CULTURAL IDENTITY
IN THE ERA OF GLOBALISATION

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Abstract

Globalisation has generated a lot of controversy, many theorists expressing divergent views concerning its impact on the different cultures across the globe. Since leading scholars have emphasized "deterritorialisation" as one of the most important phenomena in our contemporary society, this research is trying to establish how cultural identity is perceived in the new geography of the world. The article intends to show that even if globalisation tends to create a homogenous culture of capitalism, the world's cultural diversity will be preserved by people's stressing the uniqueness of their own traditions wherever they are.

Keywords: globalisation, identity, culture, space, city

1. Introduction

Globalisation is a dynamic process which has influenced the various cultures across the globe in a specific way. This research tries to determine the effects that this endeavour has had on cultural identity, starting from the premise that people have been reconfiguring their spatial relations on a worldwide scale, forming new communities and redefining themselves. The article is meant to find an answer to questions such as: How is cultural identity perceived? What does globalisation mean? What is the connection between cultural identity and space? How do cultures coexist in urban areas? What are the cultural consequences of globalisation?

2. What is cultural identity?

We are all culturally bound. Our sense of self derives from belonging to a structure capable of giving meaning and form to our existence, and this mold in which we all are cast is represented by culture. Throughout history, this complex system has helped different groups understand their origin and place in the universe, it has formed their view of the world and patterned their responses to its challenges. (Kaul, 2012)

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So far, the idea of culture has been associated with a geographic area where people usually share the same biological traits, a collective descent, language, religion, and way of life. (Horowitz, 2000) According to Stephen Bochner, this concept encompasses a constellation of myths, legends, beliefs, attitudes and established practices that are shared by the members of a group and transmitted from generation to generation. (Bochner, 1973)

Every existing community possesses a distinct cultural identity that is shaped by the way in which its specific tradition influences people's thoughts and emotions, creating personality patterns and typologies of social behaviour. These internalised roles and norms function as coordinating mechanisms in a person's life, merging individual self and culture. Thus, cultural identity provides the group with the stable codes and frames of reference that are so necessary in an ever-changing world.

According to Kaul, the concept of cultural identity refers to a coherent self that relies on a constancy of values and a sense of wholeness and integration:

Culture, the mass of life patterns that human beings in a given society learn from their elders and pass on to the younger generation, is imprinted in the individual as a pattern of perceptions that is accepted and expected by others in a society. The deeper structure of cultural identity is a fabric of such images and perceptions embedded in the psychological posture of the individual. At the center of this matrix of images is a psychocultural fusion of biological, social, and philosophical motivations; this fusion, a synthesis of culture and personality, is the operant person. (Kaul, 2012: 346)

3. Views on globalization and culture

Simply put, globalisation is a process due to the expansion of modern capitalism which seeks to integrate the population of the world into a common system. As a key concept of our time, globalisation has given rise to different and even contradictory interpretations, being associated with prosperity and freedom, but also with exploitation and inequality. Nevertheless, most theorists agree that this elaborated mechanism has had political, economic and cultural implications, influencing social structures and identity referents. In this sense, Kaul affirms:

The process of a deterritorialized or multi-local world productive system, which is more informational than industrial and more speculative than productive, has led to a crisis in social structures and the breakdown of identity referents that formerly had provided a sense of meaning to individual and social life. We are facing both a breakdown and a disarticulation of institutional and symbolic mediations from the past, and also a process of reorganization of differences and inequalities that are having a strong impact on identities. (Kaul, 2012: 346)

As Vineet Kaul shows, scholars have adopted three main positions concerning globalisation. Expansionists extol its virtues, perceiving it as an unavoidable, ever-increasing development which derives from technological and economic changes (Held, 2000). They believe that the importance of national boundaries will decline and that all economies and cultures will be inevitably integrated into a global network.

Other scholars criticise globalisation, considering it nothing but a form of expanding imperialism, of cultural dominance and supremacy meant to bring about the creation of a hybrid and homogeneous culture based on excessive consumption that would erode the socio-religious identity of communities and their traditional values, provoking a decline of their meaningful social orders. (Giddens, 1999)

The third point of view regarding globalisation, which is known as "transformationalism," limits the importance of this process. This theory considers that people are able to resist the pressure imposed by globalisation by instigating a cultural rebirth that would lead to the preservation of unique local identities. (Mirabedini, 2001)

Talking about the interactions between globalisation and culture, Hassi and Storti have come with the classification of the "three H scenarios", which comprises homogenisation, hybridisation and heterogenisation. (Hassi and Storti, 2012). The homogenisation scenario considers that local cultures can be shaped to look alike by a more powerful, standardised global culture that would make people adopt the Western model of social organisation and life style (Liebes, 2003).This perspective appears in a number of theories: Global Culture (Robertson, 1992), Americanisation (Jaja, 2011) and McDonaldisation (Ritzer, 1993). According to the hybridisation scenario, the mix between culture and globalisation gives rise to distinctive and hybrid cultures which are neither global nor local in essence. (Ritzer, 2010).

From the perspective of heterogenisation, local cultures continuously transform and reinvent themselves when coming into contact with global forces. Although they do not remain unaffected by change, these communities keep the core of their heritage intact. (Ritzer, 2010) As Hassi and Storti suggest, "cultural differentiation will most likely remain strong despite globalisation forces. What will probably change are the criteria used by different cultural groups to define their identity and differentiation vis-à-vis other cultures." (Hassi and Storti, 2012:8)

4. Yearning for the good old days

In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. was expressing his view of the world in the following words:

Did you ever stop to think that you can't leave for your job in the morning without being dependent on most of the world? You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for the sponge, and that's handed to you by a Pacific Islander. You reach for a bar of soap, and that's given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your coffee for the morning, and that's poured into your cup by a South American. And maybe you want tea: that's poured into your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you're desirous of having cocoa for breakfast, and that's poured into your cup by a West African. And then you reach over for your toast, and that's given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half the world. (King, 1986:254)

His words were never truer than today, when interdependence between people and communities across national boundaries is constantly increasing. Most scholars agree that the social and cultural changes brought about by globalisation are related to interconnectedness and to a transformation in the spatial dynamics, together with a growing awareness worldwide of the intensification of these phenomena.
The contemporary intermingling of culture and globalisation seems to have called into question the traditional modes of belonging, making people wonder about their place in the scheme of things. According to Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, the distinctiveness of nations and cultures has been traditionally established upon a clear division of space, the map of the globe appearing as a collection of fragmented spaces of different colours representing different countries with their own distinctive culture, "each rooted in its proper place". (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992:6)

If the identity of a community has been strictly connected to a "homeland", today, the partial erosion of the cultural particularities of spaces and the intense population movements give people a sense of deterritorialisation. Nowadays, half of the world's population lives in the big cities. This phenomenon implies a bringing together of different societies and cultural identities, and also a penetration of the homeland by distance. Having broken the connection with their familiar environment, the people who moved to these urban areas have a profound sense of loss of their roots. In the same time, the natives of the cities, who find the nature of their relation to their birthplace ineluctably altered, realise that cultural difference, "the other", is present "at home" and has become familiar.

Thus, in a time that seems to increasingly reject firm territorial attachments, dispersed individuals begin to feel nostalgic about their old picturesque country imbued with local colour, with its beautiful attire, its

solidary traditions and its unambiguous religion. This imperious desire to return to the "lost origins" comes from the fact that people need to redefine their identity by reconstructing the relation with their culture through memory and myth. According to Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, the memory of a beloved homeland serves as a "symbolic anchor of community" for those who feel culturally "homeless". (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992:11)

5. New geographies of the old world

Gupta and Ferguson believe that our contemporary society needs to "move beyond naturalized conceptions of spatialized "cultures" and to explore instead the production of difference within common, shared, and connected spaces" ". (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992:16) These spaces would be, in Sassen's terminology, the global cities. (Sassen, 2000)

According to the Dutch-American sociologist, globalization has led to the emergence of a new spatial order, based on a network of "global cities" [2], which have become spaces of reconstruction for the social identities and communities that are no longer defined through the reference point of nation-states. Global cities are inscribed with the dominant capitalist culture, but they are also influenced by a multiplicity of other cultures that are claiming territory in the new environment. Sassen notices that

... through immigration a proliferation of originally highly localized cultures now have become presences in many large cities [...]. An immense array of cultures from around the world, each rooted in a particular country or village, now are reterritorialised in a few single places, places such as New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, and most recently Tokyo. (Sassen, 2000:89)

The de-nationalizing of urban space transforms the global city into a frontier zone where a plurality of cultures are re-establishing their identity by protecting their cultural and artistic heritage, but also by entering into constructive dialogue with other traditions, religions, races. Thus, the city becomes a relational place that engenders the reterritorialisation of local cultures and the formation of new communities in a spirit of tolerance and cultural solidarity. In a period when people try to adjust themselves to a different, transforming society, various movements have initiated a process of re-elaboration of cultures which aims to preserve cultural identity and help it face the challenges of an ever-changing world.

6. Conclusions

Globalisation has brought about the coexistence in the same area of various cultural traditions, artistic manifestations, ways of life and social practices. This phenomenon reinforces identity boundaries, but it also creates shared cultural spaces where exchanges of ideas and values take place. Thus, uniqueness and difference are stimulated to enter into a fruitful dialogue, reterritorialising the world in a movement of solidarity and tolerance. Militating for a multicultural environment, Kaul affirms:

The search for cultural unity and complementation through inter-cultural dialogue should commence as a result of this protection of cultural and artistic heritage. This avoids ethnocentrism and stimulates each culture to open itself up to other cultural matrices. Giving value to roots, ethnic groups and races, religions, shared history, cultural manifestations and artistic expressions should be the foundation from which all the processes of identity formation are structured. (Kaul, 2012: 343-344)

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[2] In Sassen's view, Global cities represent strategic sites bound to each other by the dynamics of economic globalisation. These places, which bypass the national, represent complex locations in a grid of cross-boundary, global processes. This new geography of centrality encompasses the most important international financial centers: New York, London, Tokyo, Paris, Frankfurt, Zurich, Amsterdam, Los Angeles, Sydney, Hong Kong, etc.

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