With Love to Insiders and Outsiders

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It is perhaps a very human tendency to form groups of "us" and "them," of insiders and outsiders. Where the differences are obvious the matter of identifying "us" and "them" becomes quite easy; for instance, to determine an "us" and a "them" based on skin color. Sometimes, though, the difference is not easily evident. For instance, it may not be easily apparent even to Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis which of the countries a stranger they spot on the street is from. Nonetheless, this does nothing to dim the ardor of Hindu nationalists in India keen to evict alleged Bangladeshi immigrants into the country, for instance. On the contrary, it actually worries them that millions of Bangladeshis are slipping into India unnoticed. The true root of this worry is in a question of power: the peril of democracy is that any group that has sizeable numbers becomes the rulers. The Hindu nationalists fear that growth in the population of Muslim migrants from Bangladesh will shift power out of their hands. The matter becomes more complicated because of India's multiplicity of languages and ethnicities. Small ethnic communities in the areas bordering Bangladesh, many of which are tribal Christian groups, don't care for Hindu religious politics. However, like the Hindu nationalists, they too fear local power slipping away from their own hands. Therefore, culture and identity become the arena of contestation in what is primarily a political struggle for power at the local as well as the national level.

Given the realities of the world we inhabit, such contestation is inevitable. It was possible, in the world before the advent of mechanized transport, to live local lives untroubled, for the most part, by the happenings of the wider world. Movement of human populations has occurred throughout the world and through history, but the rapidity, frequency and scale were orders of magnitude lower. Moreover, the notion of border in terms of both territory and identity was fluid. Identity before the advent of universal education seems to have been a very different thing in large parts of the globe. Linguistic identity, for instance, was evidently not the most important in many places. This continued down to the First World War when the age of empire ended. The changing identity of the British royal family illustrates this point well. It was only after World War I broke out that the British royal family, which was of German origin, changed its name from the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to the House of Windsor. Several previous rulers including Queen Victoria, who was Empress of India, had German as their first language. Her husband, Prince Albert, was also German. Their linguistic identity as German speakers ruling the British Empire had not been an issue in the era before the advent of linguistic nationalism, which emerged in the 1800s. Examples similar to the British royal family abound from around the world, of people taking on the linguistic identity of whichever territory they were in. We sometimes forget that a language can be learnt, and that family names have often changed over the years. The current American president's family name, for instance, was Drumpf, and his family too came from Germany. An ancestor in the 17th

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century changed the family name to Trump, and Donald Trump's grandfather Freidrich, who moved to New York, changed his name to Frederick.[2]

The predominance of linguistic identities followed the rise of national vernaculars that went hand in hand with the secular study of languages. It was a process by which "the old sacred languages—Latin, Greek and Hebrew—were forced to mingle on equal ontological footing with a motley plebeian crowd of vernacular rivals, in a movement which complemented their earlier demotion in the marketplace by print-capitalism," according to Benedict Anderson.[3] Secular education built on this. Anderson quotes Eric Hobsbawm to add his weight to Hobsbawm's dictum that "the progress of schools and universities measures that of nationalism, just as schools and especially universities became its most conscious champions." The map, the census and the museum further contributed to the reimagination of the world.[4] The world where German queens could rule the British empire—and largely enjoy the loyalty of her distant Indian subjects—disappeared. Between World War I and World War II, the old world of multicultural empires, such as the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman, collapsed, and a new world of nations with national cultures and languages came into being—a process of which the end of colonialism following World War II may be seen as the highlight.

World War II, however, was also a clash between rising national empires with colonial ambitions, and existing empires with colonies. Its horrors made the perils of combining nationalism with imperialism and colonialism painfully apparent. The world has shrunk away from all of these very substantially in theory if not always in practice. Religion had already been pushed aside by secularism in a large part of the world when modern nations were born. After the Cold War, even ideology, which was a kind of religion, suffered defeat. The grand theories departed, leaving a vacuum in many a human heart. Although there is a clear economic dimension and an aspect of political competition driving identity politics in many places, there is also perhaps something deeper. The reactions that we see around the world now, in country after country electing right-wing leaders, and in the ascent of religious nationalists in various places, may perhaps reflect a quest for stable and meaningful identities beyond what is offered by consumer capitalism.

Identities and cultures are human inventions, prone to continuous change, but they are essential mental software that help people find answers to the basic existential question, "Who am I?" It is practically impossible to live outside of the matrix of culture and identity. Our relationship with the national and religious culture that, by the accident of birth, we are born into, is often complicated by the demons and angels of history. Nonetheless, we cannot shun one culture and identity completely without adopting some other, because to do so would be practically impossible.

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[2] Daniel Victor, "Donald Drumpf: A Funny Label, but Is It Fair?" *The New York Times*, March 2, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/03/us/politics/donald-drumpf-a-funny-label-but-is-it-fair.html (accessed February 2019).
[3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso Books, 2006).
[4] Ibid.

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Visitors at Umananda, a river island on the Brahmaputra in Assam, India.[5]

If we view human cultural diversity as we view biodiversity, we come to a very different conception of how to deal with the difficult question of identifying with cultures. A famous quote usually attributed to the explorer and anthropologist Wade Davis put it very nicely: "Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you; they are unique manifestations of the human spirit." Different cultures, including the ones we are born into, have grown and flowered in different parts of the world through centuries of human endeavor and creativity. It is only right that they should all be accorded due respect and viewed with affection—both those that we happened to be born into, as well as all others, which are part of our shared human heritage, and manifestations of the human spirit.

The contents of this article reflect solely the opinions of the author.

[5] The island has a temple several centuries old that is visited by Hindu pilgrims, mainly from India. Despite their shared religion and nationality, they speak a multitude of languages and reflect a great diversity of ethnicities that may not be immediately apparent at first glance.

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