

NATIONAL VERSUS TRAVELLING IDENTITIES

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Abstract. This paper tackles that nation is a form of collective identity which becomes possible only in the conditions of modernity. Hence, national identity is an 'object' of modernity. It is widely known that nation is a form of social philosophy, a way of thinking focused on promoting the interests of a particular social group. In this paper, we try to emphasize that nation, like the rest of the human culture, is 'imagined' in the sense that it is constructed rather than the result of a natural process. On the other hand, culture in itself is not static, it is very fluid. Culture evolves, adapts and adopts. In this sense, traveling identities are part of an initiation step. The journey is an apparently linear and fixed path, while wandering / adventure has some unforeseen and sinuous implications. However, the apparent purpose of an imposing a trip overlaps the apparent lack of purpose that characterizes the cultural adventures.

Keywords: national identity, individual identity, collective identity, culture, ideology

Introduction

The concept of identity can be defined in terms of sameness vs. difference. More particular, *difference* (in the sense of difference, according to D  rri  da) is always there within any apparently 'similar' identities; though temporary fixity is needed in the process of identification, "there is always something 'left over'"¹.

In understanding the concepts of *identity* and assimilation, terms such as "diaspora" and "hybridity" become other ways to analyze the nature of identity. Thus, we can see home and exile as two dynamic ends of what Byfield comments as "the creation of diaspora is in large measure contingent on a diasporic identity that links the constituent parts of the diaspora to a homeland"². However, the discourse about identity is filled with a clash between those who see a relatively fixed, coherent and racialised identity and those who perceive identities as multiple, provisional and dynamic.

To a large extent this issue of displacement and authenticity sets up the background for what followed: some sustained that there was an annihilation of cultural characteristics during the middle passage and did not consider Africa as a reference point, while others considered the African culture as being a surviving one and took this as an evidence of a desire to return. These returnings are thus connected to a racialised and gendered hierarchy: "we must always keep in mind that diasporic identities are socially and historically constituted, reconstituted, and reproduced"³. The circumstances in which this takes place are highly organized within the imperial cultural configurations, but one thing which is fixed is

¹ Hall, Stuart; Du Gay, Paul. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 1996, p.55.

² Byfield, J. "Introduction: Rethinking the African Diaspora". *African Studies Review* (Special Issue on the Diaspora), 2000, 43, 1, p.2.

³ Patterson, T.; Kelley, R. "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World". *African Studies Review* (Special Issue on the Diaspora), 2000, 43, 1, p.19.

that “the arrangements that this hierarchy assumes may vary from place to place but it remains a gendered racial hierarchy”⁴.

In what concerns the dynamics of identity within diaspora, during the nineties, several typologies were adopted in order to understand and to describe the diasporas. In this perspective, for Alain Medam the typology of the diasporic structure should be based on the opposition between the “crystallised diasporas” and the “fluid diasporas”. From the point of view of homeland, Robin Cohen created a new typology of diaspora based on diversity, namely: “1. Labour diasporas; 2. Imperial diasporas; 3. Trade diasporas; 4. Cultural diasporas (the Caribbean case)”⁵.

The last type of diaspora – the *cultural diaspora* – with the Caribbean case became one of the most stimulating and productive type. In its one cultural dimension, the diaspora discourse emphasized the notion of hybridity, used by post-modernist authors to mark the evolution of new social dynamics seen as mixed cultures. One of the most important metaphoric designations of roots for diasporic hybridity is considered to be the *rhizome*, a term developed by Guattari and Deleuze. The rhizome becomes thus a useful motif because it describes root systems as being a continuous process that spread continuously in all directions, from random nodes, creating complex networks of unpredictable shape that are in constant process of growing. In this sense, the French Caribbean is a good example of the occurrence of the concept of hybridity. Edouard Glissant presents a clear reference to *rhizome* identity.

In this respect, James Clifford also developed a reference to “travelling cultures” founding its corepondance in th Black diaspora and in the work of Paul Gilroy (see the concept of the ‘Black Atlantic’). In this perspective, this current was concisely expressed by Cohen in his quotation according to which: “diasporas are positioned somewhere between ‘nations-states’ and ‘travelling cultures’ in that they involve dwelling in a nation-state in a physical sense, but travelling in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside the nation-state’s space/time zone”⁶.

As Paul Gilroy described, the nation-state is the institutional means to finish diaspora dissemination (diasporic translocation): on one side, through assimilation and, on the other side, through return. On the other hand, we are also at a converging point here because all these researches lead to the different questions about the connection between transnationalism and diasporas. In Gilroy’s view, the concept of diaspora is foregrounded as an antidote to what he calls “camp-thinking”⁷ which involves oppositional and exclusive modes of thought about people and culture that rest on basis of purity and cultural identities. In contrast with this approach, the diasporic identities are conceived as being “creolized, syncretized, hybridized and chronically impure cultural forms”⁸. Notably, the diaspora concept can be “explicitly antinational” and can have “de-stabilizing and subversive effects”⁹. It offers “an alternative to the metaphysics of race, nation and bounded culture

⁴ Idem, p.20.

⁵ Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: UCL Press, 1997, p.85.

⁶ Idem, p.95.

⁷ Gilroy, Paul; Grossberg, Lawrence; McRobbie, Angela (eds.), *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*. London: Verso, 2000, p.84.

⁸ Idem, p. 194.

⁹ Ibidem, p.128.

coded into the body, diaspora is a concept that problematizes the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging”¹⁰. Diaspora is also “invariably promiscuous” and it challenges “to apprehend mutable forms that can redefine the idea of culture through reconciliation with movement and complex, dynamic variation”¹¹.

To conclude, if we turn back to Hall’s notion of diasporic identity we can see that his type of identity is one based upon difference and hybridity. It rejects old “‘imperialising’ and ‘hegemonising’ forms of ‘ethnicity’”¹². It is “defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity... *hybridity*”¹³. Therefore, the diasporic identity can often express more the experience of migrancy and settlement, of ‘making’ one’s home than a fixation to a ‘homeland’ of diasporic cultures. For much of this subchapter we have suggested that a diasporic consciousness as classically conceived is opposed to the process of creolization.

National identity

Nation is a form of collective identity which becomes possible only in the conditions of *modernity*. Hence, national identity is an ‘object’ of modernity. It is widely known that nation is a form of social philosophy, a way of thinking focused on promoting the interests of a particular social group¹⁴. However, Anderson is right to emphasize that nation, like the rest of human culture, is ‘imagined’ in the sense that it is constructed rather than the result of a natural process:

*“I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”*¹⁵.

Anderson’s work refers to anthropological data, as he maintains that the concept of “nation” is truly a cultural construct, a man-made artifice. Thus, for Anderson, it is “imagined”. Nation and identity, begin with one’s family and closest friends, and slowly move out from this center. In our contemporary example, two residents of the same country may live in completely different geographical climates, having very little in common with each other.

Raymond Williams also comments that:

*“‘Nation’ as a term is radically connected with ‘native’. We are born into relationships which are typically settled in a place. This form of primary and ‘placeable’ bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance. Yet the jump from that to anything like the modern nation-state is entirely artificial”*¹⁶.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p.123.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 129-130

¹² Hall, Stuart; Du Gay, Paul. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 1996, p. 401.

¹³ Idem, p. 402.

¹⁴ See Breuilly’s statement: “To focus upon culture, ideology, identity, class or modernization is to neglect the fundamental point that nationalism is, above and beyond else, about politics and that politics is about power”, Breuilly, John. *Nationalism and the State*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, p.1.

¹⁵ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991, p.5-6.

¹⁶ Williams, Raymond. *Culture & Society: 1790-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, p.180.

Subsequently, by repeating this internalisation of an idealised reflection of itself the subject aspires to a homogeneity and permanence which will make good its lack, identifying its unity in an image of the body as a unified whole and fearing a corresponding image of the body in pieces. The individual, then, is an effect of multiple identifications.

Nation is almost certain to be more heterogeneous in its membership than a pre-national grouping, more mixed by race, class, gender, regional loyalty. At the same time, it is composed of two separate aspects, a modern state and a culture. It occupies a “symbolic rather than territorial space”¹⁷. In this sense, national cultures provide discursive narratives.

In *National Identity*, Anthony Smith explains the concept of *national identity* by setting forth five essential characteristics: a historic territory or ‘homeland’ which becomes “a repository of historic memories”, “common myths and historical memories,” a “common, mass public culture,” “common legal rights and duties for all members,” and a “common economy with territorial mobility for members”¹⁸. Besides this, the myths and symbols of national cultural identity were imposed by a colonial order and caused the conquest of European civilization, on the one hand, and the negation of the myths and symbols associated with the popular culture and resistance to a system of oppression on the other. In short, the national cultural identity is largely a hybrid of European, African, Amerindian and Asian cultures, in other words, essentially Creole.

Therefore, the struggle for cultural identity involves struggling for the hegemony of the popular Creole culture over a culture associated with European traditions and the recuperation of myths and symbols largely suppressed by the local elites. Culture is taken here in both the narrow sense of creative expression and its wider anthropological meaning, the way of life of a distinct population.

On this basis, to conclude, it becomes possible to say that, on the one hand, “nationalism... is an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining the autonomy, unity and identity of a nation”¹⁹; on the other, there is a national credo against a colonial power; “nationalism is a reaction of peoples who feel culturally at a disadvantage”²⁰.

Cultural identity

If multiple identities have to be conceived as a cultural pattern, according to the four primary axes that allow cultural identities to form described by David Winterstein, we can identify four types of cultural identities: *nested* or *embedded* identities (conceived as concentric circles), ‘*marble-cake*’ or *mixed* identities (where the components are inseparable at different levels and they influence each other), *cross-cutting* or *overlapping* identities, *separate* or *exclusive* identities. The first axis is the *inclusion*, a set of attributes that an individual uses to communicate with a group; the second is the *exclusion* or the ensemble of means by which the group differentiates itself from others; the third defines itself as a *point of identification* within a culture’s value system; and the fourth axis is related to *space*,

¹⁷ Samuel, Raphael. *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity: Minorities and Outsiders*. Routledge: Kegan & Paul, 1989, p.16.

¹⁸ Smith, Anthony. *National Identity*. London: Penguin, 1991, p.14.

¹⁹ Idem, p.74.

²⁰ Plamenatz quoted in Kamenka, Edward. *Political Nationalism: The Evolution of the Idea*. London: Edward Arnold, 1976, p. 94.

which helps to associate a cultural group with a specific territory”²¹. Within these four axes, the cultural norms are implied and meanings that work together to create the phenomena are known as *cultural identity*.

Certain identities are nested or embedded within others. We will refer to those identities towards the bottom as lower order identities (*marble-cake* or *mixed*) and those toward the top as higher order identities (*separate* or *exclusive* identities). Nested identities form the end of the chain to a higher order identity and the end of a lower order identity.

The *nested identities* (e.g. personal identities) have at least three key dimensions: inclusive/exclusive, abstract/concrete and distal/proximal. Because higher order identities are more inclusive, abstract and distal, there tends to be at least some overlap in the range of nested identities. The degree of inconsistency and conflict between nested identities may fluctuate in time as new identity issues arise. Ironically, such flashpoints may facilitate shifts by rendering multiple identities, although such shifts are likely to trigger heightened anxiety. A second reason that shifts between nested identities is that identification with a given level tends to generalize to other levels such that the subjective importance of the implicated identities tends to generalize as well. Because the culture provides the context in which local identities may flourish, culture may come to be seen as one’s ‘home’ or the ‘vehicle’ for expressing one’s local identities. The *cross-cutting identities* (e.g. social identities) include formal and informal collectives. The larger rings depicts identities that cross-cut multiple nested identities, including identities that extend beyond the boundaries. Although the rings converge on the ‘marble-cake’ or embedded identities, cross-cutting identities may converge on any nested level.

Travelling identities

Culture in itself is not static, it is very fluid. Culture evolves, adapts and adopts. In this sense, *travelling identities* are part of an initiation step. The journey is an apparently linear and fixed path, while wandering / adventure has some unforeseen and sinuous implications. However, the apparent purpose of an imposing a trip overlaps the apparent lack of purpose that characterizes the adventures.

Within the oscillation between *negritude* and *negriceness*, the African-descendent experiences become the symbol of mobility. Involved in such a kind of moveable identity, “[...] the subject develops different identities in specific moments. These identities are not unified around a coherent ‘self’”.²² This mobility which features the African-descendent identities is sustained by the *double consciousness* of the existential experience that instigates the black subject to move within the westernized world. Du Bois explains that when he lives the *double consciousness*, the black subject “feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”²³, thus creating a so-called ‘hyphenated’ cultural identity.

²¹ Winterstein, David. *Local Radio and the Promotion of Language and Cultural Identity in Modern Brittany*. California: San Diego University Press, 2003, p.123.

²² Hall, Stuart. “Introduction: Who Needs Identity?” In Hall, Stuart and, Paul Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1992, p.13.

²³ DuBois, William Edward Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Publications, 1994.

The concept of *négritude* refers to those traveling identities and cultures, coming from Africa, going to the Caribbean, and then advancing to Europe. In such an experience of leaving from one place to reach another, the ship turns itself into the metaphor of displacement, being able to develop a ‘traveling alterity’:

“Because the womb of the slave-ship is the place and the moment, in which the African languages disappear, as they never put together in a slave-ship, or in the plantations, people who could speak the same language. Thus, the persons found themselves dispossessed of all kind of elements of their daily life”²⁴.

This consideration brings the concept of *signifyin(g)* which implies the idea of traveling and navigating cultures; influenced by cultural mobility, *signifyin(g)* intends to account for intertextuality in African-descendants’ experiences. In the African-descendent literary scenario, *signifyin(g)* explains “how black texts ‘talk’ to other black texts”²⁵.

Glissant is of the same opinion when he suggests that the identity is open and develops a double root, which, according to him is the identity that comes from creoleness, “that is, from the rizome-like identity, from the identity no longer as one solitary root, but as a root moving toward and encountering other roots”²⁶.

However, in thinking about travel, the identitarian questions that arise are: What becomes the sense of home? Is home merely a place to depart from, or can we see travel as leading us to think about how homes must also be cultivated through movement? James Clifford argues that “Cultural centers, discrete regions and territories, do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things”²⁷.

Conclusions

Home is not a place that one leaves behind, but a geographical point of reference, a sense of place which serves as an anchor for the travel. According to James Clifford, the cross-cultural or ‘border’ experiences of travel should not be viewed as acculturation, where there is a linear progression from culture A to culture B, nor as syncretism, where two systems overlap each other. Rather, Clifford understands these cross-cultural or ‘border’ experiences as instances of historical contact, “with entanglement at intersecting regional, national, and transnational levels”²⁸. Inspired by Mary Louise Pratt’s ‘contact-zones’, a contact approach emphasizes the intercultural interaction that takes place within these spaces of interaction and exchange.

In his study on rites of passage, Arnold van Gennep identifies three stages at work in transitional events such as births, marriages, and deaths: *separation* (the preliminal stage), *transition* (the liminal stage), and *incorporation* (the postliminal stage). Dionne Brand, a

²⁴ Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. by Betsy Wing. London: Penguin, 2005, p.19.

²⁵ Gates, Henry Lois. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. xxvi.

²⁶ Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. by Betsy Wing. London: Penguin, 2005, p.27.

²⁷ Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p.3.

²⁸ Idem, p.7.

member of the African-Caribbean diaspora, describes the diasporic experience as one of feeling disconnected from the lands on both sides of the ocean: “There is the sense in the mind of not being here or there, of no way out or in. [...] Caught between the two we live in the Diaspora, in the sea in between. Imagining our ancestors stepping through these portals one senses people stepping out into nothing; one senses a surreal space, an inexplicable space. One imagines people so stunned by their circumstances, so heartbroken as to refuse reality. Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space”²⁹.

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²⁹ Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Vintage, 2002, p.20.

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