Towards an Impure, Dynamic Concept of Identity?

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Abstract—We live in homogenizing times, in an increasingly globalized world; at the same time, we are witnessing an era of ferocious particularities and rabid individualism. Both trends—rooted in essentialisms of identity—deny entire populations the opportunity to emancipate themselves and participate in self-government. Universalizing (or imposing a specific hierarchy of values and ideas on others) is as dangerous as refusing to recognize the role other values and ideas play in shaping one’s own value set. This paper will take a closer look at the notion of identity through the looking glass of globalization.

Index Terms—Identity, democracy, colonialism, universalism, hegemony, human rights.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rose Moss, a writer and Nieman-Harvard scholar, recalled in an American literary magazine one of her father’s stories, set in a popular village of fools. It tells of a man who, on his way to the communal bath, sees a piece of string in the road and picks it up. What a lucky thing, to find this piece of string, he thought. In the bath, I’ll be naked and everyone else will be naked too. How will I know who I am? But if I tie this piece of string round my finger, I’ll be able to know immediately. He went to the bath a happy man, tied the piece of string round his finger and immersed himself in the water. But the piece of string got loose and floated about until another fool in the water saw it. That fool thought, what a fortunate thing. If I tie this piece of string round my finger, I will know who I am even though I’m not wearing any clothes. Soon, the first fool met the second fool and saw the string round his finger, “All right,” he said, “You are me. But who am I?” [1]. There is no easy answer to the question of what constitutes the cultural identity of a person or group.

The tension lying between Hegelian and Spinozian conceptions of the other is key to understanding both our relationships with others and opposing conceptions of the world. According to Hegel, the existence of the other is a denial of oneself—the result of the creative action of fundamentum absolutum. Spinoza, in contrast, argues that anything that exists does so in and of itself; the other is different but there is no need for denial. Cultivation of what Sen terms ‘solitarist identities’ breeds an easy ‘us’ vs ‘them’ dynamic which plays into the hands of the violent [2]. Denial of the other opens the door for a reductionist conception of identity, which I will take a closer look at in this paper. Finally, I will provide several strong ideas aimed at contributing to a complex conception of identity within the framework of democracy and human rights.

II. IDENTITY NEUROSIS

Basing existence on denial of the other is a practice that can involve both imposition and relativism—in essence, two sides of the same coin. The notion that cultural processes, like people, are hermetic, independent compartments is illusory. Equally misguided is to insist on preserving so-called cultural purity or to ignore the relationships of power and domination produced within cultures. A good example of such identity neurosis is the Iran government demanding the non-imposition of values—including human rights—on the part of other governments (especially the U.S. and Europe) while organizing purges against university professors, students and critics in the name of the re-Islamization of ancient Persia. Universalizing—or imposing a specific hierarchy of values and ideas on others—is as dangerous as refusing to recognize the impact other values and ideas have on our own. The history of European colonialism is an example of the former. Cases like Iran exemplify the latter.

Nonetheless, the universalism vs localism tug-of-war is a constant source of tension in academic discussions and everyday global politics. Why so? Let us propose three potential explanations for the sake of discussion: a) Western neurosis or complex; b) A simplistic
conception of cultures and their internal relations;
c) A static conception of cultural processes.

a) The first reason is rooted in Europe’s soiled conscience, fueled by countless decades of imperialism and colonization. We cannot forget the dark deeds done in the name of spreading the ‘blessings’ of ‘civilization’: acculturation, massacre and exploitation are the crimes of empire-building throughout the world. Yet this indisputable fact must not lead us to accept the excesses in which many leaders of colonized territories incur—and justify by virtue of cultural relativism.

Not so long ago we were horrified by news of a deranged killer, armed with an axe, who entered the house of a Danish cartoonist (the cartoonist had dared to draw cartoons of Mohammed); or by reports of pressure exerted by groups such as Islam Way to curtail freedom of expression on the Internet. Neither of these events fosters mutual understanding nor the free exchange of ideas. Respecting difference—respecting the other—entails respect for criticism.

Europe must have no complexes about its history; we should accept our past but not repeat it. This means steering clear of new, slicker neocolonial paradigms. It also means fighting despondence, acquiescence and silence in the face of injustices perpetrated in the name of culture or tradition. Too often the weakest are the target of such abuse—as is evidenced by oppression of women in its multifarious forms, abject poverty and hunger, and the restriction of basic rights such as freedom of expression and assembly.

By the same token, Europe must not back governments that exploit or oppress their people—even in the name of culture or tradition. Revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria, among other places, cry out for freedom and social justice. It would be absurd to say protesters gathered in Cairo are betraying their ‘cultural values’ when they struggle for a better life and fight for their rights. Yet many governments reject human rights, arguing that such ideas are foreign, western. This is, quite simply, a desperate attempt to justify injustice and tyranny. The same individuals responsible for oppressing their people under the auspices of ancient traditions enjoy gambling weekends in Las Vegas or boast well-nourished Swiss bank accounts. They do not seem to have any qualms about reaping the fruit of the cultures they so vehemently criticize. Some justify the use of the burka in their countries while accepting large sums from western corporations; many condemn imperialism and demand respect for their traditions and culture while imposing their politics—whatever the price in human suffering and life may be.

b) The second potential reason behind the tension sparked by the universalism vs localism debate is misguided persistence in perceiving cultures as homogeneous, immutable wholes, where relations of dominance magically disappear; as if dominance were only denouncible when imposed from the outside—that is, when a foreign power or powers oppress a group of people belonging to a different cultural tradition. Yet the internal relations of these groups are very rarely challenged. We cannot turn a blind eye to the differences and conflicts inherent to cultural processes; nor ignore the hegemony of one group over another.

c) The third explanation is rooted in the first two: cultural processes are not static. In other words, cultures change—mainly because most cultures make connections and establish relations with other cultures. In the real world people from different cultures have different types of relationships with each other. These relationships can range from peaceful and enriching to conflictive or even violent and—for better or for worse—they explain the changes which take place within cultural processes.

Glissant emphasizes the key role cultural transactions play in cultural development. Such exchanges should be actively sought out rather than avoided. More concisely: we must demand exchange-based cultures.

‘Purity’, in social or cultural terms, is a mirage—having nothing to do with the real world. ‘Pure’ cultures are mere figments of the societal imagination. Western neurosis, a simplistic vision of internal cultural relations, and a static conception of cultural processes converge in an imaginary—even dangerous—conception of identity, breeding fantasies of supremacy, right-of-blood and fundamentalism.
The best defense against this misguided approach to identity is Glissant’s notion of *traces*—in direct opposition to a ‘pure’ identity paradigm. In this context, the term refers to connection and cooperation; to the footprints cultures leave on each other [3].

In line with Glissant, I call for an *impure* identity paradigm rooted in blending, hybridity, *common ground*; the latter meaning that which we share, what we have in common as human beings. Common ground is a powerful building block for constructing mutual comprehension and cooperative relationships. But we should not fall into abstraction or sweet delusions. Building common ground in the context of traces or impure identity can only be achieved by satisfying needs. Satisfying need is key, as it brings cultural processes closer to our common ground. We all experience hunger, yearn to be loved, need a place to take refuge from extreme cold or heat. We also need opportunities to develop our skills through education, and access to medication when we are sick.

Connecting identity with our needs is fundamental in order to avoid essentialisms of identity. It is common knowledge that people have needs. We can identify several types of needs: economic, social, emotional, etc. The differences between these needs are a hot topic these days and a very relevant obsession in the academic world. To some degree, this obsession arises as a reaction to homogenization and universalism in our increasingly globalized world. Cultural difference has become a sort of fetish which is used to divide people and communities. In fact, cultures are not really as different as they would have us believe. Human beings have many needs in common, and these very needs bring us closer together.

All human beings need to have their basic needs met—affection, respect, and the opportunity to develop skills through education. The satisfaction of basic human needs could constitute a vital starting point for uniting people, regardless of the cultural milieu. Problems arise, however, when common human needs are forgotten by the wayside in an obsession with nationalist or religious impositions and abstractions. When this happens, society becomes unfair; sometimes unbearably unfair.

### III. IMPURE IDENTITY

Both universalism and relativism are abstract, idealistic stances vis a vis the conflicts and connections between cultures. They are rooted in the neurosis of a pure identity paradigm. Such notions have nothing to do with the reality of human essence and, therefore, are unable to account for the world we share or aid in finding solutions to human problems. On the contrary, they tend to deepen the divides between us.

In order to empower all that brings us together I have adopted Glissant’s notion of traces—in conjunction with the ideas of exchange and common ground. Exchange and cooperation depend on meeting basic needs shared by all human beings.

The notion of identity has been used against any ‘other’ who has been classified as an enemy; it has been used to preserve the hegemony of one interpretation of a cultural process and to reinforce injustice and domination paradigms that benefit an elite minority. We do not need a better understanding of identity as currently conceived. We need a different type of identity altogether—an impure and inclusive conception of identity; a trace paradigm that favors exchange and cooperation while refuting the delusion of singular affiliation.

Social class, ethnics and gender should all be conceived within the framework of a complex identity concept. Identity cannot be understood in isolation. Identity is interconnected and, more importantly—like freedom of choice and association—it undergoes transformation; freedom seen as a liberating, cooperative process between people, for the purpose of satisfying human needs.

A healthy conception of identity—open, multiple and dynamic—should take freedom into account. We are not referring to an atomistic or individualistic conception of freedom. Freedom as independence from the rest of the world, the rest of our fellow human beings, is mere illusion; it has nothing to do with reality. Freedom, understood as a cooperative process of liberation, requires the ‘other’. If we accept this principle we must call for creative action; for common ground in the context of an identity that, in Glissant’s
thought, would be a trace; for a culture of exchange.

But at the end of the day this still would not be enough. It is indispensable that all cultural processes be democratized. We conceive of this democratization as being the universalization of democratic behaviors. Such democratization must be carried out; and, within such a framework, we must take action against relationships of domination and injustice.

IV. DEMOCRATIZATION OF CULTURAL PROCESSES

We live in homogenizing times, in an increasingly globalized world; at the same time, we are witnessing an era of ferocious particularities and rabid individualism. Both trends, rooted in essentialisms of identity, deny entire populations the opportunity to emancipate themselves and participate in self-government. And both trends are interdependent; part of the global obsession with universalizing fundamentalism and autism as diverse while labeling anything cultural as a mere accessory of particularities within the framework of capitalist cultural values—an identity purism that denies ideological differences and focuses on political debate and national or ethnic construction. It is the 21st century equivalent of an ancient phenomenon: The nation-state-as-machine that makes oppressive, exploitative relations invisible. There is little doubt that capitalism has become the sacred backbone of our time—displacing state, history and religion [4].

On one hand, globalization supposes the sublimization of one of the fundamentals of modernity: the imposition of a given set of cultural values or paradigms inherent to a given cultural process—in this case, made in Anglo-Saxon Europe. Schumacher points out several 19th century ideas that have been passed down to us in the 21st century—among which, notions such as progress, competition, natural selection and ‘historic motor’ stand out [5].

On the other hand, imperialist imposition is facing resistance: weaker cultures are fighting any external influence within the context of the uniformization process we are addressing. It would be interesting to rethink Zygmunt Bauman’s thesis regarding uniformization in the west. Bauman considers globality—that is, the possibility of eating hamburgers anywhere in the world or watching the same television shows—to be mere condescension to what is happening elsewhere. Challenging this trend, Bauman defends the *illustrated universality of reason* and the benefits that such a project would afford humanity [6]. I consider, however, that a cause-effect relationship exists—not an absolute separation as Bauman suggests. My thesis is corroborated by a critical reading of George Ritzer’s sociological study on, what he terms, the *McDonaldization* of society [7]. Edward Said criticizes both Eurocentric tradition and nationalist ideologies. He argues that dialogue among cultural traditions fosters more democratic forms of humanism [8].

At this point it is convenient to recover the Babel myth and the theological construct inherited from liberalism—the basis for its homogenizing tendencies, as a good number of intellectuals has demonstrated. This circumstance is often exploited by the elite, who essentialize certain functional values with the aim of reproducing relationships of domination. In today’s world it is not difficult to observe the struggle between two essentialisms: the capitalist market and elite leaders, who exploit the market in order to perpetuate their power. In this line of thought, Benjamin Barber’s or Tarig Ali’s contributions are enlightening; both authors postulate that we are witnessing the clash between religious and imperialist fundamentalism—both sharing sacred symbols and similar degrees of anachronism.

Hence, both paradigms are forms of imposition that operate inside and outside their cultural processes—the latter exports a series of values to the rest of the world while seeking to maintain social cohesion in its interior through mechanisms that perpetuate established relations of dominance. Cultural processes that are closed to external influence transmit a cultural relativism to the exterior, with which they try to justify elite hegemony. And both paradigms provide feedback to each other—they are expressions of the same behavior [9].

How can the democratization of cultural processes be supported, beyond a relativist, classical, universalistic posture? Democracy consists in constructing the means by which to bring about self-governance; government by the
people, for the people. This must be done in accordance with the unique characteristics and needs of each society.

The way this is coming about is very similar to how human rights are conceived. That is, confronting relativism and universalism in a devious dualism that derails all hope of accessing more appropriate, complex forms of understanding reality and empowering alternatives.

Electoral polyarchy aims to impose a formalism that requires strict affiliation—at any cost. Even in those states with highly consolidated collective imaginaries, such formalism is at the brink of—or already in—crisis, since the paradigm is progressively losing its capacity to meet new challenges. Legitimation does not affect democracy, as the dominant political factions would like us to believe; rather, it affects what has been made of it, for elitist purposes: that is, electoral polyarchy. We must avoid talking about electoral polyarchy as an analytical concept. Doing so serves as a pretext for dominant political factions to justify the problems that current political systems are experiencing, allowing them to find refuge in the concept of democracy and its “defense” whenever they are criticized and reminded of the pre-conceptual framework to which they are indebted.

This is a logical step, diverting any criticism of today’s hegemonic model of government towards the false dualism between reality and authoritarianism; when, in fact, what is presented to us as representative government is closer to a form of highly refined totalitarianism—rooted in the growing influence multilateral organizations such as the WTO have on decision making processes which are kept under the radar of parliaments and public opinion. Consequently, we cling to the vague assumption that democracy has very broad legitimacy, like the power of the people; however, the product of rational action, the elitist model and the neoliberal structure of political opportunities does not. Likewise occurs with procedural legitimacy, which is what we approach through the idea of the universalization of democratic behaviors.

The English Revolution itself would have been notably different had the popular push to sideline Protestant ethics and shore up greater institutional democratization triumphed. Its failure enthroned Protestant values and property-owning class ideologies. Foucault refers to biopower when he affirms that sovereign power—materialized since the 18th century by regulating bodies designed to deliberately control life—became an indispensable factor in consolidating capitalism through an adjustment of population phenomena to the economic processes of capital accumulation [10].

This leads to a severe legitimacy crisis and important institutions such as parliament lose their specific weight within the democratic dynamics of a country. In democracy, citizens look to their representatives for answers to their problems. When answers are not provided, one more stone is placed on the wall dividing the representatives from the represented. This is true in both representative and capitalist democracies.

Today it seems there is an eagerness to universalize procedures which clearly do not contribute to achieving self-governance and are far from addressing the day-to-day problems of the societies they claim to serve. Submitting democracy to procedure rather than submitting procedure to democracy fosters an ‘ism’ mentality which stunts or even kills people’s creative potential. This is hampering the capacity of collectives to develop their own democratic decision-making procedures, and exercisin ideological violence against other cultures—against different ways of understanding the world [11].

This is the worst possible variety of colonialism—authoritarian and disrespectful of other mindsets, cultural spaces and processes; worse still, it is in full force in the 21st century, and well on its way to becoming universal. What must, indeed, become universal is democratic behavior, defined as a hierarchy of values that cultivates self-government by citizens who are actively involved in the construction of their own democratic procedures. Democratic decision-making involves complex endogenous and rational processes. As always, practice makes perfect; the more actively we practice democracy the more anti-democratic behaviors will tend to diminish.

We must steer clear of the messianism found in both authoritarian socialism and liberal
individualism. The only school of democracy is constant, participatory problem-solving applied to issues affecting citizens—and participation must include opportunities to decide, not only to consult. Governments must coordinate decisions made by the people but not act unilaterally. Democracy is synonymous with respect for social and human complexity. Moreover, complexity is the paradigm upon which democracy rests. Thus, civil action is complemented by a new ontology that uses creative subjectivity as a driver for constructing self-government processes.

When all's said and done, the universalization of democratic behaviors indicates that self-government must lead to the organization of societies. Procedures may be different—because they are the product of cultural processes—but a majority of the people should participate in the political decision-making inherent to self-government. This is what promoting and universalizing democratic behaviors consists in. As Nelson Mandela reminds us, in his South African hometown there were democratic procedures in place that allowed the people to govern themselves; there was no need to copy what was being done in other parts of the world. Such examples must be cherished and cultivated.

Within a framework of universalization of democratic behaviors, human rights—the fight against oppression and exploitation—must not be neglected. We cannot go on taking human rights for granted. They are the fruit of great struggles and sacrifice, and they owe their existence to the injustices suffered by countless human beings and collectives. Human rights should be understood as a reaction to injustice and oppression; their mission: to protect basic human needs. They are a radical, creative, transcultural reaction to attacks on human dignity—triggered when basic needs are declined.

Some governments reject democracy and human rights on the grounds that they are products of western culture. Such arguments are misguided. It is a universal right to fight off oppression. Human rights—seen in this light—defend human dignity, support satisfaction of basic human needs and foster respect for minorities within the framework of an impure and dynamic approach to identity. Together with democratic behavior, human rights safeguard respect within cultural processes and prevent dominant relations from taking root.

Sustainability is clearly no easy task, however. There will always be elites and factions determined to undermine democratization efforts. The first step would be to denounce them in their point of origin; stripping away their mask of relativism and of ‘anything goes’.

V. CONCLUSIONS

All things considered, we are in need of a new, broader, more dynamic identity paradigm, including categories such as gender, ethnicity and social class. This trace—more than identity, in the traditional sense—is impure, hybrid and open to the world. We must find tools that can aid in achieving comprehension, not incomprehension, among humans. The whole world is immersed in a freedom-seeking process of liberation. Democracy is part of this; cooperation and the satisfaction of common needs are essential.

According to Maillard, places are not owned, they are created; built by all, with their movement, encompassing the bodies [12]—the materiality of bodies building places in space and applying resolute rhythms, with no selfish and narrow miths. It is from this perspective that democratic practices must be conceived; as points of origin—as procedures that are open to interaction with others.

REFERENCES


