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THE CONTINUAL RECONSTRUCTION OF
MULTIPLE MODERN CIVILIZATIONS
AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

1 CONSTRUCTIONS OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The starting point of this analysis is the recognition that the major patterns of social interaction and social structure which crystallize in any population are always structured on multiple levels, in different arenas of social and cultural activities, in different contexts of action and they also tend to exhibit systemic tendencies.

The populations which live within the confines of what has been designated as a “society” or a macro-societal order are not usually organized into one “system,” but rather into several frameworks or “systems,” including political systems, economic formations, different ascriptive collectivities, and civilizational frameworks seemingly naturally given.

In every such continuous pattern of social interaction, there develop tendencies to some systemic qualities, with the concomitant construction of boundaries of the different patterns of interaction. However, these are very fragile. But being fragile does not mean that they are non-existent. It does mean, however, that special mechanisms of control and integration, special regulative mechanisms – above all, those of the institutionalization and reproduction of the general prerequisites of social interaction – are needed to overcome the inherent instability and fragility of their boundaries in order to maintain and assure their reproduction.

Such integrative mechanisms and processes of control become more important and autonomous and hence also more fragile – as manifest for instance in the connection of bureaucracies of general systems of social law – as different social and political systems and civilizational frameworks become more complex. It was Herbert Simon’s signal contribution to point out that the mechanisms of control are autonomous analytical dimensions, and that every such mechanism of control has an in-built second order of stability and instability.¹ These mechanisms of control, these integrative mechanisms may acquire an autonomy of their own in the construction and maintenance of systemic boundaries.

However, whatever the strengths of the systemic tendencies of patterns of social interaction, such patterns never develop as entirely self-enclosed systems, nor are they naturally given. The processes of the construction of collectivities, social systems and civilizational frameworks constitute processes of continuous struggle in which ideological, “material” and power elements are continuously interwoven. These processes are structured, articulated and carried by different social actors, above all by different coalitions of elites and contra-elites and influentials in interactions with the broader sectors of the society. Each “system” with its flexible boundaries is carried by different coalitions of such carriers. These different structures and patterns – these “systems” – evince different patterns of organization, continuity and change. They may change within the “same” society to different degrees and in different ways in various areas of social life.

These differences in the settings and contexts of various activities are not random or accidental. They are closely related to the specific organizational exigencies and to the basic symbolic problematic of each type and level of activity. These different types of problematiques are often combined and recombined in various concrete situations, according to the definitions of the settings of such situations.

Needless to say, not all components or themes or tropes which can be found in the cultural repertoire of a society are relevant to and activated in all such activities and situations. There is continual selection, reconstruction, reinterpretation, and invention of themes, tropes, parameters, models and codes, as well as of the modes of semiotic mediation employed in their presentation. Such selection, recomposition, and reinterpretation emphasize the distinctiveness and autonomy of each sphere or arena of activity, as well as its connection with the more general frameworks or meta-contexts. Yet, to whatever extent they are interconnected, they are never fully integrated in a closed system and they are always subject to continuous reinterpretation, and each one of them necessarily evinces strong tendencies to some, albeit limited, autonomy. Thus, the different arenas of human activity do not lose their partial autonomy or the possibility of innovation within and across them.

2 BOUNDARIES OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS

The construction of the boundaries of social systems, collectivities and organizations, necessarily delineates their relations with their environment. It is wrong, however, to assume that there is a natural environment of any society, of any pattern of social interaction. There is no such thing as the “natural” environment “out there”. Rather, each pattern of social interaction, each society constructs its own environment, continuously highlighted. It is the construction of such multiple environments in different ecological settings, which highlights the distinct features of the construction of the human environment. Any environment is, within very broad limits, constructed by

society and can be understood only in relation to that society or pattern of social interaction. Of course, in the construction of an environment, any society has some material to base itself on.

Each “natural” environment provides several possible institutional choices, and one of these choices is being chosen by the respective social actors. Once such choices have been made, they set the limits or the boundaries of the system and generate the systemic sensitivity to environmental changes. These sensitivities are created not by the environment as such, nor by technology as such, but by society – in reconstructing the environment by using different technologies.

The concretization of these institutional tendencies takes place in different political-ecological settings. Two aspects of these settings are of special importance. One, emphasized strongly in recent research, is the importance of international political and economic systems in general, including the place of societies within them, and different types of relations of hegemony and dependency in particular. The second is the great variety of the political-ecological settings of societies, such as differences between large and small societies, and their respective dependence on internal or external markets. Both of these aspects greatly affect the ways in which institutional contours and dynamics tend to develop.

The fact that any setting of social interaction in general, and macro-societal orders in particular, are always acting in some inter-societal, “international” setting – makes them vulnerable to forces and change which may activate the various potentialities of protest and conflict that develop within them. Changes in various parts of the respective international system or systems of any society may impinge more directly on different groups and they may become more vulnerable to such impingements. Changeability and conflict are also inherent in the constitution of any social order because, as we have seen, such patterns of social interaction, however strong their systemic tendencies, never develop as entirely self-enclosed entities.

3 CONSTITUTIONS OF SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES

Thus, indeed, collective identities and boundaries are also continually constituted, constructed and reconstructed. Truly enough in classical sociology and anthropology collectivities, collective identities were conceived, often implicitly, as quasi naturally given, almost as a non-social basis for social action, as a stable, unchanging, basically premodern counterpart to the fragile and alienating structure of modern social order.

As against these implicit assumptions of the classical approaches we propose that collective identity is not naturally generated but socially constructed: it is the intentional or non-intentional consequence of interactions which in their turn are socially patterned and structured.²

Collective identity is produced by the social construction of boundaries. These boundaries divide and separate the real manifold processes of interaction and social relationships; they establish a demarcation between inside and outside, strangers and familiars, kin and akin, friends and foes, culture and nature, enlightenment and superstition, civilization and barbarity. Such a distinction does also pose the problem of crossing the boundaries: the stranger can become a member, and a member can become an outsider or a stranger. Religious conversion and excommunication represent obvious illustrations of this process of crossing the boundaries.

Collective identity depends on special processes of induction of the members in the collectivity, ranging from various rites of initiation to various collective rituals, in which the attribute of "similarity" among its members, as against the strangeness, the differences, the distinction of the other, is symbolically constructed and defined. Constructing boundaries and constructing a basis for trust solidarity and communal equality are two aspects of such processes.

The major codes of the construction of collective identity are those of primordality, civility, and transcendental or sacredness. These codes have to be seen as ideal types, while real codings always combine different elements of these ideal types. Therefore concrete historical codings of collective identity are not homogeneous. They contain various components, the importance of which varies in different situations.

The construction of boundaries and solidarity is not, however, a purely "symbolic" affair, unrelated to the divisions of labor, to the control over resources and to social differentiation. Obviously solidarity entails consequences for the allocation of resources, above all for structuring the entitlements of the members of the collectivity as against the outsiders, and for different institutions within the collectivity. Such combination of constitution of "symbolic" boundaries together with the structuring of access to resources entails continuous struggle – and such struggle always takes place in specific historical contexts in which different combinations of primordial, civil and sacred orientations or "codes" come together.

4 THE COMPONENTS OF EUROPEAN HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

I shall illustrate some of these processes by the analysis of the modern (European) nation states against the background of the historical experience of European Civilization.

The starting point of such analysis are some general characteristics of European civilization as it crystallized in the Medieval period³ – the most important of which is the structural and cultural ideological pluralism that constituted one of the major components of the European historical experience. The structural pluralism that developed in Europe was characterized above all by a strong combination of low, but continuously increasing levels of structural differentiation with the continuously changing

boundaries of different collectivities and frameworks. Parallely there developed in Europe a multiplicity of prevalent cultural orientations which developed out of several traditions – the Judeo-Christian, the Greek and the various tribal ones; and a closely related multiplicity and complexity of ways to resolve the tensions between the transcendental and mundane orders, through either worldly (political and economic) or other-worldly activities. This multiplicity of orientations was rooted in the fact that the European civilization developed out of the continuous interaction between, on the one hand, the secondary breakthrough of two major Axial civilizations – the Jewish and the Greek one and on the other hand numerous “pagan” tribal traditions and society.

The combination of such multiple cultural traditions, with pluralistic structural and political-ecological conditions, explains the fact that in Western and Central Europe there developed – more than in other Christian civilizations – continuous tensions between hierarchy and equality, as the basic dimensions of participation of different sectors of the society in the political and religious arenas; and between the strong commitment and autonomous access of different groups and strata to the religious and political orders, on the one hand, and the emphasis on the mediation of such access by the Church or by political powers, on the other. At the same time there developed a strong tendency to define the respective institutional arenas or collectivities or strata as distinct social spaces with relatively sharply defined boundaries.

A second major repercussion of these ideological and structural dimensions is the fact that the mode of change that has developed in Western Europe, from at least the late Middle Ages on, was characterized by a relatively high degree of symbolic and ideological articulation of the political struggle and of movements of protest; by a high degree of coalescence of changes in different institutional arenas; by a very close relationship between such changes and the restructuring of political centers and regimes. Changes within various institutional arenas in Western Europe – such as the economic or the cultural arenas – impinged very intensely on one another and above all on the political sphere. These changes gave rise to a continuous process of restructuring of the boundaries of these different arenas, which did not however obliterate their respective autonomies.

The various centers and collectivities that developed in Europe did not simply coexist in a sort of adaptive symbiosis. The multiple centers and subcenters, as well as the different collectivities, which developed in Europe tended to become arranged in a complicated but never unified rigid hierarchy, in which no center was clearly predominant – but in which many of them aspired not only to actual but also to ideological predominance and hegemony.

All these collectivities and central institutions were legitimized in a variety of terms – in terms of primordial attachments and traditions, of transcendental criteria, as well as in terms of criteria of civic traditions. The continuous restructuring of centers and collectivities that took place in Europe was closely connected with the continuous



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