



ORIGINAL PAPER

Cultural Diversity and the New Politics of Identity

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Abstract

In a world of interdependence, the politics of identity should be reformulated according to the new realities: i.e. the refugees' crisis, the threat of terrorism, the phenomena inherent to globalization. Globalization puts a severe strain on ethnic, religious or national identities whereby people used to define themselves. Local identities do not disappear, but are reinterpreted. The ethnic diversity and the claims of cultural and political self-determination, even of territorial autonomy, formulated by historical minorities, have weakened the national state, which is no more capable of social integration. Some people regard cultural diversity as a source of instability and conflict, others think that cohabitation and dialogue are still possible. As groups want not only to be tolerated but also recognized in the multicultural public space and respected for their specificity, the new identity politics should differentiate between individual and collective identity, between inherited identities and chosen ones, between cultural identity and gender, racial, professional or religious identities; it should also specify the criteria for the application of cultural rights in the relationship of national minorities with the majority population or between migrants and receiving countries.

Keywords: *cultural diversity, inherited identity, modus vivendi, cultural rights, politics of recognition*

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The political relevance of cultural identity

The new identity politics emerge from the concrete and pressing need to answer all identity issues postmodern societies are faced with. Social environment, which nowadays is much more dynamic, entails the rapid reconfiguration of collective identities and individual identity. Individual identity is caused, at the same time, by individuals' affiliation with a group, by the personal history of each of them and also by the collective memory of the ethno-cultural community they come from, choices people make, inherited cultural traditions and elements, by the way they interpret these traditions and the place they occupy within them, by the way they are perceived by others in certain contexts and certain stages of their life. Therefore, the question of identity is both anthropologically and politically relevant. It requires field work, gathering of statistical data, systematic analysis of ways of expression and moral or political normative importance of identity acknowledgment in the public space.

Freedom, equality are political values that guided the public policy agenda in the western world in the second half of the last century. Starting with the last two decades of the 20th century, social and political thinking has started to shift its emphasis from social and economic issues related to preservation of natural rights and fair distribution of material goods to symbolic goods. Acknowledgement of identity, of cultural identity first and foremost (some kind of symbolic entitlement), counterbalances the issues of social (distributive) justice. That is why certain authors compare recognition and redistribution (Fraser, Honneth, 2004).

Charles Taylor analysed the transition of the need for recognition from rank acknowledgment in pre-modern societies to the recognition of affiliations and inherited identities as a defining element of human dignity in egalitarian modern societies (Taylor, 1994:27-28). Traditional societies of the Old Regime, which were hierarchical societies, professed mores based on the code of honour and acknowledging of ranks. In the spirit of that age, people would have an exclusivist attitude of denying cultural otherness. Hierarchical societies would regard ethnical diversity as inequality. The contact with the Stranger, the Other would not entail moral dilemmas: whatever is not like me is inferior, therefore it has to be removed, assimilated by forced conversion or extermination or accepted in a subordinated position. Acknowledgment has shifted from the social level of rank recognition to the interpersonal and intercultural level of difference acknowledgment.

The transition to early modernity also meant a moral and behavioural transition from practices related to honour recognition to those related to dignity recognition. And dignity is no longer a privilege, a prerogative of a social class, but the right of every individual who is simultaneously a rational agent and a legal subject. In a world in which states and ranks have disappeared, recognition can no longer address class membership, or a hierarchical stage, but man as such, man seen as a subject that needs to always be treated as an end, never as a means (Kant, 1993: 30).

The situation became much more complex in late modernity when egalitarian regimes faced the multicultural coexistence phenomenon. For modern democratic societies, the question of identity is much more complicated. Social relationships in a world which is open to globalisation cannot be regulated only legally or through a policy of neutrality and natural rights. Claims in the name of social justice and fundamental

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liberties have been complemented by identity claims. Groups of all kinds and individuals who make them up claim not only rights and welfare, just distribution of material goods, but also recognition of symbolic goods.

Identity, particularly, that of cultural communities, needs public recognition, therefore a fundamental right of cultures and ethno-cultural communities to express their specificity and preserve this specificity is appealed to. It is why a number of debates have been held within the UNESCO especially by the Fribourg Group (Fribourg, 2007). The emergence of cultural rights is also a consequence of the impact and influence anthropological studies have on the study of multicultural societies. The frequency with which human rights are invoked today seems to be rivalled only by the frequency with which cultural relativism is invoked when a lucid and objective evaluation of relationships between ethnical and religious groups in the present-day social landscape is carried out.

The presence of identity groups causes problems within contemporary liberal democracies. The recognition these groups claim appears in the current view as a threat to public order and community life forms. That is why identity groups and inherited identities are discredited while interest groups and chosen identities are acknowledged as legitimate. Hostility towards traditions and belonging identity comes also from the fact that their founding values are not negotiable, while interest is. Identity groups should not be mistaken with interest groups. An interest group can be very well constituted in the absence of a mutual identification among its members.

All an individual has to do in order to approach an interest group is to share the same instrumental interest as the other members of the group. Even identity groups may defend the interests of their members, but this will not be deemed as the group's reason of being and will in no way be a necessary consequence of its existence. In this case, interest is not a founding element, but a derivate of the group's existence. Amy Gutmann sums up the difference between the two pattern groups as follows: "In paradigmatic form, identity group politics is bound up with a sense of who people are, while interest groups politics is bound up with a sense of what people want" (Gutman, 2003: 15).

Unlike interest groups, which fall apart when the convergent interest disappears or has been satisfied for all those who have adhered, ethno-cultural groups are founded on values, have persistence and structure despite syncretism and acculturations due to social circumstances. Interests, which are fatally individual, can only generate contractual cooperation (therefore conditioned by compliance with the agreement). It is only values that can bond the social fabric, can maintain solidarity, which is the communion of destiny of a community. Consequently, cultural identity is a collective identity which applies both to groups and individuals inasmuch as they belong to these groups. You may belong to a group by origin or by affiliation, but not optionally. Cultural communities are not the result of the voluntary and interested decision of their members to live together. Usually, cultural identity is perceived as inherited identity, connected rather to someone's origin and heredity. One may deny their culture of origin, and thereby affirm it however. And one denies it not to place themselves outside any culture, but to look for another culture that should respond to their needs. Let us share the view stated by Joseph de Maistre: "In the course of my life, I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc.; I am even aware, thanks to Montesquieu, that one can be a Persian. But, as for Man, I declare that I have never met him in my life. If he exists, I certainly have no knowledge of him" (De Maistre, 1994).

Identity claims are perceived as a reactionary phenomenon, as irrational

aspiration to return to the past, to an out-dated stage, as an attempt to circumvent the law or to create a state within a state. Therefore, chosen identities are regarded as the only legitimate ones, while cultures are seen as contingent forms of life in common, which may possibly disappear leaving room for some forms of cooperation and rational arrangements; as inherited identities (traditions, religions) build social life upon determinism and affiliations that limit the freedom of agents, they are regarded with suspicion. Castells, who described the tensions cultural identity encounter in a network society, states: "However, the defenders of the community would argue, which is in agreement with my own theses, that people generally resist the process of individualisation and social atomisation and tend to group in forms of community organisation which, in time, generate a feeling of belonging and, eventually, in many cases, a common cultural identity" (Castells, 1997: 64).

Clifford Geertz speaks about the primordial attachment of the individual to the world, which is expressed as an attachment to a particular life framework. This attachment emerges from the data of people's social existence: contiguity, family relationships, being born in a particular culture, with a certain religion, mother tongue, sharing the same social practices. According to Geertz, biological, genetic affinities, those that have to do with language, beliefs, attitudes, customs, are perceived by people as inexpressible and, at the same time, overwhelming: "By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the givens of existence or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed givens of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves" (Geertz, 1963: 109).

This primordial attachment is connected to the feeling of belonging and the inside-outside symbolism of identification. But it can be associated with other social relationships and attachments as well, such as kinship, contiguity or territoriality, with the attachment to the common language, common customs, myths and symbols of a common origin. This attachment is the foundation of identifications which shape the feeling of belonging to an ethno-cultural community, to a tradition. Furthermore, it explains why cultural identity prevails in the structuring of individual identity. It nourishes the projects and the ethno-nationalist political discourse when it comes to majority groups or support identity claims and the policy of recognition when it comes to minorities striving to live together in the multicultural environment. In both cases, the stake is preserving identity. In postmodern times, the fight for freedom or social justice has been replaced by the fight for recognition, of identity in particular. According to Smith, (Smith, 1986: 22-31; Smith, 1991: 21) an ethnic group is a community characterised by a common collective name, shared myths, common ancestry, memory, shared historical memories, an association with a particular territory and a sense of solidarity.

By a "sense of solidarity" Smith understands deep feelings of commitment to a group expressed through values and altruistic actions. It includes a sense of membership to a common ethnic group which in times of crisis is seen as superior to other forms of social identification. In other words, ethnic solidarity is an essential condition of belonging to an ethnic group and surpasses any type of individual or collective attachment, attachments such as those based on class, religion, politics or regional

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affiliation. Although group solidarity may vary and change in time, including one or several layers of society, as Smith shows (Smith, 1986: 30), in order to talk about an ethnic community in the true sense of the word, this sense of solidarity has to at least animate the superior, educated layers of the community so that they should communicate it to the other levels of society. We shall call ethnicity the membership to an ethnic group based on shared cultural elements. Culture has an anthropological meaning and a normative, existential one as well. "An ethnic group is a type of cultural collectivity, one that emphasizes the role of myths of descent and historical memories, and that is recognized by one or more cultural differences like religion, customs, language or institutions" (Smith, 1991: 20). Although he deems the ethnic collectivity as the result of the intervention of historical memory and symbolic representation, in other words a cultural process, Anthony Smith is well aware that ethno-genesis as an anthropological fact and symbolic construction, resumed and reinvested, is a given, that culture is the environment, the natural given of man, while ethnic communities are cultural and natural at the same time.

In early Romanticism, Herder believed that only within a particular culture may the humanity of each individual be fully achieved. There is no human nature, no special, universal "humanity" separated from the particular cultures in which people live. This doesn't mean that there is no human nature at all, but that it is expressed only contextually and mediated. And the cultural context, though it can be considered as an accident at universal scale, has a privileged, essential relationship with the human individual. This makes of collective, inherited identities elements which are not to be ignored for the individual profile. Cultural identity is something else, is the type of identity which, as unsurpassable horizon of human condition, is expressed by rootedness, persistence, fidelity to certain formative principles, style. Local specificity, limit and diversity are also vested with value. Nature: "has placed in our hearts inclinations towards diversity; she has placed a part of diversity in a limited circle around us; she has restricted man's view so that by force of habit the circle becomes a horizon, beyond which he could not see nor scarcely speculate. All that is akin to my nature, all that can be assimilated by it, I hanker and strive after, and adopt; beyond that, kind nature has armed me with insensibility, coldness and blindness, which can even turn into contempt and disgust" (Herder, 1774: 509-510).

One may find in Romantic political philosophy a precursor of today's communitarianism. Community is a social reality that cannot be reduced to the sum of individuals that make it up. Community represents a qualitative synthesis and therefore has autonomy, certain characteristics that are not to be found at the level of individuals' behaviours and psychology. On the other hand, methodological individualism is the main instrument of researchers in studying the epistemology of social sciences today and represents a consequence of nominalism as intellectual attitude and method of research: the fact that in analysing social phenomena, only the individual who possesses his autonomous intentions and possibilities has explicative value. Methodological individualism entails a constructivist and voluntaristic vision over all social relations. Those who interpret ethno-cultural identity in this way do not give it more importance than other markers of identity, or to ethnic communities' greater importance than to other groups to which the individual can join. The portrait of man which they make is an intersection of identities. These identities decrease or increase in intensity depending on the concrete existential circumstances in which the individual is included in every particular stage of his life.

The individual identity depends not only on bio-anthropological or psychological constants of the individual but also on the configuration and the significance that different identities of belonging or affiliation have at a time. The identification of an individual with the group of belonging fluctuates according to circumstantial opportunities and interests. In this way the cultural identity is seen only instrumentally, subordinated to the interests of individuals or groups. Moreover, according to modern political theories of individualist, contractualist nature, the individual is the norm; it is only the individual that carries significance and values and all social arrangements must have, as final goal, the individual, his interests, rights, welfare.

Social contract theories can only interpret cultural communities as the result of a mutual agreement among their members. That is why these theories claim that group members recognise their common ancestry and ethnic affiliation to the group only when they have a political interest, in other words, when they are ideologically motivated to do it. Methodological individualism cannot nevertheless account for the pathos with which individuals appeal to cultural identity to support both nationalist convictions and ideologies and legitimate claims of recognition within the public space of various ethnical minorities. Anthony Smith criticises the instrumentalism and modernism of certain interpretations of nation, nationalism and ethnicity. Individualism, Smith states, cannot explain the virulence of ethnical conflicts, the sensitivity of the masses regarding the membership to a community which invokes common ethnical origin and ethno-cultural traditions. (Smith, 1996: 445-448).

Cultural diversity and the politics of recognition

Charles Taylor supports the identity based on difference, a version of multiculturalism which is sensitive to the preservation of cultural diversity, lifestyles that, according to him, are sources of authenticity. In this sense, he gives a number of arguments such as the recognition politics against cultural imperialism, against the hegemony of western culture. Charles Taylor shows how recognition moves from the social level of rank recognition in pre-modern ages to the interpersonal and intercultural level of dignity recognition, hence of identity. (Taylor, 1994: 27-28).

The public recognition of cultural identity could be interpreted as an individual natural right linked to the right to free speech and to dignity. The private expression of cultural difference, as stipulated by Rawls's conception about the right society, could deprive man from a fundamental right inscribed in its very nature. On the trail of the classic antiquity, Hannah Arendt acknowledged the importance of the public space as favourite locus of visibility and affirmation of each unmistakable individual face. „For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (Arendt, 1998: 57). The same thing can be said in the case of cultural groups. Or it can be interpreted as a special right of ethno-cultural minority groups, involving special treatment designed to preserve the specificity, the traditions, the identity of a culture. Such claims are made also in the name of so-called cultural ecology. As the preservation of biological diversity is good so is good the preservation of cultural diversity. Today it is talking more often about the global culture. Intuitively, the term culture is associated to the idea of ethno-cultural community. Culture is the spiritual environment, specific to a human group with common origins, that allows it to self-

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reproduce and to persist over the time, environment that offers to the members of the community a specific vision of the world, ways of understanding, values and specific behaviours, ways of expression and creation that are different from those of members of other cultures.

Culture is the specific environment of an ethnic group, of a „natural” community, that allows it to be different from others. The term „culture”, in identity sense, was re-emphasised thanks to anthropology (Kroeber, Kluckhohn, 1952). What is most interesting is that not recognising the other as another means annihilating or abandoning one’s own identity. As culture must have a face and an identity, it is self-limited in point of expression and dissemination. It cannot express itself and expand so far as to cause the cancellation and annihilation of the other cultures. Therefore, western culture cannot expand to the detriment of the other cultural forms and identities without self-annihilating. I am interested in the other not for what is similar to me, but for the difference that reconfirms my identity. Not the other as myself, but myself as the other, “soi-même comme un autre” (Ricoeur, 1993). The issue of cultural identity has polemic and even subversive potential in terms of a rational social-political order (contractually built and regulated, proclaiming its neutrality and thus indifference to values, opinions, beliefs, which, inevitably, have the colour of a particular perspective, of local specificity). Given the labour force migration at global level, this new nomadism, some liberal or communitarian authors have reflected upon the need for the politics of recognition (Taylor, 1994) or upon multicultural citizenship (Kymlicka, 1995). Starting from the example of Canadian multicultural society, Kymlicka will try in his writings to accommodate the liberal philosophy with the ethnic groups’ claims, specifically to ensure, at theoretical level, a liberal framework for fair treatment to ethno-cultural minorities (Kymlicka, 1995: 18) For minority groups, cultural rights represent not just the claim to be publicly recognized, but create the possibility of more concrete demands, like independence and territorial jurisdiction. These special claims are considered indispensable for the normal and unhindered development of cultures, to preserve their specificity and to defend the interests of their members.

It is a real balancing act of decision makers to permanently renegotiate through engaged politics the recognition of cultural differences or the relationship between the respect for fundamental human rights and the respect for cultural rights. The politics of recognition is all the more difficult to profess in the multicultural public space where coexistence, a *modus vivendi* of various ethnical groups, must permanently be renegotiated. When coming from majority ethnic communities, which make up the demographical basis of national states, identity claims, especially those referring to the inhabited territory, are perceived as a reactionary phenomenon, as a form of xenophobia. When coming from national minorities or groups of immigrants, they are regarded as an attempt to undermine public order, to break the law or to create a state within a state.

Pragmatism and new identity politics

By postulating the neutrality of public policies in terms of opinions, convictions, loyalties and memberships, deontological liberalism has evacuated the issue of cultural identity in the private sphere of personal choices, choices of conscience and freedom of expression. And that is because deontological liberalism defines human persons by the ability to choose. However, human individuals are not defined as rational and autonomous beings only by the freedom to choose, but also by what they choose.

A first virulent criticism received deontological liberalism from the

communitarian camp. M. Sandel incriminates the utopia of a self which doesn't define itself by its purposes, by the choices it makes, but by its ability to choose (Sandel, 1982). As if it is just this ability, while the object of its choices is something external, that could be appropriated by the very act of choice, but which is not constitutive, inherent for the human being. Man is ability to choose and has goals. The procedural liberalism assumes a priori that moral doctrines and worldviews are necessarily particular, because they cannot be the subject of a disinterested and objective rational consensus. The same fate have the values, beliefs and convictions, which can be freely professed in the private sphere and may be expressed publicly as long as they do no harm to the other members of society.

But the instrumental reason subordinates the values and interests, deconstructs the traditions, loyalties, affiliations and the identity ethos. By following Kant, Rawls consecrate "the priority of the right over the good". Further, "the main idea is that given the priority of right, the choice of our conception of the good is framed within definite limits... The essential unity of the self is already provided by the conception of right." (Rawls, 1971: 563). The way in which man perceives himself through the relation with his values and purposes, his conception regarding the relation between law and morality determines what he actually is. The deontological liberalism separates the self from its purposes; the latter are separated from the self, are the subject of its choice and are not the expression of a deep and defining need for human individuals. Sandel criticizes the simplistic anthropological model of deontological liberalism that the rational man as agent is defined only by its ability to choose. More, „the priority of the self over its ends means that I am not merely the passive receptacle of the accumulated aims, attributes and purposes thrown up by experience, not simply a product of the vagaries of circumstance, but always, irreducibly, an active, willing agent, distinguishable from my surroundings, and capable of choice" (Sandel, 1982: 19). The ultimate consequence of this vision is the reduction of all identities and belongings to the choices that the individual makes. Therefore, traditions and affiliations cannot have a constitutive role in the formation of the human individual, but are simply contingent determinations that can be changed by free decision.

In the real world, the human being imagines itself not as a person with a variety of relationships and contingent attachments, but as being made up of the history and the community to which they belong, with all the ensuing contradictory consequences. Man chooses (and is autonomous) because he belongs to a culture that defines him by his choices, orders them, orients and gives them a local colour. His choices are oriented and limited by a structured and structuring horizon of significations, which is practically provided by a culture of belonging. The human person is also the involuntary bearer of certain cultural values shared within the communities of affiliation, of a way of interpreting experiences, of a view of the world and human condition.

The political reality of the coexistence of cultural groups in the world of today requires rethinking the political theory. The pluralism of values and life forms made clear the impossibility of searching for a consensus not only in terms of values, but also of principles. Human beings pretend to be understood in the fullness of their concrete existence, of their particular belonging and rooting, of cultural forms and public expression that unites and differentiates them at the same time. The cultural identity begins to be considered as a decisive ingredient of human dignity along with the natural individual rights, which are understood especially as rights-liberties. Thus, the public non-recognition of cultural identity is perceived and interpreted in the current context as

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a flagrant form of oppression that is even comparable to the violation of universal rights of freedom of conscience and expression. The respect for the dignity of human individuals also includes the recognition of their concrete dimension as historical beings that owe their way of life to specific traditions, ethnic groups and cultures of origin.

That's why, even Rawls is forced to reformulate its initial version of liberal theory so as to recognize the right to existence of different modes and styles of life, it means of traditions and cultures with their specificity. The compromise solution is to abandon the ideal of the universal consensus, which is also abstract and rational, and to accept the particular, concrete and realistic forms of consensus (the overlapping consensus). That's what Rawls performed in the second stage of his philosophical creation. The political liberalism begins to be sensitive to the diversity of lifestyles. (Rawls, 1993: 141-142). In some cases there is not even partial consensus. Because even cultures and ways of life that are incomparable, because they were built on experiences, fundamental values, worldviews and conceptions radically different, could be found in circumstances of coexistence.

Then, the multicultural public space will not emerge from the ideal of consensus, but from the need for pragmatic coexistence which is negotiated taking into account the cardinal values that guide the particular lifestyles and the elements of behaviour that express better the ethnic groups. The rules of coexistence will be adapted to the context and will involve the mutual recognition, the importance of cultural difference not only the equality of rights. The principles of coexistence and cooperation will express a *modus vivendi* and not abstract principles (Gray, 2002: 121-157). The coexistence rules will be adopted in the presence of values and not apart from them, behind a symbolic veil of ignorance. This implies a rethinking of the relation between public space and private sphere.

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