



Exclusive Culture? Representation and Prejudice

*The Network Effect – Budapest
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Culture of exclusion and prejudice

The purpose of this paper is to set a context for the Network Effect event 5-7 March 2008 in Budapest. It attempts to raise questions and confuse concepts on identities.

This document focuses on the way individuals construct their identities, what role public representation of groups plays in this exercise and how individuals therefore form opinions of themselves and others. It addresses Europe but uses a number of American examples, as this often is the reality we share. The paper openly lobbies for serious attention to the individuals behind group classifications. It also attempts to raise questions on what our national and European cultures are based on.

It asks how much power we actually have over who we are and who others think we are. It attempts to make the reader think what power structures and traditions are behind certain identities and why concepts like nationality are defended so fiercely.

The paper starts by addressing the impact of the current digital revolution on individual identities, continues by using the notion of a national identity as a prime example of the European identity confusion, goes on to discuss the impact of media representation to the way we see ourselves and others and finally asks whether we should even be looking for a solution.

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Acting out ourselves

*"Swing it, shake it, move it, make it, who do you think you are?
Trust it, use it, prove it, groove it, show me how good you are."*

Acting out is the way to prove one's true self, sang the recently reunited British pop sensation **Spice Girls** in 1996 – at a time before **YouTube** and **Facebook**. Little did they know how on the mark they were.

Public performance and interaction is today's way to build and live out one's identities. Individuals and groups fight over attention and appreciation in the public sphere, in schools and on the streets. We are all fully occupied with who we are as people, nations and as Europeans. Search for self and community keeps individuals and systems busy, as well as therapists, NGOs and consultants in business.

The search is acted out in all spheres. Governments are trying to rebuild Britishness or Dutchness by starting "national discussions", introducing citizenship tests, launching cultural canons and inventing traditions such as an obligatory citizenship ceremony. On the other hand, commercial actors are promoting consumer artefacts as demonstrations of who we are. **Apple**¹ is beyond selling hardware when it asks us to decide whether we want to be the boring PC person in a brown suit or the relaxed Mac guy in a hoodie and jeans. **Dove**² brands itself as the gender-conscious cosmetics brand with its Real Beauty campaign. Individuals swim in a sea of opportunities. Who am I? Am I what I buy or what I think? Can I buy who I want to be? Who is like me or am I really unique?

We are freer than ever to compose and compile but we are still born with certain parameters. We also have more tools than ever to perform, present and promote our identities, ideologies and ways of living. YouTube and **MySpace** function as megaphones for radical Islamists, for the second coming of punk as well as a forum for teenager girls into poetry.

Identities are in constant flux. What parameters such as disability, gender or sexual orientation mean for our future is a political battle. We can link to people in the same subculture unlimited by geographic distance but we still need to take part in our neighbourhood or city. A non-domestic name can still create difficulties when sending a CV to a potential employer. We can choose to link or separate our online and physical identities but only if we can afford to pay for an ADSL connection. A greater amount of young adults can achieve economic freedom and choose their lifestyle independently from their parents. More Europeans than ever have the means to live multiple lives but no man – or woman - is an island.

The vibe is positive. However, difficulties arise when identities collide, when identities are defined violently from the outside or when one identity requires

¹ <http://www.apple.com/getamac/ads/>

² <http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.co.uk>

the termination of another. The battle for attention and power is not a discussion amongst equals.

The State We're In

One of the strongest examples of the identity confusion is the idea of a nation. During the 19th century Europe saw new nations emerging across the continent. In most cases the identities were carefully designed constructs mixing elements of the national saga for the purpose of writing a story of uniqueness and greatness. The idea grew and took hold amongst politicians and philosophers that the nation state could align the concepts of culture, identity and nationality. Strong institutions were created to foster and protect national heritage and culture. All for one and one for all within the nation.

In 2008 the idea of a nationality as a binding cultural identity remains on the battlefield. From below, regional and local identities re-assert themselves and some, such as the Scots and the Catalans, see themselves as nations, not just as provinces of other nations. ERASMUS and **EasyJet** transform Europe into a playground for millions of young people. But simultaneously the fear of losing and falling behind feeds into the support of right-wing populism. Mass immigration from East and South challenges the traditional ways of linking national identity to shared traditions and history. Nationality and citizenship more often tend to divide than unite.

Many have hoped that a joint European identity would be the solution to the current confusion. However, generations clash when it is becoming more and more evident that the ideals of peace, freedom and prosperity set in the aftermath of the Second World War do not function as sources of excitement for Western European youth.

The problems of the European dream show the fundamental problem of the dominant identities in our societies – the “European project” focuses on structures, not on people. The goals concentrate on employment rates and social cohesion, not on work and happiness. The European dream as it is written now does not leave much room for the individual. Presidential hopeful **Hillary Rodham Clinton**'s recent formulation of the American dream shows the radical difference:

*“It is time to renew the promise of America.
Our basic bargain: no matter who you are or where you live,
If you work hard and play by the rules, you can build a good life for yourself
and your family.”*

We are still far from seeing European identity or national identities as living organisms or allowing people to give their own meaning to being European. Defending the history-based, top-down identity constructions benefit only certain elites in the society. Europe still lacks an understanding for multiple individual identities. We still push people to choose with questions such as “Where are you from?”, “Where is your home?” or “Are you European or African?”. For a black girl adopted to Sweden at the age of two that is a

question which never allows her to give an answer that would satisfy the audience.

Freak TV

Societies do not consist of communities, they are built from people who have conflicting and complementary identities but who all strive for personal happiness and satisfaction. We as individuals and as a society are more complicated than the first glance would suggest. From the outside, for example, being devout Christian and gay would seem impossible but thousands of people live out combinations like this every day.

Mass immigration and sexual liberation in Europe has made the diversity more visible. But if we look at most of our public sphere, it still seems like we live in a small village in the English countryside – all of us with the same language, same background and same religion. The division to “normal” and minorities remains strong in media representation. As the discrepancy in the representation is becoming more evident, some movement is, however, starting to happen.

News media reacts to the growing complexity by providing airtime to talking heads that claim to represent the views of the “Muslim community”, the “black community” or the “disabled community”. Minorities are still mostly handled as tribes, which can only be addressed by talking to the “oldest of the village”. Immigrants make it to the news when they stand out as immigrants, but very rarely through their occupation.

By the selection of interviewees and images the news media strengthens stereotypes. It is easier to feature Iranians as fanatic demonstrators burning US flags than to interview people on the street of Teheran and provide the viewers with the full complexity.

In the entertainment media the reaction is slightly different. Mainstream drama and comedy is still rather white and heterosexual. Just try to count the non-Caucasian characters in hit series such as **Sex and the City** or **Friends**. However, the future seems brighter. American and European daytime television is slowly starting to introduce societal questions into the living room in ways already popular in for instance the Brazilian *telenovelas*³. Many recent American hit series such as **Desperate Housewives**, **Law & Order**, **Ugly Betty** or **Six Feet Under** feature sexual and ethnic minorities in prominent roles – and not only as the Slick Latino, the Angry Black Man and the Anxious Gay. Transgender issues make it even to **Oprah**.

The biggest increase of minority representation in the media is due to reality television as this is seen as generating drama, which sells more advertisement. An attractive Southern Baptist gay man makes his way to **MTV's Real World** as surely as a transsexual applicant is selected to **Big Brother**. These productions, however, often have a tendency to start from the

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telenovela>

difference and foster the notion of a clash of cultures by putting a rich Indian Bollywood⁴ film star against a white trash D-list British celebrity like in the scandalous Celebrity Big Brother.

Even with some hiccups, this movement should be interpreted as positive. We are far from perfect though and learning does take time. Due to the lack of diversity amongst editors and script writers, the media's take on minorities is still very much based on external observation rather than involvement and lived experience, which leads both to unnecessary caution and stereotypes. One can still argue that if the diversity of mainstream media grows, we will also have better quality in the end.

Don't laugh at the wheelchair

*"In my country there is problem, and that problem is the Jew.
They take everybody money and they never give it back.
Throw the Jew down the well (so my country can be free)."*

British comedian **Sacha Baron Cohen**'s Kazakhstani character **Borat** invites a bar crowd in Arizona to join in for a clearly anti-Semitic song. The release of Cohen's film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* upset Jewish organisations and the Government of Kazakhstan among many others with its politically incorrect jokes. One of the arguments for defending Borat has been that Cohen himself is Jewish and a grandson of a Holocaust survivor.

Humour is a tough test on our level of equality and freedom of opinion. Who defines what is funny and what should be shown? Would Borat turn racist if Cohen was Christian or Muslim? Are the criteria for jokes about minorities different than for majorities? Some would say that by limiting humour, we patronise and victimise minorities whereas others would stress the inequality of public representation. But is the main question really – is the joke funny?

British **Channel Four** launched a prime-time series in 1999 called **Queer as Folk** on gay life in Manchester. The series shocked the masses by showing for the first time explicit gay sex on mainstream television. The series was attacked by the British LGBT⁵ organisation **Stonewall** that stated that the series was an unfair representation of gay life with its obsession on sex and that QAF was not making enough effort to talk about the dangers of unprotected sex. The creator **Russell T. Davies** defended his work by saying that entertainment is not about fair representation. He also asked whether people see daytime soap operas as a fair representation of straight life.

The vulgar but witty language of *Queer as Folk* made it an instant hit amongst TV viewers but led to beer brand **Beck's** to withdraw its sponsorship. The same happened with its US version slightly later. It was an instant hit amongst the audience but clothing brands such as Versace and Abercrombie & Fitch

4 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bollywood>

5 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT>

refused having their clothes linked to a gay series. It seems like we are still taking baby steps in setting standards.

In 1998 Danish director **Lars von Trier**'s film **Idiots** caused controversy amongst censors due to its sexually explicit nature and the representation of disabilities. The film featured a group of adults searching for their "inner idiot" by pretending to be mentally retarded in public places. Whilst von Trier was criticised fiercely in the media for his irresponsible take on mental disorder, disability groups welcomed the film as exposure of underlying prejudices towards disabilities.

In non-fiction, one can always focus on the accuracy and equality but when it comes to humour or drama on minorities, this turns extremely difficult or even impossible. Should we judge minority humour based on who is laughing at whom and are there subjects that fiction should not address? The most difficult question is once again a question of power and representation – who has the right to set these standards? As many examples show us, by consulting NGOs one would often get a more conservative answer than the people they claim to represent would have. Setting the limits is a sign of the fact that we are still learning how to live with complexity. Therefore one needs to find a way to go back to the individual and allow contradictions.

Conclusion

There are several contradictory crosscurrents in the debate about identity – some of them impossible to reconcile. Who are we, who owns the public space and what is our shared context? But why should we strive for a one-cut solution? Why is the idea of multiple, shifting identities not seen as an inspiring possibility? Why should you or I not choose whom we want to be, depending on who we are with? Shouldn't we be making more room for complexity rather than trying to hamper it down into old rigid structures? One could argue that progress in the rights and freedom of one minority improves the situation for us all as it creates understanding towards diversity.

Many aspects of the European identity mess are highly liberating – not only for the elites but also for the less privileged. By allowing people to form groups based on shared interest, we create a higher sense of belonging and therefore cohesion. Without criticising NGOs, it is essential to keep in mind that we can share and cooperate also with shorter engagements and less structures and that NGOs are interest groups, not a democratic voice of the people.

The business sector is in this respect in the lead. They have largely bypassed the NGOs as middlemen and formed a bond with the people themselves by focusing on the things and desires we share. Apple or **Google** do not ask you what you wish to communicate and with whom – they provide you with an aspiration-driven platform for making your case. Communities form out of will, not out of external definitions.

We do need group identities for ourselves to have a sense of belonging and for others to understand where we come from and what we strive for. The crucial question is who defines the characteristics of an identity – the people themselves or the ones in power? If we hand more power to people themselves, we avoid a great amount of conservatism and oversensitivity generated by the professional gatekeepers. We have all the means but we lack courage.

There is a clear urgency to realise that a large part of our understanding of culture and of the people we live with is based on ‘constructions served to us’ by our parents, schools and the media rather than on tested or lived out experiences. We need to fiercely defend the right for self-definition and redefinition. We have to try to see through and look past these constructs to challenge the inherent prejudices that are hampering social cohesion and the development of a more humane society.

Further reading and watching:

- Hillary Rodham Clinton: I'm In (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJuRQZ2ZGTs>)
- Sonya Dyer: Boxed In. <http://www.manifestoclub.com/publications>
- Ekow Eshun: Identities and the blurring of borders, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-11-03-eshun-en.html>
- Maxwell Taylor Kennedy (1999): Make Gentle the Life of This World – The Vision of Robert F. Kennedy. Broadway.
- Tommi Laitio (2007): Superlocal identities. The European in the youth experience. (<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-12-13-laitio-en.html>)
- Joris Luyendijk (2006): Het zijn net mensen. Uitgeverij Podium.
- Abdul-Rehman Malik: Take me to your leader. Post-secular society and the Muslim industry. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-04-23-armalik-en.html>
- Media Awareness Network (<http://www.media-awareness.ca>)
- Steven Poole (2006): Unspeak (pg. 14-41). Little, Brown.
- Wikipedia (<http://wikipedia.org>)