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Collective Identity, between Ideology and Cooperation

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Abstract: The present article aims to analyze the shaping method of collective identities and how they operate. A collective identity is based on a common set of symbols and values – both material and spiritual – faiths, rules of conduct and rituals, all consistent through time, and it derives from the interactions of the individuals, but also from their relationships with the social structures and ideologies. The more extensive and original the structures are, the stronger the identity is. Throughout time, collective identity has been identified with different types of membership, such as nationality, tribe, race, ethnicity, thus forming the *classic identity model*. Therefore, it has been assumed that the biological inheritance includes an inheritance – in certain cases a cultural superiority, based on the observation that people actually live in communities genetically related, going as far as isolating themselves from other groups around. On the contrary, the American liberal antiracism denies the importance of both biological factors and races, due to the fact that, in this perspective, races do not exist. The current analysis aims to propose an *in-between view*. We shall see that race is an inherited morphological reality, which, contingently and a posteriori, can acquire cultural significance. Categories such as self-description, social standpoint, affiliation to the group and values of the community might provide us, in the end, the key to a better analysis of the relationship between common identity and ideologies, especially in modern societies. Consequently, collective identity will appear as a commitment rather than a merely given affiliation, in the formation of which ideologies play an essential role.

Keywords: collective identity, nationality, ethnicity, belonging, values, symbols, culture.

Collective identity presupposes several agents and it is built on common goals, as a result of complex social interactions, which can, to the same extent, compose or decompose communities. However, how could we define social identity?

"Collective identity is not simply a stable and enduring set of symbols, values, beliefs, behavioral rules, emotions, and rituals, since these vary widely in their elaboration and stability." (Downey, Lofland, in Stoecker 1995, 113) Rather, collective identity is produced and reproduced continually through the life course of a social movement, as activists interact with targets and other audiences (Benford and Hunt, in Stoecker 1995, 113). "As these individuals interact with each other, they also interact with more enduring social structures, such as race, class, and sex/gender divisions, whose influences they must interpret and define." (Stoecker 1995, 113)

Collective identity results from the interactions between individuals and from their relations with the social structures, which survive in time, defining them both individually and as members of the community. Involvement in solving common problems, as well as participating in structures by which values and acceptability are defined, make collective identity "the universe of frames that are often linked together" (Stoecker 1995, 113). The more extensive and original the structures are, the stronger the identity is. It seems that collective identity could be understood as a sum of individual identities, as it is easy to accept that individuals, who pursue their personal interests first and foremost, would

also unite in order to achieve goals. And yet, it couldn't be so, mainly because the frames in which each of them moves are not particularly consistent, especially in the relation between individual and collective frames. People can be both self-interested and politically committed, reactionary and radical, brave and fearful. Thus, a collective identity only partly reflects the various identities of its members, providing further potential for identity disputes." (Stoecker 1995, 114) Hence, according to Charles Westin, we could say that any community with a stable identity is characterized by internal divergences, and not only by a high degree of convergence to a common set of values (2010, 40).

Researchers, especially sociologists and political scientists, have tried to define collective identity on the basis of their representative notes, such as individual, group, interest, ideology, solidarity, thus risking an over-extension of the concept's sphere. Instead, a possible compromise solution between a proper definition and one that is too broad could be the one proposed by Francesca Poletta and her collaborators: "We have defined collective identity as an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity." (2001, 285) As several authors mention, collective identity should not be confused with personal identity, being a representation of a shared status, "rather imagined, than experienced directly". (2001, 285) As a construct, the individual finds the collective identity already formed from the first stage, so, in a way, imposed at an exterior level and only subsequently accepted on a personal one. This level consists of – but is not limited to – cultural references, such as names, denotations, symbols, verbal specificities, rituals, clothing etc. Collective identities are not the result of computing opportunities and, unlike ideologies, they generate positive reactions even among groups other than their own.

As DeMarrais and her colleagues prove, ideologies – as part of culture – constitute an important component of socio-political systems and human interactions (1996, 15-31). Their thesis is that ideologies go through a process of materialization, in order to be shared as parts of culture. Thanks to this, ideologies obtain concrete forms that will allow them to self-perpetuate, even beyond the group of origin. Generally speaking, we can understand ideologies either as epiphenomena caused by certain modes of production, or as active elements meant to influence social, political and economic institutions, possibly resulting from externalizing ideal images of communities. "We approach ideology differently, recognizing it as a central element of a cultural system. The direction we pursue here is to understand ideology as a source of social power. Social power is the capacity to control and manage the labor and activities of a group to gain access to the benefits of social action." (1996, 15)

Interestingly, the choice of certain power strategies over others does not lead only to different results, but reflects the historical circumstances in which those choices was made, as well as the goals of the groups – so, indirectly, their degree of cohesion. Ideologies involve, as DeMarrais and her collaborators state, "both a material and a

symbolic component", which have equal degrees of importance in communication (1996, 16). Symbols, including images, rituals, monuments and written texts, have the role of sending messages. How can they convey their messages, especially when faced with competing ideologies? By taking physical, concrete forms, which translate into 'materializing the ideology' (in the current sense, the term should not be confused with that of 'objectification', as it appears, for example, in Marx). This special process allows symbols not only to survive as forms of power radiating from central authorities, but also, in time, to spread and be accepted as values and benefits, at the community level itself. Since they are not self-sufficient, humans need to collaborate with others, this being accomplished within cultures, as organized structures that can include a diversity of individuals. Since we cannot understand culture only as a collection of abstract norms and values, we must also recognize the importance of its practical component, namely the actual production of objects.

Thus, we can say: "Materialization is the transformation of ideas, values, messages, myths and other similar ones into physical realities – ceremonial events, symbolic objects, monuments, writing systems." (DeMarrais 1996, 16) Although less evident at the level of small groups, such as families, the need of materialization becomes clearer in the case of larger groups, such as nations. Besides being a form by which leaders legitimize themselves as elites, ideologies facilitate the communication of values, giving meaning to the outside world. Thus, the main effect of the materialization of ideologies is that they bestow power, allowing elites to promote their goals in groups and outside them. Also, since ideas can be hard to control, there is a risk that ideologies will be sabotaged and destroyed, by manipulating meanings on both inside and outside level. However, the more accessible and less anchored in reality an ideology is, the more easily it can be attacked, copied, modified, replaced or destroyed.

The means by which an ideology can be materialized – ceremonies, symbol-objects, public monuments – can take different forms; speech, for example, can be such a form. Of course, the selected shapes depend on the target audience, the combination of certain means being more capable of ensuring success than others. Therefore, things such as the degree of information, interest or cohesion of the public, play an important role, collective identities being put into play with a double meaning: as, on one hand, being constituted by ideologies and, on the other hand, by validating or sanctioning ideologies. By examining the ways in which ideologies materialize, we can reconstruct, implicitly, the ideologies themselves and we can determine their degree of success. As expected, the better a community is managed and the greater economic resources it has, the greater its capacity to put ideals into practice.

We may recognize ceremonial events and rituals amongst the most effective forms by which ideologies manifest themselves. This is due to the larger degree of participants involved, to the possibilities of combining various types of materialization, and to the immediate effects they produce. They all involve recognition of rules, while stimulating competition between participants. Consider, for example, the case of ceremonies such as

the 'harvest festival', which take the form of habits that seem to be lost in the darkness of time. In the same way, we may consider popular assemblies such as those organized – sometimes according to newly introduced rituals" – by various political leaders: take, for instance, the case of the May 1st holidays or the Nuremberg meetings. Fetish speeches and images, such as portraits of leaders and party and state" symbols, will, at their turn, reinforce expected responses ('tightly united around the beloved Party and Leader'). Ceremonies imply a high degree of perishability in exchange for the immediacy of the effect they produce, in the sense that they require a permanent renewal of the message transmission. The rituals that characterize such ceremonies can be confiscated by elites, who may or may not allow access to certain categories at different stages or at different places of their activities. "These costs, complexities, and scale demonstrate through dramatic ephemeral images the hierarchical organization of the state and its apparent monopoly on such performances." (DeMarrais 1996, 18)

In turn, symbolic objects and images produce significant ideological effects, forming rapid bridges in communication. They can constitute distance signals between leaders and groups, reflecting relationships of affiliation, dependence, correspondence, thus being meant to signal loyalty and consensus among individuals. Being possessed, transferred or inherited, some of these objects are excellent status signifiers. Through them, elites signal who they are, going as far as conveying to others the monopoly they have over them, through their associated images and values – see the case of the treasures with which some leaders are buried, a symbol of the importance of the social position, which goes beyond personal death. Therefore, as power symbols, the objects can take different forms, from valuable ones, to others with insignificant value, as in the case of medals or laurel wreaths.

Also, on the list of symbols manipulated by ideologists, one can find imposing monuments and even changing landscapes; ceremonial or defensive buildings, pyramids, public markets, political centers – all represent the power of authority. As examples, I will mention the mausoleums and memorial houses dedicated to political personalities, such as those in the Red Square or the one in the Tiananmen Square. Hitler's projected capital ('Germania'), with its new meeting building ('Volkshalle') that would have had a dome so large that, alone, would have produced its own atmosphere, or the People's House and the Civic Center of the dictator Ceausescu, with its Victoria Socialismului boulevard (which is said to have been designed to be one meter wider than the Champs Élysées'Paris); do these symbols not exactly support this view of the role of materialized ideology? Or, why not, the capital city, Washington D.C.?

The way in which public and management buildings are distributed in space is therefore also a map of the distribution of power over a certain territory – in the most proper way of the term. This has been done since ancient times, as evidenced by the studies of Hyslop and Zuidema, cited by DeMarrais (1996, 19). Thus, in Cuzco, the center of the Inca empire, a series of radiant lines had the role of tracing relationships between different groups, but also between them and the cosmic powers. The monuments remain over time,

surviving the civilizations that built them, evidence not only of their passage, but of the permanence of the ideologies to which they temporarily gave form.

Last, but not least, writing is another form of ideology. It is a form whose advantage is that it can be direct, because it can say clearly, not only strictly symbolic, what it has to say. "Written documents, such as inscribed stelae or monuments, legal documents, contracts, and stories, are physical manifestations of belief systems and, like other means of materialized ideology, may tell a story, legitimate a claim, or transmit a message. While the other means of materialization accomplish this task indirectly through symbols, some texts are explicit and direct" (DeMarrais 1996, 19). Due to these qualities, written documents have the characteristic of formalizing the rules issued by authorities and of establishing hierarchies, but also of carrying political or propaganda messages, regardless of whether they are exaggerated or even false. It remains to be seen which role would writing still have in the hierarchy of ideological means, in the post -"Gutenberg Galaxy".

What is an ideology, and what is the origin of this concept? Even if there is no agreement on the definition, the opinions are consistent, at least, on the origin. The first use of the term is from 1796 and belongs to Destutt de Tracy. He returns to the term in his *Les élements de l'idéologie* (1801-1807), as stated by Michailo Markovic (1984, 70), which also shows that its original meaning has changed several times. Initially, according to Locke and Condillac, ideology was considered an exact science, having the role of studying the origin of ideas and even of all knowledge, starting from sensory perceptions; this sense, however, is lost. What remained would be the tendency to criticize social order, from an idealistic perspective, in order to propose other foundations for it. By the 1800s, this tendency was strongly fought by some philosophers and important politicians, as an 'utopia.' On the contrary, other thinkers (e.g. Helmut Plessner) believed that man is simply "an ideological being".

The nineteenth century brought a more objective, even neutral interpretation: ideology is a science that studies the origins, development and variation of ideas. Instead, "There is a universal consensus nowadays that whatever ideology is, it is not a *science*, and whatever its social function is, it is not to provide a true description of reality and of existing culture." (Markovic 1984, 71) Marx, in turn, distinguished between two forms of ideology: a descriptive one, that is widely accepted, and a normative or critical one. According to the first interpretation, ideology would be the totality of the forms that a social superstructure can take: political orientations, laws, religions, philosophy, art, sciences, morals. According to the other, an ideology, as reflecting economic infrastructures, can be false or true insofar as it agrees with or favors historical progress. In contradiction with the Marxist view, A. Seidel rejects the sociological explanation, proposing instead one of a biological nature: "ideologies are attempts to sublimate a sick instinctual life" (Seidel, in Markovic 1984, 71). In the same vein, Erich Fromm's research shows that "something indeed goes wrong with the instinctive life of an individual with ideological consciousness, but sickness is not a

purely biological phenomenon, it is rather determined by the social position and the way of life of the group to which it belongs" (Fromm, in Markovic 1984, 71-72).

After analyzing the origin and meanings of the concept, Markovic (1984, 73), argues that any ideology is an organized corpus of ideas, which satisfies simultaneously the following necessary conditions: it appears in societies where social forces are strongly imbalanced, not being subordinated to an autonomous and democratic regulatory framework; it represents the expression of particular interests of social groups whose purpose is to conserve or change the structures of power; these particular interests are not completely visible, partly because social relations are not sufficiently transparent, which makes their driving forces unconscious, unknown and irrational. "Ideological statements are value judgments expressed in factual (indicative) form" (Markovic 1984, 73): vis-à-vis a given social order, ideologies offer a dual distorted image – either idealizing it, in order to legitimize it, hiding its essential incapacities and presenting it as a necessity of human fulfillment, or criticizing it, with the aim of abolishing the smallest achievements, regardless of the differences between the ideal and the concrete world. "Consequently, ideology is neither a true knowledge nor a merely false consciousness; in order to attract and get mass support it must preserve an appearance of truth (*Schein*), therefore properly selected half-truths are the material which it builds up." (Markovic 1984, 73); the social function of an ideology is to incite attack or defense, integrating itself with a particular grouping, offering it a scale of values and a direction in practical activity.

It is not to be understood that, necessarily, every social construction must correspond to an ideology. There are better ways of fighting than ideologies, in accordance with democratic ideals, which, in turn, represent the best compromise between the group interests of those who lead and the general interests of those who are led. Thus, a democratic regime will favor balanced criticisms, taking care in preventing drifts either on the side of the unrealistic idealization or on the other of denying any limits, or practical gains.

What determines people to form communities, and also to consider themselves members of a culture, a group of citizens or of a state? "Self-acknowledgment of membership is a *prima facie* sufficient, if fallible, condition for cultural identification." (Cahoone 2005, 57) In addition to this we must mention, of course, certain ways of perceiving the world or of sharing common values and norms. As cultures themselves are not perfectly homogeneous, identities cannot be precisely identified, especially since each one in particular and all in a collective manner manifest themselves in a continuous change. However, the basis of any collective identity seems to be a certain type of cooperation and sharing of supplies and ideologies, starting with the physical ownership of land and resources and ending with symbols and rites. The latter can be very diverse, as in the case of large communities, provided there is a number of super-norms recognized and defended by most, as is the case with citizens in a state.

It is not enough, however, to be able to satisfy some characteristics pertaining to a group in order to be part of it, because identity is more than just a sum of features which

you can approach from the outside. Parekh, quoted by Lawrence Cahoone (2005, 58), exemplifies this aspect, pointing out that being British does not equate with sharing a set of values, a history or civil institutions, but rather "a specific form of life [...] a specific way of talking about and conducting common affairs. Being British therefore means learning the grammar, vocabulary and syntax of the prevailing form of life and knowing how to participate in its ongoing dialogue [...] [it is] a matter of acquiring conceptual competence in handling the prevailing cultural language". Cahoone also gives the example of someone who would learn Italian in order to do business in Italy, which could not turn anyone into an Italian. These would be just cases of "intimacy", but not of cultural "identity", because, in fact, cultural identity should be something deeper and be an end in itself, or at least refer to the goals one is proposing. Not even sharing certain values is equivalent to sharing an identity. I can do everything like a Japanese, or even get to know Japanese art, philosophy and civilization better than a Japanese, without becoming one, in the sense of being recognized as such. Being part of a group is not just about matching that group, but, especially, being recognized as such. Also, over time, collective identity has been identified as different types of belonging, such as nationality, tribe, race, ethnicity. Each of these has, more or less, been the subject of contradictory debates and idealizations.

Therefore, we can take as example the influence of American liberal antiracism, which denies the importance of both biological factors and races. Under this ideology, there are voices that state presently that races do not exist, although many centuries in a row have supported the contrary, as can be seen in some anthropological movements from the 19th century and some pseudo-scientific ones from the 20th century. In the philosophical field, Anthony Appiah states that the races do not exist and that the term itself is void of meaning. The critiques of the "racial pentagram" (the so-called black, red, yellow, brown and white races) addressed by David Hollinger, go in the same direction. On the opposite side, starting from aspects such as skin color or facial features, it has been assumed that the biological inheritance includes a heredity – in certain cases a cultural superiority. Nevertheless, people actually live in genetically related communities, going as far as isolating themselves from other groups. Philip Kitcher, quoted by Lawrence Cahoone, defined race from a genetic point of view, as a "phenotypic commonalities in a group defined by sufficiently inbred lineages" (Kitcher in Cahoone 2005, 61).

Isn't it, though, the in-between version precisely the right one? Indeed, it might be that "Race is a set of morphological traits that are inherited, hence can serve as markers for ancestry, which societies *may* then pick out as salient whenever they think ancestry matters." (Cahoone 2005, 61) In other words, race is an inherited morphological reality, which, contingently and a posteriori, can acquire cultural significance. This explains the fact that race worked as a social, cultural and psychological delimitation in many places and historical times. Since there are more cultures than races, it can be clearly stated that races do not determine cultures or, at least, not by themselves.

More than race and as culmination of this principle, the so-called 'land and blood bonds' or "tribe bonds" provide the basis for group solidarities and the creation of the collective identity ideologies. "Blood is in one sense narrower and in another sense broader than race. For blood means *descent,* and descent is a complex matter." (Cahoone 2005, 62), presenting genetic, social and legal aspects. So, can only genetically linked persons be part of a family? As a counterexample, spouses do not share the same bloodline. Therefore, this proves that community cannot be constituted of unique clans, no matter how small they are – marriages would prevent that. By gathering together, some clans could form a tribe at best, which could not work as an equivalent to a race, an ethnic group, or a nation. The tribes are surpassing local and cross-ethnic boundaries. However, bloodline bonds play a key role in individuals' existence: this is due to the fact that we are born and raised in families, and that these wear the mark of a specific culture, which is passed on to us and acquires a shaping role. The family passes on to its members, and especially to children, notions and concepts regarding ethnicity, nationality, culture, affiliation and identity.

Another type of connection that unites communities is the place, the ground or land. One's origin and cultural identity are determined, somehow, by one's birthplace and childhood place. The 'land customs' unite the individuals and provide the feeling of a super-individual identity. This is a historical and geographical identity, and therefore also cultural, although the Western-liberal philosophy seems to deny it. However, the sense of belonging to a certain place generates specific types of socio-economical relationships, based on property and commercial exchanges, which create, in turn, development and therefore culture, including cultural identity as well. Retrieving an identity justification based solely on place connections is debatable, but surprisingly, morally plausible: we have been working this land since ancient times and that unites us and provides us certain rights. Furthermore, this interpretation is supported also by real acts, such as repossessions or compensation claims to communities or individuals who, at a certain point, had their land taken away (let's take as example the native Americans).

Nowadays, the 'blood' and 'land' concepts have lost much of their importance and there are only a few who still claim them as identity criteria, although these concepts continue to power certain nationalist ideologies. This comes also as a consequence of the individual's belonging to larger communities, such as nations, and requires larger concepts as well, such as citizenship, nationality or ethnicity. The last concept of the list embodies multiple interpretative possibilities, including the ones narrowed by race or derived from it. As Cahoone mentions, historically and linguistically speaking, "ethnicity" is often understood as "nationality" and comes from the Greek word "ethnikos", which refers to a different people, some sort of "barbarians". "Ethnikos" is related to "éthos", which translates as character, but also to "ethos", which translates as custom. Also, the word 'nation' comes from Latin, and is correlated with 'nasci', which means to be born, to belong to a descendance.

For a long time, the communities founded on ethnic principles have been considered as the basis for the ideal state. Their problem was the identification of social belonging with the one of a particular culture, which leads to isolation. Moreover, group belonging will be conditioned by the appropriation and consideration towards certain rules, the same for everyone. This shortcoming can be surpassed, as in the case of the great Western or Islamic civilizations, which allowed a very specific collective identity. They were constructed on a central authority and a religion-based culture, but comprised a diversity of languages and customs. This type of identity has multiple levels, which create, in turn, several adherence criteria, depending on the proximity to the center. In these cases, one might speak of subordinated local identities or, better yet, of identities correlated to the central ones. Furthermore, ethnicity can be understood as descendance. Claiming your identity using ethnic arguments equals stating your belonging to a certain descendance. However, this type of statement can be easily refuted. Nevertheless, modern societies cannot be considered homogenous to any extent.

Edward Shils stated that "traditional" societies, and a few modern ones as well, are grounded upon three constituents: the personal one, resulting from individual roles and interactions, the sacred one, religious in kind, and the primordial one, related to territorial and blood bonds. The last ones are mostly related to the past (Cahoone, 2005, 73). Anthony Smith leans towards a similar interpretation, by submitting that the present countries have their origin in ethnic groups. Moreover, he states that nations are not a product of modernity, but modernity is a product of a historical development initiated by ethnic groups (Smith, in Westin 2010, 16). Obviously, considering ethnicity as the basis for identity is controversial. Therefore, Charles Westin mentions (2010, 13) that one should keep in mind at least two meanings of the concept: a primordialist and an instrumentalist one.

Supported by Geerz, the primordialist view states that the ethnical identification is deeply embedded in the human nature. Some interpretations go even further and consider that ethnicity is embedded at a genetic level. Instead, the instrumentalist view claims that ethnicity is not a given feature belonging to the individuals, but instead is a characteristic of human relationships, manifesting under certain economic and political conditions. However, the facts that modern societies have these connections as fundament does not imply, as some think, that they are reduced to or explained fully by these. On the contrary, Shils mentions that societies should not be considered only as selfish, lacking compassion and based exclusively on interests or impersonal rules, but also that they are established on countless interpersonal connections, moral and civic attitudes. According to Fredrik Barth, even within a primordialist view one must admit that the nature of the interpersonal and cross-cultural exchanges is to modify borders, thus affecting the self-image and affiliation of individuals. The fact that a community can preserve its identity despite the contact with other communities shows that it is grounded on primordialist criteria, along with inclusion and exclusion (Westin 2010 14-15). Similarly to Brubaker and Cooper, in order to reject or tone down primordialism,

René Grotenhuis believes that the problem of defining identity can be solved by separating the multiple aspects of the concept.

Therefore, one should consider categories such as identification and categorization (how I characterize myself compared with certain socially predefined roles – for example, being a medic), self-description and social standpoint (what I am, in my own terms and contexts) and affiliation to the group and values of the community. Taken as a whole, these categories might provide us the key to a better analysis of collective identity, starting from individual ones.

Consequently, collective identity is a committed and not just a given affiliation. As Cahoone notes, "Nevertheless, clearly modern and postmodern society tend to efface the conditions necessary for primordialism. In those areas and dimensions of social life where it is correct to say that modernity is a world of *contract*, not status, of individual initiative, liberty, and self-creation, not inheritance or acceptance, of making and doing, not being, primordialism is blocked or demoted." (2005, 76) Undoubtedly, modern and postmodern societies have a tendency against favoring the conditions of primordialism.

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