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## Community? What Community?

It is an issue that has been at the centre of news reports over recent weeks: the fragmentation of society in groups that barely relate to each other or at worst collide in Britain today.

Interestingly, there has never been such attention paid to the concept of 'community cohesion' than in the past few years of New Labour. Back in the late 1990s there was the recognition that British society was being polarised in those who had and those who had not.

Large areas of the country had fallen victim to deprivation, with impoverished populations, inadequate or non-existing services and with no support structures in place to buck this trend.

Since, large sums of money in the form of flagship government and European programmes have gone into addressing this situation.

Why then, despite the obvious physical improvement to communities in the areas targeted by those programmes, do we find ourselves living in a country where to the polarisation between people in economic terms, we must add that of the fragmentation of community relations and the segregation of society by way of creed, culture or sexual orientation?

At the heart of this accelerated fragmentation, if in fact that is what is happening, we find the concept of community,

in itself ambiguous and at best prone to blurred affiliations.

What does it mean to belong to a community? Is there such a thing as one community to which all people living in a particular country should subscribe?

Surely one of the joys of living in a mature, non-homogeneous society is the fact that its diverse population celebrate their commonalities and respect their differences.

Sensational tabloid stories tend to mask a deeper current of discontent which those news bites only exacerbate and distort. Discontent, which is the product not so much of domestic but international interventions and perceptions held as a result.

Also as a result the perception of not belonging, of victimisation whether real or not, emphasises differences and encourages new or restricted notions of belonging and community.

Increasingly, for instance, people are defining themselves by their religious affiliation rather than by nationality.

What is the reason for this growing trend?

Is it because they do not identify with the model of community that is being sold by those in charge of policy, is it safety in numbers?

A question voiced by a commentator in the news this week: Is there such a thing as a 'Muslim community', a 'gay community', or a 'Christian community'?

These labelling terms do not offer a clear or useful picture when describing or trying to define the forces at work in society or in fact the great deal of diversity among those groups.

By the same token, impartial government ministers with vested or sectarian interests at heart do not an inclusive government make.

What to do then?

Somehow, solutions being bandied about do not strike as particularly new or even fit for purpose.

Einstein once said that problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.

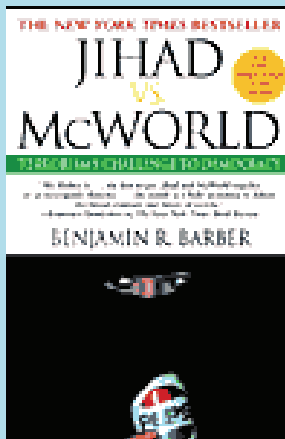
In fact, however, many of the theories and methods being used today were originally conceived as tools for the corporate world; and are being applied to social issues as mere rehashes of those approaches. It is not clear that this is the solution.

A deeper, more appropriate level of thinking is needed and soon.

There are, however, attempts to think and act in a way other than the status quo when grappling with the pressing issues that affect our communities today. From, internationally, the Alliance of Civilisations recently advocated by the UN to examples currently at work in local communities.

This issue of Interchanges highlights some examples of theory and processes of community engagement that have come to our attention, which highlight the importance of wide consensus and empowerment when tackling common concerns within a community or communities. Here is to a ray of hope. AMV

## Publications



**Jihad vs. Mc World**  
by Benjamin Barber  
1995, Ballantine Books,  
New York, 289pp  
ISBN 0345383044

It seems to be one of the main effects of globalisation to promote simultaneously two opposite tendencies, a centripetal force that tends to unify and uniform and a centrifugal one that tends to fragment. In his book *Jihad versus McWorld* (New York, 1995),

Benjamin Barber explores these two antithetical forces operating in contemporary society, while raising the question of the future of democracy and civil society in a world dominated by the free trade.

He argues that whilst the tendency he names Jihad aims at recreating sub-national borders based on culture and ethnicity, McWorld, which is driven by international markets, operates as a strong homogenising force and aims at promoting uniformity.

'The tendencies of what I am here calling the forces of Jihad and the forces of McWorld operate with

equal strength in opposite directions, the one driven by parochial hatred, the other by universalizing markets.(...)They have one thing in common: neither offers hope to citizens looking for practical ways to govern themselves democratically.'

Barber lucidly raises a crucial issue, that the growth of private supra-national corporations has weakened the sovereignty of nation states but it has not been accompanied by the development of global political and civil institutions.

In a world where financial, commercial, human, cultural and technology flows are faster and more extensive than ever, notions of global citizenship and global civil society are yet to be developed.

Read also the author's post 9/11 follow up article for *The Nation*  
<http://www.thenation.com/doc/2002/0121/barber>



### **Global Civil Society 2006/07**

by H. Anheier et al (eds.)

2006, Sage Publications  
London, 400pp  
ISBN 1412934362

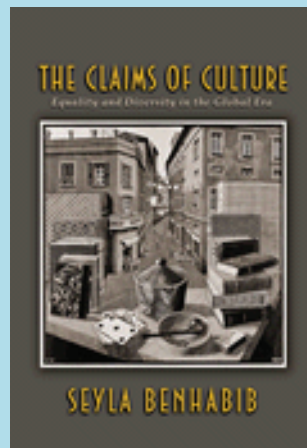
Now in its sixth edition, the annual Global Civil Society series provide an indispensable guide to global civil society or civic participation and action around the world.

Each yearbook includes commissioned contributions from leading commentators across the social sciences on the latest issues and developments; it also presents the latest approaches to measuring and analysing global civil society and provides a chronology of key global civil society events in the year.

Global Civil Society 2006/7 looks into the complex relationship between violence, civil society and legitimacy in a unique dialogue that crosses political, cultural and religious boundaries.

Is the use of violence by non-state actors ever justified? How is violence transmitted from the private to the public sphere?

Why is terror and 'the war on terror' catalysing rather than suppressing violence? Do Western and Islamic traditions of thought offer any solutions? The chapters in this edition include: Not Even a Tree: Can Violence be Justified in a Global Era? By Mary Kaldor and Heba Raouf Ezzat; and Bringing Violence 'Back Home' by Jenny Pearce.



### **The Claims of Culture**

by Seyla Benhabib

2002, Princeton University Press,  
US and UK, 245pp  
ISBN 0 691 04863 0

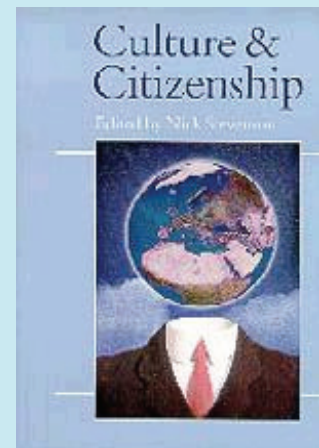
The Claims of Culture challenges the assumption shared by many theorists and activists that cultures are clearly defined wholes. Benhabib argues that much debate is dominated by this faulty belief, one with grave consequences for how we think injustices among groups should be redressed and human diversity achieved.

She presents an alternative approach, developing an understanding of cultures as continually creating, re-creating and renegotiating the imagined boundaries between 'us' and 'them'.

She suggests that groups are too often identified in terms of marginalisation or discrimination, and that we should focus rather on investigating those processes through which existing social and cultural divisions are transformed into political mobilization.

Drawing on contemporary cultural politics, the author develops a double track model of democracy that permits maximum cultural contestation within the official public sphere, as well as in social movements and the institutions of civil society.

Over seven chapters, some of the topics analysed are multiculturalism and gendered citizenship, dilemmas of citizenship, and alternatives to the outmoded notion of the nation-state.



### **Culture and Citizenship**

by Nick Stevenson

2001, Sage Publications,  
London, 216pp  
ISBN 0 7619 5560 7

This collection of essays analyses the relationship between culture and citizenship and their significance in the context of contemporary society. The premise is that whilst culture seems to point in the direction of particularistic issues of aesthetics meaning and difference, citizenship points towards universalistic issues relating to rights, obligations and belonging in the modern world. Likewise, a theory or policy of citizenship which fails to take culture into account is worthless, while an approach to culture which marginalises questions of rights and obligations is equally defective.

Stevenson begins by arguing that there are fertile grounds for exploring the interconnections between the two domains of culture and citizenship, which invite a dialogue across disciplinary boundaries such as inclusion, rights, and market and policy. Furthermore, cultural resources and our public institutions have a vital role to play in citizenship.

The main topics investigated include cultural democracy; globalisation and the nation state; European citizenship, and cultural policy. Also included is an outline of a general theory of cultural citizenship; an investigation into disability and cultural citizenship; and an exploration into race, multiculturalism and difference.

# Resources

In this section you can find initiatives, online resources, organisations and research relevant to the theme of this issue of Interchanges. Some of them you will have come across, their common thread: an uncompromising commitment to a society rich in its diversity and willingness to enter into healthy debate and reflection.

## Open Democracy

OpenDemocracy is an independent website on global current affairs - free to read and to participate. Its vast archive of contents, updated several times daily, offers stimulating, critical analysis, promoting dialogue and debate on issues of global importance and linking citizens from around the world.

<http://www.opendemocracy.net>

## Open Democracy forum

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe\\_islam/issue.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/issue.jsp)

What meaning does a 'European Islam' have? How does European identity define itself in relation to Islam? This is an Open Democracy forum for Muslims and non-Muslims to define their interaction.

## Diversity in Question

by Sarah Lindon

In what seem to be bad times for multiculturalism, this paper asks whether the concept needs to be reformed or replaced.

The basis of this paper was an OpenDemocracy / Open University panel convened to discuss living with difference and joined by Reena Bhavnani, Max Farrar, Judith Squires, and Sami Zubaida. Sarah Lindon, OD Readers and Participation Editor at Open Democracy summarises this discussion.

Available at

<http://www.opendemocracy.net>

## RELATED LINKS

### Pickled Politics

<http://www.pickledpolitics.com/>

### True Majority

<http://www.truemajority.com>

### Bassac

<http://www.bassac.org.uk/>

### Kairos in Soho

<http://www.kairosinsoho.org.uk/>

### Forum Monterrey 2007

<http://www.monterreyforum2007.org/>

### Tackling the Roots of Racism - a report by the

Joseph Rowntree Fdn.

<http://www.jrf.org.uk>

### IFF

<http://www.internationalfuturesforum.com>

### IDEA

<http://www.idea.gov.uk>

## Varieties of Otherness

by Arlene Goldbard

The author comments on Tony Blair's recent remarks on the issue of the niqab in an insightful reflection on the concept of fear and the other.

<http://arlenegoldbard.com/>

## World Social Forum

<http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>

The World Social Forum (WSF) is an annual meeting held by social movements, networks, NGOs and other civil society organizations opposed to neo-liberalism to coordinate world campaigns, share and refine organising strategies, and inform each other about movements from around the world and their issues. Born as a response to the World Economic Forum held in Davos, the meeting is normally held in January to coincide with its 'rival'. The next meeting of the WSF will take place in Nairobi, Kenya, between 20-25 January 2007.

## EVENT

### Better Together 2006

Better together 2006 is a two-day interactive residential workshop held in four different locations around the UK for those committed to partnership working. Led by international practitioners, this will be a learning opportunity for school leaders and managers looking to develop or extend community partnerships. For more information visit the conference website

<http://www.livegroup.co.uk/bettertogether/>

### Reaching Out

by the Social Exclusion Unit, UK.

On 11 September, the Social Exclusion Unit Task Force published 'Reaching Out: An Action Plan on Social Exclusion'. The plan sets out the work across government to improve the life chances of those who suffer, or may suffer in the future, from disadvantage.

[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social\\_exclusion\\_task\\_force/reaching\\_out/](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/reaching_out/)

### Alliance of Civilisations

<http://www.unaoc.org>

In its mission statement this initiative launched by the UN Secretary General says that it 'responds to a broad consensus across nations, cultures and religions that all societies are interdependent, bound together in their development and security, and in their environmental, economic and financial well-being.

The Alliance seeks to forge collective political will and to mobilize concerted action at the institutional and civil society levels to overcome the prejudice, misperceptions and polarization that militate against such a consensus'.

The initiative is led by a 'high-level group' composed of twenty leaders in the fields of politics, academia, civil society, international finance, and media from all regions of the world, which guides the work of the Alliance of Civilizations, assessing the forces that contribute to extremism, and recommending collective action to counter these forces. The group has held several meetings since its inception and will be publishing a final report of recommendations by the end of 2006.

### 'Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society'

This is the UK Government's strategy to increase race equality and community cohesion.

Download the publication at <http://odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1502614>

Visit the page of the Department for Communities and local Government to find out more about the work of the Race and Equality Unit in the UK

<http://odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1500185>

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The Centre for Creative Communities (CCC) is a non-profit organisation committed to the building of sustainable creative communities - communities where creativity and learning have pivotal roles to play in personal, social, civic, cultural, and economic development.

CCC works in partnership with a wide range of organisations interested in promoting activities that put creativity at the heart of social change.

CCC is supported by donations and grants from foundations, corporations and individuals and we rely on this support to carry out our work. Please email us at [info@creativecommunities.org.uk](mailto:info@creativecommunities.org.uk) if you would like to make a donation to support our activities.

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