Modernity
An Introduction to Modern Societies

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The Question of Cultural Identity

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1 Introduction: Identity in Question

The question of "identity" is being vigorously debated in social theory In essence, the argument is that the old identities which stabilized the social world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. This so-called "crisis of identity" is seen as part of a wider process of change which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies and undermining the frameworks which gave individuals stable anchorage in the social world.

The aim of this chapter is to explore some of these questions about cultural identity in late-modernity and to assess whether a "crisis of identities" exists, what it consists of, and in which directions it is moving. The chapter addresses such questions as: What do we mean by a "crisis of identity"? What recent developments in modern societies have precipitated it? What form does it take? What are its potential consequences? The first part of this chapter (sections 1–2) deals with shifts in the concepts of identity and the subject. The second part (sections 3–6) develops this argument with respect to *cultural identities* – those aspects of our identities which arise from our "belonging" to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, and, above all, national cultures.

Several of the chapters in part III approach their central concern from a number of different positions, framing it within a debate, as if between different protagonists. This chapter works somewhat differently. It is written from a position basically sympathetic to the claim that modern identities are being "de-centered"; that is, dislocated or fragmented. Its aim is to explore this claim, to see what it entails, to qualify it, and to discuss what may be its likely consequences. In the course of the argument, this chapter modifies the claim by introducing certain complexities and examining some contradictory features which the "de-centering" claim, in its simpler forms, neglects.

Accordingly, the formulations in this chapter are provisional and open to contestation. Opinion within the sociological fraternity is still deeply divided about these issues. The trends are too recent and too ambiguous, and the very concept we are dealing with – identity – too complex, too under-developed, and too little understood in contemporary social science to be definitively tested. As with many of the other phenomena examined in this volume, it is impossible to offer conclusive statements or to make secure judgments about the theoretical claims and propositions being advanced. You should bear this in mind as you read the rest of the chapter.

For those theorists who believe that modern identities are breaking up, the argument runs something like this. A distinctive type of structural change is transforming modern societies in the late twentieth century. This is fragmenting the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality which gave us firm locations as social individuals. These transformations are also shifting our personal identities, undermining our sense of ourselves as integrated subjects. This loss of a stable "sense of self" is sometimes called the dislocation or de-centering of the subject. This set of double displacements – de-centering individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves – constitutes a "crisis of identity" for the individual. As the cultural critic, Kobena Mercer, observes, "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (Mercer, 1990, p. 43).

Many of these processes of change have been discussed at length in earlier chapters. Taken together, they represent a process of transformation so fundamental and wide-ranging that we are bound to ask if it is not modernity itself which is being transformed. This chapter adds a new dimension to the argument: the claim that, in what is sometimes described as our post-modern world, we are also "post" any fixed or essentialist conception of identity – something which, since the Enlightenment, has been taken to define the very core or essence of our being, and to ground our existence as human subjects. In order to explore this claim, I shall look first at definitions of identity and at the character of change in late-modernity.

1.1 Three concepts of identity

For the purposes of exposition, I shall distinguish three very different conceptions of identity: those of the (a) Enlightenment subject, (b) sociological subject, and (c) post-modern subject. The Enlightenment subject was based on a conception of the human person as a fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness, and action, whose "center" consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same – continuous or "identical" with itself – throughout the individual's existence. The essential center of the self was a person's identity. I shall say more about this in a moment, but you can see that this was a very "individualist" conception of the subject and "his" (for Enlightenment subjects were usually described as male) identity.

The notion of the sociological subject reflected the growing complexity of the modern world and the awareness that this inner core of the subject was not autonomous and self-sufficient, but was formed in relation to "significant others," who mediated to the subject the values, meanings, and symbols – the culture – of the worlds he/she inhabited. G.H. Mead, C.H. Cooley, and the symbolic interactionists are the key figures in sociology who elaborated this "interactive" conception of identity and the self. According to this view, which has become the classic sociological conception of the issue, identity is formed in the "interaction" between self and society. The subject still has an inner core or essence that is "the real me," but this is formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds "outside" and the identities which they offer.

Identity, in this sociological conception, bridges the gap between the "inside" and the "outside" – between the personal and the public worlds. The fact that we project "ourselves" into these cultural identities, at the same time internalizing their meanings and values, making them "part of us," helps to align our subjective feelings with the objective places we occupy in the social and cultural world. Identity thus stitches (or, to use a current medical metaphor, "sutures") the subject into the structure. It stabilizes both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit, making both reciprocally more unified and predictable.

Yet these are exactly what are now said to be "shifting." The subject, previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed, not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities. Correspondingly, the identities which composed the social landscapes "out there," and which ensured our subjective conformity with the objective "needs" of the culture, are breaking up as a result of structural and institutional change. The very process of identification, through which we project ourselves into our cultural identities, has become more open-ended, variable, and problematic.

This produces the post-modern subject, conceptualized as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity. Identity becomes a "moveable feast": formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us (Hall, 1987). It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent "self." Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or "narrative of the self" about ourselves (see Hall, 1990). The fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily.

You should bear in mind that the above three conceptions of the subject are, to some extent, simplifications. As the argument develops, they will become more complex and qualified. Nevertheless, they are worth holding on to as crude pegs around which to develop the argument of this chapter.

1.2 The character of change in late-modernity

A further aspect of the issue of identity relates to the character of change in late-modernity; in particular, to that process of change known as "globalization" (discussed in earlier chapters, especially chapter 14), and its impact on cultural identity.

In essence, the argument here is that change in late-modernity has a very specific character. As Marx said about modernity, "[it is a] constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation. . . . All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air. . . ." (Marx and Engels, 1973, p. 70).

Modern societies are therefore by definition societies of constant, rapid, and permanent change. This is the principal distinction between "traditional" and "modern" societies. Anthony Giddens argues that "In traditional societies, the past is honoured and symbols are valued because they contain and perpetuate the experience of generations. Tradition is a means of handling time and space, which inserts any particular activity or experience within the continuity of past, present and future, these in turn being structured by recurrent social practices" (Giddens, 1990, pp. 37–8). Modernity, by contrast, is not only defined as the experience of living with rapid, extensive, and continuous change, but is a highly reflexive form of life in which "social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character" (Giddens, 1990, pp. 37–8).

Giddens cites in particular the *pace of change* and the *scope of change* – "as different areas of the globe are drawn into interconnection with one another, waves of social transformation crash across virtually the whole of the earth's surface" – and the *nature of modern institutions* (Giddens, 1990, p. 6). The latter are either radically new compared with traditional societies (e.g. the nation-state or the commodification of products and wage labor), or have a specious continuity with earlier forms (e.g. the city) but are organized on quite different principles. More significant are the transformations of time and space, and what he calls the "disembedding of the social system" – "the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time–space" (1990, p. 21). We will take up all these themes later. However, the general point we would stress is that of *discontinuities.*

> The modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order in quite unprecedented fashion. In both their extensionality ["external aspects"] and their intensionality ["internal aspects"] the transformations involved in modernity are more profound than most sorts of change characteristic of prior periods. On the extensional plane they have served to establish forms of social interconnection which span the globe; in intensional terms they have come to alter some of the most intimate and personal features of our day-to-day existence.
> (Giddens, 1990, p. 21)

David Harvey speaks of modernity as not only entailing "a ruthless break with any or all preceding conditions," but as "characterized by a never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself" (1989, p. 12). Ernesto Laclau (1990) uses the concept of "dislocation." A dislocated structure is one whose center is displaced and not replaced by another, but by "a plurality of power centers." Modern societies, Laclau argues, have no center, no single articulating or organizing principle, and do not develop according to the unfolding of a single "cause" or "law." Society is not, as sociologists often thought, a unified and well-bounded whole, a totality, producing itself through evolutionary change from within itself, like the unfolding of a daffodil from its bulb. It is constantly being "de-centered" or dislocated by forces outside itself.

Late-modern societies, he argues, are characterized by "difference"; they are cut through by different social divisions and social antagonisms which produce a variety of different "subject positions" – i.e. identities – for individuals. If such societies hold together at all, it is not because they are unified, but because their different elements and identities can, under certain circumstances, be articulated together. But this articulation is always partial: the structure of identity remains open. Without this, Laclau argues, there would be no history.

This is a very different, and far more troubled and provisional, conception of identity than the earlier two (see section 1.1). We should add that, far from being dismayed by all this, Laclau argues that dislocation has positive features. It unhinges the stable identities of the past, but it also opens up the possibility of new articulations – the forging of new identities, the production of new subjects, and what he calls the "recomposition of the structure around particular nodal points of articulation" (Laclau, 1990, p. 40).

Giddens, Harvey, and Laclau offer somewhat different readings of the nature of change in the post-modern world, but their emphasis on discontinuity, fragmentation, rupture, and dislocation contains a common thread. You should bear this in mind when we come to consider what some theorists claim to be the impact of the contemporary change that is known as "globalization."

1.3 What is at stake in the question of identities?

So far the arguments may seem rather abstract. To give you some sense of how they apply to a concrete situation, and what is "at stake" in these contested definitions of identity and change, let us take an example which highlights the *political* consequences of the fragmentation or "pluralization" of identities.

In 1991, President Bush, anxious to restore a conservative majority to the US Supreme Court, nominated Clarence Thomas, a black judge of conservative political views. In Bush's judgment, white voters were likely to support Thomas because he was conservative on equal-rights legislation, and black voters would support Thomas because he was black. In short, the President was "playing the identities game."

During the Senate "hearings" on the appointment, Judge Thomas was accused of sexual harassment by a black woman, Anita Hill, a former junior colleague of Thomas's. The hearings caused a public scandal and polarized American society. Some blacks supported Thomas on racial grounds; others opposed him on sexual grounds. Black women were divided, depending on whether their "identities" as blacks or as women prevailed. Black men were also divided, depending on whether their sexism overrode their liberalism. White men were divided, depending not only on their politics, but on how they identified themselves with respect to racism and sexism. White conservative women supported Thomas not only on political grounds, but because of their opposition to feminism. White feminists, often liberal on race, opposed Thomas on sexual grounds. And because Judge Thomas is a member of the judicial elite and Anita Hall, at the time of the alleged incident, was a junior employee, there were issues of social class position at work in these arguments too.

The question of Judge Thomas's guilt or innocence is not at issue here; what is, is the "play of identities" and its political consequences. Consider:

- The identities were contradictory. They cross-cut or "dislocated" each other.
- The contradictions operated both "outside," in society, cutting across settled constituencies, *and* "inside" the heads of each individual.
- No single identity – e.g. that of social class – could align all the different identities into one, overarching "master identity," on which a politics could be securely grounded. People no longer identify their social interests exclusively in class terms; class cannot serve as a discursive device or mobilizing category through which all the diverse social interests and identities of people can be reconciled and represented.
- Increasingly, the political landscapes of the modern world are fractured in this way by competing and dislocating identifications – arising, especially, from the erosion of the "master identity" of class and the emerging identities belonging to the new political ground defined by the new social movements: feminism, black struggles, national liberation, anti-nuclear, and ecological movements (Mercer, 1990).
- Since identity shifts according to how the subject is addressed or represented, identification is not automatic, but can be won or lost. It has become politicized. This is sometimes described as a shift from a politics of (class) identity to a politics of *difference*.

I can now briefly outline the shape of the rest of the chapter. First, I shall look in somewhat more depth at how the concept of identity is said to have shifted, from that of the Enlightenment subject to that of the sociological and then the "post-modern" subject. Thereafter, the chapter will explore that aspect of modern cultural identity which is formed through one's membership of a *national* culture – and how the processes of dislocating change, encapsulated by the concept of "globalization," are affecting it.

2 The Birth and Death of the Modern Subject

In this section I shall outline the account offered by some contemporary theorists of the main shifts that have occurred in the way the subject

But feminism also had a more direct relation to the conceptual de-centering of the Cartesian and the sociological subject:

- It questioned the classic distinction between "inside" and "outside," "private" and "public." Feminism's slogan was "the personal is political."
- It therefore opened up to political contestation whole new arenas of social life – the family, sexuality, housework, the domestic division of labor, child-rearing, etc.
- It also exposed, as a political and social question, the issue of how we are formed and produced as gendered subjects. That is to say, it politicized subjectivity, identity, and the process of identification (as men/women, mothers/fathers, sons/daughters).
- What began as a movement directed at challenging the social *position* of women expanded to include the *formation* of sexual and gendered identities.
- Feminism challenged the notion that men and women were part of the same identity – "Mankind" – replacing it with *the question of sexual difference.*

In this section, then, I have tried to map the conceptual shifts by which, according to some theorists, the Enlightenment "subject," with a fixed and stable identity, was de-centered into the open, contradictory, unfinished, fragmented identities of the post-modern subject. I have traced this through five great de-centerings. Let me remind you again that a great many social scientists and intellectuals do not accept the conceptual or intellectual implications (as outlined above) of these developments in modern thought. However, few would now deny their deeply unsettling effects on late-modern ideas and, particularly, on how the subject and the issue of identity have come to be conceptualized.

3 National Cultures as "Imagined Communities"

Having traced the conceptual shifts by which the late-modern or post-modern conceptions of the subject and identity have emerged, I shall now turn to the question of how this "fragmented subject" is placed in terms of its *cultural* identities. The particular cultural identity I am concerned with is that of *national* identity (though other aspects are implicated in the story). What is happening to cultural identity in late-modernity? Specifically, how are national cultural identities being affected or displaced by the process of globalization?

In the modern world, the national cultures into which we are born are one of the principal sources of cultural identity. In defining ourselves we sometimes say we are English or Welsh or Indian or Jamaican. Of course, this is to speak metaphorically. These identities are not literally imprinted in our genes. However, we do think of them as if they are part of our essential natures. The conservative philosopher Roger Scruton argues that:

> The condition of man [*sic*] requires that the individual, while he exists and acts as an autonomous being, does so only because he can first identify himself as something greater – as a member of a society, group, class, state or nation, of some arrangement to which he may not attach a name, but which he recognizes instinctively as home.
> (Scruton, 1986, p. 156)

Ernest Gellner, from a more liberal position, also believes that without a sense of national identification the modern subject would experience a deep sense of subjective loss:

> The idea of a man [*sic*] without a nation seems to impose a [great strain on the modern imagination. A man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears. All this seems obvious, though, alas, it is not true. But that it should have come to seem so very obviously true is indeed an aspect, perhaps the very core of the problem of nationalism. Having a nation is not an inherent attribute of humanity, but it has now come to appear as such.
> (Gellner, 1983, p. 6)

The argument we will be considering here is that, in fact, national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to *representation*. We only know what it is to be "English" because of the way "Englishness" has come to be represented, as a set of meanings, by English national culture. It follows that a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings – *a system of cultural representation*. People are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the *idea* of the nation as represented in its national culture. A nation is a symbolic community and it is this which accounts for its "power to generate a sense of identity and allegiance" (Schwarz, 1986, p. 106).

National cultures are a distinctly modern form. The allegiance and identification which, in a pre-modern age or in more traditional societies, were given to tribe, people, religion, and region, came gradually in western societies to be transferred to the *national* culture. Regional and ethnic differences were gradually subsumed beneath what Gellner calls the "political roof" of the nation-state, which thus became a powerful source of meanings for modern cultural identities.

The formation of a national culture helped to create standards of universal literacy, generalized a single vernacular language as the dominant medium of communication throughout the nation, created a homogeneous culture and maintained national cultural institutions, such as a national education system. In these and other ways, national culture became a key feature of industrialization and an engine of modernity. Nevertheless, there are other aspects of a national culture which pull it in a different direction, bringing to the fore what Homi Bhabha calls "the particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 1). Some of these ambiguities are explored in section 4. First, section 3.1 will consider how a national culture functions as a system of representation, and section 3.2, whether national identities are really as unified and homogeneous as they represent themselves to be. It is only when these two questions have been answered that we can properly consider the claim that national identities were once centered, coherent, and whole, but are now being dislocated by the processes of globalization.

3.1 Narrating the nation: an imagined community

National cultures are composed not only of cultural institutions, but of symbols and representations. A national culture is a *discourse* – a way of constructing meanings which influences and organizes both our actions and our conception of ourselves (see chapter 6). National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about "the nation" with which we can *identify*; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it. As Benedict Anderson (1983) has argued, national identity is an "imagined community" (see the discussion of this idea by Kenneth Thompson in chapter 12).

Anderson argues that the differences between nations lie in the different ways in which they are imagined. Or, as Enoch Powell put it, "the life of nations no less than that of men is lived largely in the imagination" (Powell, 1969, p. 245). But how is the modern nation imagined? What representational strategies are deployed to construct our common-sense views of national belonging or identity? What are the representations of, say, "England" which win the identifications and define the identities of "English" people? "Nations," Homi Bhabha has remarked, "like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 1). How is the narrative of the national culture told?

Of the many aspects which a comprehensive answer to that question would include, I have selected *five* main elements.

1 First, there is the *narrative of the nation*, as it is told and retold in national histories, literatures, the media, and popular culture. These provide a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols, and rituals which stand for, or *represent*, the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation. As members of such an "imagined community," we see ourselves in our mind's eye sharing in this narrative. It lends significance and importance to our humdrum existence, connecting our everyday lives with a national destiny that pre-existed us and will outlive us. From England's green and pleasant land, its gentle, rolling countryside, rose-trellised cottages and country-house gardens – Shakespeare's "sceptered isle" – to public ceremonials like Royal weddings, the discourse of "Englishness" represents what "England" *is*, gives meaning to the identity of "being English," and fixes "England" as a focus of identification in English (and Anglophile) hearts. As Bill Schwarz observes:

> These make up the threads that bind us invisibly to the past. Just as English nationalism is denied, so is the fact of its turbulent and contested history. What we get instead . . . is an emphasis on tradition and heritage, above all on *continuity* so that our present political culture is seen as the flowering of a long organic evolution.
> (Schwarz, 1986, p. 155)

2 Secondly, there is the emphasis on *origins, continuity, tradition and timelessness*. National identity is represented as primordial – "there, in the very nature of things," sometimes slumbering, but ever ready to be "awoken" from its "long, persistent and mysterious somnolence" to resume its unbroken existence (Gellner, 1983, p. 48). The essentials of the national character remain unchanged through all the vicissitudes of history. It is there from birth, unified and continuous, "changeless" throughout all the changes, eternal. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher remarked at the time of the Falklands War that there were some people "who thought we could no longer do the great things which we once did . . . that Britain was no longer the nation that had built an Empire and ruled a quarter of the world. . . . Well they were wrong . . . Britain has not changed" (quoted in Barnett, 1982, p. 63).

3 A third discursive strategy is what Hobsbawm and Ranger call *the invention of tradition*: "Traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. . . . 'Invented tradition' [means] a set of practices, . . . of a ritual or symbolic nature which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviours by repetition which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historical past." For example, "Nothing appears more ancient, and linked to an immemorial past, than the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy and its public ceremonial manifestations. Yet . . . in its modern form it is the product of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, p. 1).

4 A fourth example of the narrative of national culture is that of a *foundational myth*: a story which locates the origin of the nation, the people, and their national character so early that they are lost in the mists of, not "real," but "mythic" time. Invented traditions make the confusions and disasters of history intelligible, converting disarray into "community" and disasters into triumphs. Myths of origin also help disenfranchised peoples to "conceive and express their resentment and its contents in intelligible terms" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, p. 1). They provide a narrative in terms of which an alternative history or counter-narrative, which pre-dates the ruptures of colonization, can be constructed (e.g. Rastafarianism for the dispossessed poor of Kingston, Jamaica; see Hall, 1985). New nations are then founded on these myths. (I say "myths" because, as was the case with many African nations which emerged after decolonization, what preceded colonization was not "one nation, one people," but many different tribal cultures and societies.)

5 National identity is also often symbolically grounded on the idea of a *pure, original people or "folk."* But, in the realities of national development, it is rarely this primordial folk who persist or exercise power. As Gellner wryly observes, "When [simple people] donned folk costume and trekked over the hills, composing poems in the forest clearings, they did not also dream of one day becoming powerful bureaucrats, ambassadors and ministers" (1983, p. 61).

The discourse of national culture is thus not as modern as it appears to be. It constructs identities which are ambiguously placed between past and future. It straddles the temptation to return to former glories and the drive to go forwards ever deeper into modernity. Sometimes national cultures are tempted to turn the clock back, to retreat defensively to that "lost time" when the nation was "great," and to restore past identities. This is the regressive, the anachronistic, element in the national cultural story. But often this very return to the past conceals a struggle to mobilize "the people" to purify their ranks, to expel the "others" who threaten their identity, and to gird their loins for a new march forwards. In Britain during the 1980s, the rhetoric of Thatcherism sometimes inhabited both these aspects of what Tom Nairn calls the "Janus-face" of nationalism (Nairn, 1977): looking back to past imperial glories and "Victorian values" while simultaneously undertaking a kind of modernization in preparation for a new stage of global capitalist competition. Something of the same kind may be going on now in Eastern Europe. Areas breaking away from the old Soviet Union reaffirm their essential ethnic identities and claim nationhood, buttressed by (sometimes extremely dubious) "stories" of mythic origins, religious orthodoxy, and racial purity. Yet they may be also using the nation as the form in which to compete with other ethnic "nations," and so to gain entry to the rich "club" of the West. As Immanuel Wallerstein has acutely observed, "the nationalisms of the modern world are the ambiguous expression [of a desire] for . . . assimilation into the universal . . . and simultaneously for . . . adhering to the particular, the reinvention of differences. Indeed it is a universalism through particularism and particularism through universalism" (Wallerstein, 1984, pp. 166–7).

3.2 Deconstructing the "national culture": identity and difference

Section 3.1 considered how a national culture functions as a source of cultural meanings, a focus of identification, and a system of representation. This section now turns to the question of whether national cultures and the national identities they construct are actually *unified*. In his famous essay on the topic, Ernest Renan said that three things constitute the spiritual principle of the unity of a nation: ". . . the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories, . . . the desire to live together, [and] the will to perpetuate the heritage that one has received in an undivided form" (Renan, 1990, p. 19). You should bear in mind these three resonant concepts of what constitutes a national culture as an "imagined community": *memories* from the past; the *desire* to live together; the perpetuation of the *heritage*.

Timothy Brennan reminds us that the word *nation* refers "both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous – the *natio* – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging" (Brennan, 1990, p. 45). National identities represented precisely the result of bringing these two halves of the national equation together – offering both membership of the political nation-state and identification with the national culture: "to make culture and polity congruent" and to endow "reasonably homogeneous cultures, each with its own political roof" (Gellner, 1983, p. 43). Gellner clearly establishes this impulse to *unify* in national cultures:

> . . . culture is now the necessary shared medium, the life-blood, or perhaps rather the minimal shared atmosphere, within which alone the members of the society can breathe and survive and produce. For a given society it must be one in which they can all breathe and speak and produce; so it must be the *same* culture. (Gellner, 1983, pp. 37–8)

To put it crudely, however different its members may be in terms of class, gender, or race, a national culture seeks to unify them into one cultural identity, to represent them all as belonging to the same great national family. But is national identity a unifying identity of this kind, which cancels or subsumes cultural difference?

Such an idea is open to doubt, for several reasons. A national culture has never been simply a point of allegiance, bonding and symbolic identification. It is also a structure of cultural power. Consider the following points:

1 Most modern nations consist of disparate cultures which were only unified by a lengthy process of violent conquest – that is, by the forcible suppression of cultural difference. "The British people" are the product of a series of such conquests – Celtic, Roman, Saxon, Viking, and Norman. Throughout Europe the story is repeated *ad nauseam*. Each conquest subjugated conquered peoples and their cultures, customs, languages, and traditions and tried to impose a more unified cultural hegemony. As Ernest Renan has remarked, these violent beginnings which stand at the origins of modern nations have first to be "forgotten" before allegiance to a more unified, homogeneous national identity could begin to be forged. Thus "British" culture still does not consist of an equal partnership between the component cultures of the UK, but of the effective hegemony of "English," a southern-based culture which represents itself as the essential British culture, over Scottish, Welsh, and Irish and, indeed, other regional cultures. Matthew Arnold, who tried to fix the essential character of the English people from their literature, claimed when considering the Celts that such "provincial nationalisms had to be swallowed up at the level of the political and licensed as cultural contributors to English culture" (Dodd, 1986, p. 12).

2 Secondly, nations are always composed of different social classes, and gender and ethnic groups. Modern British nationalism was the product of a very concerted effort, in the late Victorian and high imperial period, to unify the classes across social divisions by providing them with an alternative point of identification – common membership of "the family of the nation." The same point can be made about gender. National identities are strongly gendered. The meanings and values of "Englishness" have powerful masculine associations. Women play a secondary role as guardians of hearth, kith, and kin, and as "mothers" of the nation's "sons."

3 Thirdly, modern western nations were also the centers of empires or of neo-imperial spheres of influence, exercising cultural hegemony over the cultures of the colonized. Some historians now argue that it was in this process of comparison between the "virtues" of "Englishness" and the negative features of other cultures that many of the distinctive characteristics of English identities were first defined (see C. Hall, 1992).

Instead of thinking of national cultures as unified, we should think of them as constituting a *discursive device* which represents difference as unity or identity. They are cross-cut by deep internal divisions and differences, and "unified" only through the exercise of different forms of cultural power. Yet – as in the fantasies of the "whole" self of which Lacanian psychoanalysis speaks – national identities continue to be represented as *unified.*

One way of unifying them has been to represent them as the expression of the underlying culture of "one people." Ethnicity is the term we give to cultural features – language, religion, custom, traditions, feeling for "place" – which are shared by a people. It is therefore tempting to try to use ethnicity in this "foundational" way. But this belief turns out, in the modern world, to be a myth. Western Europe has no nations which are composed of only one people, one culture or ethnicity. *Modern nations are all cultural hybrids.*

It is even more difficult to try to unify national identity around race; first, because – contrary to widespread belief – race is not a biological or genetic category with any scientific validity. There are different genetic strains and "pools," but they are as widely dispersed *within* what are called "races" as they are *between* one "race" and another. Genetic difference – the last refuge of racist ideologies – cannot be used to distinguish one people from another. Race is a *discursive,* not a biological category. That is to say, it is the organizing category of those ways of speaking, systems of representation, and social practices (discourses) which utilize a loose, often unspecified set of differences in physical characteristics – skin color, hair texture, physical and bodily features, etc. – as *symbolic markers* in order to differentiate one group socially from another.

Of course the unscientific character of the term "race" does not undermine "how racial logics and racial frames of reference are articulated and deployed, and with what consequences" (Donald and Rattansi, 1992, p. 1). In recent years, biological notions of races as a distinct species (notions which underpinned extreme forms of nationalist ideology and discourse in earlier periods: Victorian eugenics, European race theories, fascism) have been replaced by *cultural* definitions of race, which allow race to play a significant role in discourses about the nation and national identity. Paul Gilroy has commented on the links between "cultural racism" and "the idea of race and the ideas of nation, nationality, and national belonging":

> We increasingly face a racism which avoids being recognized as such because it is able to line up "race" with nationhood, patriotism and nationalism. A racism which has taken a necessary distance from crude ideas of biological inferiority and superiority now seeks to present an imaginary definition of the nation as a unified *cultural* community. It constructs and defends an image of national culture – homogeneous in its whiteness yet precarious and perpetually vulnerable to attack from enemies within and without. . . . This is a racism that answers the social and political turbulence of crisis and crisis management by the recovery of national greatness in the imagination. Its dream-like construction of our sceptered isle as an ethnically purified one provides special comfort against the ravages of [national] decline.
> (Gilroy, 1992, p. 87)

But even when "race" is used in this broader discursive way, modern nations stubbornly refuse to be resolved into it. As Renan observed, "the leading nations of Europe are nations of essentially mixed blood": "France is [at once] Celtic, Iberic and Germanic. Germany is Germanic, Celtic and Slav. Italy is the country where . . . Gauls, Etruscans, Pelagians and Greeks, not to mention many other elements, intersect in an indecipherable mixture. The British Isles, considered as a whole, present a mixture of Celtic and Germanic blood, the proportions of which are singularly difficult to define" (Renan, 1990, pp. 14–15). And these are relatively simple "mixtures" as compared with those to be found in Central and Eastern Europe.

This brief examination undermines the idea of the nation as a unified cultural identity. National identities do not subsume all other forms of difference into themselves and are not free of the play of power, internal divisions and contradictions, cross-cutting allegiances and difference. So when we come to consider whether national identities are being dislocated, we must bear in mind the way national cultures help to "stitch up" differences into one identity.

4 Globalization

The previous section qualified the idea that national identities have ever been as unified or homogeneous as they are represented to be. Nevertheless, in modern history, national cultures have dominated "modernity" and national identities have tended to win out over other, more particularistic sources of cultural identification.

What, then, is so powerfully dislocating national cultural identities now, at the end of the twentieth century? The answer is a complex of processes and forces of change, which for convenience can be summed up under the term "globalization." This concept was extensively discussed by Anthony McGrew in chapter 14. As he argued, "globalization" refers to those processes, operating on a global scale, which cut across national boundaries, integrating and connecting communities and organizations in new space–time combinations, making the world in reality and in experience more interconnected. Globalization implies a movement away from the classical sociological idea of a "society" as a well-bounded system, and its replacement by a perspective which concentrates on "how social life is ordered across time and space" (Giddens, 1990, p. 64). These new temporal and spatial features, resulting in the compression of distances and time-scales, are among the most significant aspects of globalization affecting cultural identities, and they are discussed in greater detail below.

Remember that globalization is not a recent phenomenon: "Modernity is inherently globalizing" (Giddens, 1990, p. 63). As David Held argued in chapter 2, nation-states were never as autonomous or as sovereign as they claimed to be. And, as Wallerstein reminds us, capitalism "was from the beginning an affair of the world economy and not of nation states. Capital has never allowed its aspirations to be determined by national boundaries" (Wallerstein, 1979, p. 19). So *both* the trend towards national autonomy and the trend towards globalization are deeply rooted in modernity (see Wallerstein, 1991, p. 98).

You should bear in mind these two contradictory tendencies within globalization. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that, since the 1970s, both the scope and pace of global integration have greatly increased, accelerating the flows and linkages between nations. In this and the next section, I shall attempt to track the consequences of these aspects of globalization on cultural identities, examining *three* possible consequences:

1. National identities are being *eroded* as a result of the growth of cultural homogenization and "the global post-modern."
2. National and other "local" or particularistic identities are being *strengthened* by the resistance to globalization.
3. National identities are declining but *new* identities of hybridity are taking their place.

4.1 Time–space compression and identity

What impact has the latest phase of globalization had on national identities? You will remember from chapter 14 that one of its main features is "time–space compression" – the speeding up of global processes, so that the world feels smaller and distances shorter, so that events in one place impact immediately on people and places a very long distance away. David Harvey argues that:

concrete, known, familiar, bounded: the site of specific social practices which have shaped and formed us, and with which our identities are closely bound up.

> In premodern societies, space and place largely coincided, since the spatial dimensions of social life are, for most of the population . . . dominated by "presence" – by localised activity. . . . Modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between "absent" others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In conditions of modernity . . . locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the "visible form" of the locale conceals the distanced relations which determine its nature.
> (Giddens, 1990, p. 18)

Places remain fixed; they are where we have "roots." Yet space can be "crossed" in the twinkling of an eye – by jet, fax, or satellite. Harvey calls this "the annihilation of space through time" (1989, p. 205).

4.2 Towards the global post-modern?

Some theorists argue that the general effect of these globalizing processes has been to weaken or undermine national forms of cultural identity. They argue that there is evidence of a loosening of strong identifications with the national culture, and a strengthening of other cultural ties and allegiances, "above" and "below" the level of the nation-state. National identities remain strong, especially with respect to such things as legal and citizenship rights, but local, regional, and community identities have become more significant. Above the level of the national culture, "global" identifications begin to displace, and sometimes over-ride, national ones.

Some cultural theorists argue that the trend towards greater global interdependence is leading to the breakdown of *all* strong cultural identities and is producing that fragmentation of cultural codes, that multiplicity of styles, emphasis on the ephemeral, the fleeting, the impermanent, and on difference and cultural pluralism which Kenneth Thompson described in chapter 17, but on a global scale – what we might call *the global post-modern.* Cultural flows and global consumerism between nations create the possibilities of "shared identities" – as "customers" for the same goods, "clients" for the same services, "audiences" for the same messages and images – between people who are far removed from one another in time and space. As national cultures become more exposed to outside influences it is difficult to preserve cultural identities intact, or to prevent them from becoming weakened through cultural bombardment and infiltration.

People in small, apparently remote villages in poor, "Third World" countries can receive in the privacy of their homes the messages and images of the rich, consumer cultures of the West, purveyed through TV sets or the transistor radio, which bind them into the "global village" of the new communications networks. Jeans and tennis shoes – the "uniform" of the young in western youth culture – are as ubiquitous in South-East Asia as the US or Europe, not only because of the growth of the world-wide marketing of the youth consumer image, but because they are often actually produced in Taiwan or Hong Kong or South Korea for the New York, Los Angeles, London, or Rome store.

The more social life becomes mediated by the global marketing of styles, places, and images, by international travel, and by globally networked media images and communications systems, the more *identities* become detached – disembedded – from specific times, places, histories, and traditions, and appear "free-floating." We are confronted by a range of different identities, each appealing to us, or rather to different parts of ourselves, from which it seems possible to choose. It is the spread of consumerism, whether as reality or dream, which has contributed to this "cultural supermarket" effect. Within the discourse of global consumerism, differences and cultural distinctions which hitherto defined *identity* become reducible to a sort of international *lingua franca* or global currency into which all specific traditions and distinct identities can be translated. This phenomenon is known as "cultural homogenization."

> What is being created is a new electronic cultural space, a "placeless" geography of image and simulation. . . . This new global arena of culture is a world of instantaneous and depthless communication, a world in which space and time horizons have become compressed and collapsed. . . .
>
> Globalization is about the compression of time and space horizons and the creation of a world of instantaneity and depthlessness. Global space is a space of flows, an electronic space, a decentred space, a space in which frontiers and boundaries have become permeable. Within this global arena, economies and cultures are thrown into intense and immediate contact with each other – with each "Other" (an "Other" that is no longer simply "out there", but also within).
>
> I have argued that this is the force shaping our times. Many commentators, however, suggest that something quite different is happening: that the new geographies are, in fact, about the renaissance of locality and region. There has been a great surge of interest recently in local economies and local economic strategies. The case for the local or regional economy as the key unit of production has been forcefully made by the "flexible specialization" thesis. . . . This perspective stresses the central and prefigurative importance of localized production complexes. Crucial to their success, it is suggested, are strong local institutions and infrastructures: relations of trust based on face-to-face contact; a "productive community" historically rooted in a particular place; a strong sense of local pride and attachment. . . .
>
> Whilst globalization may be the prevailing force of our times, this does not mean that localism is without significance. If I have emphasized processes of de-localization, associated especially

> with the development of new information and communications networks, this should not be seen as an absolute tendency. The particularity of place and culture can never be done away with, can never be absolutely transcended. Globalization is, in fact, also associated with new dynamics of *re*-localization. It is about the achievement of a new global–local nexus, about new and intricate relations between global space and local space. Globalization is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle: it is a matter of inserting a multiplicity of localities into the overall picture of a new global system.
> (Robins, 1991, pp. 28–31, 33–6)

To some extent, what is being debated is the tension between the "global" and the "local" in the transformation of identities. National identities, as we have seen, represent attachment to particular places, events, symbols, histories. They represent what is sometimes called a *particularistic* form of attachment or belonging. There has always been a tension between these and more *universalistic* identifications – for example, to "humanity" rather than to "Englishness." This tension has persisted throughout modernity: the growth of nation-states, national economies, and national cultures continuing to provide a focus for the first; the expansion of the world market and modernity as a global system providing the focus for the second. In reading section 5, which examines how globalization in its most recent forms impacts on identities, you may find it helpful to think of such impact in terms of new ways of articulating the particularistic and the universalistic aspects of identity, or new ways of negotiating the tension between the two.

5 The Global, the Local, and the Return of Ethnicity

Are national identities being "homogenized"? Cultural homogenization is the anguished cry of those who are convinced that globalization threatens to undermine national identities and the "unity" of national cultures. However, as a view of the future of identities in a post-modern world this picture is too simplistic, exaggerated and one-sided as it stands.

We can pick up at least three major qualifications or counter-tendencies. The first arises from the observation that alongside the tendency towards global homogenization, there is also a fascination with *difference* and the marketing of ethnicity and "otherness." There is a new interest in "the local" together with the impact of "the global." Globalization (in the form of flexible specialization and "niche" marketing) actually exploits local differentiation. Thus, instead of thinking of the global *replacing* the local, it would be more accurate to think of a new articulation between "the global" and "the local." This "local" is not, of course, to be confused with older identities, firmly