



# **“THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGING”: REFLECTIONS ON THE CRISIS OF PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES**

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**Abstract:** *This paper reviews the main twentieth century changes that have shaped the contemporary crisis of identity. After exploring four hurricanes of modernity – total war; the cultural revolution of the 1960s; modernization and globalization; and the rise of the information society – I discuss the decline of trust in civil society. Personal identities once tightly focused on family, friends and neighborhood, are now much looser connections with the emphasis on social networking. The process is one of individualization, subjectivization, and self-realization. Collective identities are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy. Ideologies, associations, mainstream churches and nation-states have lost their mobilizing power. I argue that globalization in a network society offers a possible solution to the crisis. Until recently domestic and international politics, save in times of war, seemed separate worlds. In the twenty first century they form one continuum. Cosmopolitan politics with its advocacy of a global civil society offers not only an opportunity to reconnect individual and collective identities in a new and purposeful way but to respond to the demand for justice worldwide.*

**Contents:** 1. Introduction, 2. Total War, 3. Cultural Revolution, 4. Modernization and Globalization, 5. The decline of trust, 6. The information society, 7. Conclusion: A Global Civil Society?

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

It is an honor and a great pleasure to be invited to speak at this symposium on *Cambio cultural y Cambio social*. I have been lo-

oking forward very much to my first visit to Pamplona and the campus – regretting somewhat that the Symposium did not coincide with the “*Sanfermines*”. Perhaps this is just as well since I might have been put out of action before giving my paper!

The paper begins by reviewing the main social, political, cultural and economic changes that have contributed to the contemporary sense of a crisis of identity. To be sure, there is material here for several symposia. Although what I have to say in the time available is necessarily brief and selective, it will be enough, I hope, to provoke questions for discussion. Four hurricanes of change are explored: total war; modernization and globalization; the cultural revolution of the 1960s; the rise of the information society. Personal identities once tightly focused on family, friends and neighborhood, are now much looser connections, with the emphasis on social networking. The process is one of individualization, subjectivization, and self-realization. Collective identities are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy. Ideologies, associations, mainstream churches and nation-states have lost their mobilizing power. I argue that globalization in a network society offers a possible solution to the crisis. Until recently domestic and international politics, save in times of war, seemed separate worlds. In the twenty first century they form one continuum. Cosmopolitan politics with its advocacy of global civil society provides an opportunity not only to reconnect individual and collective identities in a meaningful and purposeful way but also to respond to the call for justice worldwide.

Three caveats. Firstly an obvious disclaimer. My approach is that of a historian, focusing on the impact of twentieth century upheavals. Philosophers, sociologists and political scientists would offer you different perspectives<sup>1</sup>. For the purpose of this discussion identity is defined as the individual’s sense of being in

1. For the most recent overview see *Daedalus*, Fall 2006, “On Identity”.



various ways distinct from others. This self-awareness is constructed over time from a multiplicity of influences. Second caveat. Beginnings and endings in social and cultural history are notoriously difficult to pin down. By starting with the world wars I do not wish to imply that all significant change began in 1914. Many antecedents of post-1914 developments are in evidence from the 1890s. The women's movement, for example, develops in the nineteenth century. Lastly, the unevenness of all historical change. Over the past century the pace of social and cultural change varied hugely across countries, regions, and continents, for instance, Europe in the 1960s offered striking contrasts between social democracies and the authoritarian regimes of Spain and Portugal, and between Communist Eastern Europe and the West. The following analysis draws mostly on examples from North America and Western Europe.

## 2. TOTAL WAR

The experience of total war in the first half of last century profoundly influenced European identities<sup>2</sup>. Major neutrals like Spain, as the Civil War demonstrated, could not escape the cascade of violence and ideology. Some historians view the war of 1914 as the beginning of a thirty years war in Europe. Stefan Zweig's memoir *The World of Yesterday* (1946) evoked a sense of a lost world. The slaughter shook belief in nationalism, nation-state and church, subverting post-Enlightenment assumptions of progressive moral and material improvement. The wars reordered the contract between state and citizen. In 1914 to fight for one's country was a civic duty. Indeed, the Italian Futurist em-

2. A film that depicts with skill and humour the opportunities war offers for the invention of identity is *A Self-Styled Hero (Un Heros Tres Discret, 1996)*.

phasis on war as a positive value, an affirmation of life and manhood, commanded wide appeal. A peasant mother waved farewell to her son, saying war “will make a man of you”. The awful destructiveness of industrialized killing challenged the old absolutes of patriotism and organized religion. British Nurse Edith Cavell voiced this shift in values on the eve of her execution in 1915: “patriotism is not enough”. The questioning of received values is captured in another incident. An English school on Armistice Day November 1918 organized a Thanksgiving Service. “When the national anthem was played one girl refused to stand up. The headmaster asked why. ‘All the other little boys and girls’ Daddies would be coming home now; but her Daddy would never come home again. She was caned for disobedience”<sup>3</sup>.

Nationalism, stripped of the old “my country right or wrong” attitude, was further diluted by internationalism, loyalty to the League of Nations, collective security and disarmament. In the 1920s and 1930s youth and veteran exchanges between former enemies aimed at forging an international community based on face to face contacts, goodwill and cooperation. Universities gathered home and foreign students together in purpose built housing like the Cite Universitaire, Paris (1924), and International Houses in the USA. Total war reconfigured attitudes to the state and conflict. Revulsion from war refueled the nineteenth century peace movement, raising its profile and influence. In both conflicts governments used the carrot of a better world to mobilize electorates. Britain’s Beveridge Plan (1942) offered a welfare state blueprint. As a result, the contract between state and citizen was renegotiated. The night watchman state of 1914 had promised internal order and protection from external attack but precious little else. By 1945 the double failure of interwar democracies to prevent not only war but mass unemployment and economic mi-

3. Cited Mark MAZOWER, *Dark Continent; Europe’s Twentieth Century*, New York, 1999, 253.



sery ensured the rise of a West European welfare state. Citizens now expected rulers to deliver social goods: prosperity, employment, and welfare.

The catastrophe of 1939-1945 discredited European nationalism. Manifestly the nation state had not saved its citizens from death and occupation. Moreover, dependence on an American Cold War shield of conventional and nuclear arms underscored the inability to deliver security. Integration came to the rescue. As the state reinvented itself in the European Economic Community so did its citizens. Gone was the 100% commitment to fight for one's country. After 1945 Europeans expressed increasing reluctance to go to war. Conscription has long since disappeared. The citizen-state relationship has become only one allegiance among many-. Global loyalties often come first-the future of the planet, and causes like Amnesty International and Greenpeace-.

War brought lasting change to women and the family. The Great War produced an assertive and emancipated "new woman" whose demands for softer and more sensitive "new men" led to conflicts between the sexes in the aftermath of a conflict which many males viewed as an assertion of their virility. Despite efforts in the 1930s and 1950s to re-emphasize women as homemakers, by the 1970s women confidently asserted a new identity of autonomy and social and economic equality with men. The traditional patriarchic family of wives subject to husbands and children subject to parents encountered attack in other ways. The surge in divorces beginning after World War I and the rise of the nuclear family gave women more freedom. Between the wars greater use of artificial contraceptives and growing prosperity established the family of two children as the norm. The joke of the time was that British parents rather than have another child opted for the "baby Austin" - Britain's first small car for the masses. Broken marriages and the rise of the nuclear family heralded the end of the large extended family of numerous aunts, uncles and cousins.

### 3. CULTURAL REVOLUTION

From Berkeley to Paris the cultural revolution of the 1960s metamorphosed attitudes and assumptions in Europe and North America. To be sure, not everything of importance occurred within the sixties. Historian Arthur Marwick's *The Sixties* (1998) stretches the decade to the years 1958-1974. Distinctive features included Vatican II; black civil rights; youth culture; protest and rebellion; the triumph of popular music as a universal language; the challenge to censorship and authority; massive changes in personal relationships and sexual behavior; a new audacity and frankness in books, in the media and in everyday behavior; the new feminism; gay liberation; the emergence of a counterculture; optimism and faith in the dawning of a better world.

While the influence and importance of some of these developments may be debatable, their overall revolutionary impact is incontestable. Indeed, the legacy is now so much taken for granted that it's hard to recapture the pre-sixties atmosphere of deference to authority and hierarchy. Two small personal memories of the time might help. At my university students were forbidden to use the lifts. While forcing students to climb several flights of stairs might improve their health it does little for campus community relations. One day I had the temerity to enter a lift and came face to face with a senior academic who said loudly "What young professors we have these days!" Visiting the Sorbonne I noticed that French professors had keys to their lifts. Second recollection. As a novice teacher I attended my first departmental meeting. The senior professor presided at the head of a long table. Entering the room I slipped into an empty seat half way down the table only to be told to sit at the end!

Perceptions of personal and collective identity became much more fluid. Egalitarianism ruled. Television shows mocked authority figures. Clothes, accents and body language, always-strong markers of identity and status, lost their power. Blue jeans



served as a universal classless uniform for both sexes. The death of a dress code can be dated to a single year. Staying at a Cambridge College I glanced at old photographs of entering freshman during the 1960s. New undergraduates had an official group photograph. Until the mid-60s all wore dark suits, white shirt and tie; from 1967 casual dress took over. In Britain until the 1960s the BBC banned regional accents; almost overnight provincial voices were OK. Upper class youth practiced a kind of inverted snobbery by adopting Cockney accents. The defeat of the attempt to stop publication of D.H.Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1960) on the grounds of obscenity signaled the collapse of state censorship. The sense of sexual liberation is neatly caught in British poet Philip Larkin's remark: "Sexual intercourse began in 1961". A new anti-war movement *CND* (Complete Nuclear Disarmament) extended post-1918 condemnations of war. The savage satire and comic humor of *Dr Strangelove; or, How I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb* (1963) replaced the solemn and earnest tone of classic anti-war statements like *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928).

That Vatican II changed the identity of modern Catholicism is a truism. Yet the jury is still out on the Council's lasting significance. What did it mean for the experience of the ordained ministry at the time? One of my high school teachers, an English Jesuit, recalled his personal transformation:

In January 1968 I was Fr Edwards, a cleric in a long black gown, a Deputy-Head who knew that a sixthformer's hair should not stick over the back of his collar. By October 1969 I had dropped the prefix "Father", was called "Paul" by almost everyone, and had bought a pair of warm, very comfortable, but quite graceless jeans. And I no longer knew how long or how short anybody's hair should be...<sup>4</sup>

4. Paul EDWARDS, *Canute's Tower: St Beuno's 1848-1989* (Worcester 1990), 141.

One outcome of the Council was to delegitimize Church authority, witness the furore over the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968). No Catholic writer had publicly questioned the Church's traditional teaching before 1963. In fact there is a continuing crisis of identity within the Church –institutional and individual– with the emergence of traditionalists and liberals arguing over the desirability of the Tridentine Mass and much else. For many rank and file Catholics the rapid post-Conciliar abandonment in many dioceses of long-standing devotions like the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Benediction and Rosary generated confusion and doubt. Now the wheel has come full circle. In Berkeley my own Newman Holy Spirit parish, which always prides itself on being “progressive”, has recently reintroduced Benediction, and Adoration! One result of greater liturgical diversity is the growth of consumer culture within the Church. Just as shoppers pick and mix merchandise so people look for a local church, which fits their perceived life style. Thus Catholic identities become loose and fragmented.

#### 4. MODERNIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION

Modernization gathered speed in mid-twentieth century, reinforcing the impact of total war. The story is one of the adoption of modern technology in the broadest sense, including medical advances and rational management of industry and bureaucracy. Mass consumer society gave most people more money, better health, longer lives and leisure. But there was a price to pay, the erosion of family unity and group solidarity. Migration from countryside to town and across Europe replaced what Marx and Engels called “the idiocy of rural life” with an anonymous urban environment, offering multiple possibilities. Prosperity gave people options that only the rich had had in the past. Britons for example, bought second homes in Spain and France. Rapid ex-





pansion of state funded higher education in the 1960s, together with additional leisure and the advent of cheap package tourism further weakened loyalties to family, community and social class. A French student living on a state grant in Paris talked of his new life: “Money problems I have known since childhood. Here for me, it’s a palace. It’s luxury! ...Living in the city has, thanks to contact with other people... allowed me to lose my blinkers. I have changed...”<sup>5</sup>

The golden age of prosperity from 1945 to the mid-1970s guaranteed full employment and sustained economic growth. The crash came in the mid-1970s. The oil price hikes and the devaluation of the US dollar revealed western capitalism’s vulnerability to the outside world. The restructuring of the 1980s emphasized globalization, the need to stay competitive in an increasingly integrated and predatory world economy. The idea of social progress as a collective project based on the accumulation of goods lost its attraction. *The Limits to Growth*—the 1972 manifesto of the Club of Rome—sold ten million copies, marking a new environmental and conservationist consciousness. Ecological movements like the Green party in West Germany were the new expression of disaffection with the degradation of the environment. Many of the great manufacturing centers of Europe fell into decline. The sharp economic downturn and the response of Reaganomics and Thatcherism had important consequences for personal and collective identity. The ruthless downsizing of manufacturing and coal mining wiped out whole communities. Glimpses into the plight of British coal miners and steel workers can be found in the popular films *Billy Elliot* (2000) and *The Full Monty* (1997).

The era of collective political mobilization was superseded by more fragmented forms of politics. Ties to class, trade unions and political parties atrophied. Politics centered less on class and

5. MARWICK, *The Sixties*, London 1998, 557.

more on “identity” issues. By the 1980s a debate on “national”, “cultural”, and “gender” identity had begun. Race and immigration issues moved centre stage. The large influx of non-European immigrants, especially Moslems, raised fundamental questions about national identity. Should a state pursue multiculturalist or assimilationist policies? How should Britishness or Frenchness be defined? One prominent social theorist Anthony Giddens talked about the advent of what he called “life politics” in which “self and body became the sites of a variety of life-style options”<sup>6</sup>. The rethinking of gender roles, which began in the 1960s, achieved its greatest legislative impact in the 1970s and 1980s. Divorce laws were liberalized and the legal equality of husbands and wives reaffirmed. The 1977 West German Marriage Law scrapped the clause, which permitted a wife to work only with her husband’s permission. In the 1980s civil marriage was legalized in Greece, and women gained rights in Spain and Portugal following the collapse of the Franco and Salazar dictatorships. Marriage itself was being repackaged as a choice rather than a duty and as a limited commitment. In 1960 one in four American marriages would fail, today one in two will.

Some commentators argued that Western consumer capitalism, by forcing people to live at a dizzying pace, had created a sort of existential crisis. People were harangued by “experts” and thus encouraged to mistrust their own intuitions, and presented with “identities” to select and discard at random. The result, it was claimed, was an increasing sense of anomie, manifesting itself in growing fear, on the one hand, and a sporadic search for “genuineness” on the other. The multiple identities offered by post-industrial society had spawned an obsession with “roots” and “heritages” among a politically immobilized electorate, too sophisticated any longer to trust the media, and deprived of any dependable

6. *Modernity and Self-Identity*, London 1991, 225.



sources of knowledge. Television opened up a world of images, but robbed personal experience of its authenticity. The spread of astrology, New Age philosophies and other forms of irrationalism reflected this growing anxiety in the face of an uninterpretable world. Journalists talked of the “fretful 1990s” when fear is the new badge of citizenship.

This picture of postmodern *angst* has some validity but the degree of alienation can be exaggerated. What had happened was that politics was no longer regarded as the prime area for personal fulfillment or action. Voter apathy and abstention were on the increase, and party memberships dropped. The ranks of the *pasotas* increased. In Belgium, Italy, France and Britain corruption scandals rocked public confidence in political elites. Part of the problem was that as a result of globalization patterns of employment and personal relations were more varied and less settled than ever before. Greater choice inevitably meant greater uncertainty, increased individualism reduced the opportunity for collective mobilization. The great demonstrations and marches of the past grew more and more sporadic: mass groupings of people were more likely to be generated by sports events and pop festivals. Individualism opened up a world of vulnerability to risks, which had formerly been countered with familial, local or national solidarities.

## 5. THE DECLINE OF TRUST

Turning now to attitudes towards politics and government. A prime problem is the hollowing out of legitimizing identities in the public sphere. The following remarks are largely based on changes in British and North American society. Spain’s experience may be quite different and I should welcome your comments. The public domain of citizenship is crucial both for individual fulfillment and the well being of democracy and society gene-

rally. In America and increasingly in other developed nations people are not plugged in very tightly to groups and associations, they may volunteer a few hours a week for a while, but they will not join an organization which will expect their loyalty and commitment for the long haul, or at least they are much more reluctant than they once were. Even commitment to marriage and family, leaving aside job and vocation, are much more fragile, much more dependent on individual mood than they used to be. In part this situation reflects porous institutions. In a world of porous institutions it is hard to have any connections that are not loose.

British political scientist David Marquand's *Decline of the Public* (2004) identifies one cause of the weakening of the public domain. He contends persuasively that in Britain over the last thirty years interventionist government policies of the New Right under Thatcher and the New Left under Blair have undermined systematically the culture of service and citizenship. The outcome is the rise of a culture of distrust of traditional institutions, above all of politics and government. But there are other reasons for the corrosion of public life. One is the non-democratic nature of the post-1945 international system. Today's global economic order was a great achievement in its time. It now operates, however, in such a manner that it manifestly undermines trust between different nations, and especially between the affluent Western (in part East Asian) world and the rest.

Another reason for disillusionment has been the failure of ideologies and redemptive politics to ensure a better world. The gulf between rich and poor countries grows apace. In many parts of Africa quality of life and conditions generally are worse than under European colonialist rule. In the United States, the richest and most advanced nation, over 40 million cannot afford health insurance. In Britain social mobility between classes has declined for several decades. Above all, tardy and quite inadequate governmental responses to climate change threaten irreversible damage



to large areas of the world by the end of the century.

Moreover, what has also contributed to the breakdown of trust is the perception that political leaders have not hesitated to mislead electorates. The late 1950s and 1960s brought a surge in political mendacity in Britain and the United States: official denials of collusion with Israel in the Suez crisis of 1956; denial of the Bay of Pigs fiasco 1961; the Tonkin Gulf incident tricking America into the Vietnam war; the multiple deceptions of Watergate. Some would argue that this is nothing new-political mendacity has flourished since Machiavelli. The apparent surge in mendacity, it is contended, reflects the greater transparency of Western democracy. Politicians who in the past would not have been found out are now quickly exposed. However this explanation does not get to grips with the issue. Ruling elites may have lied extensively in past centuries but we do not know for sure. What is certain is the surge in mendacity in the second half of the twentieth century. I would argue that the surge represents a new and real phenomenon that reflects the contradictions of pluralist democracies. The continual balancing of interests between different constituencies in the electorate means that certain tensions cannot be fully resolved. Politicians attempt to paper over the cracks and in this sense lying may be a useful and necessary strategy. However over time the cumulative effect is to destroy confidence in the democratic process.

## 6. THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Finally I want to turn to the information society. Its basis is the explosive growth in the accessibility of knowledge since the early 1990s. It's not that we know more than we did a decade or so ago, but that we *can* know more than we did. Today's internet offers whole encyclopedias, journal runs, whole libraries, not to mention much more ephemeral information that in the past would

have taken months or years to retrieve if it could have been retrieved at all. What is salient for this discussion is the impact of the information age on globalization. Globalization in the economic sense is nothing new. It has been under way for centuries. What is new, however, is that the information revolution has enormously accelerated globalization by making every product and every resource in the world instantly accessible to everyone—a global market place. We live in the world of the “terrific deal” —there is always something potentially better out there— new gadgetry, mobile phone, job, location, house even partners and spouses. Finding and switching to something allegedly better is easier today than at any other time in the history of humanity. The competition and fragmentation of a market society breaks up identities, disorientating individuals and communities, drowning them with information but offering little or no meaning. Those aged 18-25 Generation Y are now Generation ME. My Space, web cams, pod casting, blogging and social networking by phone encourage round the clock updates on all aspects of personal lives, nurturing a culture of narcissism. Sociologist Manuel Castells considers that “the dissolution of shared identities” between generations and within civil society “is tantamount to the dissolution of society as a meaningful social system” and “may well be the state of affairs in our time”<sup>7</sup>.

## 7. CONCLUSION: ¿A GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY?

The contemporary crisis of identity can be summed up in this way. At first sight the twin phenomena of globalization and the information society appear to have widened and deepened individual autonomy by providing numerous alternative life styles and virtual communities. But the positive gains carry severe shortco-

7. *The Power of Identity*, 1997, 355.



mings. One is the erosion of the sources of what Castells calls “legitimizing identities”, family, church, state, and associations of civil society. The condensed codes of tradition, the life force of societies, are in danger of draining away. There is also an overload of information, which leaves people hungry for meaning.

That people are searching for more spiritual meaning in their lives is confirmed in the proliferation of web sites devoted to religion. Lastly, it is arguable that the appearance of greater individual autonomy and self-realization is in fact illusory. In an age of terrorism we are part of a surveillance society. Unhappily, domestic and international constraints on the liberty of the individual are more extensive today than ever before. People’s awareness of their inability to influence effectively and decisively the things that really matter for the twenty first century –climate change, energy supplies, nuclear proliferation, world hunger and human rights– has accelerated the hemorrhaging of civil society.

My vantage point as a specialist in international relations attracts me to possible solutions to the world order, which hold out the hope of renewing personal and collective identities. These solutions include what are called cosmopolitan scenarios<sup>8</sup>. One of these may offer a way forward. The increasing interconnectedness of all parts of the world through the global economy gives cosmopolitan solutions a growing influence, even if some of the practical obstacles to their implementation remain severe. What is common to them is that they do not rely on the state or the existing international system, believing that other forces are more fundamental in shaping the world order. The scenario I have in mind puts the emphasis on global civil society and on cosmopolitan democracy, focusing on the way in which new global organizations, global pressure groups and global campaigns have begun emerging, and the incremental steps through which the

8. See Jan Aart SCHOLTE, *Globalization, 2005*; David HELD, *Global Covenant, 2004*



creation of a global polity from the bottom up might be constructed. New global forums to allow the voices of all peoples of the world, all civilizations to be heard and recognized, new kinds of association, a new global politics which would recognize universal human rights, and allow for the first time the representation of all peoples and interests in the governance of the world. This pressure for a global civil society would include existing institutions but go beyond multilateralism. In short to heal fractured identity we have to think globally and offer a vision, which will restore meaning and justice. Building a global civil society would empower us to respond to the world's cry for justice.