

Identity as Theory and Method for Ethnic Studies

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The question of identity is fundamental to human life. "Who am I," as a biological and psychological being; as a member of a human group with a particular style and history; as a participant in the common human values, perceptions, and processes which transcend any particular group? Ethnic studies should have as its focus the whole human being, articulated in the biological, socio/cultural, and psycho/personal categories, and the methodology for ethnic studies should reflect the process by which people live and move within the named categories. The interaction of people who are self-consciously engaged in exploring their lives biologically, culturally, and personally, and the articulation of the boundaries at which these interactions take place, determines the scope and content of ethnic studies.

Michael Novak suggests that "the reasonable articulation, investigation, and criticism of one another's fundamental human standpoints are part of the business of becoming fully educated."¹ His comment introduces us to the method by which human beings move from their biologically determined particularity, through cultural nurturing and identity, to personal and self-conscious transcendence.

The assumption that we live as human beings in three areas, always—biologically, socio/culturally, and psycho/personally—means that we all share some things in common because we are interbreeding members of a single species; that we have cultural identities which divide us into local groups; and that we have personalities which are capable of transcending the biological and cultural determinants. We become conscious within a human group, a culture, which determines for us how we understand ourselves prior to deliberate reflection. Our culture is our home, our roots. Robert Nisbet puts it this way:

Among all the loyalties and devotions recorded by history in Western and other civilizations, none exceeds in intensity that expressed in the words which lie richly in all the world's literature: "My people."²

We can, and many people in the world still do, grow-up in this

ethnocentric world wherein our biological and cultural identities are collapsed into one another. An example of this phenomenon is to be found among American Indians, who are usually aware of two names for their tribes, one given them by other tribes—usually a derogatory term—and one by which they know themselves. The name always used to identify themselves is “human being.”

The word “Indian,” introduced by European explorers, forced upon the various groups of “human beings” an identity that transcended tribal affiliations. Indians have been struggling with this self-identity ever since: What does it mean to be an Indian, in addition to being biologically/culturally *dineh*? Indian people now of course recognize the three distinctions in their lives; Angloamericans are perhaps the last culture group to become aware of this collapse, and many still will not admit it. “Few phrases more momentous in historical terms have ever been uttered than ‘Black is beautiful!’ The cry serves as a paradigm for rediscovered beauty in being Chicano, Jew, Pole, French, German, Chinese, or other. Perhaps before long even Anglo-Saxon!”³ The recognition, the awakening of one to the difference between biological nature and cultural identity, is the first step toward self-transcendence.

The next step is recognition that, at least in the United States, we do not live in just *one* cultural context. We live in at least two—our local community and a national culture. We can imagine, and through imagination, realize at least a third orientation. The landing of humans on the moon has given us a new image, a global perception, of the possibilities of life. As Joseph Campbell said: “. . . the actual fact of the making and the visual broadcasting of that trip has transformed, deepened, and extended human consciousness to a degree and in a manner that amount to the opening of a new spiritual era.”⁴ This event and its preparation struck deep responsive chords in the lives of many ethnic minorities in the United States, and it was *not* that so much money was spent on the space projects. Common sense does not dictate the form of new creative images but rather what Campbell calls an “infusion in the minds of blacks, Chicanos, and others—an image of the possibilities of excitement” which created the new vision of life that had been systematically denied to them.⁵

The 1960s produced both the Civil Rights Movement and the landing of men on the moon. The Civil Rights Movement was not only a demand for social justice but an expression of a new perception of what it means to be human—a perception no longer sheltered among the intellectual elite, but shared by *all* people. It began, true enough, with Copernicus. His work, *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*, was indeed revolutionary. That revolution has taken 400 years to work itself into the hearts and

minds of the masses, and to find its living verification in a man's first step on the surface of the moon. In the U.S. we are in the final moments of resistance to that revolution.

John Higham suggests that racism arose out of the Copernican revolution, as an expression of resistance to change. We do not *want* a new way of life, so we establish rigid social boundaries to protect ourselves from change, and those boundaries are expressed as racism. Higham noted:

... modern racism [is] an expression and a result of the rigidification [*sic*] of social boundaries during a particular era of European and American history. Prior to modern times, ... the boundaries of the nation, the family, the age group, and the individual were vague. Even the concept of mankind was imprecise when monsters, angels, and legendary creatures also peopled the imagination. An immense demand for purity arose in the nineteenth century. A "Wall of Separation" grew between church and state, between Protestant and Catholic, between sinner and "teetotaler," between black and white. ... as the interdependence of an urban industrial society [became] increasingly evident [at the turn of the century], the purity ethic became more and more defensive. A fear of infection, sharpened by the germ theory of disease, replaced a hope of purifying the world. It was in this context that national and racial identities acquired an absolute character. After World War I, a policy of "isolationism" in foreign affairs was a culmination of a two-hundred-year trend toward cultural and social apartheid [in the United States].⁶

Higham is confident that this country's sweeping changes of the recent past will continue.

Nathan Huggins argued that pluralism is an avoidance of the question of an American identity, that we do not yet have such an identity but we need one to avoid fragmentation and mere anarchy. He noted:

The notion of pluralism, with its dynamics of competition and cooperation, assumes that community interests will be served naturally. Like the model of laissez-faire economics, it is as if by an "invisible hand" that the collective interest will be formed out of the struggle for self-interest. But it is just the absence of a sense of larger community that has made pluralism a compelling concept. Where a sense of broad community does not exist, it becomes useful to reduce the whole to its parts. The result can seem like a collection of groups and interests grabbing whatever they can get, producing little sense of commonwealth.

In his view, we must discover what unites us as a nation—the shared experiences which form a base for making us cohesive as a people. "There is a need to share in a general community—to look in the face of a fellow who is not one's own ancestry or religion and to acknowledge shared assumptions and values, to anticipate behavior and feelings."⁸

Huggins finds such a base in the shared experience of immigration, which is common to all but the American Indians, and even there, immigration forced upon them a new concept—*Indianness*.

The historical commonness of this immigrant and Americanization experience—the obligation, for better or worse, of living together and sharing one another's destinies—that has shaped new [people] and will define the distinctiveness of American character and American civilization.⁹

The commonness is true not only of European but even more so of the

black experience:

The coming of the African to America did make the African into a new man. In the old world, there were many Africans. Particularism [*sic*] was, and to a large extent still is, characteristic of African peoples. Tribal differences meant differences in language, religion, principal occupation, family relationship. They were not inconsequential matters. Some Africans were matrilineal, others patrilineal. Some were polygamous, others were monogamous. While most who came to America followed traditional African religions, others were Islamic. They had lived under a wide variety of social and political organizations. While we might find prevalences among the people who came, and while we may recognize a general commonality among them, they were preoccupied with the differences. They could not understand one another's language. They might find one another's customs repugnant. Yet out of this diversity there was created a single people in a much more thorough way than has occurred in the rest of American society. Ethnic pluralism was not allowed the Africans as it was the various Euro-Americans.¹⁰

If it is possible to discover commonly shared experiences transcending cultural boundaries and giving substance to the term "American," then it is equally possible to expand this process and discover the common experience of people in the Western Hemisphere, and finally in the world at large—and perhaps beyond that.

But we must be clear that such a commonly shared basis of experience is *not* the same as the marketplace society in which we perform must live. That distinction is insisted upon by Michael Novak:

There [are] . . . two distinct cultural networks in which the people of the United States participate. The first is the national culture, serviced and maintained by national magazines, national television networks, and other national systems of distribution and coordination. The second consists of the many other . . . networks, regional, religious, ethnic, and local, down to family network and neighborhood. It is regrettable that the universities and colleges are so often perceived to be, and are, agents of the national superculture and do so little to defend, nourish, and strengthen the local networks within which most citizens actually live.¹¹

We have hunches about the common culture's existence. The common culture is often confused with the superculture, and the reaction of many ethnic groups is as toward an adversary. Suppose we can find that common culture which both Novak and Huggins insist upon, must we then choose between that and our local culture? This is the argument between pluralism and integration, and it is finally one of personal identity. Who am I? Am I first an Italian or am I first an American or, for that matter, am I first a human being?

Perhaps one does not have to choose. Perhaps the categories are unrealistic. John Higham suggested:

The essential dilemma is the opposition between a strategy of integration and one of pluralism. Although the contrast has many dimensions, it can be summed up as a question of boundaries. The integrationist looks toward the elimination of ethnic boundaries. The pluralist believes in maintaining them. Their primary difference, therefore, concerns the scale and character of the community each takes as a model. Integration is pledged to the Great Community which is yet to be realized: the brotherhood of mankind. Pluralism holds fast to the little community: the concrete local brotherhood which is rooted in the past. Integration

in its modern form expresses the [universal nature] of the Enlightenment. Pluralism rests on the premises of romantic thought.¹²

These two points of view have contrasting understandings of the role of the individual:

The democracy of integration is an equality of individuals; pluralist democracy is an equality of groups. For the assimilationist the primary social unit and the locus of value is the individual. What counts is [the right] to self-definition. The individual must be free to secede from . . . ancestors. This is exactly what happens in the process of assimilation: individuals or families detach themselves one by one from their traditional communities. For pluralists, however, the persistence and vitality of the group comes first. Individuals can realize themselves, and become whole, only through the group that nourishes their being.¹³

Put in this way, both views appear undesirable and unrealistic. "Assimilationism falsely assumes that ethnic ties dissolve fairly easily in an open society,"¹⁴ and pluralism ". . . assumes a rigidity of ethnic boundaries and a fixity of group commitment which American life does not permit."¹⁵ Moreover, "pluralism encourages the further illusion that ethnic groups typically have a high degree of internal solidarity."¹⁶ Finally, "whereas assimilation penalizes the less ambitious and successful groups and individuals, pluralism circumscribes the more autonomous and adventurous."¹⁷

His answer is a system which Higham calls "pluralistic integration"; that is, a combination of both views, a system in which one lives in both cultures—the local culture and the common culture of the United States (and, ultimately, the world). That such a view is objectionable to some ethnic minority groups stems from the effects of racism and the consequent adversary relationship between the ethnic culture and the "superculture." But racism has a particular history and is coming to an end. Since the time of the isolationism of the years following the First World War, ". . . we have witnessed what may be only the beginning of a profound shift of direction."¹⁸

That direction is, of course, the recognition of the realities opened by the Copernican revolution and symbolized by the landing of men on the moon, the possibility of multicultural life. Such a possibility should not be seen as a fascination with exotica but an affirmation of the essential nature of people—that we are both locally identified and capable of transcending that context. We may be reeds, as Blaise Pascal said, and the weakest thing in nature, but we are thinking reeds, nonetheless. To transcend oneself is fundamentally human.

How do we transcend ourselves? First, by dialogue and interaction and study; by "reasonable articulation, investigation, and criticism of one another's fundamental human standpoints."¹⁹ And what we discover is that the more multicultural we are, the more intensely personal we become, because it is simply not possible to interact in intelligent and

emotional ways with cultures other than our own and *not* discover the cultural limitations of self-identity in a vacuum. The point is to see our cultural matrix from a new perspective. We become objective about our own cultural value-system as we come into contact with other cultures and other value-systems. Since we are all members of the human race, we can discover other and enriching dimensions of being human, increasing thereby our self-consciousness and expanding our self-identity. At the same time, of course, we learn to recognize the specific grasp of reality and mode of existence of other cultures, and their right to exist, equal to our own, neither better nor worse.

The educational system must be responsive to the three dimensions of people—their biological particularities, their ethnic and socio-cultural matrix, and their psycho-personal transformations. The problem has been that educational institutions, as Nisbet and Novak both suggest, have reflected and been determined by the marketplace society, the “superculture.” The effects of this are to alienate us from our cultural matrix.

In a word, if ordinary people in the United States begin to lose confidence in the cultural services provided them by America’s colleges and universities, there is some reason for their mistrust. Not often does a young man or woman from one of America’s many neighborhoods depart for the university and then come back deepened, more articulate, and peacefully self-critical with respect to his or her native neighborhood. Most often, particularly at the “better” schools, the student is purposely, in any case intensively, “enlightened” from his or her previous unenlightenment, sometimes embittered, almost always alienated from the home. Is it wise or good that so many in our land “cannot go home again”? An educated person ought not to return unchanged; but one would hope that change would be characterized by sympathy, by a greater understanding, by an easier tolerance, rather than by a vague and scarcely nameable hostility.²⁰

The trend should be toward a more responsive and responsible commitment to local and regional groups. This trend must be encouraged, for it is the only way members of ethnic cultures (which is all people) will discover that we are beautiful, and that our heritage is beautiful.

The task for ethnic studies in encouraging the search for identity at all levels is discussed in the conclusion of *Habits of the Heart*. After analyzing American cultural traditions and what Robert Bellah calls the “first language” of autonomous individualism, he pleads for a return to tradition, community, and commitment. Only in the local, ethnic identification with “my people” can one find authentic identity and a foundation from which one can reach for the moon. In Bellah’s words, we must reaffirm the “. . . classic role of education as a way to articulate private affirmations with cultural meanings so that individuals simultaneously become more fully developed people and citizens of a free society.”²¹ Anyone who wishes to find authentic identity must face the paradox of being identified with a tradition, a culture, and even a

biology. Perhaps we are on the threshold of an even greater paradox: to find one's true self, one must identify with all of the globe's people.

Notes

- ¹Michael Novak. "The One and the Many." *Daedalus*. (Fall, 1974) 204.
- ²Robert Nisbet. "The Decline of Academic Nationalism." *Change*. (Summer, 1974) 28.
- ³*Ibid.*
- ⁴Joseph Campbell. *Myths to Live By*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1972) 246.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, 249.
- ⁶John Higham. "Another American Dilemma." *The Center Magazine*. (July/August, 1974), 73.
- ⁸*Ibid.*, 56.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, 57.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, 58.
- ¹¹Novak, 207.
- ¹²Higham, 67-68.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, 68.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*
- ¹⁹Novak, 204.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 210.

²¹Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985) 293.

Critique

Ethnic Studies is generally viewed as a minor program in the academy, lacking research philosophy and methodology. Consequently, scholars who attempt research concerning peoples of color focus on the “group”: their social history, migration patterns, political and economic development, educational attainment, and lifestyle. Social science disciplinary guidelines are the usual framework. John Hatfield’s “Identity as Theory and Method for Ethnic Studies” provides a basis for truly understanding ethnicity.

Hatfield stresses “identity” as a key for understanding the nature of the human character: That is,

The interaction of people who are self-consciously engaged in exploring their lives biologically, culturally, and personally, and the articulation of the boundaries at which these interactions take place, determines the scope and content of ethnic studies.

Hatfield emphasizes how the interrelationship of the biological, socio/cultural, psycho/personal components are crucial for ethnic studies theory and method. Although Frederik Barth emphasized the nature of ethnic group members moving across ethnic boundaries depending on their social situation,¹ Hatfield’s specific focus on personal identity provides a method for comprehending how “human beings move from biologically determined particularity through cultural nurturing and identity, to personal and self-conscious transcendence.” By placing emphasis on identity within a program devoted to understanding the complexities associated with ethnicity and ethnic groups, Hatfield begins to explore the soul of human development and choice. Personal liberation within the context of understanding oneself in relationship to society, familial inheritance, and group alignments bridge university disciplines and broaden the scope of ethnic studies.