

# Identifying your place in the world

Akshat Gautam

ID: 201601212

## Topic under observation

Social and political theorists argue that the onset of modernity in Europe in the 15th century liberated individuals from the constraints of their 'given' identities and allowed them to construct their own identities themselves.

By using insights from the articles by **Zygmunt Bauman** and **Stuart Hall** (As discussed in the lectures) the project of identity has become complicated and tension ridden today in the period of late/liquid modernity and the age of globalisation.

## Authors background

I have referred to the readings of 2 authors for this response paper, below given is a short note on the history and background of these 2 authors.

### Zygmunt Bauman

The first author whose readings I have referred to is Zygmunt Bauman, he was a Polish sociologist and philosopher. He was driven out of Poland by a political purge in 1968 engineered by the Communist government of the Polish People's Republic and forced to give up his Polish citizenship to move to Israel.

Three years later he moved to the United Kingdom. He resided in England from 1971 and became Professor of Sociology at the University of Leeds, later Emeritus. Zygmunt Bauman was one of the world's most eminent social theorists, writing on issues as diverse as **modernity** and the Holocaust, postmodern consumerism and **liquid modernity**.

In the later stages of the 20th Century, Bauman published various books that explored topics like rationality, modernity and social exclusions and the relationships between them. He saw that European modernity had drawbacks and one had to trade off certain aspects of individual freedom to obtain security. He believed that modernity would remove the uncertainty and other chaos from human life to remove insecurities and make the person more familiar.<sup>1</sup>

### Stuart Hall

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zygmunt\\_Bauman#Modernity\\_and\\_rationality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zygmunt_Bauman#Modernity_and_rationality)

The other author which I've referred to is Stuart Hall, he was born in Kingston, Jamaica, into a middle-class Jamaican family of African, British, Portuguese Jewish and likely Indian descent.<sup>[6]<sup>2</sup></sup> He attended Jamaica College, receiving an education modelled after the British school system. He was a British Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist and political activist. Stuart Hall, along with Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, was one of the founding figures of the school of thought that is now known as British Cultural Studies or The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies<sup>3</sup>.

He regards language-use as operating within a framework of power, institutions and politics/economics. This view presents people as *producers* and *consumers* of culture at the same time. For Stuart Hall, culture was not something to simply appreciate or study, but a "critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled".<sup>4</sup>

### **Summary of the Readings**

Before we delve into the comparisons between the 2 readings, we must understand the different perspectives that both of the authors have provided in their readings.

Thus I would first give a summary/broad outline of the provided readings portraying the perspectives of both the authors and then discuss how the concept of Identity has been approached by each of them

### **Identity in a Globalizing world**

Identity has fascinated many sociologists, philosophers over the years, it is said that identity has become a "medium" through which we interact with our day to day things and the effects they have on us.

The aim of the author is to find the root of the rise in the interest of identity studies via experiential and structural aspects of modernity

The author says that we understand a philosophical condition just as it passes away, it can only be understood this way since it works in introspection. Bauman also discusses that

"Zuhandenheit over Vorhandenheit", it means we prefer to perform tasks in order to achieve a particular goal than merely look at an object and theorize it's usefulness at its face value.

We cannot change if we merely operate in our comfort zone, it's the unpredictability and chaos that causes anxiety and surprises us. Such scenarios trigger a resolve/ambition of sorts in the person. He has also said that the advancements made in the human society are due to the sense of faith in three things, in oneself, in others and in the jointly built institutions where we can confide our actions. The main perspective that the author has put is defining identity as a "task" that each and every man/woman must perform to their fullest. He states that we must first "melt the solids", meaning that we will have to clear the foundation and renew it with something else, a more trustworthy faithful system. It is also said that everyone is endowed with reason

---

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart\\_Hall\\_\(cultural\\_theorist\)#cite\\_note-Observer-6](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Hall_(cultural_theorist)#cite_note-Observer-6)

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart\\_Hall\\_\(cultural\\_theorist\)#Publications\\_\(incomplete\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Hall_(cultural_theorist)#Publications_(incomplete))

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart\\_Hall\\_\(cultural\\_theorist\)#cite\\_note-27](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Hall_(cultural_theorist)#cite_note-27)

with which we can make choices that may define us. Our identity doesn't solely depend upon our choices but also our social interactions and the society in which we live plays a big role in shaping our identity. This brings us to the segregation of classes in a society which determines the respect/privileges you obtain, these aren't "tasks" as we had previously stated. Instead this is something solid, somethings that an individual is born into. It is assigned to an individual the moment he is born and cannot be taken away from him or altered in any way. These classes expect mannerisms/behaviour from the individual as these classes are predefined and work in a regulated manner. This is the type of "Liquid modernity" that takes place now, the identity is both a function of the individual and the class the person is born with entailing certain privileges with it. This also brings along certain problems with it which causes an individual to search for alternate identity in case the identity he was born with becomes obsolete or doesn't have the same effect in society as it did before. Hence the individual always worries about his identity becomes invalid suddenly. In such a volatile world, we cannot have a fix identity and must keep changing with times so that we can fit into various identities but none of them so rigid that you cannot leave them in case of any problems. We cannot control the society we live in, that is a global phenomenon, what we do control is our local actions which changes the mould of our identity. An individual performs various pastimes to keep him/her occupied, one such pastime is dismantling and rearranging its identity. An individual in the society searches for a group/community to belong to so that it doesn't have to change so frequently in this ever changing world. There is a paradox here as the individual doesn't want to be bound by anything but at the same time it searches for a community that it can be a part of, the moment it becomes a part of the community it becomes bounded by its working and set of rules that come along with it. Thus we can conclude that finding an identity is a never ending phenomenon, it will always remain incomplete but it doesn't mean that globalization has restricted it instead it flows smoothly along with it ever changing and evolving.

### The Question of Cultural Identity

Individualism currently is differently defined from what it was before, the rankings/class/caste were rigid and belonged to a chain of being which couldn't be fundamentally altered. This part of the identity of a person overshadowed the individuality of a person. In the modern history an individual is considered unique and sovereign and distinct from others. Modern identities are being considered fragmented due to the conception of modernity, but it is said that instead of being fragmented, it is dislocated through time due to various reasons/ under various circumstances. These can be broadly classified into 5 centerings.

*The first de-centering* is based around Marxist Thinking, it says that we can make history but not on our own. It is based on the history/background we are provided that we can make amends. Marx displayed to key points of Modern Philosophy, (a) that there is a universal essence of man; (b) that this essence is the attribute of "each single individual" who is its real subject':

*The Second de-Centering* comes from Freud and the discovery of the "Unconscious", it states that whatever we are, various aspects of life, all are governed by our "Unconscious" which doesn't work with a normal rationale. It states that this doesn't only come from within but from our daily social interactions which have an unconscious effect on our psychic and causes are to

mime/adjust with the the other person. It also talks about the 'mirror phase' where we develop ourselves by mimicking the actions of the person in front of us. The contradiction of ideas that unconsciously happen in our minds causes us to develop an identity. Thus we can say that identity is not formed at birth but rather grows/develops over time. These contradictions cause us to search for an identity that can bring these fragmented parts of our identity together and make us complete. Many of the modern thinkers criticize Freud's views regarding identity but at the same time they take it for granted unconsciously.

*The third de-centering* is based on the structure and the works of our linguistics and is discussed by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, it tries to say that language is a pre-existing system that existed before us. Hence we cannot expect our language or the sentences we speak to have the same effect on different individuals as it would mean something for us but they could interpret it in a different manners as these words would innately signify certain different meanings for them as words do not have a one to one correspondence with meanings and are in no way absolute. Thus we cannot always convey our thoughts exactly as they are supposed to be interpreted due to this.

*The fourth de-centering* focuses on the work on Michel Foucault who states a disciplinary power that works on two things, the human population as a whole and then the individual. It aims to bring various aspects of an individual under control and discipline. Such a power creates a paradoxical scenario that the more organized the institutions in late modernity are, the more isolated the individual would be.

*The fifth de-centering* occurred during the times of late modernity along with many youth movements, civil struggles. It mainly focuses on the impact of feminism as a social movement in the society. This movement appealed to the identity of an individual regardless of the race, gender and so on which caused the birth of *identity politics*.

## **Comparison**

On closely inspecting the 2 readings, we can see that both of the readings were approaching similar conclusions about the identity of an individual and how much of it would be innate and how it is also governed by external factors. We could also see that during liquid modernity, identity of a person is seen as a task which a person must perform to the best of his abilities to develop an identity whereas in the pre-modernity times, identity was taken to be granted/innate which is fundamental and cannot be changed. On the onset of globalization the concept of identity became fragmented and didn't entail certain privileges as it used to instead it could be whatever the individual wanted it to be. Hence we can conclude that the readings were reading a similar conclusion regarding topic of Identity from the time of Enlightenment to Modernity to liquid modernity and Globalization.

## **Conclusion**

After analyzing the 2 readings given to us, we can conclude that pre-modern times people were satisfied with the identities that they were born into (Class), or what was told to them as a part of

their identity. ON the onset of modernity, with the arrival of Philosophers/Thinkers like Zygmunt bauman, Stuart Hall, Karl Marx, Freud changed the fundamentals of Identity and caused unnerving changes and chaos in the minds of the people in a positive way such that they could change their identity and adapt to these fast shifting times without having to worry about whether they fit into a society or not. Because at the end of the day, an individual requires validation from the society about his/her identity and since the liquid modernity states that you do not belong to a specific class/group, the individual has control and freedom on whatever he wants/chooses to be.