

Article

Controversial Issues and the Rhetoric of Common Values

Lars Laird Iversen

MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, 0302 Oslo, Norway; lars.l.iversen@mf.no

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Abstract: In this article, I identify a broad, international ‘rhetoric of common values’, which hinges on the poorly supported assumption that values should be promoted because the sharing of values are the basis for social cohesion in groups. Through discussing two cases, I identify, analyse and critique key features of the empirical phenomenon that I call the rhetoric of common values. The two cases are the British government response to the so-called ‘Trojan Horse’ incident in 2014, and Norwegian core curricula since 1974. Previous research has critiqued the use of the term ‘fundamental British values’ as being unhelpful when schools teach controversial issues. The results of my analysis provide international breadth, some historical depth and metaphorical structure to our understanding of how the rhetoric of common values is used in education policy today. The article focusses less on dilemmas faced by teachers and more on the context of choice established ‘upstream’ by education policy. I argue that it is timely and important for teachers in religious education to understand the rhetoric of common values. It is a contemporary and politically relevant way in which religion is mobilised and politicised for exclusionary forms of national identity. Avoiding the rhetoric of common values does not mean avoiding values in education policy. The rhetoric of common values identitizes values. This causes the terms ‘values’ to be mobilised in boundary work separating ‘us’ from ‘them’, thus undercutting a better role of values in education policy: to reflect upon, and make relevant in life, guidelines for future action.

Keywords: controversial issues; religious education; rhetoric of common values; communities of disagreement; safe space

1. Introduction

An idea has appeared and become widespread in recent decades: that shared values are the social glue of groups. I call this the ‘rhetoric of common values’. In this article, I identify, analyse and criticize the rhetoric of common values. I shall use two examples, namely Norwegian core curricula since the 1970s and former Prime Minister David Cameron’s public argument for making schools promote ‘fundamental British values’ (FBV). This contributes to the emerging literature on controversial issues in school (Anker and von der Lippe 2016; Hand 2008; von der Lippe 2019; Sætra 2019, 2020; Toft 2020; Woolley 2020). In particular, it supports, broadens and deepens the insights provided by Lockley-Scott (2019a, 2019b) into the political and educational use of fundamental British values in recent education policy. This article supports the thrust of Lockley-Scott’s argument. It broadens the scope by identifying the rhetoric of common values as an international discursive trope, and it deepens the insights by investigating the intellectual history of behind the use of the rhetoric of common values in education policy and by further interrogating the metaphors that constitute it.

At a more general level, this paper responds to von der Lippe’s argument (von der Lippe 2019) that when a school decides what to teach as controversial, this decision is intimately bound up with the normative mandate of the school. In so doing, the article focuses attention on education policy. There is not necessarily a direct causal line from policy to teachers’ choices and practices in the classrooms.

Nevertheless, education policy statements and documents are important and influential, not only in the complex effects they have downstream in education systems but also as public rhetoric from positions of power. The article contributes to the research-based understanding of controversial issues by investigating the political and discursive patterns that inform the production of the normative mandate of national school systems. Conversely, investigating controversial issues in school curricula and policy is a useful window into understanding more of how education policymakers are shaped by political ideas, metaphors and discursive patterns in their understanding of the nature and place of the communities that the schools cater to in an increasingly global, connected, mediatized and securitized world.

The Norwegian and British cases are useful for several reasons. Providing examples from two national contexts broadens the scope of previous research on the use of values in education policy. The key empirical contribution of this article is to show that there exist rhetorical patterns that have several similar characteristics in the different places they are articulated. The comparison also allows for insights into how such global discursive patterns may refract (Beckford 2003) in contingent ways as they become articulated in the unique historical and place-specific contexts of Norway and Britain. The Norwegian case draws on previous research into the historical evolution of the rhetoric of common values in education policy and illuminates how the rhetoric of common values draws on wider political and cultural assumptions that resonate beyond the populist right. The Norwegian case shows the mobilisation of religion in terms of 'us-building', emphasising as it does the Christian and humanist heritage and traditions of Norway. The British example shows how the rhetoric of common values may become part of a more strident anti-extremist, counter-terrorist moment of securitization in politics (Farrell 2016; Lander 2016; Panjwani 2016; Sinclair 2018). This is especially true of politics that deal with cultural and religious diversity, including what Beckford (2003) calls the securitization of religion. The UK case shows the mobilisation of religion for identity in terms of 'othering', implicitly positing Islam as a threat to fundamental British values, and hence as other to the British 'us'.

Norwegian core curriculum documents and UK government public statements arguing for their proposed education policy are documents of power. They articulate the position of the state, a state that wields both coercive and soft power to enforce, legitimize and circulate their ideas. Investigating the rhetoric of common values is thus an investigation into the specific strategies of democratic states. The coercive aspect is clearer in the UK example, given the context of the Prevent strategy, the context of fear of terrorism and the securitization of religion as well as education. However, the emphasis in this article will be on the rhetorical 'soft' metaphorical structures that have normalised a certain way of thinking about how values and identity are connected.

The key problem with the rhetoric of common values is that it posits an unhelpful understanding of the connection between values and identity. Religions have often been mobilised as purported sources of the shared values of groups (Iversen 2012). This understanding of values and religion has been an important part of politicizing religious education. These connections have a dominant flow of direction: they connect desired values to Norwegianness and Britishness as well as to Christianity and humanism. Research has emphatically shown that Muslims are singled out as the contemporary relevant other. In so doing, the users of the rhetoric of shared values often mobilise religion as what Roy (2008) calls a pseudo-ethnic marker and contribute to what Moodood and Meer amongst others have designated the racialisation of religion (Meer and Modood 2012; Meer 2013). The rhetoric of common values essentialises groups. The way it is used in Norway and Britain has racializing consequences. This is because the notion of shared national values is connected to a nationally imagined religious heritage, which, given the secular contexts of both countries, resonates with ethno-cultural and racialised understandings of nation. It metaphorically binds together a range of different concepts, including Christian, liberal, white, humanist and Norwegian/British and thus enables a way for majorities to imagine 'us'. This is then seen as a morally relevant, historically constant and emotionally salient 'us'. The contrast is to a racialised and, in these times, predominantly Muslim, other.

This has consequences for the teaching of controversial issues. Disagreements about values become framed in one or both of the following problematic ways described in the two examples presented here. On the one hand, debates about controversial issues may become an assimilatory exercise in which minorities are expected to become more like majorities. In extreme cases, it can seem that rhetoric about religiously founded shared values becomes a proxy for previous racialised notions of national and ethnic identity. On the other hand, debates about controversial issues may become a multiculturalist game of respect, where perceived cultural or religious groups are entitled to 'their' values. In this case, political discussions may become reduced to distanced 'dialogue' between communities that are falsely seen as essentially distinct in lasting and morally relevant ways. In both cases, disagreements about values become controversial and sensitive in part because the identity of individuals and groups are seen to be at stake. The rhetoric of common values undercuts a more useful role of values in education policy, namely motivation for good action and encouraging well-managed disagreement as a crucial part of democratic cultures in school and society. Rather than seeking to become communities of shared values, classrooms, schools, communities and nations are better to understand as communities of disagreement (Iversen 2012, 2014, 2018).

It is useful at this stage to place my argument in relation to some similar but distinct academic debates. Clearly, I am not arguing that education policy should not establish values that schools should strive to live by and promote. However, my argument could more easily be misconstrued as arguing against any form of particularistic attachments in schools. There is a large and vibrant debate in political and educational philosophy on the role of particularistic attachments in liberal states or education systems. Can schools legitimately promote patriotism? If so, should they? If not, are there other forms of associational commitments that schools can and/or should promote? For instance, Nussbaum (1994, 2011) argues that cosmopolitan values in education frequently draw on more immediate and affectively close attachments such as family or nation. These identifications and special affections can be seen as nested within cosmopolitan commitments. Love of family and country might even provide motivation and affective modelling for love of humankind. Taylor (1994) argues that patriotism might be a virtue in order for democratic states to garner enough support for necessary institutions and affective motivation needed for individuals to act to create or uphold these institutions. Callan (2006) and Hand (2011) also argue that teaching patriotism in school can not be dismissed as wrong, though there are great risks attached to it. Consequently, Hand suggests that patriotism should be taught as a controversial issue.

Stepping down the emotional intensity from patriotism (love of country) to associational attachment or commitment to democratic institutions, there are even more arguments that schools should promote these kinds of particularistic commitments. Hand (2011), for instance, specifically disentangles patriotism from the belief that we have special obligations to our fellow nationals beyond our general obligations to all humans. It is perfectly possible for a person that does not love their country to approve of and support democratic institutions within that country, for all kinds of reasons. It might be because the person agrees with the values that the institution seeks to uphold, which might be completely cosmopolitan. Williams (2003) argues that education should instil a sense of citizenship based not on identity, but on shared fate

It is not the purpose of this article to argue against teaching that promotes associational attachments in school. Neither is it necessarily an argument against the teaching of patriotism in schools. My only contribution to these debates would be to point out that *if* the promotion of associational attachments, including patriotism, happens through the means of the rhetoric of shared values, then that would be fraught with dangers of group essentialisation and othering.

It is also useful to clarify the relationship between the substantive good of a value and the sharedness of a value. I claim that the rhetoric of shared values misplaces the good of a value by emphasising that the sharedness of the value enables group cohesion. I argue that the benefit of a value is the good that is reached by living and acting in accordance with that value. There are two further problematisations I wish to address here.

First, clearly if a value is worth acting and living by, surely it is a good thing that it is shared by many? I would agree to this, but my critique of the rhetoric of shared values is that it places the goodness of the value in the *sharedness*, not the morally good substance, of the value. Indeed, it is within the logic the rhetoric of shared values to uphold as valuable a trait that is morally neutral as a marker of belonging. An example of this could be the then minister of immigration and integration in Norway stating that ‘in Norway we eat pork’ (Sylvi Listhaug in [The Local 2016](#)). Here, it is the purported sharedness of pork-eating amongst Norwegians that constitutes the reason for upholding it. Conversely, if many people in a country share a good value, say trustworthiness, the benefit of the widespread sharing comes from the substantive good of the value, not the sharedness.

Second, some good values might benefit social cohesion, especially if they are widely shared, and this would be a worthy goal. For instance, if tolerance is a widely shared value within a group, there are reasons to believe that this would benefit social cohesion. Furthermore, this would be a good thing. Again, I would agree with this argument, but it does not invalidate the critique of the rhetoric of shared values. The difference lies in the structure of the argument. If tolerance is promoted in school because tolerant behaviours further the legitimately desired goal of social cohesion, then it is also good that it is shared by many. This would not be an instance of the rhetoric of shared values the way I present it here. However, if tolerance is promoted *because* it is already deemed to be a shared feature in a population, then it *is* an instance of the rhetoric of shared values, and may have paradoxical intolerant results. Indeed, several scholars have pointed out how tolerance has become a marker of Dutchness and is rhetorically used by political actors to marginalise or exclude minorities that are branded intolerant ([van Kessel 2016](#); [Mepschen and Duyvendak 2012](#)).

2. Previous Research

Recently, religion education (RE) researchers have discussed the role of controversial issues in teaching ([Anker and von der Lippe 2016](#); [Franken and Levrau 2020](#); [von der Lippe 2019](#); [Lockley-Scott 2019a](#); [O’Grady and Jackson 2019](#); [Avest 2020](#); [Toft 2020](#); [Woolley 2020](#)). RE discussion has been entwined with a parallel discussion concerning the concept of ‘safe space’ as a pedagogical ideal ([Arao and Clemens 2013](#); [Barrett 2010](#); [Boostrom 1998](#); [Callan 2016](#); [Flensner and von der Lippe 2019](#); [Holley and Steiner 2005](#); [Iversen 2018](#); [Osbeck et al. 2017](#); [Redmond 2010](#)), initiated by the promotion of the RE classroom as a safe space in Signposts ([Jackson 2014](#)), the influential Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) primer on religion education as intercultural education. The topic of controversial issues has been discussed since the early 1980s but has been reinvigorated in the last decade, initially by scholars of citizenship education and education for democracy ([Rangnes and Ravneberg 2019](#); [Sætra 2019, 2020](#)).

Two intertwined questions are the main focus in the theoretical discussion on controversial issues ([von der Lippe 2019](#); [Sætra 2019](#)): the criteria question and the normative teaching question. The criteria question concerns determining if an issue is controversial in the first place. The normative teaching question concerns when teaching should and should not be normative, or directive. The two are linked because of the affinity between seeing a topic as *settled*, and thus no longer controversial, and teaching it in a directive (normative) way. [Hand \(2008\)](#) argues that this connection is justified and that it is important to have clear criteria for when a topic is to be seen as controversial. For instance, it is not necessarily the case that a topic should be taught as controversial just because parts of the public think it is controversial.

There is a large and growing literature on the introduction of fundamental British values (FBV) in education ([Bamber et al. 2018](#); [Elton-Chalcraft et al. 2016](#); [Lander 2016](#); [Panjwani 2016](#); [Revell and Bryan 2016](#); [Richardson 2016](#); [Sinclair 2018](#)) as well as the so-called ‘Trojan Horse Affair’ ([Arthur 2015](#); [Awan 2014](#); [Holmwood 2018](#)). Recently, the British education scholar Anna [Lockley-Scott \(2019a, 2019b\)](#) has investigated the effects of the top-down promotion of fundamental British values in UK schools specifically in terms of religious education and the teaching of controversial issues. She finds that the substantive content of the proposed values is undercut by the political context of

anti-terrorism, anti-extremism and securitization surrounding the introduction of FBV education policy. This is especially the case as FBV promotion came in the immediate aftermath of several political statements proclaiming the ‘death’ or ‘failure’ of multiculturalism. She points out how curriculum and education policy can become a controversial, divisive and sensitive topic. She also points out how the imposition of FBV promotion limits the ability of teachers to create classroom spaces conducive to treating controversial and sensitive issues well.

If the rhetoric of common values has become part of the educational policies, curriculum documents, assessment criteria or legal mandate, it diminishes the space available for teachers to deal effectively with controversial and sensitive issues—not primarily because the school mandate already has the right answer and has closed the debate so to speak, but because the rhetoric of common values sees *the shared nature* of the values as the key point, not necessarily the ethical substance of the value. Real disagreement in class then, is not seen as a democratic and pedagogical asset, but as a threat to community and/or national identity. This happens because the rhetoric of common values confuses political agreement and compromise with pre-political consensus and value-alignment. Consequently, the rhetoric of common values misrepresents the origin of feelings of belonging within groups with identity claims.

Many of the controversial issues concern competing conceptions of the good that have become increasingly visible through increasing cultural and subcultural diversity in a world with accelerating mobility and change. Many of these issues are sensitive because they threaten the human dignity of those involved. In many of the debates, the full peoplehood of different groups of people is seen to be at stake.

Woolley (2020) relates sensitive and controversial debates to what he calls ‘isms and phobias’, such as classism, racism, xenophobia, sexism, disablism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Even though populations have, overall, become more accepting of differences, these ‘isms and phobias’ have somehow become increasingly prominent. This might be because of changes in an increasingly polluted information ecology (Phillips and Milner 2020). These changes include populist political entrepreneurs, contemporary media logics and social media mechanics that emphasize strong emotional reactions amongst users. The increased salience of controversial issues in school coincides the rise of large right-populist political movements in nearly all liberal democracies (and in many other countries too). Other trends in the last thirty years include the rise of extremist Islamic terrorism and extremist right-wing terrorism.

A different dynamic is the rise of clear protest voices from underprivileged groups, sometimes pointing out privileges that majority populations have been blind to and that are uncomfortable for the same majorities to confront. The increased visibility and feedback from underprivileged groups concerning the many ways dignity is threatened in their lives also provides a background for why a range of issues tackled in school are not only controversial but also sensitive.

These dynamics, along with the increasing *identitization* (including racialisation and nationalisation) of religion, in part explain why RE has become a key site for citizenship education and education for democratic cultures. Thus, questions which are emotionally fraught, and that potentially threaten the dignity of students, must be expected as part of teaching RE, either because centralised curricula demand it, because teachers choose to include it or because students themselves bring it up in class. Consequently, the influential Council of Europe recommendations found in *Signposts* (Jackson 2014) encouraged educationalists to try to make RE classrooms into *safe spaces*, where students feel free to share their opinions and positions without fear of having their dignity compromised by the responses of teachers and co-students. Without challenging the pedagogical ideals behind it, some scholars have challenged the use of ‘safety’ as an appropriate metaphor (Flensner and von der Lippe 2019; Iversen 2018; Osbeck et al. 2017). The critiques challenge the extent to which such safety for all is possible and interrogates the power dynamics in terms of whose safety is highlighted. Maybe alternative formulations such as ‘brave space’, communities of disagreement and disagreement classrooms better present the ideal of encouraging student self-expression in the face of opposition. Lockley-Scott

(2019a) argues that when education policy presents the values of school in a national identity frame, the classroom and the school becomes less safe, especially for minoritized groups. The policy context removes the preconditions for safety and restricts the scope for teaching controversial issues well.

von der Lippe (2019) identifies six different criteria that have been forwarded in research-based discussions. These six are as follows. (i) *The epistemic criterion*. Originally proposed by Robert Dearden, and defended by Hand (2008), this argues that a topic should be taught as controversial when ‘contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason’ (Dearden, quoted in von der Lippe 2019, p. 6). According to this point of view, it is necessary to distinguish between *controversial* issues and merely *disputed* issues. Disputed issues are topics on which there exists disagreement, either in the classroom, the local communities or in society at large. Often, such disputed issues are also *sensitive*, in that students may be vulnerable in terms of their dignity or in terms of their emotional reaction. Disputed and sensitive issues may or may not be controversial according to the epistemic principle. (ii) *The values system criterion*. Stradling suggests that controversial issues are ‘the type of issue that divides a populace and that generates conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values systems’ (von der Lippe 2019, p. 5). (iii). *The behavioural criterion*. This is when it is clear that people disagree about a topic. (iv) *The political criterion*. In which a topic is controversial if it is deemed to be within the private sphere of selecting the good life, and thus not relevant to political public values of a liberal democratic state (Hand 2008; von der Lippe 2019, p. 5). (v) *The politically authentic criterion*. von der Lippe presents Hess and McAvoy’s view that a topic is controversial when it is being discussed within the sphere of legitimate political decision-making (von der Lippe 2019, p. 7). (vi) *The religious criterion*. Von der Lippe’s last criterion is Cooling’s argument that a topic should be taught as controversial when different faith communities have different positions (von der Lippe 2019, p. 7).

All of these criteria accept the underlying assumption that when a topic is controversial, it should be taught in a non-directive manner and that schools should not take sides or attempt to influence the views of the students. However, von der Lippe (2019) and Sætra (2019) both refer to the work of Bryan Warnick and Spencer Smith, as well as their own work, to argue that this link should be treated with more flexibility. A school might have a formal mandate that clearly settles a potentially controversial issue. Nevertheless, it might be pedagogically well-founded to teach the topic in a non-directive way. Indeed, it might also be defensible for a school to teach a non-settled controversial issue in a directive way, based on the normative foundations of the school.

The academic and political discussion about values and social cohesion is not a new one. The 2000s saw heated debate about these issues, not least in the UK (Beckford 2015). A key part of these discussions is the recurring trope of shared values being seen as the key source for social cohesion. This rhetoric often takes the form of various politicians, academics of other actors trying to identify different sets of values and claiming that these values are somehow ‘theirs’. This we can observe statements of British values (Cameron 2014), Norwegian values (Ezzati 2020; Iversen 2012, 2014), Christian values (Cvijic and Zucca 2004) or African values (Cobbah 1987), and many more.

This way of thinking has become part of the self-presentation of many groups. National governments attempt to shore up their people’s identities by emphasizing a set of proposed national values. Religious, ethnic and other groups with identity claims also lay claim to a set of distinct and shared values. At the same time, ‘values’ have become popular in corporate self-presentation and attempts to build business identities (Byrkjeflot 2010; Falkenberg 2007). Any start-up needs a PowerPoint with the company’s aims, visions and values. Without such a presentation, the company is open to criticism for being without an identity. Even civilisations are claimed to be owners of ‘values’, and consequent clashes are interpreted as foundational and deep-rooted in the human psyche (Huntington 1996; Brubaker 2017).

3. Presenting the Case Studies

I shall present two cases. First, the short history of the rhetoric of common values in Norwegian education documents in the last 50 years. Second, the British use of fundamental British values in the aftermath of the so-called ‘Trojan Horse affair’.

The presentation and analysis of the two cases will sensitise readers to how the rhetoric of common values appears, and analyse its affordances in terms of building imagined communities and its constraints in terms of encouraging healthy democratic cultures. However, political values clearly *do* have a role in education policy, and I shall end my discussion by tentatively pointing to some ways in which values-driven education, including teaching controversial and sensitive topics, can be distinguished from the rhetoric of common values. The case studies are meant to highlight the similarities between the cases, emphasising how tropes, rhetorical figures and ideas can move between contexts in increasingly global flows. Such boundary work is always an ongoing process, never a ‘thing’ in itself. Nevertheless, the discursive resources available for such boundary work need to have a certain measure of stability to be actionable. Extending the metaphor of flow, it might be useful to think of social life as always in flow, but at different speeds or levels of viscosity (Iversen 2012; 2013). Increasing the viscosity of a social flow, making it ‘stick’ and seem unchanging and taken-for-granted, is costly in terms of power. A key goal of this article is empirical, in identifying the rhetoric of common values as a semi-stable cluster of meanings with a relatively high viscosity. A second goal is to provide an analysis that explains the historicity and specificity of the trope, and thus expand the agency of teachers and educationalists by sensitising readers to the fact that it could have been different and that it is amenable for future change.

3.1. Values in Norwegian Education Policy

A key text in Norwegian state education is the core curriculum, especially the preambles and introductions of the various iterations. These documents lay out the state’s reasons for educating its citizens and outline the normative foundation for schools. What follows is not a comprehensive historical overview of the period in question. Nor is it an adequate interpretation of the documents, which are rich and complex. Rather, it is a specific investigation into the emergence and development of the rhetoric of shared values in these documents. It is instructive to compare the 1974 preamble to the present one which was passed in the Norwegian Storting in 2017. In the 1974 curriculum, it says:

Basic schooling shall, as a whole, build upon the ethical foundational values that are anchored in Christianity. The responsibility that is laid upon school in this way makes it a duty for school to try to awaken and strengthen the pupil’s sense for values of an ethical nature. Considering their age and maturity, school must try to help them see that, in the varied circumstances of life, it should be asked what is good and evil, right and wrong. (. . .)

The aim for school must be that foundational values such as truth, honesty, fairness, loyalty and loving-thy-neighbour really become values for the pupils, and thus decisive for their attitude to life and how they live their lives. (Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementet 1974, p. 10)

I want to highlight the way the term ‘values’ is understood here. Values are connected to ethics, reflections on right and wrong, and schools should aim for a situation where these values become decisive for how pupils will live their lives. The reference to Christianity is out of date in so far as it would be inappropriate to only mention one system of ethical thinking in the 2020s. However, for the purposes of my argument, the point to note is that Christianity is understood as a system of ethical thinking, rather than cultural heritage or a source of group identity. This values-as-ethics understanding does not disappear, it is found in later core curricula as well. However, it is supplemented by the rhetoric of common values: a new values-as-identity approach. The present introduction to the core curriculum goes as follows:

School shall base its practice on the values in the objectives clause of the Education Act. The objectives clause expresses values that unite the Norwegian society. These values, the foundation of our democracy, shall help us to live, learn and work together in a complex world and with an uncertain future. The core values are based on Christian and humanist heritage and traditions. They are also expressed in different religions and worldviews and are rooted in human rights. (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017)

The values listed in the education act are: (i) respect for human dignity and nature ii) intellectual freedom, (iii) charity, (iv) forgiveness, (v) equality and (vi) solidarity. There is a small but relevant difference between the wording of the education act and the core curriculum. The Education Act says that 'Education and training shall be based on fundamental values in Christian and humanist heritage and traditions, *such as* respect for human dignity and nature . . . ' (Education Act 2014, my emphasis). The core curriculum says that '[s]chool shall base its practice on the values in the objectives clause of the Education Act.' Is the foundation of education the six listed values? If so, the heritage and traditions are there as a supporting act, specifying which expression of the values that shall be emphasized. Or, rather, is the foundation of education the wider set of values in the Christian and humanist heritage and traditions? If this is the case, the six listed values are merely specifications or exemplifications. Going back to the preparations for the Education Act in 2009, the Norwegian Storting received a white paper from a working group (Bostadutvalget) with similar wording as the final Act. However, the working group suggested making the list of values the foundation for education (they proposed five values, the sixth was added by the Storting). However, one of the few changes the Storting made was to make the Christian and humanist heritage and traditions the focus, and the list of concrete values was demoted by the introduction of the seemingly innocuous words 'such as'. It seems to me that the Storting intervened in order to increase the emphasis on values-as-identity.

At first sight, the 'values foundation' of Norwegian state schooling has been adapted to contemporary cultural diversity in Norway. Christianity is joined by humanism as a heritage and tradition that underlie the values listed in the Education Act. They state that these values also can be 'expressed' in other religions and world views and are 'rooted' in human rights. It is not immediately clear what the difference is between being 'rooted' in human rights and being 'based' on Christian and humanist heritage and tradition. There is, however, a clear prioritization implied by the difference between Christianity and humanism on the one hand, and other religions and worldviews on the other hand. It is not entirely clear what the relationship between an abstract value and its various expressions might be. A reasonable interpretation might be that the prioritisation of the Christian and humanist heritage and tradition is a place-specific instantiation, and that it is especially important that pupils in Norwegian school learn about *this* version of the same value, rather than other versions. The way the listed values are expressed in Christian and humanist heritage and tradition is not *better* or *truer*, but more *ours*.

This emphasis on identity is deepened and explicitly connected to social cohesion in the second sentence: '(. . .) values that unite the Norwegian society.' To be fair, the core curriculum text continues with passages that certainly include values-as-ethics. The point here, though, is to illustrate the two different understandings of values and point out that the values-as-identity is the newer invention. The rhetoric of common values could be said to enter the Norwegian Core Curriculum in the 1987 version, but it is most fully developed in the 1993 version.

The rhetoric of common values, then, emerged in Norwegian documents in the late 1980s and came to fruition in the 1990s. It has survived in Norwegian documents since then, though maybe toned somewhat down. It is interesting to follow the way the rhetoric of common values has changed its political colours in Norwegian debate over time. When it emerged in the 1980s, the concern was that young people were growing up in a shallow postmodern media world, where cultural depth and tradition was threatened by Hollywood, VHS and MTV. The 'Other' was Americanised pop-culture, and the proponents of the rhetoric of common values were educationalists concerned with *bildung*, often as much on the political left as on the political right. The 1990s version of the rhetoric of common

values should be seen as an instantiation of what Iversen (2012) calls ‘mainstream multiculturalism’. It was presented as a positive outlook towards cultural diversity by celebrating and highlighting the distinct identity, culture and values of minorities. In the same vein, it was seen as legitimate to do the same with the majority Norwegian culture. It might be added that Norwegian self-image at this time was changing. For most of the 20th century, it saw itself as a small and threatened identity, with a recent history of liberation from larger neighbours, recent occupation during WWII and concerns with so-called cultural imperialism from Europe and the USA. ‘Norwegian’ was emerging as a privileged and dominant identity. Norway was economically successful, thus attracting migrants in larger numbers and establishing migrant minorities. Policymakers had to adapt to a rhetorical situation where emphasising Norwegianness was no longer universally seen as siding with the plucky underdog. Add to this an increased awareness of a history of oppression towards national minorities. During the 2000s and 2010s, the term ‘Norwegian values’ was increasingly used by the populist right, and more clearly posited as an assimilationist ultimatum.

This potted history of the use of the term ‘Norwegian values’ illustrates a few important points. First, it is a new idea. It emerged from sociology and entered into policy and public debate in the late 1980s, and with greater force in the 1990s. Second, the term emerged as an opposition to perceived shallow pop-culture, and was used across the political spectrum. Third, as Norway has become increasingly culturally diverse, the rhetoric of common values has become a part of national identity work. The previous wide usage has lent respectability to the term as it has migrated towards the right, and is now a key staple of the rhetoric of the populist right. However, the term resonates beyond this, and the term can still be used by conservatives, centrists and social democrats, though often in an attempt to challenge the populist understanding of what those Norwegian values should be.

3.2. *The British Government and the Trojan Horse Affair: An Instance of the Rhetoric of Shared Values*

In this section, I shall give an example of the kind of analysis that is enabled by the concept of the rhetoric of common values. I shall analyse British prime minister David Cameron’s political use of the term ‘British values’ after the so-called Trojan Horse scandal. I hope that the example can shed light on the anatomy of the rhetoric of values that enables exclusion and discrimination.

The ‘Trojan Horse affair’ in Birmingham in 2014 arose from the suggestion was that there had been a plot to take over a number of Birmingham schools in order to introduce an Islamist agenda. This provoked a government response that is the object of analysis in the following. According to Peter Clarke, who conducted an enquiry on behalf of the Secretary of State, a ‘number of associated individuals’ had engaged in ‘co-ordinated, deliberate and sustained’ attempts ‘to introduce an intolerant and aggressive Islamic ethos’ into ‘a few schools in Birmingham’ (Clarke 2014). On the other hand, the enquiry found that there was no ‘evidence of terrorism, radicalisation or violent extremism in the schools of concern in Birmingham’ (Clarke 2014, p. 12).

This incident was troubling enough in its own right. However, it added to public concern about the role of Islam in the UK and a fear of an enemy within. The Cameron government’s first response was to emphasize British values in media interviews. This was followed up by non-statutory Departmental Advice on Promoting fundamental British Values in November 2014. ‘Schools should promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs’ (Department for Education 2014, p. 5).

A few months earlier, the Prime Minister David Cameron wrote an article for the British tabloid newspaper *Daily Mail*, fleshing out the arguments around promoting British values (Cameron 2014). There are several sections of this text that illustrate well how the rhetoric of shared values is part of a nation-building effort where shared values are seen as some form of social glue:

‘The values I’m talking about—a belief in freedom, tolerance of others, accepting personal and social responsibility, respecting and upholding the rule of law—are the things we should try to live by every day. (. . .)

And taken together, I believe this combination—our values and our respect for the history that helped deliver them and the institutions that uphold them—forms the bedrock of Britishness.’ (Cameron 2014)

These two sentences represent two different ways of presenting values. The first gives a list of concrete values, with the suggestion that these are ideals to live by. They are named, and they imply that we are looking towards our future when we try to live by them. However, they are hardly unique to British people in the way they are presented. In the second quote, however, the focus has moved to the past, to the alleged origins of these values. Note the metaphor evoking solidity and foundations in the choice of the word ‘bedrock’.

‘The question is: should we actively promote this? I absolutely think we should. For a start, this is a matter of pride and patriotism. (. . .)

[T]here are two other reasons why we should promote these values.

The first is economic. I strongly believe our values form the foundation of our prosperity(. . .)

The second is social. Our values have a vital role to play in uniting us.’ (Cameron 2014)

It is the last sentence that establishes in clear words the connection between values and unity that is so crucial to the rhetoric of shared values. However, the excerpt also strengthens the linkage between a set of values declared to be ‘British’ and national sentiments such as pride and patriotism. The final point I want to emphasize from this excerpt is the absence of the intrinsic merits of the previously listed values. Surely, a person that holds a set of values would want to promote them because she believes they are good or right?

‘So I believe we need to be far more muscular in promoting British values and the institutions that uphold them.

That’s what a genuinely liberal country does: it believes in certain values and actively promotes them. It says to its citizens: this is what defines us as a society.’ (Cameron 2014)

Notice how the voice and the agency are fuzzy in these excerpts. In the first sentence, the ‘we’ can be either the Government or the citizenry more generally. The second sentence, however, gives life and agency to a country. In fact, in the last sentence, the country speaks to its own citizens. Who is doing the speaking in this case? An uncharitable interpretation would be that ‘the country’ is the non-immigrant majority population, and ‘its citizens’ is a euphemism for immigrants and minorities. In a more narrowly sociological interpretation, the establishment of ‘the country’ as a clearly bounded entity imbued with agency is rhetorically complete. Furthermore, this is an entity that is defined by its values.

‘We are saying it isn’t enough simply to respect these values in schools—we’re saying that teachers should actively promote them. They’re not optional; they’re the core of what it is to live in Britain.’ (Cameron 2014)

The last point to notice is the use of the word ‘core’. Cameron places values as ‘the core’, a word that connotes something deep, unchanging and interior. The rhetorical work done in this text does more than promote a set of values. The effect is to conjure up an idea of what a country is: i.e., an entity with agency, defined by shared values at its core. When a nation-building agent such as Mr. Cameron is actively working at defining the core of the country he led at the time, it is sociologically interesting to ask if the same words are doing any boundary work at the same time. The context of the Daily Mail piece is the threat of radical Islam in the UK. The response is a combination of British national pride, shared values and history. The context directs the text in such a way that it is read and understood as a response to globalisation and immigration, and Islam in particular, even though the wording would technically challenge the Britishness of *everyone* who does not believe in freedom, personal and social

responsibility, the rule of law and tolerance. However, its effect is unlikely to make freedom-hating, intolerant slackers of a majority white British background hand in their passports. The distinction between British and non-British is talked about symbolically in terms of the core, but only becomes a material reality in the boundary zones represented by immigrants and visible minorities.

British education scholar, Anna Lockley-Scott (2019b) has incisively argued that the top-down requirement to promote fundamental British values (now complete with an acronym, FBV) is counterproductive. '[A] teacher may struggle to mediate the risked outcomes without significantly distorting the aims of education' (Lockley-Scott 2019b, 365). Lockley-Scott's work emphasises how the political context of securitization and counter-terrorism means that the push for FBV in British schools may lead some students to refrain from active participation in class and lead some teachers to avoid discussions on controversial topics, and risks a sense of alienation among students. She argues how the use of FBV rhetoric leads to an 'us and them' narrative and a reductive sense of Britishness. These findings and arguments dovetail well with my own concerns. My arguments here are both more specific and broader. They are more specific as I am specifically interested in the rhetoric of common values as a trope. It is broader because I identify the rhetoric of common values as an international style of speaking and thinking. It is interesting to note both how the British and the Norwegian case are remarkably similar in what terms are used but also in how the specifics of history and place cause the same global cultural flow to be refracted in unique ways.

The rhetoric of shared values is an example of how ideas from the dustbin of sociological history can spill over into public life. There was a functionalist tradition in sociology that can be traced back through Talcot Parsons to Emile Durkheim that saw shared values, shared culture and shared religion as key aspects for explaining the social cohesion of groups (Durkheim and Swain 2008). Durkheim theorized that shared religious community rituals both instilled the shared norms of the group in a visceral and emotional way into the participating individuals. More, the emotional power in the ritual comes from a sense of being a part of something larger than yourself, often symbolically represented as the sacred image (the totem or later, god) that was the shared focus of attention at the centre of the ritual. This sacred, emotional power ultimately stems from the material reality that *is* greater than the individual, namely the group. According to Durkheim, then, common religious ritual is the source of both group identity and a set of values that are associated with that identity. The flashlight of the heightened emotional effervescence of the ritual etched an image of the group and its values on the internal film of the individual.

Parsons developed the notion that the function of religion in society was social cohesion and inculcating shared norms. His account relied more heavily on the assumption that shared values represented a coordination asset, and that coordinating people's behaviours by instilling shared action orientations (ie values) was more efficient than coercing people (Parsons 1973).

This kind of functionalist social theory came under heavy criticism in the 1960s and 1970s. Lukes (1975), for instance, disparagingly called these Durkheimian consensus theories of social cohesion. Key parts of the critique were as follows: (i) It privileges social and cultural structures at the expense of the agency of individuals. (ii) It seems to explain stabilities but it has a hard time explaining social change. (iii) Its emphasis on stability and social reproduction has a conservative bias, as change easily becomes theorised as pathology. (iv) It underestimates the effects of power and hegemony to hide dissent, missing latent conflicts in society. (v) There is a logical timeline problem in explaining a cause in terms of its effects.

The rhetoric of common values is very much a Durkheimian consensus theory of social cohesion transported into politics and education 100 years after its formulation. The main change along the way is that it was adapted to fit a situation of increased cultural diversity in one of two ways: either in terms of a cultural assimilationist nationalism, where minorities were expected to accept the values of the majority, or in terms of what Modood (2019) calls a multiculturalist nationalism, where each cultural community was seen as distinct holders of a set of values that defined their culture and identity, and where the national identity was seen as a 'community of communities' to borrow a phrase from

the Parekh report (Parekh 2000). This way of speaking of a multicultural society as consisting of clearly delineated, distinct and stable communities with their own values was identified by Gert Baumann (1996) as 'the dominant discourse' organising public and official management of cultural diversity in London in the 1990s.

This recent history of how values were used in the language of multiculturalism is part of the legitimisation of the use of the rhetoric of common values in support of states such as Britain or Norway today. If religious groups and minorities can talk about their distinctness in terms of the seemingly moral and emotional language of values, why can't majority identities do the same? Or so the argument seems to go. However, the critique of functionalist consensus theories of social cohesion would also apply to the 'plural monoculturalism' (Sen 2006) that characterises mainstream multicultural thinking of the 1990s and early 2000s. The way mainstream multiculturalists talked about cultural groups could be construed as 'freezing' a culture that would otherwise be in flux and mutual hybridisation, often maintaining traditional power structures and maybe failing to protect underprivileged groups within the various cultural groups (Iversen 2012).

The British government's response to the Trojan Horse affair and the recent history of Norwegian education policy provided two excellent recent examples of the rhetoric of shared values. Drawing on the critiques of 'Durkheimian consensus theories' as well as the present analysis, I outline seven critiques of the rhetoric of common values.

- i. *Essentialism*. The rhetoric of shared values invites the user to see society as a bounded unit with an inner and stable essence, exaggerating internal similarity and external difference.
- ii. *Conservatism*. It becomes difficult to theorize change without pathologizing it.
- iii. *Causal direction*. When sociologists explain social cohesion as a function of shared values, there is a logical problem with the timeline because the effect comes before the cause.
- iv. The rhetoric of shared values *misrepresents* the distribution of values between and within groups. It overemphasises in-group agreement and underestimates between-group disagreement.
- v. It *identitizes* values, arguing that they should be upheld because they are 'ours' rather than that they are good, or right. This includes *nationalising* and *religionising* values.
- vi. It *instrumentalizes* values, arguing that we need them because of the positive side effects of social cohesion, rather than because it is good to live by them.
- vii. It *traditionalises* values, arguing that the legitimacy of a set of values arises from the past of a certain community, rather than in directing present and future action.
- viii. It *excludes* too many people. This becomes a problem if you need to invest in a particular cultural, historical or religious heritage in order to be seen as adhering to a set of values. Your opinions come to be viewed as a question of identity rather than ethics or politics. Minorities will stand at a structural disadvantage.

Avoiding the rhetoric of common values does not mean avoiding values in education policy. How can schools uphold and promote their values, which may be their democratic mandate, without falling into the seven pitfalls of rhetoric of common values identified above? Using what we have learned, we can suggest a checklist that can guide practice and policy concerning the teaching of values-driven controversial issues.

- i. *Non-essentialism*: Identity groups could be presented as historical and contextually shaped. Their stability is an empirical matter, influenced by power structures internal and external to the group.
- ii. *Change-agnostic*: Change or continuity are not seen as moral categories in and of themselves, but could be seen relative to achieving the values of the school.
- iii. *Agency sensitive*: Treats people and institutions as moral agents, not traditions and cultures.
- iv. *Empirical*: It does not assume that group belonging defines an individual's values, but sees the distribution of values as an empirical question.

- v. *Universalist*: Provides arguments for the chosen values that are relevant to a universal audience, not place-specific.
- vi. *Ethical*: Provides the ethical argument for the chosen values, rather than instrumentalist side effects.
- vii. *Political*: Sees the chosen values as directing common action towards a future goal, rather than being legitimized by a common past.
- viii. *Inclusive*: The value 'belongs' to all who hold the value and act by it, regardless of group identity.

It is time to summarize the presentation and analysis of the cases. I have shown that there exists a rhetoric of shared values, and that it is not limited to one specific limited country. Furthermore, I have argued that it is a relatively *new* rhetorical figure, even though it has intellectual precursors in sociology. Finally, I have argued that the rhetoric of shared values is often used to identify values and thus essentialises groups in unhelpful ways. However, this does not preclude the directive teaching of values, nor the promotion of values within the context of a particular group, such as a democratic nation. Nor does it mean that schools can not promote associational commitments, even including patriotism. It narrowly argues that the recently emerged rhetoric of shared values is often used to essentialise both 'us' and 'them'. In both the Norwegian and British case, the rhetoric of shared values was used to reify national majority identities and to marginalise minorities. Such educational policies make it harder (though not impossible) for teachers to deal with controversial issues effectively.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Does the discussion of the rhetoric of common values in Norway and the UK contribute to the established debates about controversial issues and safe spaces? A few key points can be identified.

First, Anna Lockley-Scott (2019a, 2019b) arguments are supported. They are also broadened and identified part of a larger, international discursive pattern that I call the rhetoric of common values. Furthermore, Lockley-Scott's arguments are deepened by outlining the intellectual and political history, and the metaphorical structures, that shape the rhetoric of common values.

Second, this paper has also contributed to the research-based discussions about controversial issues more broadly. The literature on controversial issues has emphasised the dilemmas of the teacher and not paid much attention to education policy. The political and educational policy choices that are made 'upstream' from teachers and classrooms constrain and enable different kinds of teaching on controversial issues. In this case, I argue that using the rhetoric of common values constrains the ability to teach controversial issues effectively. Conversely, it enables teaching that reifies national identities in ways that may lead to marginalisation and misplaced othering of pupils. The same points are true for the establishment of 'safe' (or brave) spaces and effective communities of disagreement or disagreement classrooms.

Third, the theoretical discussions of controversial topics have considered controversy largely in terms of epistemology (do pupils/citizens hold opinions that are rational?) or political opinion (do pupils/citizens disagree about politically hot topics?). While these are important, they do not fully catch the recent trend towards identification of religion, politics and truth. In this trend, religious identification, political points of view and what you see as factually true, have become intertwined with performing racialised, gendered and classed identities. For instance, teaching LGBTQ+ rights might be interpreted by some pupils/citizens not as a human-rights-based activity, not even a moral point of disagreement, but as an attack on religiously conservative identities. In another example, teaching science-based knowledge about climate change might be challenged as politically partisan or elitist.

This trend is enabled by polluted information ecologies (Phillips and Milner 2020), and results in tribal epistemologies (Bronk and Jacoby 2020). The rhetoric of common values is a key mode in which this tribalized ethical epistemology has been articulated. Some large-scale political developments are connected to this. Marzouki et al. (2016) argue that populists are 'hijacking' religion for the dual purposes of us-building and othering. Brubaker (2017) sees a similar trend and identifies the use of religion for us-building purposes in Western Europe as 'secular Christianity', whereby a secularised

cultural heritage version of Christian tradition is mobilised in order to provide emotional, moral and historical depth to national narratives in largely secular or non-active Christian populations. These populist movements also highlight anti-immigration policies and especially anti-Muslim rhetoric. Brubaker also identifies the paradoxical use of liberality as a boundary marker in these movements. ‘We’ are liberal, these movements claim, and ‘they’ must become like us to be tolerated. The use of liberality as a boundary marker can partly explain why FBV rhetoric works in such exclusionary ways, even though the substantive values that are promoted would seem to be liberal, tolerant and inclusive. This dynamic would not have been possible to identify using any of the six criteria for controversial topics identified by von der Lippe (2019).

The rhetoric of shared values is widespread and unhelpful for effectively teaching controversial issues. I hope this article contributes to greater awareness of, and further research on, this political trope.

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