

## AGAINST IDENTITY. A SKETCH TOWARDS A GENEALOGY OF CULTURE

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### *Abstract*

Cultural identity emerged as a philosophical and theoretical concern in the last century. During the post-Second World War era, thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon critically explored the notion of identity and its function in various racial discourses. Curiously, as Stuart Hall discerns, the critical discourse of identity has harboured a duality since its inception. On the one hand, identity has become an axis around which political struggles were organized (identity politics), and on the other hand, the concept has been constantly questioned and viewed as a discursive position imposed on the individual (subjectification). The critique of identity renders it either as distorting the universality of humanism, or as halting the flux of becoming and the processes of hybridization through which cultures are formed and transformed. Hall, among other scholars, resolves this disparity at the cost of undermining the ontological position of cultural specificity. He replaces the notion of identity with identification and thus diverts the attention from what subjects are to what they identify themselves with. In this paper, I critically examine the presuppositions of the discourses on identity and identification. I argue that proponents and critics alike establish their analyses of the phenomenon of social belonging on a rickety theoretical premise that does not take into account the historicity of terms such as “identity” and “culture” and the political and social processes that they reflect, primarily colonialism. Identity, I argue while exploring the genealogy of the term “culture”, does not represent particularism but its containment within the universal order constituted by coloniality/modernity and leads to the erosion of cultural differences. By replacing the notion of being with becoming, Hall and other hybridity thinkers overcome the shortcoming of essentialism but continue to psychologise the notion of cultural belonging. Paradoxically, being in culture is not a state of being but the relation that one establishes with tradition.

*Keywords:* Identity, Stuart Hall, Identification, Culture, Colonialism

1. *Introduction*

The title of this article might be misleading, as my intention is not to propagate for universalism, nor do I share a disdain for «tribalism» common among identity's detractors<sup>1</sup>. The following critique of identity stems from a decolonial standpoint that questions western epistemology and explores the terrain upon which questions of multiculturalism, social particularism, and cultural differences are debated today. From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that the critique against identity politics arises nowadays from the left and the right. Their opposing positions merely represent different modes of organising a social sphere viewed from a universal vantagepoint. What is relatively refreshing about the neo-universalist discourse is the “frank” eloquence of its speakers, who no longer use universalism as a euphemism for eurocentrism but propagandises the latter unapologetically. This also explains the fascination of thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek and Francis Fukuyama with the former US president Donald Trump. Like their object of criticism, they represent «a kind of authenticity», in an age that imposes draconian speech etiquettes, which allegedly pose «a threat to free speech»<sup>2</sup>. This rhetoric strategy not only projects the speaker's courage to say «what he thinks», but what allegedly everyone thinks but dare not say<sup>3</sup>. If Žižek and Fukuyama's arguments meet a popular demand, it is not only due to the persistence (or reawakening) of soft racism, but the inability of identity politics to transcend the framework of western modernity. Fukuyama is obviously oversimplifying things by reducing identity politics to a «demand for dignity», and Žižek is rather unfair when he labels it a victimising discourse, but they are not fundamentally mistaken as long as the struggle against eurocentrism is organised

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<sup>1</sup> F. FUKUYAMA, *Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy*, in «Foreign Affairs» XCVII, 5 (2018), pp. 90-114; S. ŽIŽEK, *Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism*, in «New Left Review» CCXXV, 1 (1997), pp. 28-51.

<sup>2</sup> F. FUKUYAMA, *Against Identity Politics*, cit., pp. 101-102.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

around the rights and demands of different subjectivities<sup>4</sup>. Identity, from this perspective, is not the antithesis of universalism, but an element within its order as I will argue in the following.

## 2. *Deconstructing Identity*

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall opens his article “Introduction: Who Needs Identity?” with a paradox regarding the discourse on cultural identity.<sup>5</sup> Even though the 1990’s saw a surge of interest in the subject, the concept was simultaneously criticised, destabilised, and deconstructed. Hall does not attempt to solve this riddle. Instead, he develops a post-essentialist framework to address identity, and advocates its deployment by underling the unique operation of deconstruction. Unlike other forms of critique deconstruction does not replace the concepts it criticises with more accurate phraseology but places them between quotation marks and utilises them under-erasure. Since some concerns cannot be addressed without certain concepts, identity among others, deconstruction sanctions, as it were, their utilization in their deconstructed form.<sup>6</sup>

The dual attitude towards identity persuades Hall to rearticulate this concept but not to explore its ambiguity. This approach coincides with his thesis’ synchronicity and its indifference towards the historicity of identity. Derrida, on the other hand, is conscious of the need to genealogise identity, but like Hall he does not pursue this investigation: «In spite of the inclination and conviction that should lead me to analyze genealogically the concepts of identity or culture - like the proper name of Europe - I must give this up, since the time and place do not lend themselves to it»<sup>7</sup>. Taking the cue from Derrida, the following inquiry contours the genealogy of culture and

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<sup>4</sup> ID., *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2018; S. ŽIŽEK, *A Leftist Plea for “Eurocentrism”*, in «Critical Inquiry», XXIV, 4 (1998), pp. 988-1009.

<sup>5</sup> S. HALL, *Introduction: Who Needs Identity?*, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by S. Hall and P.D. Gay, Sage Publication, London 2003, pp. 1-17.

<sup>6</sup> ID., *Introduction: Who Needs Identity?*, cit., pp. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> J. DERRIDA, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, trans. by P.A. Brault, M.B. Naas, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1992, p. 9.

identity and hence perceives the ambiguous contemporary attitude towards identity that Hall underlines as a symptom. That identity can be simultaneously evoked, and provoked, urgent, and impossible, I propose, is a manifestation of the gap between the current identity discourse and the earlier social order that it seeks to replace.

Derrida “compensates” for the absence of genealogy by projecting a “radical” articulation of identity. «I must nonetheless formulate in a somewhat dogmatic way and this is my second axiom, a very dry necessity whose consequences could affect our entire problematic: *what is proper to a culture is to not be identical to itself*»<sup>8</sup>. Identity and culture, Derrida argues, are never identical with themselves but are constituted through difference and in relation to the Other. Hall resonates with this deconstructionist approach that perceives identity and identification as «signifying practices», and underscores their dependence on a «constitutive outside», which makes their ‘positive’ meaning possible<sup>9</sup>. Operating through negation and exclusion, identities are both hierarchic and unstable. They exclude their opposite terms (White/Black, Man/Women), which constantly haunt and disrupt them.

In the absence of genealogy, however, Derrida reaches conclusions that are far from being self-evident. For example, he assumes that cultural identity is a «very old subject», and so is the «subject of European identity»<sup>10</sup>. Hall does not explicitly say that cultural identity is ancient, but since his analysis lacks diachronic dimension, his approach to identity is practically synchronic. This para-historical perspective has specific ramifications not only for Hall’s deconstruction of identity but also for its reconstruction. If identification is a signifying process established through exclusion, how should it be understood in relation to cultural belonging? Are the two phenomena congruent or merely related? Is cultural belonging the outcome of a signifying practice and if not, how should it be understood, and what are the relation between the two?

### 3. *Identity and the Order of Nature*

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> S. HALL, *Introduction: Who Needs Identity?*, cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> J. DERRIDA, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, cit., p. 5.

While Derrida and Hall seem to conflate the concept of identity with the phenomenon of cultural belonging, the Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that identity is a modern invention. Bauman does not provide an exhaustive account of identity's conceptual history but a point of departure to consider its discursive upsurge. Taking sociology as both his field of enquiry and research method, Bauman compares the recent outburst of identity discourse and its absence from the writings of «the spiritual fathers of sociology»<sup>11</sup>. Illustrating the hermeneutic gap between the current discourse on identity and the questions that engaged Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel, Bauman writes:

I suppose that were they [Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel] to have turned their ears, finely tuned to whatever might be the great issues of their own time, to our kind of society that was to be born almost a century later, they would have considered the sudden centrality of the 'problem of identity' in the learned debates as well as in common consciousness a most intriguing sociological puzzle.

It is indeed a puzzle and a challenge to sociology - if you recall that only a few decades ago 'identity' was nowhere near the centre of our thoughts, remaining but an object of philosophical meditation. Today, though, 'identity' is 'the loudest talk in town', the burning issue on everybody's mind and tongue. It would be this sudden fascination with identity, rather than identity itself, that would draw the attention of the classics of sociology were they to have lived long enough to confront it.<sup>12</sup>

The method of sociology enables Bauman to uncover discontinuity where Derrida sees continuity, and to reflect on the historicity of identity discourse. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's notion of circumspection, Bauman explains the rise of identity discourse as follows: «you tend to notice things and put them into the focus of your scrutiny and contemplation only when they vanish, go bust, start to behave oddly or otherwise let you down»<sup>13</sup>. Accordingly, he argues that modernity did not lead to the crisis of identity, but rather the

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<sup>11</sup> Z. BAUMAN, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

latter «was born as a problem (that is, as something one needs do something about - as a task)»<sup>14</sup>. Viewed from this socio-historical perspective, the concept of cultural identity does not mark social belonging but the crumbling of social ties, an absence instead of a presence:

One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence<sup>15</sup>.

Cultural identity retains a structural gap from its referent. It appears when the latter is no longer in force, at least not in the same transparent and self-evident way it used to exist. Accordingly, even though as an object of discourse it «does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity...» as Foucault puts it, identity ought to be seen not only in relation to the social order that it establishes but also the one that it supplements<sup>16</sup>. Its formation is a re-configuration of the social domain constructed through the prism and the effort of individuals:

Identity entered modern mind and practice dressed from the start as an individual task. It was up to the individual to find escape from uncertainty. Not for the first and not for the last time, socially created problems were to be resolved by individual efforts, and collective maladies healed by private medicine<sup>17</sup>.

This turn does not imply that individuals were freed from the shackles of social institutions, but rather that power, to put the matter in Foucauldian terms, begun to operate in the form of subjectification and through the authority of those who possess knowledge.

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<sup>14</sup> ID., *From Pilgrim to Tourist - or a Short History of Identity*, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> M. FOUCAULT, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A.M.S. Smith, Routledge, London & New York 2002, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Z. BAUMAN, *From Pilgrim to Tourist - or a Short History of Identity*, cit., p. 19.

Not that the individuals were left to their own initiative and that their acumen was trusted; quite the contrary - putting the individual responsibility for self-formation on the agenda spawned the host of trainers, coaches, teachers, counsellors and guides all claiming to hold superior knowledge of what identities could be acquired and held. The concepts of identity-building and of culture (that is, of the idea of the individual incompetence, of the need of collective breeding and of the importance of skilful and knowledgeable breeders) were and could only be born together. The 'disembodied' identity simultaneously ushered in the individual's freedom of choice and the individual's dependency on expert guidance<sup>18</sup>.

Identity is predicated on a new social structure whose basic unit is the subject or the individual. Jean-Paul Sartre, whose existentialism is consistent with the logic of this order, abridges its presuppositions by way of negation. If for the anti-Semite «A whole is more and other than the sum of its parts; a whole determines the meaning and underlying character of the parts that make it up», in the social order that is centred on individuals, their totality is tantamount to their sum<sup>19</sup>. The reduction of social interaction to a mathematic formula is not only an abstraction but a method that was borrowed from the natural sciences to describe the social sphere. In a similar manner to the order of nature, the social sphere is analysed through basic, uniformed, and atomic unites, namely individuals. Accordingly, Sartre may pose an analogy between human courage and a chemical element:

[for the anti-Semite] There is not one virtue of courage which enters indifferently into a Jewish character or a Christian character in the way that oxygen indifferently combines with nitrogen and argon to form air and with hydrogen to form water. Each person is an indivisible totality that has its own courage, its own generosity, its own way of thinking, laughing, drinking, and eating<sup>20</sup>.

Sartre's argument coheres with the framework that views the social sphere through the prism of the natural sciences. If individuals

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> J.P. SARTRE, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. by G.J. Becker, Schocken Books, New York 1995, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

are reduced to their natural functions, it is absurd to assume that they drink, eat, or breathe differently. «[T]hinking, laughing, drinking, and eating», however, are by no means merely mechanical or bodily functions. People think, laugh, and dream in different languages, and culturally speaking they also eat and drink differently. They bless their bread in unique fashions and consume it with diverse purposes in mind. They toast their wine (or not) with diversity of greetings, and even drink water according to different sets of prescriptions and prohibitions. As a matter of fact, culture, in the sense of cultivating and fostering, has the function of attributing meaning to activities that otherwise would be seen as an automated, and mechanical. The gradual adoption of the natural science's methods to the social domain enabled the establishment of a universal order that can transcend cultural differences or allow them to exist without undermining its basic uniformity. Identification, accordingly, is an attempt to reconstruct cultural belonging over a smooth, and undifferentiated field that resists or at least is indifferent to epistemic heterogeneity and incongruent habitus. Racism, however, should not be seen as “exterior” to the logic of this order. The racist casts cultural differences into scientific categories in a process that culminated in death factories.

#### 4. *The Horizon of Tradition*

The Heideggerian insight that enables Bauman to theorise the emergence of identity discourse was articulated by T.S. Eliot in the context of tradition. Tradition, according to Eliot, is not a set of «dogmatic beliefs», but «habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of ‘the same people living in the same place’»<sup>21</sup>. Accordingly, tradition is a phenomenon that operates inconspicuously. «It must largely be, or that many of the elements in it must be, unconscious; whereas the maintenance of orthodoxy is a matter which calls for the exercise of all our

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<sup>21</sup> T.S. ELIOT, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, Faber & Faber, London 1934, p. 18.



conscious intelligence»<sup>22</sup>. While as a society and as individuals we follow tradition without being aware of it, «We become conscious of these items, or conscious of their importance, usually only after they have begun to fall into desuetude, as we are aware of the leaves of a tree when the autumn wind begins to blow them off when they have separately ceased to be vital»<sup>23</sup>.

Both Eliot's tradition and Bauman's identity fail to grasp the phenomenon they address. The discourse on tradition arises after the fact, that is when "tradition" is no longer in force, whereas identity operates before the fact, in a perpetual process of becoming that ought but structurally cannot compensate for the retreat of tradition that gave individuals their sense of being-at-home. Tradition belongs to what Hubert Dreyfus calls following Heidegger *background practices*, i.e., the unobjectifiable and thus unconscious domain «that shape our lives and give meaning to our activities, our tasks, our normative commitments, our aims and our goals»<sup>24</sup>. The world, according to Heidegger, becomes intelligible not by individual efforts but by pre-understanding inherited from tradition. Since the articulation of our presuppositions can never be exhausted, the horizon that we inherit from tradition cannot be objectified and analysed like other entities. Conversely, that which comes to our notice under the name of tradition can only function as its trace.

The positivist phantasy of establishing a social domain guided by a transparent universal rationality, can never be fulfilled, as the activities of people are necessarily informed by background practices. The universal order, in moments in which its practitioners are not in denial, embarks on a Sisyphean mission whose fulfilment can only be projected into the future and articulated through concepts of the end of history and utopia. In a similar vein, Eliot deconstructs the binary opposition between poetic tradition and the modernist notion of the new, arguing that the latter presupposes the former and that

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<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> M.A. WRATHALL, *Introduction: Background Practices and Understandings of Being*, in *Background Practices: Essays on the Understanding of Being*, ed. by H.L. Dreyfus, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, p. 4.

the latter is constitutive for the former:<sup>25</sup> «No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead»<sup>26</sup>. Individual talent is instituted through its difference from tradition, i.e., in comparison to it: «In a peculiar sense he [the poet] will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past... not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics. It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other»<sup>27</sup>.

To employ this argument to the larger domain of culture would mean that either through obedience or rebellion we are conditioned by tradition. This insight has several implications, first and foremost the displacement of western modern philosophy's notion of autonomous subjectivity.

But this does not mean that tradition is static or that individuals have no role to play in it. Rather, tradition is a thread of interpretations and revisions, and its preservation demand intellectual and creative labour as well as deployment of free choice. Tradition informs our manner of being in the world, but in return we also shape it. The continuity of tradition is predicated on interpretive repetition without which it either becomes petrified or vanishes. If the conservation of tradition indicates that it is no longer effective, rigid orthodoxy and its endeavour to make background practices conscious and stable indicate that the group members already operate according to a different cultural horizon. Similarly, the notion of identification implies that the identifying subjects operate through an alien horizon from that with which they desire to identify. Even though the Cartesian subject cannot escape the grip of tradition, its conception and the universal order that enables it led to a global destitution of cultures.

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<sup>25</sup> Boris Groys recently formulated a similar argument in relation to the museum and the readymade.

<sup>26</sup> T.S. ELIOT, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, in ID., *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London 1957, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 50.

### 5. *The Origins of Cultural History*

The same logic through which Eliot and Bauman analyse the formation of tradition and identity as objects of discourse, can be applied to the notion of culture. The surge of interest reflects a crisis or a transformation in the approach to culture and in its function. Eliot's "Notes towards the Definition of Culture," for example, can be read as a response to such watershed and as an attempt to enable the «survival of culture»<sup>28</sup>. Eliot defines culture through an analogy to agriculture, as an «improvement of the human mind and spirit», and distinguishes between «the development of an individual, of a group or class, or of a whole society»<sup>29</sup>. Despite the importance that he attributes to the cultivation of the society and the individual, he is aware of the historicity of his project: «The term itself [culture], as signifying something to be consciously aimed at in human affairs, has not a long history»<sup>30</sup>. Although Eliot does not consider why the amelioration of society became an issue at some point in time but rather how this goal is to be attained, he provides a clue to understand the appearance of culture on the horizon of the western discourse. «One people in isolation», he argues, «is not aware of having a "culture" at all»<sup>31</sup>. Like the notion of tradition, the domain of culture becomes a subject of discussion when it is no longer self-evident, i.e., when members of one society encounter other modes of behaviour.

Eliot's traditionalism notwithstanding, his thesis alters the traditional order of cultivation. If the word "culture" was initially used to designate the spiritual improvement of the individual and had no regard to the perfection of society, Eliot gives precedence to the cultural development of the society as a whole over the refinement of the individual: «It is a part of my thesis that the culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class, and that the culture of the group or class is dependent upon the culture of

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<sup>28</sup> T.S. ELIOT, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, in ID., *Christianity and Culture*, Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego 1988, p. 89.

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, p. 93.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Ivi, p. 165.

the whole society to which that group or class belongs»<sup>32</sup>. Eliot epitomises the culmination of a historical process that altered the concept of the word “culture.” Richard Velkley traces the use of the Latin word *cultura* to Cicero who borrows this metaphor from agriculture to designate the cultivation of the soul by philosophy<sup>33</sup>. While this sense persisted in modern European languages, during the seventeenth century the word was adopted by Samuel Pufendorf who «uses *cultura* to designate collectively the means for overcoming the inconveniences of the state of nature»<sup>34</sup>. The shift from the individual “interiority” to the social sphere changed the word’s designation to refer «to all the ways in which human beings overcome their original barbarism, and through artifice, become fully human»<sup>35</sup>.

The German word *Bildung* has different origin but a similar lingual career. During the Middle Ages and well until the Baroque it was used in a religious context and signified the «cultivation of the inner as the space of divinity and worship»<sup>36</sup>. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Kristin Gjesdal argues, it shifted from the «religious context» to the «political discourse», «meta-discussions in history», and «the birth of the modern novel»<sup>37</sup>. Furthermore, culture was no longer used exclusively to denote cultivation and improvement but was also used in a more “neutral” sense as in the anthropological discourse. Eliot, for example, uses the two senses of the term and his thesis can be seen as an attempt to wed them by maintaining the hierarchy between «higher cultures and lower cultures»<sup>38</sup>.

The duality that characterises the use of the word even today can be traced to the time of its inception and to the debate between Voltaire’s and Herder’s approaches to culture. Isaiah Berlin argues that

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<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> R. VELKLEY, *Being after Rousseau: Philosophy and Culture in Question*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2002, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> K. GJESDAL, *Bildung*, in *The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by M.N. Forster, K. Gjesdal, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, p. 696.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> T.S. ELIOT, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, cit., p. 198.

Voltaire foregrounds the Enlightenment's universalising approach to the question of culture, whereas Herder advocates the position of the counter-Enlightenment. In contemporary terms these two worldviews can be dubbed monoculturalism and multiculturalism. While Voltaire examines culture with rationalist tools and views it in term of progress and development, Herder was the first to propose a definition which is closer to the neutral sense with which we evoke the word today, i.e., a «form of collective manifestation of life which people choose to put forward»<sup>39</sup>. Voltaire believes that there is an objective criterion to evaluate the moral, political, aesthetic, and religious spheres and that cultural perfection was achieved in a few rare moments such as Rome, Florence, and France of Louis the XVI. Herder, on the other hand, believes that each and every culture expresses the essence of humanity in its own unique manner and there is no way to gauge cultures as superiors or inferiors.

Berlin attributes these differences to the rift between the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment over the natural sciences method. While Voltaire adopts the natural sciences technique to the study of what came to be known in his time as culture, Herder and other German thinkers rebel against his rational methods. If scientists ought to provide one explanation to the phenomena that they describe, the same approach should be applied to culture. In face of cultural diversity, there must be one superior form that all other modes of collective being gradually leads to through a gradual process of development. Herder's multiculturalism, on the other hand, is rooted, according to Berlin, in the relatively provincial position of Germany, that led its intellectuals to a kind of defensive revolt against the French Enlightenment. As opposed to the latter's rationalism, Herder and the German Romantic thinkers propagated spirituality, simplicity, and a withdrawal into the inner life of the self. Pluralism was one of the outcomes of this reactionism.

Berlin, however, does not attempt to explain the emergence of culture as an object of discourse and why during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries human cultivation gradually became a social rather than a private affair. Furthermore, even though the term

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<sup>39</sup> I. BERLIN, *The Origins of Cultural History*, p. 9. <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/origins1.pdf>

culture is employed in relation to non-European cultures, particularly in its anthropological sense, Berlin narrowly focuses on the social history of Europe instead of offering a more global point of view. This eurocentrism is emphatically surprising since Herder's multicultural perspective was informed by colonial expansionism. When Herder thinks about the question of culture, what he has in mind is the living forms of peoples from the four corners of the earth. In one of his letters, for example, he encourages his correspondent to read the travel accounts of the French officer François de Pagès:

Let one read his depictions of the characters of several nations in America, of the peoples in the Philippines, and the judgments that he passes here and there on the behaviour of the Europeans towards them, how he sought to, so to speak, incorporate into himself the manner of thought of the Hindus, of the Arabs, of the Druse, etc. even through participating in their manner of living – Travel descriptions of such a sort – of which (let us be thankful to humanity!) we have many – expand our horizon and multiply our sensitivity for every situation of our brothers<sup>40</sup>.

Curiously, his criticism against the Enlightenment and colonialism resonates with the link that Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo and other decolonial thinkers underline between modernity and coloniality.

Least of all, therefore, can our European culture be the measure of universal human goodness and human value; it is no yardstick or a false one. European culture is an abstracted concept, a name. "Where does it exist entirely? With which people? In which times?" Moreover (who can deny it?), there are so many shortcomings and weaknesses, so many twistings and horrors, bound up with it that only an unkind being could make these occasions of higher culture into a collective condition of our whole species. The culture of humanity is something different; it shoots forth everywhere in accordance with place and time, here more richly and more luxuriantly, there more poorly and meagerly. The genius of human natural history lives in and with each people as though this people were the only one on earth<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> J.G. HERDER, *Philosophical Writings*, trans by M.N. Forster, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 397.

<sup>41</sup> Ivi, p. 396.

In a similar manner he reproaches the «so-called philosophy of humanity, tolerance, facility in independent thought» propagated by Voltaire «who without quarrel or contradiction has had an effect on his century like a *monarch* – read, learned, admired, and (what is still more) followed from Lisbon to Kamchatka, from Novaya Zemlya as far as the colonies of India»<sup>42</sup>. What is peculiar about the cultural apparatus of the Enlightenment, according to Herder, is the ambiguity of the identity in the name of which it speaks. The European culture which is imposed on other cultures is an «an abstracted concept», invented, one may add, through the encounter with other cultures, and constituted in opposition to the Other of Europe. Herder himself falls into the same trap when he projects the European world as «philosophical» and «cold» and the Orient as simple, imaginative, sensitive, childish, happy, and obedient<sup>43</sup>.

Since the notion of culture, as Eliot argues, cannot emerge in isolation, the colonial expansion, I propose, led to the constitution of culture as a distinct field of knowledge and practice. During the centuries following the ‘discovery’ of America, the domain of culture went through a crawling revolution, similar in scale and structure to the Copernican Revolutions in astronomy and philosophy. The colonial encounter led to a realisation that what was considered to be obvious and transparent is only one way of being in the world. Europe was obviously not isolated before to the sixteenth century, but its interactions with other geographies were limited and hence cultural differences were negotiated differently. The cultural turn that manifested itself in the eighteenth century is thus not a watershed or a threshold, but a slow redistribution resulting from the growing acquaintance, familiarity, and intimacy of Europe with other cultures.

The transition in the relation of the coloniser to other cultures can be traced through the shift in the way that the former identifies the latter. Mignolo argues that the shift from the term “barbarian” to “primitive” reflects a transformation from spatial to temporal difference and the organisation of cultures on a scale of development that is diachronic and synchronic at the same time. «‘Modernity’ was defined no longer in simple contradistinction to the Middle Ages or

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<sup>42</sup> Ivi, p. 355.

<sup>43</sup> Ivi, p. 278.

against the spatially bound barbarians, but against ‘tradition’<sup>44</sup>. While the barbarians resided beyond the space of civilisation, the primitives were considered «to lag behind in time»<sup>45</sup>. Mignolo, explores the casting of “barbarian” and “primitive” in order to demonstrate the emergence of the modern order of time, but the introduction of temporal difference also indicates that the spatial difference was not sufficient to sustain Europe’s cultural specificity and superiority and that the growing familiarity with other cultures demanded the establishment of a more comprehensive and advanced system of classification that will acknowledge other modes of living and at the same time maintain the coloniser dominance and will to knowledge.

The establishment of cultural anthropology as a distinct field of inquiry marks one of the climaxes in the development of this tabulation but also its inevitable disintegration. If Edward Burnett Tylor, the father of cultural anthropology, introduces a branch of knowledge capable of accommodating each and every cultural form and at the same time sustains western primacy through the notion of progress, Franz Boas outlines, around the same time, what later came to be known as cultural relativism. Tylor’s tabulation, one may argue, is more effective when it functions tacitly, that is when western superiority is presupposed and not articulated scientifically. When the notion of cultural evolution becomes an object of study it can also be questioned, interrogated, and finally contested. Voltaire and Herder’s debate regarding monoculturalism and multiculturalism should be read against this background, not as attempts to reject, or accept foreign influences, but as different ways to negotiate the tacit relativism that the colonial encounter produces. Accordingly, Voltaire’s monoculturalism is not the by-product of the adoption of the natural sciences method to the study of history and culture as Berlin argues. Rather, science - as Berlin himself shows by questioning the rationality of Voltaire’s own arguments - merely veils the latter’s attempt to sustain cultural superiority and stability, or in other words, to preserve the manner in which European culture functions

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<sup>44</sup> W.D. MIGNOLO, *Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality*, in «Cultural Studies», XXI, 2 (2007), p. 472.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



before the colonial encounter with other modes of being in the world.

The introduction of the natural science method into the domain that heretofore did not exist as an object of scientific study, enables Europe to sustain the stability of its customs and will to knowledge, but it simultaneously transforms the manner in which culture is perceived. If culture, as Eliot argues, must be at least partially unconscious, the introduction of the natural sciences method to the domain of the human sciences led, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argues, to an aesthetic and historical distance from the knowledge that was up until then transmitted by tradition. In a similar manner to the distance that «the age of mechanics» created between humanity and nature by objectifying the latter, the application of the natural sciences method to the domain of culture distances people from their heritage, be it texts, or artefacts, customs or modes of behaviour<sup>46</sup>. As objects of scientific knowledge and aesthetic appreciation their truth is no longer relevant for their readers and observers. The establishment of the universal library, the modern museum, and the concert hall, as Gadamer shows, was part of this project. Texts and artefacts were collected, exhibited, and performed regardless of their content and truth that became secondary and at times redundant. In this manner, the universal order could both acknowledge the global multiplicity of living forms and at the same time stabilises it by maintaining distance from them<sup>47</sup>.

Cultural chauvinism can be seen as a desperate attempt to retrieve the unstated function of culture in face of the plurality that weakens its foundations. If Voltaire, according to Berlin, is «half tourist, half moralist» while writing about other peoples, it is because he tries to regulate a vast domain of knowledge and practice through notions of rationality and progress<sup>48</sup>. Herder and Romantic thinkers, on the other hand, negotiate cultural diversity by introducing an alternative criterion that transcend contradicting cultural values. In *The Origins of Romanticism* Berlin defines «the Romantic revolution» as «a great

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<sup>46</sup> H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, trans. by J. Weinsheimer, D.G. Marshall, Continuum, London 2006, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, p. 75.

<sup>48</sup> I. BERLIN, *The Origins of Cultural History*, cit., p. 7.

break in European consciousness»<sup>49</sup>. If earlier generations would gauge other religions and faiths according to “objective” standards of *what* they believe in, the Romantic movement was more interested in *how* they believe. An enemy could be appreciated for his courage and a followers of another faith can be admired for their *sincerity*. Berlin conceives this development as what ultimately led to modern liberalism even if «this was very far from the intentions of the Romantics»<sup>50</sup>. But the romantic sincerity, which was later translated by Existentialism to *authenticity*<sup>51</sup>, was also a new measurement that enables the formation of a universal cultural tabulation. While truths and beliefs may vary according to different traditions, sincerity and authenticity are categories that can be applied universally. Crucially, sincerity and authenticity may lead to the prioritisation of the individual over society and the marginalisation of cultural values. Sartre’s existentialism is a case in point that informs his analysis of racism, and decolonisation.

#### 6. *Identity and Authenticity*

Sartre’s perception of identity is predicated on the global vantage-point of the universal order that enables him, as argued above, to construe human affairs through “objective” patterns borrowed from the natural sciences. Although Sartre dismisses scientific determinism in the context of human affairs and advocates freedom as a fundamental human trait, the precedence that he gives to the to the human existence over essence also entails that the domain of culture is reducible to the more elementary units of individuals whose behaviour, at least potentially, do not (or should not) stem from social and cultural structures. Thus, even though his position differs dramatically from that of August Comte who maintains that the study of politics and ethics should follow that of mathematics and logic and thus expel the notion of freedom from the human sciences<sup>52</sup>, the Sartrian concept of freedom decentres the function of culture and

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<sup>49</sup> ID., *The Origins of Romanticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2013, p. 9

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, p. 170.

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, p. 161.

<sup>52</sup> ID., *The Origins of Cultural History*, cit., p. 22.

explores the social sphere through a universal humanist prism. By reducing the difference between nature and culture to that of freedom, and by rendering the latter in negative terms, Sartre's existentialism can shed the skin of tradition and with it of cultural differences.

But this does not mean that Sartre does not have an eye for the concrete situations in which people live and the role that race, colour, and ethnicity play in their subjugation. While exploring anti-Semitism and the poetry of the negritude movement, Sartre moves dialectically from what will be considered today as identity politics to universalism, and thus both undermines and affirms the notion of cultural identity. On the one hand, he maintains that «[t]he Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew», and that «it is the anti-Semite who makes the Jew», but on the other hand, since this racist discourse shapes the conditions in which the Jew lives, the latter cannot simply ignore them<sup>53</sup>. Thus, unlike the democrat who adheres to «abstract liberalism» and admits the Jew as a *man* into a «contractual society» but denies his Jewishness, Sartre proposes «concrete liberalism»<sup>54</sup>, which gives right not on the basis of «the possession of a problematical and abstract "human nature"», but accept the *other* as a concrete person<sup>55</sup>. Whereas the democrat «has no eyes for the concrete syntheses with which history confronts him» and «recognizes neither Jew, nor Arab, nor Negro, nor bourgeois, nor worker, but only man-man always the same in all times and all places»<sup>56</sup>, Sartre declares that «*the man* does not exist; there are Jews, Protestants, Catholics; there are Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans; there are whites, blacks, yellows»<sup>57</sup>. Historical reality and discourse, according to Sartre, are not easily dissected, and even though cultural identity is imposed through the process of othering, it reflects the situation which the subject is «thrown into»<sup>58</sup>. Accordingly, the authentic Jew

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<sup>53</sup> J.P. SARTRE, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> Ivi, pp. 84-85.

<sup>55</sup> Ivi, p. 105.

<sup>56</sup> Ivi, p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> Ivi, p. 104.

<sup>58</sup> Ivi, p. 64.

does not flee from «Jewish reality» but «knows himself and wills himself into history as a historic and damned creature»<sup>59</sup>.

The key element in Sartre's discourse on identity is authenticity that fulfil a similar yet reverse function to that of the Romantic sincerity. While sincerity operates across cultural differences and thus provides a universal criterion to judge other people not according to their believes but according to their inner personality, authenticity is a universal concept that paradoxically, if only momentarily, enforces cultural differences. Nevertheless, while Herder and other Romantic thinker celebrate cultural differences, Sartre ultimately attempts to rise above them. While in *Anti-Semite and Jew* Sartre underscores his perception of authenticity, in his essay *Black Orpheus* he illustrates the dialectics of transcending identity and thus resolves the tension that he inaugurates between its de-essentialisation and affirmation (Sartre, *Black Orpheus*)<sup>60</sup>. The self-affirmative notion of Negritude is perceived by Sartre as a temporal antithesis to the racist thesis, which «like the up-beat [un accented beat] of a dialectical progression» must gradually destroy itself in order to achieve the synthesis of «raceless society»<sup>61</sup>.

The strength of Sartre's discussion on cultural identity lies in his ability to both undermine racist identification and at the same time maintain the political integrity of oppressed groups. Nevertheless, his explication of cultural identity solely on the basis of negative articulation provoked criticism even among his followers such as Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon. Fanon laments the negative role that Sartre assigns to Negritude: «The generation of the younger black poets had just suffered a blow that can never be forgiven»<sup>62</sup>, and Memmi rejects the conception of Jewishness which is empty of any content<sup>63</sup>. Similarly, Michael Walzer criticises Sartre's inability to recognize the «inner strength» of «different historical cultures», and of «the people they sustain, who also sustain them, [which] are not yet

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<sup>59</sup> Ivi, p. 98.

<sup>60</sup> ID., *Black Orpheus*, in «The Massachusetts Review», VI, 1 (1964), pp. 13-52.

<sup>61</sup> Ivi, p. 49.

<sup>62</sup> F. FANON, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by C.L. Markmann, Pluto Press, London 2008, p. 102.

<sup>63</sup> M. WALZER, *Preface*, in J.P. SARTRE, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, cit., p. xxii.

candidate for disappearance»<sup>64</sup>. Sartre's critics, however, do not provide an alternative framework to address the notion of culture, and thus do not escape the universalist presuppositions that guides him. Fanon, for example, reiterates Sartre's position in the conclusion of *Black Skins, White Masks*, as Azzedine Haddour argues<sup>65</sup>. Despite his desire to preserve and speak in the name of a black tradition, he maintains like Sartre that «negritude is the only means to overcome the differences of race, but that this anti-racist racism cannot be an end in itself»<sup>66</sup>. Tellingly, these reservations regarding the approach of negritude to identity coincide with his existentialist reflections. Fanon not only refuses to be «a prisoner of history» but also declares in a Cartesian fashion: «I am my own foundation»<sup>67</sup>.

Within the universal framework that was constituted to overcome cultural differences, one can either attach cultural differences to individuals and treat them as essences or conceives them as secondary to a universalist and humanist essence or the Subject's absolute freedom. Accordingly, the existentialist approach to cultural identity marginalises the disparate ways in which cultures shape individuals. The cultural identity that Sartre (temporarily) approves, is predicated on racist signification and in opposition to it. Sartre is not concerned with what he calls following Heidegger the «being-in-the-world of the Negro»<sup>68</sup>, which he perceives as marginal to the notion of being human. Heidegger, on the other hand, does not perceive cultural differences as the products of signifying practices but as stemming from distinct background practices. The articulation of these differences, however, might be problematic, as Heidegger's characterisation of the *Judenwelt* disappointedly shows.

### 7. Identity after Orientalism

Edward Said's discourse analysis of orientalism differs from the existentialist framework of Sartre, but he reaches similar conclusions

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<sup>64</sup> Ivi, p. xxiv.

<sup>65</sup> A. HADDOUR, *Introduction: Remembering Sartre*, in J.P. SARTRE, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, Routledge, London & New York 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Ivi, p. xxvi.

<sup>67</sup> F. FANON, *Black Skin, White Masks*, cit., p. 180.

<sup>68</sup> J.P. SARTRE, *Black Orpheus*, cit., p. 36.

regarding cultural identity. Unlike Sartre's stress on the subject's freedom, Said acknowledges the impact of social forces over individuals and the way they subjectify them. This focus shift from the Cartesian Subject to background practices, enables discourse analysis to explore social and historical processes that shape not only modes of behaviour but also objects of discourse. The "Orient," according to Said, is such kind of object whose formation reflects the colonial will to knowledge and power. Thus, in a similar manner to Sartre, Said maintains that the notion of the "East" was constructed in opposition to that of the "West," i.e., through the process of othering and exclusion.

Despite arriving at similar conclusions, Sartre's and Said's approaches to culture are markedly different. While the former is concerned with identities only as products of the racial discourse and in the long run wishes to surpass them, the latter acknowledges the diverse social experiences that they endeavour to capture. Even though Said rejects the identities that both Orientalists and Islamic fundamentalists impose on the "East," he maintains in the "Afterward" to *Orientalism* that cultural differences exist, but their representations as cultural identities fail to grasp their actuality. Orientalism, according to Said is «a system of thought» that «approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint...»<sup>69</sup>. Rather than denying a unique historical reality, Said criticises the way in which it is addressed. «The construction of identity - for identity, whether of Orient or Occident, France or Britain, while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences, is finally a construction - involves establishing opposites and "others" whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from "us"»<sup>70</sup>. Said splits the notion of cultural identity into two. On the one hand, identity refers to «a repository of distinct collective experiences», but on the other hand it is a construction that is established through a fictional binary opposition of «us» versus «them». Since identities are not transparent representation of these «experiences», they should be subjected to «continuous interpretation and re-

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<sup>69</sup> E. SAID, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, London 2003, p. 333.

<sup>70</sup> Ivi, p. 332.

interpretation». While experience belongs to a fluid order that does not neatly fit into classifications, identity discourse operates through binary oppositions (us against them) which misses the cultural phenomenon it aims to identify.

Sartre's existentialism enables him to gloss over the problematic relation between being and representation that Said articulates and to view the mechanism of cultural identity through the lens of becoming. If existence precedes essence, the identity of the Jew is simply a reflection of racial signifying practice that in order to overcome it Jews have to become Jews but then renounce this position in order to realise their liberty. Culture in the Sartrian system of thought is understood as freedom. Said, on the other hand, not only recognises cultural differences but also analyses orientalism as a cultural practice. For instance, he links Kipling's notion of White Man to «the *culturally* sanctioned habit of deploying large generalizations by which reality is divided into various collectives...»<sup>71</sup>. Clearly, this analysis of the orientalist culture is critical and does not attempt to capture the essence of the Occidental. Paradoxically, however, it enables Said to characterise the cultural and intellectual history of Europe, while the genealogy of the "East" remains abstract and mute. Derrida's essay "The Other Shore" manifests the advantage of this critical representation, as he reconstructs the identity of Europe in relation to its civilising mission and colonial past. Paradoxically, the critique of representation may practically lead to the erosion of cultural differences and the triumph of the universal order.

### 8. *Hybrid Identity*

Said's "Afterword" leaves the question of identifying cultures open, acknowledging cultural differences but simultaneously underscoring the inability to represent them. Hall, on the other hand, develops a diasporic and post-essentialist notion of identity, undergirding his project on the idea cultural hybridity, understood not only as a fusion of different traditions but as a recognition of their fluidity and contingency. Writing in the context of Caribbean identity, Hall presents two ways of thinking about cultural identity, essentialist,

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<sup>71</sup> Ivi, p. 227 (my italics).

and hybrid. If the essentialist approach perceives it as «a sort of collective “one true self”, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed “selves”, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common», the hybrid approach accentuates the historicity, contingency, and discontinuities of cultural identities<sup>72</sup>. What is missing, however, from Hall’s attempt to recuperate a deconstructed form of cultural identities is a historical perspective that explains when and how they emerged, the absences they were trying to fill, and the traditional and tacit order of culture that they endeavour to replace. In the absence of this horizon, Hall constructs his hybrid identity in opposition to a crude understanding of culture and tradition, and thus continues to think about cultural belonging through the individualistic viewpoint of the universal order: «Identities», for Hall, «are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us»<sup>73</sup>. Hall devotes much energy to argue for the wedding of a Foucauldian discourse analysis with psychoanalysis and the creation of a new field of inquiry that explores «the mechanisms... by which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the ‘potions’ to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylize, produce and perform these positions, and why they never do so completely»<sup>74</sup>. What he does not consider, however, is that being in culture cannot be reduced to the function of discursive positions. To be in culture is to be moulded by a particular set of background practices that operate mostly without their subjects’ awareness or consent. Psychologising culture, on one side, Hall distances himself from his object of desire by treating culture as a goal to be achieved and identity as something to arrive at. Since culture can never be addressed directly but is always in the background of what we think and act, it can only be acquired indirectly, by setting our goal elsewhere. Hall, however, thinks about hybrid identity in a similar way to which Bauman describes modern identity, i.e., as a task:

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<sup>72</sup> S. HALL, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, in *Identity: Community, Culture Difference*, ed. by J. Rutherford, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1990, p. 223.

<sup>73</sup> ID., *Introduction: Who Needs Identity?*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>74</sup> Ivi, pp. 13-14.



We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’, without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean’s ‘uniqueness’. Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past<sup>75</sup>.

Hall’s perception of our relation to the past is similar to the way in which Gadamer (and Eliot) understand the operation of tradition, which is never simply a repetition but an act of bridging the gap between diverging horizons:

Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, and it is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one... Even where life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows, and it combines with the new to create a new value. At any rate, preservation is as much a freely chosen action as are revolution and renewal<sup>76</sup>.

Both Hall and Gadamer sees the relation with the past as constituted through continuities and discontinuities, but since hall focuses on identity, he tends to underscore its transformation, while Gadamer accentuates the constant flow of tradition. Nonetheless, what set them apart is not their choice of concepts but the way they address them. Hall posits cultural identity as the object of his discourse that may or may not be recovered. Gadamer, on the other hand, is not concern with tradition as such and even less with the recovery

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<sup>75</sup> S. HALL, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, cit., p. 225.

<sup>76</sup> H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, cit., pp. 282-283.

of the past – a Romantic nostalgia that he calls «traditionalism» – but with the truth that speaks to us through tradition<sup>77</sup>. Since the operation of culture is to a large extent inconspicuous, it is only by trying to discover its truth and not by trying to identify with it that one can participate in it. By shifting the attention from tradition to the meaning that we discover in what it transmits, we come closer to the past and participate in the continuity tradition. Suppressing the awareness of culture that set us apart from it in the last centuries is perhaps not feasible nor advisable, but by focusing on the meaningfulness of tradition for our contemporary life, we momentarily let it disappear and thus appear in different light...

### 9. *Diaspora and Tradition*

I would like to conclude my argument by giving an example to what may be the difference between Gadamer's notion of tradition and Hall's identification, and why I believe that despite the former's eurocentrism, his conceptual framework is more useful for transcending the universal order's articulation of culture and particularism. My example is taken from Hall's text and the brief comparison that he makes between the Caribbean and Jewish diasporas. If, according to Hall, the Jewish diaspora represents the essentialist notion of identity, the Caribbean diaspora is a space of cultural encounter, negotiation, and fusion:

I use this term here metaphorically, not literally: diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of 'ethnicity'. We have seen the fate of the people of Palestine at the hands of this backward-looking conception of diaspora - and the complicity of the West with it. The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. One can only think here of what is uniquely – 'essentially' – Caribbean: precisely the mixes of colour,

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

pigmentation, physiognomic type; the ‘blends’ of tastes that is Caribbean cuisine; the aesthetics of the ‘cross-overs’, of ‘cut-and mix’...<sup>78</sup>

Hall’s description of the Jewish diaspora resonates with the Zionist narrative that suppresses the Jewish life in exile, and represents Jewish history as a story of exile and homecoming, as if a duration of two millenniums can be summarised as a period of anticipation in which the Spirit of the Nation was waiting to fulfil its own self.<sup>79</sup> Without undermining the central place of Zion in Jewish consciousness both as a symbolic and a physical space, Jews preserve their culture not by securing their relationship with their homeland, but by adhering to the truths transmitted by tradition that renders their homeland as holy, but not as a place «to which they must at all costs return». In fact, most of the Rabbis in Europe and in Palestine, who saw themselves as bounded by the Jewish tradition, opposed Zionism vehemently, since they predicted, quite accurately, the erosion of tradition and culture that it would entail. Even today, the Jewish traditions are usually preserved in religious spaces, precisely because the conservation of culture is not a goal in and of itself but the truth, meaningfulness, wisdom, and authority that it possesses.

The Zionist return to Israel, on the other hand, is not a realisation of this tradition, but its recasting into modern concepts of identity and selfhood, the same categories through which Hall justifies the Caribbean culture of cut-and-mix. Zionism and hybridity epitomise the two extremes of cultural identity. It can either be fetishized and militarised, or become an object of curiosity and wonder, something that “cultural agents” can toy with. The art critic Niru Ratnam has this to say about the work of the Afro-British painter Chris Ofili whose work epitomises «Hall’s description of the diasporic experience»<sup>80</sup>. The only thing that Ratnam might want to consider is that the “Limits of Hybridity” stem from the limits of identity.

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<sup>78</sup> S. HALL, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, cit., pp. 235-236.

<sup>79</sup> A. RAZ-KRAKOTZKIN, *Exile Within Sovereignty: Critique of “The Negation of Exile” in Israeli Culture – Part I (Hebrew)*, in «Theory and Critique», IV, (1993), pp. 23–55.

<sup>80</sup> N. RATNAM, *Chris Ofili and the limits of hybridity*, in «New Left Review», CCXXXV, 1 (1999), pp. 155-156.

Ofilo's use of black culture is a playful one; the figures on his canvases are often crude stereotypes, from the thick-lipped, heavily-jowled Captain Shit to the series of caricatured black prostitutes... Most importantly, Ofilo does not treat black culture as if it is something innately his, but something to be borrowed and toyed with—everything in his work is a found object of black culture, from the Matapos Hill dots to the stereotypical figures and the elephant dung<sup>81</sup>.

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*