

How to Create British Values

Written by Phil Cole

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PHIL COLE, JUN 18 2014

British Prime Minister David Cameron is committed to promoting 'British' values in the UK's education system, in order to combat extremism. On his list is freedom, tolerance and respect for the rule of law.

Of course, what counts as a list of British values is contested and so he cannot specify in advance what should be on it – we need to go through a process of creating a national identity consisting of British values, and what we have to recognize is that this is essentially the creation of something that does not exist. Any national identity is essentially a work of fiction, as we can see if we take a closer look at the process we have to go through to create one.

The first element of that process is the construction of a set of values that all members of the 'nation' are taken to share such that they have a crucial *sameness*. But this is to set aside the fact that they do not all share these values – many members of the nation will not hold them or will hold very different ones. For example, going back to Cameron's list, many citizens of the United Kingdom are highly intolerant, don't believe in freedom, or have little respect for the rule of law and there is plenty of historical evidence that this has been the case throughout most of British history.

The second element is the claim that national 'others' cannot share these values because they are *different*. But this again is to set aside the fact that these values are widespread beyond the national border. Many other nations seem to value freedom, tolerance and respect for the rule of law – this is not a unique list of distinctively British values.

So there are two creative processes going on here, as members of the nation (or rather those who take themselves to represent it) firstly create a fictional account of themselves, and secondly create a fictional account of others. This is, importantly, also a process of *exclusion* of those others who do not share our values, despite the fact that they do share them. (This process, of course, is not confined to the question of national identity, but applies to any cultural or ethnic group that sets out to define itself as distinct from others).

What we end up with is a fictional inside and a fictional outside, but the process is more complex and creative than this, because we also create a fictional past and a fictional present. The fictional past is, of course, of a national history that embodies these values – so British history is one of tolerance, freedom and respect for the rule of law, despite the fact that our colonial history demonstrates just the opposite. And so myth plays a crucial role in narrating historical events.

But also an important part of this is the fabrication of the presence or absence of others in the national history, the omission of the story of migration and the role of migrants. This fabrication extends to the national here-and-now as the presence of migrants is constructed as problematic if not threatening to our identity and values.

It is this latter aspect of the process which is most worrying because it reveals that the target of this campaign is the migrant, something made clear by Cameron's recent remarks in the Daily Mail about Muslims. It is the migrant who fails to conform to this identity, this list of values, despite the fact that the majority of those who embrace intolerance, hate freedom and break the law are members of what we might describe as the 'indigenous' community.

There is nothing wrong with endorsing freedom, tolerance and respect for the rule of law as values, and indeed much right with it, but the way forward is not to claim them as emerging from a particular national identity or culture, but to

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endorse them as constitutional principles suitable for all peoples in all parts of the world. In other words, instead of using them to draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them', we should see them as ways of uniting diverse peoples around values that embody the best of what it is to be a human being living in a political community.

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