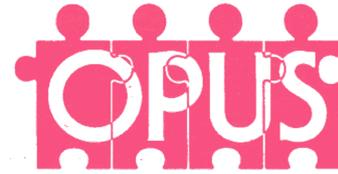


AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING
UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Report of an OPUS Workshop
held on Saturday 8th May 2004



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

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held on Saturday 8th May 2004
at
College Hall, University of London,
Malet Street, London WC1E 7HZ

CONVENORS and REPORTERS

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The aim of this one day workshop, attended by 19 people from a diverse variety of backgrounds, was to explore identity in British society today and how it affects our roles as citizens. Identity was explored from two perspectives: firstly, looking at the individual in the society, how key factors impact on individual identity and affect how we relate to each other in Britain today. Secondly, identity was explored from the perspective of its social meaning, how society manifests itself in the individual. Is there a British identity, a British mentality? Is there a cultural expression of ways of thinking that affect how we behave? What is it and how does it manifest itself?

Within a globalised, ever-changing world, identity in British society today is complex and problematic. Exploring identity is an important issue particularly now when economic and political events have brought another generation of asylum seekers to our shores, and when we are debating within society what Britishness is (for example, the recent debates about multiculturalism). The question of what it means to be British and how far this is located in the core of the individual but also in the core of the individual's communal culture was open for exploration. There was a sense of being in the middle of a great migratory process in British history.

The Individual in Society - Themes

Identity is impacted on by a range of variables such as age, class, culture, gender, language, nationality, profession, race, religion and sexual orientation. A number of participants had emigrated from their countries of birth because of war or economic factors or had lived in other countries. It was fairly usual to be a rich mixture of differences of ethnic origin, religion, country of birth, country of nationality and to hold all those as aspects of the self, highlighting the complexity of negotiating one's identity in society. For example:-

- 'I was born in Siberia of Polish Jewish background. At 6 months of age I was repatriated back to Poland but became a 2nd generation Holocaust survivor. I emigrated at 24 from Poland when anti-Semitism erupted in the 1960s. I married, settled and now have grandchildren. I have done well in the UK but if I am asked who I am I say "I am a Polish Jew born in Russia who has settled in London. My son carries this complicated identity as a third generation survivor" '.

- Another participant was English, born and brought up in the North Riding, who sees himself as a Yorkshireman, feels that he is English, although he has a non-English surname, but now lives in Luton, where he manages the tension between embracing the local multicultural society whilst being labelled a 'white bastard'.
- A paradox: 'Black people have high visibility but are treated as though they are not there'. This creates an emotional incongruity derived from a fear of attack.

There was ambivalence about immigration, on the one hand welcoming the diversity and possibility of assimilation; on the other, feeling intruded upon with demands that the British should adapt to the newcomers. The unspoken message to the newcomer (as experienced during the day) was you can come if you've got a job, this will enable you to belong. But some people came without wanting a job or wanting to belong, expressing a fear of losing their individual identity in the group.

Here are some of the comments people had about identity:

- Identity is fluid sometimes you feel strong about it, sometimes wobbly.
- Identity is about self and other I need the other to identify myself.
- There is a discrepancy between our own sense of who we are and other people's view of our identity.
- Identity is a process or even a cluster of processes not something fixed, which is/are a function of system context(s). Before I can understand my identity at any one moment, I need to consider the context in which I find myself...
- Identity is a mystery. This is positive and negative and means that to have some sense of the depth of my identity I need symbols to hold the otherwise inaccessible aspects of it. Some symbols take me inwards linking me with memories: much loved pictures, toys or books from my childhood...Some symbols take me outwards: the Union Jack, the Houses of Parliament, the Queen...

The issue of emigration, immigration and of being in transit was enacted during the day in a group remaining in the largest room where all had gathered for the introduction to the day. The experience of being in this room initially was akin to constantly being on the move, never settled or stable, a bit like Heathrow Airport. Heathrow is where people change a transit point between Britain and the USA. It felt incoherent, fragmented, fractious, uncomfortable and unboundaried. People came and went and there was no way of excluding anything or taking charge of the boundaries. In the other groups that formed, life was orderly and, although in one group there was tension and a sense of potential danger for a while, it was possible to work. At times the experience was akin to being in the lounge of one's own home, sharing memories and engaging in intelligent conversation with like-minded friends.

The Society in the Individual - Themes

1. *Pride and shame in identity*
The feeling that there was a loss of pride in being British and a growing sense of shame. British identity was equated with oppression rather than belonging. It can be a weapon but also a limitation. 'You cannot do that it's not British'. In Ireland to be called British is an insult. To be British is now a more ambivalent state. Perhaps we have to bear knowing the positive (pride) and negative (shame) aspects of British identity and hold them together.
2. *Institutional containment*
Identity is a dynamic, evolving process with institutions as the glue holding it together. Institutions can provide containment for a very pragmatic, flexible way of living together. At present however, these institutions are struggling to cope with the enormous changes in our society and globally. Thinking about Bion's specialist work group, the church is having

difficulty in this function and no longer providing good containment for dependency. The failure of pairing via the Charles/Diana couple remains unresolved. With regard to Fight/Flight, the Army has failed to perform its function in Iraq. What do the atrocities we are now hearing about mean for British identity? Are we having to contain for ourselves the chaos that would normally be projected into our national institutions? If we cannot trust our priests or police, it changes the impact on ordinary citizens.

3. *Culture and control*

The strain of being what was considered a tolerant society was evident in the question where do you set the limits and draw the line? Can you say no at some point to more difference? The effort of dealing with such change and differences, and the consequent complexity and difficulty in belonging, in society meant for some a wish to say stop enough is enough. How can we hold on to differences so that we do not need to have 'them' or 'the other'? Is there an implosion resulting from loss of overall containers and resulting in a subcultural identification, e.g. on religious and other group boundaries, such as Moslems. There was a sense of threat from Moslems (in contrast to the expanded EU one week before which did not exercise people). This raised the question about British identity in response to, and in the face of, terrorism?

4. *Global events*

The crumbling of the Berlin Wall, which divided East from West and what was held by that polarisation. Are we looking for a new fault line? How can we hold on to differences so that we do not need to have 'them' or 'the other'? On the one hand we have devolution, emphasising each country and the differences between them - within Britain and on the other hand, the expansion of the EU. Both weaken the boundary of Britain with a corresponding loss of strength, so British identity either refocuses on sub cultures or for some, we move towards identifying ourselves as European.

Is identity still linked to place? And is place changing? For instance, we think of Heathrow as the major transit point, but in the East it is Changi Airport, Singapore, which represents the transit point between East and West, so the new Centre is somewhere else. Technology and the capacity for communication have had a tremendous effect on place so, for example, someone located in the Orkneys controls shipping in Hong Kong.

Some concluding ideas

Identity is a process, which changes and is linked to the context we find ourselves in. It is also a mystery needing symbols to express it. We first develop a social identity baby and mother - and then individual identity develops. If social identity is fractured then individual identity will also be fractured.

Our sense of identity comes from what we belong to and that is becoming increasingly unclear because of the speed of technology, travel, and communication. And EU's expansion, never in history has a body tried to build up without conquest.

What is our social identity in the current state of democracy? There is a split between the notion of citizen and the individual.

Working with identity in society means ordinary everyday acts, dealing with the intricacies of difference all the time, and holding on to our curiosity. In terms of the development of our society, it means being active locally sometimes in apparently small ways in order to achieve real change.