

# Civic Education Seminars

## Identity and Diversity

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**“A nation which does not regularly question its identity is a nation which has stopped talking to itself, has lost interest in the past and lacks curiosity about the future. ”**

**John Tusa**

### **The objectives**

The objective of this lecture is to discuss a number of issues related to the concept of identity and how it is related to the field of civic engagement. The lecture provides an opportunity for students to reflect on different approaches dealing with this concept and focuses on the assumption that identities can be multiple, as individuals may have several identities, mutually reinforcing, or cross cutting each other. The lecture also invites students to build their own civic identities on the basis of the real needs of their communities.

### **The Main Points**

- 1. The Concept of Identity**
- 2. Identity and the Social Sciences**
- 3. A Compound Meaning**
- 4. Identities and Metaphors**
- 5. Majority Civic and Minority Ethnic Nationalism**
- 6. Languages as Sources of Identity**
- 7. Changing Identities**
- 8. Multiple National Identities**
- 9. Building Civic Identity**
- 10. References**

## 1. The Concept of Identity

- The term *identity* does not refer to an objective phenomenon and there is no general consent about what it means.
- The meaning of identity has evolved and has often been misused.
- Identity started off in logic, meaning sameness of two objects, in the sense of identical. It then evolved to mean the continuity of an individual personality.
- By extension, identity has been used in a metaphorical sense to signify a broader use: social identity, collective identity, where the social or collective is given an individual personality. The term has become a metaphor, moving from individual to collective.
- Other derived uses include legal identity and shared identity. The phrase 'political identity' has been so widely used that it has become devalued. There has been a slide from personal identity, to common sense identity and larger national identity.

## 2. Identity and the Social Sciences

- Cultural anthropologists, such as Margaret Mead, writing in the 1920s, assume that each culture is unique, consistent and binding. Individual identity could not be comprehended outside of a collectivity. Cultural identity theorists have been concerned with 'national character'.
- The term *identity* has also become increasingly important in modern psychology, largely through the work of Erik Erikson. He has used the term to designate a sense of 'self' that develops in the course of man's life and that both relates him to and sets him apart from his social milieu. The terms "identity crisis" and "identity confusion," introduced by Erikson, have gained a wide usage, which often varies from their intended technical sense.
- Sociologists believe that identity is only comprehensible in a social-group context, since identity is shaped by interaction. For Goffmann the individual exists only in situations of social interaction.

### 3. A Compound Meaning

- Regardless of its initial meaning, identity has a compound sense; identity can be personal, social, or collective. In practice these levels interact and are mutually entangled.
- Political identity can be understood as ‘common purpose’, as an entity that may persist through time. Collective forms of political identity are class, race, religion and nation. In most cases, rhetoric of identity strengthens the cohesion of a group.

### 4. Identities and Metaphors

- Identities can be multiple; indeed individuals may have several identities, limiting the impact of any specific identity. These identities can be mutually reinforcing, or cross cutting each other.
- Identity is understood as common purpose, something that may persist through time. It consists of a combination of myths, symbols, rituals and ideology.
  - Myths: the founding images of groups, nations, social groups, regions....;
  - Symbols: flags, signs, language;
  - Rituals: especially understood in a political sense;
  - Ideology: coherent patterns of belief.

### 5. Majority Civic and Minority Ethnic Nationalism

- McEwen and Moreno (2005) contrast majority (civic) and minority (ethnic) nationalism. In the prevalent model of civic nationalism, a predominant ethnic group forges a state and unifies a ‘nation’.
- Nations are built by core hegemonic groups, such as the Piedmontese in Italy, the English in Britain, the Castilians in Spain, the Franks in France, the Prussians in Germany, the Walloons in Belgium and the Arabs in Morocco.
- None of these states could completely eradicate forms of minority identity, which periodically reassert itself to express ethnic identities. Minority, or ethnic nationalism, has been revived across the world. It challenges the belief that citizens should have only one civic-identity and should interact in a neutral public sphere. Minority nationalists challenge the claim that the state is to govern in the name of ‘one people’ and seek to shift loyalties from the civil state to the sub-state level.

## 6. Multiple National Identities

- Though civic and ethnic nationalism are often in conflict, the core of Moreno's argument is that modern states have witnessed the emergence of *multiple identities*.
- There is evidence that 'citizens in advanced liberal democracies seem to reconcile supranational, state and local identities, which both majority and minority nationalisms often tend to polarize in a conflicting manner' (McEwen and Moreno, 2005: 22).

## 7. Languages as Sources of Identity

- There is a strong argument that recent moves to more differentiated forms of regional and local governance are likely to encourage linguistic pluralism (see, for example, Keating, Loughlin and Deschouwer, 2003).
- In countries such as Spain, Belgium and Italy, the move to enhanced regional self-consciousness in the 1980s and 1990s was associated with a rediscovery of the value of less-used languages and cultures and the adoption of new policy instruments to plan language revival. The revival of the Amazigh language and culture in Morocco is a case in point.
- In the age of 'think global, act local', language can exercise a useful signalling function, demonstrating clearly the distinctiveness and value-added identity of specific regions (see Edwards 1985).

## 8. Changing Identities

- Each individual creates systems for his verbal behaviour so that they shall resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he may wish to be identified, to the extent that
  - a. he can identify the groups,
  - b. he has both opportunity and ability to observe and analyse their behavioural systems,
  - c. his motivation is sufficiently strong to impel him to choose, and to adapt his behaviour accordingly,
  - d. he is still able to adapt his behaviour.

(Le Page1968)

- People's identities are always open to change and the ways in which they are represented and understood shifts over time.
- People have to desire to identify with a group – identities cannot be imposed.
- People have multiple identities and different aspects of this identity become more or less significant in different contexts.
- Identities are formed in part through the interaction of power and resistance.

### **9. Building Civic Identity**

- Today, youths, in many parts of the world, are constructing their civic identities through such means as community service and political activism. This community participation has given them the opportunity to comprehend the complexities of their society and work on the realization of some social-moral ideals or a common public philosophy, essentially based on a set of common citizenship values.
- This approach seeks to combat prejudice and promote positive inter-group civic relations by fostering meaningful contact among citizens of different backgrounds. Building civic Identity has a distinctive contribution to reinforce community cohesion and to strengthen affective attachments among potentially quite large numbers of people.
- The term 'civic Identity' contributes to a theory of political socialization that bases youth's understanding of political aspects of society and citizenship on participation in community and civic activities, rather than on the intake of abstract pieces of formal information.

#### **To this end, youth seek**

- to resolve ideological tensions, such as in Northern Ireland and the Middle East;
- to overcome corrupting political practices, such as in Italy and Taiwan;
- to deal with disillusionment, such as in the emerging Eastern European nations;
- to bridge barriers against youth's meaningful participation in the working of society, such as in Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States,
- to contribute to human and social development of their society , which is the case in Morocco.

Researchers in a wide array of fields, including psychology, sociology, political science, and education have been interested in this relatively new field of research.

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