Cultural Identity

ENGE 5850
Semester 2, 2016-2017
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1. Postcolonial Identity
2. Significance
3. Inevitability
4. → identity in the moment of decolonisation
5. → get beyond it eventually
Discussion

What is the function(s) of identity?

Who needs identity and why?
Identity

• “Social”
  • “Official”
  • Who you are to others
  • Public Sphere

• “Personal”
  • “Unofficial”
  • Who you are to yourself
  • Private Sphere
Discussion

How do you define identity?

What are the natures of identity?
Fluidity

Stuart Hall in “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference” (1991)

• “Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space, or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of interesting discourses [...] Identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself.”

• ➔ An epistemological knowledge resulting from continuous ontological enquiries
Sameness

• “idem” = “sameness”
• in relation to a collective group (share commonalities)
• A certain degree of assimilation
• Problematic? (Confinement or emancipation?)

• Racial Identity
• Ethnic Identity
• National Identity
Cultural Identity
• Stuart Hall in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990)
• 2 ways of thinking about cultural identity: “oneness” and “becoming”
“Oneness”

“There are at least two different ways of thinking about ‘cultural identity’. The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.”
“Oneness”

“Such a conception of cultural identity played a critical role in all the post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world.”
“Becoming”

“This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather - since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’.”
“Becoming”

“Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”
Racial Identity
To what extent do you agree with what the theorists claim about the nature of identity?

What is the significance / function of racial identity?
Négritude

• Paul Nursey-Bray and Pal Ahluwalia in “Frantz Fanon and Edward Saïd: Decolonisation and the Search for Identity” (1997)
  • “to reverse the racial vilification’s of the coloniser and to declare unequivocally from the outset that ‘black is beautiful’”
Négritude

• Léopold Sédar Senghor claims in the Second Congress of African writers and Artists in 1959:
  • “The problem we blacks now face is to discover how we are going to integrate African Negro values into the world of 1959. It is not a question of resuscitating the past, of living in an African Negro museum; it is a question of animating the world, here and now, with the values of the past.”
Négritude

• Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952)
• “Have I heard it correctly? I give it an even closer reading. On the other side of the white world there lies a magical black culture. Negro sculpture! I began to blush with pride. Was this our salvation?”
Négritude

- “The ideologies or race promoted by the theories of Africanism associated with these figures, which go in hand in hand with movements of racial solidarity, sustains in the literature a form of Romanticism that seeks to legitimise and underwrite a myth of universal black Identity.”
Négritude

• Melissa Levin and Laurice Taitz in “Fictional Autobiographies or Autobiographical Fictions?” (1999)
  • “African literature, as a discipline, was institutionalised through its confrontation with colonialism and colonial history. Here fiction writes back to history and in so doing competes for historical status. The African writer constantly confronts colonialism as one writes form a position of marginality and constructs him/herself as a center.”
Négritude

• Fanon in “The Fact of Blackness” (1952)
  • “For not only the black man must be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.”
  • “I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships.”
  • “All I wanted was to be a man among other men [...] I wanted to be a man, nothing but a man.”
Négritude

- Kwame Anthony Appiah’s in “The Illusion of Race” (1992)
  - “The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us [...] it works as a metonym for culture, and it does so only at the price of biologizing what is culture, ideology.”
National Identity
To what extent do you agree with what the theorists claim about racial identity?

What is the significance / function of national identity?
On Nation

• Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983)
  • the nation is “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”
On Nation

• the nation is not “limited” because it has “finite” and “elastic” boundaries;
• it is not “sovereign” because it dodges away from “pluralism;” and
• it is not a “community,” because over the centuries millions of people are killed and die under such comradeship.
Nation Building and Utopianism

• Lyman Tower Sargent in “Utopianism and National Identity” (2001)
  • “These myths are part of the creation of national identity and frequently have a distinctly utopian tinge to them if they are not explicitly utopian themselves. These myths are part of a collective national memory or subgroup memories that include many eutopian and dystopian stories and experiences. Utopian literature frequently use these memories to build either the justification of overcoming the past or support for the future eutopia.”
Nationalism

• Tom Nairn in *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited* (1997)
  • “the genuine point of national identity is not possession of one’s own folk-dance academy but the government – or anyway, the attempted government – of one’s own affairs.”
Nationalism

• Bill Ashcroft in “Introduction: Spaces of Utopia” (2012)
  • “The concept of the nation, or at least the nation state, has been robustly critiqued in the field because the postcolonial nation is marked by disappointment, instituted on the boundaries of the colonial state and doomed to continue its oppressive functions. Postcolonial utopian vision takes various forms but it is always hope that transcends the disappointment and entrapment of the nation-state.”
Ethnic Identity
Discussion

To what extent do you agree with what the theorists claim about ethnic identity?

What is the significance / function of ethnic identity?
Ethnic Identity

• Fredrick Barth in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (1969)
  • only defines “the group” but not “the cultural stuff that it encloses”
  • rather than conceptualising ethnicity “in terms of different people, with different histories and cultures, coming together and accommodating themselves to each other,” we should “ask ourselves what is needed to make ethnic distinctions emerge in an area.”
Ethnic Identity

• Fredrick Barth in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (1969)

  • “when one traces the history of an ethnic group through time, one is not simultaneously, in the same sense, tracing the history of ‘a culture’ [...] the group has a continual organisational existence with boundaries (criteria of membership) that despite modification have marked off a continuing unit.”
Discussion

Is there any other dimensions of identity other than racial, national, and ethnic identity?
Stuart Hall in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990)

• “cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. [...] It has its histories - and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past', since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning.”
Stuart Hall in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990)

• A “dialogic relationship”
  • “similarity and continuity” & “difference and rupture”
Identity as a concept that ... 
• Resist definitions 
• Entangled with both the past & the future 

Identity as 
• a variance 
• a narrative 

Slippery and Contested !!
Works Cited


