The Metamorphoses of Cultural Identity

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Ten years ago, an issue of the journal *L'Homme et la Société* was enti-
tled "La Mode des identités."[1] Most of the articles were about cul-
tural identity, but the basic thrust of the work was "a critique of the
'fashion' of identity calling into question the validity of a notion as
striking as it is uncertain."[2] Recently, a special issue of the journal
Sciences Humaines, entitled "Identité et identités,"[3] dealt with per-
sonal, familial, social, professional identities and only spoke of cul-
tural identity marginally and in a roundabout way. Finally, in a
manual of *Sociologie politique* published by the Presses Universi-
taires de France,[4] the author takes to task the notion of ethnicity
inherent to cultural identity and pushes the critique of the ethnic
group to the point of negating its objective existence. Must we
think then that the notion of cultural identity is henceforth obso-
lete, that it has lost all pertinence?

In reading these critiques, we realize that what is called into
question are the distortions of the notion of cultural identity
imposed on current language by certain ideologies. Whether the
notion be considered at the level of ethnic groups, the nation state,
or the supranational entity, ideological discourse of all stripes
receives attributes that are not only characteristic of the phenome-
non but even deform and denature it. The "fixity" of identity, the
"homogeneity" of culture, the "substantiality" of cultural identity
and other attributes that make ethnicity a euphemistic substitute for
racism, are of course phantasms which criticism picks up from the
literary genre called discourse analysis. Certain sociologists or polit-
ical scientists blithely move on from there to deny the reality of the
phenomenon referred to by the notion of cultural identity and to
denigrate the conceptual apparatus that allows us to grasp it, much
to the astonishment of anthropologists.

3

Since 1981 we have put the emphasis on the triple dimension – historical, sociological, and psychological – of cultural identity, on its dynamic and relational character, on its mobility and metamorphoses. We have also identified the diverse "types" of ideological manipulation which it can be the object of for political ends.[5] Subsequent research permit us to refine both the approach to the phenomenon and the conceptual apparatus by which we grasp its various facets. It might be useful here to recapitulate the principal characteristics of cultural identity, by briefly analyzing its *foundations*, that is, the meaning and the role of ethnicity that, in diverse and changing forms, serves as its reference points, and its *metamorphoses*, that is, the incessant process of modification that affect it and that it incorporates.

The Foundations of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity fundamentally refers to ethnicity. This characterizes *a group whose members claim a common history or origin and a specific cultural heritage*, no matter that the history or origin is often mythicized or that the cultural legacy is never totally homogeneous. The essential thing is that these common elements are lived by the concerned group as distinctive characteristics and perceived as such by others. It is equally unimportant that these ethnic groups were produced or exploited by colonial power or local power for economic and political ends. On the one hand, these groups were not created from nothing; on the other hand, it is significant that ethnic identity has the property of polarizing and amplifying conflicts of an economic or political order. Finally, we know that the ethnic group is neither "substantial" nor "original," since two or more ethnic groups can meld into one by "merger" or "incorporation" and that, in the other direction, an ethnic group can split into two or more groups by "division" or "proliferation."[6] It is thus futile to give preponderance to these imaginary attributes of ethnicity as grounds for denying its existence or importance.[7]

As an American anthropologist notes, the sense of ethnicity is "persistent": "It has survived in diverse forms and in different

4

names, but it is not dead and the city-dweller of the twentieth century is closer than he thinks to his ancestors of the stone age."[8] In order to grasp the diverse forms that ethnicity takes, as the foundation of cultural identity, it is necessary to consider it at three different levels: as allegiance to the relatively homogeneous cultural patrimony of the ethnic group; as affiliation to the somewhat heterogeneous cultural heritage of the nation in which the group is inserting itself; as reference to the common cultural traits of a supranational ensemble of established groups or nations.[9] It goes without saying that the culture of the entity under consideration – ethnic group, nation state, supranational ensemble – separates into subcultures as a function of the social class, the professional category, and the regional particularities that structure the entity. But, in the eyes of the anthropologist, these determinations are secondary, and methodologically they can be set aside for purposes of analysis.

The ethnic group distinguishes itself from the nation in that it is not politically organized, that is, does not have a state structure, while the nation "integrates populations into a community of citizens whose existence legitimizes the interior and exterior action of the state."[10] The ethnic group lays claim to a cultural patrimony that symbolizes its history and that, in its turn, is symbolized by one of its own elements, such as language, religion, or a racial indicator. This patrimony may reflect back to origins or lived as such, as it is the case, for example, for the sixteen ethno-religious communities, Christian and Muslim, that constitute the Lebanese Nation. It can be the reconstructed residual of an anterior national affiliation, as it is the case for the immigrated groups of both the Americas. It can be acquired at the end of a differentiation or a fusion of populations arising in the course of history: an example of differentiation is that of the Swiss Jura which detached itself from the Bern canton in the name of a specific ethno-cultural identity; examples of fusion were reported in the former Soviet Union where, aside from the groups of European origin, other groups tended to assimilate themselves with the more powerful neighbors with whom they had the most ethno-cultural affinities.[11] Whatever may be its origin, its form and its consistency, ethno-cultural patrimony furnishes a basis for the identity consciousness

5

of the group and nourishes its sense of difference: it is itself to the extent that it is different from others.

But ethnic identity coincides with cultural identity only in the case, today hypothetical, of an isolated primitive tribe. Every ethnic group is integrated into a nation, with which it shares to a degree the culture. There is thus reason for it to distinguish its ethno-cultural identity from its cultural national identity. Looking at things from the side of the integrating nation, cultural identity is very differentiated. Whether it be question of the North and South American nations, or that of Australia, constituted from the start by floods of immigrants, or of European nations that today welcome waves of immigrants of diverse origin, or African and Asian nations which have always been pluri-ethnic, the national culture with which citizens identify, beyond their group allegiance, can only be conceived as a culture of synthesis. The past ideologies of the *Melting Pot* in North America and of the *Crisol de razas* in Latin America had the merit of opening the way for the cultural contributions of immigrants and of accrediting the idea of a culture of synthesis. With a few nuances, the ideologies of multiculturalism currently spreading in the West have the same signification.

Nonetheless the above mentioned ideologies are illusory in that they "represent cultural synthesis for themselves according to the formulation $A+B+C+D=N$, where N refers to a wholly new culture and an identity, corollaries of a 'new man,' while the true synthesis takes place according to the formulation $A+B+C+D=A'$, where A' refers to the dominant culture and identity, enriched, renovated, transformed by non-indigenous contributions."[12] The synthesis is only operable from a dominant. In multinational or multiethnic States, where unicultural entities are separated by clearly defined boundaries, pluralism is purely nominal. This was precisely the case for states that have fragmented, such as the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia; it is the case for Switzerland that explicitly defines itself as a Confederation of ethnic groups. As for biethnic or bicommunal states, such as Lebanon, Belgium, Ireland, whether or not they have linguistic or religious boundaries, the national cultural identity is incessantly given a pounding by the ethno-cultural identities of the two communities present and, in the case of Lebanon, by the subgroups that compose them.

6

Ethnicity finally can, in the name of a shared historical heritage, give rise to the feeling or consciousness of a common cultural identity in groups integrated into different nations, or even among citizens of diverse nations. It is the case for ethnic or ethnically marked "peoples," who have been split into two, three, or several entities by the carving out of Nation-States (the Kurd of Iran, of Iraq, of Turkey and of Syria; French of France, of Belgium, of Switzerland, etc.). It is also the case of certain "peoples" sharing a particularly significant history and traditions, who have been dispersed throughout the world by a massive movement of exodus or emigration (Jews and Armenians). Finally, it is the case for nations that, by the effect of conquering or colonization, share a common language and/or religion (the "Arab Nation," the Francophone Community, the British Commonwealth). It is however clear that the degree of identification to a supranational "community" is a function of the economic, political or spiritual links of solidarity that the concerned entities have interest in keeping up between them. One is struck by the permanence of the reference to the "Jewish people" by all the Israelites of the world, despite their integration into different nations and whose respective cultures they share, so too the persistent allegiance to the "Arab Nation" by all Arab-speaking Muslims, although belonging to quite culturally differentiated nations. These cases contrast with the much more vague character of solidarity between partially or entirely francophone countries or between countries of Latin America that, with one exception, share the same language.

If, from the sociological point of view, cultural identity manifests itself as a collective phenomenon that plays itself out at on least three different levels, defined by as many distinct entities, from the psychological point of view, the individual's global cultural identity appears to be a mobile constellation of particular identities that identify the cultural instances to which he is tied. A Frenchman can conjugate two or three processes of identification: he is French and European or he is Breton, French and European. A French Canadian is at the same time Quebecois or Acadien, Canadian and North American. A Lebanese conjugates four levels of identification: he is Lebanese, Christian or Muslim, within his religion belonging to a determined ritual community, and linked,

7

beyond his national allegiance, to the Arab or Western cultural world. And each of these instances holds specific cultural models. In every day life, the subject identifies with one or the other of these affiliations and the models that it mobilizes, depending on the situation he must face here and now. This indeed does not mean that these identities have, in and of themselves, the same density or the same cultural significance, but that the subject trades them off, consciously or unconsciously, depending on their respective profitability in a given context. Finally, it is important to note that the cultural models stemming from each of the entities with which the individual identifies are in constant interaction, and foster in him new models constructed on the mode of synthesis or syncretism, and conditioned by his other identities: sexual, familial, social, professional.

The Metamorphoses of Cultural Identity

The dynamic of cultural identity and its metamorphoses manifest themselves in the contacts between groups of different cultures and the process of acculturation that follows, whether the coexistence of these groups in a same nation results from the history of conquests or that of nationalisms, from the history of colonization or that of immigration. One has to add that the orientation of the acculturation process is conditioned by the nature and the volume of the populations in contact, and its rhythm by the gap between their respective cultures.[13] But the type of history that has produced a determined pluricultural situation, the categories of populations implicated in this situation, and the sorts of cultures present only furnish the *sociological* conditions of the acculturation phenomenon and the metamorphoses it transmits to cultural identity. The process, itself, can only be seized in its own articulations from the *psychological* point of view of the lived experience. And still one has to know how to isolate it, distinguishing the concept of acculturation from the concept of integration for which there is often a tendency of confusion. Integration designates the insertion of the group studied in the economic, social, and political structures of global society; acculturation designates the whole of cul-

8

tural interferences that it sustains, at all the levels of integration, due to the continual contact of its culture with the dominant culture and additionally with the other cultures that are present.

Roger Bastide distinguishes *material* acculturation and *formal* acculturation.[14] The first affects "the contents of psychic consciousness" but leaves intact "the ways of thinking and of feeling." It characterizes that first generation implicated in an intercultural circumstance. We have observed the effects in two different situations: that of Lebanese immigrants arriving adult into the welcoming society, and that of two Guaranis Indian tribes engaged in a planned but self-run experience of integration.[15] In one case as in the other, to avoid the pure and simple danger of assimilation and the pathology of deculturation that can follow from it, the subject spontaneously divides his world into two juxtaposed sectors: that of secondary relations, that is, of the world of work where he adopts the models of behavior of the society within which he intends to integrate, and that of primary relations, that is, of the narrow environment of family and ethnic group, within which he conserves his models of thought and sensitivity. This situation engenders for the subject a characteristic mental attitude which consists, on the one hand, in passing alternatively from one cultural code to another, on the other hand, in reinterpreting the contents of the new culture from the original culture code.

Within material acculturation, Dominique Schnapper makes a new distinction between the *hard core* of the culture and its *periphery*: "For migrants," she writes, "participation in economic life is accompanied by a private life in which the peripheral elements know an acculturation to the norms of the global society, leaving intact the hard cultural core [...]. The distinction between the hard core and the periphery of the cultural system is not given once and for all, it depends on the original cultures and the historical circumstances that bring the group to become conscious of itself and, in consequence, of its limits."[16] This distinction has the advantage of concretely determining the concept of material acculturation. From this fact, it permits to pinpoint, at each stage of the process, the respective arenas of cultural borrowings and resistances, and to thus situate the domain and the meaning of reinterpretation. This was the case for us when it was necessary to

9

understand the rules that govern, for the Guaranis in the process of integration and acculturation, the alternation between traditional medicine and modern medicine, between the recourse to the shaman and the call to the doctor, and to seize the meaning of the interpretation they give to justify this dual behavior. More subtle was the case of the emigrant Lebanese in Montreal who, in order to integrate themselves rapidly into the welcoming society, chose to live in an area exclusively inhabited by Quebecois. On their own admission, they imperatively needed prolonged visits with compatriot friends, at least twice a week, so as to reimmerse themselves in the original environment and thus counterbalance the pressure exerted on them by the norms of the receiving society.[17]

Formal acculturation affects the very way of thinking and feeling; "it leads," writes Roger Bastide, "to the transformations and metamorphoses of the form of feeling, of apprehending, of consciousness."[18] The children of immigrants, born in or arriving very young to the welcoming country, can no longer give themselves to the dichotomous strategy of their parents. Forced, from a very young age, to interiorize the two present cultural systems, that of the country of origin at home and eventually within the ethnic group, that of the welcoming country in school and in public life, they are plagued by conflict which inevitably results in the confrontation of the two. The same is true of the children observed in the two Guaranis villages in process of development and integration: at the bilingual school, at the health center, in the school garden, on the sports ground, they are constantly in contact with the Argentinean teachers and instructors, and, through them, learn the norms and values of the global society, which profoundly differ from the familial and tribal cultural system to which they remain attached. But in order to understand the meaning and scope of the conflict of cultures lived by the subject, it is necessary to separate the notion of conflict from the negative connotation we tend to give it. Even in a unicultural environment, there isn't growth without conflict, no growth that is not the resolution of these conflicts.

This isn't all. As paradoxical as it may seem, it is this conflict of cultures, interiorized, that is a prelude to the formation, for the subject, of a cultural identity of synthesis. Indeed, as we wrote

10

regarding the subjects of the second generation in the context of immigration, "contrary to the simplistic idea that one can have of the process of acculturation, the passage of one cultural code to another is neither direct, nor immediate. In the transitory and effervescent period in which the children of migrants try to resolve their conflict, to reject the culture of their fathers and adopt that of the welcoming society, they unconsciously elaborate new models coming from the dominant culture in the process of assimilation and from the immigrated culture in the process of reinterpretation."[19] The difference between the material acculturation sustained by the parents and the formal acculturation lived by the children is that, for these latter, the reinterpretation has changed direction: henceforth it is the traits of the original culture that are reinterpreted as a function of the new cultural code and not the reverse.

There resides in the phenomenon of *reinterpretation* the secret of continuity within change, which gives the subject in an intercultural situation the paradoxical feeling of becoming other while remaining himself. Continuing with the example of immigration, the adult migrant engaged in the process of material acculturation has the feeling of enriching his original identity by the new cultural traits acquired in the welcoming society which he reinterprets from his own models of thought and sensitivity. His child, subjected to a formal acculturation, has the feeling of bringing to the national culture which is henceforth his own an original contribution coming from the ancestral culture, as he received it from his parents and as he reinterpreted it from his actual culture. But it is obvious that the process of acculturation and the metamorphoses of cultural identity that ensue will be a harmonious path only if the sociological conditions within which the intersecting of cultures operates are favorable to the integration of the group to which he is a part. If the group is treated as a minority or scorned, if it is treated as a simple work force, and if, moreover, it comes up against a latent or manifest hostility, the subject's mechanisms of regulation risk being gravely affected, blocking his integration into the global society and, in consequence, his acculturation. From this negative process there can follow diverse types of identity problems not only cultural but personal.

11

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The dynamic of cultural identity, as it manifests itself in the process of acculturation, shows that humans do not allow themselves to be reduced to their *particular* being specified by a determined culture. They are before all *singular* individuals, different from all others and capable of surpassing their socio-cultural conditioning, even calling into question the inherent values of their culture or of any other culture. If they have this power, it is that they are at the same time rational beings haunted by the *universal*, similar in this to all other humans and naturally oriented toward the values coming from the common "humanity of humans." More precisely, these values result from the "principle of equality of reasonable and free beings,"[20] inscribed in general or transcendental consciousness, that is, this consciousness that, in Kant's terms, is "one and identical in each consciousness." As the natural horizon of rational consciousness, this universal principle serves him as a standard for judging the values of a culture. Concretely, it presents itself as the regulating principle that governs the differential comparison of cultures, conducting the subject in an intercultural situation to discern that which, in each of the cultures present, is good or bad, better or worse for humans, for the *humanity* of humans.

When theoreticians of nationalism, such as Maurice Barrès or Joseph de Maistre, substituted the moral imperative that proposes itself to all humans as reasonable and free beings with the national imperative that imposes itself to the citizen as a socially and culturally determined being, they robbed the latter of the two dimensions by which he can escape from his socio-cultural conditionings: his singular individuality, irreducible to any other, his aspiration to the universal that specifies his human identity.[21] The same can be said for the contemporary theoreticians of radical cultural relativism when they deny the existence of universal values and affirm the equivalence of all cultures. In their eyes, there are as many ethics as there are cultures, each with its own rationality and internal justification, each called to defend its identity against the dangers of acculturation.[22] This is to invite nations or ethnic groups to constitute themselves in closed societies, reduce the individual to his social being and enclose him in the narrow limits

12

of his culture.[23] Opposing itself to this conception is that of societies open to the universal by means of acculturation: "It is acculturation," writes Roger Bastide, "that transforms closed societies into open societies; the encounter of civilizations, their inter-breeding, their interpenetrations are factors of progress and disease, when disease there is, it is but the reverse of cultural dynamic."[24] It is acculturation that, in consequence, metamorphoses the cultural identity of the individual and orients him towards the development of his human identity.

After all, the affirmation of cultural identity has the meaning of a quest for recognition. The need to be recognized – that is, accepted, estimated, loved – as we are, in our difference, is the essence of Desire. Indeed, in its negative dynamic of lack-of-being, Desire is identically the need for recognition, since it is desire of the desire of the other. This is why cultural identity is "a living dialectic of the Same and the Other, where the Same is as much itself as it is open to the Other. This paradox has its foundation in the intersubjective structure of consciousness: the consciousness of the self, wrote Hegel, 'is a consciousness of self for a consciousness of self.' In other words the dialectic of the Same and the Other, inherent to individual consciousness, exerts itself not only in the return to the self from the other individual, but in the return to one's culture from other cultures, and in the ultimate instance, from an absolute horizon, always present to consciousness, that of belonging to humanity."[25]

Notes

1. "La Mode des identités" (The Fashion of Identities), *L'Homme et la Société*, International Journal of Sociological Research and Synthesis, new series n°. 83, Paris, 1987.
2. Ibid., p. 7.
3. "Identité et identités," *Sciences Humaines*, n° 15, Dec. 1996-Jan. 1997.
4. D. Colas, *Sociologie politique*, Paris, 1995, pp. 461-465.
5. See S. Abou, *L'identité culturelle. Relations interethniques et problèmes d'acculturation*, Anthropos 1981, 1986, Paris, 1995; the first and third parts in particular.

13

6. D. Horowitz, "Ethnic Identity," in N. Glaser and D. Moynihan (eds.), *Ethnicity, Theory and Experience*, Cambridge, MA, 1975, p. 115.
7. This is D. Colas's tendency, (note 4 above), pp. 463-465.
8. M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, N.Y., p. 25.
9. We define culture as "the group of models of behavior, thought, and sensibility that structure human activities in its relations with nature, society, and the absolute." The models are the middle-term between the patrimony, which is the past of the culture, and the human activities that constantly re-actualize the data in terms of the challenges of every day life. It is this operation that defines living culture, turned toward the future.
10. D. Schnapper, *La communauté des citoyens. Sur l'idée moderne de nation*, Paris, 1994, p. 28.
11. See R. Pipes, "Nationality Problems in the Soviet Union," in N. Glaser and D. Moynihan, (note 6 above), p. 461.
12. S. Abou, *L'identité culturelle*, June, 1992, 4890/11. In this respect, D. Schnapper observes that even in the states that make cultural pluralism an official doctrine, such as Australia and Canada, "we can observe the marginal and symbolic character of the action said to be multicultural, and the maintenance of dominant political and economic forms of life, of English and Protestant sources in Australia, of English and French sources in Canada," in *Commentaire*, "La France pluraliste?" special issue on "L'Europe et la France," vol. 11, n° 41, spring 1988, p. 226.
13. On this subject see S. Abou, (note 12 above), 4890/7-9 and 13-16.
14. R. Bastide, *Le prochain et le lointain*, Paris, 1970, p. 138-139.
15. For the first case, see S. Abou, *Liban déraciné*, Paris 1978/1987. For the second, see *Retour au Parana. Chronique de deux villages guaranis*, Paris, 1993.
16. D. Schnapper, "Modernité et acculturation. A propos des travailleurs émigrés," in *Communication* n.° 43: "Le Croisement des cultures," pp. 157-158.
17. See S. Abou, *Contribution à l'étude de la nouvelle émigration libanaise au Québec*, Quebec, 1976.
18. R. Bastide, (note 14 above), p. 138.
19. S. Abou, (note 12 above), 4891/3. Regarding this "transitory and effervescent period," see chapt.3: "Ethnopsychanalyse d'une acculturation" in S. Abou, (note 5 above).
20. This is the definition that E.Weil gives to natural right in *Philosophie politique*, Paris, 1971, p. 35.
21. We are familiar with this declaration of Barrès: "Nationalism commands judging *everything* with respect to France." De Maistre is more explicit: "The 1795 Constitution, just as those before it, is made for *man*. However there is no *man* in the world. I have seen in my life Frenchmen, Italians, Russians. I even know, thanks to Montesquieu, that one can be *Persian*, but insofar as *man* is concerned, I declare never having met him; if he exists, it is without my knowing it," in *Considérations sur la France*, Paris, 1936, p. 81.
22. The most virulent critique of acculturation comes from Pierre Clastres who condemns without remission "this repugnant degradation that cynics or naive people don't hesitate to call by the name of acculturation," in *Recherches d'anthropologie politique*, Paris, 1980, p. 32. It is true that Clastres is referring to the ethnocides of which the Native-Americans were too often the victims, but

even in this context, all of the experiences of acculturation were not negative in the course of history and are not so today.

23. For the exposition and critique of radical relativist doctrines, see S. Abou, *Cultures et droits de l'homme*, Paris, 1992, pp. 31-40, 68-74, 113-119 in particular.
24. R. Bastide, *Le rêve, la transe et la folie*, Paris, 1972, p. 231.
25. S. Abou, (note 12 above), 4891/12.

15