Transformation of Intellectual Discourse on Collective Identities

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Abstract: Nowadays “rigid” and “soft” concepts of collective identities formed in the framework of essentialist and constructivist approaches to their interpretation have proved to be heuristically insufficient. This led to transformation of intellectual discourse upon collective identities based on the paradigm of constructive realism. The key idea of this paradigm is that collective identities are formed not only as a result of constructive efforts but due to cultural pre-conditions (predisposition) as well and social readiness of collective subjects to perceive images and ideas about imagined communities as models of such identities.

Key words: Collective identity • Imagined community • Essentialism • Constructivism • Constructive realism • Identification matrix

INTRODUCTION

Society of late Art Nouveau entered ‘sound and the fury’ epoch of lost collective identities [1]. As a result the quest for the answer to the question "Who are we?" became actual for the whole world [2]. Today discourse upon collective identities has become fashionable intellectual competition in the course of which range of various implications was found which form the idea of such identity.

Some participators of discourse equate collective identity and group identity, the others believe it to be a special kind of identity. Besides that in discourse practices we often observe transfer of identity-notion from individual to collective sphere and collective identity is judged in the same way as individual identity. But this mustn't take place because we never think about society as a single personality. Society apart from personality has not subjectivity which is an attribute of an individual but not a group of people. To associate a group of people with subjectivity - as if it possesses a consciousness or feelings - is possible only metaphorically because a group of people possesses neither consciousness nor wish.

Modern discourse practices are mainly centered around individual identity which is viewed as attitude of a person towards himself in comparison with social reality [3]. Because of that individual identity is characterized by 2 levels - personality and social (or group). Personality level - is a set of personal features which make specific individual unique, social – identification of an individual with some social roles.

From methodological point of view there are social (group) identities of individuals and collective identities. Social identities are result of identification of individual with reference groups, collective identities - the result of comparison of imagined communities with specific images or notions “who We are” [4].

The notion “imagined community” was introduced in discourse practice by B. Anderson [5] who believed that apart from a society as space of direct communication imagined community is a mental projection of community of people which this community consists of. In analytical work which opens Russian translation of Anderson's book S. Bankovskaya emphasizes that imagined community is not a given opportunity to communicate but assumed "common" which is more intense than any 'society', something more accelerated, understood through imagination, going beyond self-evidence [6].

In intellectual discourse we can make out “rigid” and “soft” concepts of collective identities. Rigid concepts were formed in the framework of essentialist approach to the study of collective identities, based on idea that collective identities are set in “natural way”, that is why collective identities are what formed social communities must have. Moreover, collective identities are what you can have not recognizing it in the same time and in regard
to which you can be mistaken or what even can be “discovered” [7]. Such collective identities are singular and steady, they demand fundamental identity and “strong feeling” as a foundation for collective identification.

“Soft” concepts of collective identities are formed by constructivist approach to their interpretation. Thanks to constructivists in the scientific discourse an idea was established that collective identities are not natural and permanent essences which are kept as such from beginning to end in spite of “external” collisions but something mobile, multiple in character, depending on context. That is why by now it is very difficult to answer the question “Who we are?” and keep collective identities in the boundaries of habitual life striving for recognition of it by others.

Today transformation of intellectual discourse about collective identities takes place because it is evident that their essentialist and constructivist interpretations proved to be heuristically insufficient. New opportunities of study of collective identities are found in such approach as constructive realism in the framework of which such identities are interpreted as “natural” (cultural), singular and steady and as “artificial”, (which can be constructed), multiple and changeable in the same time. It is emphasized that “natural” identities are unconscious, they are formed in the process of cultural socialization; “artificial” identities are conscious, they are formed as a result of choice of social and imaginary references.

Therefore it is assumed that collective identities on the one hand are formed by socially-significant information, on the other hand - they are determined by cultural actualization [8]. Such approach is characterized by wish, firstly, to emphasize that collective identities are not something “naturally” existing, apart from individuals which specific collective consists of, in order to avoid radical essentialization of collective identities, secondly - to overcome purely constructive interpretation of them, because identities are given not only “artificial” but a cultural dimension as well. In such discourse understanding of collective identities accents move from metaphysical idea of collective actors to the processes of formation of collectiveness. To divide these or those collective identities means not only to participate in their formation but in some situations “obey” their regulations norms taken as “objective” facts [9].

The product of intellectual discourse upon collective identities are models of possible collective identities or identification matrix which are set by means of different concepts by syncretic images of imagined communities or by analytic-synthetic ideas about them by means of scientific notions. Models of possible collective identities being constructed by participators of discourse are “imposed” to imagined communities through informative influence. That is why images or ideas with which members of imagined communities associate themselves do not only reflect but in the same time create social reality. In this connection some researchers believe that collective identity is not realization by people of some community of themselves but, to a great extent, definite meaning assigned to it from outside [10].

Interpretation of collective identities as discourse constructs led to the conclusion about mobility of such identities which is determined by volatility of socio-cultural pictures of the world in the framework of which different identification matrices are formed. Secondly, it was concluded that collective identities are result of symbolic struggle or competitiveness of different narratives. In the same time some participators of discourses emphasize that as a rule there are several narratives about collective identities co-existing and competing with each other and people can choose among them [11]. As a result some narratives about collective identities can prevail while the others will be pushed out to periphery - but the “victory” of the first can never be regarded as final [12].

Choice of the model of collective identities by members of imagined community is made in social and cultural contexts. In social context the choice is deliberate, made through self-identification of collective subject with definite analytical-synthesetical idea about imagined community. In cultural context the choice is unconscious and made through self-identification of collective subject with its syncretic image. Because of this scheme images of imagined communities must, firstly, have intellectual advantages, secondly, be supported by symbolic capital of power; thirdly, to provoke “public response”; fourthly, to suit mental context of the imagined communities members.

Collective identities are subjective reality because they are formed as a result of comparison of “We” image with images the “Others”. In such a way intellectual discourse upon collective identities suggests, as its participators believe, understanding of differences between us and the others. Here collective identities are defined by the significance assigned to differences rather than “objectively” existing differences: only some differences and only in definite contexts are perceived as significant and become demarcation lines, boundaries between us and the Others [13]. In this connection in
discourse upon collective identities construction of images of others is of key importance because through this construction we understand who “We” are and what is our collective similarity. From this point of view not “We” determine the “Others” but Others determine us: essence of “We” depends on the essence of “Others”. Here collective identities as a result of comparison of others with us fulfill socio-compensating function.

Some participators of discourse believe that collective identities are built on differences between “Us” and “Them”; therefore in their structure 3 interrelated components can be found: 1) definition “We” (ours): 2) “They” (aliens); definition of boundaries between ours and aliens [14]. Though images “We” and “They” can not exist one without the other, in some cases “We” prevails, in other circumstances “We”-image is secondary and is built on the base of formed ideas about aliens.

Collective identities can be formed on different grounds. In particular on cultural grounds appear collective identities, belonging to which people included in imagined communities feel spiritually rather than understand with their minds. These are ethnic or regional identities of different kinds united by idea of common ‘land and blood”, cultural and historical fate. Civilization identities which are the most common cultural identities belong to this group, people comprising these communities imagine the identity rather than feel spiritually or realize it [15].

Collective identities - these first of all, narrative identities, they are based on images created by collective imagination on the base of re-interpretation by people of different kids of narrations. Because of that collective identities are representative social realities in a form of collective images and ideas, of discourse-estranged character, based on “social imaginary”. That is the reason by which it is worth noting that collective imagination is not a fantasy or escape from reality; imagination, as researchers emphasize, becomes the field of social practices based on movements of individuals on multiple landscapes or "imaginary worlds" which are formed by historically allocated imagination of personalities and groups, dispersed over the world [16].

Researches using concept "social imaginary" to characterize collective images and ideas underline that it means something more broad and deep than just intellectual schemes, which people can use as aid, talking about social reality abstractedly. Here “those ways are meant thanks to which they imagine their own existence in society, their relationship with other people, expectations with which such contacts are usually connected and depth normative ideas and images hidden behind such expectations ... social imaginary - common understanding which enables common practices and forming and unifying feeling of legitimacy” [17].

In the same time it is necessary to point out that context of collective imaginations is culture and the source is collective memory and different discourse spheres. They are: collective memoirs connected with common cultural experience in the framework of space and time (the acts of collective articulation of such memoirs) and so called myth panoramas - discourse spheres in which myths on which collective identities are based are constantly formed, spread and discussed [18].

Transformation of intellectual discourse on collective identities is also connected with “identification hybrids” appearing in conditions of globalization - new subcultures based on recasting of traditional influences and, therefore, appearance, especially because of migration flows, of collective identities [19].

Thus, collective identities are formed as a result of not only constructivist efforts (information influence) but as a result of cultural pre-conditions as well (unconscious) and social readiness (conscious) of collective subjects to perceive images and ideas about imaginary communities as models of these identities. In general collective identities have huge mobilizing potential allowing to increase self-assessment of an imagined community as collective subject.

REFERENCES


