

Where do we go from here? Alien concepts meet British values as we contemplate the future of social integration

There is a scene in Dennis Villeneuve's film [Arrival](#) where the protagonist Dr Louise Banks confounds our expectations. On a high security mission to meet a pair of alien visitors, she relinquishes the military and diplomatic protection afforded her, removes her gargantuan space suit and simply reaches her hand out to the visitors. In that moment, she is no longer the expert linguist, leading diplomat or even US citizen – she is vulnerable, curious, human.

The analogy is a little clunky, but something about the scene resonates with my experience of working with marginalized migrant and refugee communities over the last ten or more years, perhaps because many of those I've met report feeling like aliens within the UK – not valid, not safe and not welcome. Where I have witnessed time and again our attempts to defend against perceived outsiders with policies and procedures which purportedly 'keep us safe' and 'teach them how to behave' – I have yet to see a properly sensitive, intercultural approach to new arrivals.

Why is it that we struggle with this? One much-vaunted theory since Brexit is that we are a nation hopelessly polarised on the topic of immigration, which impedes an integrated response. And yet, the polarisation itself suggests something intrinsically fearful and ambivalent within the British psyche about 'otherness' which prevents us from being able to question our cultural identity as something flexible, changing and multifarious; something which, in the philosopher [Kwame Anthony Appiah's](#) words 'endures through [...] and only by change' (2016).

Kwame Anthony Appiah delivered the [BBC Reith Lectures](#) this year, in which he invited us to reflect on four aspects of identity: Creed, Country, Colour and Culture. His thoughtful approach to concepts such as nation, national consciousness, how we decide who 'we' are and what 'our values' mean, provided something of a salve to the bitter wrangling over immigration. Instead of becoming entangled in the web of British politics, he gave us a global, historical perspective on how human beings have always struggled with these notions and pointed to where creative solutions have been found, not least in one of his home countries, Ghana, whose people, with over 80 languages and multiple religious affiliations, spread across the globe whilst maintaining and evolving a sense of shared culture.

Appiah's lectures forecast a series of further open debates on the topic of UK social integration. Through his reference to Ernest Renan's idea of nation as the 'clearly expressed desire to continue common life', he introduced the challenge of a [civic creed](#) which is both potent and lean – 'potent enough to give significance to citizenship, lean enough to be shared by people with different religious and ethnic affiliations.'

This idea surfaced again at the [London Mayoral Conference on Social Integration](#) and the [London Conference](#), both of which promoted the city as a cosmopolitan leader in diverse and inclusive approaches to a common life. At the Mayoral Conference, MP Chukka Umunna acknowledged that, despite our super-diversity, Londoners tend towards parallel lives, with few opportunities to really get to know people from other backgrounds, faiths or ethnicities. In response to this, there was

palpable good will and energy towards rethinking integration as a 'two-way street' in which, to paraphrase [Sarah Spencer](#), we might embrace an intercultural approach as 'mutual engagement in social, economic, political and cultural spheres of identity'. Perhaps influenced by [Ted Cantle's](#) work, which emphasizes the idea of different cultures as 'currencies to be exchanged', the conference explored how cities across the globe might (and often do) innovate inclusive policies around human rights, citizenship, health, housing and town planning to ensure that those who live there, regardless of nationality or status, have a stake in the country's cultural evolution.

Nevertheless, amid such optimism, there were moments at both events where these sparkling ideas felt exposed or anxious; once where [Sasha Havlicek](#) questioned our optimism in the face of rising world Fascism; and the other at the London Conference where the refugee crisis and our failure to fulfil our UK resettlement obligations came up. In both cases, and in some of the breakout sessions, it seemed as if despite all the good will and smart policy discussion, people were aware that we were talking within a bubble, an echo-chamber full of like-minded, urbanised liberals. It was all very well discussing ideas, we were within our comfort zone here. But how, within peoples' everyday lives, amid escalating concerns about money, jobs and housing, could we possibly change attitudes on the ground or foster the will to discover 'common lives', so that new arrivals are indeed welcomed and included as 'integral' to society? And were we, those invited to engage with the debate, really representative of the issues we were discussing, or able to say honestly that we model intercultural curiosity and relationships in our own lives?

The uneasy subtext to these questions became further apparent in the [Casey Review](#), in which Louise Casey set off on a worthwhile quest to explore social integration across the UK, only to come back with a seemingly unshakeable conviction that the chasm between different cultural and faith communities can be bridged by an even stronger adherence to '[British values](#)'- equated with tolerance, democracy, equality and respect - via an Integration Oath which will ensure new arrivals are 'clear on their responsibilities.' My interpretation of this, apart from the obvious assimilation slant, is that in the face of honest enquiry, in the face of *not knowing* what to do, Casey held all the tighter to a construct of what we think, or *ought to know* – perhaps shaped by those British ideals of sovereignty, history of empire, or insular certainties about what it is to 'be us'. Taken within this framework, even well-meaning questions seem to miss the point, such as [British Future's](#) somewhat complacent imagining of the questions we ask ourselves about immigration:

'How does Britain remain British with so many new arrivals? Will they integrate, contribute positively to our society and share our customs and values? Do they want to be one of us?'
(British Future, *Making Citizenship Matter*, 2016:15)

I'm not sure I was aware of the concept of British values before 7/7, or the economic downturn. I'm still not sure of what they are now, or whether I want to be 'one of us' - perhaps because I lived in Brazil as a child, or because whenever British values are invoked, they don't seem very attractive, even terms like liberty, respect and tolerance imbued with strains of national security, the Prevent agenda or plain and simple fear. Certainly, when I talk to most people, they seem equally confused; 'aren't they just human values?' is the phrase I often hear back.

Whatever they mean to individual people, the idea to me that we somehow own the monopoly on values of tolerance and respect is not only hypocritical, but laughable. Bear with me, as like many people who have been moved by the recent refugee crisis, I didn't always feel this way. When I

began work leading a women's asylum project in 2008, I felt proud that the UK had a strong human rights record and that we were willing and able to offer sanctuary to those fleeing persecution. When, five years later, I moved to social integration work in schools, I was hopeful that for more settled communities at least, things would be more positive. What I found in both cases was profoundly shocking, not only in the casual racism and blank coldness new arrivals frequently report on the bus, in the street or at the school gate, but the systematic and institutional ignorance and discrimination I witnessed first-hand. I saw violated women during asylum interviews told to stop crying as they were clearly lying about their experiences of torture; I heard from a reliable source about how interviewing officers were coerced by their managers into refusing asylum applications for the sake of quotas; I pushed for judicial reviews with a number of destitute and traumatised mothers and babies rejected by social services with the words 'we have a hotline to the Home Office you know'; I advocated for a family waiting for their asylum decision, taken to court by a leading chemist because the mother, woozy on trauma medication, had left a packet of dummies in the hood of the pram; I phoned on behalf of families who were afraid to go to their GP because the receptionists were often so rude to them; I argued with a very polite parent who refused to join our intercultural parenting course on the basis that 'it's clearly for foreigners; I'm British and I know everything there is to know about parenting'.

I wish I could say that these were isolated cases – but the truth is that this is the tip of the iceberg where my experiences of real social integration are concerned. The problem it seems, is not that we don't aspire to tolerance or respect (and I have also seen many examples of these), it's that we don't seem to be able to question our own assumptions about what these values mean, and what they might mean to others with vastly different life experiences to us. In fact, we don't seem interested in their prior life experience at all, as though everything that happened before entering our hallowed land is inconsequential. Against this backdrop, it seems rather disingenuous to ask why some communities don't want to 'be one of us', when their experiences of arrival are so utterly hostile.

So my idea of British values and how this erodes our approach to social integration is based on the fact that the what we aspire to and claim for ourselves, and the way we behave and live out our values, are often very different. That is not to say that there are not people doing amazing, courageous things – you only have to look at the surge in start-ups and volunteer projects since the refugee crisis to know how many people are catching on to the idea of a common humanity and a proper welcome. Nevertheless, although I realise that people like me – white British, middle class people working with marginalized communities – can be dubbed 'do-gooders' or martyrs (sometimes by both sides), the reasons I work in this area are actually quite selfish... and perhaps therein lies a clue.

Just as I have become disillusioned with British values when I've tried to find them in action, working with people from all around the world in London has given me something unique – not only, in bell hooks' words, the 'radical possibility [...] to see the world from an outsider's perspective' (1990:146), and to question myself within that, – but quite simply, and perhaps ironically, the opportunity to belong. There is something about losing your home and risking your life to travel to an unknown country which can kick-start resilience alongside trauma, curiosity alongside fear, and creativity alongside deprivation. Borrowed from the anthropological term 'liminality', the experience of a transitional phase of life, without social status or rank, can open up marginal spaces in which people invest in a new belonging, open to all and rejecting of no-one – with tolerance and acceptance. The

first time I experienced this was within the Women's Group at the asylum project, where I felt myself to be a guest. Although I initiated the group, set it up each week and provided activities, it was the women who ran it, invited new members, asked each other (often very directly) where they were from and why they were here, and committed absolutely to supporting each other and the growth of the project. Our relationships were complex and involved open discussion of power and privilege (some of the Ivorians liked to call me 'La Blanche' rather than by my name), imbued with wisdom, determination, dark humour and a zeal for life which come from an experience of real adversity. Within this, not having had any experience that could compare, really acknowledging that *I could never know* what it was like to be a refugee, I was the outsider, ready to learn from those who were ostensibly more vulnerable than me and yet had an understanding of humanity, relationship and active citizenship which far surpassed mine. Perhaps because of this acknowledgement, I was made welcome and enjoyed an experience of community which has informed my approach to integration ever since.

My experience of designing and running intercultural community projects is by no means unusual; rather this sort of work is common at grass-roots level but often gets overlooked in policy – as do some of the subtle and complex lessons learned. This is problematic, in that it leads to senior politicians and policy-makers believing that the solution is straightforward, or at least that it can be solved by making swift, complacent assumptions which fail to ask the right questions or integrate answers based on really listening to those directly affected. On this basis, solutions which first fail to place new arrivals at the centre of their own integration, then fail to bring together practice and policy, are doomed to overall failure.

Where do we go from here? There are things to be positive about, if you know where to look. Last year, as part of my [Clore Social fellowship](#), I went to San Francisco – a city with a migrant population similar to London. Travelling around by bus, I was immediately struck by both the diversity and dignity of those around me – people taking their place as citizens, however complex that may be; no apparent feeling of 'us and them'; even travel information tannoyed in 4 different languages. The feeling continued when I shadowed two very different community organisations, [Refugee Transitions](#) and [Mujeres Unidas e Activas](#), made similar by their approaches to service delivery which respected migrants by acknowledging their skills –via cultural exchange projects, and community organising models which encouraged new-arrivals to start training, lobbying and facilitating activities from the moment they stepped through the door. Finally, a visit to the public health/ welfare department convinced me how much we could learn here: an integrated system of social care and welfare for refugees and migrants which works across statutory and voluntary sector organisations; 'sanctuary city' protection from deportation for those as yet undocumented; a rise in organised labour movements and immigrant-based employment cooperatives – practical, bottom-up solutions which promote autonomy and get people and policy working hand in hand to build common lives.

Returning to the UK, I continue to develop projects which follow these principles, working with [Renaissi's Bilingual Advisers](#) to facilitate organising and leadership skills for migrant communities whilst encouraging participatory, exchange-based cultural activities for all families around conversational ESOL, wellbeing, family learning, employability, parenting and mental health. In this, I am further inspired by organisations such as [Migrants Organise](#), [The Challenge](#) and [Citizens UK](#) working to push forward this agenda; by funders switching to participatory and asset-based models; and by the fact that in London, deputy-Mayor Matthew Ryder will be looking more closely at the

practicalities of social integration for schools, institutions and workplaces. I also continue to believe that many British people want more and better opportunities to get to know people from other countries/ cultures and would simply say – be curious, patient, kind and open towards those arriving in your neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools: look for any opportunity to befriend, explore and exchange values, and don't assume your cultural norms for building trust will be the same – they won't be, but you'll learn so much from moving out of your own comfort zone.

Like those who migrate here from other countries, the UK is on a difficult journey into the unknown, in which the stories we have previously told ourselves about 'who we are' no longer work, and the new stories we are putting out there appear to be hasty constructs borne out of fear.

In the meantime, never have today's refugees and migrants been more certain or courageous about why they're here and what they want from life. It is we who are unsure, who are afraid not to know, or to contemplate change as we enter our own phase of liminality.

Perhaps our new arrivals can help us.

[Emma Brech](#) drafted this piece as part of her Clore Social Leadership fellowship. You can contact Emma via [Twitter](#).