

## RETHINKING IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

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*Abstract: The issue of identity has become one of paramount importance in the age of globalization whose most visible characteristic is the enhanced permeability of frontiers. The stability of nineteenth and even twentieth-century societies was accounted for by individuals developing their sense of belonging mainly in terms of their national identity, experienced as safe and secure within well-guarded national frontiers. The unprecedented opening of frontiers in the twenty-first century has facilitated the cultural encounter and made individuals rethink their identity and define themselves as the crossroads of various cultural forces at work in the contemporary society. Identity has become multifaceted and, with few, if any, exceptions, societies have turned into multicultural ones. The paper aims at offering insight into the various problems with which contemporary societies confront themselves in the global and globalizing environment when individuals act more across than within cultural borders.*

*Keywords: Globalization, frontier, identity, culture, cultural encounter.*

“No one today is purely *one* thing. [...] Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities.” (Said 336)

In spite of the clear opening of frontiers that it presupposed, imperialism reinforced furthermore the borders which separated and delimited states and regions throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century. That is why identity was primarily understood as national identity. Individuals developed their sense of belonging through ideals, beliefs and customs that they shared, or at least believed they did, within well-protected, often impenetrable, national or regional borders. Moreover, it was in and for this body of shared values that societies were deemed homogeneous and unitary, having clearly defined and, if need be, readily testable loyalties.

“National identity may [...] be viewed as a species of cultural identity, differentiated from others by the political use to which the notion is put in claiming a right to separate statehood or other forms of autonomy.” (Gilbert 36) It is constructed and consolidated through cultural icons whose main role is to create feelings of certainty and rootedness. “National anthems, flags, costumes and holidays, state rituals, national sports teams, pageantry, museums, heritage centres, buildings and monuments all help to create and sustain narratives about who we are and where we have come from.” (Weedon 24) As markers of national identity, these icons were largely responsible for people’s sense of security. With clear cultural identifications and territorial delimitations, nations were perceived and functioned as distinct entities, assumed to be homogeneous within national frontiers and thus incontestably different from any other entity.

At the heart of much of the nineteenth and twentieth-century systems lay the mentalities fostered by nation-states. We even dare say that such views and attitudes are still present nowadays and have a significant contribution to many of the clashes tormenting the contemporary world. This is because they lead to the world’s harsh division into “us,”

members and citizens of a nation, and “them,” anyone who is not of that nation, which implies a high conflict generating potential. Under the circumstances, diversity is hardly visible and definitely little welcome both within and outside nation-states.

The fall of the Berlin Wall could have, optimistically, made the world a more integrative space whose divide would eventually evolve into a much longed for unity. What has actually happened after the destruction of the Iron Curtain is, nevertheless, contrary to expectations. The new openness has turned into a major challenge for both individuals and societies. Frontier permeability invites mobility, while making people seriously consider whether “cultures actually exist as separate, pure, defensible entities” (Rushdie “March 1999: Globalization” 297).

The paradox at the heart of the contemporary world is that the more the visible frontiers have become crossable, the more the invisible ones have transformed into sometimes insurmountable walls. Cultural contact seldom ends up in genuine cultural commingling. The encounter with the Other is frequent, but little effective. We do not and, unfortunately, will not know the Other for who they really are. Instead of exhilarating us, the encounter makes us anxious and fearful, and fear creates walls, taller than the Wall had ever been. “We retreated behind smaller iron curtains, built smaller stockades, imprisoned ourselves in narrower, ever more fanatical definitions of ourselves – religious, regional, ethnic – and readied ourselves for war.”

(Rushdie “Step Across This Line” 426-7)

Globalization, intrinsic to the contemporary world’s constitution, has encouraged the mobility of individuals and cultural products to such extent that “[a]dulteration, impurity, pick’n’mix [are] at the heart of the idea of the modern, and [have been] that way for most of this all-shook-up century.” (Rushdie “March 1999: Globalization” 297) Besides, it has turned “the migrant, the man without frontiers, [into] the archetypal figure of our age” (Rushdie “Step Across This Line” 415).

Cultural hybridity is the distinguishing feature of a world best definable as cultures in contact, “mélange, metissage mestizaje, the processes of blending and melding and change under whatever description, [being] facts of the world, facts of our condition” (Levy 7).

The effects of globalization are twofold. As a multi-dimensional force, globalization has a clear homogenizing power, likely to ensure the world’s cohesion. At the same time, it represents, or at least it is felt as such, a threat to the unity of both national and individual identity. In either case, it has “its special contribution to the radical uncertainties of the current era” (Kennedy 8). Societies and individuals can no longer be understood other than in the context of globalization, as “[t]hese persistent experiences of global interdependence gradually change people’s individual and collective identities, and thus dramatically impact the way they act in the world” (Steger 12). The feeling of certainty and cultural security associated with the sense of belonging to a nation-state, community, or family, turns into the anxiety and fear caused by travelling across frontiers and encountering the Other. “Globalization decisively unmakes the coherence that the modernist project of the nineteenth - and twentieth-century nation-state promised to deliver - the neat fit between territory, language, and identity.” (Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard 3)

Both individuals and societies are culturally sensitive and everyone’s significance largely depends on the cultural forces that converge in the making of one’s identity. “[I] is not

clear that there is any sense to the notion of an identity which one has outside of a particular context. [T]here seems to be no identity one can give which somehow conveys who one is irrespective of the context.” (Gilbert 6)

Identity can no longer be perceived as unitary and homogeneous, it has become increasingly complex and multifaceted. And this is mainly because individuals mean to the extent to which they do so in a particular cultural context and, perforce, through mirroring in the Other. Identity means being either here or there, sometimes neither here nor there. It implies a sense of belonging or being an outsider, in-group or out-group feelings. It is about security or vulnerability, inclusion or exclusion, adapting or misadjusting, mobility or immobility. In the contemporary context, identity is the complicated answer to a variety of questions. “How is the identity of any one individual created? In the creation of individual identity, what factors are salient and how do these factors interact? [...] How far is identity fixed and stable? If identities do change, what factors are responsible for such change? How far is individual identity influenced by global forces?” (Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman 66) Certain is that identity represents the crossroads of cultural forces and it is always by relations within a culture that one facet or another of identity becomes significant and acquires proper relevance. Identity is even more problematic given that culture, in whose context it is defined, has become itself a highly complex issue.

Basically, there are two possible views of culture, which also account for our way of interpreting identity. The most frequent one, mainly valid throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, is the essentialist one according to which “[t]here is a universal essence, homogeneity and unity in a particular culture” (Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman 2). By relating to a body of ideas and customs shared by the community people develop in-group feelings and conceive of themselves as distinct from any other group. It is mainly because they endorse these values that they consider themselves entitled to function as the only norm by which the other is always measured and judged. The essentialist view accounts for the world being mapped into geographically and culturally distinct entities.

The second possible view, non-essentialist, interprets culture as any social grouping with specific behaviours and activities. Culture is “a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people in a piecemeal fashion to produce myriad combinations and configurations” (Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman 3).

The view adopted during the centuries preceding the twenty-first was essentialist par excellence, as it was highly convenient to think of the world in terms of more or less interconnected, yet homogeneous and independent, well delimited and thus defensible entities, able to include, dominate and control any other cultural configuration. Well drawn frontiers were of extreme importance for the proper functioning of the international space. This is the view of culture on which is founded the history of the Western world with the power relations inherent in imperialism, and to a certain extent of globalization later on. “This meeting of cultures in its various manifestations via colonialism, the slave trade, white settlement outside Europe, war, migration to the West and globalization, has involved relations of power, foremost among them attempts to dominate or assimilate others under the various banners of civilization, Christianization, modernization, progress and development.” (Weedon 3)

The experience of World War I made some suspect essentialism had a high potential for conflict, insidiously containing the germs of war. There is, however, some new awareness that “though we look at the same things, we see them differently.” (Woolf 119). Within the homogeneous, unitary cultures, diversity starts being visible.

World War II offered disastrous confirmation of the fact that cultures were far from being homogeneous and revealed heterogeneity and hybridity as the defining features of the emerging world. It is critical that individuals and nations should eventually understand that the world is interconnected and that survival depends on how willing people are to value difference and acknowledge that “[o]ne of the legacies of colonial history is the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and racially mixed nature of contemporary Western societies.” (Weedon 3).

Non-essentialism proves the view more appropriate for the cultural geography of the contemporary world. Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. “No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about.” (Said 336) It is, nevertheless, imperative that attitudes and mentalities should change and people accept that “no one culture/civilization is an unproblematic, integrated whole but rather is torn by historical tensions and differences” (Senghaas xi). This would permit interpreting identity within as much as across frontiers. The conflict resulting from the contact of cultures is likely to occur at home, as much as abroad, therefore within, as much as across national or regional frontiers. Moreover, in the age of globalization, “such clashes are more likely to occur within a culture/civilization rather than between two different ones” and “[...] facing these cultural conflicts within (western) civilization - rather than imagining an enemy ‘from without’ - implies active confrontation with processes of neoliberal global restructuring” (Senghaas xi-xii).

Societies have become explicitly multi-cultural, and as a consequence, the cultural encounters make identity a highly controversial issue. As a result, the question about an individual’s identity, which could be answered straightforwardly if one strictly referred to the person’s belonging to a homogeneous culture, such as a nation-state, turns into a very complex, complicated existential problematic. One can no longer simply be one thing. “Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only one moment are quickly left behind.” (Said 336)

The developments engendered by globalization require a significant change in our way of looking at culture. If in the nineteenth and twentieth century culture was almost exclusively associated with nation-states, in the twenty-first it has increasingly transcended national or regional boundaries. “[C]ulture does continue to be meaningful, if we can combine the earlier idea of culture as ‘the way of life of a people’ with a more contemporary concept of culture as ‘the information and identities available from the global cultural supermarket’.” (Mathews 1)

The cultural complexity of contemporary societies makes it impossible to continue viewing cultures as homogeneous, thus unitarily definable entities. With the decline of colonial powers, the empires’ margins have exercised considerable pressure on the centre and societies, especially the Western one, have become more obviously multicultural. As a consequence, ethnic identities striving to locate themselves within the dominant culture start

being perceived as a serious threat to national identity. The hyphenated identities, however, problematic as they are for mainstream cultures, have hardly undermined the belief that culture is a monolithic construction. Ethnic identity, just like the national one, is still “based on the idea of a particular people belonging to a particular place.” (Mathews 9)

In the context of globalization, a new type of identity has emerged, the identity of the migrant. It is not defined in relation to belonging to a particular place but “rather to the market in both its material and cultural forms” and, as a consequence, “in market-based identity, one’s home is all the world.” (Mathews 9)

The cultural supermarket is associated with mankind’s long history of travel, of goods and ideas and it is in, or because of it that Virginia Woolf felt that “as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.” (Woolf 234)

At present, identity construction presupposes the effort of reconciling two tendencies, one to formulate one’s sense of belonging by reference to a nation-state, the other to define oneself in relation to the cultural supermarket. Tensions and anxiety may arise in the process of answering “How do we weave our senses of identity between the contradictory yet taken-for-granted propositions that ‘you should cherish and protect your own nation and culture’ and that ‘you should be free to shape your life as you choose’?” (Mathews 11).

The individual simultaneously is citizen of a nation and denizen of the world, but identity is always defined through a constant process of mutual reflection between self and other. Depending on which definition of oneself is preferred, the world will be differently shaped and interpreted in terms of “us” and “them.” The chance to make the world a liveable, conflict proof space resides in everybody becoming aware that “[i]t is more rewarding – and more difficult – to think concretely, sympathetically contrapuntally, about others than only about “us.” But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how “our” culture or country is number one (or *not* number one, for that matter).”(Said 336)

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