

THEORETICAL MODELS OF IDENTITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERCULTURAL STUDIES

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Abstract: Globalization and European integration have often been associated with a decreased interest in national identities and values. Contrary to this perspective, we witness in recent years an unexpected return to identity themes on the agenda of social thought and political discourse. At the same time, theorists justifiably speak about a crisis of cultural identities, a phenomenon they put into relevant correlations with globalization processes, with the revolution triggered by the new communication technologies, but mainly with the increased intercultural communication. All these changes have favored the processes of acculturation, of hybridization of cultures and lifestyles, stirring up, moreover, the intercultural researches and studies, concerned with the knowledge and explanation of cultural differences. For their proper understanding, identities require a comparative and intercultural perspective, a positioning inside the paradigm of cultural relativism, along the problematic axis of the relationship between “we and the others.” In postmodern world, under the pressure of media culture, of relativistic and anti-essentialist stands, our identity is one with image the others construe about us.

In this study, I have analyzed several theoretical models of identity, belonging to authors who have developed successful methodologies in the field of intercultural communication. I referred to the theory of Edward T. Hall, founder of this discipline, who established the distinction between monochronic and polychronic cultures, and to the indicators proposed by Geert Hofstede to measure up cultural differences. Since the intercultural dialogue also applies to the theoretical space, I also focused the debate, in a comparative approach, on two identity models from the Romanian thinking, namely Lucian Blaga, who developed the concept of stylistic matrix, a concept similar to the cultural pattern from the American anthropology, and Mircea Vulcănescu, who authored studies close to cultural and linguistic relativism. My demarche is to shed light on several common elements in the four theoretical models under study.

Keywords: intercultural communication, globalization, cultural identity, stylistic matrix, cultural relativism.

The issue of cultural identities in the context of globalization

„We can see the diversity of human cultures
behind us, around us, and before us”
Claude Levi –Strauss

Few themes have rallied around so much intellectual energy and political passion throughout the times as the issue of cultural identities. In a nutshell, we can say that it is the supra-theme of today's world; in tandem with globalization. Still, one observation should be made: globalization is the framework, while identity is the issue. To be better understood, the issue of identity must be placed within the broader framework of changes leading us toward the post-industrial civilization and to the knowledge-based society. And when it comes to the factors shaping up this framework, we shall inevitably draw up an inventory of the themes and commonplaces imbedded into social thinking. Therefore, we must point out, first and foremost, globalization and all the processes it triggers around, the interaction and dialogue between cultures, the revolution brought about by the new technologies and forms of communication, the extension of European integration, the recent crisis facing the European

Union as well. The broad canvass of our times should also include the geopolitical changes: the collapse of communism, the economic crisis of the developed world and the surprising rise of emerging countries.

Basically, these overlapping crises and transitions mark the passage from modernity to post-modernity, a process that involves a shift in cultural paradigm. Our world is changing at a fast pace and our mental maps are always under reconstruction. Without setting up any deterministic correlations among these changes in avalanche, it is natural to see these developments as the cumulative outcome of the expanded and intensified intercultural communication on a global scale, with no historical precedent. The contacts among individuals, societies and cultures have never reached *a space* so wide and *an intensity* so profound. This large-scale phenomenon, caught up in a circular relationship, also works as an accelerator of the factors making it possible, multiplying the effects of intercultural contacts both economically and politically. Of course, other factors are at play with major implications, but in this study we are interested in the cultural problematic of globalization, in the way the forces that shape up contemporary world also generate correlative changes within the cultural structures of societies.

In addressing these issues, cross-cultural studies start from a set of questions that challenge the very problematic condition of cultural identities in a globalized world. What are the changes triggered in the cultural universe by the new economic practices and new communication technologies? What happens within national cultures, how is their identity changed and in what sense, what value restructurings and redevelopments occur when cultures are caught up in „the web” of so many networks, influences and interactions? When do the acculturation processes multiply on a global scale? What long-term effects will such phenomena as the increased migration of labor, the capital relocation, the expansion of multinational companies, the growing mobility of students and businessmen, the cultural tourism and the accrued intercultural experiences bring about? Would they lead to the standardization of cultures, to the wiping out of cultural differences or to a resurrection of the identity feelings and attitudes, as a response to globalizing tendencies? These are the questions covering key issues facing the societies of today and they represent reflection themes for the disciplines addressing the status of individual and collective identities.

These researches may have their starting point in the statement that theoretical approaches and political attitudes toward the issue of cultural identities have undergone changes in the last two decades. Globalization and European integration have been seen until recently as processes leading to a progressive cultural homogenization of societies, to a decreased interest in national and ethnic values, thus facilitating the emergence of a transnational or global culture, with no identity mark. Nonetheless, real history usually has an unpredictable development, as we know, and overtops these utopian predictions. Imagine how shocking was in the early 90s Samuel Huntington’s idea that in the following period the prevailing sources of conflict would have their origin in culture and identity, and not in ideology. The hypothesis that on a global scale, humankind would be confronted with the phenomenon called „the clash of civilizations” ran counter to the representations prevailing in Western media right after the Cold War. At that time, the American thinker’s bold ideas fell down like a jet of cold water over the heated minds of many analysts who spoke, full of excitement, about the victory of Western liberal model and the „end of conflict-ridden

history”. Here is what this author wrote in response to this one-sided perspective: „What Westerners announce to be a mild global integration, such as the proliferation of mass media globally, the non-Westerners denounce to be Western rogue imperialism” (Huntington, 1998, p 95). These statements carry a strange resonance today, given the real conflicts we witness, and “the conflict of interpretations” in the theoretical and ideological space.

Therefore, under the cross pressure of several factors, non-critical, apologetic approaches have gradually lost their influence in favor of rigor-bound, lucid analyses, placed under the register of geopolitical realism and approaching the phenomenon of globalization in its entire complexity. The new problematic of social thinking covers issues crossing over and calling for interdisciplinary approaches: the unity and diversity of cultures, the relation between local and global, between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, the dialogue and hybridization of cultural models, the relationship between cultural identities and their image inside the communicational space towered by media culture. The key issue, gathering together all these themes, is the *tension between globalization and cultural identity* (Tomlinson , 2002; Bauman , 2004). This idea is often acknowledged by current researches, working with the image of a complex world, interlaced onto the chain of multiple interactions and global networks, but which is crossed by contradictory tendencies, oriented either toward convergence and dialogue or toward differentiation and conflict. In this sense, a sociologist reputed for his insightful analysis into Information society, „a network society”, believes that „the opposition between globalization and identification, and also the divide between individualism and communalism” (Castells, 2009, p 117) are the two basic axes around which the current debate is focussed. When we speak about the process of European integration, the most sensitive issue refers also to identity and takes the form of the national - European relationship on the cultural and political level.

Cultural diversity - a theoretical and (geo) political challenge

The issue of cultural identity is particularly relevant in relation to the contradictory and confusing changes triggered by the forces of globalization, and it should also be placed in a wider theoretical reference framework, such as the relation between unity and diversity. It is a constitutive relation of the human condition, reproduced in all the hypostases of human creation and culture. The conceptions on the unity and diversity of cultures (be them evolutionary, universalistic, relativist, ethnocentric, etc.) vary depending on the philosophical and axiological assumptions they are based upon. They represent a kind of theoretical matrix both for the way they explain the identity of cultures and also for the meanings they attach to it.

Analyzing the 19th c. thinkers’ mono-linear evolutionism, Levi -Strauss says that they interpret the differences among cultures only as „stages” of a one-way development, as „historical gaps” to the Western model, considered to be an exemplary and canonical one. The founders of cultural anthropology (Edward Tylor, Lewis Morgan and James Frazer) capture the temporal *historical* diversity, but they are not receptive to the idea of morphological *structural* diversity of cultures. Levi -Strauss considers that this limitation is rooted in the Western-centered outlook embraced by these authors, predetermined by their stands toward other cultures. Therefore, in the case of this „false evolutionism” „it is mainly about an attempt to suppress the diversity of cultures, while simulating its full recognition” (Levi -Strauss, 1982, p.11).

The neo-evolutionist and relativistic conceptions, acknowledging the pluralism of historical development lines, embark upon a different approach and attitude toward the theme of cultural identity. Humankind brings forth different cultural worlds, which share together many symbolic and universal elements and procedures, but there is not a unique cultural pattern to be used as an acceptable criterion for assessing other cultures. Each and every culture should be understood and assessed in relation to its specific data, with its particular value system and the historically and socially contextual factors that have shaped up its identity. Speaking from the perspective of anthropology and long-term history, Levi-Strauss assures us that: „We can see the diversity of human cultures behind us, around us, and before us.” (p. 46). It is a lesson that sounds like a warning to those who are too confident in the uniformizing force of globalization.

Each and every culture is nowadays the outcome of a unique combination between global and local, between the many-sided influences it absorbed and the creative energy of nations. In each and every culture there is a certain balance between common and differentiating elements, their varying dosage, which defines the specific formula of their identity. The European rationalist tradition favors unity against diversity. It calls us to see unity as being primary, essential and intelligible, and diversity as being secondary, phenomenal and sensitive. The paradox is that globalization has just revived the interest in identities and the protection of cultural diversity, balancing up somewhat these opposite trends and constitutive parts. The world cultural and linguistic diversity is one of the most intricate issues of philosophical and scientific thinking. It is a theme that globalization has put onto today's agenda and has placed on it a geopolitical significance, given the leveling influence of cultural industries and the tendencies of cultural hegemony. An encompassing report by UNESCO entitled *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue* (2010) includes an impressive corpus of statistical data, references and interdisciplinary syntheses on this problematic. Knowing other cultures, ruling out any ethnocentric and intolerant stands, sizing up again the relationship between “we and the others”, the role of education and media system, the protection of the world cultural heritage in all its variety, and the non-conflicting management of cultural diversity are valued to be landmarks for building up our future. The message carried out by this key document is that cultural diversity should be defended as a humankind asset in the face of the biased tendencies leading „to the homogenization of cultural models, values, aspirations and lifestyles, to the standardization of tastes, the impoverishment of creativity, uniformization of cultural expressions.” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 27).

The perception of identities from intercultural perspectives

The changes brought about by globalization have fuelled up the processes of acculturation, of hybridization of cultures and lifestyles, while, at the same time, boosting the cross-cultural researches and studies, interested in the knowledge and explanation of the cultural differences. National identities are in no way absolute and homogeneous, instead they manifest themselves as complex and relative entities. Although they hold on as sustainable structures, keeping up some defining elements, identities resize and redefine themselves over time, following the influences they absorb and the interactions they are part of. Consequently, we need a comparative and intercultural perspective analyzing cultural

identities not as isolated entities *per se*, but as open structures, resulting from many-faceted past and present interactions, as an inter-relationship phenomenon, as „knots" inserted into a broad network. By their object of study, cross-cultural researches are positioned within the paradigm of cultural relativism, on the problematic axis of the relationship between „we and the others." Intercultural approaches focus on the dynamic relationships between peoples and cultures, on how they change each other through a long cohabitation and mutual influences.

Of course, the interactions among peoples and societies are a universal phenomenon, and the world's great historians, from Herodotus to Toynbee, have naturally embraced the implicitly geopolitical intercultural perspective. Nonetheless, today, in the era of global interconnection (of the *inter-net*), when the level of key processes is not „national" but „global", cross-cultural approaches are essential to explain the widespread transfer of models, styles and symbolic assets among cultures (Demorgon, 2002, p 323). The French thinker Jacques Demorgon's project on „the intercultural history of societies" is seminal and deserves an in-depth debate.

Let us also add that cultural identities depend now more than ever on the image they build up within the communicational space. The cross-cultural experience involves a mental exercise based on our systematic perception through the other's eyes and the attempt to grasp the other's expectations toward us. As actors involved in intercultural communication situations, we are called to learn the cultural codes coming from our partners (or our opponents), who often nourish different beliefs and attitudes on basic life issues. Intercultural experiences enrich us spiritually, open up new horizons of understanding the world and compel us to have a comparative assessment, helping us to better know our own identity. In the postmodern world, under the pressure of new forms of communication and media culture, our identity is part and parcel of the image the others have about us. In brief, an intercultural approach means „above all, an ongoing endeavor to see things from the other's (cultural) point of view" (Lewis, 2005, p 365). A demanding task, nonetheless a more achievable goal would be to combine the images provided by the outer and inner eye, in an attempt to accommodate these mutual assessments.

These issues are pervasive and instructive to better grasp the intricate relationships between *the identity* of a national culture and its *image* within the space of other cultures. These relationships share many perennial aspects and mechanisms, but they also reveal certain specific characteristics in the age of the Internet and Facebook. The Romanians and the Romanian culture encounter a chronic image deficit, and the Romanian intellectuals from Cantemir to Cioran were aware of it and voiced it in dramatic tones. Even nowadays, following our EU integration, our identity carries on a predominantly negative image in the Western media system devices and the European public opinion. An extended image crisis eventually shows an identity crisis as well.

The cross-cultural approaches help us understand also the mechanism through which the others build up their image about our identity. As a matter of fact, the theories on intercultural communication are implicitly theories on cultural differences. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1914-2009), the founding father of cross-cultural studies, developed a complex theory about the factors that differentiate cultures and grant them identity. Of great interest today is also the theory of Geert Hofstede who developed a series of indicators and an effective methodology aimed to determine the similarities and differences among cultures.

Keen to explain the problematic nature of Romanian identity, the Romanian thinkers have been particularly interested in the theme of cultural identity, and to this end they have formulated encompassing theories and analyzes, some as Western extensions, others tacitly or explicitly in disagreement with them. In the Romanian space, the most far-reaching theory on cultural identity belongs to Lucian Blaga, who developed during the interwar period the concept of stylistic matrix, a similar concept to *the cultural pattern* developed by American anthropology. A pride of place should be also given to Mircea Vulcanescu (1904 – 1952), an author who ushered in an analysis of Romanian identity by studying the particular meanings certain philosophical concepts acquire in the Romanian language. His studies on this topic can be integrated into the wider orientation of cultural and linguistic relativism. Of course, other Romanian thinkers would also deserve to be mentioned for their contribution to the analysis of cultural identity. A systematic research would point out the common elements these identity models share, despite that they were developed by authors belonging to so different cultural contexts. In this text we shall formulate some brief considerations and suggestions that could guide a comparative approach to the topic under study.

The iceberg model and the „reading” of cultural differences

Our starting point will be an insightful remark made by Mircea Eliade in 1935, according to which the foreigners judge us by our *visible* behavior and not by our „*unfathomable*” soul inspiring the Romanian cultural creations. „Still, this Romanian soul is not known and actually is of no interest across the borders. Foreigners judge us by the people who lead us, by they who represent us abroad (...). The truth is that everyone is bound to take into account only the values that can be communicated, values used or disseminated by the political and spiritual elites of a nation (...). It is stupid to cry out that we are only known by our mistakes. We are known by what we show to others”. (Eliade, 1990, pp. 92-94). Therefore, the others’ image about us is based on perceptions whose object are obviously the noticeable realities: behaviors, gestures and expressions made in the external and domestic public space, in the ways of working and speaking, artifacts, the street scenery and spectacle, including the artwork and also in a thousand mundane details of life. The assumption is that these surface realities translate or „express” the hidden soul of a culture, and the external observer will cross by intuition the distance from the outer to the inner aspects of a society and national culture.

By this distinction between noticeable and invisible aspects, Eliade’s text outlines the iceberg metaphor, frequently used today in many areas. The similarity between culture and the iceberg is found, in various wordings, with many theorists of culture, mainly of intercultural communication, starting with E.T. Hall. According to him, „All of culture is complex system of extensions” (1981, p 40), which appears as a stratified reality on various levels. Just like the iceberg which is sunk about 90 percent under water, culture has a massive and complex “hidden dimension”, which is invisible to the external observer while the native members of that culture are „unaware” of. Using the metaphor of the iceberg, Hall believes that „above the floating line” are the visible aspects such as behaviors, practices, tools, rituals, gestures, ways of speaking, protocol rules and „below the floating line” would be beliefs, values, attitudes, mind-frames, world visions, implied symbolic meanings. When we come into contact with a new cultural space, we first notice the surface aspects, then gradually as

you get familiar with the symbolic norms and codes of the new social environment, we come to better understand the deeper and invisible components of that culture (meanings, visions, beliefs, values, mind-frames).

This is the „reading” path a foreign observer (either a simple tourist or an anthropologist) takes as he steps into the universe of a new culture: from the outside to the inside, from the surface to the depth, from expressions to meanings. Hall postulates a close correlation between the two components of culture, considering that the visible aspects of a culture are expressions of the collective unconscious structures (p. 24). Educated at the famous American anthropological school, Hall marked the specialized literature with a series of concepts and indicators that differentiated cultures according to the importance of non-verbal language and the contextual communication acts (high-context cultures and low-context cultures) and the attitude towards time: monochronic cultures and polychronic cultures. The monochronic-type cultures are where people carry one kind of activity in a unit of time, in which what matters are the observance of deadlines and the agenda set in advance, the punctuality at meetings, the brevity and rigorousness of messages, the efficiency of verbal communication and not the contextual elements.

The iceberg model is also found with other theorists of culture and intercultural communication. For instance, Geert Hofstede believes that we can make an analogy between the programs running on a computer and the culture of a social community. He defines culture as „collective mental programming” (software of mind), through education and socialization, a phenomenon that results in the development of different ways of thinking and feeling, which distinguishes social groups and communities (Hofstede, 1996, p.21). Hofstede proposed five „dimensions” or indicators that can determine the differences among cultures: 1) the distance from the power; 2) the preferences for individualistic or collectivist values; 3) the preferences for values associated with masculinity (competition, confrontation and personal affirmation) or femininity (collaboration, consensus, harmony); 4) the way people relate to situations of risk and uncertainty; 5) orientation with respect to time, the long or short term planning.

Factors, values and attitudes with identity significance

The criteria used by E. T. Hall and the dimensions proposed by Geert Hofstede to mark the differences among cultures are also found with Romanian authors, in slightly different wordings. For instance, Lucian Blaga argues that space and time representations and the preference for certain values are instrumental in defining a culture. The Romanian thinker developed a new concept in order to explain the identity of cultures: the stylistic matrix. Cultural creations carry a symbolic, universal function, but at the same time, a stylistic mark, namely a specific physiognomy that differentiates them. The stylistic aspect is given by a set of factors rooted in the peoples’ collective unconscious structures. These „abysmal” factors (for instance, the iceberg metaphor) imprints its shape on cultural creations and explain the cultural differences among societies, nations and historical epochs. The main factors making up the stylistic matrix of a culture would be: the spatial and temporal horizons of the unconscious, the prevailing axiological accents, the meanings conferred to time, movement, history and human destiny, the preference for certain values (be them typical and general, particular and individual, elementary and organic) (Blaga, 1985, pp. 175-180).

The idea of stylistic matrix is an original theoretical construct developed by the Romanian author. It can be used as an effective tool in the comparative research on cultures. For example, Blaga achieves an in-depth analysis of the differences between Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism from a cultural and stylistic viewpoint. Thus, Catholicism is the outcome of the encounter between the universalist message of Christianity and the stylistic matrix of Roman culture. Hence the importance Catholicism attached to the idea of state and the values associated with the idea of institution: discipline, order, authority, hierarchy, the church seen as an institution, as God's state on earth. Catholicism was animated by the legal spirit, by an offensive attitude, by universalist and imperialist tendencies. In exchange, Protestantism was born from the encounter between the Christian spirit and the Germanic peoples' matrix, an environment in which the central place is given to individual freedom and not to authoritarian and institutional structures. Protestant religious life is dominated by problematization, by an inner restlessness and a keen sense of rational duty. Orthodoxy crystallized in the Eastern European environment and stands apart by its emphasis on organic categories („life, earth, nature”) and the values and attitudes that bind together community life.

From another perspective, Mircea Vulcănescu opened up a new research direction on cultural identities through the analysis of the distinctive features of languages. His underlying assumption was that the connotative and hidden meanings of the words in a language shelter a particular vision of the world. According to him, these meanings are imprinted on the „language pattern” and „the structure of expressive symbols”, in other words, „onto thinking moulds the words were carved upon” (Vulcănescu, 1994, pp. 164-165). Therefore, in the Romanian language many philosophical categories acquired relatively different meanings as compared to the Western thinking: the ideas of existence, essence, space and time, the specific meanings of expressions referring to disjunction and negation, the relation between real and possible, between necessity and chance. Following these insightful analyses, the author argues that “at the roots of the Romanian concept of being lies the supremacy of the virtual over the actual”, the missing pragmatic attitude towards life, the absence of absolute negation, of the idea that some matters are imperative. In other words, even in the face of limit-situations, the Romanians have the feeling that everything is remediable, that nothing is lost forever (pp. 130-133).

The conclusion I would like to emphasize is that the theories developed by the Romanian thinkers on cultural identity show correspondences (similarities and differences) with Western paradigms, so that comparative analyzes are mandatory. In some cases, the sources of inspiration are easily documented, in others we have to do with minor theoretical adjustments and contributions made by the Romanian thinkers, nonetheless with interesting applications and analyses on local issues. In other cases, not so many, the Romanian thinkers carried through systematic researches and developed original theoretical models on cultural identity. Unfortunately, their ideas and theories are less known, since they have not benefitted from a professional promotion on the market of the European philosophical and social ideas.

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