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When identity becomes an alibi

Huntington seen from Catalonia

I. The first issue of the journal IDEES (January-March 1999) contained an article whose title I found particularly well chosen: “The archipelago of identity”. On the cover of that first issue was a black and white photograph by Toni Vidal: a square, rudimentary country house, lodged on a desolate hill of rugged stone, with scarce signs of vegetation.

It is the image of the human being struggling against the harshness of nature, remaking the world, constructing it to fulfil his needs, fashioning it according to certain specific beliefs and values. That country house is, in the primitive sense of the word, culture. With a group of such buildings and a few common rules for those who inhabit them, the result would be, also in the primitive sense of the word, a civilization. The Latin *civitas*, the Greek *polis*, the city as it is understood in the Western World —as something more than an agglomeration of dwelling places— shapes the beginning of all our collective identities.

From our shared Western perspective, identity is both a delimitation and an opening: we feel we participate in certain specific collective traits, but this *delimitation* is not equivalent to a self imposed *limitation*, on the contrary, it necessarily implies a slow opening to other realities (if not, we would still be cave dwellers gazing at the sparks of a fire). Catalonia, for example, is simply a collection of cultural sediments which have led to a specific identity. The Catalan language, our main identity trait, is simply a dialect of a language which appeared in the middle of the Italic peninsula, Latin. The most visible geographical feature of the city of Barcelona, the mountain of Montjuïc, owes its name to the burial site of the medieval Hebrew community. La Suda de Tortosa, one of the most

emblematic monuments of the southern lands of the principality, is an impressive Arab fortress. This list could be continued up to present day. Nevertheless, these substrata are not incompatible with a specific identity which is not the result of a simple addition of its parts, a shapeless, chaotic conglomerate, but of a very long process which has produced a definite and shared identity. In general, this is how identity is understood in Europe: our own historical reality moves us prudently away from ingenuous essentialisms, although we must remember that these wreaked havoc in the thirties and that they unfortunately revive periodically.

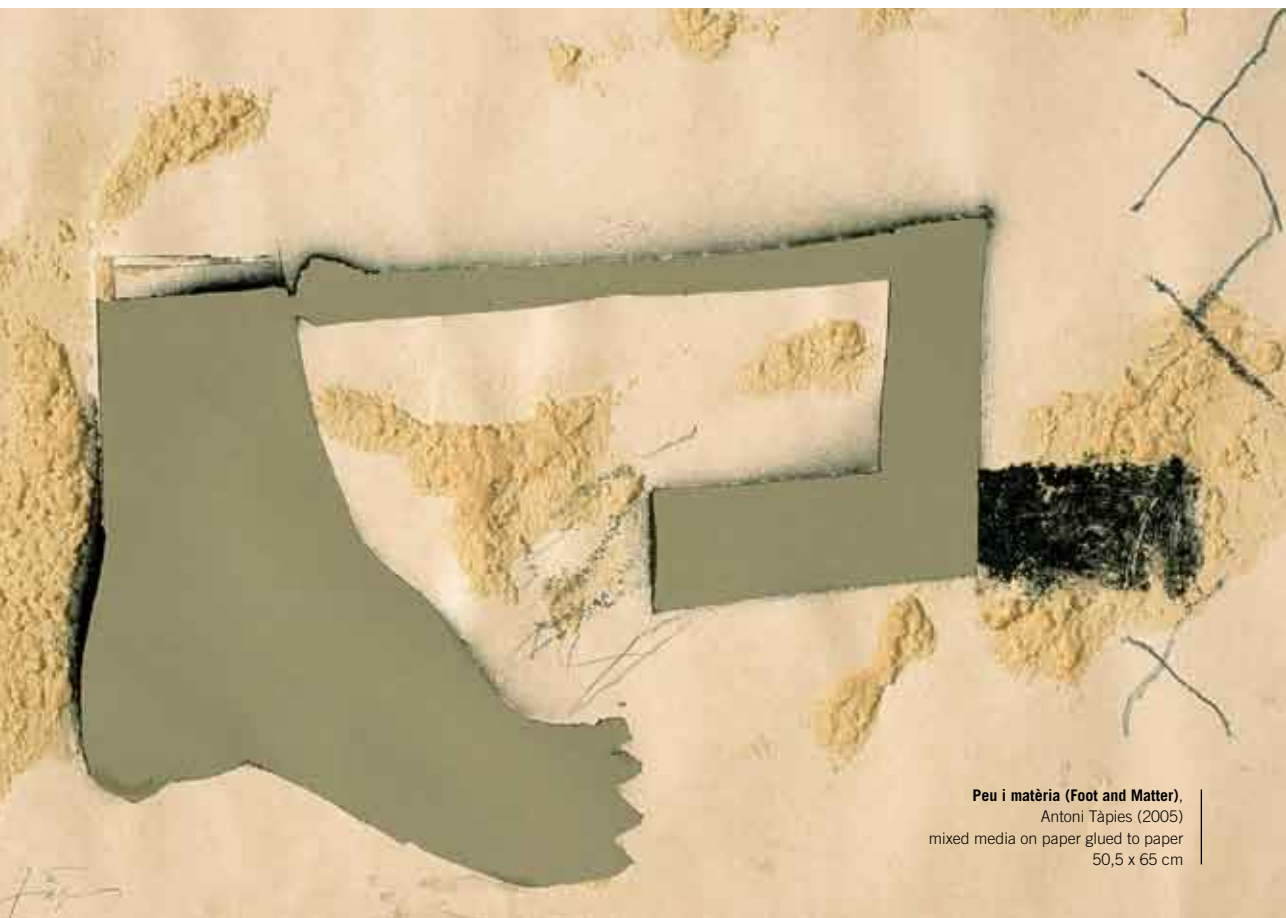
From other more recent cultural or national realities, however, identity can be lived in quite a different way, and often a more problematic one. The United States is a very recent national and cultural entity. Of course, it can be argued that Germany and Italy are even more recent as States, but this objection does not correspond to reality: Petrarch or Dante, Luther or Bach, lived long before the respective unifications of Italy and Germany, but it is obvious that Italians and Germans consider them inseparable from their culture and, in short, from their collective identity. None of this can be applied to the United States. Furthermore, the group of small kingdoms and principalities which gave place to these two national realities sink their territorial roots into remote, prehistoric ages. This cannot be said of the United States either. Thirdly and finally, the aim, the *telos*, which gave place to the majority of European cultures, is totally diffuse, vague and random: there is no point in looking for —shall we say— “a common foundational motive” which embraces the whole community. The United States, however, has a clear and defined founding motive, related mainly to the religious persecutions that took place in England in the 17th century (it is worth mentioning that the sympathy and solidarity shown towards the state of Israel comes more from this conscience than from the disproportionate weight of the American Jewish lobby). The first colonies of the Eastern coast shared this common *telos*, chronologically very specific and marked and which is still present in the collective memory.

The three differences we have just pointed out form, inevitably, two opposed ways of understanding national and cultural identity. The United States and Europe have undoubtedly many things in common but, as far as national and cultural identity is concerned, they seem condemned to a mutual lack of understanding. A striking example is that in the United States it is totally acceptable for Catholic cathedrals, Protestant churches, synagogues, Masonic lodges etc. to display the American flag. In Europe, this combination of identity symbols generates disconcert or even intense distrust. This, of course, is only an anecdote, but a very meaningful one.

II. We believe this long introduction indispensable for an accurate contextualization of the latest work by the controversial American essayist Samuel P. Huntington. *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, is a book that from the collective way of thinking of the United States —not necessarily conservative, or affiliated to the increasingly radical ideas of the Republican Party— might seem almost harmless. Apart from certain heated references to the issue of Mexican immigration and also certain radical evaluations of the alleged social disintegration that took place in the sixties, the book adheres perfectly to the main standardised ideas of the average North American (but

evidently, not to all of them). However, in Europe, Huntington's latest book might cause astonishment and, on occasions, indignation. Returning to the example with which we closed the first section of the article, the ease with which religious feeling is juxtaposed to the national American identity takes the average European reader back to times he considered superseded. This could explain why the contents of the interviews granted by the author of the article "The Clash of Civilizations?" to the American media are perceptively different from those published in Europe. For example, the interview that appeared in the newspaper *El País* in June 2004 had very little to do —especially in its tone— with the real contents of his latest book.

According to Huntington, the United States is not the result of the juxtaposition of a collection of heterogeneous cultural sediments —the famous melting pot— but have just one identity root: the Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture introduced by the first settlers during the 17th century. This culture is more than just the English language, the different Lutheran based confessions, the way law is understood, etc. In fact, according to Huntington, the American identity is a set of shared beliefs stemming from the confluence of the axes just mentioned above. It is about the American *creed*, the one that defends both individualism and equal rights; the one that backs the initiatives of civil society rather than basing the country on a state that runs the citizens' lives; the one that believes in work; the one that places religion —whichever it may be— in a very important place in people's lives and in their communities. In this sense the



Peu i matèria (Foot and Matter),
Antoni Tàpies (2005)
mixed media on paper glued to paper
50,5 x 65 cm

United States is not only a country but a certain way of understanding the world. This is Americanism. Huntington states that this is a specific phenomenon: there is no other ideology which could seriously be named Frenchism, Italianism, etc. Huntington is mistaken on this point: A thing called “Catalonialism” exists, having many points in common with Americanism, but also with many insurmountable differences. This relationship will be examined more deeply further on. But before that, a question must be asked to be able to follow Huntington’s reasoning: why does he deny the —apparently obvious— existence of the American melting pot? The answer is simple: Huntington draws a specific dividing line between the first settlers (who founded the nation) and the immigrants (who *only* helped it to become what it is now: the most powerful country in the world). The Catholic Irish, the Chinese, the Jews from Central Europe, the Italians, the Mexicans, etc., did not arrive, according to Huntington, to a mere territory, but to an already existing nation, with a refined and recognizable cultural identity. This nation had specific political and administrative structures, with laws coming from the Anglo-Protestant tradition, with a language and its own set of images (the one reflected in John Ford’s westerns, for instance). In general these immigrants integrated —albeit at different speeds and in different historical contexts— in the founders’ culture. They added their little contribution to American culture, they *complemented* it, but they did not *create* it. This distinction between the first settlers and the immigrants is therefore decisive to be able to understand the rest. In a way, it is Huntington’s main argument —perhaps the only one— against the possible translations of multiculturalism.

III. In the labyrinth of national and cultural identities two different crises have occurred; as they were almost simultaneous there is a possibility of confusion. The first is a global crisis which was almost inevitable. The formidable advances in communication and information technology —from television in the sixties to the Internet in the nineties— have caused, according to Huntington, a redefinition, or even a fading out of the so-called “traditional” identities. This happens everywhere, even in remote corners of the world. There is, however, a second, more specific crisis, which has affected some places more than others. We are talking about, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, the “Great Disruption” of the sixties. Huntington claims that up until the sixties the American national and cultural identity was more or less that of the first settlers who founded the country. It was guided by patriotism together with strong religious feelings and an inflexible work ethic. Most Americans considered themselves firstly Americans and, secondly, in a subsidiary way, claimed their family origin, their gender, their aesthetic tastes and other such things. Everything changed meaning in the sixties. The Afro-American movements fighting for civil rights, for instance, fulfilled a most important task, but also consolidated an identity which, according to Huntington, up to that moment had only had a reactive and vicarious existence. The same can be said about the feminist movements, the gay liberation movements, etc. Which defining features did that forgotten identity contain?

I would say that from a Catalonian perspective and also a European one in general, Huntington’s views could disconcert. “Religion has been and still is a central, perhaps *the* central, element of American identity. America was founded in large part for religious reasons, and religious movements have shaped its evolution for almost four centuries. By

every indicator, Americans are far more religious than the people of other industrialized countries. Overwhelming majorities of white Americans, of black Americans, and of Hispanic Americans are Christian. In a world in which culture and particularly religion shape the allegiances, the alliances, and the antagonisms of people on every continent, Americans could again find their national identity and their national purposes in their culture and religion”¹.

It seems obvious that in this fragment a great hyperbole and an omission converge. The former refers to the notion of “Christianism”, which Huntington uses in a biased and, above all, accommodating way: when it suits his purpose he makes a clear-cut distinction between Catholics and Protestants, but when not convenient he leaves it to one side as now. As far as the Americans of Jewish origin are concerned, they are fully “Western” when convenient —despite the fact that they do not belong, at least by name, to a Christian culture— and when not convenient, they are not. With respect to the omission mentioned above, Huntington’s bias is even more serious: the enormous racial tension perceptible in the United States is not mentioned anywhere. Huntington considers it overcome since the sixties (!?), which is quite untrue. For this reason there is a basis to be reasonably suspicious that the notion of identity proposed is a mere alibi to legitimize the *wasp* hegemony from a new perspective which does not refer to racial categories, but takes them for granted.

Seen from Catalonia, and with a Catalonian perspective, this discourse proves disquieting. With the exception of certain 19th century writers, a person’s religion is a private matter which does not make that person any more or less Catalonian. Neither does a person’s race condition the fact that he is or is not Catalonian. The principal sign of identity is the Catalonian language, to be more exact: the *public* use of the language, the positive attitude towards a language which, for political and historic reasons, is at a disadvantage with respect to Spanish. All this has led to a civic project shared by the immense majority of Catalonians, irrespective of their origins. In this sense Catalonianism and Americanism (in Huntington’s version at least) are ways of understanding identity with little or no connection at all ■

■ ¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Who are we? The challenges to America’s National Identity*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2004, p 20.