INTRODUCTION: DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVES OF IDENTITY POLITICS

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Identity is a concept that concentrates cultural researchers' thinking and discussions around a search for an explanation to human behaviour and ideas behind it. Identity appears to us as a contradictory idea that can be perceived in diachronic and synchronic perspectives simultaneously as fixed and vague, a core of one's self-understanding and an endless play of meanings, existential and stereotypical. Identity is related to a certain substantial sense of constancy but is seen in the course of an analytical effort as a fluid complex of discourses.

In a general methodological perspective, approaches to identity have changed considerably. Over a long period of time, different peoples' identity was seen as simple and collective. *The Other* appeared to European intellectuals as transparent (savages were treated as incapable of concealing their personality from observers) and unified (without differences between people – observing one individual was enough to enable conclusions concerning a whole group).

In general, earlier studies have concentrated on describing and interpreting determinants, some core values or key symbols of different groups' culture and identity (see, for example, Kroeber 1963 [1923]; Benedict 1947 [1934]; Mauss 2000 [1938]; Mead 1963). These early, essentially over-theorised efforts were the first steps in discussing the cultural individuality of *the Other*. Initial theoretical discussions about identity were made through strong statements, elaborating the topic by using clear and wide-ranging models. As an example of this methodological style, we can take a passage from A. Irving Hallowell:

> Personality is never completely reducible to individuality. A common culture implies, therefore, a common psychological reality, a common way of perceiving and understanding the world, and being motivated to act in it with relation to commonly sensed goals, values, and satisfactions. It is in this sense that culture is intrinsic to the human personality as well as a variable but ubiquitous feature of all the societies of mankind. (Hallowell 1971 [1955]: 36)

These strong and little-nuanced studies established the field where the identity of *the Other* was presented very broadly. The importance of these efforts was to introduce a question about a certain role of individual personality traits in identity, thus starting an inquiry into the hegemony of the collective understanding of *the Other* that previously prevailed.

Contemporary approaches to identity treat the concept as flexible and continually changing due to unstable political, social and ideological environments and the inner development of local communities (Turner 2006; Bazin & Selim 2006; Bennett 2007). Recent theories interpret identity as discourse (Bhabha 2000; Chun 2005; Doja 2006; Gannon 2006), plastic, variable, complex, reflexive (Cohen 1995; Ortner 2005; Luhrmann 2006), multi-local, contemporary (Marcus 1998; Portis-Winner 2002), close to the native point of view (Geertz 2001 [1973]; Marcus & Fischer 1999) and subjective (Derrida 2000).

In many cases people may choose the group to which they belong. Simultaneously, however, the political leadership of a state directs the shaping of particular conceptions of the self-image. Developing an alternative identity to such state-provided unanimity by smaller ethnic communities is considered to be a general process by Arjun Appadurai:

> Throughout the world, faced with the activities of states that are concerned with encompassing their ethnic diversities into fixed and closed sets of cultural categories to which individuals are often assigned forcibly, many groups are consciously mobilizing themselves according to identitarian criteria. (Appadurai 1997: 15)

Appadurai also points out that there is a lack of clarity on how the descriptions of the identities created for local ethnic communities in the official ideological discourse are supposed to be connected to specific people or groups (Appadurai 1997: 14). Contemporary research emphasises the need to consider the multiplicity of nationality and regionality, and to intertwine its approaches to culture with political, economic and social problems (Balzer & Petro & Robertson 2001: 219).

In the contemporary world, a number of new political, social and cultural developments have appeared that concern nearly all peoples. As Clifford Geertz puts it, it is still hard to determine these changes:

> A much more pluralistic pattern of relationships among the world's peoples seems to be emerging, but its form remains vague and irregular, scrappy, ominously indeterminate. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fumblings of the Russia which has succeeded it [---] have brought in their wake a stream of obscure divisions and strange instabilities. (Geertz 2001: 219)

Multicultural developments in the conditions of increasing globalisation processes result, in some cases, not in the intensification of cultural homogeneity of the population, but in the actualisation or even rebirth of local identities, in a longing to be culturally distanced from the dominant population. The processes of ethnic differentiation exist both in Russia and in a number of other countries in Europe. The developments of linguistic separatism and multiculturalisation "have produced a sense of dispersion, of particularity, of complexity, and of uncenteredness" (Geertz 2001: 220). We concur with the claim that a comparative study of the processes of ethnic fragmentation and re-identification will allow the revelation of certain general phenomena in the ethno-cultural evolution of local communities, as well as an understanding of the reasons for the actualisation of local identities and revelation of the general mechanisms of ethno-cultural mobilisation at the level of distinct groups. It is also important to compare the re-identification processes that have emerged among the previously or historically defined 'ethnographic groups', which form a part of larger established (national) communities.

Identity is something changing and constructed, even inclining to be fixed (emerging as a result of a process of substantiating reflection), both in collective and individual perspectives. The politics of the identification effort may be collective and institutional but it may also appear on the level of ad-hoc individual self-organisational conceptualisation.

This collection of articles[1] is concentrated around the "Dynamic Perspectives of Identity Politics: Analysis of Dialogue and Conflict" (2008–2013) target-financed project of the Department of Ethnology, University of Tartu. The purpose of the project is the research on different ethnic-cultural levels of identity by applying theoretical and methodological approaches drawn predominantly from ethnology and social anthropology. The goal is to study how and through which means an individual or a social group constructs, arguments and defends its own self-conception. In cultural studies, the politics of identity are of considerable importance, i.e., the social determination of their construction, the adjustment or contrast with established norms, accompanied by the possibility for a new construction (cf. Hall 1996; Rosaldo 1997; Rosaldo & Flores 1997).

The project proceeds from the premise that individuals and groups are characterised by a diversity of identities. In the social dimension, the appearance of borderline situations that accompany contemporary socio-political and cultural changes, as well as previous self-conceptions, may recede, or, conversely, strengthen in the fields of influence of both internal and external factors. Thus the wider purpose of this project is to analyse the mechanisms and catalysing factors of persistence or transformation of existing identities in the conditions of pressure from dominating cultural-political forces (e.g. the impact of increas-

ing cultural heritage tourism of both a local and international nature in search of undiscovered "exotic" others – cf. Picard & Robinson 2006; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

According to our hypothesis, the current rise of local or ethnic identities, or the strengthening of ethnic ties inside the groups studied is considered to be natural by some of its members. Thus we interpret the concept of ethnicity in the framework of discourse (cf. Brubaker 1997; Calhoun 1997), and therefore we planned to analyse the discursive practices in flux between the markers of 'ethnic' and 'local' identities. In addition, performative aspects of identities and embodied practices in which different groups enact and (re)produce their identities, are taken into consideration. Performances both in traditional and more popular contemporary events continually reconstitute identities by rehearsing and transmitting meanings, by making conflicts or negotiations explicit in encounters between locals and *Others* (Edensor 2002: 69–102).

Considering the explosive changes in the socio-economic systems during the past couple of decades, previous identities have fallen under multi-faceted and contradictory pressures particularly in marginal localities and regions. Therefore it is of significant importance to analyse in greater detail the embodiment and shaping of identities in (both literally and metaphorically) borderline situations.

The scientific objectives of the target-financed project are related to the estimation of the role of ethnic institutions and their activists: an analysis of the programmes and ideologies of ethnic organisations, the efficiency of political representation at local and regional levels. The research team also aimed to study the dynamics of interaction with state and regional administrations, and to analyse the emergent relations inside the group as well as the different ideologies that influence the processes of actualisation or de-actualisation of local ethnic identities. In addition, the group intended to investigate how local communities recognise their potential in the context of dynamic changes, how they further their own interests, and how groups or individuals construct their self-image in changing circumstances. Our general objectives are approached through research that delves deeper into particular problems – e.g. studying the role of religion, ideology, politics, remembering, everyday life, social networks, and commodification in the multicultural context.

The research team of anthropologists and ethnologists that gathered together to carry out the target-financed project is part of the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT, 2008–2015). The CECT unites scholars from Tallinn University and the University of Tartu, representing various disciplines. The aim of the CECT is to develop a transdisciplinary methodology and theory in studying the concepts of identity and memory. The Centre of Excellence was

created with the purpose of achieving a qualitatively new level in Estonian cultural studies in researching the mechanisms of cultural dynamics operating among the diverse groups of multicultural societies and between different levels of society (CECT: online).

This collection of articles is a result of the attempt to move towards a collaborative interdisciplinary approach. Anthropologists and ethnologists together with colleagues from other CECT teams representing the disciplines of human geography, sociology, and folklore studies explore the challenges by co-authored research and propose interpretation models regarding the cultural development and identification processes of different ethnic groups, national minorities and regional groups, both at collective and individual levels.

Kirsti Jõesalu and Raili Nugin examine different artistic projects that aim to interpret late Soviet experience by Estonian artists and writers who were born during the 1970s. The authors analyse a specific way of understanding the Soviet reality characteristic of the generation of intellectuals who have personal memories of the period of their childhood or youth. As it appears, although this group shares a relatively limited experience of the Soviet period, it plays an important and quite nuanced role in their personal and shared age-group identity.

There is much in common in the ways in which different groups position themselves, and in the contemporary processes of their ethnic mobilisation. At the same time, particular groups are quite different in some other features. Kristin Kuutma, Elo-Hanna Seljamaa and Ergo-Hart Västrik study the Seto people, whose historical native territory situates them in the border areas of Russia and Estonia, with their contested aspirations for ethnic difference in state politics. A comparative analysis also covers the Votian people, who constitute a tiny indigenous minority in north-western Russia, and problems of the so-called Russian-speaking minority in Estonia. Although these groups are very different in size, their political status and public socio-cultural intentions vary greatly, and they all constitute minorities in their habitat. This article demonstrates the socio-political complexities that exist simultaneously in the same region, and explores dialogues between these communities and public institutions that dominate political and ideological discourse.

The Võro group in South Estonia has become more poignantly aware of their historical and local signifiers, which are applied by them in defining their position, particularly in the socio-cultural politics of various levels. Their (re) emergent identities in a larger national context provide a particularly complex testing ground for identity research in celebrated (as well as contested) phenomena of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. The Võro have recently started negotiations to promote mutual ethnopolitical cooperation based on their local identities. In this volume, Ester Võsu and Helen Sooväli-Sepping investigate

the application of the elements of Võro culture in local tourism industry. Maarja Kaaristo and Risto Järv explore the concept of the local feeling of time in regard to tourism in Võru County and Hiiumaa Island, another Estonian region with a distinctive identity. This study reveals that at a grass-roots level, local peculiarities may be found in different local traditions and the specific emotional atmosphere in tradition-biased countryside.

Eva Toulouze and Liivo Niglas examine in their reflexive study the way of construction of one's cultural and religious identity in a dialogue between researchers and their key-informants. Toulouze and Niglas analyse in a really empathic way the situations that have revealed to them different aspects or fractions of the personal identity of Yuri Vella, a Forest Nenets reindeer herder, writer and indigenous activist living in the western Siberian forest tundra. The authors of this study demonstrate how details of fieldwork encounters shape our understanding and interpretation of somebody's personality. Although Toulouze and Niglas have extensive field experience in Yuri Vella's forest camp and communicate with Yuri on a regular basis, they must largely rely on their intuition and contextual knowledge in attempting to grasp conceptually Yuri's world-understanding.

The article by Toomas Gross about Protestant growth in rural Mexico, as well as the study by Art Leete and Piret Koosa dedicated to the development of Protestant missions in Komi Republic, Russia, both deal with tensions between the traditional religious identity (that in Mexico is based on Catholicism, and in Komi on Russian Orthodoxy) and spread of Protestant charismatic concept of the human being. In both cases, hegemonic religious models that have dominated in local societies for centuries, have been challenged by Pentecostal and charismatic Protestant infusions to previously mono-religious social landscapes. Conversion to Protestantism has severe personal and social consequences in these regions and active public and private debates have raised questions concerning the issues of being a proper person and following a proper faith in given social circumstances. Protestant growth has been experienced in these regions as a dramatic social development or culture shock and the ways in which public discourse and local people conceptualise ongoing changes are explored in these two articles.

This collection of papers is inspired by the idea of examining the concept of identity at various levels of dialogue between collective and individual agents, in different regional and social environments. At the same time, a collective collaborative and interdisciplinary approach and methodological examination has been initiated. In a way, it is an initial step in specific scholarly cooperation in the framework of the CECT. Although particular topics and conceptual frames of these articles differ a lot, in a certain way a step towards somehow shared theoretical ground has been made.

NOTE

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