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BOOK



Politics of identity

Mihaela Gligor

Identity Politics in India and Europe

By Michael Dusche

SAGE, 2010

PP 375, ISBN: 978-81-321-0304-2.

THE interdisciplinary and rapidly growing body of literature on recognition and identity politics deals with the question of how different cultures can manage to live together and how it is possible to reconcile a multitude of different identity-based claims for difference with a common sense of community and identity.

Many books on these themes have appeared during the last decade and most of them consider identity politics "in the name of the emancipation of disadvantaged groups with respect to gender, race, class, ethnicity or religion", as Michael Dusche's book also does.

'Identity Politics in India and Europe' examines the present perceptions of East and West as seen through the eyes of eminent scholars from India. It is a very important book on this subject, especially because it analyses both worlds, East and West, and it tries to offer not only a comparison between what identity politics means for each, but also extends the analysis to different areas, from culture to language, as ways for a better understanding of identity and differences.

Michael Dusche has the necessary background to do this comparison, holding a PhD in Philosophy and International Relations from the University of Frankfurt and currently being a fellow at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Study, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Beyond this, Michael Dusche is the author of many articles on this topic, which were presented at international conferences or included in edited books published in India and Europe.

The first section of this book reviews the history of perceptions between the Europe of Latin Christianity and the so-called Muslim world starting from the seventh century when both were just about to emerge from opposite fringes of the decaying Roman Empire. "The portrayal of the Muslim 'other,' both in India and in Europe, draws on age-old stereotypes, whose genealogy can be traced back to the early encounters between the emerging world of Latin Christendom in Europe and the expanding world of Islam". The book begins from here.

The focus is on the origins of perceptions of Muslims as the threatening "other". Mentioning Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, Michael Dusche puts the right question: "In the light of what empirical evidence can we afford to speak of Europe and the Muslim world even after Said?" (P. 9), and he also gives the right answer: "Both civilizations share common reference points and origins in late antiquity and both categories allow for further differentiation... Both civilizations are marked by the fact that a single language of education, Arabic and Latin, and a common universe of reference, of religious symbols and narratives, expand over vast tracts of different local cultures and their respective vernaculars" (P. 9).

Orient and Occident, East and West, or even the dichotomisation into "us" and "them" are pairs of terms analyzed according to their specific meaning. The first encounters between Christians and Muslims, the processes of acceptance of identities and the differences between "populus Romanus" and "the barbarian people", as well as those between Catholicism and Islam are carefully presented in the first section of the book.

The chapter about "Islam in Western Europe: Al-Andalus" analyses the disputes among Christians, Jews and Muslims, those that ended in the Crusades, that broke all the rules and the bounds between the permitted and the forbidden. "The crusaders violated all acceptable standards of propriety in ways unthinkable to the locals, no matter whether they were Muslims, Christians or Jews" (P. 39).

However, increasingly, a new civilization took over from within the world spanning European colonial empires: that of modernity. The second part of the book is devoted to a



characterization of that civilization from a theoretical point of view and to an analysis of its interference with older frames of reference. "Modern actors gain legitimacy and orientation from behavioural patterns and norms provided by the cultural reference frame, which also determines what is to be taken as the real character of the world, which things exist and which do not, what is to be reckoned with in terms of natural laws, social conditions, and so on" (P. 51).

While analysing "Culture and Politics in Modern Politics", the author starts from John W. Meyer's sociology and Amartya Sen's opinion about "West and Anti-West" and considers that "the debates surrounding 'Western Science' versus 'Eastern Spirituality', 'Western Values' versus 'Asian Values', 'Western conceptions of human rights' versus 'African' or 'Islamic human rights' all point to the same phenomenon: an excessive fixation with the West and, consequently, a propensity to define one's post-colonial identity reactively as 'anti-West' (P. 52).

We can't make a sharp distinction between what is purely Western and what is purely Eastern. "Nobody would deny the usefulness of the trigonometric concept of 'sine' and 'cosine' and the decimal numeral system including the number zero in mathematics even though they are of Indian origin" and as well we can't deny the Western concepts of "individual liberty, democracy and progress" and the fact that we, as humans have need of all of them.

As for identity, the concept is used not only regarding politics or religious beliefs, but also regarding language or culture. "Considering that language gives us the most sophisticated tools to express who we are and considering that language, too, has to rely on commonly accepted patterns of communicative interaction, the symbolic representation of our identity is in need of common acceptance among the users of the language" (P. 84). As social phenomenon, language is the medium through which individuals express their thoughts and act in different circumstances, and it has a very important role.

The identity of a group of people can be expressed through their language. With regard to culture, its sphere "is defined by reference to symbols, metaphors or symbolic actions with characteristic meanings" (P. 90). So, "identity" can be seen as a sum of linguistic, cultural, religious or/and political identities, all confined into the same person or group of persons. "Identity" is that which makes the difference between "us" and "them".

This complex relationship between religion and political status of a society is the subject of the third part of the book. The author investigates challenges to the established normative order in India and Europe. The methodology combines qualitative methods in the form of 20 interviews conducted with academics in India, with historical and philosophical analyses. These are set in the historical context of relations between Europe and the Muslim World and analysed from a theoretical angle drawing from theories of modernity, conceptions of justice and notions of identity politics.

Michael Dusché's interlocutors are Professors of Philosophy, Sociology or Political Sciences, from New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai or abroad. The discussions move from women rights to political independence; from intolerance and multiculturalism to leftist politics in Bengal or Westernisation of the Bollywood; pointing on the differences between Hindu and Muslim ways of living; taking religion as the starting point or as the ultimate conclusion; with many accents on the individualities of Indian culture among all the other and the role of its traditions into this globalised world.

The freedom of speech and academic freedom are the most important conditions used by Michael Dusché in composing this book. Reason and the reach of reason are important for intellectual elites of a country as India and reading these interviews one can see that quite clearly. Announced at the very beginning, Michael Dusché's thesis that "Perceptions of self, identity, social order and peace on the one hand and fears of instability, loss of self, disorder and violent conflict on the other hand seem to depend on each other in a dialectic way", was thoroughly demonstrated.

Very well structured, in three distinct but inter-correlated and curvilinear parts, the book should be of great interest to the world of social science scholars, especially those with specific interest in the history of ideas, modernity, transnational history, politics and cultural relations.

Excerpted from an extensive review published in the International Journal on Humanistic Ideology, Vol. 2, No. 2, Autumn-Winter 2009, Cluj University Press, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, PP 171-178.

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