

## Identity Movements

Simon Langlois

The main objective of social movements is to transform society so as to reflect the social actors' interests and view of the world. Such was the case with the labour movement in the early twentieth century and the decolonization movement in the 1960s (see articles "Social Movements: General" and "Social Movements: Resource Mobilization Theory"; Chazel 1992; Oberschall 1973). The identity movements that came to the fore in the last third of the twentieth century are of a different nature, because they express two complementary types of collective demands: 1) the defence of interests and the promotion of rights of certain groups of individuals who feel discriminated against, and 2) the search for symbolic recognition by a significant other.

Identity movements defend the interests, world visions, and values of groups of individuals or communities defined by such characteristics as phenotype (or *race*) and ethnicity; sex; language; sexual orientation; mythical origins and ancestral territory, in the case of First Nations in the Americas and the South Pacific; and religion, in the case of certain societies. Melucci (1989) even posits that *all* social movements have an identity dimension (on the link between social movements and identity, see Jasper 1997; Larana, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994).

Identity movements have three main and very distinct objectives. First, they denounce injustice toward minorities. Second, they convey the idea that specific cultures must be taken into consideration when public policies are elaborated so that they meet the specific needs of minorities. Third, they demand greater control of their institutions – a demand that sometimes goes as far as self-government.

Individuals involved in identity movements promote their own interests (Olson 1965) based on their way of seeing things and their personal knowledge and values. Their action is therefore marked by instrumental, cognitive, and axiological rationales. Boudon and Bourricaud (1982) have shown that the two dimensions of collective behaviour described by Smelser (1962), relation with norms and relation with values, are so closely linked as to become interdependent. The shared values of the members of a group or community play a central role in emerging identity movements, at least as important as the pursuit of individual interests.

This article will specify what should be understood by identity, define the characteristics of different types of identity movements, and discuss the relationship between the universal and particularistic norms which are specific to each movement.

## **1. Identity**

In the early twentieth century, identity was often defined according to “objective” traits, such as English tenacity, German discipline, and French ingenuity. What we now call identity was then known as the “soul of peoples” (see Siegfried 1950). Today, the problem of identity is no longer seen in this light (see the article “Social Identity”).

It is no longer possible to separate personal and collective identities. Individuals now belong to several social networks and groups, which, in turn, shape their identity, and they draw from society the elements that they need for self-definition. Today, they are faced with a great number of choices, many more than those of preceding generations. Education, individual and collective fulfilment, social mobility, career mobility, geographical mobility, and life style are some of the social processes that help to build identity.

Individuals play a key role in the building of collective identities especially in countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, where the mass arrival of immigrants shapes the basis on which identity is redefined. Canada, for example, which welcomed more than eight million immigrants between 1945 and 2000,

defines itself no longer as a bi-national society but as a bilingual and multicultural one. Australians are questioning the relevance of maintaining the royal symbols that are remnants of their colonial past. The same can be said of older countries such as England or France, whose present collective identity is marked by changes in individual life styles and moral values and the intermingling of peoples of diverse ethnic origins. Aspects of Ancien Régime France and Victorian England coexist with their more modern counterparts. Such contrasts can now be found in various degrees in every society. Immigration, urbanization, international trade, unequal regional development, differing interpretations of the past, social conflicts, and social stratification affect the construction of collective identities.

Taylor (1989) defines the concept of identity three ways. First, identity defines the moral outlook of each individual, in the sense that individuals are able to determine what is important to them. This corresponds to Erikson's (1968) conception that individual identity implies self-knowledge and a successful and accepted synthesis of diverse influences, especially those of the individual's family.

The second definition came into being with modernity and has enabled individuals to have a better grip on their own destiny. Theoretically, within the limits of their capacities, people can become what they want to be; the future is no longer dictated solely by ascribed status in society. Political freedom, education, and economic development have enabled individuals to innovate, and, to a certain point, be responsible for their future. Each individual may have diverging or even conflicting interests, but each will eventually define values that will be expressed through various social movements and collective conduct.

Taylor insists that self-affirmation and recognition by a significant other are the two conditions for achieving a successful identity. Social actors involved in identity movements are motivated both by what they see as a deficiency in democracy, and by the search for recognition which involves negotiation and sometimes struggle and which is probably the main feature of such movements.

Because individuals are also part of a people or nation and therefore also define themselves by their collective past, national identity is the third definition that Taylor

gives to the concept of identity. A nation or historical community offers people another perspective made up of a shared culture, life style, and language (Todorov 1995); Nations are also imagined communities (Anderson 1991). However, most countries are not homogeneous; in the second half of the twentieth century, they have had to deal with the problem of recognition of various nations within their own midst. One can therefore say that the relationship with the other, which is at the heart of identity assertion, is an internal problem in most countries.

Dumont (1974) distinguishes three types of human communities, each with a particular way of building self-identity: primary groups (small groups based on face-to-face interactions), integrated groupings (in which individuals play interchangeable roles), and reference groups (defined by a sense of belonging, an awareness of forming a community). Diversity, plurality, conflicts, and differences become inevitable as social groups grow in size, and the need to adopt a common reference then becomes essential to ensuring cohesion. Evidence of adhesion must eventually be transposed into a series of collective signs and symbols in order to become conscious references for each member within the grouping. Dumont goes on to describe the constantly repeated mechanisms that contribute to the building of identities: ideologies, literature, and historiography (to which, today, we could add the media) play a key role in the shaping of a common reference. He speaks of conflicting interpretations between various categories of actors involved in the process of building identities, and defines society as a series of interpretive practices.

The Scottish example is relevant here. Language is not a central issue in defining Scottish national identity, despite a recent interest in Gaelic; more important is identification with a mythic territory, a common history, and recollection of ancestral wars (Macdonald 1997). The situation is quite different in Quebec and Catalonia, where promotion of the national language (French and Catalan, respectively) plays a central role in the building of the respective identities.

## **2. Identity movements**

Four types of identity movements will be characterized by the cognitive and axiological systems that determine their action (see Boudon 1999), the means and field in which the action takes place, and the meaningful others involved in the search for recognition.

### *2.1 National identity movements*

Movements of national affirmation are undoubtedly the best-known types of identity movements. Gellner (1997) estimates that there are 15,000 national cultures demanding recognition in a world where there are only a few hundred nation-states. These movements challenge the dominant national reference in their respective countries, and they are determined to achieve official recognition. They are composed of national minorities – not to be confused with ethnic minorities resulting from immigration, who make demands of another nature.

National minorities fight social inequalities of which they see themselves as victims, and many demand that official institutions be modified. These types of protests generally give way to a search for a new constitutional framework within a nation-state. Situations and demands, in accordance with the historical and national contexts, are extremely diversified (Calhoun 1994).

### *2.2 Aboriginal identity movements*

The self-assertion of aboriginal nations in countries shaped by influxes of immigrants must be considered separately. There are approximately 250 million aboriginals living in these immigrant societies throughout the world, mainly in the Americas and the South Pacific. This enormous population (equivalent to half of that of Europe or two thirds of that of the United States) is divided into several thousand nations or distinct groups. In Canada, for example, there are 633 different bands and aboriginal nations – some groups numbering only a few hundred people –speaking 57 different languages.

Conquest and colonization by Europeans marginalized aboriginal nations, sometimes moving them to reservations, as is still the case in Canada and the

United States. These peoples have been the victims of serious historical injustices, and some of them were nearly extinguished by warfare. Today, they are demanding control of a number of institutions that will help them maintain their specific collective identities. Some aboriginal nations in the United States, the Sioux for example, and a large number in Canada and Australia are striving for self-government within their respective countries, but their small populations prevent most of them from claiming complete sovereignty.

Aboriginal communities build their action on three main aspects of their value system. First, there is the feeling of a common mythical origin. Second, and probably at the heart of their culture, is their relationship with nature, the land, and ancestral territory. Third is the idea of kinship and blood: aboriginal communities generally do not integrate strangers, for one is either born Native or one is not.

The search for symbolic recognition is particularly important to aboriginal communities, since, traditionally, their culture has been denigrated or denied. The leaders of these communities are now striving to build a new sense of identity in order to counteract the feeling of self-contempt. This explains why, for many of them, interpretation and self-definition have become so important.

### *2.3 Particularistic identity movements*

Other identity movements do not question existing institutions but aim for the rightful participation of specific groups of individuals, sometimes even imposing various modes of participation suited to their particular characteristics. Such is the case with linguistic or ethnic minorities that insist on having better access to important positions in the civil service and business organizations.

This type of movement includes the great majority of the feminist movements that demand an end to sex discrimination in public institutions and private enterprises. Although the feminist movement has very diverse components, it presents itself as an identity movement because it defends the interests of a portion of the population who feel wronged simply because they are women, and because of their opposition to a meaningful other who, in turn, becomes the main point of reference: men.

Groups of women now insist on empowerment and their share of all higher appointments in various occupations. The most radical feminist movements go so far as to claim that all social relations are gender relations.

The civil-rights movement for black Americans, which climaxed under the leadership of Martin Luther King, is also an identity movement (Morris 1984). Even though this movement is typically American, in the second half of the twentieth century, it has taken on a very important symbolic value in most Western countries; it also gave rise to programs for affirmative action in favor of visible minorities in the United States.

#### *2.4 Normative identity movements*

Other identity movements set out to modify social norms that affect private, civil, and professional lives of individuals. Actors in these movements aim for symbolic acceptance of their differences and want to change social stereotypes. These differences are of a sexual, intellectual, or physical nature, such as the visible characteristics of certain immigrants (Baumann 1996). Movements based on sexual orientation and in defence of the handicapped are good examples of this type of group, whose members feel that they are the victims of prejudice. Their complaints have been legally validated by many countries and have helped to change public attitudes. In most developed countries, homosexuality is no longer seen as a criminal offence and is officially accepted in some institutions, such as the armed forces. Today, some countries even acknowledge same-sex unions.

### **3. Universalism versus particularism**

Identity movement and the associated communitarian philosophy see values as being interwoven with specific cultures (Touraine 1997; Elbaz and Helly 2000).

Some analysts worry about the negative consequences of cultural relativism underlying certain demands put forth by identity movements (see Boudon 1999; Hardin 1995). These critics emphasize that communitarian norms easily converge with the interests of the actors involved in identity movements, whereas universal

norms seem to be weaker and take more time to surface because they do not serve the immediate interests of individuals. In this sense, Hardin (1995) has demonstrated that mobilization by spontaneous coordination may even bring about conflicts between different groups.

For other analysts, countries and modern constitutions today have no option but to accept and make the most of cultural diversity (Tully 1995). Multiculturalism – which has three different meanings and refers to a sociological reality, a philosophy, or a state policy – must be held up as an example. Kymlicka (1989) claims that multiculturalism does not split society up into isolated sub-groups but, on the contrary, offers a common framework within which differences may blossom in a context that respects diversity.



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