Identity and Diversity : could a Pan-American identity be constructed?

Prof. Jorge Larrain

Introduction

Any exploration of a possible Pan-American identity must take into account the present-day relationship between identity construction and cultural globalization. In this day and age the construction of any identity could not happen in a vacuum. This is why, prior to addressing the main issue of this presentation I would like to explore very briefly the way in which identities and cultural globalization are related. I shall outline 6 theses on globalization and culture which will provide part of the background necessary for the discussion of the main issue.

Globalization and Culture

1) In the first place, if globalization has a very important cultural dimension, this is due in part to the "mediazation" of modern culture.[1] This means that the media are increasingly shaping, on the one hand, the manner in which cultural forms are produced, transmitted and received in modern societies; and on the other, the modes in which individuals experience events and actions which occur in spatially and temporally remote contexts. Electronically created and transmitted symbolic forms can more easily abstract from space.
2) In second place, even though there are cultural elements of a great variety of origins which tend to break through national boundaries and get internationalized, this does not entail that globalization will mean an increasing cultural homogenization, or that culture will be progressively deterritorialized.[2] It may well be that today there is a certain electronic cultural space without a precise geographical location, but local cultures will

[1] See on this J. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 12-20 y 225-248.
[2] The thesis of the deterritorialization of culture can be found in K. Robins, "Tradition and Translation: National Culture in its Global Context" , en J. Corner y S. Harvey (eds), *Enterprise and Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 29.

never lose their importance and the global can only operate through them. The global does not replace the local, but the local operates within the logic of the global.

3) In the third place, globalization is not a teleological phenomenon, a process that inexorably leads to an end which might be a culturally integrated universal human community, but a dialectic and contingent process which progresses by engendering contradictory forces.[3] It may create economic advantages in international trade in some places, and unemployment in other places. It may universalize some aspects of modern life but it may also promote intensified differences. It may create transnational communities and associations, but it may also fragment existent communities. While it could facilitate centralization and the concentration of power, it could also generate decentralizing dynamics. It produces hybrid knowledges, values and ideas, but also prejudices and stereotypes which divide.

4) In fourth place, and derived from the last point, it is an error to believe that globalization has only beneficial effects or only undesirable results. There is a mix. The question that arises is how these aspects are distributed. Some, like Bauman,[4] argue that positive and negative effects are not equitably distributed around the world but lead to a new polarization between globalized rich and localized poor. There is a new global stratification which goes beyond the national geographical boundaries. The world elite becomes deterritorialized, separate from local communities which remain marginal and confined to their local space. Others, like Beck,[5] argue that these tendencies do not operate in absolute terms. The evading ability of the rich, their deterritorialization, the end of the national causal link between poverty and wealth are not phenomena which occur willy-nilly. Besides, new forms of international solidarity can and do develop. In this respect the jury is still out.

5) Fifth, in the presence of globalization, national identities are not destined to disappear. But they are certainly affected by it. Globalization puts in touch individuals, groups and nations with a series of new "others" in relation to which their identities could be constructed. Additionally, globalization accelerates the uprooting of old, widely shared

[3] Anthony McGrew, *A Global Society?*, in S. Hall, D. Held and T. McGrew, *Modernity and its Futures* (Cambridge: Polity Press and Open University, 1992), pp. 74-76.
[4] Zygmunt Bauman, *La Globalización, consecuencias humanas* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999).
[5] Ulrich Beck, *¿Qué es la globalización?* (Barcelona: Paidos, 1998).

cultural identities thus altering the categories in terms of which individuals define themselves. Many people cease to see themselves in terms of traditional collective contexts (for instance, class, religion, profession) and start seing themselves in terms of other collective contexts (for instance, gender, ethnicity, sexuality).

6) Finally, globalization affects intercultural relations and posits the question as to whether it is good and necessary to open up to other cultures or it is better to isolate yourself, close your culture and become defensive in order to saveguard your own specificity. If the national identity is not defined as an immutable essence, but rather as a permanent historical construction process, then it is necessary to avoid a total rejection of globalization and the adoption of cultural isolationism which, in any case, would seem to be illusory.

Towards a Pan-American identity?

In the light of these 6 theses, what can we say then about the possibility and desirability of a Pan-American identity? The answer could be pitched at a theoretical level and a practical level and I would like to deal with both. In theory there is nothing that could make it impossible for a panamerican identity to emerge. If we start from the premise that collective identities are not immutable essences but are historically constructed, we are bound to accept the possibility that they could emerge, develop, decline or even cease to exist altogether. A good case in point is the Hispanic identity of most of the South American-born peoples of the Americas from 1492 to approximately 1820. That hispanic identity, which did not exist prior to the Spanish arrival, was slowly built up during colonial times and consciously dismantled by the independence process. It was displaced by the construction of new national identities and also of a common Latin American identity which was rather popular among intellectuals in its beginnings but little by little lost its appeal in the face of a very strong national competition.

Now, someone could counterargue that the emergence of a hispanic identity first and its replacement by a Latin American identity later is not a relevant example to explore the possibilities of a panamerican identity today since in Spanish America then there existed conditions which do not exist throughout the Americas today: one language, one religion, one

king, one hispanic cultural heritage. The panorama of the Americas today offers a far greater diversity in all these respects: there is mixture of Catholic and protestant religions; several main languages: Spanish, English and French, not to speak of indigenous languages; a variety of independent nation-states, some very poor and weak, others exceedingly powerful and rich, and very diverse cultural traditions drawing from Hispanic, Anglo-Saxon and French traditions to mention only those coming from Europe.

Yet in theory, diversity has never been an insurmountable obstacle to the construction of a collective identity. In fact it could be argued that most national identities have been constructed upon the basis of great cultural diversity. If sometimes people believe that the opposite is true it is because discourses of national identity often tend carefully to conceal the cultural diversity underlying the nation. Public versions of national identity frequently want us to believe that there is only one true, naturally evolved version of national identity, that can somehow determine with precision what belongs to it and what does not, and that is more or less shared by everyone in society. In fact processes of selection, evaluation and naturalization take place whereby only some features, symbols and group experiences are taken into account and others are excluded. Only the values of certain classes, institutions or groups are presented as national values, naturally given, and others are excluded.[6]

This is why many other public versions could equally be constructed around different selections and exclusions. A national identity is always, therefore, a terrain of conflict. The idea of a national identity is normally constructed around the interests and worldviews of some dominant classes or groups in society through a variety of cultural institutions such as the media, educational, religious and military institutions, state apparatuses, etc. The criteria for defining it are always narrower and more selective than the increasingly complex and diversified cultural habits and practices of the people. In the public versions of national identity diversity gets carefully concealed behind a supposed uniformity.

[6] See R. Johnson, "Towards a Cultural Theory of the Nation: A British-Dutch Dialogue", in A. Galema *et al*., *Images of the Nation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 194-204.

Yet a national identity cannot be reduced to the public discourses about the nation. It also exists in the social base as a form of personal and group subjectivity which expresses a variety of practices, modes of life and feelings, ways of doing things which sometimes are not well represented in public versions of identity. These private versions are developed by common people in more restricted and local spaces in the multiple conversations and exchanges of daily life and even if they tend to be less articulated and have a more concrete, contradictory and common sense character than the public discourses, they express in a better fashion the enormous cultural diversity from which they emerge.[7]

If the state plays a crucial role in the construction of national identities in Latin America, it is precisely because of the need to overcome an enormous cultural diversity in the basis of society. In this sense it can be argued that even if during the 19th century, the elite's culture in Latin America was quite distant from the real life of the people, nevertheless a sense of national identity did increasingly emerge, partly out of popular practices and partly articulated by the state which, not only through its own rituals, invented traditions and celebrations, but also by taking advantage of difficulties, catastrophes, divisions and especially wars, could appeal through the written press to patriotism in order to build up a sense of community.

If most national identities are constructed from cultural diversity, this is even more so in the case of regional identities. Even if we can find very important unifying factors in Spanish America such as a common language, a common religión and a shared cultural heritage, differences amongst the many nations that form part of it are also enormous. Think of the big cultural differences between Argentina, Peru, Nicaragua, Colombia and Mexico, to mention only a few countries. And yet it is difficult to deny that there is a shared sense of Latin Americanness amongst them which manifests itself in a variety of dimensions, from literature to popular music, from the social sciences to football and soap operas, from shared economic problems to the political suspicions about the United States. But an even better example is Europe itself. Its unifying cultural elements are far fewer than in Latin America, its past history is plagued with war and division until well into the 20th century and nevertheless it has today embarked upon a

[7] Ibid., p. 174.

process of construction of a common identity which in spite of all the odds has made some progress.

Therefore, in principle I cannot see any big theoretical problem with the idea of constructing a panamerican identity, least of all a problem stemming from the huge cultural diversity of the area. It could not be worse than in Europe. But this theoretical possibility does not make the odds against its practical and historical construction any smaller. As we are witnessing in the case of Europe, a very important element that should be present, if the process is to have any chance of success, is a strong and persistent political commitment of member states. It goes without saying that the mutual economic convenience is also necessary. None of these conditions exist in the Americas so far. And I do not envisage their emerging in the near future. Part of the reason for this is that the size, power and development of the would-be participants, let alone their cultural backgrounds, are far too dissimilar.

Besides, by themselves, these preconditions do not guarantee the construction of a strong common identity. It is paradoxical that although in Europe there is a strong political will to integrate political and economic institutions, the common cultural identity is still comparatively weak, whereas in Latin America the opposite is true: there is a stronger common cultural identity which is not matched by the political will to integrate. Yet the chances for Europe to construct a common cultural identity are higher than the chances for Latin America to integrate economically and politically. Now, in the case of the Americas as a whole we have neither the political will to integrate nor a common identity. So we start from a weaker position.

The question is, though, whether it is worth even trying. Why should it be desirable to construct a pan-American identity? Mutual economic and political convenience in an increasingly complicated world could be one possible answer. Which means that the path to a Pan-American identity would depend on economic and perhaps some form of political integration. But this question can be turned around by asking whether integration is not in itself made difficult or impossible by the enormous differences between the Latin American identity, the North American identity and the Canadian identity, not to speak of further differences introduced by

the Canadian Quebequois identity, the emerging Latino identity in the United States and the many national and Indian identities in Latin America.

The difficulties are patent. The Quebequois Canadians may like some sort of rapprochement with Latin American nations in the belief that they may share with them a concern to preserve their own culture and the wish to resist the sheer weight of the Anglo-Saxon culture. It may be too much to expect that at the same time they could even consider an approach to the United States which will surely strengthen Anglo-Saxon identity. Latin American nations may wish an alliance with Canada in order to counterbalance the sheer power and weight of the United States in the area, how could they, at the same time, be expected to build up a common identity with the United State? The latino identity in the United States way feel closer to Quebequois Canada and to Latin America in order not to be overwhelmed by North American Anglo-Saxon culture, how could they be expected to promote a common identity with Anglo-Saxon Canada?

Hence there seem to be important difficulties for the construction of a common identity. Yet what also comes out of the analysis is that within Canada and the United States there are important minorities which have or may have partial but significant points of contact, common interests and cultural affinities between themselves and with Latin American nations in the area. The construction of a pan-american identity may be very difficult, but if there is a path that may eventually lead to it this could start from increasing links between these minorities and Latin American nations. In as much as Latino identities and Quebequois identities could help shape their own countries' identity in the future, their relationships with Latin American countries may contribute to pave the way for a common identity. I am not saying that this is already happening or will necessarily happen. I am merely detecting a possibility.

The international situation may facilitate this occurring as long as other well delimited geographical areas, like Europe, continue to build up closer links and to integrate. The constitution of integrated trading and political blocs naturally may lead those in the rest of the world, to look for some regional umbrella or association which may protect them and give them more leverage. In the case of our continent the difficulty is though that the United States as a self-sufficient superpower may not think it worthwhile to engage in such regional integration (beyond, of course, free trade agreements) and also Canada and Latin America may regard with

suspicion any attempt at doing so as a hegemonic exercise. Many will feel that a pan-american identity could only lead to the loss of regional and national identities and to the hegemony of the so-called "American way of life".

This is a fear that is frequently expressed by those who oppose globalization. Their main question is, how are we going to preserve our national identity if we open up too much and allow the culture of more powerful nations to overwhelm us? I suspect this is a major issue in Quebec. I do understand this fear which is also very common in Latin America. Yet at the same time I tend to question the idea that national identities are sacrosanct and that they should be preserved at all cost without any change. This idea smells of essentialism. In seeking to fix the contents of identity once and for all, essentialism does not only make change impossible but also overemphasizes the mechanisms of differentiation and opposition to other identities. Essentialist conceptions transform each national identity into a close world, incommensurable with others, into a separate compartment which establishes a definitive line between what is one's own and what is alien. Such a conception is of course an obstacle to any process of integration or construction of a common identity. But it should be noticed that it is not national identity of itself that promotes closure, it is the essentialist conception of a national identity that does so.

Besides, even if it were possible strictly to separate the elements of one's own identity from others, which is not, ethnocentrism can also be challenged on the grounds that not everything that constitutes a national tradition is necessarily good and acceptable for the future. There is no guarantee that all the features we consider our own are necessarily good and should be kept at all cost, only because they are ours. This is a point that Habermas has raised in the case of German identity. I tend to agree with him that "identity is not something pre-given, but also, and simultaneously, our own project."[8] And in the construction of the future not all historical traditions have the same value. It may be true that a nation cannot freely chose its traditions, but at least it can politically decide whether to continue or not with some of them.[9]

[8] J. Habermas, "The Limits of Neo-Historicism", Interview with J.M. Ferry in J. Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 243.

[9] J. Habermas, "Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity: The Federal Republic's Orientation to the West", in J. Habermas, *The New Conservatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), p. 263.

But this is not only a question of having a self-critical view of one's own national identity, it is also a question of whether a culture can learn and benefit from other cultures. Would it no be desirable that some aspects of the Latin American identity be affected by Canadian identity and viceversa? We are not talking about abandoning one's own culture, we are talking about receiving generalizeable contributions from other cultures to transform them and adapt them from our own culture thus arriving to new syntheses. In fact, whether we wanted or not, this has always been happening everywhere. Cultural features rarely are exclusively "pure" or "original", many come from abroad (via migrations, colonization, influence from neighbours, internal ethnic mixtures, globalization, etc.) and are nationalized and reconstituted in complex processes of adaptation.

So, one should not fear the construction of a Pan-American imagined community as necessarily meaning the loss of one's own national identity even if it will inevitably affect it. But the point is whether the overpowering and unbalancing weight of the United States and its present interest in policing the whole world could not become a major obstacle. If such an identity could have a chance in the future, it may well be because a Latino minority within the United States has managed both to change the orientation of North American identity and to link up with Latin America and Canada. But there is certainly no guarantee that this will ever happen.