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The Construction of Identities

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When the inhabitants of a country feel that they belong to different communities, what should be done to manage this reality? This is a question considered by all human societies, and each one has a different answer. Sometimes, the respectable option of accommodating all these communities is ultimately perverted, as in the case of Lebanon. When dealing with the issue of coexistence in these communities, we should be aware that the choice can only be contextualised in the framework of democracy. However, it is not enough to invoke democracy to establish harmonious coexistence in a society. Sometimes, universal suffrage is not a synonym of democracy, liberty and equality, but of tyranny, slavery and discrimination. In order to speak of democracy, informed voting, the only one which is a free expression, must have replaced automatic, community or identity voting.

I must admit, firstly, that I never feel comfortable when I have to deal with this issue. For a person born in Lebanon, reflecting on how to ensure that different communities live together is not one concern among many others but rather a chronic and incurable obsession. In my case, I have spent my life studying this problem from all the angles possible without finding a satisfactory solution. However, to be honest, I am more inclined to ask questions than to come up with answers, and even the novels I write usually end in question marks or ellipses... And neither can I offer a comforting solution in this case.

I intend to reflect here on a clear doubt that I will formulate as follows: when the inhabitants of a country feel that they belong to different religious, linguistic, ethnic, national and racial communities, or any other kind, what should be done to manage this reality? Are they differences that should be taken into account or is it better to ignore them and pretend that they are not visible? It is a question that, in one way or another, all human societies consider and each one

has a different answer, sometimes explicitly formulated and on other occasions implicit.

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I will focus on the case of Lebanon. Not only because it is the country where I spent the first twenty-seven years of my life, but also because the Lebanese answer to the question I have asked is one of the most curious and original – I was going to add, and one of the most absurd – that exists, as the country has decided to divide up the power scrupulously, in all fields, between a set of almost twenty religious communities. It is undoubtedly an extreme option, respectable in terms of the formal recognition of the numerous communities, but it stretches the logic of such recognition to absurdity. Although it could have been an exemplary case, the truth is that it has finally become an example of what should not be done. The

fault, to a great extent, lies with the complex realities that make up the Middle East, but also the very deficiencies, rigidities, traps and incoherences of the formula.

Thus, it does not mean that I detest the experience in itself, as in principle I have qualified it as “respectable” for having granted a place to each community and for not giving power to a single one, thereby condemning the others to submit or disappear. It is very respectable to have conceived a system of subtle balances that has enabled the emergence of liberties and the expansion of the arts in a region where the states of a single religion, single ideology, single party or single language prevail, and where those who have not been lucky to be born on the right side of the barrier do not have any options other than to submit, go into exile or die.

For all these reasons, I still believe that the Lebanese experience, despite all its defects, continues to be much more honourable than other experiences in the Middle East and other societies which – still – have not ended in civil war but base their relative stability on oppression, repression, astute purification, and de facto discrimination. Although it emerged from a respectable idea, the Lebanese formula was perverted and clearly proves the limits of a community system.

I am going to give an example, among so many others, of how those astute ideas of the founders of modern Lebanon became perverted and wretched. One idea was that, when a deputy had to be elected, a Muslim candidate standing against a Christian candidate should be avoided at any cost; in other words, Muslims mobilised for Muslims and Christians for Christians, with each election

resulting in a clash between communities. The solution proposed was to reserve some posts for Maronites and others for Shiite Muslims, so that the competition was always between two Maronites and two Shiites; that is, within each community rather than between communities. What happened was that that when this very reasonable principle was applied in all fields, to the presidency of the Republic, to the presidency of the Council, to all the deputies, to the main civil officer posts, and so on, it turned out that each important post, each strategic place, became, to some extent, a “property” of a given community. Thus, although it emerged from a respectable idea, the Lebanese formula was finally perverted.

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When I was young, I spoke out many times against this aberrant system by virtue of which the most competent candidate of two was not elected, but rather the one who belonged to the community that “had the right” to hold that given post. Still today, wherever I have the opportunity, I react similarly. The only difference is that, when I was nineteen, I would like to have replaced that system with any other, but now aged forty-nine, although I want to replace it, there is no other suitable system. When I say this, I am looking a little further beyond Lebanon. Although the system that was established was perverse, I do not think that even more perverse conclusions should be drawn from it, such as considering that those regions where there are multiple

communities are not made for democracy and only a very powerful authority can maintain the civil peace. We frequently hear, even from certain democrats, these types of reasonings that claim to be realistic, although events in recent years suggest otherwise. However much democracy does not always manage to solve the problems related to cultural, religious and ethnic diversity, neither has it been demonstrated that dictatorship has managed to do so. Was the single-party Yugoslavian regime more efficient in maintaining the civil peace than the Lebanese multi-party system? If thirty years ago Marechal Tito seemed the least bad option because the world no longer saw the diverse peoples that made up the country killing each other, today it has been discovered that under his rule the grassroots problems not only went unsolved but were worsened. What occurred throughout the former communist world is still so patent among everyone today that it saves me lengthy explanations, although it is worth stressing that the undemocratic powers help strengthen traditional affiliations. How many entered the Soviet universe as “proletarians” and “internationalists” and left it more “religious” and “nationalist” than ever. With the perspective of time, the dictatorships that seemed “secular” finally proved favourable to religious fanaticism.

A secularism without democracy is a disaster, both for democracy and for secularism. I will not say any more on this point. Those who aspire to a freer world do not need to prove that a dictatorship is clearly incapable of solving the problems related to religious affiliation, cultural diversity or identity to argue that it is not an acceptable solution. The choice can only be placed within the

framework of democracy, but it is not enough to invoke democracy for harmonious coexistence to be established in a society.

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There are democracies and democracies, and their deviations are no less murderous than those of a dictatorship. Within this framework, there are two paths I consider quite dangerous, both for the sake of preserving cultural diversity and respecting the fundamental principles of democracy itself: that of a community system taken to an absurd extreme, but also the opposite option, which I will explain next more extensively. As for the first of these paths, it is clear that the Lebanese example is one of the most revealing, although not the only one. We are told that power is distributed provisionally between the different communities in the hope of alleviating tensions, while we are promised that the system will push the population to a gradual system of belonging to the national community. However, the logic of the system goes in a different direction. From the moment the cake is shared, each community tends to consider that its slice is very small and feels itself the victim of a flagrant injustice, and there are politicians who turn this resentment into a permanent issue of self-propaganda. Gradually, the leaders who refuse to employ demagoguery are gradually relegated, marginalised. Then, the system of belonging to the diverse tribes is strengthened instead of being weakened, while the feeling of belonging to the na-

tional community slowly shrinks until disappearing, or completely disappears, with a bloodbath.

If we focus on Western Europe, we find the case of Belgium, and if we look at the Middle East, we have the case of Lebanon. The blunders of the community system have caused so many dramas everywhere that it seems to vindicate the opposite attitude, the one that prefers to ignore differences and confides in the judgement, considered infallible, of universal suffrage. At first sight, it seems that this stance reflects democratic common sense. If among the citizens there are Christians, Muslims, Jews, Blacks and Asians, Valons and Flemish, the power does not want to know anything about it, because they all have a vote in the elections and there is no higher law than universal suffrage.

The problem with this venerable law is that it works very well when the sky is clear, but not so much when it becomes cloudy. In the early 1920s, universal suffrage in Germany served to form governmental coalitions that reflected the state of general opinion. In the early 1930s, this same universal suffrage, exercised in an atmosphere of acute social crisis and racist propaganda, led to the abolition of democracy. By the time the German people were able to express themselves again in a climate of serenity, there had been many millions of deaths. The law of the majority is not always a synonym of democracy, liberty and equality. Sometimes it is a synonym of tyranny, slavery and discrimination. In Rwanda, it is estimated that Hutus account for approximately nine tenths of the population, and Tutsis one tenth. If the aim is to relentlessly apply the law of numbers, the most probable result would

be a massacre or a dictatorship, in the past, present and future.

I do not cite this example at random. When we analyse the political debate around the massacre of 1994, it is easy to see that fanatics always claimed to act in the name of democracy, and even came to compare the uprising to that of the 1789 French revolution, and the Tutsi extermination with the elimination of a privileged class, as Robespierre and his friends did in his time with the guillotine.

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Some Catholic priests ultimately let themselves be convinced and believed they were on the side of the “poor”, and that therefore they should understand their “anger”, which made them accomplices of genocide. The argument unsettles me not only because it attempts to ennoble the despicable gesture of the executioner but also because it shows to what extent the noblest principles can be perverted.

Ethnic massacres are also undertaken on the most promising pretexts: justice, equality, independence, people’s rights, authenticity, democracy, the fight against privilege, the fight against those who benefit from the state of things... What has happened in so many countries in recent years should give us pause every time we hear a universal principle invoked in the context of an ethnic conflict. No nation, principle or practice has the same meaning in all countries or in

all circumstances, and all are perverted in a climate of a racial, religious hatred or of any other nature. Among the many groups that suffer discrimination in the world, some are majorities, such as in South Africa until the abolition of apartheid, but the opposite is more most usual when minorities suffer discrimination, are deprived of the most elementary rights, and experience a constant terror and humiliation.

If a person lives in a country where he is afraid of admitting that his name is Cristiano or Mamoud or Baruc and things have already been so for four or five generations, if a person lives in a country where he does not even have to admit that it is his name because of his skin colour, because he forms part of that group which in some regions is called a visible minority, there is no need for many explanations to understand that the words *majority* and *minority* do not always belong to the vocabulary of democracy.

Universal suffrage should be exercised without resulting in excessive injustice; otherwise, a set of corrective measures, institutional channels and barriers would have to be conceived in the framework of democracy

In order to be able to speak of democracy, informed voting, the only one which is a free expression, should replace automatic, community and identity voting. While people are immersed in an ethnicist, racist or totalitarian logic, the role of democrats in the world does not consist of ensuring that the preferences of the majority prevail, but of respecting the rights of the oppressed, if necessary against the law of the numbers. What has happened in several countries in recent years should lead us to exercise

mistrust every time a universal principle is invoked in an ethnic conflict.

What are sacred in democracy are the values, not the mechanisms. What must be respected radically and with the fewest concessions is the dignity of human beings – women, men and children – regardless of their beliefs, skin colour or numeric importance. The type of scrutiny must be adapted to this requirement. Universal suffrage should be exercised without resulting in excessive injustice; otherwise, a set of corrective measures, institutional channels and barriers would have to be conceived in the framework of democracy.

After this explanation, I return to the initial question: should differences be acknowledged? Or is it better to leave them aside and pretend that they do not exist? What I have just described is the intellectual and affective path that developed inside me over the years and that allows me to feel my way along the walls at the end of all cul-de-sacs. It is dangerous to excessively respect all the differences, and it is equally dangerous to ignore them. Some will argue that between these two walls there is a space full of intermediate formulas. No doubt. But if we continue holding one meeting after another, one symposium after another, on this subject, it is because it is not at all easy to find the appropriate measures.

No doubt healthy management of the differences in identity can avoid many disasters in any country, while a biased, cynical and brutal management can sink it unimaginably, even though this observation does not really satisfy me for the very reason that all the countries in the world are faced with a series of growing difficulties for migrants and the local population to coexist: Serbians

and Albanians, Greeks and Turks, Christians and Muslims, Jews and Arabs, Catholics and Protestants, Russians and Lithuanians... The list would never end. And I cannot believe that the management of these problems is deficient everywhere. There are clearly other reasons. Neither am I convinced by those who claim that these types of current conflicts are more numerous and more violent than in past eras and that, if it seems so, it is because today people talk about them more, and they are more visible than in the past when they were overlooked. If I have to rely on my experience as Lebanese, Mediterranean, French, European or simply as a spectator attentive to the events of our time, I am totally convinced that the worsening situation is real, not an optical illusion. Never in the history of the conflicts between the Lebanese communities have they been so murderous as those I have experienced; never, for centuries, has violence together with religious fanaticism affected so many countries, both in the Muslim world and elsewhere; never have the ideological confrontations been so eclipsed worldwide by identity conflicts; never, either in France or in other European countries, have the issues related to migration been so decisive in the current political and intellectual debate.

If things get poisoned in this way, the logical conclusion that can be drawn is that today in the world there are a series of very powerful and far-reaching factors that put pressure on the tensions related to identity, and a good pragmatic, skilful, honest and lucid management is not enough to eliminate the problems. I know very well that this management is essential but not enough. It is not enough because there are global factors that no manager in the world is capable

of controlling. I am not going to delve into the extraordinary development of the communications and their consequences in our daily life, but you only need to look around to see it. Need we recall that in the era of global television things develop differently? That now people do not express themselves the same way, that bombs are not put in the same places, and that thousands of people are looking, listening and acting?

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There are also phenomena of imitation, spill over and amplification. The time of reaction is increasingly shorter; the enchainment of the act takes place at a very different pace. Events that would have taken years and decades to occur now fulfil their cycle in barely a few weeks before our bewildered eyes. For instance, the collapse of the Soviet Union. The acceleration of communications causes, in some way, an acceleration of history. We all sometimes have the impression of feeling overcome by everything that happens; new realities, new instruments, customs and ways that we do not always have the time to assimilate constantly emerge. It is the feeling of being sucked in to the extent that, naturally, we feel like holding onto something, but... to what? To certainties, ancestral traditions, the oldest, most visceral, most solid, most stable affiliations.

The world is a fabric of wounded identities, which complicates more than ever the management of relations between the different communities. For many of our contemporaries, this type of vertigo comes with a profound suspicion in terms of all the phenomena that the concept of globali-

sation encompasses. There are those who mistrust this concept because they believe it is too western, and there are those who fear it because they consider it too American or Anglophone, or simply too foreign. But today almost all human communities feel threatened or impelled to defend some essential elements of their identity – religion, language, a way of living – or of their territory, whether combating neighbouring communities or more global adversaries.

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There is another factor that aggravates the foregoing, and is linked to our vision of the identity of the individuals and groups. This is an essential aspect of my perspective. I think that we all, out of custom more than conviction, adhere to a narrow and exclusive conception that I would label as tribal and that, although some years ago it might have been natural and evident, now does not seem to adapt to contemporary realities. Neither to the mixed societies in which we live, nor to the global realities.

The historian Marc Bloch said that “men resemble their time more than they resemble their parents,” and this statement, which has always been true, is so more now than ever. Things have changed so much in so few years that we are all much closer to our contemporaries than to our ancestors. Do I exaggerate when I say that I have much more in common with the passerby chosen at random in a street of Prague, Seoul, San Francisco or Barcelona than with my grandfather? And I am no longer referring only to

appearance, clothing, deportment; I am not only referring to the lifestyle, work, habitat, all artifacts that surround us, but also to moral conceptions, ways of thinking. I am also referring to beliefs.

Although we define ourselves as Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists or Hinduists, our vision of the world and the beyond has no link with that of our “fellow believers” of some time ago. For most of them, hell was a place as real as Asia Minor or Abyssinia, a place inhabited by demons with claws that threw sinners into the eternal fire, as we see in apocalyptic paintings. Today I believe that nobody contemplates things from this perspective. I know that it is the most caricature-like image, but the same could be said of the whole of our conceptions in all fields. Much behaviour that is acceptable today for the believer would have been inconceivable for their “fellow believers” of another time. If I put the words between inverted commas is because those ancestors did not practise the same religion as us. If we lived with them now and they observed our current behaviours, there is no doubt that they would stone us in the middle of the street, lock us in a dungeon or burn us in the bonfire as heathens, louts, heretics or wizards.

We all are depositories of two legacies: one vertical, from our ancestors and the traditions of our people; another horizontal, from the era in which we live. I think that the latter is the most formative, and every day more so; however, this reality is not reflected in our perception of ourselves. We do not assert our horizontal legacy, but the vertical. It is an essential point when we focus on the notion of identity as it appears to us today.

On the one hand, we have what we are in reality and what we become as a result

of globalisation; in other words, beings interwoven with threads of all colours that we share with the immense community of our contemporaries, the essential of our references, the essential of our behaviours, the core of our beliefs. On the other, we have what we believe we are, what we intend to be; in other words, members of one community rather than another, adepts of one faith rather than another. The aim is not to deny the importance of our religious affiliations, national or of any other type; or to reject the influence, sometimes decisive, of our vertical legacy. The aim is, above all, to illuminate the breach that exists between what we are and what we want to be.

The identity of each individual is made up of many affiliations, but, instead of taking on all of them, we usually prioritise a single one

In reality, if we assert our differences with so much passion, it is precisely because we are increasingly less different, because, despite all our centuries-old conflicts and enmities, with every day that goes by the differences reduce a little more and the similarities increase a little more. If I am pleased it is only in appearance, because, can we be pleased because people are increasingly similar? Are we not heading towards a uniformised world where only one language is spoken, where we all share a single set of minimal beliefs, where we all see the same American series and eat identical sandwiches? Personally, I do not aspire to this world.

I am convinced that today's humanism is based on two indissociable elements: the universality of values and the diversity of cultural expressions. However, if we want to foster diversity, the wise path is not that of

the exacerbated and aggressive affirmation of tribal identities, but the recognition by each individual and each society of their own diversity.

The identity of each individual is made up of many affiliations, but, instead of taking on all of them, we usually prioritise a single one – religion, nation, ethnic group or any other – as the supreme affiliation, which we confuse with that of total identity and proclaim before the others, and we sometimes come to kill in its name.

Would it not be more prudent and appropriate to today's realities for each one of us to assume all our affiliations? Would it not be more normal for migrants, for instance, to fully assume their dual affiliation – that of the society of origin and that of the society of adoption – instead of being constantly forced to choose between one or the other? Would it not be more reasonable for each country to fully assume its own cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, as well as each and every one of the pages of its history? How could Europe be constructed if it did not assume its extraordinary diversity, if its future citizens felt divided between their culture of origin, the national affiliation and their support for the great whole that is being constructed? Will we not all have to accept a new Mediterranean conception of identity – less tribal, less exclusive, less narrow, less of a prisoner of dividing myths, more open to the others and to the reality of the future world? I end, once again, with a cascade of questions, but although my words express concern and are deprived of certainties, believe me if I tell you that they are not deprived of hope.

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