
Section 4.

**PUBLIC POLICIES AND REFLECTION
ON IDENTITY**

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TAYLOR'S CONCEPT OF IDENTITY AS A SIGNIFICANT POINT OF REFERENCE IN THE CONSIDERATIONS ON PUBLIC POLICIES

Abstract

The paper touches upon issues related to identity. The author considers identity in reference to the views of the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor. The author both presents and justifies selected elements of Taylor's works, bearing in mind that identity remains a key category also in the field of studies on public policies.

Key words: *human identity, social identity, 'philosopher of identity', 'creation of identity'*

According to E. H. Erikson, in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity (Gergen, 2009, p. 67). This statement can be aptly complemented by Charles Taylor's declaration: "Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter (...) Only if I exist in a world in where (...) something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial" (Taylor 1991, pp. 40–41).

The aim of this paper is to present a general outline of Taylor's views on the understanding of identity. It particularly tries to resolve how Taylor answered the questions of what identity is, what makes it and what justifies it. Achieving this aim will allow the political and social significance of understanding the phenomena related to identity formation to be emphasized. Failing to understand this issue translates into real risks the authors of public programs and policies can face.

Charles Taylor leaned in his considerations not only towards an individual placed in a broader community, as evidenced by his interest in individualism. As a communitarian, however, he primarily pondered on the relation of an individual towards a collectivity, or a defined community.

Taylor considered and justified the issue of identity in terms of two aspects – an individual and social one. The proposition can even be risked

that in Taylor's approach the issue of individual identity is valued as much as that of collective identity. At the same time, this philosopher did not shun attempts to determine what the 'quintessence of identity' is while emphasizing that the notion of identity is difficult to be unequivocally defined. Identity is elusive and inaccessible, the way all imponderables are. It does not subject itself to the principles of unambiguous definition because, according to Zygmunt Bauman, it is a negotiated category, one that has to be created, rather than discovered (Bauman, 2007, p. 14, 18).

Unlike many other scholars, Taylor took a stand in the discussion on the gist of identity, addressing other matters, apart from what builds and creates it. He also tried to specify the term 'identity.' He did that in a manner reminiscent of B. Skarga, suggesting that understanding the phenomenon of identity assumes the proportions of a task of an individual that is his or her most essential goal, and naming it as 'selfhood' (Skarga, 1997, pp. 91, 168, 172).

Similar to Pádraig Hogan (Hogan, 2004, pp. 81–101), Taylor placed the issue of identity in the context of considerations on the epiphany of identity. He addressed this issue primarily in the *Sources...*, where he not only attempted to understand and explain the gist of identity, a task undertaken also by A. Giddens (Giddens, 2007, pp. 98–122; the concept of the "trajectory of the self") and Bauman who defined identity as a task. Bauman believes this is a task that cannot be escaped. Additionally, in the light of Baumanian metaphors, identity is something that will not come into existence if it is not constructed (Bauman, 1993, p. 8). According to Taylor, identity is created in the course of a process during which an individual absorbs certain values and standards, by way of a creative synthesis of his or her own conduct. This process does not occur in a vacuum, however, but in an environment of relations with other persons. People define themselves in relations with others. This takes place in relation to another person and, frequently, in opposition to this person, via certain commitments and identification. Taylor emphasizes this crucial aspect of identity forming in his considerations when he writes: "My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand" (Taylor, 1989, p. 27).

It should be emphasized once more that, according to Taylor, the discussion on the issues of identity makes proper sense in the context of

examining the identity of an individual immersed in society. In his opinion, failing to account for the relations between individuals and society, understood as a system of points of reference to form one's identity, makes it impossible to understand the process of its creation. Therefore, Taylor says that "What I'm calling social embeddedness is thus partly an identity thing. From the standpoint of the individual's sense of self, it means the inability to imagine oneself outside a certain matrix. But it also can be understood as a social reality; here it refers to the way we together imagine our social existence, for instance, that our most important actions are those of the whole society, which must be structured in a certain way to carry them out. Growing up in a world where this kind of social imaginary reigns sets the limits on our sense of self" (Taylor, 2004, p. 55).

It should be noted that the category of identity lays foundations for the description and characteristics of both individuals and communities. Additionally, applying this category refers to the construction and establishing of the sense of the concept of community. Applying it cautiously, one can warn against excessive egocentrism, which seems particularly important in the times of late modernity. It was Alexis de Tocqueville who observed that small, and thereby common, thrills were the purpose of human endeavor in his times. Nietzsche emphatically added that people seemed to have no other ambitions but their own pitiful comfort. In the light of the reasoning by Taylor, however, self-concentration impoverishes and narrows human lives down, making them less significant and reducing interpersonal and social bonds. He described this situation as the dark side of individualism: "A society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are 'enclosed in their own hearts' is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government (Taylor, 1991, p. 4) (...) Once participation declines, once the lateral associations that were its vehicles wither away, the individual citizen is left alone in the face of the vast bureaucratic state and feels, correctly, powerless" (Taylor, 1991, pp. 9–10). Thereby, we are warned against the pernicious behavior that is becoming so visible, intentional, endorsed and fashionable today, especially in the times when the cult of self-realization dominates, frequently becoming calculated 'sad individualism'.

Taylor emphasized also relations, community and something that can generally be termed dialogue, and he observed that we can truly 'build ourselves' only in an environment of mutual dialogue. He believed that people need contact with other people not in order to define themselves,

but in order to realize themselves. Therefore, he noted: “Consider what we mean by ‘identity’. It is ‘who’ we are, ‘where we’re coming from’. As such it is the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense. If some of the things I value most are accessible to me only in relation to the person (...) then she [or he, let me add – R.H.M] becomes internal to my identity” (Taylor, 1991, p. 34).

According to Taylor, the understanding of identity was born and emerged from the ‘ideal of authenticity’ and is rooted in what has come to be called the collapse of a hierarchical society. In the past, social roles were clearly defined in traditional societies, and individual people did not think about moving beyond their class, circle or environment. The rigidly defined social status gave sense and proper meaning to what was considered important and obvious by the individual. In Taylor’s opinion, this socially established identity is irreversibly undermined by the ‘ideal of authenticity’. Importantly, the implementation of this ideal, that is discovering one’s own identity, cannot take place without the participation of other people and is rather negotiated within the framework of an ‘internalized dialogue with others.’ Thereby, the relations of dialogue with others are of decisive and essential importance for the identity of every individual (Taylor, 1991, p. 47).

Taylor also saw a significant threat related to the modern redefinition of social relations in the ‘fragmentation of bonds’, which he described in the following manner: “Fragmentation arises when people come to see themselves more and more atomistically, otherwise put, as less and less bound to their fellow citizens in common projects and allegiances. (...) This fragmentation comes about partly through a weakening of the bonds of sympathy (...) And so people give up. Already failing sympathy with others is further weakened by the lack of a common experience of action, and a sense of hopelessness makes it seem a waste of time to try. But that, of course, makes it hopeless, and a vicious circle is joined” (Taylor, 1991, pp. 112–113).

Summing up the above considerations, it can be concluded that according to Taylor, the feeling of identity is related to an accepted and recognized system of values as well as beliefs. Thereby, identity co-creates the essential structure of a given group and is based on the shared experience that is shaped on the basis of a given culture and the achievement of shared goals of the group. It is of secondary importance whether individual or group identity is being considered (as they are strictly related

to one another). Importantly, Taylor believes that identity is rooted in the need for uniqueness and being different from others, both in terms of individuals and communities.

The correct construction of human identity seems to determine the type of participation in a given group, and thereby the mutual influence of the individual and the community. The material of identity, or its content, is also shaped by the individual features of a person, including the exceptionally important need for affiliation that individuals transfer to the group, and what individuals gain from affiliation and functioning together with others. Individual human identity emerges from the differentiating comparisons with other humans and cannot be analyzed outside of its social context.

The above considerations can be concluded by stating that Taylor leaned towards the standpoint that we shape our own collectivity and community, and thereby our own identity, to the same extent we are shaped by this community. Taylor's communitarism heads towards the justification of the thesis that individuals and groups mutually influence and impact one another.

It should be noted that this paper presents only an outline of 'Taylor's attitude' to the issue of identity. It is not feasible to present a coherent, or complete and ultimate model of the emergence of identity as seen by Taylor. The above interpretation of Taylor's view is one of many. It attempts to evidence that Taylor's concept of identity and the emergence of identity should be deemed relatively comprehensive when compared to other, similar concepts. It also offers a good starting point for deeper considerations on the issues of identity. Its particular strength is the fact that it is an expression of interest in both individuals and groups. Therefore, it becomes a significant element of the modern discourse attempting to identify both the sources of human identity and its importance for how social and political communities operate. This discourse makes it possible to realize to what extent we are 'immersed' in identity. Taylor notes that the issue of identity as such constitutes a fundamental moral issue which is essential to the extent to which one is faithful to themselves (Borkowska-Nowak, 2012, p. 80). According to Taylor, identity is to an extent a process of self-creation. It is also a creative process an individual performs for his or her own sake. Yet the course of this process is always conditioned by relations with other people. It is also a form of shaping the definition of themselves which makes it possible to identify various aspects of human existence.

Ultimately, the words of this Canadian philosopher can be reiterated and slightly paraphrased: “To see the full complexity and richness of the modern identity [and the richness of the identity of a modern man, and a modern society, let me add – R.H.M] is to see, first, how much we are all caught up in it, for all our attempts to repudiate it; and second, how shallow and partial are the one-sided judgments we bandy around about it” (Taylor, 1989, p. X). Yet identity, and the processes it involves, remain a significant factor that shapes interpersonal relations. Therefore, they must not be neglected when designing public programs and policies. Ignoring issues of identity in the process of designing social change results in the implementation of unrealistic solutions. This unrealistic feature translates into social resistance and, in the long term, mounting conflicts that could frequently have been avoided at the very beginning.

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Streszczenie

W tekście autor porusza kwestie związane z zagadnieniem tożsamości. Tożsamość rozpatrywana jest przez niego w aspekcie przywołania 'tożsamościowych' poglądów kanadyjskiego filozofa, Charlesa Taylora. Autor jednocześnie przybliży i tłumaczy niektóre wątki z Taylorowskiej twórczości. Pamięta zarazem, iż „tożsamość” pozostaje kluczową kategorią także w polu badań nad politykami publicznymi.

Słowa kluczowe: *tożsamość człowieka, tożsamość społeczna, 'filozof tożsamości', 'kreowanie tożsamości'*

Резюме

В тексте автор поднимает вопросы, связанные с проблемой идентичности. Идентичность рассматривается им с точки зрения упоминания взглядов 'идентичности' канадского философа Чарльза Тейлора. Одновременно автор приближает и объясняет некоторые из мотивов творчества Тейлора. Вместе с тем помнит, что «идентичность» остается ключевой категорией также в области исследований по вопросам государственной политики.

Ключевые слова: *идентичность человека, идентичность общества, 'философ идентичности', 'создание идентичности'*

Резюме

Автор порушує в статті проблему ідентичності. Це поняття розглядається з точки зору канадського філософа Чарльза Тейлора. Автор аналізує та пояснює його концепцію. Ідентичність залишається ключовою категорією в сфері наукових досліджень з питань державної політики.

Ключові слова: *ідентичність людини, соціальна ідентичність, 'філософ ідентичності', 'створення ідентичності'*

