

The autonomy argument for liberal nationalism

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ABSTRACT. The article examines a recent normative argument for ‘liberal nationalism’ that can be found in the work of a range of influential contemporary writers. That argument seeks to defend the view that the state has a responsibility to preserve and promote national cultures. It does so by arguing that the liberal ideal of an autonomous individual chooser presupposes a rich and healthy national culture which provides, and gives meaning to, the options which an individual faces. The claim of the present article is that the liberal nationalist argument is much less successful than these writers would like to think. Although the argument may be valid in certain restricted contexts, the article shows that it runs into severe difficulties for a wide range of central cases that nationalists have traditionally been concerned with.

Liberalism and cultural nationalism

A distinction can be drawn between two different varieties of nationalism which are important both in theory and in practice. *Political nationalism* can be defined as the doctrine that nations should be self-governing. On the strongest version of this view, each nation should have its own state; on weaker versions, each nation should enjoy a significant degree of political autonomy within a multinational state. *Cultural nationalism*, by contrast, I shall take to be the doctrine that an important responsibility of the state is to preserve and promote some national culture that is contained within its borders. Political nationalism is a doctrine about how politically meaningful boundaries ought to be drawn. Cultural nationalism, on the other hand, is a doctrine about how the state, in the context of a given set of boundaries, ought to exercise its power and authority.

In practice, these two doctrines are often conjoined into a single nationalist view. Cultural nationalists frequently believe that the only guarantee that the state will fulfil its responsibility of preserving and

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promoting a given national culture is if political boundaries (be they the boundaries of the state or the boundaries of an independent unit within a federal state) are drawn along national lines. As David Miller has argued, for instance, ‘simply put, if you care about preserving your national culture, the surest way is to place the means of safeguarding it in the hands of those who share it – your fellow nationals’ (Miller 1995: 88). On this view, cultural nationalism leads to political nationalism via an empirical thesis about the political conditions under which the state is likely to fulfil its cultural responsibilities.

Different kinds of connections between these two nationalist doctrines are possible as well and exploring them is one of the most pressing tasks of any normative theory of nationalism. For the purposes of this article, however, it is worth emphasising that the two doctrines can be distinguished in practice and should be distinguished in theory. It is possible to be a political nationalist without being a cultural nationalist. One might, for example, favour the drawing of political boundaries along certain national lines because of a history of persecution of members of that national culture by non-members, without thinking that it is the business of any political entity formed in this way to seek to preserve and promote some particular culture. Equally, one could be a cultural nationalist without being a political nationalist. One could consistently think both that the state should preserve and promote a given national culture and that the cultural pluralism which characterises most modern societies makes it undesirable, and perhaps impossible, to draw the boundaries of independent political units along national lines.

The focus of the present article will be on cultural nationalism and, in particular, on whether, and to what extent, it can be reconciled with liberalism. Cultural nationalism comes in stronger and weaker forms, depending on how important the responsibility to preserve and promote the national culture in question is taken to be. In an extreme form of cultural nationalism, this responsibility is taken to be very urgent indeed – so urgent that it can justify suspending the basic rights and liberties of some members of the community (be they members or non-members of the culture in question). Virtually all liberals, I take it, would unite against cultural nationalism in this extreme form. A defining characteristic of liberalism is the priority it attaches to the protection of basic rights and liberties in anything but the most dire of circumstances.

The more difficult question is whether liberalism can be reconciled with cultural nationalism in its weaker forms. Cultural nationalism takes a ‘weaker form’, as I shall view it, when it attaches sufficient importance to preserving and promoting some national culture so as to justify imposing certain costs and burdens on members of the community but not so much importance that it justifies the suspension of any basic rights and liberties. Thus, a ‘weaker form’ of cultural nationalism might, for example, call for minor restrictions on commercial activity and educational choice, or it

might require subsidies for the arts and entertainment of a particular national culture paid for out of general taxation revenues, but it would not involve suspending anyone's right to free speech or free association.

In the view of some people, the principle of neutrality drives a solid wedge between liberalism and cultural nationalism, even in its weaker forms. According to the principle of neutrality, a fundamental responsibility of the state is to remain neutral between the different forms of good life that are found in the community. The phrase 'remain neutral' can be understood in a variety of different ways but, according to the most plausible and attractive version of the principle, it stipulates that the state must not justify its actions and policies by appealing to the goal of preserving or promoting any particular form of the good life (Sher 1997: 22–3). Since cultural nationalism aims to preserve and promote a culture – which will typically embrace a whole set of ideas about the good life – it seems, upon first examination at least, to violate the principle of neutrality (Taylor 1994: 56–8; Miller 1995: 195). On this view, the liberal commitment to the principle of neutrality makes 'liberal nationalism', at least as far as cultural nationalism is concerned, an oxymoron.

It is controversial whether liberalism is committed to the principle of neutrality in this form and whether the principle offers an attractive or coherent doctrine.¹ Whatever the merits of the principle as it is usually stated, it seems to me that a significantly weakened principle of neutrality might be formulated that is coherent and attractive, likely to be endorsed by liberals, and likely to pose a challenge to cultural nationalism. Imagine for the sake of argument that a just distribution of resources and opportunities has been achieved in some community, whatever that might entail. In this context, the state is considering expenditure funded out of general taxation revenue on some project designed to preserve and promote a particular form of the good life that is endorsed by some but not all people in the community. In this situation, it seems appropriate to apply a *weak principle of neutrality* which requires that the state be able to provide a good reason for pursuing such a project, where a 'good reason' means a reason grounded in some urgent liberal priority. It is appropriate to apply this principle because, otherwise, the state would in effect be permitted, for no 'good reason', to tax away some of the justly held resources of some members of the community to support forms of the good life that others, but not those members, endorse.²

The possibility of reconciling liberalism with cultural nationalism rests on whether such a 'good reason' can be found on behalf of culturally nationalist policies. It rests, this is to say, on whether some reason, grounded in an urgent liberal priority, can be given for a policy aimed at preserving and promoting a national culture that can justify imposing costs and burdens on members of the community who attach no special importance to the realisation of this goal.

My aim in this article is to assess an important recent attempt to argue

that such a reason can be given and thus that 'liberal nationalism' is a coherent and defensible doctrine rather than an oxymoron. The position I examine can be found in the work of a range of influential contemporary writers on nationalism, including Will Kymlicka (1989, 1995), Yael Tamir (1993), David Miller (1995) and Joseph Raz (1994). Although I am not sure whether all of these authors would be happy with the label 'cultural nationalist', and at least one of them emphasises several of the non-liberal features of his position (Miller 1995: 192–5), they all endorse one particular argument which can be viewed as offering the 'good reason' needed to reconcile liberalism with cultural nationalism. The argument I have in mind seeks to show that the liberal ideal of an autonomous individual chooser presupposes a rich and healthy national culture which provides, and gives meaning to, the options which an individual faces. Liberals cannot be indifferent to the survival of national cultures, so the argument goes, because they are not indifferent to ensuring the conditions for autonomous individual choice.

For the sake of convenience, and at the risk of being misleading, I will call this argument simply the *liberal nationalist argument*. This label is potentially misleading because all of the authors I have mentioned offer different arguments as well and there may be others that they do not consider.³ Still, I think that the argument under consideration is sufficiently central to the recent revival of liberal nationalism to merit attention on its own. The claim of the present article is that the liberal nationalist argument is much less successful than this influential group of writers would like to think. Although the argument may be valid in certain restricted contexts, I will show that it runs into severe difficulties for a wide range of central cases that cultural nationalists have traditionally been concerned with. If I am right, it would not follow that liberal nationalism has been decisively defeated. But it does mean that anyone wishing to reconcile liberalism and cultural nationalism should continue searching for additional reasons that can justify imposing the costs and burdens entailed by culturally nationalist policies.

The liberal nationalist argument

The liberal nationalist argument can be divided into four principal steps. The initial move is to affirm that liberalism is, first and foremost, a doctrine of individual freedom or autonomy. According to Joseph Raz, for instance, liberalism,

is a political morality which arises out of a view of the good of people, a view which emphasises the value of freedom to individual well-being. Liberalism upholds the value for people of being in charge of their life, charting its course by their own successive choices. (Raz 1994: 175)

Much the same sentiment is echoed by Will Kymlicka:

The defining feature of liberalism is that it ascribes certain fundamental freedoms to each individual. In particular, it grants people a very wide choice in terms of how they lead their lives. It allows people to choose a conception of the good life, and then allows them to reconsider that decision, and adopt a new and hopefully better plan of life. (Kymlicka 1995: 80)

And for Yael Tamir too, liberalism is defined by 'its respect for personal autonomy, reflection, and choice' (1993: 6).

Given liberalism's commitment to personal freedom, an urgent liberal priority is to establish and sustain the conditions under which individuals can be said to be free or autonomous. This takes us to the second step in the argument, which tries to say something more about one of these conditions. The key claim here is that liberals value a freedom 'within reason' rather than the freedom of 'licence'.⁴ They believe that individuals can only realise personal autonomy in 'the presence of a context that allows them to be strong evaluators' (Tamir 1993: 36, cf. 33).⁵ More concretely, liberals believe that an individual is only properly free if she has a range of meaningful options to choose from (Raz 1994: 176). This has two implications. The first is that an individual must have a set of 'beliefs about value' (Kymlicka 1989: ch. 8) which provides a perspective from which to guide and construct her life. The second is that the individual, to count as free in the liberal sense, must have a set of options, at least some of which correspond to her beliefs about value. If she had no options, or if none of her options were meaningful to her on the basis of her beliefs about value, then she would have no way of following her own perspective in guiding and constructing her own life.

The next step in the argument 'shows that options presuppose a culture' (Raz 1994: 176). The important point here is that it is the individual's culture which provides her with beliefs about value and offers options that correspond to those beliefs. As Kymlicka puts it: 'freedom involves making choices amongst various options, and our societal culture not only provides these options, but also makes them meaningful to us' (1995: 83). Essentially the same claim is made by David Miller: culture, he asserts, provides 'a background against which more individual choices about how to live can be made' (1995: 86; cf. 146; cf. Tamir 1993: 36, 84; and Raz 1994: 83–4). It is through being socialised in a rich and healthy culture that different roles and activities come to have a point for us and we can develop a perspective that can allow us to choose our own lives for ourselves. And it is through the practices and institutions that embody a culture, and the way in which they bring together like-minded people, that the options and possibilities corresponding to our perspective are made available.

The term 'culture' can of course be understood in a number of different ways and applied at a variety of different levels. At one end of the spectrum, one can talk of the 'culture' of some fairly small-scale entity, like an office,

or department, or golf club; at the other end of the spectrum, we refer, sweepingly, to 'western' culture, or 'modern' culture or even 'global' culture. The liberal nationalist authors I have been discussing tend to focus on the culture of groups that can be situated nearer to the middle of this continuum. They all agree that 'national' cultures are important to their members' autonomy (Kymlicka 1995: 80; Raz 1994: 129, 178; Tamir 1993: 36, 84; Miller 1995: 85–6), and, for the purposes of this article, I shall use 'culture' and 'national culture' interchangeably unless otherwise indicated.⁶

The fourth and final step of the liberal nationalist argument draws an inference from the first three steps. Given the importance that liberals attach to individual choice and freedom, and given that a rich and healthy culture is an essential condition of the realisation of freedom, liberals have a very 'good reason' to think that the state ought to preserve and promote national culture(s). To stand by and allow a national culture to decay or disintegrate would be to condemn the members of that culture to a life of unfreedom and thus to violate liberalism's most fundamental principle. Thus, Kymlicka concludes that '[g]roup-differentiated measures that secure and promote [the access to a societal culture] may, therefore, have a legitimate role to play in a liberal theory of justice' (Kymlicka 1995: 84). Raz infers that cultural groups have a 'moral claim to respect and to prosperity ...' and that 'multiculturalism emerges as a central element in any decent liberal political programme for societies inhabited by a number of viable cultural groups' (Raz 1994: 178).⁷ Miller affirms that 'the power of the state' should be used to protect aspects of national cultures that 'are judged to be important' (1995: 87), and Tamir highlights 'the importance of provisions aimed at protecting the cultural, religious, and linguistic identity of minorities' (1993: 76).

I should emphasise once again that this is not the only argument developed by the authors to whom I have been referring. But it is, as the range of authors who have made it indicates, a popular and influential argument and to that extent worth assessing. My strategy will not be to develop a comprehensive critique of the liberal nationalist argument. In fact, I believe that the argument may be valid in certain contexts. Instead, I want to argue that it is valid in a much narrower range of cases than its proponents have typically conceded. In particular, I claim that the liberal nationalist argument has trouble with four categories of cases which I will say more about: (1) cases of cultures which do not value individual autonomy; (2) cases where cultural nationalists are worried about the loss of *distinctness* of their culture rather than the loss of culture *per se*; (3) cases where members of an endangered culture could integrate into another (flourishing) culture but would prefer not to; and (4) cases where the long run costs and burdens imposed by the culturally nationalist policy are significantly greater than the short run costs imposed on some members of the community by rapid cultural change. The accumulation of these cases suggests that, for all the liberal nationalist argument tells us, the aim of

reconciling cultural nationalism with liberalism may be much less secure than is commonly thought.

Cultures which do not value individual autonomy

A standard objection to the liberal nationalist argument is that it grounds the case for cultural nationalism in liberal values which members of some cultures do not themselves endorse. Not every culture 'upholds the value for people of being in charge of their life' (Raz 1994: 175). For some cultures, religious and communal ideals that are opposed to individual autonomy are equally if not more important. A frequently cited example of such a 'non-autonomous' culture is the Pueblo culture in the southwest of the United States, which has in the recent past curtailed its members' freedom of religious worship (Kymlicka 1989: 195–8; 1995: 153; Kukathas 1992).

The extent to which a culture values autonomy is relevant to the liberal nationalist argument because having a range of meaningful options supplied by a rich and healthy culture is not the only condition of individual autonomy. One additional condition, as the Pueblo example highlights, is a liberal framework of law. If individual autonomy is to be possible, then individuals who choose to lead unorthodox lifestyles – not practising the official religion of the community, for instance – must be legally protected from coercive sanctions by the community. A second additional condition is that individuals acquire the range of capacities, self-understandings and attitudes that they require to be in a position to shape and direct their own lives. They need to be part of a culture of autonomy which ingrains in them habits of reflection, self-examination, the questioning of social norms and traditions, and so on.

In all, then, we can say that there are at least three distinct conditions of the realisation of individual autonomy: (i) that individuals have access to a range of meaningful options; (ii) that a liberal framework of law be in place; and (iii) that individuals be exposed to social conditions and mechanisms which develop in them the capacities, self-understanding and attitudes required for autonomy. A striking feature of the liberal nationalist argument is that it is only concerned with the first of these conditions: it calls for culturally nationalist policies in order to ensure that individuals have access to a range of meaningful options. This seems appropriate for cultures which are already basically liberal. But for the case of cultures which do not value autonomy the argument runs into serious difficulties.

The problem is that one or both of conditions (ii) and (iii) of autonomy are unlikely to be realised in cultures which do not value autonomy. This means that however successful liberals are at securing condition (i) they will not be successful at promoting individual autonomy. In cases of this sort, the liberal nationalist argument would, in effect, advocate the imposition of costs and burdens on some members of the community for the sake of an

aim which in any case is not going to be achieved. And this no longer seems like such a 'good reason' by which to justify imposing those costs and burdens.

In fact, as Chandran Kukathas has argued, if liberals are really serious about taking action to promote autonomy in cases of this kind, then they should not be seeking to preserve and promote the culture in question but to undermine it (1992: section III). Conditions (ii) and (iii) will never be satisfied for some groups unless their culture is transformed or they are assimilated into a more autonomy-friendly culture. Once such a transition takes place, condition (i) becomes a priority, but, until that time, it is a mistake to think that culturally nationalist policies would be anything but counter-productive from the point of view of promoting individual autonomy.

For one set of cases, then – cases in which the national culture does not place much value on individual autonomy – the liberal nationalist argument seems unconvincing. For those cases, the liberal nationalist argument does not tell us how liberalism can be reconciled with culturally nationalist policies.

Threats to the distinctness of cultures

The objection I have just been outlining may only apply to a limited range of cases (at least in North America and Europe) and would perhaps not be too strongly resisted by defenders of the liberal nationalist argument. By contrast, the objection I develop next goes right to the heart of the liberal nationalist enterprise. This is the objection that, for a substantial set of cases, liberal nationalists tend to elide the important distinction between preserving a culture and preserving the distinctness of a culture.

Recall the two senses in which liberal nationalists think that culture is important for freedom. They claim (a) that a culture provides beliefs about value that give meaning to the options available to its members and thus equips them with a perspective from the basis of which they can lead autonomous lives, and (b) that a culture provides the options themselves which correspond to these meanings. In this section, I focus on the first, 'meaning-providing' function of culture, leaving the 'option-providing' function for consideration in subsequent sections.

A distinction can be drawn between two ways in which a culture could fail in its function of providing meaning to options. A culture (let's call it Small) might fail to provide meaning to the options faced by its members because its members increasingly look to some other culture (Big) for interpretation of the value and meaning of the options they face. That is to say, exposure to Big might cause members of Small to gradually change their beliefs about value so that at some point the culture which provides their options with meaning is no longer Small but a transitional amalgam of

Small and Big, and eventually it might make sense to say that their meaning-providing culture is Big. Alternatively, it could be the case that Small fails to provide meaning to the options faced by its members because its members gradually cease to have any beliefs about value and enter into a state of anomie. Let us call these the *assimilation* and *anomie* cases, respectively.

Liberal nationalist authors give conflicting signals about the assimilation case. On one hand, Tamir, Miller, Raz and Kymlicka all take pains to emphasise that changes in the character of a community are consistent with the continuity of a rich and healthy cultural structure which provides meaningful options for its members. For instance, to use Kymlicka's example, French Canada's 'Quiet Revolution' of the 1960s was a massive change in the character of French Canadian culture but, he claims, it never represented a threat to the existence of that culture: 'the existence of a French-Canadian cultural community itself was never in question, never threatened with unwanted extinction or assimilation as aboriginal communities are currently threatened' (Kymlicka 1989: 167; cf. Tamir 1993: 51–3, Miller 1995: 195, Raz 1994: 182). On the other hand, all of the liberal nationalist authors I have been canvassing suggest that the cultural policies they favour have the aim of preserving and promoting a distinct cultural identity, suggesting that they would be concerned about the assimilation case described above in which members of Small lose their *distinct* culture (Kymlicka 1995: 100, 105; Tamir 1993: 57, 69, 72–3, 76; Raz 1994: 181; Miller 1995: 195).

The point to emphasise here, however, is not the tension within the liberal nationalist attitude to the assimilation case but the fact that nothing in the liberal nationalist argument should give rise to concern about assimilation in this sense. According to the liberal nationalist argument, a rich and healthy cultural structure is an important condition of freedom because cultures provide meaning to the options faced by individual choosers. But in the assimilation case individuals never go *without* beliefs about meaning and value. Their beliefs change from those associated with Small to those associated with Big, perhaps with a transitional phase in between showing influences of both Small and Big, but individuals always have some beliefs about value or other.⁸ For this reason, cultural assimilation (in the sense described above) is not a threat to individual freedom and should be of no concern to liberal nationalists.

It is worth lingering over this conclusion for a moment since it is precisely the distinctiveness of their culture that many advocates of support for culture are concerned to protect. They do not want to see their culture gradually blend into a more powerful neighbouring or global culture to which it is exposed and they think that the state should use its power and authority to try to avoid this outcome. From what we have seen so far, however, nothing in the liberal nationalist argument should give this kind of cultural nationalist any comfort. Liberal nationalists fail to show that there

is any important connection between protecting individual freedom and preserving the *distinctiveness* of national cultures against assimilatory pressures.

Note that this objection to liberal nationalism differs subtly but importantly from a more standard objection that cultural nationalists have rightly rejected. The standard objection is that it does not matter if one's own cultural structure is destroyed so long as one has access to some sufficiently rich and healthy alternative culture or set of cultural materials (see, e.g. Waldron 1992).

The response to this objection rightly draws attention to the ambiguity in the idea of *having access* to some culture and the options it contains. According to a weak interpretation of the phrase, 'having access' simply requires the presence in the community of the culture and the options it contains. On a more demanding reading, however, 'having access' requires, in addition, that a person have the capacities, identities and beliefs about value that make it possible fully to participate in the culture and its options. Many francophones in Quebec, for instance, have access to North American anglophone culture in the first sense – it is all around them – but not in the second sense – they do not speak English, or share an identity with anglophones, or have the beliefs about value which would make the options provided by anglophone culture meaningful to them. Despite having access to anglophone culture in the weak sense, for many francophone Quebecers it would be very costly and disorienting to assimilate into that culture, and for some it would be simply impossible.

The objection developed above cannot, however, be refuted in this way because it is making a different point. The point is not that the decline of a culture should not be viewed with alarm so long as options are made available by other cultures to members of that culture. This would be to ignore the difficulty and costs of cultural integration. Rather, the point is that, for a range of cases, the 'destruction' of a national culture is actually *constituted* by the assimilation of its members into another culture. For these cases, we cannot say that the freedom of its members is threatened by the costliness or impossibility of assimilating into another culture. It is only *because* enough members are *already* assimilating that the culture can be said to be in decline in the first place.

This objection disqualifies the liberal nationalist argument from lending support to cultural nationalism in a range of central real world cases. Very often, it is not the preservation of a culture *per se*, but preservation of a distinct culture, that cultural nationalists are concerned to defend. This is not to say, however, that the liberal nationalist argument would never be applicable. There may be some real world cases that are like the anomie case described earlier – cases where members of a culture are in danger of losing any kind of beliefs about value at all. The evidence of depression, despondency and suicide in some indigenous cultures in the New World suggests that there has been some tendency for members of these cultures to

slide into anomie after prolonged exposure to European cultures. To the extent that there are cases like this in the real world, the objection developed in this section would not apply to them.

The preference not to integrate

The objection I have just been developing focuses on one aspect of the liberal nationalist understanding of the relationship between freedom and culture: the role that cultures play in providing individuals with beliefs about value. The other aspect of this relationship, as we have seen, is the role that cultures play in providing individuals with options that correspond to their beliefs about value. Does the liberal nationalist argument become more convincing when we focus on this option-providing role?

Generally, one might expect beliefs about value and the options corresponding to those beliefs to change in step with one another. For example, according to cultural nationalists in France, French beliefs about value have become increasingly influenced by a global, 'American' culture. Corresponding to this change has been the gradual introduction of new practices, institutions and lifestyle possibilities – fast food, supermarkets, different working hours, a changing landscape and so on – and the disappearance of old ones. To the extent that changes in beliefs move with changes in options in this way, the objection developed in the previous section still applies: it is hard to see how the liberal nationalist argument can provide any justification for policies aimed at preserving the distinctness of cultures so long as individuals continue to have some culture or other.

But it is possible to construct more complex cases in which beliefs and options do not move together so neatly. Imagine a community in which some people are gradually assimilating into a more powerful, neighbouring culture to which they are exposed: their beliefs about value are becoming more like those of the larger culture and new practices and lifestyle possibilities are appearing that correspond with these different beliefs. At the same time, for reasons I will explore in a moment, others in the same community are not succumbing to the assimilatory pressures exerted by the neighbouring culture.

It seems possible that the assimilating group could so transform the character of the options, practices and lifestyles available in the community that the non-assimilating group would effectively lose access to options corresponding to its beliefs about value. Consider, for instance, the character of shopping practices in a community. This may be fundamentally transformed – from an economy of small local shops to an economy of out-of-town supermarkets – by the choices of only a (perhaps sizeable) fraction of the community. Those who still value small-scale local shopping may lose a valuable option as a result of the changing beliefs about value of other members of their community. Or consider a linguistic community struggling

to maintain viability. Unless enough other people continue speaking a language, those who do speak it, and cannot speak the encroaching language, will have trouble participating in a whole range of activities which presuppose fellow speakers.

In light of examples like this, an indirect argument for preserving distinctness might be advanced in some cases by appealing to the costs and burdens imposed on some members of the community by cultural change. When some members of a culture submit to assimilatory pressures, other members are inevitably left behind and it may be that their freedom to choose from options they find valuable has been diminished.

To assess this version of the liberal nationalist argument it is necessary to distinguish two different senses (corresponding roughly to the shopping and language examples given above) in which a person might be 'left behind' by cultural change occurring in her/his community. It might be the case that they *could* integrate into the new practices and lifestyle possibilities that have been introduced into their community but would *prefer not to*. Or, alternatively, it might be the case that, even if they wanted to, they could not integrate into their community's transformed set of practices and lifestyle possibilities. In the first case, they can see the point and value of the new practices and options, and have the capacities required to take part in them, but they still prefer the old ones. In the second, try as they might, they cannot perceive any value in the new practices and options or cannot satisfy other requisite conditions for participating in them. In the remainder of this section, I will focus on the first of these cases, leaving the second for the next section.

I suspect that some readers will have the intuition that even people who could integrate into the new cultural practices but would prefer not to deserve some kind of support from the rest of the community for their original distinctive culture. Thus many readers would probably agree that weak culturally nationalist policies aimed at preserving a distinct English Canadian or distinct Scottish culture would be justifiable, even though the suggestion that some English Canadians would be *unable* to integrate into American culture, or some Scots would be *unable* to integrate into English culture, would be untenable. The argument would be that English Canadians and Scots have a legitimate interest in the survival of their own original culture which can justify imposing some minor costs and burdens on all members of the community. This appears to be the point of Kymlicka's remark that 'even where the obstacles to integration are smallest, the desire of national minorities to retain their cultural membership remains very strong' (Kymlicka 1995: 85–6).

I happen to share Kymlicka's intuition about this kind of case but I do not think that the liberal nationalist argument can possibly account for it. The liberal nationalist claim is that some people will suffer a loss of *freedom* unless culturally nationalist policies are adopted because they will lack meaningful options. In the case being considered, however, people have

meaningful options – they can, we are assuming, see the point and value of the new practices and options that are open to them – it is just that they would prefer that the old options and practices still be available. To put this in Kymlicka's language, if the obstacles to their integration into the transformed culture of the community are small, it becomes implausible to view them as having suffered a loss of freedom. Their well-being may be diminished, since their desire to preserve certain distinctive options and practices has been frustrated, but no freedom has been lost.

A return to the example of France might help to make these rather abstract points more concrete. Imagine that the range of options and practices available in France is being transformed as a portion of the population adopts 'American' beliefs about value. However, some people are left behind in the sense that, although they can readily see the point and meaning of the new practices and options, they would prefer that France's traditional array of practices and options be preserved. Although this latter group is clearly worse off than they were prior to the advent of Americanisation, it is hard to see how they can be said to have lost freedom. They still have a range of options and practices to choose from, the point and meaning of which they can perceive. In so far as the liberal nationalist argument is concerned with preserving the conditions of individual freedom, it cannot recommend culturally nationalist policies in this kind of case.⁹

The long run costs of cultural nationalism

The case in which people left behind by profound cultural change are unable to integrate into the community's new practices and options is, in my view, where the liberal nationalist argument is at its strongest. It seems right to think that people in this situation could genuinely suffer a loss of freedom and that this loss of freedom could provide a principled basis for demands for culturally nationalist policies. Imagine, for instance, the plight of a Welsh speaker living in Wales during a period of rapid anglicisation who is unable to learn English. Because so many others in the Welsh community have decided to assimilate into English-speaking culture, her options will be severely restricted. It will be difficult (although not, of course, impossible) for her to find a satisfying job, to practice her religion, to participate in political debate, to have a rich family life and so on, given her linguistic capabilities. The range of meaningful options may well be so curtailed that it makes sense to say that her freedom has been diminished. Or imagine a case in which the member of a traditional, non-Western culture is able to learn the language of the majority but is unable to master the attitudes, conventions and basic outlook that are required for him or her to get along in modern Western cultures – for instance, in the workplace, or in forming personal relationships, or in contributing to political debate. People in this situation might be able to master the

vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation of the majority language but not the thought processes and conceptual orientation which make up the culture for a native speaker – and to this extent their freedom would be put at risk if their own culture were to become unviable.

As I mentioned above, I think that the liberal nationalist argument is at its strongest in this kind of case. A number of reservations about the argument – even on this its strongest interpretation – need to be recorded, however. The first is that the premises are sufficiently demanding that the argument is only likely to be applicable for a quite restricted set of cases. The argument presupposes a rapid, profound, and fairly, but not entirely, thorough cultural change involving a loss of language or something along those lines. If the change is too gradual or is rapid but not very profound, then it becomes implausible to think that many people will be left without meaningful options to choose from. Many of the old options will still be available and people will have time to adapt to the new options. If the change only involves a small portion of the population, then it becomes implausible to think that the old options and practices really would be eliminated. And, if the change involves everyone, then, of course, no one is left behind.

Take another look, for instance, at the example of Wales suggested above. The switch from Welsh to English by the majority did not take place overnight but occurred slowly over the course of a number of decades (from roughly 1900 to 1970).¹⁰ During the transitional period, many people would have spoken both languages, so that it would only have been after several generations of assimilation that one would expect to find a dominant monolingual English majority in traditionally Welsh-speaking areas. It thus becomes difficult to pinpoint when exactly the loss of freedom for Welsh-speakers is meant to have taken place. In the early days of the assimilation, there would still have been enough Welsh-speakers around to maintain an array of practices in that language because of high levels of bilingualism.¹¹ After several generations, bilingualism may have been gradually superseded by monolingual English speaking, but by this time it becomes much less likely that there will be many people who are *unable* to speak English.¹²

My point is not that the empirical circumstances that are required for the application of the liberal nationalist argument could never be found, just that they are uncommon. Let us say, however, that a case with the required features is located. Even here a critic might concede that some people will suffer a loss of freedom but still insist that culturally nationalist policies would not be justified. The argument here would be of a broadly utilitarian kind (and as such would be vulnerable to objections which said that arguments of that kind were always problematic). It is simply that the short-term transitional costs suffered by those who are unable to integrate into the transformed culture would be out-weighed by the long-term costs and burdens imposed on other members of the community as a result of the culturally nationalist policies. We saw earlier that culturally nationalist

policies often involve small costs and burdens imposed on both members and non-members of the culture that is being protected. These might include minor restrictions on commercial or educational choices or subsidies for the arts and entertainment of the culture in question paid for out of general taxation revenue. It is possible that these small costs and burdens could add up over time to such an extent that they would outweigh the much more serious costs and burdens borne, often by the elderly, during times of rapid and profound cultural change.

Some readers will no doubt think this a callous response to the plight faced by people who are unable to integrate into new cultural forms created during periods of profound and rapid cultural change. But it is worth noting that we do not usually think that the state should oppose other kinds of social changes, even rapid and profound changes, just because they leave some people behind. The computer, for instance, has revolutionised the ways in which we work, communicate with one another, spend our leisure time and so on. Some people have been left behind by the computer revolution, and it may well be appropriate for the state to offer special training, or other kinds of support, for these people. But very few would argue on these grounds that the state should have introduced costly policies designed to prevent the computer revolution from occurring in the first place. By the same token, in many instances, it will be more appropriated for the state to aid and support those who are left behind by profound and rapid cultural change than to work in ways which are costly to others to prevent that change from happening in the first place.

Conclusion

The strategy of this article has not been to look for a decisive objection to the liberal nationalist argument but to look for reasons to think that the argument may only work for a very restricted set of cases. To this end, I have explored four sets of cases where I think the liberal nationalist argument does not go through:

- (1) Cases where the culture in question does not value individual autonomy.
- (2) Cases where cultural nationalists are worried about the loss of a distinctive culture rather than the loss of culture *per se*.
- (3) Cases where some members of an endangered culture are left behind by cultural assimilation in the sense that they could integrate into the new practices and options that are being made available but would prefer not to.
- (4) Cases where greater urgency should be attached to the long-term costs and burdens imposed by the culturally nationalist policy than to the short-term costs imposed on some members of the community by profound and rapid cultural change.

No doubt there are some real world situations of interest to cultural nationalists which are not covered by any of the four sets of cases above. To the extent that this is true, the liberal nationalist argument does not fail completely. But it does seem reasonable to conclude from this accumulation of cases that anyone wishing to reconcile liberalism and cultural nationalism should continue searching for additional reasons that can justify imposing the costs and burdens entailed by culturally nationalist policies.

Notes

1 Raz (1986) and Galston (1991) criticise the principle of neutrality and argue that it is not a liberal commitment. For an extended discussion and assessment of the principle, see Sher (1997).

2 Here I concur with Taylor who, despite a general scepticism about the principle of neutrality, insists that a 'strong reason' would be needed to justify imposing the burdens and costs associated with a culturally nationalist policy. See Taylor (1994: 59).

3 One particularly promising argument briefly discussed by David Miller starts from the observation that a distinctive national culture is a public good likely to be vulnerable to standard collective action problems. See Miller (1995: 87–8, 147, 195), as well as Kymlicka (1989: 148, 199), and Tomasi (1995: 596). An anonymous referee has suggested to me that there may also be an important liberal argument from 'respect for personal choices'. I tend to think that this kind of consideration is more important to the case for 'political' nationalism than 'cultural' nationalism, but I don't want to rule out the possibility that it may be relevant to the latter as well.

4 This formulation is from Raz (1994: 176).

5 The phrase 'strong evaluator' is from Taylor (1985).

6 There is some disagreement among our authors about whether the autonomy argument under consideration applies, in addition, to what Miller terms 'sub-national cultures', e.g. territorially dispersed ethnic groups created by international migration. Raz argues that it does, and indeed gives his most explicit statement of the autonomy argument in a discussion of 'multiculturalism' (Raz 1994: ch. 8). Kymlicka, on the other hand, at least in his later work, seems to assume that the argument will mainly be relevant to 'societal cultures' (which 'tend to be national cultures') (1995: 76–80), and Miller quite explicitly restricts the autonomy argument to 'national cultures' (1995: 85–6, 146–8).

7 Raz is not only concerned with multiculturalism but also with nationalism. In a footnote to this sentence, he explicitly refers back to his discussion of the right to national self-determination in an earlier chapter.

8 For similar observations, see Buchanan (1991: 54), and Tomasi (1995: section II).

9 One could maintain that the variety and richness of meanings and options in traditional French culture is much greater than that found in American culture, so that the former is much more conducive to autonomy than the latter. Although this kind of cultural chauvinism may underlie some popular statements of cultural nationalism, it has no part to play, from what I can see, in the liberal nationalism of writers like Kymlicka, Miller, Raz and Tamir. Even allowing for the dubious empirical assumptions made by an argument of this form, it's not obvious to me that its implicit claim about autonomy is correct. For it is not clear that individual autonomy increases continuously with the variety and richness of cultural materials. A different view would be that autonomy is diminished if the variety and richness of cultural materials falls below some minimum threshold of adequacy but that autonomy cannot be increased indefinitely as cultural materials are increased.

10 For census figures on Welsh language usage covering the period from 1891 to 1981, see Williams (1994), Baker (1985) and Stephens (1978).

11 For instance, according to the 1901 census, approximately 15 per cent of people living in Wales were monolingual Welsh speakers, but about 50 per cent could speak Welsh. See Williams (1994: 131, also Stephens 1978: 146).

12 According to census figures, in 1971 only 20.8 per cent of people living in Wales could speak Welsh and only 1.3 per cent were monolingual Welsh speaking. By 1981 these figures had dropped to 18.9 per cent and 0.8 per cent respectively (see Williams 1994: 131). Of course, these aggregate figures mask significant regional variations within Wales, but these are unlikely to affect the point being made: if and where there are significant concentrations of monolingual Welsh speakers one would expect also to find a high rate of bilingualism amongst the rest of the population.

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