potential) value to individual lives as to justify state actions to preserve it, even if this involves imposing certain costs on nonmembers of the religion. On the common public religion version, the religion is regarded as possessing such universal value that everyone could be made better off were it to spread throughout the society.

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33. Arguably, it would impose costs on some Christians as well. A consideration of these further costs, which I will not attempt here, would strengthen the case for neutrality.

The argument from social utility also points to a good that can be real-
ized through the realization of specific religious outcomes. In this case,
however, the good is not located in the direct contribution to individual
well-being made by some particular religion. Instead, the claim is that
the realization of some specific religious outcome supports or facilitates
some nonreligious condition that is conducive to individual well-being.
In this vein, someone might defend a policy of promoting a common
public religion on the grounds that all members of society stand to ben-
efit when they share in common something as important as a particular
religion. It could be argued, for instance, that sharing a religion rein-
forces a common sense of identity, which in turn supports relationships
of trust and solidarity that promote individual well-being.

Someone who remains committed to liberal neutrality in the area of
religion, even in the face of these arguments, thinks that neither the per-
fectionist nor the social utility argument rises to the standards of plausi-
bility and urgency required to justify imposing the costs associated with
policies of religious planning. It is not hard to be skeptical about social
judgments concerning the relative contributions to well-being made by
particular religions. One could also easily question whether the goal of
reinforcing a common identity really requires a policy of religious plan-
ning. I shall not pursue these issues here, however. With an analytic
framework in place for considering both the appeal and the limitations of
liberal neutrality, we can now return to the problem of language policy.

In several respects, the cases of language and religion seem quite anal-
ogous. Just as the objectives of religious planners may only be achievable
through policies that involve restrictions on core individual freedoms,
the same is true of the objectives of language planners. The only way to
maintain some particularly vulnerable language may be to incarcerate
the speakers of that language within their language community by deny-
ing them access to other languages (e.g., through restrictions on freedom
of expression or mobility). And the only way to establish a common pub-
lic language may be through a return to the highly coercive nineteenth-
century variants of nation-building that most people today would find
appalling (e.g., the nineteenth-century English practice of beating Welsh-
speaking children who used their own language in the playground).[34]
Someone who thinks that these restrictions on basic individual liberty

34. Barry, pp. 106–07.

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should be avoided, even if it means that otherwise desirable linguistic outcomes cannot be achieved, is at least in part endorsing the liberal neutrality model.[35]

The parallel between the language and religion cases can be extended to noncoercive language planning policies as well. To maintain a language in a certain region, or to diffuse the language across the whole state, it may be necessary for public institutions to give preferential treatment to that language. This typically involves the exclusive use of the language in public schools, government offices, the courts, the health system, and so on. All else being equal, people are more likely to make decisions that contribute to the maintenance or widespread diffusion of the language (for example, the decision to educate their children in the language) to the extent that meaningful public activities mainly take place in that language.

Although these policies do not necessarily involve interfering with core individual liberties, they do impose various kinds of costs on people who do not speak the language privileged for public communications. Most obviously, the speakers of other languages may struggle to communicate in public situations and thus to access public services or participate meaningfully in the conduct of public business. In addition, just as speakers of the privileged language identify with their language community and wish to see it flourish, the same may be true of the speakers of other languages. Exclusive recognition of the privileged language makes it harder for these other language communities to attract and maintain speakers and thereby to flourish. Finally, a systematic public preference for one language over others will, in some contexts, be experienced by speakers of the other languages as symbolically denigrating. For the proponent of liberal neutrality, it is unfair to impose these various burdens on members of all language communities just so that one particular language community may survive or become predominant.

The appeal of liberal neutrality is quite similar in both the language and religion cases. In each case, the alternatives to neutrality risk violating either core individual liberties or an idea of fairness. For the religious

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35. Although I think we would be disposed to privilege the claims of basic individual liberty over achieving the outcomes associated with the two language planning models, I am willing to grant that the priority of liberty may be more urgent in the case of religion, given the special harm to individual integrity associated with assaults on religious freedom. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for drawing my attention to this important difference between the two kinds of cases.

case, the argument for neutrality is completed by showing that various countervailing considerations, for instance, the perfectionist and social utility ones sketched earlier, are insufficiently plausible or urgent to defeat the prima facie appeal of neutrality. A dismissal of the parallel countervailing considerations is necessary to complete an argument for liberal neutrality in the case of language.

It is at this point that a major difference between language and religion must be acknowledged. I do not have in mind here the fact that the state can avoid having a religion, but it cannot avoid communicating in some language(s) or other. This point was already highlighted in suggesting that a coherent neutralist approach to language policy would involve even-handedness rather than disestablishment. Rather, the difference that now needs to be considered arises from the fact that language, unlike religion, is a medium of communication. Whereas it is difficult to show that achieving specific religious outcomes has the kind of social utility needed to overturn liberal neutrality, the communicative function of language makes the achievement of certain linguistic outcomes of very great social utility.[36] The social utility of a common public language is especially important, and I devote the final section of the article to illustrating how far it requires an abandonment of the liberal neutrality model of language policy. It is worth noting, moreover, that, under certain specific circumstances, outcomes highlighted by the language maintenance model may also involve very great social utility. A complete discussion, for which there is not space here, would entail a comparison of this model with liberal neutrality as well.[37]

V

The main challenge to liberal neutrality can be stated by considering some of the ways in which a common public language is socially useful. One argument appeals to the relationship between language and *social mobility*. A second focuses on the function a common language performs of providing a medium for *democratic deliberation*. A third maintains that a common public language can provide the basis for a *common identity* that binds together the citizens of a state and reinforces their civic virtues

36. Laponce, p. 143, emphasizes this difference between language and religion: "I don't have to pray with my neighbour but I do have to talk with him."

37. See Alan Patten, "Political Theory and Language Policy," *Political Theory* 29 (2001): 691–715, at 705–09, for a discussion of the language maintenance model.

and sense of mutual solidarity. A fourth way in which a common language is useful is that it can reduce the *cost of public administration.* When a common public language is achieved, it is no longer necessary for public institutions to make significant expenditures on translation and interpretation services, and the resources that are freed can be devoted to other priorities.

Some of these arguments for thinking that a common public language would be socially useful are more challenging to the liberal neutrality approach than others. Most people do not, for instance, think that *every* possible measure reducing the cost of public administration should for that reason be implemented. In many areas of public administration, people are willing to tolerate costly or time-consuming procedures aimed at enhancing equality or fairness. The same goes for measures designed to promote a stronger sense of common identity. As mentioned in the previous section, it is conceivable that a religiously homogeneous society would have a stronger sense of common identity than a heterogeneous society. But, even if this were the case, most liberals would still oppose a policy of state preference for the majority religion designed to bring about greater homogeneity.

As for the appeal to democratic deliberation, it is not clear how much commonality of language deliberative democracy actually requires. If deliberative democracy entails that every citizen should be able to communicate directly with every other citizen, then the absence of a common language would indeed be a problem. But for reasons having to do with scale, and with the limited amount of leisure time that citizens have for deliberation, most deliberative democrats would not advocate such a demanding ideal of citizen deliberation. Deliberation can be facilitated by mediators and go-betweens (the media, elites, and so on), and thus it is not necessary for any given citizen literally to be able to speak with every fellow citizen. So long as these mediators and go-betweens are able, through personal bilingualism, or reliance on translators and interpreters, to bridge any linguistic divides that they encounter, a common public language is not necessary for deliberative democracy.

In any case, a detailed consideration of each of the different reasons for thinking a common public language to be socially useful is not feasible within a single article. Instead, I propose to examine in more detail just one of the arguments mentioned above: the appeal to social mobility. The aim is to illustrate the thesis announced at the beginning of the

article that the common public language model should partially, but not fully, displace liberal neutrality in a normative theory of language politics. A complete demonstration of the thesis would require a fuller consideration of the identity, democracy, and cost-reduction arguments.

As I mentioned in Section II, one of the main concerns about language diversity emphasized by proponents of the common public language model is that the speakers of some languages will become isolated in linguistic ghettoes. This concern reflects the great importance attached to social mobility in a liberal democracy. We do not think it is acceptable for an individual's life chances to be significantly constrained by the social position he or she is born into. Just as public institutions should seek to nullify the effects of class, race, ethnicity, and gender on a person's life opportunities, they should do the same for language. It would violate an important principle of liberal justice—the principle Rawls calls "fair equality of opportunity"—if one person's life prospects were to be significantly lower than those of fellow citizens for some avoidable reason related to his or her linguistic capabilities.

One way of expressing this concern is to say that all individuals need access to an adequate "context of choice."[38] They must have at their disposal a variety of valuable options and opportunities embracing the full range of human activities. Being able to communicate with the people around one is a precondition of having access to this context of choice. Without competence in the language spoken by those around her, a person will encounter difficulties in finding a job, doing business, making friends, practicing a religion, and so on.

For any given individual, this linguistic precondition can be satisfied in two different ways. There can be a sufficiently healthy context of choice operating in her own native language. Or she can achieve sufficient competence in a second language in which there is an adequate context of choice available.

Adapting some of Will Kymlicka's terminology, I will say that a language supports a "societal culture" when an adequate context of choice is available in that language.[39] To say that there is a Francophone societal

38. The phrase "context of choice" is from Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, pp. 82–84. I will use the phrase somewhat more narrowly than Kymlicka to designate the availability of a range of options and opportunities.

39. Ibid., p. 76. Kymlicka defines a societal culture as a "culture which provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities."

culture in Quebec, for instance, is to say that a French speaker in Quebec has access to an adequate range of options and opportunities operating in the French language. To say that there is no Italian-speaking societal culture in the United States, by contrast, would be to deny that an Italian speaker in that context has an adequate range of Italian-language options and opportunities. To enjoy social mobility, an Italian-speaker in the United States must learn English and access the English-language societal culture that dominates the country. As these examples suggest, an individual's interest in social mobility can be satisfied in two different ways. There can be a societal culture operating in the individual's native language. Or the individual can integrate into a societal culture by learning the language in which it operates.

The implications of this concern with social mobility for language policy are complex and depend on the nature of the case. The argument for the common public language model highlights one particular kind of case. In this case, there is only one viable societal culture in the state (operating I will assume for simplicity in the state's majority language). Although there are speakers of minority languages, there is no societal culture operating in any minority language. Unilingual speakers of a minority language do not, therefore, have access to an adequate context of choice. Nor, we might further specify, could a minority language societal culture easily be constructed (or revived) by means of public policy.

Under these conditions, a concern for social mobility seems to dictate a policy of getting minority language speakers to learn the majority language. Without the majority language, they would be ghettoized. Unlike their majority-language fellow citizens, they would lack access to an adequate range of economic, social, political, and cultural options and opportunities. Given the great importance that we normally attach to social mobility, it seems that the state should not, therefore, be wholly neutral with respect to linguistic outcomes. In some situations, the only way to establish conditions under which all citizens can enjoy social mobility is for the state to aim for a specific language outcome, one in which there is a public language shared by members of the majority and minority alike. Indeed, such is the value attached to social mobility in a liberal democracy that it is tempting to regard this as a knock-down argument in favor of the common public language model over liberal neutrality. As I shall now argue, however, this conclusion would not be warranted. There remain two important ways in which liberal neutrality has a role to play.

The first is connected with the assumption in the argument I have just been sketching that there is only one viable societal culture. This is certainly a fair assumption for some real-world cases, arguably including the United States (at least if Puerto Rico is disregarded).[40] But there are many other cases in which several viable societal cultures find themselves sharing a common state or where there are reasons to think that additional societal cultures could establish themselves, perhaps with the assistance of public policy. Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, and Spain are all examples of countries containing several viable societal cultures.

Where a state does contain several viable societal cultures, then from the standpoint of furthering the interest in social mobility there is no need to promote a common public language.[41] An individual's interest in having access to an adequate context of choice would be satisfied by mastering any of the languages corresponding to a viable societal culture. So long as the state is taking measures to ensure that individuals become fluent in at least one of these societal languages, it can otherwise afford to be neutral regarding linguistic outcomes. From the point of view of social mobility, one common public language is no better or worse than several language communities each of which offers an adequate context of choice to its members. In a situation like this, a policy of (prorated) official multilingualism of the sort described in Section III would work to allocate speakers of different languages their fair shares of public resources and attention without jeopardizing anyone's interest in social mobility.

Even if a state does contain only one viable societal culture, there is a second way in which the concern for social mobility still leaves some room for liberal neutrality. In some circumstances, a common public language may be rather easy to achieve, in the sense that it could be brought about under a range of different language policies. Since minority-language speakers do not enjoy social mobility in their own language, there is already a strong incentive for them to learn the majority language. It is possible that all, or almost all, members of the minority language com-

40. The suggestion is that Spanish-speakers in the continental United States (e.g., in south Florida or in the Southwest) do not have a viable societal culture of their own in the sense defined earlier (a set of meaningful Spanish-language options across the full range of human activities). I may be mistaken about this, in which case the argument for liberal neutrality in the U.S. context is that much stronger.

41. This is recognized by Barry, pp. 105, 228.

munity can be made to acquire the majority language with only minimal assistance from public policy. It might be the case, for instance, that a robust curriculum of second-language education in the majority language in a school system (and broader institutional context) that is otherwise available in the minority language would be sufficient to make the majority-language societal culture accessible to minority-language speakers. Under these circumstances, the interest in social mobility would be compatible with either majority-language official unilingualism or with some form of institutional recognition of the minority language that involved adequate second-language teaching in the majority language.

Suppose, for instance, that, in the context of the U.S. debate over bilingual education, it was the case that both bilingual education and English immersion schemes had roughly comparable levels of success at making English-as-a-second-language students proficient in English. Under these conditions, the common public language model would not tell us which policy to prefer. It would set a constraint—that, whatever policy is adopted, it should leave students proficient in English—but it would not help us to decide among the several possible policies that each meet the constraint.

The indeterminacy of the common public language model creates a space for liberal neutrality. Where several different language policies are compatible with realizing a common public language, the liberal neutrality model indicates that we should prefer the one that comes closest to establishing fair background conditions under which different languages and language-based identities can strive for survival and success.[42] In the U.S. case, assuming the empirical conditions stipulated above, this would indicate a preference for educational schemes incorporating some form of bilingualism over those that insist on English immersion.

42. It seems to me that presenting the argument this way is enough to dissolve the "puzzle" that Brian Barry claims to find in Iris Marion Young's discussion of language policy. See Barry, p. 104. Barry finds it curious that Young would say, both, that "Many Spanish-speaking Americans have asserted their right to maintain their specific culture and speak their language and still receive the benefits of citizenship" and that "few advocates of cultural pluralism and group autonomy in the United States would deny that proficiency in English is a necessary condition for full participation in American society." There is no contradiction between these propositions if Spanish-language accommodations do not come at the expense of learning English. Indeed, on these empirical assumptions, Young's position is arguably the one implied by Barry's own earlier account of equal treatment (where, recall, he allowed that both disestablishment and even-handedness were forms of equal treatment). For Young's own statement of her position, see *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), ch. 6.

   The argument of the previous few paragraphs assumes that the main way in which decisions about the language of instruction in public schools have an impact on social mobility is by influencing the minority-language child's proficiency in the majority language. For people to be equipped for social mobility, however, it is not enough that they leave school proficient in the majority language. They must also have a further range of skills, dispositions, competencies, and so on. Different medium-of-instruction alternatives may have a further, less direct kind of effect on social mobility if they have an impact on the student's propensity to develop these other necessary skills, dispositions, and competencies. It is difficult to know whether these indirect effects lend more support for bilingual education or for immersion schemes. In the U.S. context, it is often argued that language-minority status correlates strongly with low socioeconomic status. As a result, it is tempting to think that the same arguments that can be made in favor of breaking down class barriers in the public education system can also be made in favor of breaking down linguistic barriers through a single medium of public education.[43] On the other hand, minority children with limited proficiency in the majority language may, in the early years of their education at least, more effectively develop literacy, numeracy, and so on, through instruction in their home language. And it is sometimes argued that developing a positive sense of self-identity is one of the keys to social mobility and that this positive sense of self can be effectively encouraged through education schemes, such as bilingual education, which develop and reinforce pre-existing social characteristics rather than attempting to negate them. Although these indirect effects of language of education on social mobility seriously complicate the argument I have been making, they do not affect the basic point. They are all consistent with the idea that considerations of social mobility may not, on their own, be fully decisive in deciding amongst various language policy options. Where they are not, the fairness considerations emphasized by the liberal neutrality approach have an important role to play.

   43. For this form of argument (as well as the more straightforward claim that English-medium schooling is more likely to leave minority-language students proficient in English), see, e.g., Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), ch. 1; Rosalie Pedalino Porter, *Forked Tongue: The Politics of Bilingual Education*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1996), pp. 187–90.

An argument from the interest in social mobility, then, only partly vindicates the view that language policy should be guided by the common public language model. Where a state only contains one societal culture, it is true that a major responsibility of public institutions should be to ensure that everyone is able to speak the language in which that societal culture operates. Some states contain more than one viable societal culture, however, and even states that do contain only one such culture may find that there are several different ways of bringing about a common language and of equipping minority-language speakers with the skills, dispositions, and competencies they need for social mobility. There is space for the liberal neutrality model to play a role in both of these kinds of cases. Since considerations of social mobility do not dictate a policy of exclusively recognizing the majority language, policy makers can seek to give at least some positive recognition to other languages as well. Such a policy would help to leave members of minority language communities with a fair opportunity to realize their language-related identities and ambitions.

VI

This article has sought to rehabilitate the idea of liberal neutrality as an approach to thinking about how public institutions ought to respond to the phenomena of language diversity and language shift. It is widely assumed that the appropriate response to these phenomena should involve some form of language planning. A desirable linguistic outcome should be identified—typically, convergence on a common public language, or the maintenance of vulnerable minority languages—and institutions should be designed, and policy made, with a view to realizing this outcome. The liberal neutrality approach rejects language planning. The aim of language policy should not be to effect some specific outcome but to establish a fair framework of background conditions in which speakers of different languages can strive for the success and survival of their own language communities according to their own convictions and priorities. Although I did not offer a full account of fairness in background conditions, I did illustrate the content and distinctiveness of the liberal neutrality model by connecting it with a policy of (prorated) official multilingualism. I also underlined the theoretical significance of the liberal neutrality model by suggesting that it offers a basis

for defending minority rights claims that has generally been neglected in the literature.

The appeal of the liberal neutrality model, I argued further, lies in the importance we attach to a framework that secures certain individual freedoms together with basic fairness between individuals. It will normally take a fairly plausible and urgent reason to warrant abandoning or compromising this framework. Such a reason will sometimes be available in the area of language policy, and as a consequence the language planning approaches should not be entirely dismissed. I illustrated this claim by exploring the social mobility argument on behalf of a language planning model oriented around the achievement of a common public language model. In some cases, considerations of social mobility do warrant compromising liberal neutrality in order to encourage certain linguistic outcomes. Nevertheless, I argued that these considerations do not entirely crowd out the relevance of the liberal neutrality model but leave a space for it as part of a hybrid normative theory of language policy.