

2. CULTURAL IDENTITY : SEARCH FOR A DEFINITION

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In order to discuss the issues associated with cultural identity or with the unique characteristics of a community or a cultural group, first it is useful to closely examine the terminology and concepts that have been used across history to name and categorize the « others » who live both close and far.

In the ancient times, the Greeks already utilized specific terminology to categorize groups of « others » who were considered linguistically or politically different. They differentiated themselves, a group (s. the concept of *In-group* or *Wir-Gruppe* in German¹) of Greek-speaking people who were classified by city (*polis*), from all non-Greek speaking people (those who spoke « Barbarian » languages) who were classified by « nation » and who were related to each other through biology, or *ethnè* (plural of *ethnos*²). This word *ethnos* was used by the Greeks to name groups of animals, as well, while the word *demos* was reserved exclusively for the (Greek) population of « free » individuals.

In a similar fashion, the Romans used the word *ciuitas* or *civitas* (the equivalent of *polis* in Greek) to refer to the Roman life, and they also introduced expressions that represented conquered civilizations: *gentes* and especially *tribes*, referred to particular socio-political factions, either territories with human and animal populations, or groups sharing a common « birth » and biological kinship links, or a combination of these elements. This idea of a « common birth » - and therefore of a biological kinship between the members of the group - is essential to the expression *nation* (from the Latin word *nascere*: to be born), which was used frequently in the European « pre-modern » vocabulary to classify a specific ethnic group, either European or not (Littré 1874). Let us note that up to the end of the XVIIIth century in France, this Latin word, *nation*, was considered to be synonymous with *race*, which has a Germanic origin.

¹ S. for example Elwert (1989)

² S. Benveniste (1967), Amselle (1995)

In XIXth century Europe, with the emergence of modern states and academic specializations, an attempt was made to give more precise, and sometimes new, meanings to the current terminology. Also, at that time, theories emerged to describe and explain the unique characteristics of human populations, for example, *evolutionism*, which places diversity on a temporal axis. Without giving too many historical details, the redefinition of *nation*, stemming from the French Revolution, attempted to dissolve all references to biological kinship links between members of a « nation-state »; however, this transformation was not complete, as we are reminded by the verb « *to naturalize* », used in administrative vocabulary to name the process of acquiring French nationality. Napoleon also claimed that « The French do not have a nationality », in order to illustrate the absence of kinship links between his subjects; the word « nationality » in its « modern » meaning was not entered into the Dictionary of the French Academy until 1823³.

The term *race*, initially a synonym of *nation*, meaning culturally and/or morphologically unique populations, was redefined as a result of the XIXth century scientific debates about the relationship between « nature » and « culture », the innate and the acquired, the biological and the social dimensions. In 1896, French scientist George Vacher de Lapouge proposed, in his book *Les sélections sociales (The Social Selections)*, the use of the word *ethnè* or *ethnie* (which was easier to pronounce according to him...) to differentiate the socio-cultural specificity of a group from its biological specificity; a biologically specific group was called a *race*⁴.

This proposal was not carried out until 1919, when a physician, Regnault, proposed the use of the word *glossethnie* or *ethnie* to highlight the role of language in the formation of the human groups, and also to provide a concept other than *race*, which, according to Regnault, referred solely to an anatomic category⁵.

³ Littré (1874), note 3, 693 : 693.

⁴ S. Amselle (1995), note 2.

⁵ F. Regnault in his *Bulletin et Mémoires de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*, tome X, 1919, and in the *Revue Anthropologique*, tome XLI, 1931. This idea also had been proposed by F. De Saussure in his well known course of linguistics held in Geneva (1906-1911), where he evoked the word « *ethnism* » to highlight on one hand the links existing between language and other cultural characteristics, and on the other hand the absence of links between language and physical (« *racial* ») traits. S. De Rohan Czermac (1968).

Thus, academicians at the beginning of the XXth century still were attempting to distinguish the biologic traits from the cultural specificities of human groups. But, despite these endeavors, *anatomist* and *substantivist* approaches dominated the research on cultural specificities, thereby promoting the view that cultural particularities were permanent and absolute *traits*. In addition, during that time, academicians paid very little attention to the view that individual members of groups might have their own unique characteristics. Thus, the academicians often placed certain groups into «ethnies» and «races» abusively and arbitrarily, according to criteria that would make us laugh today. These conceptual discussions echoed in the public arena in the 1920's and 1930's, particularly in France, Germany, and other European countries, where the domination of Europe over the rest of the world was celebrated in various ways.

It was partly to counter these abusive and often superficial perspectives of cultural specificities, that modern anthropology abandoned, starting in the 1960's, the use of the concept *ethnie* in favor of concepts like *ethnicity* (in use in the US) or *ethnic groups* (in use in Britain) to discuss the changing processes through which belonging and identity are constructed. Additionally, one should note that in Europe (with the exception of Britain, which was very influenced by American research), researchers generally preferred the concept of *identity* to the one of *ethnicity*, probably due to the negative historical connotations of the word *ethnie* and the term *race*...

The concepts of *ethnie* and *race* were almost abandoned by academia, but there was a corresponding growth among Europeans in the utilization of these words and concepts. Today, the media and politicians promulgate this popular «*ethnicization*». The dramatic increase in opportunities to encounter «others», either indirectly (through press, TV, the importation of goods...) or directly through geographical moves (holidays, migrations...), is associated with this phenomenon. The researches are confronted with a number of questions when they point out, not without embarrassment, the often abusive use of the words coined by their predecessors.

To approach in an empirical manner the identity and the feelings of belonging as they exist «in the field», we developed with a

group of anthropologists⁶ a methodology that allowed us to analyze, using a collection of specific cases, the mechanisms through which a local identity is constructed. This methodology⁷ is based on the use of several subsets of indices of identity, some being « objective » observations and others being « subjective » perceptions of the participants (Bromberger 1987a, Dufour & Schippers 1993). A first subset of indices, *a priori* an unlimited one, is formed by what we have named⁸ objective differentiation indicators, which are controlled and accepted by the scientific observer. A second subset of indices consists of *belonging markers*: these are the differentiation traits selected by the participants from among the objective indicators; this set is limited, although the markers are variable according to the contexts in which they are used. Finally, a third subset is developed by the *differentiation criteria* used by the participants, without the possibility of objective validation: these are the stereotypes stemming from the collective imagination.

The use of this distinction - *indicators*, *markers* and *stereotypes* – for the empirical study of the feelings of identity and belonging in various contexts (rural/urban, early populations/more or less recently immigrated populations, etc...), allowed us to detect patterns in the relationships between these three types of indices. For example, we found a negative correlation between the number of markers and the number of stereotypes used. When there are enough objective elements to build the identity of the group, social participants use few stereotypes; however, when few tangible elements allow participants to differentiate from « others », who appear very similar, social participants stretch their imaginations to invent some differences, thereby creating stereotypes.

Our initial findings indicate that the construction of a collective identity is a phenomenon experienced by each social group when it is placed in proximity to different social groups. In order to belong to a given social group, individuals need to master the full catalog of real or imaginary traits of the « in-group » and to correctly differentiate the « in-group » from the « others ».

This process plays an important role in migrations, where newcomers from « outside » often need a rather long time (two to

⁶ From the IDEMEC-CNRS Aix-en-Provence.

⁷ Which was directly inspired by the work of American sociolinguist William Labov.

⁸ We are resuming Labov's vocabulary.

three generations) to integrate into the cultural identity of the group to which they already are economically integrated (economic integration happens more rapidly). Migrants protect, in the meantime, certain elements of their original identity, notably in the sphere of their private life.

Among the different belonging indices, one involves the openness or the closure of the group. It is more difficult to integrate into a group whose identity is based on biologic kinship links (the « Blood Law »), than into a group whose identity is based on a historical presence in a region or on certain shared activities (religious, social, sportive, etc.).

The different levels of construction and confirmation of identity also follow variable relevance scale positions that extend from the micro-local one (house, quarter) to the global one (worldwide). Thus for example, in Provence, the numerous Italian immigrants at the beginning of the century were all Piemontese, Bergamasques, or Calabrese, whereas today the immigrants coming from North Africa are all *Arabs*, according to the local *Europeans*. Therefore, the presence of immigrants not only results in an *a contrario* reinforcement of national identity, but it also can reinforce other levels of the collective identity, including « regional », « continental » and « worldwide » identities, *via* some changes in the social positioning of the immigrants (Bromberger 1987b).

At one extreme on the spatial scale, we have the home culture, which, for the immigrated groups (but also for certain autochthon groups), is usually a « conservatory » of their original identity, congealed in an intemporal immobility. This home culture, although it is a means to stabilize the threatened identity of the recent migrant, becomes later a simple means to celebrate the ancestral identity, notably in life's big moments (births, marriages, religious or civil feasts, and so on). As shown by the diverse events of recent years, some elements of this « home made » identity can re-emerge at any moment in the « public space », particularly if social identity is lacking.

Along with the valorization of membership to a particular group (usually « local » in European cities, and « ethnic » and « communitarian » in the U.S.), there has been a need for « cultural re-enchantment » among groups facing cultural standardization and globalization. In addition, the disarray produced by economic difficulties also is a powerful incitation to

draw the old identity fossils from their chests and to introduce them into the public life, for better or for worse.

In conclusion, I will return to a few remarks made at the beginning of this text about the words and the concepts used to refer to the specificities of cultural groups, and which are today a part of the common vocabulary.

First, let us remark that most immigrants enter Western societies at the bottom of the social scale. Therefore, their first social identity is inferior to the identity of the autochthons (and inferior the identity of earlier immigrants, as well). In a second stage, this social identity is very quickly associated with an identity of a linguistic order, thereby creating stigmatization. But once this differentiation of a linguistic order has disappeared – after one or two generations - the differentiation can operate on other levels of the collective identity, either by using identity « *markers* » other than the language (color of the skin, religious affiliation, food or clothing habits...), or by developing a specific « *stereotyped* » differentiation.

It is through development of these stereotyped identities that the Europeans draw on the ideas of the early XXth century academic world. For example, one uses the word *race* to name the nationals of a given country, although there is no systematic family kinship between the inhabitants of the concerned country. In this identity game between migrants and autochthons, the autochthons' concept of their identity significantly influences the way that they view the identity of the migrants. It is well known that many Germans considered themselves as biologically linked within a « *glossethnie* » (*das deutsche Volk*, characterized by a common heritage, *das deutsche Volkstum*), and it is not surprising therefore that they consider Turkish, Italian or Portuguese immigrants as *ethnies* just like the Sorabes from Bautzen or the Kachoubes from the Oder valley. On the other hand, in France, where the « *ethnic* » terminology has been historically reserved for colonial populations, its application to nationals coming from other states is generally considered to be incorrect; it is not surprising, in such a context, that any claim based on an « *ethnic* » definition, either coming from the French regions or from the migrant circles, will always be stigmatized in France as a primitive and archaic form of ethnic construction, although some

«*ethnic*» references still appear to be frequent in the daily discussions and attitudes ⁹.

In summary, it is important to consider the role of language in our concepts of «the Other» and of «ourselves», because we never play identity games alone. Anthropology, after linguistics, has shown many times that naming and classifying are social activities *par excellence* that are exercised not only with objects of the natural world, but also with human groups.

⁹ Certain authors, like Breton (1992), use the word «French *ethnie*» to name a complex entity made of elements of a linguistic, cultural, legal, economic, or demographic order.