

Identity and Cognition in a Socio-Ethnic Interaction Field: A Critical-Historical Approach

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Abstract

The line of research of this paper is an effort to develop a theoretical field in order to create a kernel of convergence of different disciplines which, extending beyond the borders of sociocultural anthropology, might be able to give critical and universal answers to questions posed by the problem of knowledge. This author thinks he succeeded in establishing the epistemological conditions necessary for this interdisciplinary kernel, making an anthropology of knowledge a possible goal. Following a long tradition of ethnological research, this author has produced the bases of ethnology of knowledge within its context. He considers it as a discipline which analyzes the sociocultural variable of perception, having its roots in the anthropology of knowledge (Vázquez, H., 1988)

On the other hand, the relationally conceived concept of identity is rejected from ethnology of knowledge situated on a historical-critical paradigm of anthropology. Ethnic identity will be the temporary shape adopted by material and symbolic contradictions at an individual and collective level within a socio-ethnic interaction field relatively confined to the center of a socio-historical formation and a given period of interethnic relations. The basic aspects of the socio-ethnic identity constitution are considered

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It is true that we have a tendency to apply the partial results of the work done by our research team with some Toba families to the entirety of inter-ethnic relationships. Maybe this is not perfectly right. We think, though, that our approach to the subject is suitable for the reality of the relationships of the aboriginal ethnic groups in Argentina and for the national-regional society with which they interact. It is quite probably an efficient proposal for the interpretation of ethnic interaction processes between many Latin-American aboriginal "societies" and the hegemonic societies in which they are "embedded".

In this sense, it would be convenient to consider our approach as a "research program" as described by Lakatos (Lakatos, I. 1978).

Supposing the existence of a certain integration and stability, of certain uniformities and regularities in the realm of nature, of human behaviour, of sociocultural processes, is the base of the various modes of scientific knowledge. Consequently the importance and the great heuristic value assigned to the concept of system in the field of science, because it highlights the contextualized integration of such uniformities. The same happens with the concepts of cognition and identity. The need for certain permanence, for stating the non-alteration of the organization and behaviour of the object of knowledge, i.e. for establishing its identity, is one of the assumptions which make scientific approach possible. Besides this author supposes that, at least, some mode of knowledge is possible. A mode of knowledge which does not only describe but also interprets the empirical evidence; which poses hypotheses, being articulated with coherently interwoven general principles from which characteristics and behaviour of a group of phenomena could be logically deduced.

But, what is actually immutable in the realm of nature and of psycho-socio-cultural phenomena? How are perception processes, and even the very reflexive thought which allows the symbolic organization of experience and knowledge built?

Of course, there is not a single answer to these questions. They depend on the prevailing epistemological system or, what amounts to the same, on the paradigm on which each every scientist or researcher stands. As Cardoso de Oliveira writes: "In human sciences, and particularly in anthropology, paradigms survive in a sort of simultaneousness, where all are valid in their own particular way (of knowing), provided they know each other and that they experience such a stress that, according to my point of view, no-one among us can fail to take the adequate updating of his discipline and his teaching into consideration" (Cardoso, 1984).

As far as this author is concerned, he is affiliated with a dialectic-constructivist line of scientific knowledge and with a historical-critical paradigm of anthropology, whose epistemological assumptions have been thoroughly stated in two of his books: "About Methods and Epistemology of Social Science", UAP Publ., Mexico, 1984, and "On Incest in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology", Breviario 331 at FCE Publ., Mexico, 1986. Let's just say that we emphasize the need of convergence of history, sociology and anthropology.

The structuralist approach, in the tradition of Lévi-Strauss, solves the problem of identity in the same way as it solves that of unity and multiplicity of reality. That is, taking an organized whole as a system in which the unity (which can be assimilated to identity- $\{$ with capital letter-, to a combinatory matrix) corresponds to all actual and virtual combinations, and the diversity corresponds to a particular transformation here and now, i.e. to different individual identities, all made up of the same elements (themselves immutable) pre-existing in the logical matrix, but re-combined in a different way. On the other hand, Petitot, relying on Thom's Theory of Catastrophe, presents identity as the moment of stability in an algebraic-geometrical system. This stability grows out of the strains produced by conflicting forces within a particular structure. This author is inclined to a historical-critical interpretation, forcibly dialectic, which rejects the concept of identity built in a relational mode, i.e. through unyielding and immutable opposites, which can only be differentiated as they constitute different permutations within a particular structure.

Here it is necessary to distinguish between:

1. *Genesis and transformation*
2. *Contradiction and opposition.*

While genesis implies denying certain structural elements in order to state other ones, this allows the existence of the logical concept of contradiction, which gives way to the possibility of synthesis, and operates as a way of creating a new structure, the concept of opposition (on which the concept of transformation is based) prevents synthesis and generates the reshuffling of the elements of the structure in a different point of balance. The origin of a new structure can be then explained from this new reshuffling or permutation. That is why the explanations about the nature of this same structure are not satisfactory, because the new elements it is made of belonged already to a bigger structure which contained them, i.e. to a pre-existing structure which is discovered now.

The dialectic principle of differentiation rejects the delimitation of identity through irreducible opposites, incapable of changing and only differing insofar as they constitute different permutations. It supposes, on the contrary hand, a range of dialectic expressions coming together, to deny themselves, during a moment of transience. In this perspective, the ethnic identity (a particular expression of identity) appears as the instant form adopted by (material and symbolic) contradictions at an individual and collective level within a field of socio-ethnic interaction, relatively enclosed in the midst of a historical-social formation, and during a certain time of inter-ethnic relationships. This situation gives rise to different but not to asymmetrical relationships, i.e. of authority/submission. In a logical level this process appears as the point of imbalance of the concept with itself: the kernel of dialectic reversion recongnized in its denying

Thus, in a constant process of change, the same identity must rely on its own contradiction, transfiguring (by way of syncretism and of suppressing cultural traits) its relationship with the existing social order, and generating deep intra-ethnich contradictions on qualitatively differing levels.

According to the author's point of view, the basic aspects to be considered in the processes of building the socio-ethnic identity are:

1. The constitution of a field of socio-ethnic interaction.
2. The processes of constitution and the dynamics in the change of psycho-cultural references or of socio-cognitive structures.

3. The economical-social production and reproduction strategies of the different ethnic components in the regional society, the solidarity and exchange networks, the differentiated processes of religious syncretism in each ethnic group, the attitude and value systems which regulate the behaviour patterns towards "the inside" and "the outside" of each ethnic group, intra-ethnic conflicts and the conflicts existing with the social segments with which they interact.

In view of the scarcity of space for a thorough discussion of these subjects, we will confine ourselves to point to what we consider more important in each one of them.

1. The constitution of a field of socio-ethnic interaction.

Cardoso de Oliveira assumes that the inter-ethnic system "is made of the relationships between two populations dialectically linked through diametrically opposed but interdependent interests. It is an opposition, or what amounts to be the same, a contradiction between the interacting societal systems, becoming therefore systems, part of a more inclusive one, which can be called inter-ethnic system" (Cardoso de Oliveira, 1968).

Starting from this definition and taking it critically, Graciela Rodríguez tries on the one hand to differentiate the concept of opposition from that of contradiction, and on the other hand relying on the concept, (Piaget, J. 1974) elaborated by Cardoso, of inter-ethnic friction, she delimits the field of socio-ethnic interaction "as the friction area between differentiated ethnic groups. Such frictions reveal relationships based on conflicts and contradictions where the supremacy of one ethnic group over another poses a situation of authority/submission" (CONICET Report, 1989).

This re-definition of the concept of field of socio-ethnic interaction stands in what we call the historical-critical line of thought.

The study of the field of socio-ethnic interaction requires analyzing the re-formulation of the symbolic systemization of the subordinate group, of the modes, degrees and levels of penetration of the systems of ideas prevailing in the regional-national societies, and also of the perceptible nuances of the existing conflicts between the subordinate ethnic groups and social segments of the regional society with which they interact. Such conflicts often reflect the conflicts existing in the whole society.

At this point we would like to call the attention on an aspect, which according to our approach, may lead to serious misunderstandings. We refer to the problem of conferred and/or manipulated "identity". If identification with a role establishes a conventional consensus over the social roles taken by the individuals in their daily interactions, the ethnic identity should not therefore be assimilated to simple social identification. The meaning (and taking) of roles can only be concluded within a particular cultural context capable of establishing a common code of communication (in the broadest sense of the word), from which a wide range of symbolisms and attitudes derive, going from the verbal expression and body language to the demonstration of feelings and behaviours.

The conventional context in which inter subjectivity is embedded is culturally enclosed. Different ways and habits restrict the expression and the sense of the social role taken and performed.

If personal identity is very closely linked to social standing (the relative rank of a person in a community), we should not confuse it with the performed social role, and much less should it be extrapolated to societies in which other cultural patterns prevail. In any society, the degree of social interaction of an individual, the insight of this fact, and the measure in which it is socially accepted, imposes a basic criterion for its identification. But in the case of inter-ethnic relationships the question can only be suitably approached within the context enclosed by the field of socio-ethnic interaction.

The insertion of the members of Toba groups into the society of Rosario (Argentina's second largest town, 1'000'000 inhabitants) with its various social classes must be analyzed in relation to the different social segments and to the institutions of the regional society with which they interact.

Thus, in spite of the existence of important differential nuances between the different groups of Toba families dwelling in different areas of each settling, it is possible to determine three types of different attitudes in relation to the ethnic self-identification.

"A first group made up of leaders, many of whom are also evangelical ministers (the traditional image of the Toba chief includes religious and political functions), assumes, first of all, its condition of aboriginal in front of the "white society".

Then the "special mode" (which we were not able to determine with a relative clarity, but which is linked to certain cultural traditions) in which they "experience" the pentecostal faith (they do not ignore the existence of catholic Tobas), the command of the language and the loyalty system related to kinship, seem to give them the consciousness of belonging to the ethnic group. This sense of belonging acquires an ideological form, is mingled with the pentecostal faith, and expresses a salvationist anxiety which encloses a rebellious attitude in regard to the ruling society.

A second group, the largest in number, made up of men and women older than twenty-five years of age, highlights the importance of certain regional identity (its place of origin) depending on the kinship and the language (the dialect they speak).

The third group is inclined to deny its condition of aboriginal. This situation traumatizes them, and they are full of contradictions in regard to the question. The most striking feature is the young age of its members. We have verified that, in the same way as the two groups already mentioned, they choose partners within the Toba ethnic group excluding non-Toba slum dwellers from intimate relationships.

They visit each other only among members of the Toba community, and except in job conditions, contact with the "others" are desultory and superficial (Vázquez, H. 1989).

2. The processes of constitution and the dynamics in the change of psycho-cultural references or of socio-cognitive structures

The central question posed here is one of relation between semantics and mental functions. Or, in other words, the existence or non-existence of thought without language.

In a general way we could say that, for us, not all mental activities are reduced to thinking. Nor must the concept of language be reduced to that of verbal language for there is also a body language.

We think that cognition does not consist of a natural process given without mediation, but that it is the result of a historically, socially, psychically, linguistically, and culturally conditioned related to a particular time and place. This process is never immutable; it develops in many directions according to linguistic, social, and cultural changes suffered by human groups within the context of a particular historic-social formation.

If thought consists of the elaboration of symbols expressed through the (oral and/or written) word, or through body language, it is essential to understand the constitution of the symbolic systems in which language plays a fundamental role.

Symbolic systems are representation systems within which cognitive patterns operate. The multiplicity of existing symbolic systemizations presupposes the relativity of the conceptualization of reality. A symbolic systemization results from the integration of (particular and concrete) symbols into systems, which in a given time of the historical development it organizes the collective representations of an ethnic group or sub-group.

As Margot Bigot contends, the internalization of the prevailing cognitive structures -or of the psycho-cultural references as she calls them leaning on Fernández Guizzetti- by each group member in relation to levels, degrees and nuances of the same structures, has a decisive importance.

Let us explain that the psycho-cultural references constitute the most general conceptual frames from which thoughts articulate and the perception of reality is built.

If language conditions thought we must consider though, that such conditioning does not operate mechanically by virtue of the relation language/spoken word. Besides the language system we must consider its individual actualization, a particular use of a system which allows infinite combinations, within the limits which guarantee communication. It is in the spoken word where transgressions to the system (language) arise. From the spoken word the diachronic processes develop when the strains exerted by the unbalance between the prevailing linguistic system and the communicative needs of the inhabitants produce new forms, use of cultural loans, new specifications, etc. In this way a rupture in the psycho-cultural references or prevailing cognitive structures in the members of a human group is produced, because they try to build new symbols as regards to the language.

Languages change according with the communicative needs of the members of a community, of a group, or of an ethnic group (or a part of it). These communicative needs are directly related to the ever changing circumstances of social and economic aspects, and to the strains produced within a field of socio-ethnic interaction.

The variability of such conditioning in front of the different semantic changes and its peculiar articulation in bilingual fields (where the prevalence of a particular language and its possible interferences must be taken into consideration), passing from the oral to the written language, the acquisition of a new language, all this implies passing from one to other referential symbolic system.

Besides this psycho-linguistic conditioning related to the internalization of psycho-cultural references or of socio-cognitive structures integrated in symbolic systemizations and its dynamics of change at an individual, sector, or ethnic group level, we must finally consider:

3. The economical-social production and reproduction strategies of the different ethnic components in the regional society, the solidarity and exchange networks, the differentiated processes of religious syncretism in each ethnic group, the attitude and value systems which regulate the behaviour patterns towards "the inside" and "the outside" of each ethnic group, intra-ethnic conflicts and the conflicts existing with the social segments with which they interact.

The particular and different historical social circumstances imposed upon ethnic groups and subgroups impinge in a decisive way upon the constitution of the processes of religious syncretism -very important in the development of the framework of symbolism in the Ibero-American aboriginal peoples and their cognitive-value patterns, the building-up of systems of attitudes and values, and of identity.

Following Graciela Rodríguez we could say that "the system of attitudes and values grows out of contact situations in structural situations of inequality. We characterize it operatively as the ensemble of socio-cultural patterns elaborated and re-elaborated by the members of the local group as a result of the relationships of socio-ethnic interaction which regulate the behaviour of the inhabitants of a settling according to age, sex and seniority groups" (Rodríguez, G., 1989).

We take again her definition of local group: "We characterize the local group as the ensemble of families sharing a common historical-cultural background, which is updated and receives signification through the continuous interaction with the social segments of the hegemonic culture expressed in the regional field" (Ibid.).

These conceptual boundaries seem to be of a particular importance for the operative interpretation of fundamental traits of the ever changing symbolic universe of migratory groups and sub-groups because they allow relating the symbolic systemizations to a particular time and place.

Similarly, in an unpublished paper, but emphasizing the relationship language/thought, Margot Bigot proposes to analyze the refunctioning of the mythical *Weltanschauung* in different systems of attitudes and values. In this way she tries to detect "ethnic conditions to which ethnic actors are ascribed". In this case the statement "conditions" does not mean immobility but tries to define a structural conjunction.

In regard to the processes of religious syncretism, Bastide, Balandrier, Thomas and Miller among other authors, emphasize the particular and different historical and social circumstances in which the processes of syncretism of religious symbology -which transmit a powerful emotional charge of high suggestive force-impinge upon the rupture of the prevailing symbolic systemizations and upon the re-elaboration of a new referential system in which symbol ascription acquires new meanings and values.

During a research work directed by this author, he has been able to verify in which way the historical and social circumstance experienced by different sub-groups building the same ethnic group give rise to different modes of religious syncretism. Thus, in the Toba sub-group dwelling in the Las Moras settling (Empalme Graneros district, Rosario), the re-interpretation of the pentecostal faith seems to be carried out as a function of a *Weltanschauung* relying on ancestral aspects. The christian pentecostal view seems to prevail in the other groups settled in different areas of the same Empalme Graneros district, interfering with and displacing traditional beliefs to a referential level of the collective imagery.

So far these reflections on our approach to the difficult question of identity and ethnic identity. It only remains for us now to hope that the members of the scientific community consider our approach as admissible.

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