

A Monolithic “Dead End” or a “Hybrid Exit”?

Cultural Hybrids Facing National Image Construction & Their Role in the History of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

Intercultural communication in the context of national construction is often associated exclusively with our era of globalization. But, in fact, it has been present for over 150 years, in reference to multi-ethnic regions, in particular. Therefore, the paper goes back to the origins of cultural hybridity as a historical and intercultural phenomenon, facing the emergence of national image construction, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of intercultural communication and thus shed new light on our socio-cultural problems, with national and post-national backgrounds. The analysis is on one hand focused on Central European borderland, namely Austrian-Silesia, as a crown land of the Habsburg Monarchy, at the end of 19th century, and on the other, based on theories by Homi Bhabha, Wolfgang Welsch, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Martin Buber, Benedict Anderson or Miroslav Hroch.[1]

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Cultural Hybridity as a Historical and Modern Phenomenon of Intercultural Communication

Cultural hybridity is a purely historical phenomenon of intercultural communication, without a doubt, closely connected with history. For instance, according to Pieterse “Hybridization as a process is old as history” and “hybridity is deeply rooted in history and quite ordinary” (Pieterse 2001; 222), for Welsch “transculturality [hybridization] is no way completely new historically” (Welsch 1999; 199) too, and Bhabha argues for example that cultural hybridities “emerge in moments of historical transformation” (Bhabha 2006; 3). But at the same time there is a strong tendency to concentrate exclusively on cultural hybridity as a phenomenon of our global society (Kraidy 2002; 317), in which “the pace of mixing accelerates” because of “new technologies that enable new phases of intercultural contact”, whereas “contemporary accelerated globalization is such a new phase” (Pieterse 2011; 222). For the same reason Welsch presented the theory of transculturality [hybridization] because, as he says: “I believe the concept of transculturality to be the most adequate concept of culture today (...)” (Welsch 1999; 194) since “cultures today are in general characterized by hybridization” (Welsch 1999; 198). Also Bhabha declares in an interview that his theory describes the identity of minorities as well as the way of functioning of modern societies and he comments: “We live in a strange period of transition, in a sustained conflict between the powers of hybridization and the powers of homogenization” (Charim 2007).

But, on the other hand Pieterse, for instance, distinguishes two types of hybridity: a so called new hybridity as an indicator of social changes due to e.g. migration, and so called old or existing hybridity: “(...) hybridity thinking also concerns existing or, so to speak, old hybridity, and thus involves different ways of looking at historical and existing cultural (...) arrangements. This is a more radical and penetrating angle that suggests not only that things are no longer the way they used to be, but were never really the way they used to be, or used to be viewed” (Pieterse 2011; 221) Referring to the varieties of hybridity mentioned above, I would suggest using the term “post-national” instead of “new” – as facing the decline of national constructions – and “pre-national” instead of “old” – as facing the rise of national constructions, since, in this way, we can avoid the discussion about what is historical or modern, and focus on cultural hybridity as a cultural phenomenon, in general, in the context of emerging or declining national images.

Moreover, if we assume, as Young claims, that: “Hybridity works in different ways at the same time, according to the cultural, economic and political demands of specific situations” (Young 2003; 79), then it might be quite enriching to widen the post-national perspective of Bhabha’s theory, which describes “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (Ashcraft/ Griffiths/ Tiffin 2003; 118), by looking at e.g. Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. It might be enriching to observe, how Buber – who was an Austrian-Israeli philosopher, born in the Habsburg Empire in the 19th century – analyzed the phenomenon of hybridity and came to very similar conclusions, by implementing the terms of “social fertility” or “Kingdom” (Buber, 1984; 212). This can be achieved only through a “genuine dialogue” and “by coming into the presence of “the between” (Kramer/Gawlick 2003; 167).

As we can see, the fact that hybridity works in different ways, according to different demands, does not mean that there are various types of cultural hybridity. Hybridity as a phenomenon has not been changing throughout history, what is different are its various strategies. If this is so, what can we learn from history? Pieterse suggests that “things are no longer the way (...) they used to be viewed”, if we take into consideration the pre-national, so to say historical, hybridity and re-consider our reality from this perspective. A good starting point here is the already mentioned statement by Bhabha, which claims that we are observing a struggle between hybridization and homogenization. Looking back into the pre-national history we will also find such a process of a “hybrid-monolithic transition”, namely the moment when cultural hybrids, living in multi-ethnic regions, had been facing the emergence of monolithic national movements for the first time in the history of intercultural communication.

Having said that, I would like to make a brief digression regarding the history of intercultural communication, which to my understanding, is an integral part of human history. It refers neither to “multiple histories”, so to the influence of our historical experience during

communicating with people from other cultures (see e.g. Martin/Nakayama 2010), nor to the intercultural history of mass-media (see e.g. Casmir 1995), nor to the history of intercultural communication as a discipline and its postwar origins (see e.g. Leeds-Hurwitz 1990). However, it refers to intercultural strategies, interactions, misunderstandings, reactions and phenomena like cultural hybridity in everyday inter-ethnic communication in the past.

Cultural Hybrids Facing National Image Construction & Their Role in the History of Intercultural Communication

“The very idea of pure, “ethnically cleansed” national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history (...)” claims Bhabha (2006; 7). And this is why, “They [the adherents of the national concept] – according to Welsch – “blindly deny the factual historic transculturality of long periods in order to establish the 19th century’s imaginary notion of homogenous national cultures” (Welsch 1999; 199) as well as in order to propagate “the misleading idea of a single national identity that holds together all members of a nation” (Hirschi 2012; 13). However, to reduce this historical complexity and to create a perfect “imagined community” (Anderson 1998) is not that simple, because, as Bhabha argues: “The present of the people’s history, then, is a practice that destroys the constant principles of the national culture that attempt to hark back to a “true” national past (...)” (Bhabha 2006; 218). For example the fact that “(...) multilingualism, rather than an exception, was the norm in Central Europe until 1945.” (Kamusella 2009; 150)

In Hroch’s opinion such a situation is linked to the fact that: “National awareness neither was being broadcasted as a virus nor was a biologically caused pandemic, but was a result of human decisions in certain historic situations” (Hroch 2009; 266). The impossibility and artificiality of such decisions in a multi-ethnic region are regarded as absolutely natural features, which Hobsbawm explains as follows: “Where several languages coexist, multilingualism may be so normal as to make an exclusive identification with any one idiom quite arbitrary(...)” (Hobsbawm 1992; 57). Facing this national “daily plebiscite” (Renan 1992), in Renan’s terms, cultural hybrids, living in a multi-ethnic society, tended to react, in practice, in two ways. They either played a “lubricating” role as everyday mediators, or chose the other option, i.e. to neglect or forget their multiethnic origins in favor of a monolithic national identity what we can observe in the case of Austrian-Silesia.

The Case of Austrian-Silesia in the 19th Century

The Habsburg Austrian-Silesia was characterized by a tremendously heterogeneous population comprised of mainly German-, Polish-, Czech-, Ruthenian- and Silesian-speaking people, with also some Slovaks, Hungarians, Italians, and Roma. There were Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish communities, as well as a small group of Greek-Catholics (Wnętrzak 2014; 19-62). In this area – influenced by several cultures, languages, and religions throughout the centuries – there existed no unambiguous or obvious lingual or ethnic frontiers connected with religious and/or (later) also national assignments. For example, Catholic did not mean Polish and German was not automatically equated with Protestant; speaking German did not mean being German, just as being Czech did not necessarily mean speaking Czech and sometimes being Polish meant speaking German in the family. The first national orientated activists – who became leaders of the prevailing national movements, i.e. German, Polish, Czech, Zionist and Silesian, in the 80s and 90s of the 19th century – were not initially able to create clear lingual-national borderlines. However, in the longer term, they managed to influence at least part of the local community by the gradual founding of nationalist newspapers or associations, for example (Hořinek 1948; 4/ Spyra 2008; 42).

Hybrids as a Lubricant

Hybridity is defined as “a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness” (Hoogvelt 1997; 158) which – according to Bhabha – “breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/Other, inside/outside” (Bhabha 2006; 165), and its function can be described as a “lubricant”, i.e. as a “lubricant” in the conjunction of cultures’ (Ikas 2009; 131). In the technical sense, lubricants (Schmierstoffe 2015) have three main functions, which overlap with the most important lubricant features of hybridity:

1. Friction reduction, i.e. the ability to overcome contradictions, divisions respectively ambiguities, like for example in the case of František Halfar – first a Czech and then a German activist, who founded a Czech school, but was earlier known as a committed Polish man. We also have the case of one of the leading Polish activists, Dr. Jan Michejda, who “(...) married twice to German women, who spoke so little Polish that in the family mostly German was spoken. His oldest daughter was married to a German master-builder, the oldest son was an Austrian cavalier-officer” (Gabrisch 1958; 3).
2. Protective and seal function as a binding element, i.e. consolidation of the already existing variety of components and its preservation. Take for example the description of a guesthouse, run by a Jew: “It was already midday (...) and I was looking for a guest house. Suddenly I saw a large sign on the wall of a house [in German] “Gasthaus” and in the middle, over the entranceway I read [in Czech]: “Czech Reading Association Vlastimi”. I enter the place. My greeting [in Czech] was answered in Polish” (Noviny 1896; 5).
3. Formation of a lubricating film, as a mediating and trans-border existence, including a trans-cultural potential, which is illustrated in the following examples: in the village Rychwald, there was a Polish school, with German, according to regulations, as the language of instruction in the fifth grade, and where Polish was spoken in church and Czech songs were sung only during holidays or like in another village “Bludowitz, where in the Catholic church one preaches, prays and also predominantly sings in Polish, but Czech is the language of instruction at schools (...)” (Brožek/Homola; 94).

“Forgotten” Hybrids

According to Renan, the forgetting of history had a significant influence on the emergence of nations: “Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation (...)” (Renan 1992). Bhabha continues this thought and argues that the process of forgetting or even “being obliged to forget” has constituted the national unity, because: “(...) it is the construction of a discourse on society that performs the problem of totalizing the people and unifying the national will” (Bhabha 2006; 230). Putting this “historical error” into

action was possible only in one way, namely by a conscious and consequent decision made by prevailing individuals, through the process of “self-changing” awareness, i.e. neglecting of their multi-ethnic origins, that led to a monolithic national identity. As a prime example of such “national remembering” by “multiethnic forgetting” we can take Pawel Stalmach who was the father of the Polish national movement in Austrian-Silesia.

Stalmach was born in Austrian Silesia, went to a Czech primary, then to a German secondary school, and studied Protestant theology in Bratislava/Slovakia, where he decided to become a Polish activist thanks to his Slovakian friends. As a student he was a member of the German Literary Association in Bratislava and as an Austrian-German he understood “under the influence of the first Slovakian activists” that Slavonic (Austrian-) Silesians are not Czech but Polish, just as the Slovakian people are not Czech but Slovakian (Wagner 1978; 196-98). After becoming the leading Polish activist in Silesia, he wrote in his local nationalist newspaper that he was always Polish and never German. However, one of his best friends, also a Polish national activist, officially denied this and denoted this as “boasting and nonsense” since he still had Stalmach’s old documents proving that he used to be German (Bystroń 1931; 38), Stalmach brought the first Polish books to Silesia, established the first relations with Polish people and created a fundamental nationalist network (by founding associations, newspapers, schools etc.) that was decisive for the emergence of the Polish national movement in Silesia. Shortly before his death, Stalmach converted to Catholicism to become a “real” Polish man, because religion, as a category of belonging, was still much more important than language at the end of 19th century.

Conclusion

I would like to end with a quote from Pieterse: “Hybridity is a journey into the riddles of recognition. Take any exercise in social mapping and it is the hybrids that are missing. Take most models and arrangements of multiculturalism and it is hybrids that are not counted, not accommodated” (Pieterse 2001; 239) Some of our ancestors decided to forget their multi-ethnic origins in order to remember an imaginary, homogenous national past that has become a crucial part of our present, and thus evidently, we have missed something. However, how are we going to take the global “hybrid” exit nowadays, without recognizing that we are just entering the same path of our ancestors, after having been lost for over 150 years?

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