

ASPECTS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract: *The paper focuses on problems of individual and social identity-construction in the context of globalization. The author analyses the concept of identity from an interdisciplinary and modern and post-modern perspectives. As a conclusion the author claims that a new approach strategy of defining and interpreting identity in the epoch of globalization is necessary in order to explain and understand the social changes at local, regional and world levels.*

Key words: *identity, identity crisis, globalization, social changes.*

1. Identity and change

Paraphrasing the English poet and essayist T.S. Eliot, in a changing world there is one thing that remains unchanged, the continuous struggle between Good and Evil. But as David Massey [1] observes there are still other things that do not change. For example, the never-ending longing for identity that grows as times change. And the 21-st century seems to be the epoch of globalization and of changing times. In this context of profound and accelerated changes, individuals, groups and (small as well as large) communities are fearfully and hopefully searching for their identity. Identity is present – whether explicitly or not – on the lips of ordinary people, in the halls of governmental offices, in the seminar rooms, in the social science research laboratories and among the topics of international conferences.

These common sense observations suggest that identity is perceived at different levels and in various manners as an issue of our times. ‘Identity has become

one of the unifying frameworks of intellectual debate in the 1990s’, states Richard Jenkins [2]. He notices that everybody has an opinion on identity: sociologists, anthropologists, political theorists, psychologists, historians, philosophers, etc. Moreover, identity is not only a topic of intellectual debates but a practical issue as well. Business people have understood that in order to sell goods and services it is necessary to sell an ‘identity’ as well. Purchasing a new product means a new brand. Thus, identity is constructed and purchased in corner shops, in school, at the workplace, during business trips or holidays, in families or groups of friends. A new brand (new dressing style, new diet, new hair style, new interior design, new job, new organisation, new group of friends, etc.) means a change with regard to the time and the others. Consequently, identities change: new identities occur, the traditional ones are revived, or the existing ones are transformed (de-constructed and re-constructed). However identity is not

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the only issue of our times, perhaps more importantly, social change is another. The fact that identity is searched for and disputed at all levels of human existence and practice, suggests an identity crisis and uncertainty concerning the direction of change.

2. 'Crisis of identity' or 'identity crisis'?

From a somehow nostalgic perspective, we could suggest that the crisis of identity might be 'the illness of the century'. If 'crisis' is the word brand of our times (see for instance the present-day financial crisis, the economic crisis, the political crisis, and the social crisis), then 'identity' could be the concept brand of future research.

In fact, what is identity?

Of course, identity as experience and as a concept constructed from various elements suggests various perspectives in formulating an answer to the question. For example, from a disciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective, each author aims at specific theoretical, methodological and ideological advantages and specific practical applications. My perspective in this paper is interdisciplinary (anthropological, sociological and philosophical).

From such a perspective, identity is first and foremost an ideological strategy which 'symbolises' the antinomic specificity of the human condition. Identity symbolises my, your, our, their need for fulfilment as autonomous human beings/entities. On the one hand, there is the need for continuity and belonging by relating to others on the basis of some real or imaginary common characteristics (of the species, of the group). On the other hand, there is the need for differentiation, discontinuity, and individuality, on the basis of some real or imaginary unique, individual characteristics. However, difference is

something else than identity. It is something more or less, a plus or a minus. Identity is a pattern. In order to be fulfilled it needs to follow the pattern that is constructed or inherited and to become the master of the pattern. To be master of the pattern means to be in the centre. Centrality is constitutive for the concept of identity. Understood in this way identity is an emergent socio-cultural concept, relatively and relationally opposite to static, or, for that matter, dynamic substantialism. The emergent identity bears the label of context. But, like any other construct, it is never definitely finalized. The given, declared identity is permanently re-constructed, innovated, and ascertained through a set of expressions and conventionally symbolic forms that are negotiated and shared by the members of the group or community.

Claude Levi-Strauss considers that 'identity is a kind of virtual foyer, indispensable to explaining a number of things but without having a real existence' [3]. This number of things could be: the family, the lineage, the place, the home, the name, the profession, the belief, the language, etc. So, when we feel that these benchmark-things, such as the place, the home, the parents, the life styles and customs that we inherited are disappearing, when we lose our origins, when group solidarities are breaking, we can certainly say that there is an identity crisis.

The crisis refers to the existential as well as the conceptual aspect of identity. The solution to the crisis could be similar to the 'puzzle' strategy (re-formulation, re-construction), or the 'revolution' strategy (radical change). In both strategies, a critique is indispensable. There is a 'traditional' critical strategy, the way the majority of us perform which aims at clarifying inadequate concepts by adding or adjusting them in order to get to some positive knowledge. But there is also a

kind of critique which places the concepts 'under eraser' (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze), the radical post-modernist critique, which aims at 'de-constructing' the key concepts that cannot be replaced by others (and identity is such a key-concept) in order to construct, explain and interpret socio-cultural phenomena. According to Stuart Hall [4], Derrida has described such an approach as thinking to the limits, in intervals, a kind of double writing, which hides and reverses the intervals. By reversing the intervals a new concept emerges which can no longer be included in the old paradigm. Thus, present-day identity operates in our post-modern society undercover/under eraser in the interval between revival/ replacement/ elimination and emergence/ complete change. Such an approach is radically new and is a strategy of approaching the issue comprehensively, as a whole.

Then the question arises: in relation to which set of problems does identity become an irreducible dimension, an invariant of human existence, and what factors determine the emergence of a new type of identity? The answer seems to be related to the issues of centrality and localisation that are present in the processes and forms of individual identity as well as in the processes and forms of collective (community or societal) identities, such as family dynamics or the identity of political movements, present or past.

But the notions of centrality and localisation are also the focus of critical analysis and interpretation, due to the phenomenon of globalization. We can notice at present that the role of globalization profoundly affects processes and forms of organization as well as the content of individual and social lives everywhere. Consequently, globalization is one of the factors that determine the

reconstruction/replacement and emergence of new types of identity.

3. Globalization and identity

The process of globalization is generally characterised by two main, opposing forces. On the one hand, there are the economic and technological forces that support expansion and growth in the efficient functioning of organisations (for example, the trans-national organisations) beyond traditional national borders. On the other hand there are the social and cultural forces which resist the expansion of trans-national structures and organisations. According to a research done by Galit Ailon-Souday and Gideon Kunda [5], the offensive of trans-national organisations, based on their economic and technological power which needed to achieve their objectives (for example, profit) ignoring the national borders and identities, is counter-balanced by the opposition of the national, regional, local social and cultural forces. In order to understand the significance of the opposition between the two tendencies and its implications for the construction and affirmation of national or local identities, it is useful to briefly put forward some theoretical aspects concerning the concept of 'globalization', which seem to be similar to and linked to those of the concept of 'identity'.

According to R. Roberston [6], the present-day situation concerning globalization is a major contemporary example of the way in which concepts and theories previously developed by social scientists are then used in the 'real world' in a manner that threatens their analytical and interpretative validity.

Anthony Giddens considers that it would be a mistake to conceive globalization just in its quantitative and substantialist sense as a medium which is expanding and homogenizing and within

which certain societies are developing and changing. The general term of globalization denotes the social, economic and political interdependences that cross boundaries between countries and condition decisively the lives of the people that live in those countries

In a deeper sense, globalization 'should be understood primarily as the reordering of time and distance in our lives' [7]. So, the process approach suggests the pre-eminence of the structural, qualitative sense of the concept of globalization.

Globalization does not mean just a process of increase of interdependences between nations and the formation of a single, structurally homogenous world system but a process of intensification and deepening of differences and a process of construction/ re-construction, hence negotiation, of identities. Such a tendency suggests that globalization implies complex, on-going, ontological relations between the universal and the particular. From the perspective of the relation between the universal and the particular it is more appropriate to consider that it is not only globalization that influences the identity features of national systems but national systems in their turns also affect the evolution and features of globalization.

The confusing usage of the notion of globalization in different contexts and with different meanings can be considered, in my opinion, not just negatively but also positively, stimulatingly, innovatively. Namely, as a challenging signal of the diffuse and still vague character of the profound/hidden changes that take place in the world system as a whole. The fact that the factors which determine the on-going changes are difficult to identify as analytic units has led to the common-sense perception of globalization primarily in its economic sense as one of the explanatory factors of present-day social changes. The probable cause of the focus on the

economic dimension is the universal character of satisfying the human subsistence needs. Perhaps this aspect of globalization brought organizations in general and economic organizations in particular to the attention of researchers and to the common-sense perception as the main factors of change and of the emergence of new types of identities.

4. Social change and the globalization of identity

It is natural to emphasize the fact that social change nowadays is dramatic in its amplitude, rhythm, and complexity. By social change I understand the continuous process of transition of a society from one type of structural organisation to another with phases of slowing down and acceleration. Human history represents an entirety of human acts of knowledge, creations, and actions. These human acts involve individuals associated in groups, families, households, organisations, state communities. Historical and social reality has shown that on the one hand these human associations generate the emergence of political, economic, religious institutions/organisations. On the other hand there is a close link between institutions and social changes. Institutions are structural, functional components of real societies. They are made of 'a complex of values, norms, and customs shared by a number of individuals' [4]. Institutions or organisations are ensembles of individuals who associate in order to cooperate for the achievement of some goals (needs/interests). In order to cooperate, individuals need to adhere to, to share and to commit themselves to the values, norms and rules of the organisation. Values, norms and rules represent the nucleus of the organisational culture. Culture expresses the identity of the organisation. Consequently, it is

natural for the group of associated individuals to achieve a common goal, to construct, maintain and promote the identity of the organisation, as a strategy of expressing their autonomous identity in relation to other groups.

Who and what changes? Does the individual and its identity change? Does the community/society and its identity change?

According to the modern paradigm of identity, what kind of identity can an individual or group develop who finds out overnight that his/her institution/organisation has gone bankrupt or has merged?

Or what kind of strategy for identity construction can a person develop who has had a great number of professions or occupations? Is profession or occupation still an identity dimension? In reality, as a group of French researchers found out, the identity crisis 'is in a relation of exteriority with the occupation and is in instrumental relation with the work and such relations turn 'reconversion' to other roles, in particular the family ones, into a delicate issue' [8].

Or what kind of identity can a child/adolescent construct who has experienced successive parent divorces, changes of paternity, of schools, of place of residence?

Also, in the process of intensification of globalization, what identity can a trans-national organisation develop whose individuals construct and negotiate their identities instantly, depending on the context?

In the context of globalization it is clear that the autonomy and consequently the constructed and expressed identity is being continuously attacked through commercial, financial, communication and migration strategic networks. Through these strategic networks, globalization alters, breaks down and threatens the identity of communities,

individuals, their forms of organisation, and their identity patterns. In such a context individuals search for strategies for conserving and defending their actual identities by reviving past patterns of identity (such as family lineage, professional/occupational associations, fundamentalist religious movements, ethnic movements). On the other hand, individuals search for strategies of reconstruction or construction of new identities in an emergent virtual world which is evolving in an accelerated rhythm towards new forms of structuring identities perceived as uncertain and confusing. Perhaps the tension between the past, the present, and the future, as well as the tension, subjectively experienced, between the real, the virtual and the imaginary is similar to the tension between good and evil mentioned in the beginning of this paper. This dramatic tension must have a meaning which we are going to decipher some day.

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