



GLOBAL
CENTRE FOR
PLURALISM

CENTRE
MONDIAL DU
PLURALISME

The Hardware and Software of Pluralism

Will Kymlicka | Queen's University
March 2017

In his 2010 LaFontaine-Baldwin Lecture, His Highness the Aga Khan said that successful pluralism requires both “hardware” and “software”. The hardware are institutions, such as constitutions, legislatures, courts, schools and the media. These formal institutions define the legal and political space within which members of society act. The software he defined as “cultural habits” or a “public mindset”, such as conceptions of national identity and historic narratives. These habits and mindsets shape our perceptions of who belongs and who contributes, and influence how we interact on an everyday basis with others.¹

Both dimensions are critical. Even the best-designed institutions will fail if citizens enter those institutional spaces with fearful or exclusionary attitudes. The Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant once claimed “the problem of organizing a state, however hard it may seem, can be solved even for a race of devils”. But the change cases carried out for this project suggest that this

is not true. Institutional structures can be quickly subverted by rising strands of intolerance, or slowly subverted by enduring attitudes of indifference. Promoting pluralism therefore requires both “institution work” and “culture work”.

This is not to suggest that hardware and software are independent of each other, moving along separate tracks. On the contrary, they continually interact and condition each other. Institutions like schools and the media play an important role in shaping cultural mindsets, just as cultural narratives shape institutional possibilities. At its best, these dynamics produce virtuous circles: the emergence of pluralistic narratives and identities make possible inclusive institutional reforms which in turn serve to strengthen habits and mindsets of respect for diversity. But the dynamics can equally go in the opposite direction, as exclusionary mindsets lead to discriminatory institutional reforms, which in turn serve to further polarize attitudes and exacerbate feelings of distrust or enmity.

¹ http://www.pluralism.ca/images/PDF_docs/lafontainebaldwin_lecture2010.pdf

This paper is part of a new publication series from the **Global Centre for Pluralism** called **Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies**. Focused on six world regions, each “change case” examines a specific moment in time when a country altered its approach to diversity, either expanding or eroding the foundations of inclusive citizenship. The aim of the series – which also features thematic overviews by leading global scholars – is to build global understanding of the sources of inclusion and exclusion in diverse societies and the pathways to pluralism.

This indeed is a recurring motif in the change cases: the need to attend to the reciprocal interactions of hardware and software, and to consider how these interactions can generate both virtuous and vicious cycles of inclusion and exclusion. International actors are often experts in either hardware (e.g., designing electoral systems) or in software (e.g., promoting interfaith understanding), but pluralism requires attention to, and expertise on, both.

In this brief overview, I will focus on one important form of this software-hardware interaction: namely, the link between political institutions and national identities or national narratives. National identities are by no means the only factor that shape citizens' cultural habits – we learn many of our habits in more local neighbourhoods or associations – but the change cases repeatedly illustrate how ideas of nationhood exercise a profound influence on the prospects for pluralism, both for good and ill.

Virtuous Circles:

Some commentators have argued that ideas of nationhood are always exclusionary, and that there is no such thing as a pluralistic (or multicultural) conception of nationhood. But several change cases suggest a more promising picture, in which changes in the software of national identity can trigger inclusive institutional reforms.

Consider Daniela Ikawa's study of the adoption of affirmative action in Brazil. Affirmative action is a piece of institutional hardware for dealing with horizontal inequalities. However, before this hardware can be adopted, or even considered, these horizontal inequalities must be made visible.

That is, when citizens and policymakers look at the social world, they need to be attentive to the possibility that there are systematic inequalities between particular groups in society. However, these inequalities were not visible in Brazil for a long period of time because of a certain national narrative, known as the “racial democracy” narrative. According to this narrative, Brazilians are a promiscuous and integrated fusion of European, African and indigenous racial groups, completely different from the US in which racial groups were kept segregated and interracial marriages were prohibited. Within this national narrative, it was difficult for Afro-Brazilians to argue that they suffered systematic inequalities, since the very idea that Afro-Brazilians formed an identifiable category conflicted with the national narrative.

In order to argue for the adoption of affirmative action, therefore, the first task of reformers was to challenge the national narrative of racial democracy, and to highlight the many ways in which Afro-Brazilians were in fact subject to specific processes of discrimination and marginalization. In short, the first step to institutional reform on affirmative action was culture work on national narratives.

But the story did not stop there. According to Ikawa, this new piece of institutional hardware enabled further change in the cultural software. The adoption of affirmative action policies created institutional spaces in which it became possible to discuss other ways to think about what it means to belong to Brazilian society, and other ways to imagine how to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Cultural work was needed to make race visible as a marker of

horizontal inequality, but once an institutional commitment was made to address these inequalities, this in turn opened up space to think about the positive value of a more diversity-friendly conception of national identity.

This is a striking example of a positive interaction between hardware and software, as changes to institutions and to cultural mindsets work together to build greater respect for pluralism.

Downward Spirals:

Sadly, the change cases commissioned for this project offer many examples where the interaction between hardware and software goes in the opposite direction. Indeed, the history of postcolonial nation-building is replete with examples of downward spirals in the hardware and software of pluralism.

Consider here Neil DeVotta's study of Sri Lanka. As DeVotta notes, at the time of independence in 1948, Sri Lanka was widely perceived as the British colony most likely to have a successful transition to independence. While the former Ceylon was both ethnically and religiously diverse, with a sizeable Tamil minority, there appeared to be a broad social compact amongst the inhabitants in favour of independence and democracy. Yet within six years, ethnic relations started to deteriorate, as political parties representing the Sinhalese majority passed a series of laws to entrench their hegemony, such as the 1956 Official Language Act, leading ultimately to the emergence of Tamil separatism and a bloody civil war.

This dynamic has both software and hardware dimensions. At the level of institutional hardware, the Constitution failed to provide sufficient legal checks and balances against the abuse of majority power. But a prior question is why the Sinhalese majority wanted to abuse its power, and DeVotta argues that this is intimately tied up with certain cultural narratives that began to circulate and grow. In particular, a toxic combination of religious and ethnonationalist ideologies emerged, in which Sri Lanka was conceived both as a holy island belonging to Buddhists, and a homeland belonging to the Sinhalese, in which (Hindu or Muslim) Tamils were always already a foreign element, at best tolerated guests, at worst seen as disloyal traitors. This exclusionary ethnoreligious conception of Sri Lankan nationhood displaced a more inclusive conception that had inspired the common struggle for decolonization.

As in Brazil, the software and hardware interact in an iterative process. The rise of an exclusionary ethnoreligious nationalist narratives generated pressure for institutional reforms, such as changes in language laws and public service hiring regulations, which in turn led to increasing ethnic polarization, the hardening of identities on both sides, and ultimately violence.

This story is not unique to Sri Lanka. There are many other cases where a common struggle for decolonization generated an inclusive social compact, involving both institutional hardware and cultural software, which then dissolved as one or other group sought to hoard political power or economic resources and embraced cultural

narratives that asserted their primacy while delegitimizing others as foreign or backward or disloyal.

The Importance of Cultural Framing of Inequalities

These two country studies – Brazil and Sri Lanka – represent opposite trajectories, but they share in common the challenge of addressing horizontal inequalities. In the Brazilian case, it was a marginalized group – the Afro-Brazilians – who sought to make their inequality visible in the face of a national narrative which obscured it. In the case of Sri Lanka, it was the Sinhalese majority who were disadvantaged under British colonialism, and who sought to use their newly-acquired majority power to redress their disadvantage.

These are obviously very different contexts, but in each case we see the crucial importance of how inequality is framed within the cultural software. In Brazil, the strategy of Afro-Brazilians was to fight horizontal inequality by telling a more inclusive national narrative, one which highlighted the history of racial discrimination, but which did so as part of a commitment to building a shared future. In Sri Lanka, the strategy of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists was to fight inequality by telling a more exclusionary national narrative, in which the history of discrimination was used to dispute whether Tamils really belong or whether they can really be trusted to share power.

As these cases illustrate, the challenge of horizontal inequalities is not just a hardware question about, say, the effectiveness of affirmative action policies.

Affirmative action can indeed be used to help both disadvantaged minorities (as with African-Americans) and disadvantaged majorities (as in Malaysia or South Africa). But this institutional hardware is always embedded in a larger cultural narrative, and this matters. Affirmative action in one context can be adopted as part of a narrative of national reconciliation and inclusive citizenship; and in another context, the same policy can be adopted as a tool of ethnoreligious exclusion, used to mark some groups as not belonging. Similar pieces of institutional hardware can be connected to very different narratives about identity, belonging, and collective responsibility, with very different implications for pluralism.

All of this suggests that we are going to miss a lot of the action around building a pluralist society if we focus only on the institutional hardware. We need to consider how institutions empower certain kinds of “cultural habits” and “public mindsets”, and equally how these habits and mindsets can undermine institutions. Pluralism is a cultural project as much as an institutional design task.

AUTHOR

Will Kymlicka is the Canada Research Chair in Political Philosophy at Queen's University and a visiting professor in the Nationalism Studies program at the Central European University in Budapest. His research interests include democracy and diversity, in particular models of citizenship and social justice within multicultural societies.

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

This analysis was commissioned by the Global Centre for Pluralism to generate global dialogue about the drivers of pluralism. The specific views expressed herein are those of the author.

The Global Centre for Pluralism is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at pluralism.ca