

ASPECTS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY AND LIMITING APPRECIATION OF THE ETHNIC

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Abstract

In this paper we propose an analysis of social identities based on two aspects thereof: tradition and modernity. A short foray into social life demonstrates that the two approaches are not mutually excluded although there are approaches on this matter. We then demonstrated that ethnicity is one of the deepest stances of social identity, ethnocentrism and the ethnomarginal are two forms of radical valorisation of the ethnic identity. Ideological and political instrumentation of the ethnic identity and limit valuing posed by these open the path to intolerance and social discrimination.

Keywords: modernity, tradition, ethnic identity, ethnomarginal, ethnocentrism

Résumé

Dans ce texte, nous proposons une analyse des identités sociales fondées sur deux aspects: tradition et modernité. Un bref aperçu de la vie sociale démontre que les deux ne sont pas incompatibles, mais il ya des approches à cet égard. Nous avons ensuite démontré que l'ethnicité est l'une des positions les plus profondes de l'identité sociale. L'ethnocentrisme et la marginalisation de l'ethnique (etnomarginalul) sont les deux formules radicale de valorisation sociale. Instrumentation idéologique et politique de l'identité ethnique ouvrir la chemin de l'intolérance sociale et de la discrimination.

Mots-clés: modernité, tradition, identité ethnique, l'ethnocentrisme, marginalisation de l'ethnique

Rezumat

În acest text propunem o analiză a identităților sociale plecând de la două ipostaze ale acestora: tradiția și modernitatea. O scurtă incursiune în viața socială demonstrează că cele două nu se exclud reciproc, deși există abordări în acest sens. Am demonstrat apoi că etnia reprezintă una dintre ipostazele cele mai profunde ale identității sociale, etnocentrismul și etnomarginalul fiind două forme de valorizare radicale ale identității etnice. Instrumentarea ideologică și politică a identității etnice și a valorizărilor de limită pe care le comportă acestea, deschid calea intoleranței și discriminării în plan social.

Cuvinte cheie: modernitate, tradiție, identitate etnică, etnomarginal, etnocentrism

1. Modernity and tradition, two instances of social identity

Tradition and modernity are two ways of being in the world. They hide a subtle presence of collective mentalities. Everything which is modern today becomes tradition after a while.

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The two are in a permanent transformation and in common language appear as distinct, irreconcilable categories (“let’s break tradition”, “to modernize”). In such an approach, tradition has a negative connotation, it is attributed to an outdated past, while modernity is marked as a positive element of the good and development. Of course, we also speak about a dichotomous understanding when it comes to glorifying tradition according to which all the good things and the truth stand in the past. The two formulas for valorizing tradition and modernity are damaging expressions and erroneous for understanding the social world. Their social effects are quite obvious: either can have wide identity consequences (Dubar 2003) or transform the individual and society in an obsolete conservatism.

In reality, behind this permanent changes and transformations of tradition and modernity, we discover a number of identity constants that have some features and distinctions that are manifested in social life and which characterize different environments. Therefore, this explains why modernity includes, for example, visible differences between Japanese and French, between German and Romanian, between Italian and English.

Today, the identity problem rebecomes an identity issue. Given the existence of a “transparent society” (Vattimo 1995) and an unprecedented social mobility, this are the exact marks that caused precisely those differences between people, groups and communities. Thus, nationalist, extremist and discriminatory manifestations appear. In a world of *generalized communication* where everything is subsumed, as Gianni Vattimo stressed, to the weak sense of the relativization, people, cultures, traditions and highly diverse manifestations are brought together, some being claimed by some traditions, others standing under the sign of modernity. Seen better as a globalizing formula, (post) modernity reveals, paradoxically, features or elements related to traditional data. Migration and the extraordinary mobility enjoyed by the modern world give us the opportunity to discover elements that characterizes us, those data marking some differences between us and others. This explains the rise of nationalist parties in Europe today, the attraction for tourism in exotic communities, the rediscovery of rural and eco current, fascination exercised by some artistic productions presenting the life and spirituality of certain communities, revival of old traditions in the Nordic countries etc. These events are not only an expression of nostalgia origins (Eliade 2013) but also to a search of Self, being an imprint of a strong identity.

The experience of exile, perhaps more than other forms of encounter with the Self, causes a greater awareness of cultural landmarks and profound identity that are not even deleted in long living in the new environment conditions. We believe that here is a powerful substance that is soon assimilated to the traditional data of our existence. The paradigm “rooted human” Tzvetan Todorov launched in the book with the same name shows that the state of a person living in a foreign environment at his birth does not correspond “with deculturation, not even with acculturation but moreover with what would be called *transculturation*, acquiring a

new code without losing the old one. I live, says the author (n.n), from now on in a singular space, while out and in as foreign “into my house” (Sofia) and home “abroad” (Paris) (Todorov 1999, p. 28). Or, such experiences that are simultaneously dual into the familiar and the alien, inside and outside, the known and the unknown, the old and the new, stir around the individual identity and call on him to recourse to forms of adaptation. In parrethian terms, what changes, in fact, are derivatives and residues remain constant. The latter is nothing else than our cultural, ethnic, religious origins etc.

“Moreover, cultural identities are not only national because there they others related to age groups, gender, profession, social environment; so, nowadays, everyone lived, even in unequal degrees, the meeting of cultures within himself: we're all crossed. Cultural, national and transnational affiliation is only the most powerful of all because it combines traces – in body and spirit – of family and community of language and religion.” (*Ibidem*).

The experience of the famous Bulgarian writer shows that, in reality, tradition and modernity are not mutually excluded and do not receive connotations in an axiological registry. They are ways of being in the world, manners in which the social mind translates into concrete life plan, in specific contexts.

If tradition and modernity are not dichotomous understood on the context of lived experiences, if there are formulas of harmonizing this, from the theoretical point of view, responses are more nuanced.

2. Three phases of the relationship between tradition and modernity

Faced with the challenges of modernity, authors from different fields have not remained indifferent. First, we noticed a certain pessimism to the challenges of modernity. The organicism of Oswald Spengler (Spengler 1996) cataloged by Noica as cultural determinism, shared by authors such as Toymbee, Berdiaev, in which the society is seen like an organism that is born, creates and then dies is such an example. Moreover, Spengler shows that the entire socio-cultural existence of mankind can be thought of in this way. In other words, when a culture reaches its peak, turns into civilization and exhausts itself. For example, when the ancient Greek culture reached the peak of development, it turned into civilization. This was the signal of decay and its end. It must be said that these evaluations are valid as long as the culture is defined as “an entire complex which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities acquired by man as a normal member of society” (Taylor 1851) and civilization as “the maximum degree of sociability extension” (Biriș 2000).

Standing in the same organicist logic, we can also consider that to the first party would correspond the primitive culture, followed by the traditional and modern culture and ultimately, is turned into (post)modern civilization. Of course, from this perspective, traditional culture can no longer be found in its original form (values,

norms and specific creativity), but is transformed and enriched in the technical productions of the modern man. The old man's desires to overcome traditional spatial-temporal constraints due to some spiritual practices are met today by some technical means (vehicles, TV, internet, phone). Unfortunately, all these technical inventions can not say anything new in terms of cultural values. This explains why various problems and shortcomings of the contemporary world are denounced as cultural consequences of a (post)modern cultural crisis. In such an interpretation, traditional culture remains in the past and defines a particular era, considered by some as golden era of our social and cultural development.

On the other hand, as episode of our development, traditional culture favors symbolic thinking, rituals, magic and religious practices, etc. Such an approach of the world is seen today in contradiction with the scientific criteria of research and knowledge of the modern world. It may seem outdated and lacks applicability.

Another type of response is part of a more moderate registry: traditional and modern culture can coexist in the world without being mutually exclusive. Romanian space offers enough examples that show very clearly that modern man can not detach himself completely from traditional culture landmarks. In our society, a series of celebrations, practices and rituals (birth, wedding or funeral) show over time a formidable survival of motifs and traditional practices. The same happens in other areas of Western Europe where the unexpected practices, rituals and beliefs that are considered long forgotten are revived. It's interesting that in this context the modern man does not even question the justification of its gestures and attitudes. Probably these are felt as a spiritual necessity only in the unconscious, and in the rest of the time are considered to be natural facts of life which can undergo revisions, amendments, which can sometimes turn into kitsch etc. So, civilizational progress can not replace a number of spiritual requirements.

In the discussed context, the traditional culture has somehow the fate of symbols: can overcome time either in a genuine manner or by modifying and being hidden into the most mundane everyday facts. In this perspective, kitsch-ized forms of traditional folklore and the audience enjoyed by these are only echoes of a warped sensibilities of modern man to authentic folk creations.

A third type of response, inspired by the thought of Mircea Eliade (Eliade 1992) shows that even when the traditional element seems to have totally disappeared from the modern world, certain small everyday gestures and attitudes, announces the hidden presence in the sacred world of the traditional values. This explains why many of us have the desire of a "house on the ground", to get out into the nature to celebrate, a Valentine's Day etc. In fact, the rediscovery of those things that give pleasure and a feeling of comfort, announces a rediscovery of the ancient traditional values that considered home, family, loved, nature, organic food as being full of meanings and hidden significances. "For modern consciousness, a physiological act – nutrition, sexuality etc., is but an organic process, whatever the number of taboos imposed on him being (proprieties at the table; the limits of

sexual “moral” behavior). For the “primitive”, such an act is never only physiological; it is or may become a “sacrament”, a “sacred communion” (Eliade 1992). The difference between traditional and modern man is one of perception and signification. However, behind insignificant meanings and gestures of modern man, deep meaning and significances can be hidden. They show that we are not completely lost in the arms of modernity, which in each of us there is a kernel of sensitivity which can always be reborn in authentic ideas and values.

An interesting example is the generation of the 60s, called the hippies. Mircea Eliade's interpretation given to the hippy phenomenon can reconfigure many of the radical attitudes and ideas towards this generation. In fact, gestures and way of being and thinking shows that, in fact, “they could not understand the religious value of established churches: for them it was an” Establishment”, but found this and was saved. They rediscovered the sacred springs of life, the importance of religious life.” (Eliade 1990)

So there is hope that the following generations, even if not directly benefitting from traditional cultures, have a chance – as shown by Eliade- to rediscover tradition in their own way. This is a form of finding our cultural roots and, why not, a return to origins.

3. Ethnocentrism and ethnomarginal, limiting valorization of ethnic identity

The place where tradition is felt well is on ethnicity. The latter becomes, in a sense, the crucible which preserves all the basic data that define it.

Not accidentally, the notion of ethnicity received several meanings during time: *emotional attachment* or interest relationships structured around common goals, sustainable over time; *awareness of difference and belonging*; *symbolic affirmation of identity* through various practices, rituals, beliefs, mythology; *reference to a well-defined geographical or biological space*; *externalization of ethnic dignity*. The sociological study of ethnicity emphasizes also other aspects of the phenomenon. For example, Max Weber stops at the subjective dimension of the concept of ethnicity. For this reason he defines it as “those human groups that support a subjective belief in a common origin due to the similarities of either typology or customs or due to memory or colonization.” (Mihu 2002, p. 357) Weber's idea of creating a common identity of a group is retained through that it on which it is created based on a historical experience and lived in the encounter with the Other. Thus, the ethnic also embodies the brand of difference (Ursache 2014). In the *Dictionary of Sociology*, Catalin Zamfir and Lazăr Vlăsceanu (coordinators) define ethnicity in a rather general manner “any group with subgroup traditions embedded in society” (Zamfir and Vlăsceanu 1993, p. 223).

An interesting approach to ethnology, as depositary of a genuine tradition, is found in the work *Etnosofia* (Ursache 2014) of the Professor Peter Urasche from Iași. Based on the writings of Noica, Ernest Bernea, Anton Golopenția, the author

completes the semantic notion of ethnicity with a philosophical dimension. Thus, the ethnic develops an entire *popular philosophy* or *wisdom* that characterizes a group, a nation and this fact says a lot about their mental patterns.

Based on these data and the report that tradition establishes with modernity, we can not place the problem in the current European context. Different behaviours, often deviant ones of ethnicities in majority of spaces, their misunderstanding by negative stereotypes and labels often cause undesirable social phenomena. We think here about the reaction of England to the wave of Romanian immigrants and on building a negative image based on speculation of specificity and negative phenomena or a series of positive discrimination practices developed in the spirit of tolerance. All of these announce that the relationship with the Other remains a challenge given that the difference appears in the game. It is precisely these differences of ethnic, religious reasons why (Muslim case, for example) they restore mental structures and identity data, which lead to extreme valuations. Two would be the meetings with the Other's limits that can generate social attitudes and intolerant behaviors, discriminatory: *ethnocentrism* and *ethnomarginal*.

Ethnocentrism aims an overstatement of tradition and ethnic data. This approach works on the principle that all good things were infatuated with us first.

The ethnic turns into a kind of *Axis Mundi* built around and which revolves the world. With this evaluative model, ethnicity and traditions are seen as a kind of "navel of the earth", from which everything departs and returns.

Considering these images and representations towards the ethnic, it can generate a kind of group solidarity as a strong sense of belonging and identity. However, they can be the source of creating *fictitious ethnic identities*, which may feed unbridled ambition and pride.

This approach is often the ideological frame of some politicians and political parties that may have great success to the public; also, it can feed radical attitudes.

Ethnomarginal is a negative valuation of the ethnic and its merits. Here the ethnic would not function as a supporting point or ferment among the community, but rather as a brake or an obstacle. The ethnomarginal offers the man the idea of being a victim, damned by history, without any chance of regeneration. Ethnomarginal attitudes can announce either very large demands regarding performances of an ethnic group or a state of helplessness which translates into a damaging fatalism.

In essence, the two ways of assessing and addressing the phenomenon of ethnic and thereby tradition, represents limit valuations generated by our encounters with the *Other*. The feeling of superiority or inferiority which can be given by the contact with otherness (Todorov 1994; 1999) can generate extreme depictions. Basically, they truly become walls in front of interethnic dialogue and diminish the chances of networking. This happens especially when are taken by political leaders (Le Pen in France, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Vadim Tudor in Romania etc.) to develop speeches and extremist reactions. In some situations can lead to

bloody conflicts (for example, the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina which included Catholic Croats community, Bosnian Muslims and the community of Orthodox Serbs, Kosovo conflict between Serbs orthodox and Kosovars Muslims, the conflict between Timor Island and Catholic groups who want the independence of East Timor and Muslims; israeliano-Palestinian conflict).

The paradox of our world is that when sketching a global society, the ethnic idea and national identity reappears. It is thus rediscovered the roots and tradition of a group, a community or a nation. Such situations can be handled either positively or in the negative manner. Of course, the current political ideologies play an important role in this respect.

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