

Conceptualising the Reconstruction of Identities in the Postcommunist Countries

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In this article I propose to explore the meanings, mechanisms and issues at stake in the reconstitution of identities which can now be seen taking place in the countries of the post-communist space. We shall consider this space not as a thing in itself, but in terms of its old and new interactions with the countries of western Europe, in order to understand the phenomena of reconstructed identities in general, in the context of their relationship to the period of globalisation in which we now find ourselves.

The notion of space is complementary to the historical perspective of the analysis proposed here, which conceptualises the interaction between spatial groups (nations, states, 'natural groups') and social groups (classes) in terms of paradigms. It also has the advantage of postulating the existence of a 'substratum' capable of accepting different forms of identity. The emphasis is on the current reconstruction of identities, religions and politics in the global space as it relates the economic and social identities of particular contexts.

We shall consider what remains in place, as well as those aspects which are reconstructed; we shall look at the interaction or possible interference between the various cultural and political traces in each society; these traces, both old and not so old, become superimposed, combining in a peculiar alchemy. Beneath the surface, between what was there before and what has now been reconstructed, is a process we can identify in terms of the prefixes 'de', 'dis' or 'un': de-construction, dis-integration, the un-writing of the reference points built up under communism, which had itself disintegrated and reconstructed what was there before.

All attention is on the social movements of the contemporary period, which are carrying out this process of the progressive deconstruction of the paradigms of the centralised nation state in both East and West. What required reconstruction after 1989 can be termed re-individualisation, re-privatisation or re-capitalisation; in other words a re-harmonisation with the social mechanisms in operation throughout the non-communist space.

In some cases, we are witnessing a form of restoration of not the communist, but the pre-communist period (restoration of private property, of democratic institutions if there were any, or of conceptions of the nation inherited from that past). In other cases the restoration is more of a symbolic reformulation to re-root the society in a longer-term historical continuity.

The idea of the re-construction of identity thus supposes both that there has already been a de-construction of identities in relation to the reference points current in the communist space – constructed within the national/class paradigm – and the temptation to replace it with a pre-construction that evades historical temporality (the ethnic group) as opposed to a matrice that is open to a new political future. This is usually for reasons

of political legitimisation, but also in order to rebuild societies that have been through an ordeal and become destabilised. This idea implies the coexistence of – in other words the competition between – two or more logics, forms or modes of constructing or writing a single space, each of which constructs a different political reality. Indeed they may produce an infinite variety of different scenarios, in the context of legal and political frameworks open to both innovation and repetition, and in a world from which all certainties seem to have disappeared.

So the central questions are these: what must be re-constructed in the post-communist space and on what bases does this reconstruction happen? In what ways are that which is reconstructed in this space and in the global space interdependent? There is also the question of reference points, and of their almost double loss, to the extent that unpredictable factors reappear.

Faced with this loss of reference points, the formulation of the issues governing the re-elaboration of identities is crucial: if we start from the principle that identity is comparatively fixed, if we conceive of it as a pre-given quality or essence, this abolishes any historically and politically-located past as one pole of possible, albeit imaginary, reconstitution. If, on the other hand, we think of it as a flexible principle for the self-designation of the subject, in the context of flexible categories legitimated by the state in order to facilitate the integration and democratic government of an increasingly fluid society, the political entities that are reconstructed will be quite different and far more open.

Identifying the links between modes of reconstituting identity and the nature of transformations at the social and political level, as we are attempting here, facilitates an understanding of what is changing in the postcommunist spaces and how, as compared to the rest of Europe. Choices made in the context of abrupt social and political transformation cannot be the same as those made when change occurs more gradually.

The choice of conceptual tools enabling us to grasp these changes is crucial. We need to know whether it is possible to create tools that are capable of conceptualising the phenomenon as a whole, or whether we need to create other, more specific tools to analyse what is happening in the postcommunist spaces. My hypothesis is that it is possible to create common tools to analyse the mechanisms of reconstitution that concern us here. It is only the content of these mechanisms and the social and political issues linked to particular situations that change; the substrata change beneath cultural and political forms which may remain the same.

One approach to the reconstructions taking place within the paradigmatic change that I am attempting to identify here, is to examine different corpora of important words of political vocabulary current in the global space at different times. For these words give life to emerging political realities. This subject will not be discussed exhaustively here: my aim is to give a broad, fairly methodological presentation with a view to marking out the territory and clarifying the approach.

The mutations of the global context and its corollaries for identity

The 1950s saw the beginnings of a shift away from a paradigm of homogenisation, the centrality of the nation and the fusion of individual identities in that of the nation, and towards a paradigm of differentiation, increasing autonomy for different centres and a

trend towards the ethnicisation of politics as a corollary of its denationalisation. This change taking place before our eyes requires us to re-examine the concept of collective identity, the different types of identities and the links between identities and politics in general and the dominant socio-political models in particular.

In a world which, over the last two hundred years, has become increasingly structured around nation states (with the disintegration of the empires and feudal monarchies), the post-war period has seen the development of a hitherto unknown socio-political and legal context, due to the recognition of minorities and the building of Europe. This new context is contributing to the establishment of a new paradigm of cultural difference at different levels (that of minorities and at the ethnic, national, regional and supra-national levels). In weakening the popular nation-sovereignty paradigm, the new paradigm still has a way to go in transforming the mode of socio-political grouping, itself a symbol of modernity. We had been functioning in this mode without realising that it comprised an order of practices and representations constructed at a specific point in the development of social formations (at the end of feudalism and the growth of industrial capitalism, to be precise).

The implosion of the Soviet empire was an important moment of the contemporary period for us. It accentuated our awareness of the change in paradigms of identity, by bringing to light nationalist phenomena we thought had been banished forever. These took the form of what has been called ethnic nationalism, to differentiate it from that of western democratic political nations, which define themselves as civic.

This engendered the re-emergence of a debate around the formation of the European nations, which contrasted two ideal types of nation: the French or American type, described as civic and political or as a contract nation, was opposed to the German nation, described as cultural or ethnic. This opposition brought with it the dichotomy between the right of territory and that of blood. However the overly rigid opposition of these two ideal types is invalidated by a concrete analysis of national realities, in both Eastern and Western Europe. It would seem more acceptable to conduct an analysis in terms of ethnic or civic polarities, where one trait is accentuated to the detriment of the other, both being co-present in the building of the nation, since this leaves plenty of room for evolving contextual elements.

The implosion highlighted the fact that the model of liberal democracy, as we experience it in Western Europe, was based on presuppositions that we had to deconstruct, and that the terms identity and ethnicity that enabled us to conceptualise them required greater clarification. I should say at the outset, with Jocelyne Streiff Fénart and Philippe Poutignat¹, that theorising ethnicity or the reconstitution of the nation does not mean establishing ethnic pluralism as a socio-political model. Rather, it involves examining the ways in which a postnational and ethnic vision of the world is made pertinent for those involved. It also involves examining the impact that this vision (which emphasises the ethnic and cultural dimension rather than any class references) can have on future political constructions.

There seem to be several different possibilities for the institutional organisation of difference. On the one hand are the forms in which subnational (Regional or ethnic) identities are effectively integrated into dominant national or supra-national identities, in a complementary way. Such forms implement the principle of subsidiarity and all the democratic heritage of abstract citizenship that underlies the constitution of modern states. On the other hand, and in competition with the former, are forms seeking to implement a different

political model of the nation with known or untested forms (such as ethnocratic nations or pluricultural, non-democratic nations).

From the late-18th to the early 20th centuries, a period that saw the formation of modern nations from West to East in a context of dominant historicism and belief in linear progress, certain concepts were at work, along with their corresponding lexical field. These include the nation, national, people, sovereignty, working class, bourgeoisie, hegemonic class, proletariat, citizenship, ethnic category and ethnic group. Ethnic category was placed at the bottom of the ladder of political entities, having no access to the status of political nation, which has its own state, its own official language and independent territory. It was not until fifty years after the French Revolution, when the modern model of the nation was most widely disseminated, that the different concepts were translated into reality in France, and indeed it took a century in most of Europe. The centralised, unitary nation on the French model, and the federal variant of socio-political organisation represented by the United States, incarnated the most complete models of democratic society. In comparison to these two models the multinational federative Soviet society that emerges from the Revolution of 1917 is a new synthesis. For, like the other two, it incorporates the concepts of people (*narod*), nation, ethnic group, (Soviet) citizenship, nationality and class, but differently articulated and with a specific semantic content. It integrates its component parts into the same evolutionist schema, but gives a privileged place to the notion of proletarian class. We should add here that the notion of *êtnos* (in Russian) was long used in Russia to describe non-orthodox populations.² This is similar to the meaning our societies give to this word, which has retained the meaning it had in ancient Greece of 'different from oneself', in other words, a person who was not part of the Greek city, or belonged to a different city. In the Soviet model these concepts are supplemented by others current in Marxist ideology (I shall mention only the most distinctive here): the notion of national minorities (which were in fact nations that had been transformed into national minorities in the new arrangement of federated republics), the rise of the nation before the Soviet synthesis (*Rassvet-sblizenie*), or a multinational formation (nations being destined to disappear when communism was achieved, according to the Marxist credo).

Today, in the new phase of reticular capitalism associated with the information society, we are witnessing the collapse of the evolutionist schema and its concomitant centralised and unified political models. This collapse also reveals the inadequacy of binary thinking for conceptualising the complexity of the present situation.

The paradigm of difference in the 1970s from West to East

The new paradigm of identity in cultural difference was established during the 1970s, gradually deconstructing earlier forms. Those who brought this about drew support, either manifest (in the West) or disguised (in the East), from the new social movements that arrived on the world political scene in the 1960s–70s (movements for minority rights in the United States and Europe, ecological and feminist movements) and the identity policies relating to minorities, regions and emigration jointly implemented by European states and international authorities, particularly in both the developing European Union and the USSR. In the latter case there was a discreet relaxation of the policies relating to

identity that had been in place during the Stalinist period, negotiated at different points in time on a case by case basis (1956, 1980–1985).

The paradigm of difference is articulated around a corpus of new concepts and terms which are gradually being translated into institutions: Europe, supra-nation, macro-region, different types of region (administrative, natural), nation-region, symbolic and reflexive ethnicity, ethnic/civic nation, ethnic group identities, multi-ethnic, multinational, pluricultural society, positive discrimination, politically correct . . .

The redefinition of statistical categories for describing society is one of the descriptive factors mentioned by Patrick Simon³ as revealing the national modes of grouping and the relationships between society, culture and social groups, as well as between nationals and foreigners. The modes of category construction in the democratic, postindustrial – so called information – societies of today, appear mainly to be what I shall call fluid, under-determined modes, which facilitate the manifestation of subjective categories and leave an important space for fluidity and movement in the many affiliations of those within them. This kind of movement seems necessary to enable democracy to function in societies such as ours that are experiencing rapid change. It is institutionalised in a different way in the American and French democratic models. This difference, and the pressure now being exerted on the latter, have given rise to the current debate in France around these two opposing ways of institutionalising cultural recognition, fuelled by the attempt to settle the problem of Corsica (debate between the Anglo-Saxon ‘communitarians’ and the French republicans).⁴ This debate concerns the level of institutionalisation and fluidity that cultural difference must be allowed so that what is regarded as an advance in representative democracy does not turn into its opposite (rigidification of differences, breakdown of common social bonds) under the pressure of trends towards social fragmentation and the crisis of modern democracy observable today.

Fluidity seems to have presided over the initial stages of the politico-administrative construction of the Soviet system, during the transitional period of the new economic policy (1921–28), which preceded Stalin’s accession to power.⁵

The ethnic and national categories later became rigidified, when Stalin simplified the map of ethno-cultural diversity and hierarchised the ethnic and national groups, giving each a different politico-administrative status. The everyday reality of groups under the Soviet régime was thus structured in many respects by the paradigm of ethno-cultural difference, as symbolised by the obligatory recording of nationality and citizenship on passports. Nationality was secondary to Soviet citizenship or membership of the Communist Party, modified by the political status of the group an individual belonged to; nevertheless, this *de facto* recognition perpetuated or created a group awareness, reinforced by linguistic practice, which was encouraged in order to draw those ethnic and national groups that had been confined to the status of minorities into the revolution. The more docile the group the safer its existence; however, such recognition made it possible to mobilise group identities at a later date, and this is precisely what happened in the early days of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.⁶

The division into categories was backed up by the intensive collection of the various oral literatures and the transcription of languages for teaching purposes, carried out by the Soviet ethnographers. The categories were theorised by J.B. Bromlei⁷ in the 1960s–70s, in order to control or indeed to contain ideologically the ethnic and national movements arising out of them, which were in ferment under the influence of the new world context

(the paradigm of the right to difference was widely disseminated throughout the empire via UNESCO and the linguistics journals of the academy of sciences). The aim was to stabilise the architecture of identity, giving pre-eminence to the paradigm of class and proletarian internationalism over the ethnic and national paradigms by emphasising the idea of territorial fusion in the Soviet plurality. These attempts manifested themselves throughout the empire in the fabrication of counter-rites to channel pressures against the system stemming from the global context. Once collected, elements of the oral or written epic tradition, which had been important in the ethnogenesis of the peoples of the steppes, could then easily be reshaped so that they carried a message supporting the dominant ideology. A case in point would be that of Moukhtar Aouesov, the Kazakh author who achieved the desired synthesis in his work 'The Youth of Abai' (1948) and is today emblematic of an awareness of identity reasserted in an integrational, national and macro-regional mode: this is an awareness of Kazakhstani and Eurasian, identity rather than simply Kazakh, identity, in other words including all the peoples of Kazakhstan in a privileged relationship with the Russian people and its central Asian neighbours.

Similar ways of recycling local symbols with different ideological contents were implemented throughout central Europe. In Poland the eagle of the *Jagiellons* (symbol of the multi-ethnic Polish commonwealth which was maintained from the 16th century to the first partition in 1772) was replaced by the eagle of the *Piasts*, as a unitary symbol of the Polish struggle against Prussia and, hence, Nazism. The trend was also to reinforce centralising nationalism and to keep the regional and ethnic minorities quiet, with some rare exceptions (the Polish Byelorussian minority favoured by the Soviet regime was the only one to be recognised when the Polish regime relaxed after 1956). By contrast Poland's German minorities and Romania's Hungarian minorities were not specifically recognised until after 1989.

New policies of identity after the fall of the Berlin wall

Since the collapse of the Soviet union as a reference point, the paradigm of difference, veiled by the dominant, marxist paradigm, has manifested itself in the main concepts at work in the recombination of political and identity reference points. The mechanisms attempting to overcome the crisis of the Soviet Union combine temporal and spatial dimensions to create continuity and stability in a situation of discontinuity and collapse. The diverse modes of identification and the various policies relating to identity adopted by the new elites compensate for the void left by the loss of reference points in the collapse. This they do more or less flexibly, depending on the issues of local and supra-national power involved in the reconstruction of power, of the economy and social and identity affiliations.

The new elites emerged partly out of the old *nomenklatura*, skilfully converted to fit the liberal, national model, often in an ethnocratic variant stemming directly from the old Soviet structuration, and partly out of the so-called democratic opposition. The latter can be broken down into two groups. The younger of these grew out of the quasi 'clandestine' new ecological, national and minority movements, which emerged in the period 1956–60 and were then legitimised in the 1980s. The other, older group, comprises former opponents of the communist regime, represented by their children or who returned from exile after 1989. Their ideas of the nation originated in the 1930s and 40s and have usually rigidified. The goal of the race for power unleashed at the time of *perestroika* was to take over the administrative

structure of the Republics in order to make it function in accord with the global reference points that were current within international structures under the western hegemony. These reference points, often linked to the rise of movements of the extreme right, were also present in the race to power. The concepts now operative in the post-communist spaces were essentially those of titular nation, nation-region, *étnos*, national minorities, plurinationality and the term ethnic group combined with other terms . . . We should list many others which had to be translated in the daily and scientific press in order to facilitate their comprehension and integration into the new political reality, to whose development they thus contributed. This was a complex task, since meanings vary according to groups, age-groups and ideological orientations. To add to the confusion, terminological debates were at a very early stage in all these countries, and indeed within the international organisations. For Russians, for example, *ethnos* refers to a non-territorialised group living throughout the Soviet space, and strongly distancing itself from connotations of Russian-ness, which were stoutly combatted under the Soviet regime. For most populations of the titular nations, however, it refers more or less to the territory and has connotations of being native to that place. The relationship to the territory is completely different the two cases, hence a tendency among Russians in the autonomous and independent Republics to support the projet of pluricultural societies where differences are integrated, restoring them to equal positions within the new political entities (Estonia, Kazakhstan, Moldavia, Tatarstan, etc.).

Thus new political entities are reforming under these different terms, through the establishment of policies relating to identity that use either fluid or rigidified modes of categorisation to facilitate or restrict redefinitions, mobility and strategies for integration.⁸ From this point of view, the current period of redefinition of the hierarchies of power partially recalls the period of the New Economic Policy.

The temporal element has become very important in this phase of the reorganisation of political spaces (spaces of solidarity and allegiance). There were celebrations of eight-hundred years (Lettonia), a thousand years or fifteen-hundred years of existence all over the ex-USSR, as though it was absolutely necessary to return to the distant past to legitimise the new identities that were being proposed and the elites that were promoting them. This was a time of attempts at reconstruction, whether alone, nation by nation or together (Eurasia, Central Asia), and despite national rivalries, in order to build a viable, integrated economic space within the dominant logic of regional blocs. We should recall that the recent fifteen-hundred year celebrations of the city of Turkestan (a former Silk Road city situated in Kazakhstan), or the new university built by the Kazakh state in 1989 with the help of Turkey and Kirghizistan, picked up the threads of the common history of the countries of the steppes. This is rooted in religious heroes with whom the Kazakhs and their neighbours can identify, whatever their differences (K.H. Yasawi, 12th-century poet and philosopher, propagator of Islam).

We can give a rapid outline of various causes of the rigidification of categories in those places where this had happened (Estonia, Moldavia, ex-Yugoslavia). The legacy of the previous system reveals that the ethnic divisions coincided with others which are now coming to light with the disappearance of the ideologico-political structures and the resulting series of spectacular breakdowns (social, socio-professional, religious etc. divisions). These breakdowns generated very strong tensions, since the vaguaries of restructuring in the different sectors had brutally reversed the power relations between ethnic groups (the collapse of the industrial sector penalised the Russians, that of the academic sector initially

penalised nationals; there was a reinvestment in structures by which self-sufficient artisans and families formed broad support networks (Macedonian Albanians or Kazakh clans⁹). In many cases the fragmentation of the civil society was linked to a lack of state regulations that were both substantial and flexible (weakness of the new institutional frameworks of representative democracy) and the exacerbation of inter-ethnic conflict that had remained under the surface before the implosion (Moldavian conflict in Transnistria, Macedonia). In many countries of the communist bloc, ethnicity has become the new paradigm structuring social relations. As such it reinforces the effects of indigenisation or naturalisation in the social sphere, which are felt to be reassuring because they create potential links of social solidarity to fill the identity void. In practice ethnicity as a reference point gives substance to the social constructs devised by the new elites to reestablish stability within the society, since it harks back to the emotions associated with the earliest socialisation, to roots in the place reinforced by discourses of the native land, and indeed biology. It tends to turn culture into heritage, which can then easily be incorporated into the genetic heritage at the imaginary level¹⁰. The information society contributes in turn to the instrumentalisation and reinforcement of the social and political effectiveness of ethnic reference points in societies lacking stable bearings. Often the work of stabilisation and channeling initiated under the Soviet regime is continued, this time, quite legitimately.

The weakened classist paradigm (the ex-Soviet people) nevertheless still remains operational in the national context. In most countries of the ex-Soviet space, Soviet thinking is still current in some social practices of mutual support and cohabits with the legitimised national reference point. In some situations it counter-balances the effects of fragmentation by facilitating transverse solidarity. Strong identification with the (degraded) natural milieu is generating ecologist movements which reinforce the sense of dereliction among certain dominated minority ethnic groups. The two reference points then combine their mobilising effects, giving rise to a democratic opposition, however weak, in some of these countries (Kazakhstan).

Ambivalence of the paradigm of identity in difference

The emergence of this new paradigm of identity represents both an adaptation to the new socio-economic and cultural conditions of the groups making up European societies, crossed by major migratory currents, and a mode of restructuring power within these societies so that it is more closely articulated with the culture. The latter becomes a key element in the reorganisation of politico-economic spaces into competing fragments and blocs in the context of world society. In the postcommunist societies the Soviet heritage weighs heavily on the mode of socio-political structuration, but not to the exclusion of all other factors: state structures arising from the disintegration of the socialist democracies and Soviet republics have the dual task of using national identities inherited from previous periods (Soviet or fascist) to reconstruct their economies, usually without critical distance, and of responding at the same time to current requirements for integration and the recognition of minorities. These weak, not to say non-existent, states have met this challenge with greater or smaller margins for manoeuvre, either rigidifying the internal and external borders between groups or relaxing them through many factors on which their survival usually depends (security, effectiveness of regulations, position of economic

and geopolitical strength or weakness, etc.). This leads me to conclude by noting the ambivalence of manifestations of identity, which may carry different, and indeed opposing, political messages, with no variation in form, but simply a different content.

The stabilisation of historical social constructs, now seen as contingent by those who experienced the collapse as a double loss of both social reference points and those of identity, is thus most frequently achieved by mechanisms of essentialisation, which encourage the society's members to accept the discourses of ethnicity and native roots. Where such discourses are legitimised by the new powers, they give life to these notions in exclusivist terms.

The current trend towards neo-liberalism emphasises the individual, with no reference to the people (the notion of the sovereign people that emerged from the modern revolutions) or the country that might create a strong attachment to a territorial community. This gives rise to replacement structures to ensure social cohesion: the trend towards the replacement of patriotism and nationalism by a supra-ethnic Europeanism, which distinguishes national and ethnic group identities by means of fluid categories, privileges a certain level of cohesion between groups that are neither rigidified nor codified but are implicitly accepted by the society, recreating various forms of infra-state solidarity with integrational effects.

Fluid categories tolerate a low level of essentialisation and the under-determination of the collective identity, in which implicit, ambiguous and mixed categories are always open to interpretation, undermining the closed nature of the Aristotelean or logical categories of binary opposition and the exclusion of the third term (pure/impure). A lack of definition and the impossibility of certainty does however give rise to an epistemological uncertainty which relativises the identity of the individual in such categories, making it to some extent more fragile. Clear categories on the other hand have a reassuring, stabilising effect. They oblige individuals either to fit into the category or to stay outside it, to identify their opponents in order to constitute themselves as members of a well-identified group, which has its place in the hierarchy of newly-formed groups, in the conjuncture of the post-communist reconstitution of social relations.

The mode in which the ethnic subject is constituted thus influences the classification of ethnic difference and the political translations of the process of differentiation. Whether willingly or not, politicians, citizens and indeed scientists tend jointly to foster essentialisation for reasons of social effectiveness. The result is a constant risk that politics will move in the wrong direction if the legal and statistical apparatus necessary to the government of a state make rigid use of essentialisation for the purposes of exclusion rather than integration. For, in principle, if we are to believe the supporters of the manifestation of difference, its function is the latter.

The non-constitution of a political Europe and the now manifest ambivalence of most of our political concepts may well increase this risk.

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Notes

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