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Globalisation and identity

A comparative perspective

Globalisation and the strengthening of various cultural identities (religious, national, ethnic, geographic, and gender, among others) have occurred over the last fifteen years. In my view, this is no coincidence but rather the product of a systemic relationship between the two phenomena.

1. TWO SIMULTANEOUS PROCESSES

It is not immediately because the idea has taken root that globalisation requires a global, cosmopolitan culture. There are several variations on this theme. Some talk of unification and cultural homogenisation of the world and criticise the process. Others consider that globalisation will overcome local and historical identities, supercede some ideologies, and produce an undifferentiated universal human culture. I believe that both the quest for a new universal cultural to sweep away historical cultures is misguided, while fear that “Americanisation” will wipe out historically-based cultural identities is unfounded.

This vision of economic development and globalisation is really no more than an extension of the two great rationalist movements providing the cultural and ideological foundations of the contemporary world — Liberalism and Marxism. Both schools of thought are based on a negation of historical, religious, and ethnic construction of identity, and stress new ideals (the Citizen of the World or Soviet Man, respectively). Each of these models has its own traits but they both coincide in considering any other distinction as artificial. I emphasise this because at the moment this is the dominant ideology in our society and in Europe as a whole. It is the rationalist approach, in both its Liberal and Marxist guises. These ideologies consider identities as dangerous and, most likely, fundamentalist, whether they be religiously, nationally, or ethnically based. I believe this is an extremely important issue because it goes to the root of the problems of the modern world.

2. THE PERSISTENCE OF IDENTITIES

Let us now examine the reasons for the foregoing situation. It has been empirically demonstrated that culturally constructed identities are fundamental to the way people think about things. Evidence for this comes from various questionnaires administered in universities over a longish period of time. The main source of this data comes from the *World Values Survey*, the greatest impetus for which has come from Prof. Inglehart of the University of Michigan. For many years, he has demonstrated both the persistence and the transformation of these identities. In this respect, one should also take into account the data analysed by Prof. Norris of Harvard University. She used the data contained in the *World Values Survey* that compared identities at world, national, and regional levels, and with Mankind's cosmopolitan identities in general.

With regard to data taken from the beginning and the end of the 1990s, Prof. Norris calculated that for the world as a whole, 13% of respondents primarily considered themselves as "citizens of the world", 38% put their Nation-State first, and the remainder (i.e. the majority) put local or regional identities first. One should note that the Basque Country and Catalonia appear in this database as regional identities. Moreover, a breakdown of world geographical zones reveals that the area where local and regional identities are strongest is Southern Europe (61%).

This reveals the need to begin with observations regarding the persistence of these identities. Nevertheless, one has to begin with more than just the combination of globalisation (i.e. processes producing power, wealth, and information on a worldwide scale) and identities drawing on unique cultural and local traits. In recent times, these two processes have led to a crisis in the Nation-State, which was invented as an institutional tool for managing societies and their problems.

However, the world is facing problems that cannot be managed within the national sphere. This creates a crisis of political representation in which the State fails to enshrine multiple sources of identity (not least because we live in a multicultural world). It is worth briefly looking at the trends before dealing with this complex issue in greater depth.

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3. GLOBALISATION AS A STRUCTURAL PROCESS

First, it is worth recalling that globalisation is not an ideology but rather an objective process of structuring economy, societies, institutions, cultures, etc. One should also remember that *globalisation* does not mean a set of undifferentiated processes. For example, we speak of globalisation to refer to the kind of economy capable of operating in real time at the everyday level. However, one should note here that not all economies can be considered global in scope. The world economy operates in accordance with its central

functions, which span capital and financial markets. These financial markets are globally interdependent regardless of whether they operate in true market economies or in Capitalist ones. In both cases, capital is global in nature.

3.1. Economy, Science, Technology and Communication

At root, economy is global in nature. It is interdependent and global when it comes to world trade, which increasingly plays a decisive role in economies worldwide. It is also global with regard to the production of goods and services. However, while the economy's core is global, the rest is not. For example, most of the labour force is not global. Multinational companies and their ancillary networks only provide work for some two hundred million workers. This may seem a great many but in fact it is only a drop in the ocean compared with a world workforce of three thousand million workers. However, these two hundred million workers, employed in some fifty three thousand multinationals, make up 40% of the world GDP and two thirds of world trade. Therefore, what happens in this system of production shapes economies as a whole.

Science and technology, the basis of wealth creation and military power, and of States and countries, are global in scope and are articulated on a worldwide scale. Science and technology networks operate globally and are based on local nodes of varying size.

Communication is also basically global in nature. Financial and technological control of communications also operates on a world scale. Here, one should note that 50% of the world's audiovisual material and news is controlled by just seven communication groups. However, this does not necessarily mean that the culture of these media is a globalised one. What can be seen is a process of globalisation with regard to business and information management but with content tailored to local tastes. For example, Murdoch produces classic American series for us audiences, while Sky Channel in the UK broadcasts British series. Sky Channel in India broadcasts in Hindi for Northern India, and in Tamil in Madras, using local characters. Broadcasts in Southern China are in Cantonese, and the series are locally-based. By contrast, broadcasts in Northern China are in Mandarin and series employ different storylines. In other words, communication strategies are global in business terms but are tailored to specific cultures and identities for marketing reasons.





Collage Blau (Blue Collage), Antoni Tàpies (2005) paint, pencil and collage on cardboard 50,5 x 67 cm

3.2. Global public goods The concept of globalisation has gone hand in hand with the development of a set of international institutions that are playing an increasingly important role in dealing with world problems. The notion of global public goods requiring worldwide management is one that continues to gain ground. The environment is a case in point, despite the Bush Administration's refusal to accept overwhelming expert consensus on global warming. Human rights are also considered to be universal and fall under the aegis of the International Criminal Court. Likewise, health also has a global

dimension, as shown by the AIDS epidemic and SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which reveal that disease is catching and that the wealthy have a vested interest in the health of the poor. The policies and workings of the United Nations also indicate that interdependence goes far beyond bilateral relationships between countries.

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3.3. Infrastructure and causes Globalisation rests on a technological infrastructure. However, this infrastructure is not the cause of globalisation, which is driven by economic strategies, cultural developments and markets. Even so, it would not have happened without the economic infrastructure. In other words, capital has always been global but now thousands of millions of Euros can be shifted from one investment to another in a matter of seconds. Today's globalisation is quite different from that of yesteryear because it is based on ICT (Information and Communication Technology), which renders distances between countries irrelevant.

Moreover, this globalisation is both inclusive and exclusive. It includes everything that has monetary value and excludes everything else. Thus economic globalisation is selective by nature. This is why national governments and companies try to position themselves in the global network because exclusion from it means no growth, no economic development, and no wealth creation. Failure to attract capital and technological investment can make economic outcasts of whole countries or sectors of the population. Accordingly, it is not so much a question of a “North-South” divide but rather of those within the network opposing those outside it. Evidently, a much larger proportion of people in the “North” belong to the network compared to those in the “South”. Even so, there are groups of population in the South that belong to the network yet remain isolated from their host societies.

This kind of exclusion has led to public opinion questioning the benefits of globalisation in recent years. Great swathes of society have been left on the fringes by globalisation, while its beneficiaries have reaped vast rewards. One cannot see globalisation in black and white terms as either “good” or “bad”. It depends on one's criteria, who is being considered and the subject under consideration (for example, globalisation may be beneficial in economic terms but harmful in environmental ones). In any case, Nation-States are pushing ahead with globalisation in order to shape and benefit from

the process. It is simply untrue to say that multinationals are the only parties driving globalisation. Nation-States have taken an active role by de-regulating and furnishing the technological infrastructure supporting globalisation. Put another way, globalisation of capital and international trade does not just depend on technology or on corporate strategy. It also depends on Nation-States de-regulating activities, privatising, and doing away with frontier controls —which is precisely what they have done.

3.4. The crisis in political representation Nation-States have been the main agents of liberalisation and globalisation. In carrying through these changes they have distanced themselves from their voters and lost political legitimacy. A prime example of this is the European Union, which has organised its affairs to have a greater say in the world. In this context, it is worth noting that not even the us is in a position to control world financial markets, investments, and corporate strategies. First, the EU has established what I would call a “Networked State”. Here, political management is exercised through institutions in which national governments work together, negotiating, and sharing sovereignty in order to preserve some autonomy vis-à-vis the aforementioned global networks. Second, a superstructure of international institutions (NATO, WHO) and treaties (Kyoto) has been established. Third, the issue of Nation-States’ waning political legitimacy has been addressed by decentralising powers to the regions and even to NGOs – a trend that is particularly marked in the EU. Thus the Nation-State no longer performs its traditional role but rather merely acts as a node within a super-national network. In such a network, political decisions are negotiated. Thus, while Nation-States have not vanished in the globalisation process, they have to cede sovereignty to survive. Moreover, in so doing they move one step further away from their electorates. Their citizens not only have to accept that the Nation-State is run on different lines from their own regions but also that the way the State is run has changed a great deal. This makes political representation much more distant. Here, it is worth recalling a slogan of what is wrongly-labelled the “anti-globalisation movement”. The slogan was “No globalisation without representation” and was heard for the first time at the WTO in Seattle. It echoed the one used in The American War of Independence (“No taxation without representation”). Although the slogan might be considered slightly inaccurate (the WTO does not represent multinationals but States, some of which have democratically-elected governments), the sentiment behind it is unambiguous.

This kind of reaction points to a loss in popular representation when it comes to political decisions regarding world economic policy. On the one hand, radical movements argue that ordinary citizens are powerless in this respect. Others argue that new political mechanisms are required to properly represent citizens. What it boils down to is that the emphasis on political management comes at the expense of legitimacy and popular representation.

4. THE EMERGING OF IDENTITIES

In the context of globalisation, this reaction by States and the gap opening up between the State and its representatives is driving efforts by growing numbers of people to establish their collective identities. This is because they feel alienated from a State that no

longer represents them or helps them build meaning in their lives. They therefore tend to build these identities on historical foundations.

Identity is way of constructing meaning in people's lives at a time when the *raison d'être* of modern States seems to be vanishing. In this respect, people crave much more than just market economics. Indeed, the State can be said to be an agent of globalisation rather than of the people. The reaction to this is an alternative construction of meaning based on identity.

At this juncture, it is worth recalling what we mean by identity, given that it is a word that means different things to different people. In the Social Sciences, identity is the process whereby people draw on a cultural attribute to build meaning in their lives. People create a cultural construct in referring to something that lies beyond them as individuals but which also defines them as such. However, one should note that such a cultural construction may be purely individual, given that individuality is also a form of identity. For example, one could express identity in the following terms: "I am the be-all and end-all of existence", or "I and my family are the be-all and end-all of existence". This is a kind of identity, although we generally consider identities to be based on historical elements. Sociologists, social scientists, and anthropologists argue about whether identity is constructed or not. I consider that identities are constructs and that all cultural phenomena are the product of such construction.

What are such constructs built with? Evidently, I cannot awake one morning and suddenly decide to be a Hutu. Becoming a Hutu is a much more complex affair. One could draw on post-Modernist theories in which everything is possible and identities are mere inventions. According to this approach, being a Muslim or being a Catalan, being a woman or hailing from Manresa are simply part of the same process in which everything is constructed.

While there is an element of truth in this, identity is built upon personal experience, which in turn draws on a history, a culture, and has linguistic and geographic components. Even so, one can ask how an identity is constructed, who constructs it, and how it can be pinned down. The process of constructing identity is where the problems begin and thus where one needs to hone one's analysis.

4.1. Legitimising identity I distinguish three types of identities, which I have empirically observed in groups. I have termed the first *legitimising identity*, which is constructed by institutions in general and by the State in particular. Thus, taking French national identity (which happens to be one of the strongest in Europe), it is the French State that has constructed the French Nation, and not the reverse. At the time of the French Revolution, less than 13% of the territories now forming France spoke the language of the *Île de France*. Indeed, I would go further and say that France is the only example of a European national identity that was effectively forged by the State. This was mainly achieved through repression, as is the case of all State-constructed entities. However, repression was also used elsewhere but to much less effect. The schools inspired by Jules Ferry during the Third Republic were to prove decisive, constructing the *petit citoyen français* as a cultural model. Unlike the French case, another revolutionary nation —the United States— built a strong national identity without drawing on traditional components but instead, built one based on the State, the Constitution, and multicultural and multi-ethnic elements.

4.2. Resistance-based identity The second type is the *resistance-based identity*. In this case, groups who feel they are pushed to the fringes of society in cultural, political, or social terms react by constructing an identity that allows them to resist assimilation by the system that subordinates them. They do this by drawing on history and self-identification. For example, there is currently an extraordinary upsurge in Indian movement throughout Latin America. This identity has lain dormant and it is only recently that it has been strongly asserted. The reason for this lies in resistance to certain kinds of globalisation that have pushed Indians to the fringes of society. Not all kinds of globalisation provoke such resistance but some social groups take this path precisely because they cannot resist as citizens, or because they are in a minority and cannot exercise their political rights.

4.3. Project-based identity The third kind is *project-based identity*. This is based on self-identification, albeit drawing upon cultural, historical, and geographic components for this purpose. Such a project may be of a national or a generic nature. For example, the feminist or ecological movements reflects this kind of process.

These three kinds of identities differ greatly from one another and it would be a mistake to think that one can slip easily between them. For example, it is unlikely that one can jump from a resistance-based identity to a project-based one. If this were the case, these identities would simply become one and the same. Legitimising identities involve ideological manipulation. If the project for building a nation based on the State merely serves the interests of the latter, it means that anyone who disagrees with what the State does is automatically pushed to the fringes of society. Resistance-based identities may (but do not necessarily) lead to extremism in the absence of bridge-building and communication. If project-based identities are not fleshed out with historical materials, they become purely subjective and hence unlikely to be adopted by society as a whole.

5. RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

How can one empirically consider the developments seen over the last few years? Instead of considering all possible cases, we confine ourselves to religious identity and to national identity.

5.1. Religious identity Religious identity in Western Europe (and indeed Europe as a whole) is relatively unimportant nowadays. Our studies of Catalonia reveal that less than 5% of the country's population are regular church-goers. This does not mean that religion is unimportant in Catalan culture, merely that it does not represent an element of identity for the majority of Catalans. Many European intellectuals write off religious identity. However, this attitude stems from ignorance, given that religious identity is of great importance elsewhere in the world (not least in the us). This is also true of Arab countries along the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

Religion provides an identity that is very different from one based on State legitimacy. The former is based on the believer as a member of a community of faith. Talking specifically about the Muslim world, the project of building an Arab State runs counter

to the principle of *Uma*, which is a community of believers which is not expressed in the State. Indeed, the State is only legitimate insofar as it embraces Islam and represents the interests of God on Earth. From this point of departure, interpretations may be more or

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less fundamentalist. However, nationalism is anathema to *Uma*. That is why when Saddam Hussein seized power (aided and abetted by the us and France), he gained support for defending Iraq as a key Islam country. When Hussein was toppled, together with the extreme nationalists who supported him, it was Islam —the bedrock of Iraqi society— that filled the vacuum. This particularly benefitted the Shiites but Sunni Moslems agree on broadly the same principles. Put baldly, Saddam Hussein was the mortal enemy not only of the Shiites but of Islam in general.

The construction of a religious identity in the Muslim world has arisen from: the

failure of Nation-States to manage globalisation; the failure of Arab nationalism in the long-running dispute over Israel and globalisation in general; the failures of Arab or other kinds of nationalism in other parts of the Muslim world; and religious reconstruction excluding the State. It is also possible that such reconstruction is not the fruit of a project-based identity but rather represents the resistance of a community and thus tends towards fundamentalism.

5.2. National identity National construction is the point of departure for the Nation-State, usually based on the State as expression of the nation. In most cases, it is the State that creates the nation rather than the other way round. There is currently a growing separation between State and nation. This can be observed when one speaks of values —national values differ from those of the State. The latter are instrumental and now go beyond the Nation-State, being used to manage globalisation and its accompanying networks. By contrast, national values are ones that affirm identity. Nations denied the opportunity of forming their own States —Catalonia, Scotland, and Quebec— but also strong States like France feel lost in an increasingly globalised world. They perceive a loss of autonomy in State terms and see the influx of immigrants as an invasion that is culturally alien. Last year, Europe experienced politics based on fear —whether of globalisation or of invasion by hordes of foreigners. This expressed the idea of the nation being betrayed by the State. As a result, there has been an upsurge in support for extremist political movements, of which the Dutch and French far-right parties are good examples.

The separation of nationalism and State takes various political forms. The idea of rebuilding the State as an expression of the nation raises the issue of what the national identity is. In the case of Spain, when President Aznar put forward the idea of the country as an important nation in the world, he explicitly rejected the idea of a multicultural

society. Aznar invoked the principle of Spain as a single culture and nation, despite the fact that it is currently neither and both concepts run counter to the letter and spirit of the Spanish Constitution. Such a project for reconstructing identity was made in the nation's name, even though it really served the State's interests. The project is effectively State-inspired nationalism rather than nationalism inspired by a nation. One should bear the distinction in mind, not only with regard to Spain but also as a general principle applicable elsewhere in the world.

Once the State loses its potency as a symbol of identity as a result of limited scope for manoeuvre in a globalising world, it attempts to re-establish its legitimacy by appealing to national sentiment. However, in many cases this nation has separated from the State and no longer feels that it is represented by the latter.

Latin America is a dramatic case in point but there are others, such as States built upon several nations (of which Spain is an example). Appealing to the Spanish nation as if it were a single identity raises grave questions regarding the principles enshrined in the Constitution – namely a State based on common consent and on its constituent nations. Approaches such as that adopted by Aznar attempt the impossible, trying to reconcile the State, national identity and globalisation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The instrumental processes of power, global wealth, institutions, and the Nation-State no longer represent the nation and identities built on local autonomy. This lies at the root of the management crisis currently afflicting the world. Even the most powerful countries are affected by this crisis, of which the post 9/11 United States is an example. Under such circumstances, governments resort to the State's *raison d'être*, namely the ability to legitimise a monopoly of violence, as Weber put it. They resort to the threat of violence and force in a world which, over the last ten years, has seen any number of experiments in combinations of States, formulae for joint sovereignty and management, pluralist identities, and a positively Byzantine relationship between global public goods and the institutions of Nation-States. This complexity however vanishes when panic assails a country's leaders and resort is made to military might.

This is the politics of fear on a worldwide scale, not just a national one. In structural terms, we are moving towards a more complex, plural, interdependent world. But powerful forces are at work to impose their own will on the planet and wreak profound changes. Here it is instructive to recall the relationship between structure and agency, in which the first creates the framework within which problems arise but where agency finally prevails.



The agent does not understand the structure. Bush has decided that despite globalisation and cultural pluralism, he will take his own decisions regardless of the overall context in which he operates. What Bush and other powerful leaders do is to create a different trajectory. On the one hand, there is the Internet, globalisation, interdependence, and cultural pluralism. On the other hand, there is censorship, military power and technology, the unilateral use of which is capable of plunging the world into chaos as economic, cultural and institutional structures are undermined by the misuse of political instruments.

The summit meeting in the Azores brought together the four great Western Christian empires —or remains thereof— and conveyed a message of a much more dangerous, complicated world. The leaders at that summit chose to simplify things and present a model of civilisation that is so obviously superior to all others – their own. Given that they have the power to impose this model, that is just what they decided to do. The basic idea is that we can make the world more controllable by imposing our will on it. The corollary is that the world will be made a better place because our civilisation is superior to all others. Such is the logic of Empire and oil will be part of the spoils of conquest. This should come as no great surprise —all imperial ventures need to be funded somehow. Imperial thinking means considering our civilisation is right and justified in using might to drag others out of their misery.

Current US political science is that of the “Bankrupt State”, in which governments that are incapable of relating to citizens, of managing the planet, and of husbanding the Earth’s natural resources. Recently, a small coterie of American Political Science experts went so far as to propose a Commission run by Western countries to manage the world’s dwindling natural resources for the benefit of all. The unpleasant truth is that this civilising zeal is merely a mask for State *realpolitik*.

This legitimising identity is increasingly facing the resistance-based identities springing up around the world. Even so, such resistance does not necessarily aspire to something better since its *raison d’être* lies in opposition. Project-based identities need to supplant resistance-based identities (and in particular, national identities). Only thus can we hope to chart a course between powerful establishments and fundamentalist commons II