In what ways might we reasonably ask immigrants to adapt to us when they join our community? In what ways might immigrants reasonably ask us to adapt to them?

I use the term ‘we’ here deliberately in order to evoke the conventional way in which the issues I am discussing are framed – a ‘we–they’ construction in which ‘we’ reflects the perspective of those who largely share the majority culture of the receiving society, and ‘they’ reflects the perspective of immigrants from countries that are assumed to be both poor and culturally different. There are good reasons to object to this sort of ‘we–they’ construction, but I think it can be useful nevertheless to stay within it because it so shapes public discourse about these issues.

This chapter emerges from a book I am writing on the normative issues immigration raises for liberal democracies in Europe and North America, especially, but not exclusively, immigration from the developing world. One of the overarching arguments of that book is that liberal democratic principles constrain the morally permissible range of options that states officially committed to those principles have in dealing with immigration. In the larger work, I argue that immigrants who are legally admitted to stay in a state ought to be granted a right to stay permanently within a few years (five, at most), and ought to enjoy most of the rights that citizens enjoy from the outset. I also argue that children of immigrants ought to acquire citizenship automatically at birth, or, if they are born elsewhere, automatically once they have been educated in the receiving state for a few years. I argue further that immigrants themselves should enjoy relatively easy access to citizenship after they have lived in the receiving state for a few years. In this...
chapter, I wish simply to presuppose these claims as the background framework for my enquiry.

Within that framework, I will make the following broad claims: A commitment to liberal democratic principles of freedom and equality will sometimes require immigrants to change, and sometimes require the receiving society to change. In the current context, where a politics of fear has emerged, where immigrants are often constructed as threats to liberal democratic states, and where officials and public figures (especially in Europe) loudly proclaim that multiculturalism is dead, it seems especially important to emphasize the latter point; that is, the need for change by the receiving society.

Much of what passes for multiculturalism is an inevitable outgrowth of basic liberal democratic commitments to individual rights – including freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and freedom to live one’s life as one chooses so long as one is not harming others – and can be suppressed only by violating those commitments. (It is disturbing to see how ready some states are to do just that.) But justice requires more than respect for individual rights. It also requires a willingness to treat immigrants fairly, even though they are a minority, and that will sometimes require accommodations of various sorts, and even public recognition of and support for their culture and their identity.

Multiculturalism is not only – indeed, not primarily – about group-differentiated legal rights. It is much more about the question of who belongs – who is seen as a full member of society and on what basis. In speaking of liberal democratic justice, then, I mean to include more than laws, policies and institutions. How laws, policies and institutions work in practice depends on the attitudes, dispositions and behaviour of those who carry out and live under the laws and policies, and who inhabit and interact with the institutions. Liberal democratic justice entails a certain kind of public culture, one that sees immigrants as full members of society and treats them with respect. Equal legal rights are only a starting point for this sort of requirement. What matters as much is the way people in the settled population – especially public officials, but also ordinary citizens – behave, and how they interact with immigrants.

Let me begin with a few clarifications and distinctions. First, as will already be obvious, I am concerned not only with immigrants themselves, the people who actually arrive in a new country, but also with their descendants, who cannot properly be described as immigrants but are characteristically referred to as the second generation or the third generation.

Second, in describing something as just we may mean either that it is morally permissible or that it is morally required. I will try to be clear