

Crisis or Opportunity?

A Socio-phenomenological Study on Cultural Identity and its Possibility in Globalization¹

Introduction

Today, in the so-called “global age”, the world is becoming more and more tightly connected in many respects. Trans-regional networks have been constructed through the worldwide expansion of political, economical, industrial and military relations. As a consequence of these drastic changes, various grave problems such as regional conflicts, economic crises, and environmental destruction are appearing on a global scale. Among such problems, the issue of “cultural identity” will be the focus of my paper. When trans-border problems caused by globalization disturb the autonomy and stability of a society, members of this society experience this as a crisis of their cultural identity, and such insecurity often leads to antagonism between societies. Once this kind of antagonism reaches the point of conflict, it becomes very difficult to initiate the cooperation needed for coping with transnational problems. “Cultural identity” is therefore one of the most important issues in the age of globalization, not only for the internal maintenance of a society, but also for the coexistence and cooperation of societies.

It is often said that cultural identity has fallen into crisis in the process of modernization and is being further destroyed by the globalization. But is this really the case? Or, what is “cultural identity”? Although this term is frequently used, especially in the context of globalization, its meaning often remains vague. It is mostly discussed in connection with single nations, ethnic or religious groups, and so on. Such discussions tend to be held

¹ For the stylistic correction of the text, I am very much obliged to Prof. Michael Lizarin (Ryukoku University, Kyoto, Japan).

for political actions like protests or struggles for emancipation. In such a context, it seems to indicate generally the unity and continuity of a culture, but more precise and concrete explanations have not yet been adequately developed.

There is little research that treats the concept “cultural identity” itself as its main subject. The most influential theorist among sociologists is probably Stuart Hall.² But his argument concentrates on the cultural identity of the individual, and he starts from the modern concept of “subject” that is represented by Descartes, and describes the phases of its change as follows: firstly “Enlightenment subject”, secondly, “sociological subject”, and at last “postmodern subject”. Enlightenment subject is, according to Stuart, “a fully centered, unified individual”, has “an inner core which remains “autonomous and self-sufficient” since the birth of the subject.³ “Sociological subject” has also an inner core, but is “formed in the ‘interaction’ between self and society”.⁴ And postmodern subject has no longer an inner core, that is, has “no fixed, essential or permanent identity” and is “formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us”.⁵

However, this is only a conceptual scheme, that is, it refers to the matter of ideas rather than that of reality. In fact, there is not a person whose self is “autonomous and self-sufficient”, totally independent of or isolated from all social relations. It is rightly said by Hall that the “fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy”⁶, but it is not such a new, post-modern occurrence as Hall suggests, but rather it has never been the case, even in the age of Enlightenment. In this sense, human beings are all and always “sociological”. Therefore, the subject of cultural identity should be discussed in connection with society or collectiveness and needs a more

² Cf. Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity”, in *Modernity and its Futures*, edited by Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew. The Open University, Cambridge: Polity Press 1992, p. 273-316.

³ Hall, *ibid.*, p. 275.

⁴ Hall, *ibid.*, p. 276.

⁵ Hall, *ibid.*, p. 277.

⁶ Hall, *ibid.*, p. 277.

careful fundamental consideration which would allow us to grasp a broader range of phenomena.

In the first section, I will analyze some phenomena corresponding to cultural identity and point out their common characteristics. In this phase, I will describe them without technical terms so that the reality would be less distorted or unfairly reduced by a theory or a scheme. In the second section, the phenomenological concept of “situation”, which has been introduced by a contemporary phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz, will be applied for a proper understanding of cultural identity. From this perspective, the possible form of cultural identity appropriate for the global age is pursued in the third section.

1. Characteristics of Cultural Identity

In order to consider what cultural identity means, it is helpful to ask why this word has recently come to be used. Primarily, terms like “nationality” and “ethnicity” seem to sound either negative or old-fashioned, otherwise they have too specialized connotations. Moreover, it must be decisive that the problems of culture can be no longer limited to the level of nation, people, race or region, but have become much more expansive and complicated. In this situation, it may be natural that “cultural identity” should be more used as a neutral expression free from certain social units.

But this is not only suitable for today’s conditions, but also necessary for understanding more generally what corresponds to cultural identity in each phase of history. Cultural identity, or something equal to it, is mostly associated with particular countries, nations, races, peoples or regions. But that must be specific for the modern age. Above all, national identity could not come to existence without common interests and solidarity among people of all classes living in a country.⁷ Before the birth of nation states, or in the class society until the 18th century, cultural identity must have depended on which class one belonged to. For example, people in the upper class of many

⁷ Cf. David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations. Politics, Economics and Culture*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 1999, p. 336f.

European countries were closely connected to each other through kinship, religion or language, so that their culture was rather unified.⁸ Though it is much less known how different were the cultures of ordinary people in various countries, we can assume that they should have been similar to each other, at least compared with that of the upper class.

That must be also the case in non-European countries in the past and the present. Many politicians, scientists or business people are more accustomed to the European view of life or way of thinking than to those of their national or regional tradition. They must be more like Europeans of the same social status than farmers or villagers in their own country. That seems to be especially remarkable in the countries that have attained independence in the 20th century. The elites of such countries had been educated in the European style in the colonial age. Therefore, their cultural identity should be considerably different from that of ordinary people.

There is also an identity of each occupation, social position, generation or gender. For instance, today's students or young people in different countries share a lot of cultures and attitudes with each other and might have more in common than with business persons or elderly people in their own country. Feminism in different countries has also similar issues in spite of regional peculiarities so that the gender-based culture in many countries can be, at least in some cases, more unified than that of a nation. Furthermore, a person usually has several identities at a time, for example, as a Japanese, as a male, as a student, as a member of his family, etc.

How are regional or ethnic cultural identities to be defined? It might seem that they are to be found more generally in the course of history. But those discussed today are mostly based on the legal or political conditions that maintain or newly generate differences among regions or ethnic groups, and are associated with economical, educational and occupational discriminations. Such conditions have been often created alongside the birth and development of nation-states.

Considered in this way, it might appear almost impossible to define precisely what cultural identity is. But in my opinion, it is the essential

⁸ Cf. Held and others, *ibid.*, p. 334, 340.

point that cultural identity cannot be grasped definitely from such fixed categories as nation, region, race, occupation, generation, gender and so on, but is in itself ambiguous and multivalent. These fixed factors dependent on geological, political or social structures are certainly important moments in the constitution of cultural identity, but they are not its fundament. What it is eventually based on is *life style, interests, problems or concerns*, which are practically lived by people. Though these often depends on the division of the above-mentioned categories, the cultural identity corresponding to each of them is not invariable. As is already considered, cultural identity varies or reorganizes itself according to problems or concerns which each group or society faces, in short, it depends on actual conditions.

So far as cultural identity itself has such a nature, a more flexible and broader definition, which is independent of fixed categories hitherto used, is necessary for us to understand it properly. But if cultural identity is so variable and ambiguous, how can it be grasped? When it is based on life-styles, interests, problems or concerns, and so depends on actual conditions, we can start from the situation where such factors especially matter and call serious attention to them. Cultural identity will come to the fore and is asked about when a group or a society faces some severe problems—hardships such as poverty, discrimination, oppression, etc—or disturbed by unfamiliar foreign influences. It does not need to be known in advance what category it falls under—nation, race, religion, occupation, generation, gender, etc. It does not become recognizable until some crisis occurs, and the cultural identity comes into question accordingly in different ways.

People tend to think as follows: cultural identity should be in principle something fixed that does not become unstable or confused till it is disrupted by a powerful foreign influence. It is so natural for the members of the community that they do not bother to define or explain concretely what it is. Whichever form it may take in its manifestation, it must be *potentially* definite.—Such a view seems to derive from the perspective where cultural identity is understood in association with particular social group categories like countries, nations, races, and so on: as long as these remain steady, the identity must be intact. But as argued above, they are not actually the basis of cultural identity.

It is true that cultural identity is fairly stable and lasting, but it is also flexible enough to be open to greater or lesser transformations. For example, the general attitude of students or business people can change while it remains consistent to some extent. In my opinion, it is by nature fluid and ambiguous, which does not necessarily mean that it is “indeterminate”.

Though it seems impossible to comprehend such a vague thing, there are concepts suitable for determining it. They are developed by a German phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz, who states as follows: “The tendency to overvalue definiteness in the world has dominated philosophical and scientific thought for more than two millenniums. But ambiguity, indefiniteness and vagueness belong insolubly to most important and quite common phenomena in various ways. It seems to be the time to give proper conceptions to such phenomena, too.”⁹

2. A Socio-phenomenological Definition of Cultural Identity

The phenomenological concepts of Schmitz, which are helpful to grasp ambiguity or indefiniteness, are “situation” and “chaotic manifold (*chaotische Mannigfaltigkeit*)”. “Situation” is defined as a unity “held together in a holistic way by a meaningfulness, consisting of states of affairs, programs and problems; meaningfulness features an internally diffuse structure, i.e., it is not divided into single meaningful items”.¹⁰ And this diffusion, the impossibility of being divided into discrete items is called a “chaotic manifold”, which is precisely defined as “indecision about identity and difference”.¹¹

The concept “situation” covers a wide spectrum of experience and phenomena, such as impressions of persons or cities, the character of things or persons, views of life and the world, language (especially one’s mother

⁹ Hermann Schmitz, *Subjektivität. Beiträge zur Phänomenologie und Logik*. Bonn: Bouvier Verlag 1968, p. IX.

¹⁰ *Phenomenology World-Wide*, edited by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. Dordrecht 2003, p. 492.

¹¹ Cf. Schmitz, *Der unerschöpfliche Gegenstand. Grundzüge der Philosophie*. Bonn: Bouvier Verlag 1995, p. 65.

tongue); these are all so close and familiar to us that we do not usually ask what they are about. But they are quite vague, very difficult to explain sufficiently, and have so far something essential in common with cultural identity.

The further characteristic of situation becomes clear when it is compared with the opposite concept “constellation” (*Konstellation*), a complex consisting of discrete elements. In the comparison of situation and constellation, it is not significant to ask here—though it is often regarded as a fundamental question—whether the whole is only the sum of all parts or more than this. Because it is internally diffuse, or a chaotic manifold, it cannot be asked how many discrete elements a situation contains. What is much more important is “tolerance of contradiction”: as situation is more or less a chaotic manifold, undecided about identity and difference, it is impossible to ascertain definitely which elements are contradictory. Even if a situation has some explicated single items that are not compatible and insofar as it involves some contradictions, it can allow them to coexist. In contrast, if a constellation, consisting of single elements, has some discrepancy, it can easily be noticed, so that it may lose its unity.¹²

As the above-mentioned examples show, there are different sorts of situations, some are stable and lasting, others are momentary and changeable. Some concern a single person or thing, others concern a group. In this way situations can be classified into subgroups. Among them is “common situation (*gemeinsame Situation*)” which is particularly relevant to understanding of cultural identity is the stable lasting type. More concretely speaking, it involves the unwritten systems of norms, behavior patterns, sense of values or “spirit” of various kinds of groups like family, friends, enemies, occupational group, home, generation, nation, etc. When it is a situation in which we are so deeply rooted that we cannot be easily disengaged from it, it is called by Schmitz “implanting common situations”. In contrast to this, there is another kind called “including common situations”, which we take part in and are connected with, but only to such a degree that it is still relatively easy to remove oneself from it (e.g. employment in a company,

¹² Cf. Schmitz, *Der unerschöpfliche Gegenstand*, p. 77; see also, *Adolf Hitler in der Geschichte*. Bonn: Bouvier Verlag 1999, p. 29.

membership in a club, temporary life in a foreign country, etc.).¹³

Both types are the units with a chaotic manifold, which are internally diffuse and do not consist of single separate elements. That means that the members of a group or a society are not regarded as autonomous and independent of all social relations, but as fundamentally so dependent on and involved in each other that they cannot be separated from each other. And each person belongs to several common situations, which have a nesting structure or are partially overlapped. For example, a man is usually rooted in such various common situations as in a family, a friendship, a school, generation, a nation, and so on.

As situation is generally contrasted with constellation, the concept of common situation is characterized by comparison with the theory of social organism: according to Schmitz, “organism”, which is often used as a model for society, is not appropriate for understanding the structure of society. Organism is a kind of constellation and is therefore conceived to have a relatively fixed internal structure that is maintained by the harmonious relations of its elements. To put it the other way around, it means that the confusion or disharmony of its parts can exert a fatal influence on the whole, just as a disorder of a part of the body can plague the whole person and occasionally cause his death. So this model tends to assume that members or groups of society should live in harmony without conflict or antagonism.¹⁴

However, this does not reflect the reality. It is quite normal that a society contains conflicts, which do not necessarily bring the whole society into a crisis. Instead, conflicts to a certain degree can contribute to the development of the society and even its solidarity. In this meaning, they are indispensable to the “wholesome” society. On the contrary, a completely harmonious community as the ideal form of social organism—though it seems like a utopia—would need in fact a strict regulation and allow little room for both antagonism and freedom.

So Schmitz’s theory of situation is suitable to comprehend the social structure: thanks to its internal ambiguity and “tolerance of contradiction”,

¹³ About the concept of “situation” in general and in detail, cf. *Adolf Hitler in der Geschichte*, p. 21-31.

¹⁴ Cf. Schmitz, *ibid.*, p. 28-31.

the harmony of its parts is not necessary for the unity and stability of a common situation. Single persons and groups are loosely integrated in it, so that they always have room for their own freedom, with some potentiality for conflicts or opposition included. This is especially true of the implanting type. Even if this sort of society might sometimes seem from the outside as if people living there are bound by fixed ideas or conventions and they have very limited freedom, particularly when the society appears very conventional.

But this is not correct in many cases. Persons as well as groups belonging to an implanting situation are so deeply rooted in it that they are guided by its normative moments and can be rather spontaneous in decisions and judgments. As a result, they have initiatives to action within the society, where both resistance and creation are included.¹⁵ To be guided by the “common situation” does not, therefore, merely imply obedience. According to Schmitz, freedom would easily fall into mere arbitrariness without this common situation as a basis for life.¹⁶ If people are not internally guided by norms of the implanting situation, they must be at pains to adapt themselves to externally given rules and to others who have only little in common with themselves. That would make them feel repressed or frustrated. In this way, implanting common situations provide us with a more secure basis of life and give a society a firm sense of solidarity.

So-called cultural identity is best understood as a kind of “common situation”, mainly the implanting one.¹⁷ This concept helps to understand the essential characteristics of cultural identity that are considered in the first section, in particular, its dependence on actual conditions and conflict or coexistence of different identities in a person or a society: cultural identities are usually overlapped or embrace others. So each of them—whether it is of a person or of a group—should contain conflicting moments in themselves

¹⁵ Cf. Schmitz, *ibid.*, p. 387.

¹⁶ Cf. Schmitz, *ibid.*, p. 229f.

¹⁷ “Including common situation”, as is referred above, might also form a cultural identity, which is, however, less stable and more changeable, because people are more loosely connected to it and can more easily separate from it. Then it would give less of an identity to the members. But it is only a matter of degree.

while maintaining their unity and stability, because it is by nature, as a common situation, a chaotic manifold and tolerant of contradiction.

For example, delicate love for nature and inconsiderate destruction of nature, peaceful character and aggression, sensibility and insensibility can be often found both in a nation and in a person without causing dissociation. Given this situation, it is questionable that such inconsistency should be consistently criticized. What is more important here is to recognize that contradiction is more or less inherent to any group or society, as well as to any person. Certainly, in some cases, a certain inconsistency can cause a serious problem that must be solved and might otherwise pose a crisis for the identity of the person or the group. But in other cases, it is rather a proof of their flexibility, or it contains a potential for their change or development. Without any conflict, personal life and society, as well as the underlying cultural identity, would become so rigid as to allow only little change and to lose its vitality.

3. Possibility of Cultural Identity in an Age of Globalization

It is often claimed that cultural identity in the greater part of the world has been in crisis or has eroded through modernization, and this process is increasingly accelerated and extended through globalization, where so-called “disembedding” (A. Giddens) or “deterritorialization” (A. Appadurai, J. Tomlinson, etc) plays a decisive role. Apart from small differences of nuance among these terms, they mean the separation of social relations from regional contexts and incorporation of them into global networks.

From the perspective of Schmitz, this process means that more and more “implanting common situations” have been disturbed, being replaced by “constellation”, i.e. the social complex that is organized and often changed by discrete rules made with particular intentions. In this way, societies have been divided into single “independent” individuals in such a way that people lose their solidarity and are required to make more and more decisions on their own.¹⁸

¹⁸ Cf. Schmitz, *ibid.*, p. 55-64, 239-242, 381-385.

Although this was precisely the aim of the European Enlightenment and Rationalism in the modern era, the aim itself is doomed to failure according to Schmitz: as a result, people can no longer expect to receive reliable guidance for their lives from the common situation, and many people have even lost their power of initiative. The less one is rooted in an “implanting common situation”, the more difficult it is to adjust oneself to the newly constituted milieu, and the more uneasy and unstable their life becomes. The formation of society on the basis of the self-determination of independent individuals is, even if it might sound very ideal, an excessive demand for the majority of human beings.¹⁹ Enlightenment thinkers overlooked such significance of “implanting common situations”. And it may probably be said that in this process cultural identity was made into nationalistic ideology, which has replaced the common situation so as to unite a society as a nation-state. People must be interconnected there in new forms, more widely and closely by means of politics, technologies and industrial or business activities. But we should here reconsider the significance and characteristics of “implanting common situations” and try to find ways to recover them and develop the corresponding cultural identities in the way suitable for today.

How is this possible? If the globalization process is irreversible, so seems also to be the erosion of “implanting common situations”. It might then sound anachronistic to speak of their recovery. It might be true that a part of certain common situations have vanished never to be restored, as is often remarked with regard to traditions. However, this tragedy is only one side of the whole phenomenon: on the other hand, a good deal of what we call “tradition” is a modern “invention”, as Hobsbawm points out.²⁰ The retrospective invention of tradition is a reaction against modernization. Something similar might be claimed with regard to the relation of cultural identity as common situation to globalization, but this is not something to “invent”, but is rather to be transformed—or perhaps revitalized—and developed further.²¹ Besides, when “implanting common situations” can be

¹⁹ Cf. Schmitz, *ibid.*, p. 380, 384f.

²⁰ Cf. Eric Hobsbawm, The first chapter of *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983.

²¹ Schmitz also refers to the attempt to recover implanting situations in the modern age:

unsuccessfully replaced by constellations, that means they are indispensable for human life and remains in some form or another.

So it is rightly said that the process of globalization is accompanied by a kind of “regionalization” (D. Held), “reterritorialization” (G. Canclini, J. Tomlinson) or “glocalization” (R. Robertson). Thus globalization will not result in the homogenization of cultures, but will bring about various transformations and hybridizations in the ways specific to each society, which causes the cultural differentiation.²²

Such “counteractions” may contribute to the recovery or revitalization of “implanting common situations”. But the question is how that is realizable in a way appropriate for the global age. One of the distinctive characteristics of today’s globalization is the wide-ranging interconnection that brings about, in comparison with that of modernization, much greater extensity, intensity and rapidity of influences. As mentioned above, it is essential for “implanting common situations” to be close and familiar to us. The possibility of their recovery or revitalization must be found in the issues or tasks that concern our daily life, namely in the personal or local arena. And in a society where people live without solidarity because of the erosion of the common situation, as is quite noticeably the case in large cities, coping with such problems together with others can itself contribute to the formation of an “implanting common situation”.

In fact, in today’s world, people who would enter into cooperation with one another need neither live in the same neighborhood nor meet in person frequently, but can live in distant places. For it is very likely today

that is named “impression technique (*Eindruckstechnik*)”, which intends to bring about a stable lasting situation by producing impressive scenes or events. In modernization, this has been applied in order to unify a nation state by means of propaganda and advertisements in politics and industries. The invention of tradition must have played an important role there. But according to Schmitz, it is the defect of impression technique that it makes only suggestive effects and is apt to sway to and fro without a proper balance. “Implanting common situation”, so cultural identity as well, would not grow from such an unstable basis. Cf. Schmitz, *ibid.*, p. 243-245, 395.

²² Cf. Held and others, *Global Transformation*, p. 15f.; John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1999, p. 36f., 148, 154f. See also, Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World. How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives*. New York: Routledge 1999, p. 12.

that even people living in regions far removed from one another share similar problems; in other words, problems have become trans-regional and sometimes even global. Or though people might have a lot of similar problems in many regions of the world since old times, it must have been previously very difficult to get to be known by each other, much less to cooperate together. By contrast, especially thanks to transportation and communication technology, it is now not difficult any more for such people to stay in contact with one another.

Generally speaking, only those who share something fundamental in their lives can maintain the cooperation needed to develop an “implanting common situation”.²³ Today this shared something is not necessarily based on nationality or regionality; it may be based rather on concerns and problems—such as those associated with the environment, discrimination, education, labor, religion, illness and health, mental or physical handicap, etc. The activities of NGOs and NPOs are among the best examples of such cooperation. Probably at first, such co-operations would produce only “including common situations”, so they could not serve as a secure, stable basis of life. But so far as we might expect that they would develop to “implanting common situations” in the long run, these forms of trans-regional cultural identity would be one of the most appropriate for the globalized world, because they would, in contrast to ideological nationalism, enable us to tackle specific problems together and to manage the balance between cultural diversity and cultural interaction. Whether it will succeed or not depends on how closely and deeply the cooperation—the shared problems and concerns—is related to one’s life as a whole. It will not be easy for us to develop such cultural identities. There are certainly many risks involved, but this endeavor also promises to offer us many new opportunities.

²³ Cooperation based on sharing something fundamental in one’s life can contribute to “the unity of rights and duties”, too, which Schmitz finds indispensable for the regeneration of implanting situation. Cf. Schmitz, *ibid.*, p. 386. For the unity of rights and duties, Schmitz makes many concrete suggestions as to social services, education of children and responsibility in the generation chain, and in relation to the last one, he refers to Confucianism. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 386-390.

