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Questions of identity

In this article, I shall look further into a number of ideas I discussed in an earlier work, “Els equívocs de la multiculturalitat” (The Errors of Multiculturalism-Institut d’Estudis Ilerdencs [Institute of Lleida Studies], 2003), as well as several articles for the press in which my aim was to offer a critique of what might be called “multiculturalist ingenuity”. The ingenuity lies in the fact that this notion is used on the assumption that cultures form a homogenous whole, that they can be maintained and developed apart from the social structures that have created them, and that they can interrelate by means of “dialogue” and “mutual recognition among equals” in some kind of No Man’s Land.

I am in no doubt that this kind of discourse is ideologically very well intentioned, but it is devoid of any analytical credibility. While cultures are open processes, they are determined by economic, political and social structures that declare their conditions of existence. And when “cultures” meet —by way of individual and group encounters— this also occurs within certain political frameworks of relationship. I am not referring, of course, to differences in the formal dignity of cultures but to the social conditions wherein individuals express themselves as the bearers, whether they are aware of it or not, of different cultural features, with different degrees of commitment to the culture to which it is supposed they belong. In my abovementioned paper, I argued for the idea of citizenship as a vehicle of coexistence and integration in a historically and territorially determined community, a concept I thought should replace the chimerical notion of an impossible —as a sociological impossible, let us say— “multicultural society”. In such

a case, citizenship should be understood as the acceptance of certain duties towards the community to which one belongs in exchange for which one receives recognition of individual rights. Since that paper was published —and in the wake of events in the United Kingdom, Holland, France and, indeed, throughout Europe— the debate in Catalonia has advanced considerably along these lines, while criticism of the multicultural model has become more generalised, making way for the notion of citizenship as the focus of all discussion.

1. IDENTITY WITHOUT ESSENTIALISM

Nevertheless, in this discussion of 2003, there were still a lot of loose ends. One of the issues I was not able to deal with then, and it seems an appropriate time to do it now, is that of identity. This is a basic factor in the constitution of any political community, the existence of which is essential if we are to be able to speak of citizenship in the strict sense of the word. It is true that one may talk about identity, and what it is in the sense of a community or a people (nation) in essentialist terms, referring to supposed innate “natures” and immemorial “features of national character”. This, however, is not my perspective. From the standpoint of sociology we can only approach reality from historical and contingent categories. Essentialist positions, in contrast, inevitably cling to culturally static and socially pre-modern societies.

Yet there is another way to talk about *identity* that departs from the idea that, whatever we are as a community, or a people or a nation, we might have been otherwise if the historical, political, economic or social conditions had been different. It is evident that, depending on the nature of these conditions, at present or in the future, not only *can* we substantially change our identity, but it will *necessarily* change and we shall cease to be what we are at present. This point of view is therefore concerned with the processes that end up defining an identity and, very especially, the forms of social and political recognition without which no identity can survive as such. In other words, the question of identity obliges us to ask ourselves a number of questions. What has made us be the way we are and the way we feel about ourselves? What is the margin of “identity” choice, and with what are we obliged to identify ourselves? What are the mechanisms that make possible the creation, maintenance and transformation of identities? When we speak of identity, are we thinking of relational social processes or precise cultural contents? These are questions about the objective and subjective dimensions of identity, about power relations, about mechanisms and about different kinds of social logic. As for the answers, they will certainly have to take into account the fact that, at the moment, we are the way we are because of what we have inevitably been in the past, that we are several contradictory things at once, that we are what has happened to us, like it or not, that we are what others recognise we can be and, naturally, we are what we are able to be, and able to want to be.

We Catalans, like any other political community in general, are what we are but we can stop being that and become something else. We can even be what we would like to be in different ways. Nobody has ever said, for example, that each and every Catalan has to be Catalan in exactly the same way. In this sense, it is as well to recall that identity

is primarily a matter of recognition. Each one of us is not exactly what we would like to be but, rather, what we are recognised as being. It is what Jean-Paul Sartre expressed in his famous words, “*L’homme est ce qu’il fait de ce qu’on a fait de lui*” —we are what we make of what others have made of us. Of course, identity is a question of power too: of what we are permitted to be. We Catalans have a great deal to say about that. Again, identity, rather than constituting a well-defined and systematic content made up of values, attitudes and social practices, is a container, a façade, a mask that “simulates” the existence of a specific and differentiated content. In other words, we could say that the advantage of having a recognised identity is more one of being able to spare oneself the question about who one is than of managing to specify what one is.

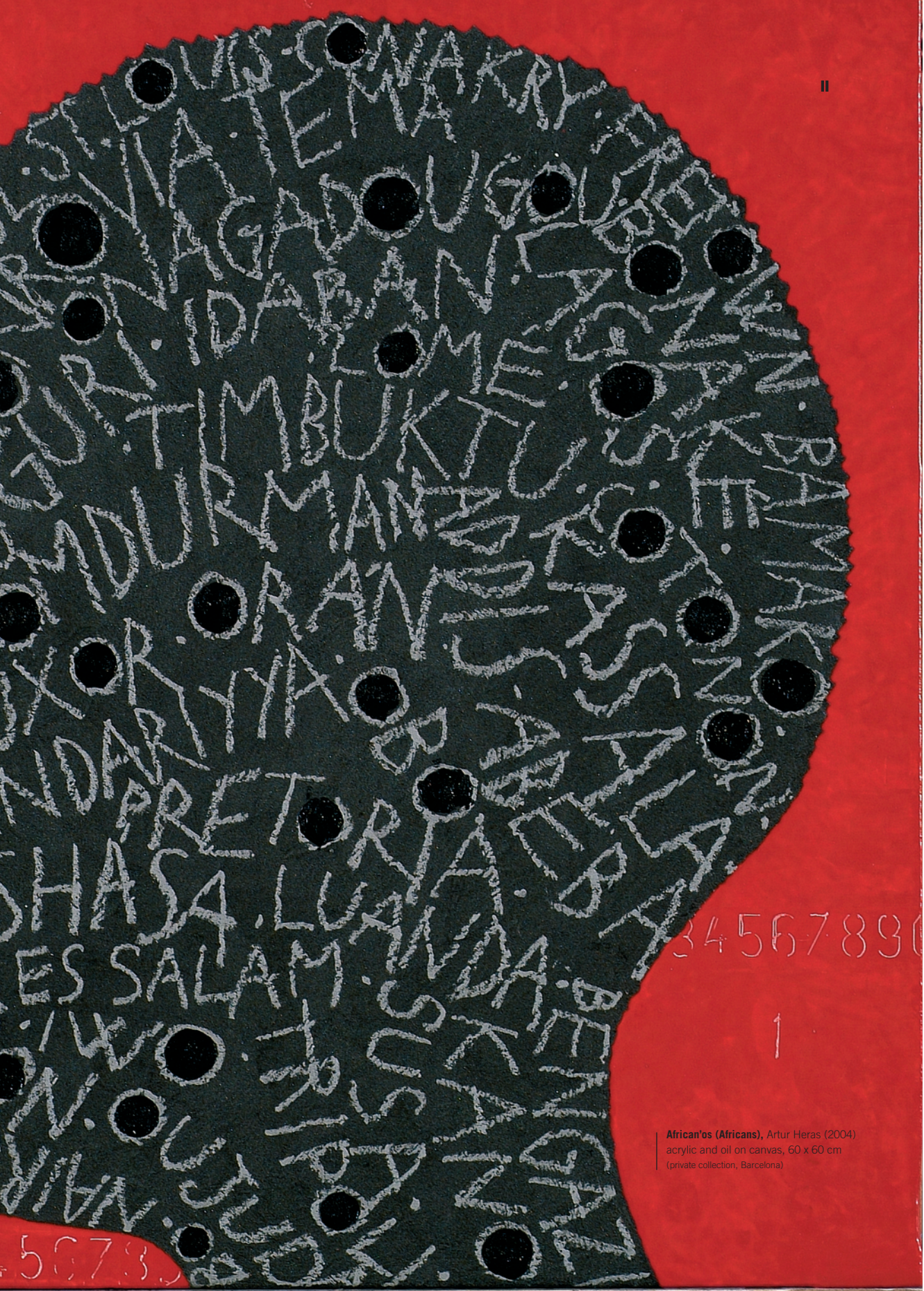
2. IDENTITY AND CITIZENSHIP

What I find interesting in this reflection on identity is the possibility of linking it with the notion of citizenship. As we know, it tends to be politically correct nowadays to say we should be citizens of the world. But the truth is that, historically and politically, one is not a citizen of the world but a citizen of a particular community. The “world” does not recognise that we have rights, and neither does it lay down obligations for us, from the juridical point of view, the social point of view or the historical point of view, because the “world” is not a political entity. We are not citizens of the world, of a world in general, but heirs of a very specific history that is frequently markedly distinct from that of the neighbouring town or of the people who live nearby. We are citizens because there are certain political institutions that recognise and guarantee our rights, and we are citizens because we have citizenship of one or another country, without which we would be “illegal” and “undocumented”.¹ Hence the rights of citizenship, as everyone knows, are not guaranteed to us in general, but they are specific, in a political here-and-now, in a national framework, and they are conditional upon loyalty to that community.

From the cultural point of view we are also prone to say that ours is, or should be, a universal culture, and that we have to get on well with all the other cultures in the world. Nonetheless, it is not true that a society or a culture, either Catalan or any other, is by definition or desire a catalogue of universal signs. The productions that result from a cultural process may certainly achieve universal recognition and they often aspire to such recognition. However, they stem from,

■ ¹ In Catalan, the adjectives *il-legals* and *sense papers* are frequently used without a noun —such as “people” or “immigrants”— so that they refer to “nobody”, and this lack of a substantive dimension highlights the absence of rights for the people concerned [translator].





African'os (Africans), Artur Heras (2004)
acrylic and oil on canvas, 60 x 60 cm
(private collection, Barcelona)

and have their first expression and their early development in a particular social and historical framework. They are not universal from the outset, so to say, but become so later, and only if somebody recognises them as such. In brief, ideas of citizenship and national identity are not in opposition but, in social terms, one is the condition of the other.

What happens is that the tracks taken in the definition and maintenance of identities have evolved in a highly accelerated fashion over the last half century, to such an extent that the very concept of identity has substantially changed. I mean that the concept of identity, which literally means the equality of something with itself, is a term that was used at a time when the rhythms of change in society were much slower paced. It was a

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word that went with a much more closed and stable society that could still recognise itself even as the generations moved on. Hence it was a concept used to describe a society in which a certain way of being was carefully maintained, where the successive generations resembled those that came before them, where place-names were conserved, with lifestyles that only changed with

the introduction of some or other technological innovation that partially revolutionised them, where fathers passed on old crafts and trades to their sons, where the oral tradition was handed down, and even old feelings and hatreds were passed down through the generations, and so forth. In this kind of society, which we can only vaguely imagine now, the term identity, in the sense of sameness, might have made sense.

Now we have a completely different society in which changes are occurring at a spectacular rate. Let us consider the example of education. We still tend to speak of a “before” when we say that our parents, one generation ago, brought us up in such and such a fashion. The fact is that the changes are now so rapid that they condition the educational styles for different children in the same household. The first child grows up at a time when people usually don’t have a computer at home, the second child has a computer while the third, at the same age, is using a mobile phone as well. Everyone knows to what extent the computer and the mobile phone, to stay with this example, can modify the forms of personal and family relations, access to worlds beyond the home, styles of knowledge about reality, organisation and concepts of space and time, etcetera. Each child will therefore have to be brought up differently, with different tools, introducing new ways of doing things. In brief, living in a society that moves at such an accelerated pace as ours, a society that is so open from the point of view of cultural influences and lifestyles and, it is also worth mentioning, a society that is so heterogeneous, obliges us to reconsider the very notion of identity. We need a conception of identity that can also respond to the tensions that arise between all the diversity and changes I have mentioned and the powerful homogenising processes that are linked to new forms of cultural dependence pertaining to the leisure industries and the mass media, especially in the audiovisual domain.

The question is, then, in such a changing, such an extraordinarily heterogeneous society, what does identity consist of? And how is identity constructed? We must ask this because it is clear that if one wished to continue to be what one was, keeping the same identity in the face of all the changes, it could only be done by remaining apart from society. The way I see it, the concept of identity as it is used in the social sciences is clearly not adequate for describing the mechanisms of identification with the society to which one belongs, or those that foster loyalty to our national or local communities.

Perhaps a more apposite concept in these circumstances would be what is suggested by the word *identification*. Rather than *national identity*, we could speak of *national identifications*, which would seem to denote a process that is constantly adaptable to what there is, whatever it might be. Recognition, then, would not be obtained from the condition of being the same as something from the past, but from the fact of identifying oneself with what there is now. Even so, this concept does not completely satisfy me because there is something acquiescent about it, and because it seems to lose the thread of continuity, loyalty or fidelity to the community that originally afforded the idea of identity. I believe that the conceptual change must be more daring than this. Neither identity nor identification is useful if we keep thinking in terms of what they contain or what they identify. Identity needs to be rethought in its relational function rather than in terms of what it supposedly contains.

In any case, if we wish to keep talking about identity, what becomes clear is that we can no longer imagine it as it must have been in the last century. We must think about it in its new circumstances. In fact, it is relatively easy to observe what the new instruments of creation and maintenance of national identity are. To cite the most evident case, for example, one need go no further than the mass media. It is undeniable that, recently, the television reality-show-cum-talent-contest *Operación Triunfo* (Operation Triumph) has done more for the Spanish national identity than all the history lessons about Spain that the incumbent minister of Education might have wished schoolchildren to learn. Unlike what was true for the past, history teaching nowadays is an almost irrelevant instrument in the creation of national identity. In contrast, the mechanisms of national identification and territorial structuring offered by *Operación Triunfo* do create a Spanish national identity and they do so radically and potently.

It is not only the mechanisms of national attachment that are changing. Our way of thinking about ourselves is also changing. Has anyone realised that almost everybody who is over about forty or even thirty years of age is an immigrant in his or her own city or country, without having needed to move? The city where I was born and where I grew up no longer exists, for little of it remains today. Its population was 70,000 inhabitants, while now it is over 200,000. The school where I spent so many years, the railway station where I took the train to go to the university, the textile industries that filled the place with their noise, fumes and smells... do not exist any more. I would now be a veritable stranger in my city if I had remained trapped in that Terrassan identity from the days when Terrassa was full of looms. In fact, how many present-day inhabitants of Terrassa have known that city of which we all feel we are heirs? Who are more Terrassans, the people who come from the now non-existent Terrassa or those who, coming from outside, have settled in the city that they have contributed towards shaping with their presence? Hence, rather than saying that we are all immigrants in the strict sense, what I sustain is

that we all experience the condition of immigrant because we all know what it is to live in a society that has nothing to do with the one we knew years ago even though we have never moved away from home.

In this regard, it is interesting to take up the idea of the French historian Pierre Nora when he refers to *places of memory*. These are real or imaginary places on the basis of which national identities have been constituted. They are landscapes, myths, historic events, oral stories, heroes, and fictional characters, literary or popular, and so on. Nowadays, they might even be pop singers or dated junk telly programmes! In any case, this is an “invented” and permanently reinvented memory, and not precise memory. It is not an accurate memory but one that is negotiated, agreed upon by social consensus, made up from the sum of memories and forgettings that are required for the whole community to recognise itself at each particular historic moment.

3. IDENTITY AND IMMIGRATION: THE CASE OF CATALONIA

We Catalans have some unfinished business, and the appropriate solution to a number of our most recent identity challenges depends on this. I refer to the incorporation of immigration as a national “place of memory”. The fact is that, in Catalonia, immigration was the most significant phenomenon of the twentieth century. It is what made the Catalans of the twentieth century. Everyone, those who came during the course of the century, and those who were already there, has been moulded by it, some against the grain, others perforce, and others without even realising it. Immigration has always been a major factor in Catalonia—in the seventeenth century with the French, in the 19th century with the flow from country to city... However, it is one thing to say that it has always been thus, but quite another matter is the sheer volume of twentieth-century immigration with its almost unprecedented dimensions of which we are scarcely aware. Permit me to return to the case of my home town. Terrassa went, in one century, from 15,000 to 180,000 inhabitants or, in other words, its population increased sixteenfold. Nonetheless, we still keep speaking of it as if we are lifelong Terrassans. This is the result of being able to create our own identity, in this case, a local identity, but it does not detract from the idea that with only 15,000 Terrassans, as there were in 1900, we would not have constructed the city we know today. By this I mean to say that those of us who are the heirs of those 15,000 are not all a direct product.

As for Catalonia in more general terms, our population increased from 1,900,000 at the start of the twentieth century to 6,200,000 when it ended, to become 3.25 times greater. This is a spectacular increase that, from any point of view, has meant radical modification of Catalan society. The result is that three out of every four Catalans living in Catalonia at the recent turn of the century were descended from immigrants. Furthermore, three million newcomers arrived in Catalonia during the twentieth century. The demographers have estimated that if there had not been any immigration over the twentieth century, the population of Catalonia today would be at most 2,400,000 people. Can you imagine a Catalonia of only 2,400,000 inhabitants at the end of the twentieth century? It is no exaggeration to say that, in these circumstances, Catalonia would be an economically decadent reality, a culturally irrelevant country and, in political terms, we would be non-existent. In other words, there would be no Generalitat (Catalan Government), no Catalan television, or any kind of relevant economic potential.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, there are two paradoxes that need to be discussed. First, at some point, we Catalans will have to wake up to the fact that immigration has not only not been an obstacle to our national identity but, rather, the necessary condition for the survival of the country as an autochthonous cultural, political and social project. Far from being an obstacle, immigration has given us the impetus that has saved us. The balance of the twentieth century, then, is that immigration has not been a threat but an opportunity that we have been able to use to our advantage.

The second paradox that I believe is interesting to raise should have the effect that, if we recognised ourselves as a country of immigrants, no one should feel that he or she is an immigrant in particular. This would mean that if, instead of masking this condition of our Catalan existence, as has happened for different reasons, we were able to turn it into a “place of memory” in the sense I have mentioned earlier, old and new resistances between people would be surmounted more quickly. It is understandable that, in order to guarantee our survival during the dictatorship, we concealed our condition as immigrants. But now, the most intelligent approach would be to break radically with the old notion of identity that disguised our historic reality: the reality that, in order to go on being the same people, we have changed profoundly. In any case, one of the conditions that have made us more specifically Catalan is our great ability to incorporate new population into the country, in a tradition that has understood that what is new revitalises what has become old.

I am convinced that the day we discover ourselves as a country of immigrants, the great value of what joins us together as a community will be fully recognised. And the day that we are able to see that maintaining our identity is not mostly about defending what we have been, but the struggle for what we want to be, that is the day when we shall have the strength to guarantee full recognition of our national community. Whatever the identity we exhibit at that point II