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SPACE-TIME ORIENTATIONS AND THE NOTION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

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DISCUSSION PAPER

on

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TIME, SPACE, TECHNOLOGY AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

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SPACE-TIME ORIENTATIONS AND THE NOTION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

(A Response to Dan V. Seagre on "Time, Space, Technology and
Collective Identity)

The presentation by Dan V. Seagre is basically focussed on the contrasting roles of 'space' and 'time' in giving shape and form as well as directionality to different types of collective identity. Two types of collective identity which are central to the paper are identities emerging around traditional religions and those related to the growth of nation states. In the case of monotheistic religions like Judaism and Islam, "time became the main factor around which the identities of these monotheistic religions coalesced and developed". At the other end of the spectrum, one finds identities conditioned by the idea of territory.

In addition to the presentation of the relative role of space and time in the formation of collective identities in a historical setting, a third factor is brought in from the contemporary setting, namely the impact of technology, some times confusing the scene, at times weakening and yet at times enhancing traditional forms of identify.

The presentation of time bound identities and space bound identities is clear, insightful and interesting. Also the danger in excessive dependence on narrowly focussed notions of territoriality is presented with clarity. But the study moves out into a wider problematic situation. At this point there is a thematic shift which is not sufficiently integrated to the major focus on space and time. What exactly is the contemporary problematic situation, the disease, the new forms of alienation and their connection to the time and space bound identities.

- (i) Sometimes reading through the paper, one feels that the problematic context today is the despotism of a new type of determinism — the science based minutely programmed technology which man cannot control.
- (ii) A second strand is the conflict between rationalism and romanticism. I am a part of the human race which is rational — an answer which is true but insufficient because it does not give us identity. Also, the romantic answers, I am part of my land, without my motherland, I cannot realize myself.
- (iii) There is also the unhealthy consequence of linear conception of time and history which can generate the deterministic forms of historicism.

To bring in all these facets together, a more comprehensive examination of the very notion of 'identity' itself should have emerged in the concluding sections of the paper. There are various forms of pseudo-identities which drown a sense of healthy directionality, whether we talk of personal identity or corporate identity.

The tolerance of other identities which the paper presents as an answer to identity issues in socio-political contexts is a good gesture but we also have to make a distinction between healthy and creative unities and attachment oriented malignant forms of identity. The conceptual focus of identity issues go beyond their expressions in time and space.

In spite of this limitation, the focus on spatial expressions through which collective identities get expressed is a timely and useful

notion. In fact, questions pertaining to issues of national identity in both Ireland and Sri Lanka have an interesting spatial scaffolding. The role of temporal and spatial identities have interesting empirical implications if the problem under discussion is well delineated.

II

The other set of issues which I wish to raise are questions internal to the distinctions made within the notion of 'time', 'space' as well as the relation between 'time' and 'space'.

The author observes that "Jewish identity is determined by calendar, not by territory". This is true, but then he makes a distinction between linear and cyclical time. He says that most religions are cyclical except the monotheistic ones, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. I think as a broad distinction this is a relatively sound observation, as religions like Hinduism and Buddhism have a cyclical conception of time.

But a few qualifications need to be made. When the author says, ". . . monotheistic religions are, so to say, linear, since their divine purpose has broken the cyclic pattern of 'pagan' faith, a reader could always say, that the contrast between linear and cyclical time in this context is too strong : calendar is partly cyclical and partly not, "19th July, 1985", the underlined bit is 'cyclical' and if the Jews are governed by calendar the enunciation of calendar, at least in part is cyclical (for instance annual festivals). Secondly, though eastern religions are more time bound than space bound, the cyclical-linear contrast do not always work for eastern religions in certain contexts :

for instance the ancient Chinese historical records and the Sinhala/Sri Lankan chronicles like the Dipavansa etc., I think both Hinduism and Buddhism have a very strong cyclical perspective but in historical contexts, when they get mixed up with nationalism and politics, territoriality notions, as well as incongruous linear conceptions of history emerge in practice. A few modifying comments of this sort would have enriched the essay, which seems to offer a hypothesis with a structural neatness for a complicated and complex world.

Not merely do 'space' and 'time' dimensions run into each other, but we also have more refined notions of space, which are not always linked to rationality and territoriality.

Perceptions of 'space' across cultures can be far more refined and intricate, as shown in the book by Edward Hall, entitled, The Hidden Dimension, the experience of space in Japanese culture. In the arrangement of the Zen monastery, and the skill in flower arrangement, one is overcome by the order, serenity and the discipline of extreme simplicity. In contrast to the single point perspective of Renaissance and Baroque painters, the Japanese garden is designed to be enjoyed from many points of view.

At a surface glance, observations of this sort may not be related to the main theme of the paper. But this shows that more complex and refined perspective of not merely 'time' but 'space' is possible. As to how these get tied to nationalism and politics is not a question I will venture to answer here. Different types of eastern cultures as different from western culture, like the Japanese culture have generated new notions of human organizations in human management and economic activity.

But in spite of all these, the contemporary human predicament itself is in a tangle. This cannot be understood by merely a focus on 'rationality', 'territoriality' or 'technology'. The notion of identity is more complex and deep. As humans 'conscious of being condemned to lose their identity, in time and space, through death' (p. 16), it is an educative process to look back with critical awareness on human history and see the relative role of space and time, in the manner that the author has admirably done. But if we are concerned with the wider human predicament and questions of alienation (the dictates of historicism, technological determinism, etc.) a close look at the notion of the quest for identity itself may illuminate the deeper bases of the sickness which generate the dilemmas created by the notions of both personal and collective identities, old and new.

III

In general, the main thrust of the essay is centered on 'territorial nationalism' : "Territory has proved to be more powerful than national identity, class identity, or even ideology. In our country two world wars have dramatized this fact in Europe". (p.6). The author also feels that identities based on time are more flexible, adaptable and congenial to change.

The author sheds some interesting insight here, as perhaps even those who are entangled in ideology, ultimately fight over territory. But behind the struggle over territory is the drive for power, images of prestige and the acquisitive drive. The ideologies in turn are influenced

by these perennial drives. Such drives in corporate identities as in personal identities are fed by the logic of dispositions - the historical perceptions which people have of their own image and others. As long as this perception (whether 'time-bound' or 'space-bound') is not ethnocentric, is not narrow, it can provide room for the co-existence of other types of identity. Even among those who are rooted in some territory, the sense of history has to be refined, creative and tolerant. It is perhaps at this point that we can make a framework for charting out a possible distinction between malignant and benignant identity profiles. Language can be a triggering cause in some cases, economic factors in another, colour of the skin, power, etc. The struggle for territory may be a medium in which the battle is fought, a battle caused by something less tangible : conflicts between groups are often generated by the mutually conflicting historical perceptions they have of each others identity. Both space and time contribute to the formation of such historical perceptions. While space may block and heighten narrow identities, time can be both a liberating factor (as the author says) and a factor which can bolster up narrow and aggressive identities.

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