
“CULTURE OF IDENTITY” AND “IDENTITY OF CULTURE”**Ivan Majić***Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Hrvatska***Key words:** *culture, identity, culture studies, difference*

Summary: In this paper I am interested in special relation between individual aspect of culture which is connected with identity, forms and narrative discourses that establishes it and the issue of common culture, reference to social aspects of culture. Problems between individual identity and common culture are complex and interlaced; what is more, their meanings reflect always-already one another. (Hall) According to postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha hybridity can be final consequence of locating culture *in between* and mimicry, as an inner strategy of the postcolonial subject, is final consequence of the same strategy where identity might be *in between*. Nevertheless, Stephen Adam Schwartz detects numerous paradoxes within cultural studies especially in relation between the terms “identity” and “culture”. As a consequence he sees methodological individualism in cultural studies as a form of ethnocentrism. Due to mutual conditionality between them, concepts of “identity” and “culture” are showing that the knowledge and power are inseparable.

I.

The beginning of the famous article *The Three Senses of «Culture»* of T. S. Eliot shrewdly anticipates the pith of debates about culture that will be current a few decades later not just within a project of 'cultural studies', but more widely, within a majority of debates concerning culture. Eliot says: «The term *culture* has different associations according to whether we have in mind the development of an *individual*, of a *group* or *class*, or of a *whole society»* (Eliot, 1948 (1962): 21). Without intention to criticize Eliot's thought about *development*, recognizing his ideas under the circumstances of his time and place, I would like to emphasize his approach, which is based on relation between meaning and its use. In other words, term *culture*, for Eliot, will be variously recognized according to whom it is addressed. However, he insists on connection and interdependence between 'individual, group or class and whole society' and says «We only mean that the culture of the individual cannot be isolated from that of the group, and that the

culture of the group cannot be abstracted from that of the whole society; and that our notion of 'perfection' must take all three senses of 'culture' into account at once» (Eliot: 24). That quote shows not just his intention to build «perfection» of notion of culture, but also his awareness of different possibilities of its interpretation.

Today culture as a term can be connected with almost anything. Raymond Williams's statement about the term culture in which «'Culture' is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language» (Williams, 1986: 1) describes that as well. However, in this paper I am interested in special relation between individual aspect of culture which is connected with identity, forms and narrative discourses that establishes it and the issue of common culture, reference to social aspects of culture. In the first case we are dealing with the identity debates, problematic relation between identity and difference and/or psychoanalytic term transmission and, in second case, we are within one aspect of cultural studies (especially early work of *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* in Birmingham). In other words, main interest for me in this paper will be to consider two different approaches when we talk about culture: identity and society. «Is identity determined by common culture, or vice versa, is common culture determined by individual's peculiar identity?» That question might be articulated too strictly because the answer is probably both, specially if we follow Eliot's thought, i.e. identity and culture are mutually determined, but power which is inscribed in discourse of «culture» and «identity» is not always equally located.

II.

It should not seem contradictory, then, to start thinking about culture from the point of identity because, if we consider culture as «realm of identity-and difference-making» (Mueller-Funk, 2007: 2), then we need a starting point in which we have to deal with concept of individual identity. Nevertheless, there is a major problem in this approach, because, identity is not a stable category. Identity has already become questioned due to the impact of the unconscious (Freud), or the Other (Lacan), or *differance* (Derrida) or, what is more, due to the impact of culture and history (Hall). However, in Hall's view, identity is not a standing point towards culture, but quite opposite, culture is a standing point for thinking about identity. In his essay *Who needs identity* he says: «Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been

represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves» (Hall, 1996: 4). As the quotation implies, problems between individual identity and common culture are more complex and interlaced, what is more, their meanings reflect always-already one another.

The reason for that uneven distribution of discursive features is probably connected with the impact of difference which has, paradoxically, become one of the basic principles for re-thinking about identities or meaning. Hall continues: «Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the `positive` meaning of any term - and thus its `identity` - can be constructed (Derrida, 1981; Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1993).» (Hall, 1996: 4) For anti-essentialistic approach, «it is something like an epistemological law that cultures are not pure or homogeneous; that subjectivity is never outside the discursive practice that constitute it; that identities are never fixed or immutable, that the boundaries of communities are not given but constructed; and so on.» (Scott, 1999: 9) And the consequences of that approach are that that identity, and/or culture are always-already viewed as difference, what is more, they bear one another and, if we further simplify, individual identity is never firmly fixed on its own because of the impact of inherent differences in it which represent discursive practices of `culture`, and of course, common culture is never unique because of its inner differences, represented by numerous, peculiar, various identities. Threat for this anti-essentialistic approach could be a simple fact that - although that approach counts with *constitutive outside*, i. e. difference - when we talk about identity, we must have a vision of potential unique (and very essentialistic) culture, and when it is about common culture, we must count on very essentialistic comprehension of identity (every person is (or, in that context, must be) different, but closed category). Emphasizing the difference is therefore conditioned with a strong and demanding `identity` of the Other, what is more, difference is enabled by the Other. But here essentialism is just displaced and latent because here it is about those «theories of difference (that) take difference itself as given, as the economy out of which identities are produced» (Grossberg, 1996: 93-94).

On the other hand, although we can criticize essentialistic or anti-essentialistic view of culture, identity or meaning, although we can speculate about many discursive forms and/or their transformations, there is a strong necessity to see what is going on with culture, no matter if we have agreed if it is `placed` or `displaced` under or above the identity discussion.

In other words, we must ask ourselves «what are the conditions through which people can belong to a common collective without becoming representatives of a single definition? (Grossberg, 1996: 88) In that question, it is important to avoid «residing» in one, single definition, under the authorization of one *signifiant*, one specific meaning of *culture*, because we must bear in mind that, according to Eagleton, «if the word `culture` is an historical and philosophical text, it is also the site of a political conflict» (Eagleton, 2000: 19). To put it differently, although it has not been agreed on a unique definition of a culture, in the meantime, that *signifiant* is being taken for granted and localized under one discourse, which can turn into a means of power.

If «identity is always temporary and unstable effect of relations which define identities by marking differences» (Grossberg, 1994: 89), then culture, as I have already put it, is (battle) -ground on which identities are restoring their differences. In that way, culture is becoming time-spatial term which can be seen as central location of identity making. Identities are only in the realm of culture - that which Hall categorizes as `what-we-might-become` and therefore, culture enables identities as a functional categories. On the other hand, we cannot exclude power inscribed in discourse of culture, either. The major link between identities as those that are marked by difference and culture, which is `space` (of power) where identities are realized is an issue of agency. In Grossberg's words «while it is clear that structures of subjectivity and self may influence and be articulated to questions of power and the possibilities of agency, there is no reason to assume that they are the same or equivalent. In fact, the question of agency is a matter of action and the nature of change.» (Grossberg, 1996: 99) Question of agency between concepts of identity and culture is therefore intersection between meaning of identity and its activity, its definition and its use. Thus, «agency involves relations of participation and access, the possibilities of moving into particular sites of activity and power, (...) and agency enact power» (ibid.). Because of that, individual's or subject's agency links epistemological problems of cultural identity to political problems of culture, which makes these issues even more complicated.

III.

Questioning of the problems of identity and culture is always-already restricted to issues connected with those features that are considered external. That orientation toward *constitutive otherness* could not be seen just as an aspect of specific theoretical approach, but also, as an infinite *constitutive* lack which is, paradoxically, much needed for possible success of that approach. In that sense, when it is about `culture`, Bhabha ironically

says: «deprived of our stagecraft, we are asked to face the full frontal reality of the idea of 'Culture' itself - the very concept whose mastery we thought we had dissolved in the language of signifying practises and social formations». (Bhabha, 1996: 53) And further more, he continues: «This is not our chosen agenda, the terms of debate have been set for us, but in the mids of the culture wars and the canon manoeuvres we can hardly hide behind the aprons of aporia and protest histrionically that there is nothing outside the text.» (ibid.) That con-textual, even sociological aspect, which is inherent to the term 'culture' is also present in culture debates. Also, Tony Bennett remarks that (¹1998, ²2005), «culture is manifested as government's pluralized and dispersed sphere» (Bennett, ²2005: 105) and according to Robert J. C. Young (1995), culture has been seen as a «dialectical process which inscribes and dislodges its otherness» (Young, 1995: 30).

Although we have seen before that issues about culture or/and identity have nowadays been seen almost as a rule in anti-essentialistic approach which glorifies difference, the most influential contribution is Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity. That concept draws from Derrida's concept of *differance* and, according to it, it adopts post-colonial discourse of culture. The letter *a* in *differance*, which can only be seen in spelling (writing), rather than in pronunciation, which, in a way, shows difference of writing and of meaning, is crucial to Bhabha's concept of postcolonial subject. He emphasizes: «from that shadow (in which the postcolonial *a* plays (stress by H. B.)) emerges cultural difference as an *enunciative* category; opposed to relativistic notions of cultural diversity, or the exoticism of the 'diversity' of cultures». (Bhabha, ¹1994, 2006: 85) And so, Bhabha sees postcolonial subject within that enunciative category of cultural difference, I would say, he goes even further and sees identity-as-difference. Thus, in his work there is a connection (or he enables possibilities for that connection) between two categories: identity/postcolonial subject, and culture seen as cultural difference. These categories are similar in context of difference, seen as a product of Derrida's term *differance* and its obligatory use in writing. He says: «my insistence on locating the postcolonial subject *within* the play of the subaltern instance of writing is an attempt to develop Derrida's passing remark that the history of the decentred subject and its dislocation of European metaphysics is concurrent with the emergence of the problematic of cultural difference within ethnology.» (Bhabha, 2006: 84)

In fact, as it can be seen from these quotes, Bhabha's main intention seems to be showing both (postcolonial) identity *and* culture as a space for (on deeper levels) political action. His hybridity is a reply to essentialistic «claims for the inherent authenticity of purity of cultures which, when

inscribed in the naturalistic sign of symbolic consciousness frequently become political arguments for the hierarchy and ascendancy of powerful cultures» (Bhabha, 2006: 83-84). And therefore, if he criticizes an action which is *in se* political then reaction to that must be also political, if it aims to be efficacious. Bhabha restores connection between identity and culture via terms of mimicry, ellipsis, invisibility, “evil eye” and the missing person (Bhabha, 2006: 85). These terms, actually these strategies enable political strength and provide conditions for the kind of culture which can be seen as «hybridity». Hence, situation in which identity and culture are interlaced within a comprehension of «hybridity» is apt to be potential for political rejection of essentialistic assumption of unique, pure, and hence dominant, closed (national) culture.

Therefore, culture and identity are merged as categories of anti-essentialist political reaction in Bhabha's work. If hybridity is final consequence of locating culture *in between*, then mimicry, as an inner strategy of the postcolonial subject, is final consequence of locating identity *in between*. Here, again, difference is inaugurated as a basis for concept of identity, but in the opposite way because here, difference is hidden, even more, difference has, ironically enough, become a demonstration of «non-being» in essentialistic way. The moment of double articulation is crucial to mimicry. Put in Bhabha's words: «Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask (...) The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.» (Bhabha, 2006: 126). Actually, mimicry has no presence or substance in itself, «mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*» (Bhabha, 2006: 125) and that makes identity as a never ending process because it is not certain what/who is going to be base for next identification-`mimicrization`. Culture as a hybridization and identity as a mimicry, especially in postcolonial context, in Bhabha's work are explained in a way that they are always double-directed, ambivalent. Thus, the aim of that writing is to achieve political response directed to the colonizers and that can be realized through the slyness of special hybrid, ambivalent, elusive concepts of identity and culture, which are articulated through the terms of mimicry and hybridization.

IV.

Influences of Bhabha's postcolonial approach are connected with expansion of the whole set of issues, that are usually associated with the cultural studies. That anti-disciplinary and anti-methodologically concept has been considered as a «kind of *bricolage*» and therefore questioning the definition of the major issue - `culture` can be seen as a failure, because

according to that 'method' any precise definition is inadequate. Nevertheless, Stephen Adam Schwartz in his essay *Everyman an Übermensch: The Culture of Cultural Studies* detects numerous paradoxes within cultural studies which reveals cultural studies even as Romantic, essentialistic concept. His essay opens up with an analysis about cultural studies and says «To ask what cultural studies is, they imply, to misunderstand this fundamental anti-or post-disciplinarity» (Schwartz, 2000: 104). But in fact, it turns out that all these efforts to avoid some consistent or any determinative methodology do not result in a vast production of various and heterogeneous views, but, quite contrary, in a surprisingly similar way. Actually, on the one hand, «the underlying premises and particularly the conception of culture remain remarkably consistent» (Schwartz, 2000: 105), while, on the other hand, «'culture' must be taken at the greatest level of generality, as a 'signifying practises'» (ibid. 109).

In spite of the fact that the only thing «that holds together various cultural study approaches is - culture (ibid: 105), «the point of departure (as well as highest value) of cultural studiers is always *individual* and his or her preferences is evident(...)» (ibid: 120). Therefore, the majority of the issues that are emphasized by the cultural studiers are often connected with their own personal experience. Schwartz sees that as a logical consequence: «both the anti-disciplinarity and the autobiographical method in cultural studies are merely logical consequences of the rejection of all normative constraints as oppressive of particularity.» (ibid: 122) And therefore, «strange as it may seem, this methodological individualism makes of cultural studies a form of ethnocentrism» (ibid: 124).

At this point, cultural studies are understood as a practice which tries to comprehend a vast realm of culture, but, instead of that, cultural studiers' practice demonstrates the opposite, actually, an effort to study the culture of *one* individual. And here questions about identity and culture are again interlaced. What we are faced with is a phenomenon that «by representing culture and reality itself as matters of choices and decisions imposed by the few on the many, cultural studies conceive culture in strictly individualist terms» (ibid: 120). In the end, the major dilemma remains: «whose culture 'cultural studies' studies»? By insisting on anti-disciplinarity or post-disciplinarity, cultural studies are faced with pseudo-liberalization of the method, which ends in particularity of individualistic approaches, that celebrate similar aspects such as «difference», «hybridity», «the Other» etc. But in fact, «cultural studies cannot tell us much about contemporary western culture or any other, for it is a symptom of what it claims to analyze, a modern form of culture in which individual is the highest value» (ibid: 124).

V.

Critical perspective of cultural studies is nowadays important because of symptomatic aspects of, among other, identity and culture. I am sceptical about the possibility of precise and pure definition of these terms and, of course, from the very beginning they are mutually connected and/or conditioned, but in this paper I have tried to bring attention to some consequences of the dominant paradigm of contemporary cultural scholars, which are focused on *constitutive otherness*. As a result of that tendency, the meaning has been considered always somewhere where it is not expected, in the place of the Other. Yet, that otherness has become the constitutive (even essentialistic) condition for allocation of the subject's agency in relation between identity and culture. What is more, identity and culture have become terms which are implied by one another and which can be considered as a mirror to each other. But that does not exclude the political potential of the *floating signifiants* of culture and/or identity. Practice of cultural studies has shown that even that anti-methodological and/or post-disciplinary practice can fall into a trap of repetitive uniformity of the one and specific discourse, which is just another illustration that knowledge and power are inseparable.

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