



## Interview with Manuel Castells

# Brands are more important than countries

MAR JIMÉNEZ

Economy and identity is the subject of the fifth *Paradigmes* issue. This becomes an irresistible matter to analyse with Manuel Castells, full professor of Sociology at the [University of Berkeley](#) and researcher at the [Universitat Oberta de Catalunya](#). Will globalisation, with its deep impact on national identities, be the final blow to nation-states? And what is the influence of globalisation in the construction of nations without state? Mr Castells looks into these issues in-depth, considering relevant events shaping Catalonia's present, including a sentence by the [Constitutional Court](#) that cut back the Autonomy Statute voted by the people of Catalonia. He also analyses from an economic perspective how the identity of a country, a brand or a city becomes a powerful tool in a setting of constant global exchange.



Alain Touraine has some thoughts about the impact globalisation has on national identities. The French sociologist explains that «an increasing part of our experience is linked to movements, change, blends and thus, in a word, to loss of identity or fragmentation of identities as well as double or treble remade identities».<sup>1</sup> Put in other words, «our life experience is not national anymore, in any area, both material and symbolic», Touraine states. Yet he points out that «this does not mean that we speak of an irreversible decline of the nation-state».<sup>2</sup>

The thoughts of the French sociologist are the starting point for this interview with another sociologist, Manuel Castells, who in this conversation with *Paradigmes* reflects on the subject this monograph is devoted to: economy and identity. Mr Castells' analysis, who in 1998 published *El poder de la identidad*<sup>3</sup> within his trilogy *The Information Age*, is very seducing. Reading it is highly recommended.

## The network state is the key political player and nations without state become cultural forms articulating the identity.

### What impact does globalisation have on building individual and collective identity?

Globalisation involves partial loss of sovereignty of the nation-state regarding control of fundamental activities, from the capital market to communication. This weakens social representation and control systems, which until some years ago were based on the relation between society and state. And as these systems were the ones providing citizens with a given protection and participation, they have now turned to a defensive reaction: basic collective identities (religion, nation, ethnic group, territory, etc.) become systems of self-identification. They allow to negotiate with global flows out of feelings of belonging rooted in strong identities.

### This loss of sovereignty you just mentioned can cause nation-states to become weaker or even disappear? And what impact does this have on nations without state?

Globalisation will not cause nation-states to disappear. But in order to survive in a global world, they will change and create networks of states sharing sovereignty. In these networks states will be able to implement their decisions on a joint or negotiated basis. This is how we moved from the nation-state to the network state: the European Union is a good example. Also, nations without state become in globalisation a reference for those peoples that do not trust the states they are embedded in. These nations that mistrust their states of reference identify themselves with their historical and cultural roots. In this setting, the network state is the key political player and nations without state become cultural forms articulating the identity. In this respect, an increasing gap between nation and state is occurring everywhere right now.

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One of Manuel Castells' greatest contributions to the study of identity is the distinction between three types. In *El poder de la identidad*, he states: «As the social construction of identity always occurs in a setting subject to power relations, I suggest a distinction between three forms and origins of identity building: <sup>1</sup>. Legitimizing identity: introduced by the dominant institutions in society to expand and rationalise their domination vis-à-vis social players [...]; <sup>2</sup>. Resistance identity: generated by those players in positions/conditions devaluated or stigmatised by the logic of domination, by which they build trenches of resistance and survival based on principles different from or opposed to those governing the society's institutions [...]; <sup>3</sup>. Project identity: social stakeholders who, based on available materials, build a new identity redefining their

position within society and in doing so seek transformation of the whole societal structure». <sup>4</sup>  
 Based on these thoughts of Mr Castells, the question arises on the impact of the current economic crisis on the definition of identity, and especially what impact the combination of crisis and globalisation will have on our national setting: Catalonia. For the Catalan sociologist points out in *El poder de la identitat*: «The age of globalisation is also that of nationalist rebirth, expressed in both the challenge of established nation-states and widespread (re)construction of identity along nationalities, always asserted against what is foreign.» <sup>5</sup>

**What impact will the economic crisis, together with globalisation, have on the Catalan identity? Will it strengthen the resistance identity to the detriment of the project identity?**

The resistance identity, for instance the national one, appears as a reaction to the lack of institutional tools for managing problems, particularly situations of crisis. In this respect, nationalism may become fundamentalist and xenophobic. In Catalonia there is a good example with the party *Plataforma per Catalunya*. However, it can also occur that nationalism becomes a project identity trying to overcome the limits of the current nation-state: a new open-minded nationalism aiming at more democracy at supranational level. This new nationalism can do so for instance by trying to change the European Union towards a new institutional form articulating societies all over Europe beyond the framework of nation-states.

**At which stage is Catalonia? Is ours a resistance identity or have we reached a project identity?**

We need to know that the resistance identity is the present: it is necessary, indispensable to be able to resist constitutional counterreformation and the hostility of Spanish centralism, which is very aggressive towards Catalonia again. However, the resistance identity leads to political and social stalemate if it is not linked to a nationalist project becoming democratically part of a supranational framework in a European space in which civil societies with their own cultures create a participatory and democratic European federal state.

**Catalonia has experienced a migration boom in the last decade. How does migration, intricately related with globalisation, affect national identities? Are fears by some justified that multiculturalism will lead to the dilution of the national identity?**

Migration and its children turn European societies into multicultural ones, and there is no way back. So in this context, a direct relation between cultural identity and state is not possible unless excluding minority cultures by

**Manuel Castells**

One of the most quoted researchers in social science, specifically the fifth, ahead of celebrities in this area like Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman and Richard Sennett: this is Manuel Castells, the author of the renowned trilogy *The Information Age. Economy, Society and Culture*, professor of Sociology and director of the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute of the *Universitat Oberta de Catalunya* (UOC) and full professor at the Wallis Annenberg Chair in Communication Technology and Society at the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Southern California. He is also emeritus professor of Sociology and Urban and Regional Planning at the University of California at Berkeley, where he taught for 24 years. He recently published *Comunicació i poder* (Barcelona: UOC, 2009).



undemocratic means. By that I also mean that nations without state are multicultural as well! That is, nations without state cannot be defined as such only through their history. They hence need to be so according to the classical definition of who is Catalan for the sake of fellowship and progress within that nation.

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**Let's take your approach regarding national identity: what does this contribute to the construction of a country in a moment like this, when we are experiencing a deep economic crisis?**

National identity increases social cohesion, which is a key item to maintain social peace in times of crisis and to assert solidarity in those projects involving mobilisation of citizens. However, there needs to be clarity about what I told you in the previous question: today, national identity is national while multiethnic and multicultural.

*Let's come to strictly economic matters. Joan Costa-Font<sup>6</sup> explains how «identity shapes our conduct and demand for public and private goods. However, identity also has an impact on the offer of products as individuals adapt, either consciously or unconsciously, products and services they offer to their identities.» Does Manuel Castells agree with this approach? Does he consider it positive? Also, what is the brand image of Catalonia and Barcelona? What do potential purchasers of goods or services (let's think first and foremost of tourism) associate with the Barcelona brand? Is the image of modernity kept? Mr Castells, who spends most of the year in the United States, thus having a perspective on these matters from a vantage point, provides an answer to it.*

**Can national identity have an influence on internal and external demand for public or private goods and services in a country or territory? What do you think of that?**

We need to be clear about the fact that, only in some exceptional cases, buying or investing in what is produced in the own country can help to get out of the crisis. This approach places the nation in a defensive position within the competitive setting of globalisation. In this respect, we could find a positive side to what you asked about cooperation between institutions and companies in order to compete together in the global markets and create value. This value turns later back to progress in the national territory.

**Does national identity have an influence on the offer of products from a given country or territory? What does nation branding need to be successful?**

The national identity is positive in commercial branding if associated with an acknowledged quality, for instance Italian fashion, French cuisine or German engineering. But this involves a quality that is recognised based on its origin in the nation and can be later associated to national branding. However national identity branding is different from commercial one: the nation is asserted in values like democracy, tolerance, open-mindedness, lifestyle... It is in this context that Barcelona is a brand as a cultural and party city. But we need to be very careful: this is not associated to a city that is efficient in productivity. Besides, we need to be clear that Barcelona is a brand (Gaudí, Barça) but Catalonia is not: its name is not even known in many countries!

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**Is the image of Barcelona still that of a successful brand? Or do phenomena like mass tourism bear the risk of weakening and standardising it?**

Drinking and low-cost tourism is destroying Barcelona's image as a destination for people with a high purchasing power looking for culture and not drugs or sex. The municipal governments of Barcelona and other towns have a big share in having gone the easy way for raising money: saturation of hotels and clubs and unlimited hours for night fun. This sort of tourism attracts a young audience without money and limits top value-added tourism, which is also less of a predator to the city.

**What is today associated to the Barcelona brand abroad, especially in the US?**

Culture (Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí), architecture and urban planning (Antoni Gaudí), food, football (Barça) and unfortunately limitless fun: all young American students dream of going «studying» to Barcelona. And by the way, few know that Catalan is spoken there. Also, in political spheres, Barcelona is related with pacifistic social movements criticising unfair globalisation.

**If the international projection of the Barcelona brand is not much older than twenty years, is it possible to do anything similar with the Catalonia brand? Or is it better to project Catalonia's international image through the Barcelona brand?**

It is possible, but it will be hard. In this respect, I think it is better to strengthen Barcelona and do a parallel campaign, as was done at a certain point, with *Barcelona, capital of Catalonia*. Barcelona can be used as a gateway to the diversity and beauty of Catalonia.

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▲ Barcelona has gone for young tourists without money, which limits top value-added tourism.

*What is more important in globalisation, a commercial brand or the country where the product of that brand has been manufactured? In a world of constant exchange of products, services, images and icons, what is more decisive, the nation or the logo of a given product? Has capitalism turned governments into secondary actors vis-à-vis big corporations? Do brands have a soul? Or put in other words, are brands identified with certain values? Mr Castells reflects on these points.*

**Global trade allows products or symbols from different countries to be spread all over the world. How can a brand image be created?**  
A brand or a product can be identified with positive values if a fair trade strategy is done

involving cleaning up the companies in the country. What do I mean by that? Just look at the **Volvo** example: it's identified with a safe car and we all think it's Swedish... although its owners are Americans! Scandinavia is generally identified with controlled, safe products and companies respecting social rights. Or we also have the example of **Silicon Valley**, which is associated to technological innovation... In a word, the brand image is created by bringing quality into a product, process or company to later associate that product, process or company to its country of origin. Just think of the **Nokia** case: Finland had to struggle to have the phone company identified with that country. People thought it was a Japanese company!

**Can a product or service become the symbol of a country? What is more decisive in the identity of a product: the brand (i.e. Coke) or the country of origin (USA)?**

Brands are more important than countries and are associated with the value people confer

them. What is important is to introduce brands to the market that are associated with a country once they are successful. Everybody knows that **Apple** and **Google** are Silicon Valley. But there has been, and still is, the belief that Microsoft is also Silicon Valley, when in fact they are based in Seattle. And this is precisely why Seattle made an effective campaign to remind that **Microsoft**, **Boeing** and **Starbucks** were created in that city.

Nevertheless, what is indispensable is first to recognise a given brand, to be successful and then to associate it with a specific place. That is, Gaudí creates an image for Barcelona, it is not Barcelona creating an image for Gaudí. In Catalonia we need to push dissemination of innovation and creativity across the world, just before reminding its Catalan origin.

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**To finish, what impact has massive introduction of products from abroad on the national and collective identity, like Asian imports to the United States?**

Any intensification of exchange of any sort allows to know the «other». And consider that it is less likely to attack whom is known or have a defensive attitude arise. All in all, commercial and cultural exchange makes us interdependent and teaches us to live with each other.

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▲ «Gaudí creates an image for Barcelona, it is not Barcelona creating an image for Gaudí.»

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A regular collaborator in different media, among which TV3, Catalunya Ràdio, BTV and La2.

She has been in charge of technical support and coordination of the cabinet of the Minister of Economy and Finance of the Government of Catalonia.

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**Notes**

1. TOURAINE, A. (2006). *Globalització econòmica i fragmentació social*. Barcelona: Breus CCCB, p. 5.
2. TOURAINE (2006), p. 6
3. CASTELLS, M. (2001). *La Era de la Informació. Vol. II, El poder de la identitat*. Mèxic Distrito Federal: Siglo XXI Editores.
4. Manuel CASTELLS (2003). *La Era de la Informació. El poder de la identitat*. Barcelona: Alianza Editorial. 2nd edition, p. 35-36.
5. CASTELLS (2003), p. 58.
6. COSTA-FONT, J. (2007). «Identitat col·lectiva i l'economia de la identitat nacional: Catalunya en perspectiva global». *EINES per a l'Esquerra Nacional*, 2, p. 145-157.