

THE QUANDARY OF THE IDENTITY DEBATE

BEHROOZ MOAZAMI
Department of History
Loyola University New Orleans
bmoazami@loyno.edu

Abstract: Concepts of identity, identity formation, identity politics, and collective identity, despite being vague, are among the most used notions in social theory, historical analysis, and everyday life and politics. In the last four or five decades “identity” has become a catchword that could explain almost any political or cultural development. In this paper, I discuss existential and social dimensions of identity and identity formation, decode the relational and historical conditions of their construction and argue that identities at any given point of time represent a general (albeit multiple) and fragmented expression of human’s capacity. I further contend that identity is a social relation: an embodiment of power structures and power discourses. I end up with some reflections on how we can imagine communities compatible with human emancipation by replacing the particularity of identity with the universalism of humanity and focusing on humanity and discourses of human emancipation. This paper reconstructs the “identity debate” as a part of a conceptual liberation of the narrative of historical change.

Keywords: Identity, Identity Formation, Identity Discourse, Power Relationship, Human Emancipation.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of identity is among the most used notions in social theory, historical analysis, and everyday life and politics. This has been the case since the 1970s. Why? How can this popularity in the last four or five decades be explained? Is the strength of the Age of Deconstruction in social theory and its emphasis on treating social phenomena, including identity and its discourse, as something in itself and not a part of a larger interconnected social world responsible for its popularity? What does the prevalence of the identity discourse in academia and in the popular imagination tell us about the world we live in and the theories that attempt to explain and hopefully change it? How can identity be defined and what are the potential shortcomings and consequences of theories based on identity discourse? Could they hinder critical evaluations of the status quo? How can we reconstruct the “identity de-

ISSN 2283-7949
GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION
2017, 2, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2017.2.10
Published online by "Globus et Locus" at www.glocalismjournal.net



bate” as a part of a conceptual deliberation of the narrative of historical change aiming to promote democracy and social justice? How we can replace the particularity of identity with the universalism of humanity?

I do not have satisfactory answers to these questions. Here, I am thinking aloud about them, hoping to conspire with others about how we can re-think identity and its discourse. Therefore, I call the overall debate here the quandary of the identity debate. My own approach is looking historically at the mechanisms and processes of identity formation and historicizing its momentary outcome. In this debate, I see myself in the constructionist camp, but as you will see, perhaps in a peculiar way. Here, rather than engaging with views of other scholars, I freely adapt and treat their contributions as a part of my own analytical toolbox. If you want to use fancy words, I deconstruct their constructions before reconstructing them! This debate, at least for me, is primarily political. The region that I come from and can claim some expertise about – the Middle East – is currently falling apart for many reasons, including how identity and identity politics are understood, articulated, and practiced by diverse political and religious actors. Social theories, as we all know, have political motives, usages, and consequences, even if they are not inherently political.

To tackle the questions raised above, first I will focus on the existential and social dimensions of identity and decode the relational and historical conditions of its construction. Then, I will look at the performance capacity of identities, or identity as performance, and trace the impact of multiple and fragmented identities in political and social realms. Third, I will locate the identity debate in the power structure and discuss the role and power of agencies in identity formation, calling the involved actors “identity entrepreneurs”. Fourth, I will discuss the impact of capitalism, particularly the sociopolitical conditions of late capitalism on identity formation. Finally, I will conclude with some reflections on how the shortcomings of the identity debate and the fragmented narratives it advocates could be overcome by its inclusion into a normative narrative of historical change that is conscious of the identity quandary.



A COMPLEX AND EXISTENTIAL QUESTION

Who am I? Identity in its simplest form is the existential question of human beings. The answer seems easy at first glance, but it is not. In many ways, the answer is as varied and complex as humans themselves are. Depending on who asks the question and why, how, and when it is asked, different answers emerge from the same person or group. These responses sometimes are conditional, other times vague or even contradictory, but almost always they are incomplete or very general.

Any momentary answer to the question of who am I will be normative, conditional and transient in nature. The response should at least be relational (defining one individual or group versus other individuals and groups), historical (describing personal biography and group history both in themselves and in relation to other groups and individuals), situational (explaining personal and or group social backgrounds and their developments), intersectional (looking at the interlocking relationships of individuals or groups with each other and other related sections of society), and normative (decoding personal beliefs or a group's world view). It should look at all of the above and how they each change over time.

The answer to the question of who am I is even more complex when we consider that *a*) we define who we are and what social group we belong to by describing our relationship with other actors, including our interlocutor, *b*) we tune our partial biography or segments of a group's history depending on the nature of the conversation and reason for the inquiry, *c*) we are involved in a multitude of relationships but stress only the most appropriate part of an individual or group's position in any encounter, *d*) we express only part of our worldview based upon our goals and understanding at the time, and *e*) our identities and situations change over time. So what is identity?

Identity is a construction and social relationship symbolizing the complexities of the power structure but has its own power and hierarchy. As a construction, it is a cognitive outcome of the rationalization process of the interaction between the human condition and the power structure. The power structures acknowledge, meditate, and form, if not enforce, identities that are either imposed from above and then rationalized or formed from below and then rationalized. Rationalization, here as elsewhere, is a pro-

cess and force, bound to physical or perceived realities and the power structure. Rationalization of identity is rationalization of certain forms of social relationship; it is the human embodiment of all the powers engaged in that specific social interaction. In the simple relational statement of “we” against “them”, “we” is a social relation – not all those who make up the “we” have equal power; the same is true of those who make up “them”. Further, the more “we” is inclusive, the more “them” is exclusive. In the process of identity formation physical traits; situational, historical, cultural, and political experiences; and the normative views of subjects and interlocutors are interlocked with the larger social world and its inherent power structure in a multitude of horizontal and vertical interactions constructing a number of general, multiple, and fragmented collective identities. In short, identity is a social, political, cultural, relational, and historical construct embodying, representing, and reflecting the practices, expectations, desires, fears, material or cultural interests, and power relations of a given society at a given time.

Collectivity is a precondition of human development and individuality is its outcome. Collective and individual identities – feeling connected and powerful by being similar to others in a group and feeling unique among them – evolve out of prolonged experiences of human interaction with others in their geographic, social, political, historical, and cultural environments. Collective identity is not only about sameness; it is also about difference from others. These differences play out in what I call identity performances.

IDENTITY AS PERFORMANCE

Identities are beyond self-definition: they are also performed. Identities in this sense are narratives leading to performances – a genre that permits improvisation, letting the actors compose their own scenarios. The composition of the power structure sets the tone, pace, and extent of this performance and provides the initial scripts, casts and plots.

The Identities are the Acts and Plots in the Making

Whether identifying with those in power, empowering against existing norms and rules, or changing positions in the ladder of social and political hierarchy, the changes are incremental and gradual. Social groups are embedded in the power structure and are interacting within its parameters, even when they wish to change it, hence, the resilience of continuity in the face of change. Composing the script, articulating differences, accentuating demarcation boundaries and performing in social scenes are done consciously or unconsciously with an eye towards power. In a story that stretches back millennia, emerging social groups present themselves as new and indispensable sources of stability or progress. They feed off their own narratives of uniqueness, survival, ultimate righteousness and act accordingly.

To have an attractive show for storytellers and audiences alike, to charm viewers and to engage actors, to perform any scene with a lasting impact on spectators and players, and to enlist or empower them for further acts, narratives should have plots that arouse emotion. Those that appear worthy of performing almost always entail adventure and risk, such as found in intense moments of history: wars, revolutions, strikes, demonstrations and street clashes. Though the actors hope that these narratives are considered novel at the time of their performances, they are in fact revivals of previous acts with some modifications. They could appear original because they might give birth to new subjects and subjectivity and demonstrate discontent with existing situations. Actually, however, they are based on our historical repertoire, including previously internalized identities. Identities are not only changing and multiple, but they are also multi-layered and multi-face.

The Historical Power of Identity and Identification

Given the complexity, historicity, multiplicity, and inner divisions of expanding and changing identities, attempts to curtail them involve designing manageable categories and enforcing certain hierarchal relationships through violence. Laws acknowledge or invent categories to fix identity boundaries, to solidify existing



differences in status, and to keep the internal order functioning. Political communities connect and rule diverse groups through coercion and by providing services and protection. Religions provide moral justifications for expansion or defense, as well as social networks to uphold their promises while keeping the desire for salvation alive. Political rule, harmonized law, and religious and cultural rituals form and internalize durable and overarching identities. Through this process history is turned mainly into a narrative of identities; it reduces the complexity of life into narratives of groups against each other.

Identification is an effective instrument of power and empowerment. Identification with certain territories, states, religions, or social groups leads to the formation of overarching identities. Identifying with one god, one religion, one rule, one moral value, one constitution, one nation, one class, or a mixture of these has become the norm. Declaring, assigning, or assuming identities draws boundaries among diverse groups. It helps them to define, mobilize, and internalize their behavioral codes. That is even the case when the “other” is not an individual or a group but documents such as scriptures and codes of law or institutions such as states, political organizations, academia, the religious establishment, or other less formal associations. Identification leads to standardization and the homogenization of groups, and this implies a profiling or stigmatization of groups. Powerful abstract categories become forces shaping society. Some identities appear unchangeable and become models or justifications for other identities.

Identity needs agency or multiple agencies in order to form. The agency could grow out of routine interactions of different segments of a society championed by a diverse network of cultural, political and religious elite. This could be a slow evolutionary path, or it could be sudden – the revolutionary path. The agency could also be an outside force or large-scale events. The identity makers transform identities by reinforcing or updating the habits, traditions, and grievances of a particular group and by presenting these habits as the dominant bond of the population they strive to control. No matter what language and symbols they use, what their intention is, the essence of their work is claiming certain spots for a particular group in the power structure. These individuals – members of groups, professions, or institutions – or the institutions themselves are in fact identity entrepreneurs. They shape our



perception of others and ourselves and have a stake in framing identities – they are either a part of a power elite or are aspiring to be part of it. At any rate, their power is inscribed in identities they help to form, maintain, or change.

Capitalism and Identity

The rapid historical developments of the last six centuries and the formation of industrial capitalism expanded and transformed the mechanisms of reproducing overarching identities, their meanings, and implications. They destroyed some identities and introduced new ones, most importantly nationalism, which acted as a model of empowerment for other identities. State, law, and to a certain extent religion continue to be the social and political arbiters of identities defining the radius of their inclusion. The rights of citizenship, most simply are defined by the possibility of effectively participating in shaping the destiny of oneself and one's community. All are considered equal in the eyes of law (we are told) and citizenship makes inclusion possible. But citizens have different "natural" status and rights from non-citizens. Notwithstanding the impact of the history of different democratic countries and differences in the meaning of citizenship, in even the most advanced democratic countries, skin color, place of birth, religion, gender, profession, and rank have all been relevant to citizenship and its implementation. Not all citizens in a given country have the same power, even when formally they have the same rights. Inclusion in the social system has not meant inclusion of the "others" in the political and social order. What is interesting is not that the legacies of the past are shaping us, or that real or perceived identities are hindrances to our evolution, but how this process plays out. Modernity, whatever it is, has accentuated the quandary of identity, as we see in the revival of what seems to be the structural and durable identities – race, religion, and ethnicity.

The pace of change in structural and durable identities is slow, even slower than the social realities that gave birth to and uphold them. These forms of collective identity have a sense of continuity, entitlement, and empowerment, and some, despite their gradual changes throughout history, appear to have a permanent status. The human urge for cooperation and belonging, the need to es-

establish networks of trust, the acceptance of dogmas or certain rules of behavior, and the efficiency of force and violence are all forms of rationalization leading to the internalization and durability of certain identities. These identities are reified through old custodians, or newly self-appointed ones, identity entrepreneurs who strive to fill vacuums. They respond to impending political and social crises to expand their power and keep their structural advantages by adopting and reproducing the perceived common identities. The identity entrepreneurs, the power structure, and the discourse associated with these identities tend to give them a more permanent status than they actually have. The habits of the past continue in the present.

Late Capitalism and Identity

Late capitalism, particularly that since the end of the Golden Age of capitalism that lasted from 1945 to 1973 and the beginning of the relative demise of American hegemony and the European welfare states, could be characterized as *a*) further encroachment of capital into the state, leading to the state's expansion in the economy and the state's militarization, *b*) acceleration of capitalistic development leading to transformation of the division of labor internally and internationally, *c*) a gradual but decisive increase in the share of finance capital over industrial capital and the internationalization of the financial market, *d*) the creation of a vast disparity between different segments of the world population, and different geographical zones, and *e*) the formation of a minority holding economic power and controlling the majority of the world's wealth and resources; a cosmopolitan elite embedded in local, national, and regional cultural and behavioral settings.

State, history, geography, and religion all participated in the creation of late capitalism. By expanding their capacity for surveillance and coercion, states maintained the political order needed to control, empower and expand the market economy. States built military and industrial infrastructures, adopted laws facilitating competition, trade, and the circulation of capital and labor, and implemented national and regional monetary as well as fiscal policies. This involvement of the state in capitalistic development is unprecedented in its scope and intensity in history. History and

geographic proximity and to a certain degree religion, provided a framework and incentive for regional market integration (EU, NAFTA, ASEAN). Everything was mobilized to facilitate rapid capitalist integration. The political outcomes of this process are readily apparent: the formation of political and regional bodies, the EU despite its crisis still is the best example, the disintegration of the Soviet block and the reemergence of Russia as a regional and international power; change in the American hegemonic position, now more a military power than an economic one; and the spread of chaos in the international scene. I call this overall development the regionalization of the global system of power.

CONCLUSION

But, what has all this to do with the identity debate? First and foremost, rapid changes in social and political conditions of capitalist production led to the expansion of interactions among different actors and the emergence of new actors on the local, national, regional, and global level. This development causes all actors to rationalize their newly acquired positions, or adapt themselves to emerging issues by developing new identities. Concurrent with these developments is the defeat of the modern classical grand narratives of historical change, liberalism, and socialism in history and in theory, and the transformation of the world order with its accompanying chaos and militarization. Hence, the identity discourse is empowered in advanced industrial countries, and the narrative of nationalism and regionalism and the revival of religious discourse is strengthened in less developed countries. While these identity discourses may have different implications and will change as conditions change, they act within the cage of the identity discourse and within its power structure. This could be changed.

To aim differently, to rethink the elements of how to reconstruct the meta narrative of hope and change, we need to emphasize on human as the unit of analysis and humanity as the basic discourse. Further we need to make human emancipation the basic subject of our reflections. We could incorporate values and insights from the liberal and socialist traditions to imagine a post-capitalist future. We need to start proposing different forms of

identities that we have experienced so far. We need to bypass from the boundaries of our cages. At least rhetorically, “we”, the 99% could be the beginning of constructing a new “imagined community” compatible with human dignity and emancipation.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- B. Anderson (2006 [1983]), *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso).
 R. Brubaker, F. Cooper (2000), *Beyond “identity”*, in “Theory and Society”, 29 (1): 1-47.
 P. Chatterjee (1993), *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
 E. Gellner (2008 [1983]), *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
 E.J. Hobsbawm (1990), *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
 E. Laclau (ed.) (1994), *The Making of Political Identities* (London: Verso).
 Ch. Tilly (2003), *Political Identities in Changing Polities*, in “Social Research”, 1: 605-620.

EDITORIAL NOTE

This article has not been submitted to the double-blind peer-review process of “Glocalism”, but has nevertheless been published because it is considered an interesting reflection on the current issue’s topic.

