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Critical Review of Stuart Hall (1992) "The Question of Cultural Identity"

The concept of identity is a problematic one and one that is continuously debated by sociologists. One of the key debates surrounds the apparent 'crisis of identity'. This debate centres on the idea that the firmly established identities of the past are becoming dislocated from central structures and processes in modern society. Stuart Hall in his article "The Question of Cultural Identity" examines cultural identity and he analyses the issues surrounding the 'crisis of identity'.

Stuart Hall begins his examination by looking at three different concepts of identity, the Enlightenment, the sociological subject and the post-modern subject. Hall suggests identity during the Enlightenment was perceived as a centred, unified and rational one. Identity according to the sociological subject reflected the growing complexity of the modern world and awareness that individuals were not autonomous and self-sufficient beings. Identity developed between what was viewed as the 'personal' sphere of how we present ourselves in terms of our cultural identities and the 'public' sphere where meanings and values are internalised. In a similar way to how Symbolic Interactionists would argue our identities develop in through the interaction with others. In this sense Hall suggests our identity is stabilised, unified and predictable. Hall moves on to suggest the identities of the past which were viewed as fixed are becoming fragmented in a post-modern society. They are no longer composed of a single identity but several identities that can become contradictory. Structural and institutional changes have led to the process of identity becoming open ended, variable and problematic.

Hall argues the concept of individualisation began when individuals were freed from religious traditions and structures. A number of events led to this process. The growing belief in Protestantism and the Reformation freed the individual from religious institutions. Renaissance humanism thinking had placed man at the centre of the universe and the revolution in scientific interest encouraged man to inquire into the mysteries of nature. Together these events, Hall argues, helped to develop the idea of man as a rational being. Hall draws upon the philosophical thinking of Rene Descartes to show how the concept of the individual was being influenced. Later on in history when economic structural changes from feudalism to capitalism developed people were freed from a previous rigid hierarchal societal structure. Hall argues society was beginning to become more complex and out of this complexity a new social concept of the individual emerged. The individual was seen in terms of how they were placed in the structures and formations of society. Darwinian theory influenced human thought to view human nature in terms of biology and the advances in the social sciences theories influenced the concept of the 'individual'. Individuals were seen in relation to their membership of and participation in society. It was believed the processes and structures of were sustained by roles individuals play. Other examples Hall uses to show the process toward identity fragmentation are Marxism and psychoanalytical theory. Marxist thinking replaced man as the universal essence with the social relations of modes of production, exploitation of labour etc. No longer was man at the centre of the universe but a series of social systems. Freud's psychoanalytical theory of the unconscious suggests identities are not unified but something an infant will learn gradually, partially and with great difficulty. Therefore identity as unified entity becomes a fantasy because of the individual divided experience. In a post-modern

world identity as a unified concept also becomes a fantasy and this is where the sense of a 'crisis' develops for some individuals.

Hall examines the character of change in late modernity and the arguments put forward by other writers in relation to his analysis. Hall agrees with Marx who suggested modern society experienced constant, rapid and permanent change. It is this constant, rapid and permanent change Hall argues, is the principle distinction between 'tradition' and 'modern' societies. Anthony Giddens suggests in traditional societies the past was used as a guide for present social practices whereas in modern societies social practices under go constant re-examination and reformation. Hall draws upon Ernesto Laclau who suggest modern society is experiencing a sense of dislocation where the centre is becoming displaced yet nothing is put to replace it and what then develops is 'a plurality of power centres' that create the fragmentation of identity. Laclau also argues that societies are only held together because under certain circumstances the different elements and identities can be articulated together but only partially so as the structure of identity is able to remain open to change. Hall recognises the positive aspects of Laclau's argument as he suggest dislocation allows for new identities to form, for the production of new subjects and for identities of the past to open up.

It is important to understand how and why change has created an uncertainty in our sense of identity. Hall uses the example of Judge Thomas, a black judge of conservative political views accused of sexual harassment. The example demonstrates how the fragmentation or plurality of identity can contradict between society and the individual. Some people supported or opposed the judge on the basis of their racial

identity and others on the basis of their political identity. Therefore a woman may oppose Judge Thomas because she believes he has committed a crime but feel the need to support him because of the lack of highly positioned black judges in America and herein lays the contradiction. This example demonstrates how identity can shift in accordance to how the subject is addressed or presented. What became evident according to Hall is how in a post-modern society there is no longer a single identity to act as a 'master' one over other prevailing identities. In the past class acted as a master identity for everyone. Hall argues how the new social movements such as feminism and equal rights have helped to create these new emerging identities.

In conclusion there are many aspects to the concept of identity especially in a post-modern society. Hall in his article apologises for the seemingly simplistic historical context of the concept of identity as he points out history developed over time and events acted to influence one another at different stages. It is important to remember here how it is problematic in itself to state the exact development of some of the issues surrounding identity such as when modernity actually began. Halls article is well structured and detailed which, will help the audience to follow his argument. He used relevant sources of evidence in an articulate manner. I would suggest a further analysis of why certain identities prevail in a post-modern society over others is needed to fully understand the process of fragmentation in identity.

Critical Review of Anthony Giddens (1991) "The Self: Ontological Security and Existential Anxiety"

Anthony Giddens in his article “The Self: Ontological Security and Existential Anxiety” suggests the identity of the individual develops in relation to their psychological make-up. He suggests the individual knows him/herself to the point where they know what they are doing and why they are doing it. This concept of identity fits well under a modern perspective of identity. Giddens moves on to suggest individuals are reflective in their awareness of their societal conventions. In this sense we could understand the individuals reflective nature in terms of how it is suggested that in a post-modern society identities are re-examined and re-formed in a process of development.

Critical Review of Scott Lash (1990) “Modernism And Bourgeois Identity: Paris/Vienna/Berlin”

In his article “Modernism and Bourgeois Identity: Paris/Vienna/Berlin, Scott Lash discusses the impact of modernity. Lash concentrates on a specific area and a specific national and class identity. However, his argument is able to contribute toward the debate if the effects of modernism on identity and demonstrate the processes that contributed toward a modern sense of identity. Lash argues that each national identity needs to be understood in relation to the historical context that surrounds them. It is important to understand the specific complexities surrounding identity. Lash suggests the rise of modernism develops out of the disruption of a previous stable bourgeois identity. He also suggests the variations in bourgeois identity is determined by different classes and different class fractions. As a process Lash moves on to argue modernisation differentiates in relation to cultural and social spheres. Here we could

draw upon the plurality of identities that Hall argues has been created through post-modern fragmentation.

Critical Review of Oben Timothy Mbuagbo (2002) “Cameroon: Exploiting Anglophone Identity in State Deconstruction”

Oben Timothy Mbuagbo suggests Cameroon is a plural society with cultural diversity in terms of the state structural system and of the individual citizens. The importance of this argument is how Mbuagbo demonstrates the inter connections of a fragmented society. Mbuagbo informs the audience of the historical background to Cameroon’s past in order for the audience to fully understand the consequences of the argument presented. Hall in a similar way gave the audience a context for the audience to fully appreciate this argument. The diverse nature of Cameroon’s society allows the audience to fully appreciate the contradictions that arguably arise out of a plural identity. For the people of Cameroon this has at times caused actual conflict and even resulted in some aspects of society to become marginalized. It is also interesting to see how even in this fragmented society Mbuagbo demonstrates how political identity tends to prevail, as a form of ‘master’ status that Hall argues does not exist. In this sense the concept of a post-modern identity is re-examined. And this very process of re-examination is a post-modern one in itself.

Critical Review of Kobena Mercer (1990) “Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Post-modern Politics”

In Mercer's article "Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Post-modern Politics" the debate of a 'crisis' of identity becomes an essential theme to the argument. Mercer argues identity only becomes an issue for society and the individual when it is viewed as being in a crisis. Mercer suggests an identity in crisis is one that no longer seems fixed and a sense of uncertainty thus arises. Mercer draws upon the political aspect of identity to demonstrate the ambiguity of recent political phases and their effect on the sense of identity. Here it is suggested recent political sphere and the impact of new social movements such as lesbian and gay rights has led to a disorganised sense of identity. Mercer uses evidence from other theoretical thinking such as Marxism to support their argument. The importance of this article in relation to Hall's article is how Mercer is able to show the diversification of political events has had an effect on identity, an area that could have been assumed in a 'modern' period to be a fixed ideal.

Critical Review of Carina Korostelina "The Multi-ethnic state-building dilemma: national and ethnic minorities' identities in the Crimea"

In her article "The multi-ethnic state-building dilemma: national and ethnic minorities' identities in the Crimea" Carina Korostelina examines the process of national identity in terms of its formation for ethnic minorities. Korostelina concentrates her argument on the development of a new identity that she suggests has arisen out of an existing group identity. In the article it is suggested prejudice toward differing groups can influence attitudes and stereotypes of the other groups. Evidence for her argument comes from surveys carried out in Crimea. Here there is a contrast to the article written by Hall who uses the theories of other thinkers as evidence for his argument.

Korostelina suggests the existence of a new identity of common nationality is being used to influence the construction of positive stereotypes identity of Crimean people. However, there has also been a development in negative attitudes towards other groups. Carina Korostelina argues also the meaning of identity is dependent on other systems and therefore is changeable and not entirely fixed. She suggests Identity can be used as an early warning of conflict, which is something Hall doesn't address in depth in his article.



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