

Centre for Culture, Technology & Values, Limerick

Culture, Technology & Values: Ethical Dimensions of European Identity

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The Allure of Certainty: Identities, Religious Others, and the Ambiguity of Modernity

Jonathan Culleton

Introduction

This paper will attempt to present an overview of the research I have done thus far on inter-connections between a 'crisis' of identities brought about by modernity and the significance of religion as a reaction to this crisis. I will begin by offering some reflections on what 'identity' means, and the impact of modernity where, as Bauman has noted; identities are perhaps the most common, most acute, most deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of ambivalence' (2004). The concept of the 'other' will then be examined, particularly as it relates to the construction of identities, as well as the impact of religion on such constructions. Finally, this paper will consider the allure of extremisms and fundamentalist perspectives in the context of the uncertainties inherent in the modern 'condition'. This final section will argue that contemporary religious reaction isn't against a rival belief system or philosophy, so much as against 'an absence of strongly held values- a spiritual- philosophical void' (Huberman, 2007).

1. Context: Identity and Modernity

What is identity?

It is interesting to note that the term has a relatively short history within the social sciences context. Indeed, according to Gleason, identity is a new term, as well as being an elusive and ubiquitous one (1983). It came into use as a popular social science term only in the 1950s. The

contrast between its handling in two standard reference works dramatises its novelty. The International Encyclopaedia of the social Sciences, published in 1968, carries a substantial article on 'Identity, Psychosocial,' and another on 'Identification, Political'. The original Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, published in the 1930s, carries no entry at all for identity, and the entry headed identification, deals with fingerprinting and other techniques of criminal investigation' (Gleason, 1983).

Having established its relative newness as a term, we must attempt to present an understanding of what 'identity' is. Quite clearly, identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. However, as a concept it comprises considerably more, for Weeks; 'it gives you the sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality... it is also about your relationships, your complex involvement with others and in the modern world these have become ever more complex and confusing (1990).

Any understanding of what identity is, must include the consideration of its second important aspect, its' social assignment. Although some of identity's dimensions are more formative than others, individuals or communities are never defined by a single aspect of it. Erick H. Erickson (cited in Gleason, 1983) admits that identity, as he conceives it, is hard to grasp because it concerns 'a process 'located' in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture. The connection between what Appiah calls a 'personal dimension', consisting of socially or morally important features of a person, on the one hand, and other collective identities, on the other, is vital (2000). Identity may be self- designated or assigned to individuals by others. Such a view implicitly recognises that identity now increasingly derives from a multiplicity of sources, and that these sources may conflict (AlSayyad and Castells, 2002).

Bearing the above discussion in mind, the centrality of individual

choices concerning what or who to identify with is clear. Traditions no longer automatically steer this process, but are only possibilities from which the individual might choose. For each choice made, there are alternatives. Even the relation to tradition has changed and has become more reflexive due to the fact that those who choose – for instance-traditional religions, are all too aware of the fact that they do not have to (Boeve, 2005).

The demands of the 'modern' society noted earlier, also appear to place new types of strain on identities. Many commentators point to contemporary European identities which appear to reflect the notion of longing for wholeness, of a 'crisis' of identity, brought about by the advent of modern societies. As Weedon would have it; 'the desire to be from somewhere, to have a feeling of belonging are key features of the quest for positive identity in post modern, post- colonial societies' (2004). Indeed, Bauman has carried this notion further, noting that; 'the frailty and the forever provisional status of identity can no longer be concealed' (2004; 16). Anthony Giddens has described modernity as involving the 'institutionalisation of doubt' (in Ruthven, 2006). Identity is a location for this doubt as contemporary society demands a constant, wearying, search for personal identity, but, 'one is always aware that even when it is achieved to some degree, it remains a fiction because there is no way to prove its objective truth' (Arbuckle, 2004). Further, 'modernity introduces a world where the potential future paths are so varied, so unknown, and the lack of authority is so great that individuals seek assurance and comfort in the elimination of unsettling possibilities' (Stern, 2003). Under these circumstances, some crave the reduction of options.

Finally, identity is relational. It is defined in a relation of difference to what it is not. 'All identities have their 'others' from which they mark their difference' (Weedon, 2004). Given that this paper will next focus

on the concept of the 'other', it should be noted that identification can be a powerful factor in the stratification of peoples. Indeed, identity can be considered one of its most divisive and sharply differentiating dimensions.

Others

'All nice people like Us are We, and everyone else is They'

– Rudyard Kipling

Historically, European identity has been shaped in opposition to others, who were given names such as 'barbarians or infidels, etc (AlSayyad and Castells, 2002). Indeed, as Weedon has demonstrated, since the early modern period in Western Europe, different peoples and cultures have increasingly come into contact with, and mixed with, each other (2004). This meeting of cultures in its various manifestations via colonialism, the slave trade, white settlement outside Europe, war, migration to the West and globalisation, has involved relations of power, foremost among them attempts to dominate or assimilate others under the various banners of civilisation, Christianisation, modernisation, progress and development. These processes have involved a 'profound 'Othering' of colonised peoples as different, and as less advanced than people of European descent' (Weedon, 2004).

'Belonging,' Stuart Hall once observed, 'is a tricky concept, requiring both identification and recognition' (in Back and Solomos 2000). Inclusion is all too frequently defined by exclusion.... 'Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty' (Hall, in Back and Solomos, 2000). From this perspective, the other is a vital element of identity, required to give meaning to it. Declan Kiberd famously utilised this notion in discussing Ireland's

historical relationship with England, 'if Ireland had never existed, the English would have invented it...Ireland was patented as not- England, a place where whose peoples were... the very antitheses of their rulers from overseas' (1996). This relational quality of identity, for Bauman, serves the purpose of 'drawing, tightening and policing the boundary between 'us' and 'them'. Perhaps the most famous realisation of this concept is found in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* where he describes himself as a young Antillean as he comes face to face with a white Parisian girl and her mother; the young Parisian girl pulls the hand of her mother and says "look Mama, a black man" for the first time I knew who I was. For the first time, I felt as if I had been simultaneously exploded in the gaze, in the violent gaze of the other, and at the same time, recomposed as another' (1968). As Weedon has pointed out, in particular, whiteness is seldom recognised as an explicit identity by those who live it, except in relation to those it excludes. It is assumed to be natural and the norm...power limits the possibilities of identity. The meaning of the visual is not at the disposal of individuals but is 'over determined by the history of representation' (2004). Otherness then, (like identity) appears as a dualistic concept, which on the one hand serves to illustrate identity and belonging, and on the other can highlight difference, and those who should be excluded, those who do not belong. In short, as Amartya Sen has demonstrated (2006) the world is frequently taken to be a collection of religions (or of 'civilisations' or 'cultures'), ignoring the other identities that people have and value, involving class, gender, profession, language, science, morals and politics'.

'The attraction of certainty': religion, violence and modernity

The modern 'undermining' of identity outlined earlier can therefore also be found to impact on religiosity. The 'certainty' and absolute nature of traditional religious beliefs has been undermined, as

Ruthven has explained; 'religious pluralism is an inescapable feature of modernity. It implies choice, inviting the suspicion that there may be more than one path to salvation (2004). We have seen in the discussions above that the individual is 'free' as never before to select their identities from the broadest range of elements of social life. Indeed, even as these selections are made, they can be unmade, and new ones selected. However, as Bauman has warned us, 'a chooser's life is an insecure life' (2004). The value conspicuously missing in modern societies is that of confidence and trust and also of self- assurance. Fundamentalism offers that value. By invalidating in advance all competing propositions and refusing a dialogue and argument with dissenters and 'heretics' it instils feelings of certainty and sweeps away all doubt from the simple, easy to absorb code of behaviour it offers. It hands over the comforting sense of security to be gained and savoured inside the tall and impenetrable walls which cut off the chaos reigning outside (Bauman, 1998).

There exists then, a contradiction between the freedom to identify with whomsoever and whatsoever one chooses, and the inherent danger in permitting dominant narratives of history to play important ideological roles, where one identity is 'special' or superior to others. Oscar Wilde once claimed that 'with a suitable instigation, a fostered sense of identity with one group of people can be made into a powerful weapon to brutalise another'. Indeed, religion may present a more intractable barrier between peoples than other potential identifying forces, as Catherwood notes succinctly; religion discriminates sharply and exclusively among people. 'A person can be half- French and half- Arab and simultaneously even a citizen of two countries. It is more difficult to be half- Catholic and half- Muslim (2002). For Jeffrey Seul, the world's religions answer the individual's need for a sense of locatedness-socially, sometimes geographically, cosmologically, temporally, and metaphysically. No other repositories of cultural meaning have historically offered so much in response to the human need to develop a secure identity' (1999).

As religion is becoming more significant once again, as noted above, it is becoming less institutionalised in the conventional sense (Otis, 2004). Decision making authority is now devolving to the individual or small group, becoming directly responsible to God. Hence, the new reality is the emergence of particularistic religion(s), in which some individuals use a peculiar form of logic to perpetuate violence in order to fulfil what they believe. Since violence is firstly a display of power, it appeals to those who want to make dramatic statements and reclaim public space (Juergensmeyer, 2003). The uncertainties and ambiguities of modernity are refuted by the absolute conviction of fundamentalism. Contemporary forms of religious extremism seek to remove the doubt that pervades a world in which; 'what we take for granted today can no longer be invested in with any confidence or surety that it will exist in the same form tomorrow (Bauman, 1997). The allure of radicalism lies in its promise to emancipate the converted from the 'agonies of choice' (Bauman, 2004). Jessica Stern, having interviewed hundreds of religious extremists, is of the view that they often long for a simpler time, when "right and wrong were clear, there were heroes and martyrs, when the story was simple (2003)".

From the above, it is clear that one of the attractions of religious extremism is the comfort of the absolute. Though those on the side of the victims see them as evil, religious terrorists, for example, know themselves to be perfectly good. They feel engaged in a struggle of good against evil, where anyone not a member of their religion may be 'evil' (Whelan, 2005). To possess absolute certainty about one's identity, to know that one's group is superior to all others, as Stern notes, 'is a kind of bliss' (2003). For Huberman, in modern societies, 'faith is a flag' (2007). The current worldwide religious revival is a rebellion against selected aspects of modernity, in the name of identity, tribe, and tradition- a protest against the paving over of local and national traditions by the steamroller of global commercial- consumer culture

(see Ruthven, 2004). Finally, it is important however, not to assume that Al Qaeda or similar groups are somehow 'unmodern or traditionalist'... 'they are a quintessentially modern and even globalised phenomenon' (LaVine 2005). Indeed, this paper would suggest that such groups are quite selective in which aspects of modernity are to be repudiated. In short, they've given up on the possibility of modernity delivering on its promises, even as they make good use of satellite mobile phones, laptop computers and encrypted websites. According to John Grey, their ideology is in fact, a typical modern hybrid. Though they claim to be exponents of an indigenous tradition, their founders have reinterpreted Islam in the light of contemporary Western thought (2003).

Conclusion

The sense of flux inherent in modernity has been seen to have considerable implications for how identity is constructed. In one sense, the ambiguity of modernity means that all possibilities are open regarding what one wants to identify with. On the other hand, it has been seen that this freedom to choose has also undermined traditional sources of identity, and created uncertainty and a need for belonging. As the detraditionalisation of religiosity patterns develops, (after Boeve, 2005) religion has become more individualised, as those seeking identity continue to require what faith and spirituality bring. The danger inherent in such individualisation of religious beliefs is the potential for extremist 'versions' of faith to develop, and in certain circumstances, create intolerance of non-believers, and almost inevitably, violence. Insecurity about belief tends to breed a range of pathologies, including fanaticism, or, as Anthony Giddens would more succinctly have it; 'fundamentalism originates from a world of crumbling traditions' (1999). Ruthven confirms that fundamentalisms and extremism feed on contemporary alienation or anomie by offering solutions to contemporary

dilemmas, buttressing the loss of identities sustained by many people at times of rapid social change, high social and geographic mobility, and other stress-inducing factors (2004). The result of such processes, as Stuart Hall has suggested, is that the greatest likelihood of violence arises from forms of identity which attempt to secure their identity by adopting closed versions of culture or community and by refusal to engage with the difficult problems that arise from trying to live with difference' (1993).

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