FICTIVE ETHNICITY, LANGUAGE AND RACE

A brief start for a longer discussion on schooling and identity

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Social communities are essentially imaginary. That does not mean that they do not exist, but that their materiality is inescapably constituted by the projection of individual existence into the fabric of a collective narrative, on the recognition of a common name and traditions lived as the trace of an assumed common past. Without collective narratives and their imaginary representations, sociality would have to be constantly reinvented and the reproductive function of institutions would come to a halt. This is why we can affirm that real communities are essentially imaginary ones.

Common ethnicity or the notion of 'ethnic basis' is one of the imaginary mechanisms that contribute to the formation and maintenance of the community form that we call 'nation'. Etienne Balibar (2002, p. 96) applies the term "fictive ethnicity" to the community instituted by the nation-state. He argues that as social formations are nationalized, their diversity is ethnicised as a unit. Different social groups are thus represented in the past, present and future as if they formed a natural community, with a shared identity of origins, culture and interests that transcend individuals and social conditions. Fictive ethnicity would thus permit that a pre-existing unity is recognized in the state and that the state is continually measured against its historic mission in the service of the nation. The idealization of politics is a consequence of this process. In Balibar's words:

> By constituting the people as a fictively ethnic unity against the background of a universalistic representation and which thus divides up the whole of humanity between different ethnic groups corresponding potentially to so many nations, national ideology does much more than justify the strategies employed by the state to control populations. It inscribes their demands in advance in a sense of belonging in the double sense of the term – both what it is that makes one belong to oneself and also what makes one belong to other fellow human beings. (...) The naturalization of belonging and the sublimation of the ideal nation are two aspects of the same process (*ibid.,* p. 96).

The formation of a nation and its constitutive production of fictive ethnic uniformity would thus obliterate historical differences and institute in its place a dividing line based on ethnicity. Internally, 'nationals' are ethnicised and a collective and individual sense of belonging is cultivated and used by the state for purposes of population control. Simultaneously, 'non-nationals' are also ethnicised but excluded from the field of 'belongingness'. Their potential threat or utility is judged according to the criteria posed by the ideological mission of the state.

No modern nation possesses, however, a given or determinable 'ethnic basis'. Even the nations that arise out of independence struggles are multiple in their origin. So how is the myth of common ethnicity produced? And how can it operate in such a way that it does not appear as fiction, but as the most natural of origins? Balibar (*ibid.,* p. 97) suggests that two complementary pathways are explored in response to these questions: language and race. Both express the idea that the national character is immanent in the people and convert the historicity of populations, of their diverse languages and 'races', into a predestined fact of nature.

The old empires and pre-national complex societies were conglomerates of linguistically differentiated populations, where a superimposition of mutually incompatible languages for the dominant and the dominated occurred. A whole system of translations operated between the different spheres. This ancient task of translating between languages is performed in modern national formations by writers, journalists, politicians, teachers and other social agents who speak the language of the 'people'. The translation process, Balibar (*ibid.,* p. 97) affirms, has

become one of internal translation between distinct "levels of language". Social differences are thus expressed as different ways of speaking the national idiom and relating to its common code. Schooling provides some of the crucial mechanisms through which national languages are normalized.

A close historical correlation between the formation of nation-states and the development of schools as popular institutions has long been identified. A number of historiographical theories suggest that the nation state is a 19th-century European phenomenon, facilitated by the popularisation of the schooling system. In line with this claim, Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that nations are "imagined communities" and that the sense of unity that gave rise to nationalism is a result of mass literacy and the emergence of the printing press.

The uniformity posed on the acquisition of language, its norms and functioning through institutionalized education makes the school one of the main producers of ethnicity as an expression of the linguistic community. Schooling provides the first context where, beyond family relations, the idea of nation is actualized: diversity is unified through language, which appears as the unquestioned essence of a people. A shared linguistic experience allows processes of subjectivation to occur on collective and individual levels. The nation, as a collective personality, as well as the individual self are constructed through the acceptance of common norms, genealogy, social codes and shared ideals. The linguistic construction of identity, however, is by definition an open process. Other languages can be appropriated and defying discourses can be performed. This is why Balibar argues that a principle of closure is needed in order to stabilize identity formation: this principle is the belief in a common 'race'.

Unlike unity being formed on the basis of a linguistic community, in the case of race there is no practice that is common to all the individuals who form a political body. The notion of race creates an internal fracture, thus involving one of the paradoxes of fictive ethnicity: national unity absorbs difference through internal processes of inclusion and exclusion.

> Whereas the language community can only create equality between individuals by simultaneously 'naturalising' the social inequality of linguistic practices, the race community dissolves social inequalities in an even more ambivalent 'similarity'; it ethnicizes the social difference which is an expression of irreconcilable antagonism by lending it the form of a division between the 'genuinely' and the 'falsely' national (Balibar, 2002, p. 100).

The motor behind the idea of race is the belief that the filiation of individuals transmits from generation to generation a substance both biological and spiritual, which inscribes them in a certain community. National ideology enunciates that the individuals who belong to the same people are interrelated, share the same filiation or constitute a circle of extended kinship. Although linguistic ethnicity can be understood as an *open* process, in which the possibility of change is ever present, and racial or hereditary ethnicity as a *closed* pre-determined and pre-destined community, migration and inter-marriage are constantly transgressing the limits of fictive ethnicity and redefining its substance. Conversely, differences in linguistic and, subsequently, literary, 'cultural' and technological competence function as caste differences, assigning different social destinies to members of the community. A quasi-racial or racial and immutable mark is then conferred to speech and its singular or non-universalizable features. Foreign or regional accents, popular styles of speech, language errors or erudite correctness designate the portion of the population a speaker belongs to and are interpreted as signs of a specific family origin and hereditary disposition. In this sense, Balibar and Bourdieu allow us to comprehend how the production of ethnicity is also a process of racialisation of language.[1]

Linguistic communities created through colonization in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Oceania were to a great extent the result of extermination

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[1] Pierre Bourdieu (1992) demonstrates how language far from being a neutral means of communication is a significant mechanism of power. Social position is indicated by the type of language one uses – the racialisation of language reinforces pre-established structures in the social field and functions as a determinant of who has the right to be listened to, to interrupt, to pose questions, etc., and to what degree these linguistic acts are to be accepted.

and exclusion. Most nations that emerged from such processes would have developed a narrative of foundational multiplicity which was united as a 'new race' under a national mission and language. If on one hand language and ideology function as the melting agent in the American pot, for instance, on the other, 'race' and 'racialised language' will persist as social nodules that justify internal hierarchy and exploitation. The fiction of nation as uniform substance would thus permit internal divisions insofar as an overarching ideal of unification continue to operate and utilize difference for its purposes.

Schooling and the uniformity of multiculturalism

Balibar's elaborations on the notion of fictive ethnicity provide useful tools for understanding the current rhetoric of multiculturalism. With the accentuated increase of migration to countries that had subtly exported or vehemently imposed specific models of life and economic development, the necessity of assimilating new social groups rises in addition to the historic problems of unifying diverse internal communities. In this process, the function that language and 'race' perform in the maintenance of national identity has been challenged. Divisions within nations that have become the new land of migrant populations have posed new limits to the very experience of national unity. The discourse of multiculturalism emerges as an attempt to preserve the physical, psychological and conceptual associations between nation and territory. In this sense, multiculturalism figures as the contemporary emblematic discourse that most vividly encompasses the paradox of substantial uniformity and internal fracture.

Colonizing processes or "the domestication of difference" (Hage, 2002)[2] that had historically occurred in other territories have gained new levels of

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[2] I borrow this expression from Ghassan Hage's pungent critique of white Australia's "paranoid nationalism". According to Hage (2002), nationalism tends towards the domestication of all forms of cultural otherness.

sophistication and been adapted for internal implementation. Cultural difference is assimilated into the general functioning of national language and institutions whilst the impression that distinct cultures are being preserved is produced. General acceptance and interest towards symbolic and stereotypical cultural features are cultivated and such collective disposition serves as a confirmation of the nation's multicultural status. What is perceived as 'culture' and delineated as authentically different is to be found primarily on the corporeality of the new members, on mute objects, food and a few habits that have been popularized as the most significant signs of 'ethnicity'. The complex history, traditions and distinct forms of sociality of the 'cultures' that now take part in the multicultural constellation of a nation are not made known or regarded as particularly relevant. Instead, it is the surface of bodies and objects as well as unthreatening cultural habits that portray the silenced presence of difference. Hence, predominant modes of sociality and power structures are not effectively defied, but, instead, their operations are broadened and intensified so as to include the new members in the national mission of unification. Simultaneously, the production of social inequality through the 'racialisation' of groups and individuals is naturalized and strengthened.

The discourse and practices of multiculturalism strategically lead to an increase of the usefulness of cultural difference whilst its potential harmfulness is decreased. The absorbable traits of a culture are portrayed as significant contributions, despite the fact that in most cases their force is merely symbolic. Two main dispositions are created for the materiality of difference in the national space. Firstly, general tolerance or distant acceptance is cultivated. In this case, difference is seen as a type of symbolic value that improves the moral self-image of the nation. 'Authentic' nationals would thus feel proud to belong to a generous community that exercises a form of superior morality. The second principal disposition generated in the process of assimilation lies in the conversion of difference into consumable goods. Cultural signals are decontextualised and offered as exotic merchandise: ornaments, cuisine, dance,

music, etc. are widely sold in the multicultural market. In the case of distant tolerance as well as in the case of consumption, the assimilating culture is not structurally challenged but focuses on the usefulness of 'difference' in the conservation and expansion of its own national personality.

As difference is increasingly used for the reaffirmation of structural sameness, the challenging force that other cultures can offer to the deconstruction of national forms of sociality is diminished. Schooling provides an array of fundamental processes through which attempts to actualize the formula of maximum usefulness and minimal threat are made. On the scale of assimilation by means of educational practices, three major degrees can be identified. The first one tends toward total assimilation, that is, the deletion of significant cultural difference experienced by groups or individuals. Monolinguistic contexts and inflexible institutional practices ensure that novelty is normalized. None or little consideration is given to difference and members of distinct cultures are expected to incorporate the new national habits in substitution of other possible modes of sociality. This is probably the most widespread process occurring in multicultural nations of the Global North. The strong sense of belonging that children and adolescents from migrant families cultivate in relation to the country where they live illustrates the effectiveness of such assimilatory procedures. In many of these cases identification with the new set of norms and ideas involves a negation of the parents' cultural background.

A second position in reference to assimilation through education is one that structures teaching practices with the use of more than one language. In addition to the national idiom, students are offered the opportunity to learn other languages and in other languages. This the case of bilingual educational institutions, may they be indigenous or non-indigenous. The national curriculum is completely or partially preserved, however, the means through which it is taught is altered.

The third position is the one that most directly challenges assimilation processes through schooling. In this case, not only the languages of indigenous or

migrant communities are used, but also notable modifications regarding curricula and social practices are established. The adoption of national curriculum generates obstacles for the implementation of structural changes in education. Nevertheless, a few experiences tending towards the decolonization of school practices are currently taking place in a number of communities. These experiences show how new schooling models can play an effective role in the dynamic preservation or reinvention of cultural traditions and forms of socialization that differ from nationalised European models.[3]

A discussion to be continued

The intensification of concrete and symbolic migration that characterises globalisation poses a challenge to the unifying mission of nations. Two contrasting phenomena seem to be at the base of this challenge. Firstly, it could be noted that although the political porosity that allows transnational corporations to extend market dynamics is somehow blocked or controlled for the physical flux of individuals, the migration of diverse groups towards the Global North has only increased. As previously discussed, in spite of the aspired adhesion of individuals to the new national community, internal fractures are made evident and multiculturalism becomes a unifying discourse whose effort aims at assimilating difference into the new order.

A second phenomenon that challenges the mission of national unity is the growing resistance of a significant number of indigenous or so called ethnic communities. In this case, it is the struggle to preserve difference that poses a risk to the unifying mission of nations. This struggle, however, does not occur without various contradictions, one of which includes the reproduction, in a smaller scale, of mechanisms that underpin national identity practices. For

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[3] In spite of considerable difficulties in their implementation and maintenance, a number of Latin American intercultural schools and universities provide examples of how curricula can be altered in order to include traditional forms of knowledge and practices. See, for example, Bertely *et al.* (2008) and Mato (2008).

instance, legitimised narratives of a common past and the conversion of ethnicity in a fact of nature also operate creating internal and external segregations. In this scenario in which ethnic cohesion and differentiation function as complementary dynamics, schooling becomes a prominent process at the service of ethnicity.

The maintenance, reconstruction or invention of social practices (language use, political relations, curricula, etc.) by means of indigenous and intercultural schooling raise a series of questions for further discussion: How do these new school programmes contribute to reconfiguring the relationship between national and ethnic identities? What is the role played by the use of indigenous languages in the (trans)formation of such identities? What role do new identities play in the transformation of indigenous languages?

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