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Toleration and the Public Sphere

Newport, London, Stirling, York, Belfast

These workshops will focus on issues of toleration that raise tensions at the legal and political level of the community, and pose questions of citizenship and belonging. The overall theme is whether Britain can embrace cultural difference in its political and legal structures, and so become a genuinely plural community. Five workshops will be held throughout Britain, addressing different but related themes: (1) Cultural Identity and Freedom of Expression; (2) Immigration and Citizenship; (3) Gender Equality and Cultural Justice; (4) Toleration and Multiculturalism; (5) Division, Democracy and the Public Sphere. The workshops will be aimed at academics, officials, lobbyists, and members of cultural minority groups, and the speakers will reflect that aim.

Further details

Migratory movements have created ethnic, cultural and religious minorities who wish to preserve their group identities, but whose values can come into conflict with the majority public culture. Recent events in the UK and mainland Europe provide many examples of these conflicts. Europe's affluent states are the target of mass migration which challenges their national identities; in response they have imposed strict requirements to gain residency and citizenship. Sikh protests against *Behzti* and Christian critics of *Jerry Springer: The Opera* both cited the deep offence these plays posed to their beliefs. The Government's decision to outlaw incitement to religious hatred has further problematised rights of freedom of expression. Cultural and religious conflict is made more acute by the cross-cutting gender division. The debate in France and the UK about Muslim girls' desire to wear headscarves to school, for example, raises issues of the justifiability of Muslim women's subservient status in liberal societies.

Though philosophers and other academics can help in clarifying the issues at stake, ultimately such conflicts need to be resolved by citizens themselves in the public sphere – with government policy and legislation reflecting those deliberations. The public sphere is that impartial space where all members of the community meet as citizens of equal standing, able to engage with and make claims on others. This project will explore how different social identities might actively encounter each other in that space, demonstrating positive dialogue as fellow citizens who engage constructively with each other's beliefs, values and norms. The project also aims to play a small part in revivifying the public sphere in the UK by inviting a wide range of participants to the workshops. It is therefore integral to the project that alongside academics, representatives of religious and cultural minorities, think tanks, lobby groups and local community activists, participate in each workshop.

Workshop programme

(1) Cultural Identity and Freedom of Expression

(Newport, Wales, April 2006)

Organiser: Dr Gideon Calder

This workshop will focus on issues concerning the rightful scope of censorship and legal intervention in terms of guaranteeing space for diversity among different faiths, and cultural forms of life. It will consider the tensions involved in maintaining the normative goal of 'inclusivity', when balanced with the priority to protect freedom of belief and expression and the question of whether the state can, or should, remain 'neutral' between alternative faiths and cultural dispositions.

(2) Immigration and Citizenship

(London, April 2006)

Organisers: Dr Phillip Cole and Dr Jonathan Seglow

This workshop will explore the moral norms by which the UK can legitimately select new residents (economic contribution, material need; family reunification; ex-colonial links). It will also examine the acquisition of citizenship, assessing what competencies (language, inculcation of liberal democratic values, knowledge of national culture) will best make a thriving and inclusive public sphere to which all can contribute as citizens of equal standing.

(3) Gender Equality and Cultural Justice

(Stirling, June 2006)

Organiser: Dr Andrea Baumeister, University of Stirling

While many established cultural and religious customs cannot be easily reconciled with the norm of gender equality, cultural and religious communities tend to attach great significance to the expectations and rules that shape traditional gender roles. These tensions pose a complex dilemma for liberal democracies committed to a more inclusive notion of citizenship that recognises diversity. This workshop will consider the implications of these tensions for conceptions of gender equality and citizenship.

(4) Toleration and Multiculturalism

(York, September 2006)

Organiser: Professor Susan Mendus, University of York

This workshop will focus on contrasting notions of toleration, and their implications for the negotiation of the kinds of issues raised elsewhere in the workshop series. It will address the relation between negative toleration as forbearance and positive toleration, as an active engagement with public culture, committed to reforming it in a more inclusive and egalitarian direction. The workshop's chief aim would be to consider whether multicultural societies need to invoke the latter model in order to be successful.

(5) Democracy, Division and the Public Sphere

(Belfast, November 2006)

Organiser: Dr Cillian McBride, Queens University, Belfast

This session will explore ideas of citizenship and recognition in a divided society, including constitutional devices for accommodating political and religious divisions and encouraging public dialogue; the role of parading and religious iconography in shaping public spaces; and the potentialities of citizenship education as a means of inculcating liberal democratic values.

Speakers and Participants

Each workshop:

- 12 participants, comprising (a) academics; (b) officials from public bodies; (c) representatives of cultural and religious minorities
- 4 formal presentations (2 from academics, 2 from non-academics), plus discussion