

Cultural Identity: Solution or Problem?

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Cultural Identity: Solution or Problem?

Introduction

We are living in an age in which everyone seems to be seeking an identity. On the one hand, this can be a personal endeavour, a search to find out who one 'really is', how one is made up: this is a psychoanalytic or spiritual quest. On the other hand there is a search for a *cultural* identity. This, of course, is connected to a personal search, but seeks a secure identity in what one has in common with others, perceived to be like oneself, not what makes one unique as an individual.

This search for cultural identity is evident in the late twentieth century in various ways. There has been, above all since the Second World War, a spate of so-called Fourth World social movements.¹ Fourth World is a term used to refer to the indigenous inhabitants of areas colonised by Europe who still retain aspects of their original lifestyles.² In many areas, such colonised peoples have a very long history of resistance to their oppressors – native American Indians all over the continent, for example, have rebelled and fought against domination by European colonisers since the latter first set foot on the 'New World', although they also adapted to and accommodated their new masters. Nowadays, however, we can see the emergence of many indigenous American organisations which attempt to defend not only land but also a self-consciously formulated notion of 'culture' or way of life.³ Equally, it is only really since the 1960s that Australian Aborigines have begun to organise in defence of land and culture.⁴

This wave of Fourth World organisation – which is in evidence among tribal peoples in Asia (e.g., Philippines, Thailand, Bangladesh, India), in the Pacific region (e.g., Melanesia) and in Africa – is due to a variety of causes. One is the intensification of resource exploitation in the areas where such peoples live. Of course, natural resources have been exploited, often in brutal and destructive ways, in the Australian outback or the Amazon region for centuries, but in the latter half of the twentieth century, such

exploitation has tended to penetrate more decisively into these areas. Perhaps more significant, however, has been the wave of post-war decolonisation in which colonial empires finally broke up, giving previously dependent peoples a sense of their own destiny and independence in the world. In fact, such decolonisation in some cases proved troublesome for tribal peoples who found themselves straddling new national borders and subjected to attempts at control from more than one newly independent government.

But this type of organisation, seeking redress, rights and a self-conscious cultural identity is not limited to 'Fourth World' peoples. In the USA, black people – or African Americans, to use a more current term – already had long traditions of organisation, both informal and formal.⁵ The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, for example, was founded in 1909; the United Negro Improvement Association, although founded in Jamaica by Marcus Garvey in 1914, also had a major impact in the USA, not to mention the entire Caribbean basin. But it was the post-war civil rights movement, associated with Martin Luther King, and the later Black Power movement that had the greatest influence and also provided models for black consciousness and struggles against racism and for 'black pride' for the descendants of Africans all over the Americas. Malcolm X became a hero figure for many black people in Brazil, Colombia and all over the Caribbean.⁶ In the USA, the trend towards ethnic and racial self-consciousness was officially recognised in 1970 when the Census Bureau adopted a categorisation that divided the population into five basic groups: African, Anglo, Hispanic, Asian and Native.

In the UK, and in much of the rest of Europe, there has also been a surge of ethnic and racial consciousness and organisation, deriving mainly from currents of immigration from former colonies into the metropoli. In the UK, this has resulted in concerns about cultural identity not only for Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigrants, but for the British as well (or more precisely the English, Welsh, Scots and Irish). In some ways fears about immigration – actually, fears about 'coloured' immigration, since a majority of Britain's post-war immigrants have been white – have channelled concerns about the decline of Britain as a whole, its loss of world power, its decline as an imperial nation, its possible absorption into Europe and so on. Gilroy (1987, 1993) argues that this sense of

crisis is 'lived' through ideas about the 'problems' caused by racial minorities.

Why is this search for cultural identity happening now? There are many reasons for this post-war phenomenon.⁷ First, there has been a gradual challenge to the security of Western forms of knowledge: science and the 'progress' it is said to bring have been opened to increasing doubt from both epistemological and ecological points of view. The certainty of scientific knowledge, of course, has been questioned for a long time, by such as Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, but this element of doubt has strengthened with more recent historical approaches to science which seem to indicate that scientists to some extent 'construct' their knowledge rather than simply discover it.⁸ Of course, such knowledge may 'work' effectively at very high levels of resolution, enabling missiles to fly and atoms to be split, but this does not mean it is necessarily 'true' in some absolute, complete and permanent way. This whole trend may seem to have a tenuous link with the emergence of a widespread search for cultural identities, but the point is that it is part of a general challenge to the authority of Western modes of knowing, planning and progressing. These modes, to which science is central, have in a very general sense envisaged the march of modernisation as a process which will lead to the global dominance of Western-style rationally planned, democratic and capitalist societies in which traditional ethnic and racial identities wither away. The questioning of science itself removes one strut from under the edifice of this vision and opens the way to seeing cultural identities as important, viable and modern forms of living.

Second, the processes of decolonisation to which I referred above also challenged the centrality of Western knowledge and power. Whereas Europe and, more recently, the USA had seemed to be the masters of a global empire that encompassed not only economic exchange, but also moral values, standards of lifestyles and taste, decolonisation worked to undermine this image of power. Of course, economically the USA and Europe (but now also Japan) do continue to dominate the globe, but post-colonial writers and artists have mounted a major challenge to the imperium of taste and value. Such a challenge is riven with problems about originality and imitation – to what extent are intellectuals and artists from the post-

colonies simply producing imitations of Euro-American originals, rather than producing something ‘new’ – but the challenge itself is unmistakable. It is in this context that anti-racism has flourished, as racism itself is seen to be a product of Euro-American colonial and neo-colonial domination of the rest of the world.

Third, some of the identities that people previously felt to be secure and that they took for granted have been disturbed by recent trends in theory and political practice. Part of this is the result of decolonisation itself, which upset identities such as ruler/ruled. Feminism has also played an important role here. Feminists explicitly set out to challenge what it meant to be ‘female’ or ‘male’. They sought to show, often using examples from non-Western cultures, that Western ideas of female and male were not ‘natural’ but historically particular. It was not inevitable that men should be ‘on top’, or that they should be aggressive, dominant and oriented to the public domain, while women were tied to the domestic domain, weaker than men, dependent and ‘naturally’ linked to caring and nurturing roles. In other societies, women might be in charge of heavy agricultural labour outside the home, or men and women might see each other as linked in relations of egalitarian complementarity, rather than hierarchy. Feminism itself felt the impact of searches for cultural identity, as black women, in Britain and the USA, for example, started to question the way feminist agendas seemed to be set by middle-class white women who, they argued, did not always grasp the way things looked from the point of view of ethnic minority women, who suffered not only sexism, but also racism.

Fourth, although the human world has always been interconnected by circuits of migration and exchange that stretch around the globe, in the twentieth century, the process of ‘globalisation’ has intensified greatly, mainly due to the communications technology that allows people, money, goods, images and ideas to circulate with great freedom and rapidity. The chief driver of this process is, of course, capitalism which develops and uses these technologies in the permanent search for profits. This search has been a major spur for the economies of the West for centuries, leading to the exploitation of the Americas, Africa and huge regions of Asia. Nowadays, the world is indeed the oyster of modern multinational companies who can exploit cheap labour and

resources in virtually any corner of the globe and can invest, and disinvest, billions of dollars in almost any national economy at the drop of a hat. This global movement of things and symbols has blurred national boundaries to some extent and created a degree of cultural standardisation – the so-called McDonaldisation of the world. In this context, local identities seem to break loose from their moorings: Durham mining communities collapse, economically and culturally, as Britain imports cheaper coal from Australia; African pastoralist tribesmen buy Armani suits and play video games.⁹ Cultures become ‘deterritorialised’ (Appadurai 1991) as the overlapping of people, property and places becomes less stable. However, in this context, local cultural identities do not disappear. In the face of this destabilisation, people try to secure a new identity, whether local, ethnic, racial or national. They do so using the various resources at their disposal, which may be of strictly local origin or more likely derived from the very circuits of global exchange that are destabilising the older certainties.

All this sketches out the basic theme that I am addressing in this essay. People are faced with various problems – how to achieve a sense of identity and ‘home’; how to secure land rights or human rights (including a right to be different from the majority and yet not be discriminated against for it). To solve these problems they use the notion of ‘cultural identity’ as a self-conscious formulation with which to represent themselves, to locate themselves and struggle for the end they seek to achieve. ‘This is who we are’, they can say, ‘this is our history and culture’.

But is this a good solution? Or does it bring as many problems as it seems to solve? Is there a better way? To answer this, we need to look at what ‘cultural identity’ is, where the notion came from and how it has developed as an idea. This in turn means looking at how the ‘experts’ (in this case, social scientists and academics of the arts) have approached the concept of ‘culture’ and the ways in which they tried to solve the problem of how people work as cultural animals.

The history of ‘culture’

‘Culture’ is a word with a very complex history.¹⁰ It derives from the Latin word for ‘cultivate’ and in this sense it passed into English in about the fifteenth century as a word to express tending, husbanding

and cultivating. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, it acquired the connotation of cultivating, educating and improving the mind. Here is the root of the idea of culture as elite, 'advanced' artistic forms, the product of extensive 'cultivation'. From this notion of improvement there gradually derived the idea of culture as an abstract process of human cognition or the products of that process; culture here was a human faculty, it was what made humans human. This is the root of the (modern) late nineteenth-century sociological and anthropological use of the term. For example, culture was defined by E.B.Tylor (sometimes labelled 'the father of anthropology') as the sum total of activities of humans: 'the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. However, these complex wholes were seen as arranged on a ladder in which some people were more advanced culturally, or 'civilised', than others. Culture was seen as a process of human development or evolution over time and all the founders of social science were interested in human history as a process of steady improvement and approach to the 'civilised' state (of which, not surprisingly, they considered European society to be the exponent). Human history was the history of culture as a sort of ladder with 'savages' and 'barbarians' at the bottom and civilised Europeans at the top. Some people had got 'stuck' on the ladder and these were the 'less civilised' peoples. There were various explanations for why they had got stuck, ranging from environmental factors (the tropics debilitated people) to 'racial' (some 'races' were biologically inferior to others). For all these scholars, culture was essentially used in the singular; hence E.B.Tylor's classic work was titled *Primitive Culture* (1871), not 'Primitive Cultures'.

There is also a different current of usage of the word culture which goes back to the late eighteenth century. This is the idea of cultures, in the plural: various cultural units, located in specific geographical areas. The pluralist notion developed partly during the Romantic movement with the idea of folk and traditional cultures. These cultures were identified as the authentic roots of national traditions and this linked the notion to two developments: i) the spread of nationalism in Europe and the search for authentic national identities which defined each nation as unique and distinctive; ii) the Romantic search for unsullied traditional

community values in the face of alienating industrialism and modernity. (We can see here that the things that spur the search for identity today – a quest for a feeling of being ‘at home’ in the face of destabilising modernity – actually have deep roots.)

This pluralist meaning of culture was developed in anthropology by the German-American scholar Franz Boas and it is the meaning that came to dominate anthropology (and also sociology and other social sciences and humanities). Franz Boas was part of a wider redefinition of anthropology and social science in the USA and Europe, moving it away from the armchair speculation of the founding fathers and their evolutionist histories of barbarity and civilisation, towards an approach that relied on long-term, hands-on fieldwork in small communities. Anthropologists would go and spend one or two years in different cultures, learn the language and find out how people lived and thought. Fieldwork and ethnography (the detailed description of individual societies) became enshrined as the defining techniques of anthropology and the rite of passage through which all aspiring anthropologists had to pass to be accepted into the professional fold.

Working like this meant that cultures were seen as separable things, each with its own characteristics. Anthropologists worked in specific communities and this encouraged an inward-looking approach. Theoretically, most anthropologists worked within a framework of functionalism, which saw communities – and by extension whole cultures – as neatly bounded functioning units. Anthropologists were trying to solve the problem of how cultures worked and they used – metaphorically, of course – the image of cultures or societies as organisms. As one might explain the lungs in terms of how they function in the maintenance of the body as a working system, so one could explain different customs and social practices in terms of how they contributed to the stable functioning of society. This was generally phrased as how a given social institution created ‘social integration’ or ‘social solidarity’.

Culture thus had the meaning that became dominant in anthropology from the early twentieth century until about the 1960s – although it is still current today to some extent. Cultures were integrated collections of customs, objects, things, practices, beliefs and institutions that characterised a given society. This change in ways of thinking about culture and society was a big advance on the

social evolutionists. It was an important part of the cultural relativism of anthropology (which had some roots in the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, Voltaire or Swift that European society was not necessarily the best possible society). A pluralist notion of cultures was a more democratic and egalitarian approach: there are many different cultures and they cannot necessarily be arranged in an easy hierarchy of 'civilisation'.

However, there were also problems involved in thinking about culture in this way.¹¹ It was tempting, and useful in some ways, to focus on 'bounded' communities as objects of detailed attention which could be seen as functioning systems, but in fact communities and much less whole cultures are not bounded at all; cultures are not divided up into neat bits, sitting like sea-shells on the sand ready for the analyst's attention. From the 1960s, anthropologists began to highlight the interconnectedness of 'cultures' and the history of changing 'primitive cultures'. To give a concrete example, the Mundurucu Indians of the Amazon region had a particular type of kinship arrangement in which villages were built round groups of related men. Women left their natal communities and married into their husbands' villages. With Spanish contact in the late eighteenth century and especially with the nineteenth-century rubber boom in the region, Mundurucu men were frequently hired by colonists as fighters, while the women took on the role of food providers for the whites. This gradually changed villages into groups of related women, who lived together to better cultivate manioc, with men as more mobile individuals who married into these communities. Hence history and interconnectedness mattered in the definition of what Mundurucu culture was in the twentieth century when anthropologists went to study them; this culture could not be seen as a bounded unit, on its own and outside history, because its very structure responded to the presence of other cultures.

It also became clear that 'cultures' are relational, that is, they are defined by their difference from others, at various levels. The 'Welsh' as a culture are defined in part by their difference from the 'English'; both these take their shape in part from their difference in relation to others, such as the 'French'; all three can be grouped as 'European' in contrast to 'Africans', and so on. Hence 'culture' is a relative term. In addition, what counts as a significant 'difference' depends on who is doing the classifying. What is a minor cultural difference to one

person – a turn of phrase, an accent – may be a crucial marker of difference to another. This means that the boundaries of cultures are not set and stable, but are always shifting as different people go about classifying others. As people classify others, they do so with certain interests in mind and these may change. Somebody who you want to include ‘on your side’ one day you may want to exclude the next. For some whites in, say, the USA, black people and their cultural practices may be included ‘in the family’ for some purposes (e.g., domestic service), but not others (e.g., marriage). Thus again, cultures are again shifting constructs. What is included in ‘the English’ or ‘English culture’ is not subject to stable definition, but varies historically and according to specific context.

Cultures were increasingly seen as symbolic constructions, not as a set of practices ‘out there’, like an insect on a dissecting table, but as a malleable, shifting, contextual, situational set of meanings and ideas which changed according to perspective. Culture is now often talked of as not something you ‘have’ or ‘own’, but something you ‘live’, that is cultures are in a permanent process of becoming. Anthropologists who once talked about the culture of the So-And-So tribe now had to ask, ‘culture from whose point of view?’, men and women, old and young, elite and commoner might have different views on what made their society what it was.

From the 1980s, this sort of trend has been labelled ‘anti-essentialism’. An ‘essentialist’ definition of identity holds that a social group (or indeed a single person) has an interior essence which defines its identity and its nature, its cultural soul, as it were. This essence can be uncovered, often by revealing a history which made that essence. An essentialist definition of Englishness, for example, would assume that there was a thing called English culture and would then try to define the essential characteristics of an English person (phlegmatic, stiff-upper-lip, or whatever) and delve into English history to see how those characteristics came about. Anti-essentialist views emphasise that there are as many differing definitions of Englishness as there are people trying to define it; that a view of English as the classic ‘*rosbif*’ of the French cartoons (with bowler and broolly) is not just a simplifying stereotype, but is a middle-class, bourgeois, white male image of Englishness that comes out of the public school and the Colonial Office; it therefore tends to exclude other aspects of Englishness. The stereotype of

Englishness exists and has a certain meaning in the social world, but it is a representation that comes from a particular class and gender perspective. Anti-essentialist views of identity also emphasise that securing a cultural identity is not only about unearthing past history, of discovering an inner essence; it is also about making something new in the future. If the past is always to be used as a guide to the present, it can be restrictive and excluding. If Englishness or Britishness is defined by some notional rootedness in an Anglo-Saxon tradition, then newer post-colonial immigrants to the UK are excluded from those definitions. Anti-essentialism is thus also about identifying where particular versions of a given culture come from and how some versions become dominant and more accepted than others. The connection of 'Englishness' with 'whiteness', for example, has developed historically and is a dominant view which works in a racist way to exclude black people.

Conflicting views of culture

Anti-essentialism is now *de rigueur* in the social sciences and the arts. There is a whole industry dedicated to unpicking essentialist representations of given peoples, cultures and social groups and showing how these essentialisms came to be and what effect they have. However, the older, more essentialist notion of culture, that anthropologists took from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantic nationalism and turned into one of the central concepts of their discipline, has paradoxically lived on in general usage and become one of the main ways people think about the cultural identities that they seek for themselves. Anthropologists and social scientists are not entirely to blame for this: they, after all, took the concept from the realm of daily practice in the first place. But they did give the concept a good deal of solid 'scientific' legitimacy which made it seem like a useful way of thinking about cultural identity. For example, in colonial Africa British anthropologists often studied something called native or customary law, looking at how various peoples resolved their disputes and dealt with wrongdoing. In fact, the 'customary law' they were studying was itself partly a product of colonial administration which, as part of British strategies of indirect rule, had already formalised the processes involved in dispute settlement, creating Native Courts which used local elders as mediators, but which were accountable to colonial

authorities. By glossing over this, anthropologists legitimated this thing called customary law as a solid part of 'tribal culture'. Or again, anthropologists readily studied 'tribes' as cultural units when these units had partly been created by the colonial administration imposing a more formal order on what had been a very fluid situation. Thus they legitimated these units as nice, neatly bounded 'cultures'. The paradox is that now peoples in Africa or Melanesia sometimes use anthropological texts from the 1930s and 1940s as an accurate guide to their own history.

A more recent example is that of the Kayapó Indians of the Brazilian Amazon. Terry Turner (1991) charts a change from a situation in which they had no real concept of their 'culture' as an identifiable unit – they just lived their lives in what they saw as appropriate and worthy ways – to one in which they have a self-conscious awareness of this thing called 'Kayapó culture'. This happened partly because of their relation to the Brazilian state, which increasingly came to figure in their lives, and also their growing awareness of Brazil as a nation in which they are located alongside other similar groups of Indians. It also happened because anthropologists, including Turner himself, talked and wrote about something called 'Kayapó culture'. In Turner's case, the change in consciousness is linked in part to the Kayapó video project in which Indians were taught by Turner and others to handle video cameras and to shoot and edit films about themselves. They make films for their own enjoyment, but they also make films which they use for more political ends in their political struggles for land. They have filmed themselves meeting with government officials and other Indian groups, for example, and they have also filmed important events in their own communities which they can then refer to as historical documents. Turner argues that this has given them a sense of their own culture as a 'thing', an object which can be recorded and represented to others.

All this indicates the operation of 'reflexivity': a condition in which people routinely use in their daily practice the knowledge about them produced by specialised experts. Reflexivity of this kind is especially marked in the modern world since the knowledge produced by, say, sociologists routinely enters the everyday public world via the mass media: the articles on sex and marriage in countless popular magazines derive in part from sociological

research on these matters and affect the way people think about and practise sex and marriage. For anthropology, the reflexivity effect used to be less marked, since many of the people anthropologists studied were illiterate and anthropologists published their results in their home countries and in their own languages. But with increasing education and globalisation, the people the anthropologists study are now often able to read what is written about them.

In sum, then, social scientists helped to institutionalise a concept of 'culture' as a thing, with an essence and often an essential history, a thing which can be owned, and therefore stolen and lost. Even though they no longer use such a concept of culture and spend a good part of their time criticising it, it has become a major aspect of modern society.

What are the problems involved in these essentialist views of culture? They are, of course, the sort of problems I outlined earlier. Take the example of Afrocentrism which has a certain currency among blacks in the USA (and elsewhere).¹² Afrocentrism focuses on the African origins of African Americans and tries to re-evaluate African culture, giving it a positive worth, perhaps glorifying Africa as the source of all civilisation, construing Egypt as 'African' and as the source of Western civilisation itself. Afrocentrism invites black people all over the Americas and throughout the African diaspora to come together around a common notion of themselves as African and thus sharing certain basic attributes. Now this sort of philosophy can be very useful in inculcating a certain pride and discipline in, say, black urban communities in the USA. But it also has problems which stem from its essentialism. It claims to define African American culture in terms of a central core of African tradition and culture and to talk about African American history in terms of the thread which links American blacks to Africa. In so doing, it tends to reproduce the process of stereotyping (of blacks as 'uncultured', as 'inferior', etc.) which it is seeking to criticise. It may invert the stereotypes, but it is still dealing in the same currency. Some Afrocentric activists and theorists talk about 'ice cultures' (Northern European ones) and 'sun cultures' (African ones) in which 'ice' is bad, cold, unemotional, repressed, domineering and exploitative, while 'sun' is good, warm, friendly, empathetic and egalitarian. This actually reproduces very stereotyped views of Africans and Europeans, although it places the former at the top of the ladder instead of the bottom. In some cases,

this sort of talk can even get biological, claiming that melanin has all kinds of virtues that black people benefit from because they have more of it. In addition, the image of Africa invoked in this sort of talk is very over-simplified and homogenised, as if all Africans were the same and shared some central essence, despite the huge variety that characterises the continent. Finally, this Afrocentrism also tends to exclude certain things that are important to black American culture. For example, in Colombia, a growing concern with the African origins of aspects of black Colombian culture means that things that are evidently non-African, but that form part of black culture, are in danger of being ignored. In some areas, black Colombian musical practices are actually based on European musics which were adopted and adapted by blacks during the colonial period and maintained by them as they disappeared elsewhere. They are a central part of some local black cultures but they are not 'African'.

Staying with black America, but taking a different tack, other work on the Black Power movement in the USA has shown that the version of black identity purveyed by black activists in the 60s and 70s was actually very much about black *male* identity and about a recovery of a sense of black masculinity which depended on black male supremacy. The position of black women in the movement was said by one black activist to be 'horizontal'. Not surprisingly, black (feminist) women felt excluded. The essentialist notion of blackness, centred around masculinity, that was being produced by a particular set of people within the movement effectively excluded other people.¹³

A second example of the problems involved in essentialism comes from the widely noted fact that in much of Europe, the USA, and Australia, discourse about 'culture' has replaced one about 'race', at least in the public forum.¹⁴ Right-wing politicians no longer talk about Caribbean, African and Asian immigrants as racially inferior or even refer to 'race' at all; instead they talk about how these immigrants are 'culturally' very different and that this culture represents a 'threat' to the 'host' culture. In Britain, politicians such as Margaret Thatcher or Douglas Hurd then remark on how too many immigrants will cause tension and social problems in Britain (rather than seeing the problems as related at least partly to white racism).

People are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture... So if you want good race relations,

you've got to allay people's fears on numbers. (M. Thatcher, 1978, TV interview)

It would not be in the interests of the ethnic minorities themselves if there were a prospect of further mass inward movement. That prospect would increase social tensions ... firm immigration control is essential if we are to have good community relations. (D. Hurd, 1987)

'Cultural difference' then becomes taken for granted as a 'problem'; immigrants' children are 'torn between two cultures'. It is assumed that it is human nature to be ethnocentric and rooted immovably in one's own culture, that each person is essentially linked to his or her own cultural identity, seen as a thing which cannot change and adapt. Essentialist ideas about cultural identity are being used here to legitimate nationalist exclusion, controls on 'black' immigration, foot-dragging over multicultural education, and so on.

A third example comes from the Maoris in New Zealand. This case also shows how anthropologists' recent anti-essentialist views of culture sometimes conflict with more essentialist views which may be held by 'the natives'. In New Zealand, there is a Maori social movement which fights for land and cultural rights. Allan Hanson, a US anthropologist, undertook a study looking at the way Maori activists (mainly well-educated intellectuals) talked about Maori culture and history.¹⁵ They had a particular story about Maori history and the old migrations and religious beliefs of Maoris and Hanson discovered these stories were basically myths derived from the erroneous theories of nineteenth-century European historians. His 'exposé' hit the local press and sparked trouble. Maoris resented his intrusion and questioned his right to study them; only Maoris should or even could study Maoris, they said. This shows the exclusionary nature of this version of Maori identity: Maori culture was such an essential part of every Maori that a non-Maori would not be able to understand it. There is, of course, a real ethical and political point here about rights to intellectual property and about the arrogance implicit in a discipline whose history has been, in part, the study of 'them' (supposedly ignorant natives) by 'us' (the expert, and of course, Western, anthropologists). But the expression of this point through such an essentialist way of thinking does not, I think, represent a good solution.

In sum: these notions of cultural identity provide a solution to various problems: they can be a source of pride and community or

national solidarity, or resistance to oppression, or a basis on which to battle for land. But they also tend to be divisive and exclusionary. This is evident in the USA where, building on a very racially segregated history, 'cultural identity politics' has, in the view of many, run rampant. Academic departments have to make sure their staff are ethnically balanced, even if it only means getting someone with the right-sounding surname. A Supreme Court judge (Clarence Hill) could play the 'race card' and imply he was being victimised as a black, when he was caught with his pants down in a case of sexual harassment.¹⁶ Local politics works through ethnic patronage and lobbying and you can't say 'Happy Christmas', but only 'Happy Holidays', for fear of offending someone whose cultural identity does not include Christianity. For some critics, this obsession with cultural identity and the right to cultural difference is obscuring real problems that many ethnically different people share: poverty, unemployment, bad housing, poor education, violence, drug-abuse, and so on.¹⁷

Any answers?

Is there any way out of the trap? Cultural identity seems to be a useful tool in some ways, but not in others. In my view, part of the problem is that social scientists are, as usual, becoming too focused on their own theoretical approaches. They assume that anti-essentialism is a Good Idea, that it recognises the true face of culture, as a lived process, malleable and shifting. Any form of essentialism is thus a Bad Idea and a false appreciation of culture. Hence the conflicts that occur when social scientists try to unpick the histories and identities that cultural minorities construct for themselves in their struggle for rights and equality.

My view is that we have to get rid of the simple opposition between essentialism as Bad and anti-essentialism as Good and look at the practical and political effects of essentialism (or its opposite) in different cases. Thus the cultural fundamentalism of the British or French right-wing in its talk about immigrants is clearly a dangerous sort of essentialism, partly because it is being wielded by a dominant group which has some power to impose its views on others. The cultural identity politics of the USA had a legitimate purpose and starting point, in recognising the disadvantaged position of certain minorities, but it has become

channelled into pork-barrel politics in which ethnic identity becomes a meal ticket, a way into government funding; in this context, it becomes more divisive. The sort of essentialism practised by Colombian blacks who are involved in the black social movement in that country is much less pernicious and is linked to an important challenge to the long-standing tendency which denies the existence of racism in Colombia and denies the presence of any African contribution to Colombian culture.

This is no easy answer. As social scientists we have to make moral decisions about whether we consider the political and practical effects of particular types of cultural identity strategies to be good or bad. We cannot assume a scientific 'distance' and treat other people as 'objects' of study. Nor indeed will those people allow that to happen nowadays, as increasingly they demand a say in the process of being studied, are ever more capable of assessing the results of our studies and for that matter, of studying their own cultures. This means there has to be a dialogue in which the studier and the studied can talk about the political and practical impact of particular ways of thinking about and practising identity. Such a dialogue is not easy, because academics are tied into an institutional academic context in which the vast majority of the production and distribution of knowledge is still concentrated in Western countries. There is a basic inequality here which hampers an equal dialogue and even new communications technologies such as the Internet can only partially offset these structures of inequality. But things are changing slowly. Western anthropologists could perhaps take a leaf from the book of some of their Latin American counterparts. Anthropologists in Colombia, in my experience, are forced to be more accountable to the people they take as the subject of their studies, because they live in the same country, work within the same political system and speak the same language. Of course, Colombian anthropologists are still mostly white middle class urban dwellers, whereas most of their subjects are black and indigenous peoples who live in rather peripheral rural areas. But there is necessarily more communication between them and this makes judgements about cultural identity easier to root in ethical practice, rather than theoretical purity.

Notes

1. See Burger (1987), Survival International (1985), Young (1995), Dyck (1985). See also 'Native peoples and the future', a special issue of *New Internationalist*, no. 186, 1998.
2. The term derives from the categorisation of the globe into 'First World' (the so-called 'developed' nations of Europe, North America, etc.), the 'Second World' (which used to refer to the Soviet bloc) and the 'Third World' (a term coined to refer to the so-called 'under-developed' regions).
3. In Mexico, the National Council of Indigenous Peoples was formed in 1975. In Colombia one of the first indigenous organisations was the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca, formed in 1971 mainly by Páez and Guambiano peoples. In Bolivia, the Movimiento Indio Tupac Katari was formed in 1962, taking its name from the indigenous leader of colonial times. In the USA, individual tribal councils had existed for some time as a form of organisation for native Americans, but they were often seen as tools of state domination; more 'grass-roots' organisations include the National Indian Youth Council (1961) and the American Indian Movement (1968).
4. See Maddock (1983). The Federal Council for Advancement of Aborigines, founded 1959, was, as its name suggests, a government initiative. In 1966 there was a famous strike by Aboriginal stockmen at Wave Hill Station, Northern Territory, protesting against against poor wages and conditions. As recently as 1967, 92% of the Australian electorate voted in a referendum that racist and discriminatory clauses in the Constitution should be removed. It was then that Aborigines were allowed the vote. Land rights campaigns date from the 1960s and protested against the presumption that, when the Europeans arrived, Australia was a territory where land was not owned by anybody, giving the new arrivals *carte blanche* to occupy the land and gain legal title to it. Protest eventually resulted in the 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territories) Act which allowed claims to be made by 'traditional owners'. In the 1992 'Mabo case', the High Court ruled that Murray Islanders (of the Torres Straits area) already held title to their land, thus acknowledging that Aborigines at contact had had a system of land ownership.
5. There is a gigantic literature on this theme; see, for example, Levine (1977), Omi and Winant (1986).
6. See Wade (1993, 1995), Hanchard (1994), Nettleford (1970).
7. See Hollinger (1997), Hall (1991, 1992).
8. Kuhn's famous text, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1970), was an important step in the historicisation of

scientific knowledge. For an example of a more recent approach to the constructed nature of scientific knowledge, in the field of biology, see Haraway (1989). For a general account, see McLennan (1992).

9. On globalisation, see Appadurai (1991), Featherstone (1995), Hall (1991), Friedman (1994).
10. See Williams (1988), Pasquinelli (1996), Friedman (1994).
11. See Wolf (1982: ch. 1), Carrithers (1993: ch. 2).
12. On Afrocentrism, see Gilroy (1993), Kanneh (1998).
13. See Hooks (1981).
14. See Barker (1981), Wetherell and Potter (1992), Gilroy (1987).
15. See Hanson (1989, 1991).
16. See Morrison (1993).
17. See Hollinger (1997), Marable (1995: ch. 16).

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