CHAPTER 6 THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

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CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION: IDENTITY IN QUESTION

The question of 'identity' is being vigorously debated in social theory. In essence, the argument is that the old identities which stabilized the social world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. This so-called 'crisis of identity' is seen as part of a wider process of change which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies and undermining the frameworks which gave individuals stable anchorage in the social world.

The aim of this chapter is to explore some of these questions about cultural identity in late-modernity and to assess whether a 'crisis of identities' exists, what it consists of, and in which directions it is moving. The chapter addresses such questions as: What do we mean by a 'crisis of identity'? What recent developments in modern societies have precipitated it? What form does it take? What are its potential consequences? The first part of this chapter (Sections 1–2) deals with shifts in the concepts of identity and the subject. The second part (Sections 3–6) develops this argument with respect to *cultural identities* — those aspects of our identities which arise from our 'belonging' to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious and, above all, national cultures.

Several of the chapters in this volume approach their central concern from a number of different positions, framing it within a debate, as if between different protagonists. This chapter works somewhat differently. It is written from a position basically sympathetic to the claim that modern identities are being 'de-centred'; that is, dislocated or fragmented. Its aim is to explore this claim, to see what it entails, to qualify it, and to discuss what may be its likely consequences. In the course of the argument, this chapter modifies the claim by introducing certain complexities and examining some contradictory features which the 'de-centring' claim, in its simpler forms, neglects.

Accordingly, the formulations in this chapter are provisional and open to contestation. Opinion within the sociological fraternity is still deeply divided about these issues. The trends are too recent and too ambiguous, and the very concept we are dealing with — identity — too complex, too underdeveloped, and too little understood in contemporary social science to be definitively tested. As with many of the other phenomena examined in this volume, it is impossible to offer conclusive statements or to make secure judgements about the theoretical claims and propositions being advanced. You should bear this in mind as you read the rest of the chapter.

For those theorists who believe that modern identities are breaking up, the argument runs something like this. A distinctive type of structural change is transforming modern societies in the late twentieth century.

This is fragmenting the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality which gave us firm locations as social individuals. These transformations are also shifting our personal identities, undermining our sense of ourselves as integrated subjects. This loss of a stable 'sense of self' is sometimes called the dislocation or de-centring of the subject. This set of double displacements — de-centring individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves — constitutes a 'crisis of identity' for the individual. As the cultural critic, Kobena Mercer, observes, 'identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty' (Mercer, 1990, p.43).

Many of these processes of change have been discussed at length in earlier chapters. Taken together, they represent a process of transformation so fundamental and wide-ranging that we are bound to ask if it is not modernity itself which is being transformed. This chapter adds a new dimension to the argument: the claim that, in what is sometimes described as our post-modern world, we are also 'post' any fixed or essentialist conception of identity — something which, since the Enlightenment, has been taken to define the very core or essence of our being, and to ground our existence as human subjects. In order to explore this claim, I shall look first at definitions of identity and at the character of change in late-modernity.

1.1   THREE CONCEPTS OF IDENTITY

For the purposes of exposition, I shall distinguish three very different conceptions of identity: those of the (a) Enlightenment subject (b) sociological subject, and (c) post-modern subject. The Enlightenment subject was based on a conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose 'centre' consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same — continuous or 'identical' with itself — throughout the individual's existence. The essential centre of the self was a person's identity. I shall say more about this in a moment, but you can see that this was a very 'individualist' conception of the subject and 'his' (for Enlightenment subjects were usually described as male) identity.

The notion of the sociological subject reflected the growing complexity of the modern world and the awareness that this inner core of the subject was not autonomous and self-sufficient, but was formed in relation to 'significant others', who mediated to the subject the values, meanings and symbols — the culture — of the worlds he/she inhabited. G.H. Mead, C.H. Cooley, and the symbolic interactionists are the key figures in sociology who elaborated this 'interactive' conception of identity and the self (see *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology:* MEAD,
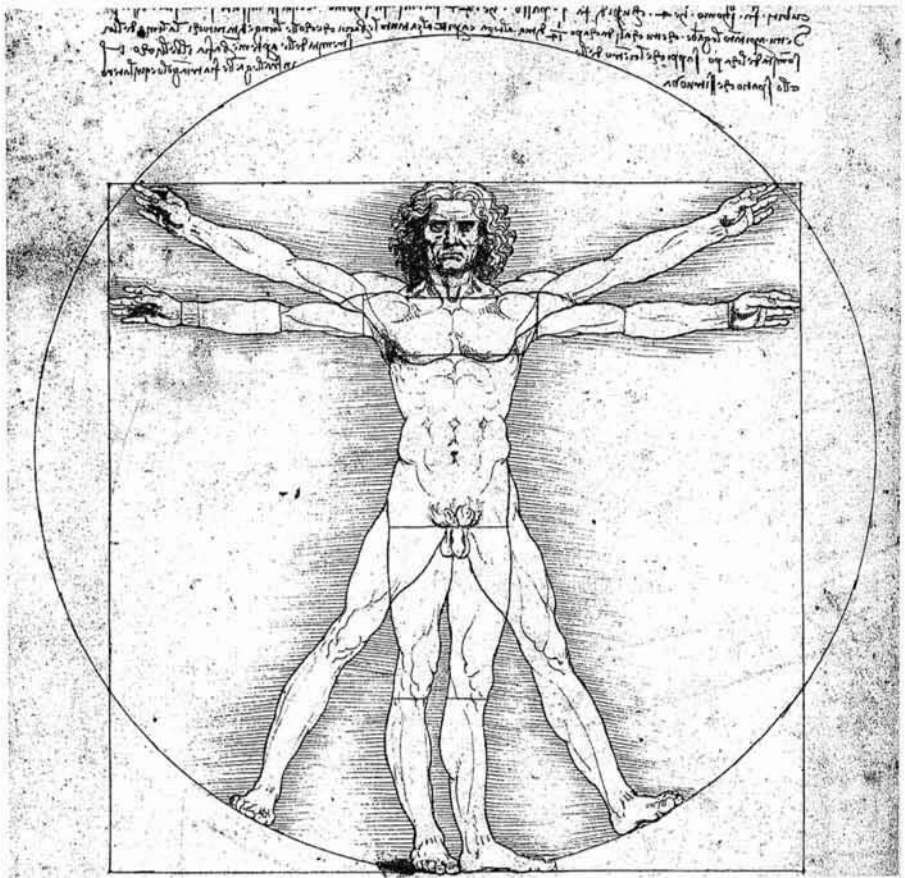
Renaissance thinkers, like Leonardo da Vinci, put Man at the centre of the Universe

GEORGE H.; SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM). According to this view, which has become the classic sociological conception of the issue, identity is formed in the 'interaction' between self and society. The subject still has an inner core or essence that is 'the real me', but this is formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds 'outside' and the identities which they offer.

Identity, in this sociological conception, bridges the gap between the 'inside' and the 'outside' — between the personal and the public worlds. The fact that we project 'ourselves' into these cultural identities, at the same time internalizing their meanings and values, making them 'part of us', helps to align our subjective feelings with the objective places we occupy in the social and cultural world. Identity thus stitches (or, to use a current medical metaphor, 'sutures') the subject into the structure. It stabilizes both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit, making both reciprocally more unified and predictable.

Yet these are exactly what are now said to be 'shifting'. The subject, previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed, not of a single, but of several,

sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities. Correspondingly, the identities which composed the social landscapes 'out there', and which ensured our subjective conformity with the objective 'needs' of the culture, are breaking up as a result of structural and institutional change. The very process of identification, through which we project ourselves into our cultural identities, has become more open-ended, variable and problematic.

This produces the post-modern subject, conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a 'moveable feast': formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us (Hall, 1987). It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves (see Hall, 1990). The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with — at least temporarily.

You should bear in mind that the above three conceptions of the subject are, to some extent, simplifications. As the argument develops, they will become more complex and qualified. Nevertheless, they are worth holding on to as crude pegs around which to develop the argument of this chapter.

1.2 THE CHARACTER OF CHANGE IN LATE-MODERNITY

A further aspect of the issue of identity relates to the character of change in late-modernity; in particular, to that process of change known as 'globalization' (discussed in earlier chapters, especially Chapter 2), and its impact on cultural identity.

In essence, the argument here is that change in late-modernity has a very specific character. As Marx said about modernity, '[it is a] constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation. ... All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air. ... ' (Marx and Engels, 1973, p.70).

Modern societies are therefore by definition societies of constant, rapid and permanent change. This is the principal distinction between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies. Anthony Giddens argues that, 'In traditional societies, the past is honoured and symbols are valued because they contain and perpetuate the experience of generations.

Tradition is a means of handling time and space, which inserts any particular activity or experience within the continuity of past, present and future, these in turn being structured by recurrent social practices' (Giddens, 1990, pp.37–8). Modernity, by contrast, is not only defined as the experience of living with rapid, extensive and continuous change, but is a highly reflexive form of life in which 'social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character' (ibid., pp.37–8).

Giddens cites in particular the *pace of change* and the *scope of change* — 'as different areas of the globe are drawn into interconnection with one another, waves of social transformation crash across virtually the whole of the earth's surface' — and the *nature of modern institutions* (Giddens, 1990, p.6). The latter are either radically new as compared with traditional societies (e.g. the nation-state or the commodification of products and wage labour), or have a specious continuity with earlier forms (e.g. the city) but are organized on quite different principles. More significant are the transformations of time and space, and what he calls the 'disembedding of the social system' — 'the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time–space' (ibid., p.21). We will take up all these themes later. However, the general point we would stress is that of *discontinuities*.

> The modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order in quite unprecedented fashion. In both their extensionality ['external aspects'] and their intensionality ['internal aspects'] the transformations involved in modernity are more profound than most sorts of change characteristic of prior periods. On the extensional plane they have served to establish forms of social interconnection which span the globe; in intensional terms they have come to alter some of the most intimate and personal features of our day-to-day existence.
> (Giddens, 1990, p.21)

David Harvey speaks of modernity as not only entailing 'a ruthless break with any or all preceding conditions', but as 'characterized by a never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself' (1989, p.12). Ernesto Laclau (1990) uses the concept of 'dislocation'. A dislocated structure is one whose centre is displaced and not replaced by another, but by 'a plurality of power centres'. Modern societies, Laclau argues, have no centre, no single articulating or organizing principle, and do not develop according to the unfolding of a single 'cause' or 'law'. Society is not, as sociologists often thought, a unified and well-bounded whole, a totality, producing itself through evolutionary change from within itself, like the unfolding of a daffodil from its bulb. It is constantly being 'de-centred' or dislocated by forces outside itself.

Late-modern societies, he argues, are characterized by 'difference'; they are cut through by different social divisions and social antagonisms which produce a variety of different 'subject positions' — i.e. identities — for individuals. If such societies hold together at all, it is not because they are unified, but because their different elements and identities can, under certain circumstances, be articulated together. But this articulation is always partial: the structure of identity remains open. Without this, Laclau argues, there would be no history.

This is a very different, and far more troubled and provisional, conception of identity than the earlier two (see Section 1.1). We should add that, far from being dismayed by all this, Laclau argues that dislocation has positive features. It unhinges the stable identities of the past, but it also opens up the possibility of new articulations — the forging of new identities, the production of new subjects, and what he calls the 'recomposition of the structure around particular nodal points of articulation' (Laclau, 1990, p.40).

Giddens, Harvey and Laclau offer somewhat different readings of the nature of change in the post-modern world, but their emphasis on discontinuity, fragmentation, rupture and dislocation contains a common thread. You should bear this in mind when we come to consider what some theorists claim to be the impact of the contemporary change that is known as 'globalization'.

1.3   WHAT IS AT STAKE IN THE QUESTION OF IDENTITIES?

So far the arguments may seem rather abstract. To give you some sense of how they apply to a concrete situation, and what is 'at stake' in these contested definitions of identity and change, let us take an example which highlights the *political* consequences of the fragmentation or 'pluralization' of identities.

In 1991, President Bush, anxious to restore a conservative majority to the US Supreme Court, nominated Clarence Thomas, a black judge of conservative political views. In Bush's judgement, white voters (who may have been prejudiced about a black judge) were likely to support Thomas because he was conservative on equal-rights legislation, and black voters (who support liberal policies on race) would support Thomas because he was black. In short, the President was 'playing the identities game'.

During the Senate 'hearings' on the appointment, Judge Thomas was accused of sexual harassment by a black woman, Anita Hill, a former junior colleague of Thomas's. The hearings caused a public scandal and polarized American society. Some blacks supported Thomas on racial grounds; others opposed him on sexual grounds. Black women were divided, depending on whether their 'identities' as blacks or as women prevailed. Black men were also divided, depending on whether their sexism overrode their liberalism. White men were divided, depending,

not only on their politics, but on how they identified themselves with respect to racism and sexism. White conservative women supported Thomas, not only on political grounds, but because of their opposition to feminism. White feminists, often liberal on race, opposed Thomas on sexual grounds. And because Judge Thomas is a member of the judicial élite and Anita Hall, at the time of the alleged incident, a junior employee, there were issues of social class position at work in these arguments too.

The question of Judge Thomas's guilt or innocence is not at issue here; what is, is the 'play of identities' and its political consequences. Consider:

- The identities were contradictory. They cross-cut or 'dislocated' each other.
- The contradictions operated both 'outside', in society, cutting across settled constituencies, *and* 'inside' the heads of each individual.
- No single identity — e.g. that of social class — could align all the different identities into one, overarching 'master identity', on which a politics could be securely grounded. People no longer identify their social interests exclusively in class terms; class cannot serve as a discursive device or mobilizing category through which all the diverse social interests and identities of people can be reconciled and represented.
- Increasingly, the political landscapes of the modern world are fractured in this way by competing and dislocating identifications — arising, especially, from the erosion of the 'master identity' of class and the emerging identities belonging to the new political ground defined by the the new social movements: feminism, black struggles, national liberation, anti-nuclear and ecological movements (Mercer, 1990).
- Since identity shifts according to how the subject is addressed or represented, identification is not automatic, but can be won or lost. It has become politicized. This is sometimes described as a shift from a politics of (class) identity to a politics of *difference*.

I can now briefly outline the shape of the rest of the chapter. First, I shall look in somewhat more depth at how the concept of identity is said to have shifted, from that of the Enlightenment subject to that of the sociological and then the 'post-modern' subject. Thereafter, the chapter will explore that aspect of modern cultural identity which is formed through one's membership of a *national* culture — and how the processes of dislocating change, encapsulated by the concept of 'globalization', are affecting it.