

AN APPROACH TO CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ITS CONNECTIONS WITH MASS COMMUNICATION

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INTRODUCTION

When I was preparing this article, I had the opportunity of visiting extensively the Museo Nacional de Antropología of Mexico City, where the identity of the different types of Indian population is very much underlined. My reaction was that to understand the cultural identity, the mind, of a people, a visit to such types of museum is indispensable, at least to form a general idea as to which are the main characteristics. At the same time, this visit reminded me of a similar experience I got from the Anthropological Museum of Seoul. So I am convinced that in order to study the problematic of cultural identity, an anthropological approach is quite necessary, because it allows one to cope with the diverse aspects involved in it.

The word 'identity' has become in the last decade a fashionable term, employed from various points of view. In fact, identity - in singular, as individual identity - is today one of the most used and, at the same time, least defined concepts in the field of social and human sciences. The same happens, from a collective perspective, with group identity or even collective identity. However, the most usual expression is 'cultural identity', which sometimes is confused with 'national identity'. We may even mention here the expression 'political identity', employed often in the Anglo-Saxon world. I prefer the expression 'cultural identity', on account of the fact that I am

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convinced that it better reflects the expression of the culture of a community from an anthropological standpoint.

So, in this article my aim is to deal with the concept of cultural identity, building on my earlier contribution to this field (Parés 1992). I shall try to offer a broad overview of the concept and its nature, its main characteristics, its effects, the impact of social change, its connections with national identity, its embodiment in the idea of nation, and finally, the connections between the idea of 'cultural identity' and its relationship with mass communication.

As a matter of fact we are confronted with a very complex concept, basically interdisciplinary, which can be approached from different perspectives. My main interest lies in the fact that, as a Catalan, a member of a nation without state but inside the state of Spain, this issue worries me very much. It is evident, however, as I shall try to demonstrate, that this is a question which does not permit unidirectional analysis, because of the complexity of the elements that are implied. So, in this text I shall deal with the concept of cultural identity applied to all those communities, states or stateless nations, where cultural identity is vigorously experienced, and that gives pace usually to corresponding national identity. Thus, as a Catalan, I pay particular attention to the cases of stateless nations such as Catalonia, Euskadi, Quebec, Scotland, Wales, and so on.

On the other hand, I must emphasise that my analysis is based upon my knowledge and my experience as a European, living in a welfare society with a long history of democratic rule, as well as a capitalist economic structure, where the idea of intercultural society from an anthropological point of view is just emerging. In the so-called developing countries there exists also a rather similar problematic, but one which adopts other modalities on account of their degree of political, economic, cultural, religious and ethnic development.

A final consideration in this introduction is to point out that every cultural identity has its own traits. It signifies that everyone is specific, and there may be some risks in carrying out a comparative analysis.

CONCEPT

I ought to mention a certain number of definitions of cultural identity because there are many authors who have tried to make their contribution to this field.

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However, as far as I know, the most comprehensive one is that of Yves Brunsvick, Jean-Pierre Bady and Bernard Clergerie (**Léxique de la vie culturelle**, 1987) which has the advantage of offering different ways to understand this complex concept. So, according to them,

- Objectively speaking, cultural identity is made up of customs and habits, traditions, values, beliefs, ways of living, thinking and behaving, and a certain style of existence and presence in the corresponding community. I should like to add that this is an anthropological perspective.
- Subjectively speaking, it is the feeling of belonging to a society in which everyone has the sense of being an actor in his or her own history. This is a clear psychological approach, which is fundamental when we deal with the nature of cultural identity.
- From outside it is the living core of a culture, the dynamic principle of a person or a community on the basis of their past, promoting its potential and receiving external aid in accordance with their needs, which goes on with the continuous process of their own creation. Again here, anthropology, along with history, sociology and social psychology among others principally, are the scientific disciplines able to analyse the development through time of cultural identity of a definite community.
- From inside a community, cultural identity corresponds to the feeling, experienced by any member of a society, of recognising oneself in this culture and one's willingness to identify it so as to express the sense of belonging and the assertion of one's own roots. Again we are facing the role of these sentiments and the sense of identification that is obvious in all those members of a community who share them. This is the reason why I attach great relevance to this psychological perspective.

I have arrived at the conclusion that, in practice, it is very difficult to offer a succinct definition of cultural identity. In other contexts I have felt the need to use a descriptive criterion as, for instance, when I tried to define institutions as political communication (Parés 1995) or public opinion (Parés 1992).

So I prefer not to offer my own definition on account of the complexity of the subject and the different approaches that can be carried out in an effort to clarify what cultural identity really means in different spaces, times, cultures,

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ideologies, etc. Because of this, I shall endeavour to enumerate the principal characteristics that can define any cultural identity. It is necessary, however, to underscore that not all those that I mention actually exist in all cases.

CHARACTERISTICS

In my opinion, the outstanding characteristics to be considered are the following:

Territory

However, this is not always a general rule, for instance in the case of the Jewish community or of the Palestinians. This concept may be applied to states (for instance, the idea of French identity is often expressed in France in this way), stateless nations (Catalonia, Scotland, Quebec, for example), and even to certain towns or smaller communities with very specific characteristics, where the feeling of their own identity is very intense. As far as I know, some large towns might be a good example of this characteristic.

I disagree with those authors who claim the deterritorialisation of cultural identity as a result of the transnationalisation of mass culture or mass communication. I think that often a specific cultural identity may coexist with the effects of the global mass culture or communication.

A dominant ethnic group

However, most cultural identities are in fact the result of the historical mixing up of different ethnic groups. This phenomenon has increased in recent times, and we may assert that most communities are actually multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. Internal and external migrations, for different causes - economic, labour, political, exile, etc - have given way to the reality of what we might call hybridism or crossbreeding.

Sociology

There are a certain number of elements that affect the basis of any cultural identity, namely, class structure, the concept of power, the dialectics between elites and the rest of the population, the role of leaders, and so on. Moreover, age, sex, education, economic or social status may offer a range of different attitudes, which must be taken into consideration. For instance, I believe that

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youth behaviour should be analysed and studied to see if it changes when people become adults.

Another aspect to consider is the fact that people are members of diverse peer or primary groups and of secondary groups as well. This circumstance may have a certain influence on our opinions and behaviour. All these elements thus may generate different views of cultural identity, resulting in a taxonomy of perceptions from a subjective point of view.

History

The role of traditions, of the collective memory, of the rooted customs, etc often explain the evolution of any community. An important issue is how the history of a society is written, and hence the risk of a biased approach, either in a positive or in a negative sense. Historical science should be as balanced as possible.

Culture

Either in its anthropological or sociological sense, culture is important, that is, culture as a creative process of the different fine arts, literature, music, and aesthetics. Moreover, the role of autochthonous culture and its contacts with other cultures of the same state - in the case of stateless nations - or with foreign cultures is significant here.

No culture is today isolated, and its evolution is a consequence of a permanent cross-cultural process. External cultural contributions or influences are necessary and unavoidable. However the basic element of any cultural identity must keep its main elements, but adapt itself to the changing conditions. A cosmopolitan approach to culture should be felt as a necessity by members of any cultural identity. Popular culture is also an element to consider very seriously: humour, handicraft, antiques, dances, tools, cooking, clothes, songs, pictures, photographs and so on, are often some of the best ways to express an identity. Seen from abroad these elements constitute some of the most representative images. Special consideration should be given to the place occupied by diverse types of museums. They are effectively one of the best representations of the process of formation of any cultural identity.

As far as science and technology are concerned, I believe that their identity role has been less ascertained, possibly because scientific research and

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technological development are rather concentrated in a very limited number of countries.

Language

In many analyses, the mother tongue is considered the main element. In this concern I must say that in many societies - whether states, nations or even regions - we are witnessing phenomenon of linguistic confrontation because the simultaneous use of the mother tongue language and other languages - external or not - bring about bilingual or diglossic situations.

Sociolinguistics is a discipline becoming more and more relevant, because there are more and more frequent cases of languages in contact which become conflictive. For instance, the cases of the Flemings or Quebecers are paradigmatic here.

Intellectuals

This aspect relates to culture and language. The cultural elite is outstanding in the process of development and crisis of any cultural identity, because to a large extent the culture is constructed as a consequence of their contributions, actions or behaviours. I think that often intellectuals are among the main builders of any cultural identity and their role as opinion leaders and communicators has to be specially heeded. For this reason their action through the mass media is very significant. Again they are the main providers of ideology, either of nationalism or of other type of ideological approaches. Certain journalists, of course, should be included in this category.

Religion

Religion is a relevant element which cannot be neglected, even in industrial societies. Religious conflicts connected with the development of certain cultural identities are a noticeable fact.

Political system

The political system allows, according to its nature, a cultural identity to develop in one form or another, especially in the case of the coexistence in a state of one or more stateless nations, as happens, for instance, in Spain, which is a pluri-cultural and a pluri-linguistic country.

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The key problem here is the role of power, how it is conceived, how it is exercised and how it is distributed. We can then distinguish between a democratic or an authoritarian regime, a monarchy or a republic, a unitarian or a federal state. The possibilities of development of a cultural identity, principally of stateless nations, depend to a large extent on the structure of such a regime. Undoubtedly, if it is democratic and federal, they will be larger.

Citizens should be aware of this feeling of cultural identity, and their political participation should reflect it. Furthermore, it is necessary that political parties, pressure groups and social movements keep it alive. In other words, it is indispensable that the corresponding civil society feels the need to maintain this idea and sentiment of cultural identity.

Legal system

The legal system is, indeed, connected with the political system in every community. In stateless nations, as Catalonia or Scotland, private law offers specific features. The same can be said in Catalonia in the field of public law as a consequence of being, since 1978, an autonomous state in Spain. So, the Spanish Constitution of 1978 allows a certain number of competencies to Catalonia and to its parliament, created as a result of the Law of Autonomy of Catalonia, which was enacted in 1979.

Economy

Economic development as the necessary background to any society is able to contribute to its cultural identity. Effectively, without a consistent economy, a community is incapable of promoting and protecting its development. So, economic progress is indispensable, and stateless nations which enjoy an advanced economy may defend their cultural identity more effectively.

Notwithstanding this, modern industrial societies are also consumer societies, and the importance of foreign investments by great multinationals, especially those belonging to the most advanced economic states, may in fact restrict the consolidation of the sense of cultural identity in the economic area. The role of advertising can often exercise a troublesome influence.

This is an important issue. If there is a field where confrontation between globalisation and cultural identity is more tangible, it is precisely in the economic area. There is a real phenomenon of internationalisation of a

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consumer culture of goods with trade marks and labels that may be found and bought everywhere. Their homogenising effects are obvious.

Education

Education is another element to be considered as a way of socialising the population in the acceptance of and identification with the cultural identity of its society. The attention paid to the learning of its history is a fact to be thoroughly taken into account. The same can be said in relation to the learning of outstanding manifestations of the cultural production of a society, such as in the field of fine arts, literature, music, etc.

Leisure

Leisure activities, connected or not with popular culture, are also an element of interest. In this area a special role attaches to some sports such as football, athletics, tennis, cycling or automobile races. Their social impact in this field is principally strengthened by the coverage that the mass media devote to them. In this aspect, the connection between sport and identity is quite strong. For a lot of people it is of the greatest significance in expressing cultural identity. The best example is offered on the occasion of the Olympic Games or of international contests or races. For instance, Scotland or Wales, but not Catalonia, as communities, enjoy a presence in the international sports arena. This is an aspect that deserves great attention.

Mass media

Mass media as the most effective agents of socialisation are, indeed, extremely relevant in this field.

Symbols

Any cultural identity possess a certain number of signs or elements of identification, such as flags, anthems songs, and sacred days, whose symbolic content and projection should be underscored because of their relevance.

Belonging

Finally, in this long enumeration, we have to refer to what I call the psychological dimension, namely the will to belong and to identify oneself with a definite society and with its elements defining its cultural identity, the

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feeling of belonging to a community, its values, its history, etc, in other words, the strongly-based sentiment of being members of a community with a specific cultural identity. This dimension has always had a rational and a sentimental background.

After this long and necessary description, I believe it is of interest to complement my approach, with a quote from Philip Schlesinger (1992), who states:

Let us turn now to the next term in question, that of cultural identity. I take this to refer to a specific form of collective identity. Such identities are emergent properties of collective action ... and sustained by a dual process: one of inclusion that provides a boundary around 'us', and one of exclusion that distinguishes 'us' from 'them'. I have argued elsewhere that we should seek such identities as 'constituted in action' and as continually reconstituted in line with both an internal dynamic and external balances of force. We should also be aware of the 'temporal dimension' through which the complex process of reconstituting traditions and activating collective memories occurs. And finally, we need to think about collective identities in their 'spatial dimension': in the present context we might be thinking of nations and ethnic groups that aspire to have states or forms of autonomous rule in an area of territorial concentration.

(He also refers us to Schlesinger (1987).)

I believe that I have dealt with the main characteristics of cultural identity. Their relevance depends on the case in question, for they are of an uneven importance depending on the situation.

FACTORS TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT

In connection with the preceding items, I should like to underline the following factors in the development of cultural identity.

Social change

In fact, cultural identity evolves in a continuous process of historical development in any community. It is submitted to a constant dialectic of conflicts and consensus, which means that it gives way to positive or negative outcomes.

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Furthermore, each cultural identity may be compelled to adapt its own development to new and changing circumstances. At the same time, it may generate certain trends of resistance if they affect its actual structure. I think that we should pay great attention to how the young perceive the formation of their cultural identity and their national identity, how it evolves through time, and the role played by external influences, how these imply the consolidation or not of the previous identity. Again, the process of socialisation should be studied, as well as the weight of the different agents intervening in it.

Space and time

Space and time are two factors which play a fundamental role in this issue. They should be interpreted in the sense that every cultural identity has its own specific nature and singularity.

Diversity

We cannot conceive a uniform, unitarian or homogeneous sense of any cultural identity. As we shall see, any cultural identity is permanently yielding to the influences of external sociological, psychological, cultural, political, economic, technological and communication factors. As a result, we must accept that pluralism and diversity in the process of evolution of any cultural identity are a logical fact. I do not pretend to affirm that in any society there exists a plurality of cultural identities. Often a dominant, hegemonic cultural identity coexists - especially in the cases of migration, more external than internal - with other cultural identities. Language is one of its principal aspects. The possibility of duality of identities deserves particular attention.

In my opinion, any cultural identity should be integrative of the different types of population living in it, of diverse mentalities, and should try to avoid being exclusive. In other words, it is indispensable to banish any idea of racism or xenophobia.

Crisis

This does not mean that cultural identity is not sometimes in a situation of crisis. This is a consequence of the fact that nowadays, especially in the Western world, no society remains closed. On the contrary, they are increasingly open and more and more affected by external influences of many types. If these influences are very strong, they may indeed generate a

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situation of cultural identity crisis. In some cases it can happen because the coexistence of different cultural identities in the territory of a community. Catalonia, with about a third of its population made up of non-Catalans of origin, is a very interesting example to analyse, especially because of its actual atmosphere of good coexistence. On the other hand, all cultural identities, like most other social institutions, constantly undergo situations of conflict, that generate crisis, because societies in their evolution are always exposed to such risks.

Danger

Most communities express their need to defend and to protect their cultural identities when they feel they are in danger or threatened by external or internal actors or factors. The same attitude is shown by those political societies with strong nationalistic feelings - whether or not they become nation-states - which take advantage of any situation to express clearly their cultural identity.

In this field, the debate between globalisation and localisation should be strongly emphasised. My personal feeling is that it exists, but the former does not exclude or eliminate the latter in practice; in fact they coexist. To a certain extent confrontation might be between national culture and mass globalised culture. As I have indicated before, in this area we should not forget the relevance of the popular culture of each community.

Ideology

The consciousness of a cultural identity is of an ideological nature. It may be an attitude, expressed by opinions, and it may become an action, a behaviour. Generally speaking, this ideological approach evolves into nationalism.

Images

From a psycho-sociological dimension, a very important issue is how we see and how the other people envisage our cultural identity. What is the image, in the case of stateless nations, which the inhabitants and the political institutions of the other regions of the state have? Similarly, what is the image a culture identity offers of itself to foreigners? These are crucial issues in this field. I should like to point out that often other people have stereotypes of cultural identity. Sometimes such stereotypes become prejudices, and as a result, the phenomena of ethnocentrism, racism or xenophobia may emerge.

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A biased perception of the image of a cultural identity may be a source of misunderstanding. So, communities trying to defend and to protect their cultural identity should be very careful about its possible consequences.

Cosmopolitanism

In any case, I want to assert that the approach to cultural identity has to be very cosmopolitan and open to external influences, but at the same time I feel very strongly the need to maintain its structural nature and characteristics, which are always in a permanent process of adaptation to social change.

National project

The national project of a society with a specific cultural identity is an element to be taken into account, whether this society is a nation without state or a nation-state. Of course this situation is linked, in political terms, with the concept of nationalism.

Yet, often, such projects do not exist clearly, or, if they do, then it is in an implicit or an ambiguous way. This means, in practice, that the aims and the criteria for the development of this identity may be less defined and less obvious, with their corresponding negative effects.

National identity and nationalism

From a political point of view, generally speaking cultural identity becomes, inevitably, national identity, and its ideology is nationalism.

My assertion is that any cultural identity from an ideological standpoint is potentially nationalistic - either in the form of a state or a stateless nation. Indeed - at least in Spain - the nationalism of its nations (Catalonia or Euskadi, for instance) is often emphasised as if the nationalism of the State did not exist. In practice - even if it is not always mentioned - the nationalism of nation-states is far more evident and stark. The analysis of governmental information sources attests to it.

On the other hand, nationalism in a stateless nation does not always lead to the building up of a nation-state, even if the goal of sovereignty is the dominant one.

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As far as analysing this theme is concerned, my opinion is that quantitative research is valuable but I believe that the use of qualitative methods - fieldwork, individual interviews, group dynamics, focus groups - is vital.

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If mass media are considered the leading and most effective agent of socialisation, and the basic element in the formation of public opinion, it is evident that its role in the formation, development, consolidation, and even crisis, of cultural identity, is fundamental.

I think that the rule should be that, on the whole, public opinion in a community should correspond to the largest extent possible with the dominant sense of its cultural identity. This theme has been mentioned by a certain number of authors, but conversely, it is a pity that often these authors do not explain what they understand by cultural identity, which is actually a vague and complex concept, as I have tried to demonstrate. In this article I have focused my attention on the concept and its elements, because I consider that the role of mass media in the maintenance of any cultural identity is paramount.

Mass communication is dominated by the role played by power, by ideologies and interests, and by conflicts and their necessary consensus. It happens either in the public mass media, or in private ones, because of different motivations and reasons. We might think that both public and private media are aware of their influence to improve the development of the cultural identity of their community. Such an aim, however, may be impeded or limited by the impact of advertising, which in practice serves more economic objectives - sometimes transnational - than a purely national one in the sense defined by the concept of cultural identity.

Another aspect to consider is the implications that new communication technologies may have in this field. Do they generate change, positive or negative, in the role played by the conventional mass media? Do communication superhighways modify to a certain extent cultural identity? May it alter the nature and content of the globalisation-localisation relationship? These and other questions should be asked by all those who approach this subject. We must accept that these new technologies will affect the role of mass media, but it is perhaps too early to give an answer.

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Summing up, the role of mass media in this field may be approached from the following perspectives:

1. as an operational and useful instrument of cultural identity;
2. as a means of integration or cohesion;
3. as a reflex of the development and performance of cultural identity;
4. as a danger leading to disintegration or destruction because they may convey external influences which are counterbalanced by this sense of cultural identity;
5. from a cosmopolitan point of view, as an expression of cultural exchange.

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