Centre d'Investigació de la Comunicació
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Mass Communication, Cultural Identity, and Cross-Cultural Relations

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The concept of cultural identity

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I. Introduction

The Centre d'Investigació de la Comunicació (Communication Research Centre) –the sole existing institution in Catalonia exclusively devoted to research in the field of mass communication– organised an international Symposium on Communication, Cultural Identity and Cross-cultural Relations, with the cooperation of Unesco, in Barcelona, on November 21-23, 1990.

This book contains the English version of all the papers presented at the Symposium originally written in English, French, Spanish and Catalan. A Catalan edition has already been published.

The main reasons behind the aims of the Symposium are the following:

a) Catalonia is a nation within the Spanish state which has always had a strong desire to express and strengthen its identity, on both cultural and national levels. At the same time, it has a very cosmopolitan approach to its identity, which makes it extremely internationally-minded.

b) On account of this, it was thought that it would be interesting to try to analyse comparatively what is the real interaction of this trilogy of phenomena –mass communication, cultural identity and cross-cultural relations– in six nations without state and two nation-states: Quebec, Slovenia, Flanders, Scotland, Euskadi (the Basque Country) and Catalonia on the one hand and Denmark and Switzerland, on the other.

Moreover, Unesco and the Council of Europe, through highly-qualified representatives, expressed their views, the first with a broad international scope, though with particular reference to the Third World, and the second with a European bias.

c) Therefore, a particular emphasis was given to the role of the mass media in the development and assertion of the cultural identity of each community, and

to their approach to the growing phenomenon of cross-cultural relations in all the societies chosen as object of analysis.

We are aware that in this field, comparative analysis is very tough and complex and not always rewarding, but we thought that it was necessary to attempt it, in spite of the fact that each cultural identity has its own specific characteristics and uniqueness.

II. The concept of cultural identity

When we use the term identity in a global sense, we may be referring to different realities: individual, social, collective, political, cultural, national, etc. All of these concepts can also be interpreted in a different way depending on their geographical or cultural background.

Here, we limit our analysis to cultural identity. I know that many definitions have been formulated and I am aware of the ambiguities that exist. Nevertheless, I believe that a very interesting definition comes from Yves Brunsvick, Jean-Pierre Bady and Bernard Clergerie ("Lexique de la vie culturelle", Dalloz, Paris, 1987, p. 128), which has the advantage of encompassing the various ways of understanding this concept:

a) From an objective point of view, it is made up of customs and habits, traditions, values, beliefs, ways of living, thinking and behaving, and a certain style of existence and presence in the corresponding community.

b) Subjectively speaking, this is a feeling of belonging to a society in which everyone has the sense of being an actor in his or her own history.

c) From outside, it is the living core of a culture, the dynamic principle of a person or a community on the basis of their past, promoting its potential and receiving external aid in accordance with their needs, which goes on with the continuous process of their own creation.

d) From inside, it corresponds to the feeling, experienced by any member of a society, of recognising oneself in this culture and one's willingness to identify with it so as to express the sense of belonging and the assertion of one's roots.

This definition stresses a certain number of elements of cultural identity that we will have to take into account throughout this text. Nevertheless, I should like to underline some further elements:

a) Cultural identity evolves in a permanent process of development. In this sense, it is constantly submitted to social change and we may even apply the concept of modernisation to it. In any society, this process is carried out under the permanent dialectics of conflicts and consensus, which means that it gives way permanently to positive and negative outcomes.

Moreover, each cultural identity may be compelled to adapt its own devel-

opment to new circumstances and, at the same time, it may give rise to trends of resistance if they affect its actual structure.

b) The concepts of space and time are fundamental in this issue. They can be interpreted in the sense that every cultural identity has its own specific nature and singularity. For this reason, comparative analysis is always useful, although risky.

c) As we shall ascertain in the next item, we can conceive neither a uniform nor a unitarian identity, nor a homogeneous one. As a matter of fact, any cultural identity is permanently submitted to external sociological, cultural, political, economic, technological, communicational influences, and so on.

As a result, we must accept that the characteristics of diversity and plurality in the developmental process of a cultural identity are a logical fact. We do not say that a plurality of cultural identities exists in a specific society, though we do assert that, in general, a dominant, hegemonic cultural identity coexists –especially in the case of migration– with other cultural identities. The language element is one of its principal aspects.

d) This does not mean that cultural identity is not in a situation of crisis. This is a result of the fact that nowadays, especially in the western world, societies are by no means closed. They are, on the contrary, increasingly open and more and more affected by external influences of many types.

If these influences are very strong, they may indeed give way to a situation of cultural identity crisis. In some cases they can produce the coexistence of cultural identities in the territory of a single community, though this is not the general rule, unless there is a great deal of immigration in quantitative terms, or society is under strong pressure from external forces.

Moreover, all cultural identities, like many other social institutions, constantly undergo a more or less acute situation of crisis, on account of the fact that their very development gives rise to it.

e) In any case, I want to emphasize that any cultural identity has to be very cosmopolitan and open to external tendencies, but at the same time to feel very strongly the need to maintain its structural characteristics, always in a permanent process of adaptation to social change.

f) It is true that communities usually express their need to defend and protect their cultural identities when they feel that they are confronted with external or even internal risks.

The same attitude is also shown by those political societies with a strong nationalistic feeling, whether or not they become nation-states, which, aggressively or otherwise, take advantage of any situation to clearly state the content and will of their cultural identity.

g) In this field there is an important element to be taken into account: the national project of the society with a specific cultural identity, whether it be a nation without state or a nation-state.

Often, however, such a project does not exist or, if it does, then in an ambiguous way. This means, in practice, that the aims and the criteria for the development of this identity are less defined and less obvious, with their corresponding negative effects.

III. Characteristics

I believe that it is necessary to try to enunciate and analyse succinctly what are, on the whole, the main characteristics of any cultural identity. Undoubtedly, each one has its own specific characteristics, which means that it is not possible to set up a general paradigm which can be applied to all of them.

In my opinion, the outstanding characteristics are the following:

a) The territory or geographical space where the cultural identity is located and its process of development is carried out, seems to be an indispensable element. It is true that in such cases as that of the Israelis and Palestinians, for instance, this rule does not apply, but this is not the general case.

Personally, I cannot agree with those authors who claim the deterritorialisation of cultural identity as a result of the transnationalisation of mass culture. I think that we are bringing two different levels of analysis face to face. The impact of a foreign mass culture, for example North American or Brazilian, on a specific cultural identity does not necessarily mean that it will disappear or be substantially affected.

b) History is another essential factor. Its role and the anthropological cultural development of its society are both key indicators of its specific nature and singularity.

c) As far as its sociological perspective is concerned, a certain number of aspects have to be stressed: the different approaches from the point of view of class structure, social stratification, different attitude according to age, gender, social group, fringe groups, etc.

All these elements may give rise to different views of cultural identity, making way for a taxonomy of perceptions of cultural identity from a subjective point of view.

d) The economic dimension is also relevant, but with an impact which may vary according to the corresponding economic development, economic imbalance, degree of industrialisation, the extent of the consumer society, and so on.

Strongly linked to it, we have to mention the weight of technology, and the new technologies, especially the new communication technologies. In fact, when

we refer to the industrial, consumer society, we are alluding to the technological or postindustrial society, which is also known as the information society. Nevertheless, I would like to remark that its existence does not by any means exclude the development of its cultural identity. The point is that cultural identity is influenced by these new factors, which have to be taken into account.

It is nonetheless necessary to point out that the relationship between cultural identity and economy is a dialectical one. In practice, if an economically-developed society has better chances of sustaining its cultural identity, it is also true that economics plays a role of homogeneisation either inside the nation-states with different cultural identities or in the international arena through the actions of multinationals.

This fact is noticeable in the field of leisure, consumption of goods or mass culture, etc. In other words, the transnationalisation of the economy gives way to the homogeneisation of consumer behaviour on an international basis.

e) Language is, in many cases, considered to be the fundamental element of a cultural identity. It is convenient to remark that in many societies –whether states, nations or even regions– we are witnessing phenomena of linguistic conflicts bringing about bilingualism or diglossia.

This fact raises relevant consequences in sociological, political, cultural, communication, etc. spheres, which goes to show that language is not only a communication tool, but that it also has a structural dimension.

In the field of culture and communication the question about which language is used, the language of the cultural identity concerned or an external one, is crucial. Often the defence of the use of one's own language becomes the key element in the definition of the cultural identity of a particular society.

f) Any cultural identity is linked to a specific culture. The problem lies in the fact that, as in the case of language, the corresponding society may be not only bilingual, but bicultural –or multicultural– as well.

Owing to the importance of this issue in this text, I am devoting a specific item to it.

g) The role of intellectuals or, on a larger scale, the cultural élite, is outstanding in the process of the development and crisis of any cultural identity because to a large extent it is built up as a consequence of their actions and behaviour. They are very closely connected and the second is inconceivable without the first.

I believe that to a certain extent intellectuals are among the main constructors of any cultural identity and their role as opinion leaders, communicators, etc., has to be specially heeded. For this reason, their present action by means of mass media is very significant. They are also the main providers of ideology. Neverthe-

less, all too often they have become too "organic" in Gramsci's sense of the word.

h) In any pluralistic cultural identity, we can see the dynamics of different ideologies, democratic or authoritarian, capitalist or socialist, etc. But alongside them, any cultural identity works out its own ideology, which asserts its existence, its growth and its consolidation.

Usually we call it nationalism. It does indeed have many connections with national identity but the weight of cultural identity is also extremely important. In fact, it is not always easy to distinguish between the two even if we say that the first belongs to the political and the second to the cultural sphere. In any case, their limits are not very precise.

When we mention ideology, we have to include interests in this concept, even if, frequently, both concepts can be more or less easily distinguished.

i) Religion is another noteable element which we cannot neglect, even in industrial societies. Perhaps today, in these kind of societies, the influence of religion –and therefore of churches– has decreased but in the Third World it is really decisive in many cases, as for instance in Islam.

j) The education system, as the way of transmitting the basic values of cultural identity to the younger generations of a society, is another important indicator. In addition, it plays a key role in the task of supplying them with the knowledge they need to incorporate themselves into the productive dynamics of their society.

In relation to this, I believe that when we mention this aspect we have to include it as part of a broader concept, namely that of the process of socialization, as one of its main agents, together with the mass media.

k) Its political, legal and social psychological dimensions will be considered separately later on.

IV. Culture and cultural identity

Here, we are using the concept of culture from an anthropological point of view because I think that this is the only one suitable for this purpose.

Nonetheless, I have to admit that the concept of culture permits a great many approaches. Therefore, I understand that I can also distinguish between: a) Academic or élite culture embracing a different culture of creation (artistic or literary), interpretation (of any kind of cultural production which needs to be performed: theatre, music, dance, etc.) and culture of thought or intellectual analysis; b) popular or folk culture and all its manifestations and c) mass culture. Another interesting division is culture in urban areas or rural zones.

As far as mass culture is concerned, I have to distinguish between autochthonous and imported mass culture, be it from the rest of the state or abroad.

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As a matter of fact, all these types of culture have to be taken into account when we refer to the cultural development of any society and its implications for cultural identity. For obvious reasons, I have devoted much schematic attention to all of them.

It is important to note that, in Western countries, a public cultural sector always coexists with a private one. In relation to the former, we may say that one of the leading public policies is precisely the cultural, which defines and establishes the action of public institutions in the development of culture so as to meet the cultural needs of the citizens. Undoubtedly, this public cultural policy plays an significant role, its main objective being the consolidation of cultural identity.

However, the private contribution to cultural development is very important and is tending to increase. It is understandable, if we consider the capitalist nature of these societies and the role played by private initiative, that it extends to culture as well.

In this area, I have to emphasize the increasing importance of the culture industries, of both national and international scope, especially the latter. Indeed, transnationalization is extremely acute in this field and often linked to hardware and software industries. Its negative impact on cultural identity, principally among the younger generations, can not be neglected.

On the other hand, we may assert that cultural development has entered into a new era with the general application of marketing techniques. Again, the sponsorship of cultural events or initiatives once more demonstrates the strong links between economy and culture through the activities of private firms.

In my opinion, up to now the relationship of all these phenomena to the normal development of any cultural identity has not been studied in depth, but I am afraid it represents a certain risk. By its very nature, economy always tends to promote homogeneization in all its manifestations. So, we may easily imagine that it could have the same effect on cultural identity. Moreover, the tendency is for the protagonism of private economic initiative to become even more notorious in the near future.

V. Cross-cultural relations

We can no longer think of the western world in terms of homogeneous societies, if indeed such a reality ever existed. Therefore, we have to assert that, generally speaking, most societies are more or less heterogeneous, with internal or external migrations that have their own cultures and languages. We could formulate a complex taxonomy of cases.

In relation to internal migrations, we refer to those nations without state, such as Catalonia for example, where large-scale migration, principally from the south of Spain, may have real consequences on our cultural identity in cultural, linguistic and political terms. For instance, it may change its nature and content

to a certain extent. Furthermore, as in the case of Spain, but also in other states, this fact has to be related to the uniformist, unitarian ideology of the Spanish state and of a good deal of its population, in the cultural, linguistic and even political arena.

Nevertheless, we cannot generalise in this area because, as we will see in this book, the situation and circumstances may be different in each cultural identity. It is interesting to note that the ruling democratic system does not preclude the existence of such tensions.

In addition, there is a growing tendency towards the migration of large populations from underdeveloped countries to the developed ones as the only way of improving their social and economic conditions. They take with them their own culture, religion, language, mentality, etc., and the chances of their integrating and adapting to the cultural patterns of their new societies are not very great.

This situation may give rise to cultural, religious, linguistic conflicts, and the risk of situations of racial conflict is almost unavoidable. Moreover, the existence of ghettos in urban areas is a source of many dangers. If we look at the map of Europe, we can see a great many different situations, and the new setting of Eastern European countries may darken this panorama.

From the point of view of autochthonous cultural identity, both phenomena are extremely important and, on the whole, from an international point of view, particular attention has to be paid to the latter. It is indispensable to try to reconcile the democratic system with the normal development and consolidation of our own cultural identity. We have to respect the rights of foreign migrants to maintain their culture but at the same time they have to understand that they must accept and willingly adapt themselves to the cultural identity of the society they have decided to live in. I realise that this is a difficult task but it is vital to carry it out peacefully, otherwise the risk of conflict is obvious.

This is the major challenge which any industrial society has to face. The recent Gulf War has proved that it is a burning issue. Social scientists and mass communication scholars interested in cultural identity problems should pay special attention to this matter.

VI. The political system

I should like to underline that when I refer to the political system I am always thinking in terms of a pluralistic, democratic rule. I have to accept, however, that in practice the risk of authoritarian regimes is always present and the issue of cultural identity can also arise under this type of rule.

Moreover, I believe that it is useful to distinguish between federal states and unitarian states, on account of the fact that in the former the possibility of development of cultural identities is evident. If we take Spain as an example, we see that it is an autonomous state –not just a federal one– which, according to its Con-

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...stitution, is multinational, multicultural and multilinguistic, though neither the central government nor a large section of the Spanish population seem to understand this. It must be said that there are other states of more or less similar characteristics, for example, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Belgium, etc.

The concept of cultural identity may be claimed by nation-states, nations without states and even a certain type of region which, despite not having the characteristics of a nation, has specific elements allowing such a definition.

As I have already said, it is relevant to mention the role played in this question by the public cultural and communication policies, one of the objectives of which is to consolidate the corresponding cultural identity.

In relation to cultural identity, and as another of its characteristics, I have to mention the legal system, whether public or private, which represents it from this particular legal perspective.

It is interesting to link the concept of cultural identity with the idea of civil society, because a profound relationship exists between them. The development of any civil society gives rise at the same time to a similar process in its cultural identity. So, in connection, we may quote the concepts of cultural and communication space, which are aspects to be considered in this field.

VII. The role of the mass communication system

Up until now, the attention devoted by mass communication scholars to this issue has been rather limited; a fact to which the bibliography included in this book bears witness. This is a pity in my opinion; it is of paramount importance if we take into account the place that mass media occupy in the social process of any community.

Any mass media system keeps up a very strong connection with its corresponding political, economic and social systems, which means that it acts according to their requirements and affects news, propaganda and advertising. In this aspect, however, it should be said that its corresponding centralization or decentralization may have an obvious impact on the development of cultural identity.

As far as mass media are concerned, their role may be conceived from different perspectives: a) as an operational instrument of cultural identity; b) as a means of integration or cohesion; c) as a risk of disintegration or destruction because they convey external influences which may not be counterbalanced by this cultural identity; d) as a reflex of cultural identity; e) from a cosmopolitan viewpoint, as a form of cultural exchange.

Bearing in mind earlier arguments, mass media not only create or diffuse mass culture but are also leading instruments for the transmission of academic and popular culture. In my opinion, from a cultural point of view, they are today the leading socialization agents.

Mass media may, on the one hand, be the most powerful instrument of consolidation of a cultural identity though, on the other hand, through them foreign cultures and foreign mass communication may have a strong disruptive influence. This fact is very noticeable in the field of advertising and mass culture.

We are witnesses to an increasing trend towards internationalization of certain mass media, especially of satellite television, which breaks up the idea of territory as linked with the concept of national or state diffusion of the mass media. Large radio networks and some leading international magazines should also be mentioned here.

The role of news agencies is of special interest in this field, as pointed out in the MacBride Report, in relation to Third World countries and the strong influence of the Four Majors. The relationship between news agencies and cultural identity in industrial societies should be analysed, as it is a theme that has been sadly neglected.

A public communication policy is judged to be necessary, but we have to realise that the phenomena of deregulation and privatization are giving crucial importance to private –commercial– mass media, thus creating this ever increasing tendency to set up mass media conglomerates or multimedia.

Generally speaking, we can say that the public media may be conceived as leading tools of consolidation of cultural identity, whereas it is difficult to make the same assertion in relation to private media. In the case of the latter, their main aim is profit, which is not always compatible with a willingness to develop cultural identity.

In any case, the different contributions to this book, precisely on this topic, constitute an interesting point of departure for further research.

VIII. An approach from social psychology

I am convinced that in this area the dimension of social psychology is one of the basic elements to be considered.

We cannot understand the development of any cultural identity without referring to concepts such as collective memory, national character, national consciousness, national feeling, identification, etc., which are all connected with the idea of nation and, in the cultural arena, with cultural identity. This is an element of collective psychology, strongly related to the feeling of willingness to be a member of a society and to belong to it.

I realise that this key element is not always evaluated, which seems to me to be an erroneous approach. If cultural identity and nationalism maintain contact, we must accept that in neither case can the psychological dimension be neglected.

This point of view is particularly relevant if we relate it to the far-reaching

influence that mass communication may have in this issue. Stereotypes, prejudices, myths, images, as regards cultural identity, are effects of mass media on their audiences that have to be considered in terms of their real impact. They may have either a positive or a negative influence according to the circumstances.

Particular attention must be devoted to effects of image. How do we judge our cultural identity? How do we think people see it from outside? How do we represent our feeling of cultural identity ourselves? How is our feeling of belonging to a particular cultural identity perceived by others, etc.

I am aware that this is a tough issue, but I think it is necessary to consider these points.

IX. Conclusion

I have tried to put forward some ideas in order to formulate the framework of the Symposium. My approach here is necessarily global and without specifications.

We believe that by way of this introduction, we may perhaps have contributed to the opening of a new field of research in which comparative analysis, in spite of its difficulties, is a fundamental tool.

Although this initiative is of Catalan origin, I feel sure that our cosmopolitan approach will be appreciated.