

Support for Students with Foreign Backgrounds in Sapporo: Comparing the Concepts of Liberal Multiculturalism and Civic Nationality

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1. Introduction

Local authorities' support for "students with foreign backgrounds" (in this paper, *students* are individuals attending elementary school through high school) has recently increased across Japan, including in areas with scattered foreign population groups. Thus, local authorities in areas with some foreign residents are responding to public comments from grassroots organizations regarding the need to address the problems faced by migrant workers and students. This responsiveness suggests the implementation of policies integrating migrants as citizens of the local community.

In many areas with scattered foreign population groups, large budgets are not typically allocated to "private sphere" issues, such as native language education, which aims to preserve the identities and maintain the intra-familial communications of students with foreign

backgrounds. Therefore, clarifying how public and private actors in areas with scattered foreign populations distinguish between public and private support for students with foreign backgrounds is essential to determine how such support should be provided. Thus far, no systematic research has been conducted on the relationship between multiculturalism and public support for students with foreign backgrounds. Studies focusing on the fields of support that local authorities — as the “public sphere”—have been targeting in Japan are scarce. Based on multiculturalism and related to political theory, this study examines the position of local authorities in Sapporo — an area with a scattered foreign population — and the various actors there, including a school for students with foreign backgrounds, a night school (open to all residents), and a community school.

2. How does this study contribute to the current debates in the field?

Three studies related to Japan and immigration appear in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. For example, Nagayoshi (2011) has used international public opinion surveys to clarify the position of multiculturalism in Japan. The study quantitatively assesses agreement (or disagreement) with multiculturalism. However, it barely mentions the relationship between multiculturalism and education.

Furthermore, Oishi (2020) has reconsidered Japan’s immigration policy regarding the technical internship system and detailed how the policy has evolved to compensate for Japan’s declining population and labor shortage. However, the study is drawn from a macro perspective and does not mention local multiculturalism.

Finally, Nakamatsu (2014) interviewed volunteer staff at Japanese language classes in Aichi Prefecture and reported that citizens consider the banner of *tabunka kyōsei* (multicultural coexistence) held by the Japanese central government “superficial or ambiguous.” The study, however, does not cite multiculturalism as a political theory, despite the large volume of data from interviews with supporters involved in education.

Therefore, in Japan, few studies have linked multiculturalism, as a political theory, to educational research on students with foreign backgrounds, as most research has used case studies or problem-solving perspectives. Therefore, these studies overlook or fail to connect their findings to multiculturalism. This area has rarely been analyzed from a political theoretical perspective.

The topic may be considered a niche area for global readers. Western theoretical analyses have discussed multiculturalism, focusing on specific countries as their primary topic (Taylor 1993; Walzer 1994; Kymlicka 1996; Barry 2001; Kymlicka 2002). However, this novel Japanese case study discusses multiculturalism comprehensively related to local governments and schools that operationalize the system’s multicultural content. Investigating multiculturalism from a local perspective is essential for examining its depth beyond its ideals. Figure 1 outlines the gap in the literature this study seeks to address.

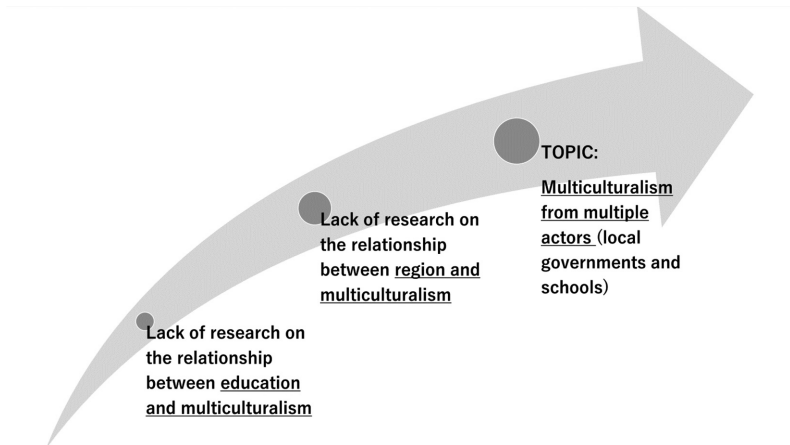


Figure 1. Research gap and novelty of this study

3. Japan-focused literature review

Studies have generally focused on the “right to education” of students with foreign backgrounds in Japan. Some research has examined the non-enrollment of students with foreign backgrounds (Miyajima and Ota 2005). Additionally, studies have investigated discrepancies in the support provided by different local authorities to children not enrolled in school (Sakuma 2006). Challenges in education related to the progression faced by students with foreign backgrounds have been found to lead to the non-enrollment problem (Kojima 2016). According to the Constitution of Japan and the Fundamental Law of Education, compulsory education does not apply to students with foreign backgrounds in Japan. Based on their families’ decisions, some students with foreign backgrounds are not affiliated with any school, presenting a social structural problem. Studies considering the sociology of education have detailed the strategies that students with foreign backgrounds,

especially those in elementary or junior high school, should adopt in school culture (Kojima 2006; Shimizu 2006) to overcome issues owing to language barriers and cultural differences. The social inclusion of students with foreign backgrounds is a major challenge for Japanese society, both legally and socially. This issue has attracted media attention, raising awareness for the non-enrollment problem, as noted in an article in *The Mainichi* on January 6, 2019.

Ito (2009) has examined the support for students with foreign backgrounds at Sapporo Odori High School, which opened in 2008. The school had a quota for these students. It offered Japanese language classes as a means of affirmative action. Ito's study included a detailed investigation of voluntary Japanese language classes in Sapporo and the projects undertaken by the Sapporo Municipal Educational Committee. Fushimi (2013) has indicated insufficient support for foreign parents who sought to enroll their children in nursery school or kindergarten.

According to Tani (2021), the municipality's preparedness to accept students with foreign backgrounds in Sapporo was "worrying." One major issue was that only four additional teachers had been deployed to teach Japanese in Sapporo. Even if the number of additional teachers was increased, sustaining sufficient support for all students with foreign backgrounds who live across Sapporo would be "impossible" (Tani 2021). Moreover, public support for the native languages of students with foreign backgrounds in Sapporo is scarce (Tani 2021). However, political theory-based research on students with foreign backgrounds in Japan is limited. The lack of an overview of the political positioning of various actors in Sapporo, an area with a scattered foreign population, remains a challenge. As these works have not elucidated the extent to which

organizations' activities are provided as public (or private) services, identifying the political levels on which they occur, and their impact, is challenging.

4. Theoretical framework

In an effort to clarify the political positions of the foreign citizens of Sapporo, this study uses the concept of "civic nationality," rooted in liberal egalitarianism, discussed in Brian Barry's *Culture and Equality* (Barry 2001). Before Barry proposed this concept, Will Kymlicka (2002) proposed a theoretical framework for the "liberal form of multiculturalism" in discussions on foreigners' rights and multiculturalism, stating that they "go beyond the familiar set of common civil and political rights of individual citizenship, which are protected in all liberal democracies" and "are adopted with the intention of recognizing and accommodating the distinctive identities and needs of ethnocultural groups," that is, the conditions for multiculturalism (Kymlicka 2002, p.335). Kymlicka emphasized the importance of public acknowledgment of a group asserting minority rights. He argued that the inability to protect and transmit their language, customs, and identity through national citizenship alone should be considered.

Describing a situation in which ethnic group rights protection is considered a deviation from state-based nationalism, Kymlicka stated:

Ethnic nations take the reproduction of a particular ethnonational culture and identity as one of their most important goals. Civic nations, by contrast, are indifferent to the ethnocultural identities of their citizens and define national membership purely in terms of adherence to certain principles of democracy and justice. For

minorities to seek special rights, on this view, is a radical departure from the traditional operation of the liberal state. Therefore, the burden of proof lies on anyone who would wish to endorse such minority rights. (Kymlicka 2002, p.345)

The protection of minority rights, a position that Kymlicka defended, is subject to criticism from the opposition. It represents a deviation from the civic identity based on the state. Liberal multiculturalism can be understood as a position that is cut off from the communitarian good. However, Kymlicka argued that we need solutions because the position prioritizing the state as the community, particularly for the majority, causes problems for minorities, as described below.

One of the most important determinants of whether a culture survives is whether its language is the language of government, i.e., the language of public schooling, courts, legislatures, welfare agencies, health services, etc. When the government decides the language of public schooling, it is providing what is probably the most important form of support needed by societal cultures, since it guarantees the passing on of the language and its associated traditions and conventions to the next generation. Refusing to provide public schooling in a minority language, by contrast, is almost inevitably condemning that language to ever-increasing marginalization. (Kymlicka 1996, p.111)

Applying Kymlicka's argument to the context of Japan, a few commonalities can be found in discussions about ensuring the sustainabil-

ity of schools for students with foreign backgrounds and native language education.

Barry questioned the “liberal form of multiculturalism,” or liberal multiculturalism, proposed by Kymlicka. He was concerned that the acknowledgment of a group’s collective could violate individual liberty. For example, in Japan, an ethnic group member might not use the group’s shared language or religion but instead adopt the Japanese language or customs for cultural or socioeconomic reasons. In this case, granting the collective rights envisaged by Kymlicka could violate the right of individuals to choose and revise freely. In response to this, Barry proposed the concept of civic nationality as an individual’s voluntary choice, not based on any specific community, such as an ethnic group.

Kymlicka’s argument partially contradicts that of Barry’s. It prioritizes an individual’s right to free choice and revision. Therefore, they disagree on culture’s public nature.¹⁾ Kymlicka developed his argument regarding an individual’s choice of multiple cultural groups based on the assumption that groups are culturally anchored. Barry’s argument did not use culture as a medium. Instead, he argued for a form in which the individual freely decides to belong to a community not culturally defined.²⁾ He saw the acquisition of cultural characteristics as essential for civic nationality. Kukathas (n. d., p.15) has summarized Barry’s position as follows: “The state should, among other things, assume responsibility for the education of children to ensure that cultural or religious communities cannot inculcate implausible beliefs in the minds of the young.” Barry argued that the receiving country should bear minimum responsibility for the education of foreign residents. In other words, his position is that individuals should be given an

opportunity to relativize the “belief” of ethnic groups in the “private” sphere.³⁾

If this discussion is applied to multicultural projects in Sapporo, two spheres can be found. One involves public schools and nighttime junior high schools, which form a civic nation (inclusion in a community). The other is a school for students with foreign backgrounds (the Korean School) which emphasizes native language education and is consistent with Kymlicka’s perspective. Both spheres are strongly collectivist in that they can produce a societal culture for a specific group (although this characteristic is essential for learning Japanese or the native language). Community schools emphasize Japanese and native language education individual choice in their place of belonging’s function and the site where various needs are met.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research subjects

This is a case study including a literature analysis and documents and the manuscript was prepared based on publicly available information. The research involved four actors, the city of Sapporo (including Sapporo International Plaza), a nighttime junior high school (public school), a school for students with foreign backgrounds, and a community (public) school in Sapporo. Under the Basic Act on Education in Japan, schools for students with foreign backgrounds are not considered a public school, nor (with some exceptions) an “Ichijoko.” In this study, the author investigates these actors to clarify their orientations and positions.

5.2 Procedure

The actors included the city of Sapporo and three organizations involved in supporting foreign residents and Sapporo's citizens. The official websites or videos of various actors (The city of Sapporo, a nighttime junior high school, and a school for students with foreign backgrounds) involved in supporting students with foreign backgrounds in Sapporo were examined with reference to Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism and Barry's civic nationality. My analysis of the community school focused on information from its official website and promotional videos.

6. Characteristics of actors regarding multiculturalism

6.1 The city of Sapporo, a nighttime junior high school, and a school for students with foreign backgrounds.

As of December 1, 2023, 17,877 foreign residents lived in Sapporo (City of Sapporo 2023). This number is relatively small compared to reports from other local authorities. However, since December 1, 2022, the number of foreigners registered as residents in Sapporo has increased by 2,163 in just one year.

Table 1 shows that Chinese residents were the largest in number, followed by South Korean or North Korean, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Indonesian residents. The number of foreign nationals from China, South Korea or North Korea were relatively large as of December 1, 2023 (Table 1).

Table 1. Foreign Population by Nationality in Sapporo on December 1, 2023

Nationality	Foreign Population in Sapporo on December 1, 2023
China	5,175
South Korea or North Korea	2,749
Vietnam	2,172
Myanmar	886
Indonesia	830
Nepal	730
United States	726
Taiwan	657
Philippines	613
Russia	325

Adapted from City of Sapporo (2023) by the author.

The Japanese government’s policy to establish the “specified skilled worker” category has created opportunities for low- and high-skilled persons from Southeast Asia. This policy exerts an influence on national demography. It was implemented to mitigate Japan’s rapid aging and low birth rates, population decline, and labor shortages. Thus, Sapporo was forced to engage in multicultural coexistence and established the “SAPPORO Help Desk for Foreign Residents” on November 28, 2019. This service had three major functions: 1) information provision, 2) consultation, and 3) direct support (City of Sapporo, n.d.). *Information provision* deals with queries on specialist institutions, support for foreign residents and related procedures, and arranging interpreters. *Consultation* helps foreign residents solve complex problems by working with relevant authorities and the local community, sharing helpful information. *Direct support* helps foreign residents experiencing anxiety and problems by providing them with advice and assistance. As of 2022, the Help Desk has four staff members and offers services by telephone in 21 languages.

In March 2021, a new webpage was published, “A Guide to Living in Sapporo,” providing information in simple Japanese, English, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese. In addition, it provides a service, “support for foreign nationals seeking medical attention,” in which a multilingual operator gathers information on the medical care foreign residents wish to access. Then, it engages in three-way communication with a medical institution to provide such care.

Sapporo established “Japanese classes for beginners SICPF,” a project to support Japanese language acquisition among foreign residents (Sapporo International Plaza 2021). The class was designed for beginning-level Japanese learners. In addition to language lessons provided by native teachers, conversation practice classes with supporters having teaching experience in Japanese (six sessions in one course) were provided. Guidance on living in Sapporo is offered to students through educational and supplementary support. However, these services are not sufficient for providing education for students with foreign backgrounds. Therefore, nighttime junior high schools and community schools have become indispensable for foreign residents of Sapporo.

Support for the foreign residents of Sapporo has developed rapidly over the past few years. As the services established are based on social inclusion related to Japanese language education, they do not embody Kymlicka’s liberal multiculturalism. With various communities providing support, Barry’s civic nationality is more evident (although not identical) in Sapporo’s case.

Next, nighttime junior high schools that accept students with foreign backgrounds were examined. Sapporo Seiyukan Junior High School

(Sapporo Seiyukan Junior High School n.d.) is the first public nighttime junior high school in Hokkaido to accept individuals older than 15 years (the end of compulsory education), regardless of nationality. As a public junior high school, it charges no tuition, and textbooks are provided free of charge regardless of nationality. No entrance examinations are conducted, and Japanese language support is offered to students with foreign backgrounds. The official website is published in English, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese, and Chinese characters are accompanied by phonetic transcriptions (yomigana) for easier reading. Upon entering the school, information is provided in multiple languages. The curriculum is the same as that in Japanese public schools. As in Japanese public schools, this arrangement does not draw on Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism.

Hokkaido Korean Elementary, Junior, and Senior High School opened in 1961 to serve students with foreign backgrounds (Hokkaido Korean Elementary, Junior, and Senior High School n.d.). The schools offer education to Koreans residing in Japan but having roots in the Korean Peninsula. The education provided supports the maintenance of their ethnic identity. From the perspective of Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism, schools are educational organizations requiring protection. However, Korean schools are classified as miscellaneous rather than Japanese educational institutions, according to Article 1 of the School Education Act. This classification means that they fall outside the public education framework. Their students are not exempt from paying tuition fees for high school education. Therefore, they have not been afforded the same rights as a specific minority collective culture, as Kymlicka suggests.

From Barry's (2001) perspective, a school is an example of a cultural community instilling certain views in young people's minds. He argued that the public education system should be responsible for preparing individuals to obtain socioeconomic benefits. Barry's civic nationality cautions us that the instilling of a particular culture in individuals by a school can lead to socioeconomic disadvantages for students with foreign backgrounds. Therefore, an examination of whether young individuals freely choose to study at a Japanese school or one for students with foreign backgrounds is necessary. The Korean School in Sapporo teaches ethnic subjects such as language and history. However, it also offers a curriculum similar to that used by Japanese schools and includes subjects such as Japanese, English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and World History. Hence, it is an educational organization that preserves identity and helps the citizens of Sapporo develop as community members (Hokkaido Korean Elementary, Junior, and Senior High School, n.d.). While the Korean school maintains students' culture and identity, as described by Kymlicka, its curriculum does not deviate from Barry's civic nationality.

6.2 The community school

Sapporo Odori High School is a municipal school in Chuo-ku, Sapporo, Hokkaido. It respects diversity with an emphasis on community building by accepting students with foreign backgrounds and returnees from abroad. It also offers morning, afternoon, and night classes year-round and adopts a part-time curriculum, allowing a student to graduate if they take the four-hour long classes for four years. "Additional registration" allows students to graduate in three years. The school's

Chieria Seminar offers ordinary local community citizens opportunities to learn in collaboration with the “Sapporo Lifelong Learning Center” (SapporoPRD, 2022).

Sapporo Odori High School has an international student quota at the entrance exam stage. In the selection process, based on self-recommendation, applicants are assessed through their personal statements, school records, essays, and interviews. In the general entrance selection, applicants are assessed through essays and interviews alone. Assessments are conducted in English, Chinese, Korean, and Russian (Sapporo Odori High School, 2022).

The school offers Japanese language support and tuition worth 10 credits a week, and native language support to preserve cultural identity. It also runs “Yugobu,” a community where Japanese and students with foreign backgrounds can socialize (Sapporo Odori High School, 2022). It facilitates activities to inculcate a sense of pride in cultural activities. For example, performances are held showcasing the tradition and cultures of various represented countries.

The community school in Sapporo can be seen as a system that partially guarantees minority culture and identity, which Kymlicka emphasized. It incorporates native language support in its curriculum. Simultaneously, as Barry emphasizes, it is a system that affords diverse individual possibilities, reflected in its efforts toward inclusion in Japanese society based on language support.

7. Analysis of the role of the various actors in Sapporo

The characteristics of various actors were examined with reference to Kymlicka’s liberal multiculturalism and Barry’s civic nationality. Table

2 shows a comparative analysis of these actors. (Table 2, Appendix)

First, Sapporo bases its activities on providing Japanese language support in education, life, and healthcare in the public sphere. Thus, it does not aim to secure the collective rights of a cultural group, as supported by Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism. Instead, Sapporo's concentration on developing citizenship to enable foreign nationals to participate in local communities more precisely embodies Barry's civic nationality. The same can be said of the nighttime junior high school, which provides Japanese language education to students with foreign backgrounds.

Second, a school for students with foreign backgrounds in Sapporo aims to preserve minority culture and identity, the focus of Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism. However, it also emphasizes Sapporo citizen development through Japanese language education. They provide civic education, which includes an individual's freedom as a citizen in the curriculum. A school for students with foreign backgrounds is based on multiculturalism and incorporates some elements of Barry's civic nationality.

Third, the community school follows a curriculum based on the Course of Study issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. However, it enforces a quota for students with foreign backgrounds at the entrance exam stage, conducts international exchange programs, and provides native language support. Its offerings have a strong flavor of citizenship education as it develops local citizens by respecting diverse identities. The school aims for both liberal multiculturalism and civic nationality.

8. Conclusion

This study examined the positions of various actors involved in supporting students with foreign backgrounds in Sapporo from the perspective of multiculturalism while focusing on the differences between Kymlicka and Barry's perspectives. Sapporo tends to promote the inclusion of students with foreign backgrounds in society through Japanese language education in classes offered by local authorities. In this regard, a nighttime junior high school has a strong affinity with the city as its support regime is based on Japanese language education. A school for students with foreign backgrounds appears to prioritize collective rights based on culture, as seen in its curriculum. It provides native language education and facilitates the transmission of native cultures. From Kymlicka's perspective, further enhancement of Japanese language education offered by the city of Sapporo would mainly strengthen the majority position. Therefore, protecting schools for foreign nationals to guarantee the preservation of minority cultures is required. In contrast, from Barry's perspective, the state should provide education. Its provision by minority groups to maintain native culture raises concerns that restrictions will be placed on individual free choice. Consequently, Barry's perspective clearly distinguishes between Sapporo's position as a public and the school for students with foreign backgrounds as private education providers.

The community school includes both Kymlicka's and Barry's perspectives. While based on Japanese-language education, the community school provides native language support and responds to the needs of foreign residents as citizens of Sapporo. It is a school that contributes to individuals' selective needs. In summary, the community school

embodies liberalism based on individual needs. While the “public” and “private” blend, they provide a different community, disconnected from culture.

This study examined the theoretical considerations of four actors in Sapporo with scattered foreign populations. Further analysis of the roles of these actors, especially in supporting the school enrollment of students with foreign backgrounds, could have practical implications.

Notes

- 1 Another debate between Kymlicka and Barry includes the latter’s critique of multiculturalism as lacking attention to economic inequalities and redistribution in the socioeconomic sphere. However, Banting and Kymlicka (2003) have concluded that no consistent evidence exists that multicultural policies can lead to a decline in welfare based on the social spending–GDP ratio and the high rates of redistribution of income and wealth in Canada and Australia, which promote multicultural policies.
- 2 Taylor (1985) has criticized liberalism as “atomism” that emphasizes the individual who fulfills themselves outside society. He argues that an individual can only achieve self-determination in the community context. Barry’s “civic nationality” can be seen to include an element of “atomism.” It is based on the individual. However, as seen in his emphasis on the national language’s importance in education, he did not ignore the importance of community inclusion.
- 3 Murphy (2013, p.95) has argued some similarity exists between Kymlicka and Barry. Kymlicka supported the autonomy of stateless persons and indigenous people from the perspective of liberal egalitarianism. Thus, his argument is profoundly similar to that of Barry in that the idea of autonomy is an important factor contributing to an individual’s freedom and sense of

fulfillment and happiness. While some commonality is shared between Kymlicka and Barry, the former strongly promotes the conferment of rights on the collective identity of ethnic groups.

Disclosure statement

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Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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Appendix

Table 2. The Multicultural Characteristics of Various Actors Involved in Supporting Students with Foreign Backgrounds in Sapporo

Actor	Support provided	Public/private sphere	Kymlicka or Barry
City of Sapporo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sapporo Help Desk for foreign residents” • Support for foreign residents seeking medical attention • Japanese classes for beginners SICPF 	<p>It aims to connect students with foreign backgrounds to public education through Japanese language education.</p>	<p>Weak influence of Kymlicka’s “liberal form of multiculturalism” and stronger influence of Barry’s “civic nationality”</p>
Nighttime junior high school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No tuition fees and textbooks are free, as it is a public school • No entrance exam • Students with foreign backgrounds are provided with Japanese language support whenever needed 	<p>It aims to connect students with foreign backgrounds to public education through Japanese language education.</p>	<p>Weak influence of Kymlicka’s “liberal form of multiculturalism” and stronger influence of Barry’s “civic nationality”</p>
School for students with foreign backgrounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity preservation through the provision of ethnic subjects • Providing a curriculum that includes Japanese, English, mathematics, science, social studies, and world history to prepare students for life in Japan and the international community. 	<p>It is centered on the maintenance of cultural identity through ethnic subjects but equally emphasizes the development of citizens of Sapporo through Japanese language education.</p>	<p>An educational institution that fits in with Kymlicka’s “liberal form of multiculturalism” but also includes some elements of Barry’s “civic nationality”</p>
Community school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing opportunities to learn with local residents • A quota for students with foreign backgrounds in the entrance exam • International exchange activities 	<p>While aiming to connect students with foreign backgrounds to public education through Japanese language education, it also offers international exchange activities and education in students’ native languages.</p>	<p>Trying to achieve both Kymlicka’s “liberal form of multiculturalism” and Barry’s “civic nationality”</p>

