

Selected Topics in Business Administration:

On Identity

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On Identity

Asserting that there is a fundamental content to identity common to and stemming from any nationality, ethnicity and race is tantamount to seeing identity as a fixed sign. In other words, considering that the signifier is a name, label, tag, gender and the signified is a person or a social formation, essentialism sees the relationship signifier-signified as fixed in time and place, that is, as a 'being'. However, the connotative value the sign carries can vary according to the way one defines the signifier across time and place. Equally, its interpretation, use and representation will depend on the position one adopts where memory and knowledge are enmeshed in relations of force. It follows that identity, considering that it is not only the way we see ourselves as individuals and social groups, but also how others see us, is rather a 'becoming'.

In what follows we shall start by presenting the concept of identity by adopting in turn the essentialist and constructionist¹ approaches where the latter will highlight the advantages and drawbacks of the former. We shall then offer a brief critique of both approaches by re-positioning human agency at the center of identity-formation.

The essentialist model of identity assumes that there is an intrinsic and essential content to any identity defined by either a common origin revealed as the product of history or a common experience or both.

This implies that the common experience people have of ethnicity is the 'self-perceived inclusion of those who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others' (De Vos: 18). What is important here is the use of self-perception, our subjectivity, whether rational or irrational, and referring to the conscious or unconscious internal processes that create a self-image (Keyes: 151), to explain, understand and experience the world that surrounds us through language and social practices (Woodward: 39). However, following G. Mead (in De Vos: 37), in the process of establishing a sense of oneself one internalizes the outside world and in consequence the other leading to an interchangeability of standpoints that promotes an essential unity between individuals (Bauman: 9). This takes place through the process of identification with outside figures in the attempt to position ourselves in relation to what we are experiencing as a pre-established social order (Bauman: 8). An order which, according to M. Douglas (in Woodward: 33), is idealized and maintained through the use of symbolic resources and language that classify, purify, thus exclude other possibilities. Therefore, when one constructs a subjective sense of an ethnic belonging one identifies with others within a social order we consider as fixed, while relying on and internalizing a social memory, that shared by a group of people (Taylor: 15).

¹ What I have later labelled un-essentialist.

When an ethnic group has the conviction that its boundaries should be political and above all 'that the rulers within [the social] unit should be of the same ethnicity' (Gellner: 35), a national identity is constructed.

For instance, in their attempt to redefine their nation, the Serbs² constructed a shared identity claiming a long-standing history which resulted, according to N. Poulanzas (in Bhabha: 57), from the tendency the national state had to homogenize differences by levelling out temporary events and differences into a continuum. In other words, to create a continuum between past, present and future senses of belonging (De Vos: 18) by rendering the politically-constructed ethnic origin (Keyes: 136) functional and ideological so as to rally its members.

An additional element, according to B. Anderson (in Woodward: 18), is the creation of an imagined community, that is, a shared idea the Serbs have had of their community as well as about the other based on the individual need for a collective continuity (De Vos: 25) whether politically-driven or not. The final step has been to construct a sense of ecological belongingness, that is, to coincide territory with ethnicity wherein shared social and political views can be expressed (Gilroy: 314-316) under the Serb banner. However, this is a source of conflict so long as an ethnic group is not spatially fixed (De Vos: 16). Thus, despite the good relationships between the peoples of Yugoslavia, ethno-nationalism was lingering and kept alive through family stories: nationalism took advantage of the economic situation to surface (Gilliland: 215-216).

Thus, it is fear that identity and its meaning may be lost in the face of socioeconomic difficulties that a collective reaction is triggered leading to the elaboration of myths that represent an imaginary immortality in a culture (Robins: 61) while essentializing difference. This takes place through stereotyping as a representational strategy for fixing both the identity and the dualism us/them, given that a common language facilitates the construction of similar classificatory systems (Woodward: 30) and the accommodation of the members of the same community (De Vos: 15).

Other ethnic factors are equally at play in encouraging a sense of a common origin. The first one is the production and consumption of common aesthetic traditions such as rites and ceremonies by the members of a group as L. Thompson (in Gilroy: 307) has noted about Afrikaner identity (Gilroy: 307). What is more, the practice of endogamy that perpetuates genetically inherited differences whether real or imagined thus constituting a common ancestry (De Vos: 18-19). And more important, religious beliefs and practices are seen by its members as ethnognomonic in that, like totemism, are a cultural and emblematic trait specific of one group in contrast to another (Schwartz: 50). Thus, for the Orthodox Serbs religion has been used as an ideological basis to maintain a separate identity and to rally people or other nations such as Greece and Russia in face of a threat from Catholic Croats or Muslim Bosniacs (Boyd: 25-32).

² At the time of writing, the Kosovo war was on.

In contrast, the constructionist approach as an alternative to conceptualizing identity denies the existence of shared authentic and unique origins, and considers instead that identities are always relational as any identity depends upon its difference and negation of another form and vice versa.

Following J. Derrida (in Woodward: 38) that meaning is produced by a process of deferral rather than difference, we can construct a figure of *differance* in the relationship between dominant and dominated identities. The former is internally unstable since language and signification are unable to unify and stabilize identity, thus the subaltern identity becomes constitutive and necessary for the dominant identity (Grossberg: 90). Thus, as difference is unstable and never finally resolved, identities cannot simply be described through the essentialist binary opposition us/them (Woodward: 53-54). In consequence ethnic or national groups are open to various external influences and according to M. Moerman (in Uchendu: 128), the cultural features that delimit ethnic boundaries such as language, ecological adjustment and territorial contiguity correlate less perfectly than essentialism asserts.

Consequently, identities, whether individual or social, are multiple and fragmented, that is, at the same time 'disassembled and reassembled', thus contradictory and partial (Grossberg: 91). This is a point that S. Freud (in Hall: 3) underlines when saying that identities cannot be unified since during the process of identification, we develop emotional ties based not on what exists but what has been abandoned, the loss of libidinal pleasures of primal narcissism. Thus, ethnic and national identities are grounded in fantasy, an ideal that remains ambivalent (*ibid.*). However, I would argue that considering all identities as incomplete brings an essential element in the constructionist logic. A case in point are the new social movements in the 1960s where some of the groups considered their identity as contingent and not rooted in biological (gender) or social (class) sameness since cultural elements can be reconstructed in various ways according to circumstances (Woodward: 24-28). Yet it is this contingency that ultimately becomes the essential feature of such movements and there is nothing contradictory about identity as K. Woodward claims. Moreover, the success to recruit members and win political battles depends on propagating an essentialist identity whereas their dissolution will be due to contingent forces.

What underlies this tension is the power to interpellate subjects which according to L. Althusser (in *ibid.*: 42) is the process whereby a subject is unconsciously recruited to occupy a subject-position, to recognize oneself. This takes place through the workings of ideology depending on the situation social actors are in, that is, their position and disposition (Boudon: 71). In the former case, the position of a subject relative to another or the environment one lives in constructs an identity which for M. Foucault (in Hepburn: 30-31) is the product of subject-positioning within discourse, a self that cannot exist beyond the limits set by discourse. Furthermore, since discourses produce specific regimes and

mentalities thus govern conduct so as to achieve a desired objective, a particular relation to the self and to others is constructed (Rose: 135-137). In the latter case, according to P. Bourdieu (in Woodward: 21-22) the subject unconsciously participates in different fields which have a material context and a set of symbolic resources along with one's habitus: one sees oneself as the same person being positioned at different times and places according to the social roles one is bound to play in different contexts, hence the construction of a variety of identities represented differently each time. Thus, identities result from the interplay between a sense of momentary continuity the discourse has constructed for us, a point of equilibrium, and the forces of change which prepare the ground for new discourses and identities.

In contrast to an ecological belongingness, migration can also provide the basis for identity-making (Gilroy: 317). Migration brings about social divisions and unequal developments that undermine the self-recognition of the parent culture and in consequence the ensuing hybrid culture is similar to but at the same time different from the parent culture, a 'partial' culture (Bhabha: 54) as the works of O. Equiano and P. Wheatly show (in Gilroy: 321-323). Thus, a hybrid identity not only undermines conceptions of a unitary national identity but highlights a process of selection in collective memories (Taylor: 17) and differences within sameness as in Turkey whose national identity has been constructed around both Muslim and Western ideals largely due to its geopolitical location as per Robins (65-66). Another force producing hybrid identities is globalization since the new media technologies transcend the nation-state and ethnic boundaries (Gilroy: 323).

Diaspora as a form of hybridity, connotes flight from violence oppression, poverty, enslavement, and search for better economic opportunities (ibid: 304). In contrast to hybrid identities, diaspora is not the result of a freely chosen displacement and has a consciousness and an identity in reaction and relation to the dangers the displaced people have faced (ibid: 318). A case in point is the African diaspora whose people have been transferred by force thus transformed into another people because, as they have only kept a vague memory of their past cultural practices, as E. Glissant notes (in ibid: 344), they have appropriated and re-articulated the symbolic meaning of dominant identities (Woodward: 58) while they have reasserted an African-derived identity through aesthetic cultural practices as songs of B. Marley show (in Gilroy: 336-338). Thus, diaspora identities, despite their masculine connotations and the tendency to adopt the position of the victim in discourses set by the dominant identity (ibid: 332), clearly clash with homogeneous and unitary essentialist conceptions of national or ethnic identities: their heterogeneous and diverse identity opens up a new space where other relationships can be created other than those of ethnicity. To take the argument further, all identities are hybrid as none is closed to external forces.

From the above we can see both approaches as discourses which position us in a different way, revealing different faces of identity, yet entrap us within the limits

of their regime of truth (Billig: 7). In addition, they put an emphasis on social forces to both shape the self and identity, or, following G. Deleuze (in Rose: 142), what is inside the human being is merely an 'infolding of an exterior' (ibid.). This is because essentialism removes agency and autonomy from the individual (Gilroy: 305-308) while constructionism sees agency as empowerment owing to a particular subject-position discourses produce (Grossberg: 102). This, however, implies that identities are both formed and exist outside of us while undermine the fact that individuals may resist forms of power (Nixon: 316).

Actually, we use the tools the social has provided us with to reshape our identity by constructing our individual regimes of truth which are not practiced under an actual or imagined authority imposed from outside, but according to our subjectivity along the different experiences we live. We can thus transcend the narrow bonds of an imposed social identity (Uchendu: 126) as we can see from the politics of identity the disabled have led (Benson: 15). Put differently, society has categorized us but it up to us to decide how and when to make use of this identity or even lifestyle it; hence identity is located within us and not outside of us.

In conclusion we can say that identity is not always rooted in nation, ethnicity, or race on the basis of one and unchanging identity. Identity can also be mobile, temporary, changing as a matter of strategic choice or imposed by circumstance. It is thus the context which not only triggers the need for identity but also determines which one to construct across different practices and which address us in various ways (Rose: 140). Yet the context can be influenced by the identity we have been given or by the one we have constructed and vice versa³.

³ The underlying relational importance should not go unnoticed.

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