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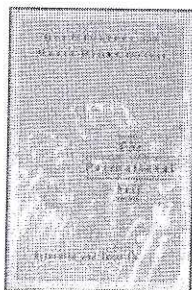
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The Postnational Self

Belonging and Identity

by Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort (editors)

University of Minnesota Press, 2002

Review by Ludger Jansen, Dr. phil on Aug 28th 2003

Volume: 7, Number: 35

The Postnational Self is a collection that comes with a message: The age of the nation is over, whereas the postnational age is beginning to dawn. A nation, or so the editors set out in their introduction, is something where one feels at home, "a structured set of emotions and attitudes, shaped by an imagined oneness of political and prepolitical, contemporary and historical, rational and cosmological orientations" (xiv-xv). Our home, in turn, is "where we belong", with "belonging" separating in the two dimensions of "being" and "longing" (vii). In our days of globalization and "globality" (xv), of multiculturalism and internationalism, this conception is being challenged: emigrants are irritated by the otherness of their host-country, natives may be irritated by the otherness of immigrants.

As a result, "the organicism and essentialism of national identities are no longer just taken for granted" (xv). As John A. Halls puts it in his contribution to the volume: "Belonging needs to be reimagined because the world has changed." (53) People react with quite different strategies to this new situation: with revisions of the concept of a nation in civic, liberal or cosmological terms, but also with feelings of uprootedness or identity loss. Some react with the "construction of multiple homes and hybrid series of belonging", but others with "reaffirmations of old-style nationalism in nostalgic, secessionist, or 'new racist' forms" (xvi). As Seyla Benhabib puts it in her contribution, "global integration is proceeding alongside sociocultural disintegration and the resurgence of ethnic, nationalist, religious, and linguistic separatisms" (85). The situation is paradoxical in many respects. Not only is there a "resurgence of national identities in a global world" (3), but also a tendency that modern particularists increasingly employ universalistic arguments (invoking human rights etc.) to put forward their claims (140).

The chapters of the book explore these changes and the different reactions to them. The 15 authors and two editors come from a variety of academic fields, from international studies and sociology to social anthropology and comparative literature. They are all renown experts on the topics they write on, basing their

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religion will no longer serve to bind together warring ethnic groups" (96). While I would join in in this dream, I doubt whether a total separation of religion and identity is even conceivable. It is not according to Maalouf's first account of identity (a) and identity (b): being religious in a certain way is, of course, a property of a person, thus constituting an allegiance to other religious persons. And if the religion in question considers itself as the one and only means to salvation, it is highly probable that this religion is also part of the subjective identity (c) of its members. What Maalouf's dream comes down to, then, is the wish that religion may not form part of a monopolized identity (d), that religion is accompanied by tolerance and a sense for pluralism. But this cannot explain why Maalouf postulates "religion must be kept apart from what has to do with identity" (96). It is true, religious allegiances often play a role in ethnic conflicts. But it is a common idea of all world religions that salvation is not restricted to a certain tribe or people. Thus, contrary to what Maalouf says, religion can even contribute to more balanced accounts of identity.

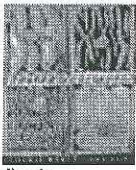
Nearly as important as religious identity is lingual identity, to which Maalouf turns in the forth and last part of his book (117-157). Lingual identity differs from religious identity in two important respects. First: "while it would not be difficult to prove that a man can live without a religion, clearly he cannot live without a language" (131). And second: "whereas religion tends by nature to be exclusive, language does not" (132). Hence, language provides a paradigm case for how we can at the same time ascertain us of our own identity (no minor task in the age of globalisation) and as well build bridges to other people with different identities. Emigrants and other persons with a 'mixed' identity "are frontier-dwellers by birth, or through the changes and chances of life, or by deliberate choice" (36). They face many problems, especially if their environment subscribes to the ideology of an monopolized identity (3). But Maalouf thinks that there is an important role to play by all those who have a rich identity: "Their role is to act as bridges, go-betweens, mediators between the various communities and cultures." (5)

Maalouf's ideal is humanistic in outlook. A person should feel related with more and more people till, in the end, the human race is the most important allegiance. This is an ideal Maalouf shares with many thinkers, starting with the Stoics and other ancient philosophers. Again, Maalouf cannot mean here the objective identities (a) or (b), nor can he wish new monopolized identities (d) as humans – which would devoid us of our cultural richness. But he can mean that within a person's subjective identity (c) no allegiance should be ranked higher than his being human. And this is indeed a humanism worth advocating.

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certain allegiance excludes the allegiance to other groups. If a group is being discriminated, its members react by stressing this strain of their identity: They will put the membership to the discriminated group first in their hierarchy of allegiances, denying other allegiances, finally arriving at a monopolized identity, an identity which is no longer rich and balanced, but dominated by a single allegiance (12-13, 26). Such are the "murderous or mortal identities", the "identities that kill" (30), the state of mind leading to crimes of identity (9): it is "how murderers are made -- it's a recipe for massacres" (5).

While Maalouf manages to get across his picture, his account would benefit from some conceptual clarifications. In his discussion of identity, Maalouf starts off with the items mentioned on an identity card (2). Considered this way, a person's identity (a) is the set of all her (important) properties. In another sense, an identity (b) consists of all the allegiances or "belongings" of a person (3). This latter concept of identity is neither wider nor more narrow than the first, because virtually any property constitutes the allegiance to the group of persons sharing this property. (a) and (b) are, one may say, different perspectives of the same thing. Different from these, however, is the subjective identity (c), i.e. those properties or allegiances a person not only possesses, but also perceives as constitutive for herself (24). Items in this list may be ranked or weighted. Finally, there is what I called the monopolized identity (d). It is not clear, how exactly such an identity looks like: to construe it as a subjective identity consisting of just one item might be too strong a concept. But it essentially involves a dominating item that excludes others from the subjective identity, even ones that should normally be regarded as being compatible with the dominating item.

It is mainly in the first part of his book that Maalouf sets out to sketch his picture of the relations between identities, allegiances, and violence (7-43). The second part scrutinises the relationship between Islam and modernity (45-83). It has, at least, a twofold aim. It tries to explain how it came about that today Islam is often seen as the "Other" of modernity, both by Muslims and by westerners. And it argues that this is far from being a necessary or essential trait of Islam, that much of 'Islamism' has more in common with third-world-theories or certain political ideologies than with the Muslim religion of former times (64-65). The third part of the book spends special attention to the role of religious identity (85-115). Maalouf coins the term "global tribes" to characterize today's religions. 'Global', because (even before the age of globalisation) they easily cross borders; 'tribes', because of "their stress on identity" (93): they are still paradigms of what could be dubbed 'tribal identities', where the allegiance to one tribe or religion excludes the allegiance to any other tribe or religion. Thus, religions today serve two needs, the need for spirituality as well as the need for identity (95-96). It is the latter, Maalouf argues, which is potentially dangerous, and therefore Maalouf would like religions to contribute to spirituality without constructing tribal identities; he dreams of "a world in which



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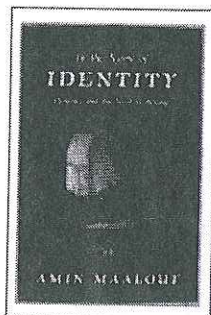
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In the Name of Identity

Violence and the Need to Belong

by Amin Maalouf

Arcade Publishing, 2001

Review by Ludger Jansen, Ph.D. on Nov 18th
2002

Volume: 6, Number: 47

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Why is it that “so many people commit crimes nowadays in the name of religious, ethnic, national or some other identity” (9) – this is the question at the root of Maalouf’s book. Maalouf is not a professional scholar, but a novelist. His text is bare of any technicalities, but rich of examples and case studies, many of them with the authorisation of personal experience. Maalouf’s whole essay is an intriguing plead for more balanced attitudes to patchwork identities. The award-winning translation from the French by Barbara Bray guarantees that it is a good read in English, too.

A person’s identity is the whole set of elements, which on the one hand link her to all other persons sharing these elements and on the other hand, taken together, single her out of all other persons (19-20). The author himself is a good illustration of this ‘paradox’ of identity. Maalouf is of Lebanese origin, but emigrated to France, where he now lives as a successful novelist (1-2). He is an Arab, and he derives from a Christian family. Any of these two properties links him to huge portions of mankind when taken singly. Taken together, they make him the member of an utter minority (17). In addition, he now lives in a country that is not his country of origin, and writes his novels in a language that is not his mother tongue. A pattern typical to an emigrant, but not to emigrants alone. For, as Maalouf argues, in a sense today we are all bound to have such patchwork identities (37, 124). Due both to cultural and to economical globalisation, we are acquainted with more cultures than ever before and have to cope with this confrontation. Maalouf, for his case, feels both as an Arab and a Christian, as a French as well as a Lebanese (1-2). Such is also his ideal of our identities: They should accommodate for all our different allegiances and all the diverse cultural backgrounds we are connected to: Identities should be rich and colourful. But this ideal is threatened by two interrelated causes. The first is the fact that identities can be hurt, by oppression or discrimination. The second is the ideology of exclusive identities, the claim that a

second entelechy of actually fulfilling it, even if the latter is more basic (*kyrioteron*, EE VII 10, 1242a 17).

In EE I 8 Aristotle presents a two-tiered argument for the homonymy of the good, attacking the conception of a single idea of the good. The first tier consists in two arguments that suggest distinguishing different meanings of "good" paralleling the different categories of being (1217b 25-34 and 34-35), while the second tier distinguishes different "goods" within the same category (*ta homoioschemonos legomena agatha*, 1217b 35-36) which are supposed to differ from each other because there is no single science studying them (1217b 35-1218a 1). Only the first argument of the first tier deserves the name "Kategorienargument". But even both tiers together are not strong enough to prove, as Buddensiek suggests, that "for any being there is a good being such that the latter incorporates the property of being the goal or characteristic (essential) of the first" (p. 93). Buddensiek does not discuss, how and when and where this "good being" is supposed to exist. Presumably the one idea of the good is not to be replaced by many small ideas-of-the-good-F?

The claim (E3) that happiness is most pleasant is given attention in the EE only in its last chapter, in EE VIII 3, 1249a 17-21, in connection with Aristotle's discussion of the *kalokagathia*. As discussion in the EE starts with the deviant view of the inscription in the propylaeum of Delos ("most pleasant is to achieve one's heart's desire", EE I 1, 1214a 6 in Wood's translation), it is surprising that Aristotle is not more explicit at this point. Buddensiek identifies *kalokagathia* with *eudaimonia*. They consist in having actualizations of an appropriate structure, and their structure is appropriate if they are organized such as to have theoretical life (the actualization of the human *nous*) as its ultimate goal. But as an intentional activity thinking needs an object, and the appropriate object in order to make the theoretical life not only good but also beautiful is the unmoved mover, the *theos*.

With regard to a book such as Buddensiek's it would be surprising if a reader agreed in every detail. One such detail in which I disagree is Buddensiek's translation of "epaineton" ("praiseworthy"). He does not really give a reason why he does not use the common German word "lobenswert" but "lobbar", which is not a current word of contemporary German. Similarly, Buddensiek translates "teleion" with the neologism "zielhaft" ("having the character of an achieved goal") instead of e.g. "vollendet" ("perfect"). Here, however, he gives an elaborate justification for his choice (p. 91 with reference to *Metaph.* V 16), which is quite plausible in its philosophical substance: There is indeed a very close relation between being good, being a goal and being the result of an appropriate process. But why should this philosophical insight be pressed into the translation of "teleion"? Because otherwise, Buddensiek argues, Aristotle uses "teleion" in the important *ergon*-argument in EE II 1, 1219a 28 without any introduction. Were there a close connection with "telos", the use of "teleion" would have been prepared by the previous use of *telos* in EE I 8, 1218b 10 and II 1, 1219a 8-11. It should be obvious that this observation does not necessitate Buddensiek's translation, which is at the same time too suggestive and too unclear. In any case, Buddensiek explicitly does not claim that "teleion" can be translated with "zielhaft" in all its occurrences. So why not stick to the usual translation and say the rest by way of commentary?

A final detail: Buddensiek does not exactly write in an exciting style. He often hides his information in sub-clauses and tends to correct his own formulations. Thus the book is at times a hard read. But it gives a fresh look at an often neglected text.

Buddensiek makes Aristotle's arguments speak again, discussing them while taking account of the different interpretations given by the commentators and their weaknesses. When evaluating previous interpretations, Buddensiek has a good eye for hand-waving and holes in the argument. When presenting his own suggestions, he always presents his account within the context of Aristotle's general philosophical framework, thus motivating and explaining the position Aristotle assumes in the EE. Especially for the passages that are discussed extensively (which have been mentioned above) it will be worth reading the book side by side with the few commentaries (for example those by Franz Dirlmeier or Michael Woods).

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