Identity, recognition and differentiation

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When talking of the notion of identity, the emphasis is placed on the content of that identity, that is, on what is substantive about it and what is supposed to make it specific and unique. This «substance» is either material (a music work, architectural heritage, a literary tradition reflected in a list of classic works) or immaterial, formulated for instance in terms of values associated to that identity, like the alleged fierce or peaceful character of a nation, the innovative spirit of a culture or a harsh and mistrustful personal character by nature. In all cases, identity is something that can be defined through its contents.

The old approaches to identity

The notion of identity has traditionally been, and still is, conceived as if it were made of a set of precise contents (cultural practice, lifestyle, beliefs) defining its singularity and allowing to make out the difference between identities. In this respect, the identity of nations was for instance supposed to be able to show itself out of an alleged overall national character of its members, forged over time to face historical adversities. Cultural identity has been considered along the same lines, based on the use of a language or the existence of popular tradition or cultivated artistic and intellectual output providing it with contents. Still, this is also the perspective out of which the personal identity is thought of, that is, like a unique, unrepeatable way of being as a result of both an unspecific inborn substrate and an accumulation of experiences and determinations in the family, at school and at work that supposedly bring it to its final shape.

However, without taking any value from this sort of approaches typical of popular common sense, from a sociological viewpoint, i.e. with an analytical will, it is notorious that these intuitions prove insufficient and hide the objectively more relevant items of the social reality they refer to. They are limited conceptions, particularly in two aspects.

First, a substantive approach, which often in-volves an essentialist view, underestimates the dynamic, changing and adaptive character usually involved with identity. And second, this sort of substantive notion of identity leads to some discourse that is to be considered an ideological tool aimed at brining into place relations of power between individuals, groups, nations or markets. As François Laplantine writes, seen in these terms, the notion of identity is «epistemologically very poor but ideologically highly effective», which leads Eric Dupin to believe in a provocative way that, put in essential terms, «identity does not exist».

Current discussions on identity

It is true that current discussions on identity are conducted by assuming their substantive nature, so the discussion usually is about which these specific contents are that make an identity and allow to establish a sort of right of admission – and hence exclusion – of one specific identity. What is being Catalan and who can be considered to be so? Or what is being Spanish or American? How are people from Barcelona, Girona or Terrassa? Which attributes are typical of the young, adult or elderly? What cultural and what biological items distinguish sexual identities expressed in terms of femininity and masculinity? Is there Spanish literature in Catalan or Catalan literature written in Spanish? Is there any specific identity typical of the Bolivian nation? Or are there rather Quechua, Aymara or Guarani ethnic identities in the state of Bolivia? However, beyond the explicit intention of these questions, looking into the ultimate reasons of this identity discussion one will notice that it is the expression of a conflictive social rationale aimed at setting in place the relations of power between groups and individu-als, that is, they are the expression of symbolic struggles for recognition and ultimately power.

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In this respect, national identities are significant examples of what I think of the recent debate on Britishness in Great Britain that became especially vivid after the terrorist attacks by radical Islamist groups in 2005 or the most recent great national debate brought forward by Nicolas

Sarkozy in France with the aim of strengthening French patriotic values, i.e. bonds of national loyalty. This issue is the more interesting as it was raised by the left in Britain, with notable action by Gordon Brown some months before becoming prime minister, whereas in France it has been viewed as a typically conservative debate.

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Also, it needs to be said that both in Britain and France the discussion came about in deep relation with migration and associated conflicts, although within each country's own political categories. Particularly in Britain, the discussion focused on the actual feasibility of a multicultural society project, whereas in France the national pride based on the integration capacity of a particular solid culture deeply related with the language as a means of socialisation is to be updated. However, under the differences of each political culture, the ultimate question is the same: how can, within the complexity of a global society, the bonds of loyalty be kept with the national community to ensure the necessary exchange of rights and duties citizenship is built upon, that is, in how far is diversity democratically acceptable and what mechanisms are democratically legitimate to force citizens to keep an emotionally strong link with their community.

Put in other words, the problem of identity in a global world is like preserving the community of wills and aspirations on which the nation is founded in times encouraging cultural promiscuity, international mobility and fragmentation of traditional national spaces; or, if you will, how to continue creating citizens in times used to a rare

combination of cult of the most primitive and farthest ethnicity and admiration of airport cosmopolitanism; further, how can loyalty to a political system founded on territorial belonging be managed in a world passing seamlessly from the seduction of ancient roots of an ancestral custom or the search of the uniqueness and authenticity of local culinary taste to transgression of all conceivable frontiers thanks to the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and low-cost travel.

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It can be said that there have always been processes of cultural universalisation of what used to be local. However, dissemination was the result of a slow appropriation and reinterpretation process. We could talk about music by Bach or Beethoven, produced first with a local view but become universal, having of course lost their original social or ideological functionalities. Now, the novelty is the implosion of the universalisation process of the local without intermediation of states, big institutions like the church or socially acknowledged cultural elites. As a consequence, the issue to be solved is which are the mechanisms of maintaining national spaces as territories of political belonging without which any logic of the system of democratic representation is shaken up.

Identity, a system of relations

I brought forward the case of the discussions on national identity, but they are not different from the rest of identity debates. They all relate to the

struggle for recognition and differentiation, which is the struggle for social existence itself. Hence it can be said that in fact, it is not discussions – as it seems – on the substance of each reality to be preserved – and created or disappear – but on the system of relations these alleged identities are embedded in. Therefore it can also be said that debates on identity stem per definition from an identity crisis, of a threat or the will of ruling above others.

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It is for all these reasons that the very notion of identity needs to be radically reviewed, at least in sociology. The identity thus needs to be conceived as the expression of a system of relations serving a process of recognition and differentiation. Hence there is no identity that can be understood out of itself (the substantive conception) but it can only exist as a result of this process of recognition or denial of recognition. So as Manuel Delgado (1999, p. 33) puts it, «identities not only need to constantly negotiate their relations but they also are these relations».

Let us give an example on an individual basis: What's the point in me considering myself a funny fellow if nobody around me does not laugh about my jokes? Obviously, if nobody thinks I am funny, I would find myself in a deep identity crisis, so my funny nature can only exist thanks to a sort of relation I negotiate with the others so they recognise, confirm and reassert it; in this respect, my being funny is not a nature anymore, it is not even solely mine.

This network of relations we could term as identity relations certainly require some real or imaginary support. However, given the complex and changing character of what shapes today ways of individual and collective recognition, what is determined is the recipient of all

particular substantive contents rather than these contents as such. In this respect, identity is rather a container than a content, a shape rather than a mould. The shape of identity is the recognisable and identifiable part, while the mould – no matter what it is made of – is confuse and heterogeneous. The shape is malleable according to the conditions of the relation, whereas the mould is usually inaccessible and more difficult to change.

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Some years ago, a car maker took an old 1971 interview with Chinese-American actor Bruce Lee, who was born in San Francisco in 1940. There he advised to «get rid of shapes» to be able to flow like water: «Pour some water into a bottle, and it will be bottle; pour it into a teapot, and it will be teapot.» And he finished: «Be water, my friend.» One could think that Bruce Lee is the most notable forerunner of what became later the highly exploited metaphor created and developed by Zygmunt Bauman on the liquid society! Yet the most interesting about Bruce Lee's advice is the paradox that by emptying the own mind and getting rid of the own shape, being water, one does not stop having a shape but as they adapt they can be any. So we could say that globalisation is in a certain respect what forced this «liquefaction» of (national, sexual, cultural, individual…) identity substances to make them more malleable to the changing circumstances and the multiplicity of possible lifestyles.

Identity is a skin

To summarise, my proposal is to change the notion of identity and shift from placing the emphasis on the substantive content to imagining it as a container of heterogeneous matter the shape of which is determined by a framework of singular and changing relations. Put with a metaphor that appears especially suggesting to me, identity is a skin.

The idea of a skin emphasises adaptive flexibility on the one hand, while keeping the specificity of recognition of the shape on the other. The skin metaphor has probably a drawback in the reference to superficiality, which could lead to think of transitory and banal circumstances. Yet in fact, the skin – if you allow me to play with the double sense of words – has nothing epidermic! The skin is the space of relation and exchange per excellence. It is the place of touch and caress. It is also the terrain of conflict and aggressive expression. The skin is the frontier, that is, separation and union at the same time. The skin is authenticity and masque, the territory of the wrinkle revealing the age and the make-up concealing it. And it is on the skin where feelings and emotions are expressed, causing goose flesh. Paradoxically, this skin is also stay and change, allowing us to recognise ourselves after years of not seeing each other, although its cells are renewed every two weeks!

However, let us leave the metaphors and come back to processes. Identity as defined out of this new perspective places us in front of the process allowing to solve three requirements of any social logic: recognition, differentiation and linkage. The identity debate is thereby not understood anymore as an introspective thought about what we are or what the others are and becomes the expression of the conflict driven out of the dialectic between affirmation, distinction and inclusion.

It is in this logic of recognition, differentiation and linkage that Manuel Castells' proposal of identifying project identities is to be regarded as
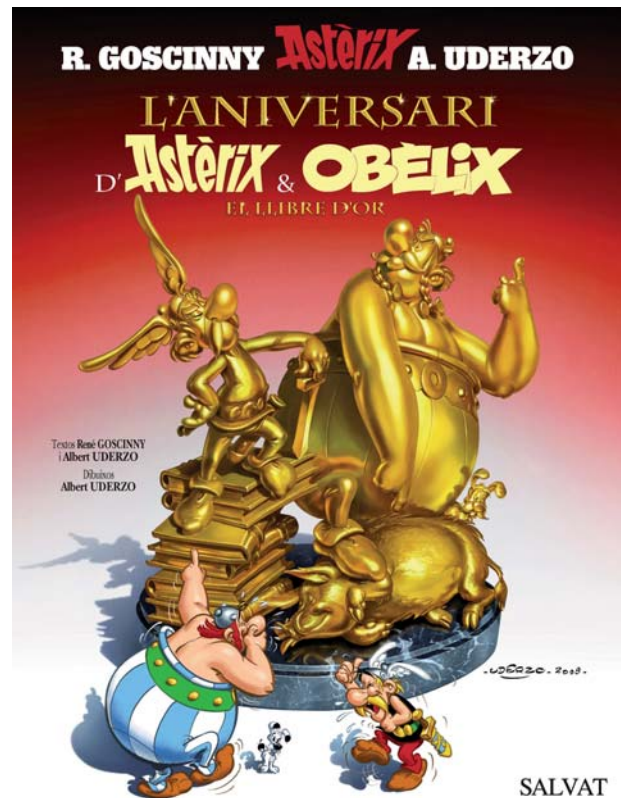
▲ «Our ancestors the Gauls…». This is how history schoolbooks in France used to begin.

a future-minded mechanism of identification and belonging and not one of recreation in an essentialist conception based on a more or less fictitious past

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To finish, I would like to point out briefly the main paradoxical rationales by which the struggle of relations between identities is fought and in which they are expressed. The first shows in that identity hides rather than shows. We already talked of the notions of «container» and «skin»,

which cover more complex structures. The first aim of having a recognised identity – as we said, if it was not recognised, this identity would not exist – is to self-represent in a simple way, hiding away the heterogeneity of contents this skin identity conceals. For instance, in the case of a national identity, the effect of recognition is not obtained by showing exactly all complex and contradictory components it is made of, but all the contrary in order to simulate a homogeneity that is not real but effective.

This is the resort to famous stereotypes that serve for both self-qualification by a community to recognise itself in given values and for dismissal of neighbouring communities, always a potential contestant to the own position in the space of struggle for recognition. For in a certain way, recognition requires to simplify, exaggerate, emphasise and thus hide anything that may blur the picture to be imposed.

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The second paradoxical rationale I will refer to is that identity works when it is not an issue, i.e. when it is not lived explicitly. Effective identities are perceived in a natural way, like being obvious. Therefore, identity discussions can sometimes become very aggressive as it is believed that the mere fact of discussing an identity is a transgression of its holy, incontestable and inviolable nature.

It must not be forgotten that the main mechanism to create and maintain identities is exerting symbolic violence, the one able to become invisible in voluntarily attaching to external impositions. In the case of national

identities, this violence is exerted by the state through its ideological apparatus and those at its service (e.g. media) defining strategies of effective emotional allegiance. Perhaps one of the clearest examples is the role of national sports teams that are attributed the virtues of the nation as a whole. However, this mechanism of symbolic violence is also applicable to the market, for instance. Fashion and trends are the climax of this rationale of symbolic duress able to hide its compulsory nature and be lived subjectively by individuals as a result of a desired choice.

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Some final considerations

All observations made regarding the notion of identity are applicable to what is called economy of identity. Markets and products circulating there set relations of competition translating into supposed substantive identities intending to become naturalised, to appear as beyond any discussion.

The brand is the expression of that essentialist intention of providing a product or, whenever appropriate, a whole country with a stable and permanent specificity. Yet one thing is its rhetoric expression, generally restricted to a commercial slogan, and another the system of competitive relations and commercial power struggles within which this brand actually wins or disappears.

Hence the challenge of an economy of identity is not very different from the rest of identity struggles and discussions. The need for differentiation comes from the need for recognition, an indispensable point to be accepted in the social game. As has been said, a global world not only does not dilute the local but it has it implode, turning it into especially useful differentiation tools. The most global brands do not give up at all local identifications of origin, albeit being often objectively false. In other words, identities in the market are also «skins» for recognition of the product and the struggle for its positioning in relation with competition.

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