

# **CULTURE,IDENTITY AND POLITICS**

## **RESPONSE PAPER-1**

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**PAPERS RESEARCHED:**

**1)IDENTITY IN GLOBALISING WORLD: ZYGMUNT BAUMAN**

**2)THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY : STUART HALL**

### **Introduction**

**This paper deals with the question of identity which was brought up in earlier times and still continues to be interpreted and moulded in different ways. Identity has been a subject of great interest for theorists, sociologists and psychologists for many centuries. This paper deals with how the ever-changing definition of identity has passed through different phases starting from the period of renaissance to the modern times. It also shows the decentring of the meanings of identity through different ideas that were brought up by different thinkers and philosophers, and by social movements. It also shows the tension these changes in the meaning of identity brought in the life of people.**

### **About The Authors**

**Zygmunt Bauman , a polish sociologist and philosopher, was an imminent social theorist and has written extensively on modernity and globalisation. He has compared between the various phases of modernity and the emerging of new ideas of identity through each one of these phases.<sup>1</sup>**

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

Stuart Hall was a Jamaican born cultural theorist and political activist. He was one of the founding fathers of the Birmingham school of cultural studies. He was also involved in the Black Arts Movement. He was considered as one of the leading cultural theorist in the world.<sup>2</sup>

### Identity

“‘Identity’ has now become a prism through which other topical aspects of contemporary life are spotted, grasped and examined.”<sup>3</sup> Different people have different views on this subject, but identity in itself is a very important and controversial topic in the globalising world. For example: the task of white supremacy, and statements like “Make America great again”, are doing rounds again in the field of politics. In countries like India, where there are huge differences in cultures, the fight over the meaning of identity still continues to persist on showing who is more “Indian” than other and the idea of Indianness is brought up by different politicians in the political arena. In the context of gender identity, feminism brought about a great change in the notion of having a single identity for both men and women, and brought up the question of sexual difference. In other social contexts too, theorists tend to differ and fight about the identity problem. But this problem isn't something that is new to this generation. Different political and social theorists have brought their ideas, have been criticised, and also changed the ideas of people through their insights.

### Summary Of The Readings

Zygmunt Bauman, while discussing the identity definition in the globalising world, starts with the identity in the earlier times when everything was related to the divine one. Each and every person's identity was thought of as something that was pre-defined and was given to you at birth. But modernity, as quoted by Zygmunt himself, “specialized in making *zuhanden* things into *vorhanden*.”, that is, modernity

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart\\_Hall\\_\(cultural\\_theorist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Hall_(cultural_theorist))

<sup>3</sup> Identity in the globalising world- Zygmunt Bauman

set the things which were present at hand to make them into only ready at hand. Marx and Engels praised the capitalists, the bourgeois revolutionaries, for 'melting the solids and profaning the sacreds' which had for long centuries cramped human creative powers. This way, the earlier predefined identity was now turned into a task which any human could perform to the best of his abilities. The philosophers of the renaissance were pleased with this new idea of identity. But, one order needed to be dismantled so that it could be replaced with another, purpose-built and up to the standards of reason and logic. The idea of disembeddedness from a system gave rise to the idea of re-embeddedness into different classes. But here, there was room for more and more people as these "beds" could be changed according to one's abilities and will.

This was the time of liquid modernity where nothing was fixed. Your identity needed to be built on your own, and you had to maintain and renew this identity time and again. And since there is no such fixed identity, or not even a fixed path to them, every individual is basically on a road all the time. But the 20th century excelled in making many roads or means. So it wasn't the road but the destination which caused anxiety among men and women. The task was now to be vigilant and change path when and wherever necessary, in case the previous destination lost its glory.

As time went on, and globalisation continued, trade flourished and people travelled to different places. When different cultures started meeting, people yet again started getting concerned of their own identity. This led to clashes between different cultures and also gave rise to the idea of identity politics. Since people were concerned about their own culture being damaged, it made it easier for different political institutions to form their objectives of politics on identity and cultures that would help them gather more votes. Thus globalisation, though thought of something that would bring people together, in a way coerced people to form different communities that would save their own culture from getting disrupted.

Currently, any individual is not restricted by any divine or cultural rules but by the ideas and beliefs of his own making. If he feels that he can become something and form his

identity, only his fear of not attaining the destination can stop him. This fear sometimes leads to people focussing on less important things and making these things seem like they are more important.

Stuart Hall elucidates the change in the meaning of identity through five decentrings or dislocations. The first decentring came through the re-readers of Marxist theory. Marx ruled out absolute human essence. His theory puts social relations at the centre and not an abstract notion of man. This theoretical revolution though contested and criticised, has brought a great change in the modern thought. The second decentring was Freud's discovery of unconscious. This discovery of unconscious led to the thought that the image of oneself is something that a child gradually learns. It does not grow naturally from inside. Thus, identity is something that is formed through unconscious processes over time, rather than being innate in consciousness at the time of birth. It's always incomplete and forms as time goes on. The third major decentring was associated with the work of structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. His work shows that language pre-exists and we are not in true sense its authors. We can thus express ourselves only within the rules language. Also, since the meanings of words change with respect to context, we cannot truly define what our identity is. The fourth decentring was the coming up of a new type of power, the disciplinary power. Its basic objective was to produce 'a human being who can be treated as a "docile body"'. The last decentring came through a number of political movements. Each of these movements appealed to the social identity of its supporters. This was the birth of what came to be known as identity politics.

### What can be inferred ?

What can be clearly seen from both the readings is that revolutions brought about changes in the meaning of identity. The first major one was the theories of Karl Marx who did not like the idea of cultural identity. He wanted a classless society, and a solidarity of the working class. Similarly, the renaissance, industrial revolution and the enlightenment period played a great role in the change of meanings.

Another important point is that individuals have always been constrained. In the pre-modern times, there was the divine law, which constrained humans not to do things that were not accepted by gods. Even after profaning the sacred and after gaining knowledge individuals are constrained by different things, for example language, in the modern times .

The concept of autonomous individual is flawed as individual is a product of society as a whole. He is a product of what he has, what he wants other to look at him as. We find pleasure in the approval of others.

The idea of categories has become unstable and fragmented throughout the course of modernisation. And the identity project involves being fragmented but keep searching for wholeness. People with same likes or dislikes, fears, interests come together and form what can be called 'peg communities'. It helps to provide a momentary respite from loneliness.

### Comparisons

Both the papers stress upon the fact that identity is something that keeps on changing. Individuals, though having their own meaning of identity, unconsciously make this identity on the basis of society and the culture to which they belong. This cultural identity can be spread through different mediums, like TV, newspapers, movies, etc. Disciplinary power or institutions are also important in the formation of such identities .These institutions tend to restrict your freedom in some way. No matter how free or liberal an individual is, he or she is constrained in one way or another.

These readings also show that as people are modernised, and as a result become more and more knowledgeable, the veil of darkness is lifted. A rational , enlightened human is what comes out and he is capable of making his own identity. This, though

seems like something that would bring order, actually brings chaos as people don't know what has to be done with this freedom.

The idea of identity politics has also been brought up in both the readings. One shows it through globalisation, the other through different political movements.

Different revolutions thus change the meaning of identity and these meanings pass through different paradigms as they become unstable again and again.

### Conclusion

The onset of modernity in Europe in 15th century liberated individuals from their so called "given" identities and allowed them to construct their own identities. It started with the profaning of the sacreds, and continued till there was no fixed definition of one's identity. But since there is no fixed destination now, people are anxious and worried about the path they take and whether the destination they desire will continue to have its glory or not once they reach there. Instead of having a final and fixed destination, what people prefer now is to have an option, which they can switch to in case the first option becomes unavailable. So people have started to opt for stable paths rather than a fixed destination. What we can basically conclude is that as people get modernised, and there is an increase in knowledge, the concept of identity is moulded and shaped differently.

