



THE LOSS OF IDENTITY IN THE GLOBALISATION AGE

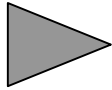


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Abstract

This article explores the struggles of identity and the multiple processes associated with increasing globalisation in the modern age. The contradictory process of globalisation has led to wideranging changes in the processes of identity formation. Globalisation causes a loss of marks, of individual identity, far away from our own ego. In this context, the term “identity” makes reference to one’s feeling of belonging that allows an individual to identify him/herself with a social group through a sort of shared memory that has a single cultural ground. Identity is reflected in people’s lifestyles, language and religion. It has two key aspects: similarity with others and difference. This fear of the loss of cultural diversity and hence identities stems from the fact that globalisation is viewed as cultural homogenisation or westernisation or Americanisation.

Keywords: globalisation, identity, global culture, cultural homogenization, language, traditions

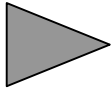


Preliminary considerations

Globalisation is the latest stage in the permanent process of social change. The term itself started to be used extensively 20 to 25 years ago to explain a recent wave of change in the economy, in technology, and in society, meaning change in institutions, norms, values and culture. Most authors agree that globalisation is nothing new. To some it began with the Turks taking control of the silk road, to others it began by passing through the seas of the Cape of Good Hope and with the discovery of America, whereby world trade expanded and natural resources from different parts of the world were transported to Europe; still others believe it began towards the end of 19th century with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, which brought on the development of production and transportation means. However, these developments really first began being referred to as “globalisation” with the fall of the Eastern Block countries and with the advancement in communication technology, including news media and the widespread use of the internet, causing an increase in communication between people. These last two components are important factors, which have direct influence on the cultural dimensional aspect of globalisation. In reality, globalisation has been around since the beginning of mankind. But one thing is sure, as transportation and communication increase in speed, the process of globalisation becomes more and more apparent. From the time capitalism and industrialisation became the main social forces that shape societies, one of the main characteristics of modern time is the exponential speed of social change. Traditional societies, including feudal ones, were characterised by a very slow process of change, where generations lived in basically unchanged conditions. The speed of change is becoming faster and faster, and today we can expect major changes to happen, not only from one generation to the next, but also within a generation. This speed of change has profound consequences on the individual’s life. In traditional society, for example, an occupation was transferred from one generation to the next within the family, as today we can expect that the individual would change several occupations during his/her career.

Globalisation is, in my opinion, an extremely complex phenomenon. On the one hand, there is the tendency towards homogeneity, synchronisation, integration, unity and universalism. On the other hand, there is the propensity for localisation, heterogeneity, differentiation, diversity and particularism. These processes are intricately interwoven and represent - in reality - two faces of the same coin. Thus the term “globalisation” is sometimes used to indicate that “globalisation is not an ubiquitous or uniform process, but involves various terrains, manifests differently in various contexts and has different effects for people in different contexts” (Braman, Van Staden, 2000: 20). Within this fast globalising world with all its

contradictions, struggles for identity have emerged as one of the most striking characteristics of the social, cultural and political scene.



The loss of identity

From a sociological and cultural point of view, global culture, the child of globalisation, is a standardization process of lifestyles, models and tastes; it is a process that can unite very different people which can feel closer simply because they can purchase the same food, the same fashion items, and share culture forms that are more and more alike. Here the question as to whether globalisation might have a positive effect in the formation of new identities, new worldwide forms of belonging and solidarity arises:

If it might produce a sense of disorientation, a feeling of impotence of people and traditional institutions that are not able of handling the growing complexity; or if globalisation will foster the perception of a collective responsibility with respect to the worldwide system and its manifold troubles (Tomlinson, J.B. 1999: 58).

In this context, the term “identity” makes reference to one’s feeling of belonging that allows an individual to identify him/herself with a social group through a sort of shared memory that has a single cultural ground. Identity is reflected in people’s lifestyles, language and religion. “Man arranges his own lifestyle according to the criteria that have been established by the social group he belongs to” (Gallino, 2001: 78). A notable number of theoretical approaches have been developed on the concept of identity, so much so that the term itself has acquired multiple meanings. Generally, identity is the central aspect of conscience itself. Human being’s existential insecurity pushes man to seek a confirmation of his own identity in the explanations of his culture of origin. However, the actual confirmation of man’s existence and identity can be found only through the acknowledgment of others; this kind of socialization can be achieved only when man has interiorized “the generalized other”, as Mead maintains. He also pinpointed the fact that man tries to fulfil himself through his own actions: “Man becomes for others” (Mead, 1972: 43). Man can assert himself and consolidate his self-esteem through the participation to collective action. Also Axel Honnet has investigated the issue of the dynamics of recognition. Following the thought of Mead, Honnet observes that “men owe the experience of mutual recognition to the chance of establishing a relationship with themselves” (Honnet, 1993: 123), so that man can develop a normal identity. Nevertheless, the ruling trend in post-industrial society is the closure of man in his own identity. In particular, as Touraine states, there is a tendency towards a “socialization of the defence of identity” (Touraine, 1990: 89). This brings forth some important observations on such a concept: it cannot be considered any longer as a permanent and fixed fact, but as something that has

been built through the process of identification in the course of life through the roles that men and groups occupy. Just the relationship with the otherness and the recognition of the other allow man to overcome the closure and the defence of identity with no fear of diversity or loss of identity, trying to make a live culture last longer. Identity has two key aspects: similarity with others and difference; the latter makes one autonomous. This is actually a conflict but it can be managed in a balanced way. Keeping the difference means above all “seeking one's own identity, a sphere of free expression and identification and the need of playing different roles at the same time within a system that imposes ritual rules” (Leonini, 1998: 110). Robertson himself had indicated the presence in the modern system of factors that were able to lead to personal and social identity disruption that would lead to protests against the dominant culture. In particular, Robertson dealt with personal and social disruption processes caused by the modern industrial system, and he maintained that certain factors within this system are able to favour the development of a personality that is lonely, anxious and insecure; the loss of the ego provokes in man the need to conform in order to meet others' expectations. Often the recovery of this identity occurs through the identification of opposing forces to counteract and confront. In such a case, there is a protest against the dominant culture. The consciousness of one's own ethnic and cultural identity, for example, may be originated only from the comparison with other cultures and from the acknowledgment of the different featuring elements that distinguish it. This explains the tendency to withdrawing in one's own culture (localism), to protecting it as a necessary form of rediscovery of man. What one is actually trying to protect is their own socio-ethical identity, which is nothing but all the values that belong to morality and social issues. These values are the ground of everyone's existence in the relationship with others; but at the same time the same values are used as means for self-recognition and self-definition by the group one belongs to.

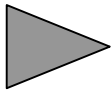
In this age there seems to be no more interest in tradition and collective memory. Several authors have highlighted the crisis of the model that has been handed over from traditional middle-class culture, characterized by a “strong individualism that has withdrawn into itself, rejecting any social and political responsibility”, and ending up in “narcissistic dependencies” (Morley, Robins, 1995: 33). Most contemporary sociologists have acknowledged an incurable fracture between the traditional society and current developed societies. Today more than ever people have to obey to new demands from institutions, new controls and constraints dictated by the labour market: they require certain prerequisite in order to be entitled to a right. In every day life, one continuously has to choose; the loss of spiritual heritage of the origin culture has not been followed by the spirituality of a different culture. Man becomes then a nonentity, an outcast of the spirituality of his own culture. Man is forced to face the tyranny of possibilities, which he tries to escape even turning to irrational dimensions (magic). Parsons himself places identity on a higher position and he assigns it the task of coordinating and controlling the remaining parts of personality:

...identity represents the system of meanings that allows man to give a sense to his actions (for himself and for others) relating him with the universe of symbols and socially shared values (Parsons, 1951: 145).

Mead regards identity as the individual's representations of his/her own self. Identity is not fixed but it evolves in the continuous confrontation with social integration. To Parsons, identity allows man to set a hierarchy of aims and to act in order to pursue them. The author claims that

...modern identity basically keeps its structure and function, while roles plurality and the increased choice are not an expression of alienation for the ego but the chance of an autonomous identity, even more than in the past (Parsons, 1951: 65).

The task of identity, in my opinion, is that of orientating the system's selections reducing social complexities, and that of promoting the richness of complexities keeping denied chances and adapting them in order to reuse them in future selections.



Global culture

Globalisation may have produced uncertainty and frailty in individuals and groups denying the stability of belonging and the certainty of identification, and depriving us of stable reference criteria. For this reason, today there are both a degree of *planetization* and cultural integration within the global society, and mobilizations that seek to assert peoples and cultures' rights of self-determining their own differences. There is a strong sense of localism that opposes the globalizing process. Global culture can suggest a whole series of similar perspectives of the world, but it cannot neglect some trends of cultural particularism; these are based on the increased awareness of those who live in marginal conditions that their own difference can be acknowledged on equal terms. Why such a revival of local socio-cultural elements? The answer can be attributed to the several social phenomena that characterize the rapid socio-cultural transformation process after the 60s, to the fast standardization process, to the growing gap between wealth and poverty. Small groups and local communities have seen their cultural identity totter and they have felt the urge to find themselves through new forms of communication, not in a global village, but in more intimate and closer spheres. Examples of these various expressions of cultural revival “are pilgrimages to sanctuaries, patronal festivals, miracle plays, which have penitential, magic, religious and ritual functions, with a powerful socializing character” (Waters, 1995: 79). The attempt of protecting an identity is put forward by underlining the differences and the originality of

particular traditions. In fact, the myth of the city has attracted the vast majority of people who have felt the urge to become part of it, both for the chance of new work opportunities given by industrial development, and for the chance of living a more interesting and stimulating life, with new opportunities of growth and social exchange.

With globalisation, within the social sciences attention has largely focused on the negative impact of globalisation on culture. Therefore, I also focused on the influence of the Western ways of life on non-Western societies. The domination by the West accelerated by global networks of communication and economic exchange “diminishes the grip of local circumstances over peoples’ lives” (Giddens, 1990: 18). This latter concern highlights aspects of a subset of the global culture approach, “globo-localism” which aims to unravel the complexities of local-global relations by focusing on the territorial dimension, in particular the impact of globalisation on territorial identities. Giddens says that social interactions and relations in today’s world are not dependent upon simultaneous physical presence within a specific location, since “communication technology has facilitated and fostered intense relationship between absent others” (Giddens, 1990: 20).

There was a time before globalisation when there was a cultural connection between identity and geographical place. Identity then became something that belonged to communities, to local culture. However with the advent of globalisation, people were displaced, culture thus erasing the differences between locality-defined cultures which had constituted our identities. Thus “globalisation has dislocated traditional livelihoods and local communities, and threatens environmental sustainability and cultural diversity” (*World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation*, 2004: 3). This fear of the loss of cultural diversity and hence identities stems from the fact that globalisation is viewed as cultural homogenisation or westernisation or Americanisation. With increased interaction across borders, local cultures are being diluted in favour of global norms, ideas and practices. The new cultural mixture therefore deeply impacts the world of the family. According to Pieterse, cultural homogenisation is the belief that the so-called global culture “follows the global economy and this has led to such phrases as ‘Cocacolonization’ and ‘McDonaldization’” (Pieterse, 1994: 49). For example, the notion of “McDonaldization” refers to the worldwide homogenisation of societies through the impact of multinational corporations. In this view, the mechanisms for change are closely linked with the globalisation of the market economy and multinational corporations. As Holton notes that “consumer capitalism of this type has been built upon a standardized brand image, mass advertising, and the high status given by many Third World populations to Western products and services” (Holton, 2000: 142). This view of cultural homogenisation and the global economy has been strengthened by the rise of the Internet and other information technologies. With the influence of Information Technology, computers and the Internet, the world becomes a small and new place

that directs people towards exploring their actions, events and virtual groups. Tomlinson wrote that the world as a whole “increasingly exists as a cultural horizon within which we (to varying degrees) frame our existence” (Tomlinson, J.B. 1999: 30). This means that in developing a global identity, people have a sense of belonging to a worldwide culture which includes an awareness of the events, practices, styles, and information that are part of the global culture. Global identity allows people to use information technology to communicate with other people throughout the world. Tomlinson believes that people “are not passive recipients of media output and that they do interpret the global media through their own cultural experiences” (Tomlinson, A., 1991: 134). But Morley and Robbins (1995) see the global media as having consequences for cultural identities. Drotner sees age difference as significant because while the “older generation may prefer home produced programs, the children would prefer imported programs which indirectly encourage the emergence of global youth cultures that transcend national and cultural borders” (Drotner, 1995: 66). The erosion of values of the local culture has no doubt been affected by globalisation. Therefore, as globalisation alters and erodes traditional ways, identity has to be created and recreated on a more active basis than before. Furthermore economic globalisation has heightened the demands for formal education and linguistic homogeneity thereby reinforcing English as a dominant global language. This could threaten the local language/ dialect of groups especially as they are already struggling with English as a second language. Another dimension of cultural homogenisation is that of the assimilation of elites into the political, educational, and economic life of Western society. The experience of a Western education not only globally disseminates Western knowledge but also creates similar values which then influence international organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and multinational/global corporations.

Central to the notion of identity is the notion of culture since the latter plays an important role in constituting identity. Despite this, there are other, quite contradictory, views on globalisation which show that far from destroying cultural identity, it has been perhaps the most significant force in creating and proliferating cultural identity. Castells offers, as primary objection, the fact that globalisation has the power to create “the widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalisation...on behalf of cultural singularity and people’s control over their lives and environment” (Castells, 1997: 2). What is implied here is that local culture is powerful enough to challenge global capitalism and hence the implications for preserving one’s cultural identity are increased. Central to the analysis of transnational social formations are structures or systems of relationships best described as networks. Technologies do not altogether create new social patterns but they certainly reinforce pre-existing ones. The role of the family in keeping alive cultural awareness of the beliefs and practices, in determining relationships and maintaining them within and outside its unit, in promoting

contact with the extended family, in influencing, even directing career aspirations, choosing life partners are all part of the family's role description.

The notion of cultural identity is not easily eroded under globalisation because it

...is not in fact merely some fragile communal-psychic attachment, but a considerable dimension of institutionalised social life in modernity... it is the product of deliberate cultural construction and maintenance via both the regulatory and the socializing institutions of the state: in particular, the law, the education system and the media (Tomlinson, J.B., 1999: 270).

People are exposed to hybridised forms of multicultural life through migration and transnational transportation and they are becoming self-conscious of the changing "civilisational, societal, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and regional engagements in which their lives are embedded" (Singh, 2004: 44).

In order to better understand the fundamental importance of the issue, let's examine how much of a portion of our lives is encompassed by cultural goods and services: cultural goods consist of a variety of products such as books, magazines, multimedia products, software, records, CDs, films, videos, audiovisual programs and fashion designs. Cultural services are comprised of libraries, documentary centres, museums, theatres, and orchestras, even circuses, the press, cable news broadcasts, and satellite broadcasts. As of 2000, the world's 5 largest cultural exporters were Japan, USA, UK, Germany and China, exporting 53% of cultural goods and services while maintaining an import rate of 57%. In the year 2005 nearly half of the world's cultural industries were located in the USA, 30% were located in Europe, with the remainder being located in Asia. Today, 85% of movies seen in the world are made in Hollywood. In Romania 95% of the films viewed are imported from the USA. The question confronting us and requiring a response is: must cultural goods and services be seen as part of the global economy? The response to this question is "yes". In order for it not to be so, different legal rules applicable to the cultural goods and services business would have to be agreed to and acted upon, which as of today would not be possible. It is at this point that globalisation becomes a problem from the cultural identity perspective. In the global economy, culture has almost become only a one-way operating manner of business; cultural goods and services produced by rich and powerful countries have invaded all of the world's markets, placing people and cultures in other countries, which are unable to compete, at a disadvantage. These other countries have difficulties in presenting the cultural goods and services, which they have produced to the world market and therefore are not able to stand up to competition. The natural result is that these countries are unable to enter the areas of influence occupied by multinational companies of developed countries. To make a simple point, let's look at language. In scientific and cultural areas, the language of dominant cultures is quickly spread by means of the media and the internet and

becomes the common means of communication. The most frequently used language is English. English is the common language of use on the internet and if one is expressing oneself on information technology; it is the English terms, which become inserted into the local language. As a result of IT development, we witness an avalanche of scientific and technical terms, which are used in the English alternative. Such terms as: *businessman, barter, broker, dealer, computer, marketing, management, manager, dumping, know-how, trend* are used today in Romania without translating them. This invasion of English and American terms can be called the globalisation of vocabulary.

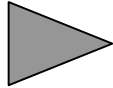
If the native fairy tales, songs, celebrations and childhood stories are replaced by computer games produced on a different continent, then we have already become part of a global culture. In my opinion, there will be two results, on a medium and long term, which will be difficult to bear. Firstly, in the world market for cultural goods and services, the role of underdeveloped or developing countries will steadily decrease. If these countries forfeit their right to their own production and distribution, or are forced to do so, this will be detrimental to their national economy. A resulting example would be a loss of foreign money income, qualified labour and potential export opportunities. But more importantly, cultural products for the enrichment of all mankind would not be produced and they would not be offered as a service. As long as the rules of international business perceive cultural goods and services as equal with other goods, and as long as on the global economic level, the powerful and the weak enter competition under equal trade conditions, the cultural diversity of developing countries will be in danger.

The second result will be growing awareness at local level for the need to protect cultural identity and cultural diversity. What is meant here is: when we look at the situation of the human kind today, the diversity of race, sex, language, class, age and religion can not be ignored. Each one of these variables holds the potential for serious clashes for any state and with globalisation it is eliminated. In the day-to-day lives of people, these most significant factors have accumulated for hundreds of years and form the pattern of the cultural identities of societies. No matter how much globalisation challenges the authority of states, and even if it changes the nationalistic awareness of people, the truth is that, the roots of the identities of societies and cultures will not change very much. No matter how much globalisation is encouraged by the lifting of boundaries in the markets, the struggle for identification on the local level is increased by the same token. Who would want to break off all cultural ties in order to be a world citizen? Or worse, who could claim that cultural ties are in opposition to world citizenship? But today throughout the world, in the middle of the discussion on globalisation, it is increasingly being claimed that globalisation brings with it homogeneity and that the identity of countries, in short their cultures, are destroyed. The protest marches in different countries indicate that the subject of globalisation and cultural identity need to be taken much more seriously.

The current danger on the horizon is that of micro cultural diversity giving birth to a sense of nationalism at local level. Language, religion, race, age group, different traditions may be seen as the world's richness and the foundation of a single coloured globe is shown by the multitude of colours at its base.

But from the economic perspective this local diversity, which lingers far behind developed countries, contains within itself an extraordinarily explosive quality, which it both protects and frequently displays (Held, Anthony et. al., 1999: 165).

From day to day, nationalism at the micro level is manifesting more and more thorough expressions such as democracy, human rights and similar concepts. Nations are made up of ethnic and religious elements, which can be challenged with the name of individual freedom and freedom from oppression. In short, in each society, or in each of its subcultures, reference points of cultural identity, ethnic roots, religious beliefs, and the attempt to establish one's own laws exist. Globalisation brings with it a sense of opening up and the defining of cultural identity, and the declaration of values which each person has taken on for themselves, can be seen as a basic right. Just as the protection of these local identities is necessary during the process of globalisation, it is equally important not to disperse the traditional makeup of these local societies in such a manner as to endanger their being forever. Once groups of people, who have traditionally lived together, begin to differ and struggle with one another, it is doubtful that the happiness and well being of all mankind can be brought about. The Balkans, the Middle East and Africa provide us with examples of lessons to be learned for both the supporters and the protestors of globalisation.



Conclusion

As today's global economy continues to expand, we know neither how to protect cultural identity at the local level, nor do we know how to prevent local nationalism. What we do know is that if an economic standard of comfort is not ensured, then developing countries will face even more hardships in the future. The protection of the world's natural environment and cultural diversity, and the elimination of poverty can only be accomplished with economics. As long as the countries, which are in control of the global economy do not share the same worries as those of less fortunate nations, the destruction of local cultures in underdeveloped countries will continue and waves of local nationalism will become a serious threat to world peace.

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