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Political and cultural identity in Europe

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PhD project: seminar presentation

Working title: “Political and cultural identity in Europe: Press representations of ‘Otherness’ in Britain, France, Poland and Sweden (2002-2007)”.

Other: “Exclusion and identity in Europe: political discourse and press representations of ‘Otherness’ in Britain, France, Poland and Sweden (2002-2007)”

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Introduction:

In a nutshell, the aim of the project is to build a coherent framework of social and political theory around defined case studies of discourse analysis – an analysis of the representation of ‘Otherness’ in political and press discourse.

As this is an aim yet to be attained, I will be talking in the first part of my presentation about the theoretical background of this project, and in the second part, I will be presenting highlights of my recently engaged case studies.

Part 1: Nation-states, nationalism and democracy, or the “modern ideological cluster” (paradigm)

I would like to start this presentation with a quote by the American sociologist, Craig Calhoun, which I persistently quote every time I write a presentation of this project:

“Is it possible to build states and even confederations of states in which cohesion and self-rule are established through public discourse across lines of difference? Can we conceive the growth of a cultural unity within such states or confederations that does not devalue or demand the obliteration of other sources of personal and political identity? Or must we fall back on nationalism alone as our shelter in a world grown too frightening, or as the one immediately satisfying identity with which to confront the globalization of capital?”¹

These questions, which I personally like to call the “Calhoun project”, are the general questions in which my research is involved. It seems to me that 15 years or so since

¹ “Nationalism and Civil Society: Democracy, Diversity and Self-determination”; paper first presented in June 1991 at the Hungarian Sociological Association. Last retrieved on 14.11.2007 from www.ssrc.org/staff/calhoun/publications/nationalism_and_civ_society.pdf. Cf. Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, Oxford, Blackwell, pp. 304–335.

the “Calhoun project” was formulated, it remains a valid, and indeed increasingly valid. For instance, it seems that the contemporary issues related to pluralism – at least in the context I am concerned with – are not being answered “across lines of difference”, but dangerously *along* these lines. In fact, despite the calculations of many globalist theories on the fall or decline of Nation-states, and despite the enlarged liberalized space of mobility in Europe, I think there is little doubt that the Nation-state remains *the* central political institution. Concurrently, and this is what I am concerned with, nationalism (as state ideology and self-determination ideology) remains the modern central mode of collective identification.²

Of course, there is no denying that globalization or the European construction does have a major impact on modern institutions. In fact, these phenomena do put the Nation-state into question, but do not hamper its existence, and particularly its (imaginary/ideological) legitimacy.

The recent expressions and policies of exclusion we have witnessed in most European countries, the ongoing debates about immigration and the tightening of related laws for instance (in the Netherlands, in France, in Denmark..., but this is only the tip of the iceberg) follow and respond to the ideological stance of Nation-states: they show (they want to be perceived) as far as these issues are concerned, that they are “in power”. This power is exercised along state ideology through (dominant) nationalist discourse. When the state’s power or legitimacy is put into question, it relies on the ideological grounds of modern state legitimacy: national democracy.

It is in this sense that the “current state of affaires” I briefly mentioned before, is fostering the development for some and the repetition for others of nationalism (in its banal or “aggressive” forms). This is based on the belief that nationalism is the sole identity formation compatible with modernity, and hence the logical rampart against a cultural imperialism undercurrent in globalization. But why is this problematic in the light of the “Calhoun project”? It is because of what I would like to call the

² Cf. e.g. Michel Sauquet, *L'intelligence de l'autre* (the intelligence of the other): “The simultaneous existence of the same western cultural forms in certain sectors of certain cities in some of the four corners of the world can not be taken as proof that the world is homogeneous. The progressive alignment of dressing codes is a superficial phenomenon. A real homogenization would suppose a general mutation of representations and imaginaries, which does not correspond to what reality now is. *La présence simultanée des mêmes formes culturelles occidentales dans certains secteurs de certaines villes de certains des quatre coins du monde ne peut guère être prise pour preuve que le monde est homogénéisé. L'alignement progressif des codes vestimentaires est un phénomène superficiel. Une véritable homogénéisation supposerait une mutation généralisée des représentations et des imaginaires, ce qui ne correspond pas à la réalité.*”

“ideological cluster of modernity” (Zizek would call it a “symbolic field”), i.e. the circular legitimating of nationalism and democracy. In my mind, it does not answer the contemporary issues in the management of social pluralities: the inclusion of non-majority communities, groups or individuals in a reciprocal cultural and political equality within the framework of the modern state (and this is the iceberg...).

This is not only problematic in itself (i.e. from a theoretical point of view), it is more precisely problematic because societies, at least in Europe, are increasingly aware of their plurality – whether accepted or refused, a plurality increasingly complex given the fluidity (or hybridity) of peoples (geographically and imaginary). And this may be the most important influence of globalization for the purpose of my research, the fostering of social sensitivity towards identity issues (hence the national “revival”).

But going back to nationalism, one of the central questions for modernity it claims to answer is “who are the people?”: and the answer it provides is part of the self-determining process and of the democratic process i.e. as it gives an answer to the “self”, it is a necessary prerequisite for the definition of democratic citizenship. [And in a certain sense, the process of democratization of the national communities in Europe have reached a certain paroxysm: we cannot on this basis include even more people in the community.]

Yet, this answer does not involve the existence (or even potential) plurality of societies. It is, in a certain sense a contradiction, as the equal participation in the polis is based on nationality (it used to be even more exclusive, cf. gender equality), the boundary between participating in the affaires of the polis and cultural hegemony is constantly ambiguous.

In short, the linkage between state and society, between cultural and political community, between the polis and the nation, opens a certain gap. In John Breuilly’s mind, it is through an ambiguity that nationalism appears to provide an answer to this problematic link. In fact, the ambiguous references of national discourse to the cultural community on the one hand and to the political community on the other overtake this problematic.

Part 2: Hypotheses, the collective imaginary and empirical references; or *doxa* and *praxis*.

This point forms **the first hypothesis** of my thesis that the case studies will need to confirm or discard. For this hypothesis, I assume that the discourse involved engages in an association of terms and significations that exclude other type of significations, like the differentiation between cultural community and political community *for the purpose of pluralism*. I would like at this point to give a short quote of Nicolas Sarkozy (NS) which provides with a quite astonishing example:

“Si on veut vivre avec sa culture, on ne vient pas vivre sur le territoire de la République Française” [“If one wants to live with one’s culture, one does not come to live on the territory of the French republic”] (Live on France 2, one of the largest French television network (France television), then interior minister, “A vous de juger”, political talk show, 30 November 2006.)

What we see here is the juxtaposition in the same sentence of a (relativist) cultural reference to a (universalistic) political reference, all of this very carefully said at first with the impersonal pronoun, while the definite article (unambiguous, fix) then defines the reference to France.

The question contained in this first hypothesis is (paraphrasing Bauman): does political coexistence (or which form of political coexistence) necessarily entails a homogeneous culture (what mode of culture)? Or more pragmatically, do contemporary democratic communities have to necessarily be national? The answer to this question would involve an analysis of this “necessity” in terms of imaginary associations, or in other words, of the exclusiveness of imaginary associations (are there associations that are not necessarily exclusive? If yes, to what extent?³).

This is when the **collective imaginary** comes in, as the national imaginary and the democratic imaginary, are both exclusive imaginaries on a cultural basis⁴. It is in fact in this imaginary space that processes of exclusion take place. And discourse analysis can here provide elements that define the “grid of signification” (Foucault) discourse imposes on the imaginary.

³ E.g. Scottish “new nationalism”: the break-up Britain within the EU.

⁴ NB: democracy is exclusive through the “equality postulate”: it is a historical fact that democratic forms of power have always been shared among “equals”, i.e. people recognizing each other along lines of similarity, of identity. Consequently, there is no real example of the institutionalization of democracy with a non-homogeneous cultural community. That is why nationalism provides a very effective corollary to democracy: essentially, equality for “us”.

The four countries involved in this study are Britain, France, Poland and Sweden. The choice of these countries has been determined through the will to engage in a study involving a varied panel of European societies. As Britain and France are often depicted as mainstream actors of the European concert of nations, I wanted to include countries that are not often considered as such.

What is also more interesting is that each is thought to represent a certain model of society. France is famous for its Jacobin republican model, often opposed to Britain's long running multicultural and liberal system. Both also represent post-colonial states and societies, with the particularly sensitive approach relative to these issues. Sweden for its part is famous for its attractive social model which has for long been thought of as a model of integration, and while it faces some difficulties, it is still looked up to. Poland, despite a certain multicultural past and a relative immigration since 1991, is finally the only country not famous for an attractive model, but rather for its "tradition" of emigration. It is also an evident representative of central and eastern European countries, new to the European construction but where political discourse often presents an openly nationalist tone. Yet, many features bring these four countries together; one obvious is their involvement in European affairs, another is the migration and integration crisis that stirs the whole of the European community. For my concern, I aim at analysing the extent to which there are common processes of exclusion despite the obvious differences.

The study of the dominant discourse will engage in the political discourse on the one hand with the discourse of media on the other, more precisely the daily national newspapers. It could be argued that narrowing the study to daily national presses would not be representative of the modern media (referring more specifically to television). Despite a certain decline of the printed press, it still represents the traditional means for information and formation of popular opinion. As it remains an important, accessible and modern medium, it plays a major role in the construction of stereotypes and representations of identity and otherness.

I would like to draw upon a case study I just started to describe my methodology concerning the imaginary, i.e. to describe some of the processes through which imaginary exclusion is performed. The case study concerns France, and particularly the discourse on immigration and national identity which has been on the front stage for a good few years now.

The debate has crystallized during the presidential election campaign earlier this year when the creation of a new ministry dealing both with immigration and national identity appeared as one the 15 points of NS presidential project (“immigration control”). The ministry for immigration, integration, national identity and codevelopment was finally created six months ago (31 May) and is widely being referred to in the media as the “ministry for immigration and national identity”.

At first glance, it seems that it is the association of terms that has shaken the opinion and the opposition, but when we look closer, it is the creation of a single ministry (for two competences) that stirs the opinion rather than the name of it. What obviously overtones in the name of the ministry is that immigration is a threat to national identity; but threat discourse is far from being the monopoly of NS, e.g. it can also be found in the discourse of the political opposition, in Segolène Royal’s presidential campaign project (the expulsion and foreigners when there are “dangerous criminals”)⁵.

As far as the mainstream press is concerned, I do not have enough references now to say more than that alternative readings are rare (I have in one week found only one article, an “expert analysis”, that does in fact propose an alternative approach). But this is, in my mind, linked to my second hypothesis that dominant discourse calls for itself, and it is very hard to oppose it in different categories that those it “imposes”. Consequently, even though one can find opposing political stances, the grid of signification remains virtually untouched.

Coming back to the case study, one has also to note a very important aspect: NS had been interior minister for the previous government, and as interior minister he was then in charge of immigration policies. And this association has precedence: one of the first laws NS drafted was the “law related to immigration control, the sojourning of foreigners and nationality” (Loi no. 2003-119, 26 November 2003).

Since then the discourse of the would-be president and his supporters has grown very strongly around these themes. Here is a short sample of NS and the UMP’s rationale about immigration that has been repeated throughout the past few years:

In the “banlieues”, we are paying the price of an immigration policy that was neither chosen, nor wanted, nor claimed or organized; but the accumulation in certain neighbourhoods of sons and grandsons of foreigners who never had any formation, any

⁵ She explained later that she was not “talking about those that have grown up in France, but those you have arrived not long ago.”

education, any job has created real powder magazines. I conclude that one has to control immigration.⁶

Public discourse was systematically filled with discourse on immigration and national identity, etc. In short, it has been banalized and it has consequently become part of the dominant discourse.

And it is in this light interesting to note that none of the policies from the new ministry do anything but mentioning the relationship (threat) of immigration with national identity. Here is an extract from the press conference the new minister for immigration and national identity, Brice Hortefeux (BH) gave on the 8 November 2007. It is the starting point to the reasons why the minister sees new tougher immigration laws are necessary:

“First of all, let us be honest: the French integration system has failed. The proof is the much too high concentration of population of foreign origin in only three regions out of 22: 60% of foreigners live in Ile-de-France, Rhône-Alpes or in PACA, sometimes in real urban ghettos. Another proof is the average unemployment rate of foreigners, above 20%, which is more than twice the national average. In certain “banlieues”, this rate reaches to 40%. We have to say the truth to the French people: our integration system is no more a model. And to succeed in integration, one has first to control immigration.”⁷

What I would like to point at here, both in the previous “sample” and in BH’s declaration is the exact ellipsis we find in the laws. We can see of course that there is the same correlation that overtones immigration as threatening the national identity. But more precisely, we see that the reason for a new (future) immigration policy is need because of the errors of the previous one(s). In short, we find in both cases the mention that there is a situation inside, and this is indeed very important because this were the ellipsis appears: while we find the acknowledgment that there is a situation that has to be answered, the answer leads us to immigration control and not to what

⁶E.g. « Dans les banlieues, nous payons le prix d’une politique de l’immigration qui n’a été ni choisie, ni voulue, ni revendiquée, ni organisée ; mais l’accumulation dans certains quartiers de fils et petit fils d’étrangers à qui on n’a donné ni formation, ni éducation, ni emploi a conduit à de véritables poudrières. J’en tire la conclusion qu’il faut maîtriser l’immigration, qu’on ne peut pas accepter tout le monde pour donner la chance de l’intégration à ceux qui ne l’ont pas. » “A vous de juger”, political talk show, 30 November 2006

⁷ « D’abord, osons regarder la vérité en face : le système français d’intégration a échoué. J’en veux pour preuve la concentration beaucoup trop forte de la population d’origine étrangère sur seulement trois régions sur vingt-deux : 60% des étrangers habitent en Ile-de-France, en Rhône-Alpes ou en Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, parfois dans de véritables ghettos urbains. J’en veux aussi pour preuve le taux de chômage moyen des étrangers, supérieur à 20 %, soit plus du double de la moyenne nationale. Dans certaines banlieues, ce taux atteint les 40%. Il faut donc dire la vérité aux Français : notre système d’intégration n’est plus un modèle. Et pour réussir l’intégration, il faut d’abord maîtriser l’immigration. » http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/imidco/salle_presse_832/discours_tribunes_835/discours_brice_hortefeux_presse_57958.html

society inside is concerned with. It seems to me that it this “gap” in significations is very important the processes of imaginary exclusion. The “logic” of the linkage between immigration and national identity (or vice versa) imposes a grid of significations where the association (i.e. the inclusion) of a certain fringe (French citizens of foreign origins living in the poor suburbs⁸) of the *existing* French society is made unthinkable, or in Foucault’s words, is forbidden. We can describe it in formal terms through the logic of amalgamate (“population of foreign origins”/ “sons and grandsons of foreigners” become not integrated “foreigners”), but also in terms of imaginary processes of exclusion. The linkage between one the hand immigration (i.e. the question of **newcomers**) and national identity (the shared collective references, the shared grid of significations, etc.) aims at draw a line between those that can easily fit the grid of significations and those that would need an adjustment: the effect of this discourse of exclusion has a direct effect on the majority imaginary. But it aims at a secondary effect on the minority/stereotyped/excluded community: it renders their own imaginary unviable if including themselves in the French community. The space which is left in between is the important exclusive process as it is only in this space that inclusion can take effect.

Before concluding, I would like to relate an interesting anecdote that came out after the suburban riots in France in 2005. Given a increased amount of identity checks in the so-called “dangerous” suburbs, there was this advice from some young people⁹ (who are the main targets of the id checks) to have their electoral card at the front of their wallets. The aim was to show the policemen (representing the state authority, but indirectly NS as interior minister) that “we” are part of the same political community. The effect of this was supposedly for the police to be less inclined to be hard on them. What I find interesting here, is indeed the attempt to fill the imaginary space I have described, and that this effort has come from the “excluded” (yet, I cannot tell to what extent this fulfilled its aim or made it more complicated).

Conclusion

My aim here was to try raising some hypothesis:

⁸ To make it short, it is easily understood that the peoples NS points to are Muslims. Cf. His preference for a Christian/White Europe, and in his campaign video clip on immigration, the example he uses to describe French values (the rights of women).

⁹ NB. This was used later by Segolène Royal during her campaign to incite young people to vote (for her).

→ Through stereotyping, oversimplifying implications, scapegoating, threat and risk discourse, the ambiguity of who is included or not in the community, maintains the game of nationalist significations of confusion between political and cultural communities. The political motives are usually left out in the press mediation of this discourse: we end up with a culturalist grid of signification.

→ Dominant discourse calls for itself, the grid of signification it imposes excludes or renders no *mediating space* (hybrid, plural). It imposes a mode of using categories the “other” is compelled to understand and use to be himself understood or taken notice of, e.g. NS: “racism is not only French, it is also immigrant” (talking about French people of immigration origins). This process ends up in what I have described as an imaginary gap.

→ The paradigm of modernity (cf. the ideological cluster) plays a role in the exclusion processes as it is based on what Edgar Morin has called the hypersimplification of the modern mind. In this sense, the implications from the previous two hypotheses would impact on this paradigm. For instance: what the dominant grid of signification excludes is a complexity (plurality) of society, in this sense the inclusion of diversity could mean the inclusion of complexity, in imaginary terms, a (more) complex grid of signification. It is on this level that an imaginary “mutation” (cf. footnote no.2) would take place.

[→ Following, the contemporary dominant discourse adds a third party to the game of significations which involves additional confusion to legitimize a certain exclusion/inclusion pattern: market economy/liberalism/neo-liberalism.]