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Hybridity and agency: some theoretical and empirical observations

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Abstract

In this article, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity is being discussed from the point of view of its impact on persons' capacity for agency. Bhabha emphasized the emancipating and anti-authoritarian potentials of hybridity. In this paper it is argued that this positive evaluation does not hold for all cases of hybridity. It is also argued that the value of hybridity will depend on whether it expands or diminishes persons' capacity for agency. A limited empirical study of Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands will illustrate this hypothesis.

Keywords: Agency; Homi Bhabha; hybridity; identity; Turkish immigrants

Hybridity: Good or Bad?

In his discussion of the concept of hybridity, Homi Bhabha famously observed that '[h]ybridity ... is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the "pure" and original identity of authority)', bringing with it a 'revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity' and thereby constituting 'a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority' (Bhabha, 1994: 112–113). Bhabha's idea is that colonial oppression presupposes a belief in distinct cultural identities, separating colonizer and colonized. Hence, to the extent that a colonized people can challenge this belief by asserting themselves as 'hybrids', having aspects of their identity in common with the colonizers, they can also liberate themselves from the identity-based hierarchy imposed on them by the colonizers:

> To see the cultural not as the *source* of conflict – *different* cultures – but as the *effect* of discriminatory practices – the production of cultural *differentiation* as signs of authority – changes its value and its rules of recognition. Hybridity intervenes in the exercise of authority not merely to indicate the impossibility of its identity but to represent the unpredictability of its presence (Bhabha, 1994: 114; emphasis in the original).

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As an example, Bhabha discusses the spread of Christianity by British missionaries in India. In the early nineteenth century, the Bible was translated into several Indian languages and handed out for free or sold at a very low price in thousands of copies. However, the adoption of Christianity by Indians was not just a case of the colonizers' religion being extended to the colonized, but it also brought about a transformation of how colonized Indians perceived themselves and their British rulers. As Indian Christians came to accept the Bible as God's gift to them, while at the same time retaining their pre-Christian Hindu vegetarianism, they also came to ask themselves the question '*how can the word of God come from the flesh-eating mouths of the English?*' (Bhabha, 1994: 116; emphasis in the original).

The spread of Christianity in India did not work unambiguously to support the authority of the colonizers, although Christianity was their religion. Instead it brought about a hybrid Indian Christianity, which in turn could challenge the separateness maintained by the British. In this way, according to Bhabha, hybridity has an anti-authoritarian potential, as it combines elements of diverse cultures and uses these combinations to question power relations based on cultural purity and distinct identities.

Other scholars have suggested that hybridity is not only anti-authoritarian, but may also function as a mediator and as a way of bridging gaps of distrust between a minority group and a majority population. Speaking of Muslim girls in Canada who play soccer, Annette Baier comments that '[t]hese soccer-playing young Muslim women, who know what Western culture has to offer, and also value their own tradition, are the ones we must hope can help mediate the differences threatening us today' (Baier, 2012: 83).

However, here we have to ask ourselves if the blurring of boundaries associated with hybridity always works in the liberating way suggested by Bhabha. Certainly, it may at least sometimes be as Bhabha says: Authorities that rely on a conception of clear and distinct cultural boundaries will be challenged by hybridities questioning the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Moreover, at the level of individuals, hybridity may also be experienced as an asset by those who, from a privileged position of, for instance, a renowned academic, have access to a prestigious global academic work market, regardless of her ethnic, religious, or cultural background. Hence, a university professor's confident declaration that:

> I can be, at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a nonreligious lifestyle, from a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a nonbeliever in an afterlife (and also, in case the question is asked, a nonbeliever in a "before-life" as well) (Sen, 2006: 19).

But not every individual experience of hybridity can be expected to be like this. Whether hybridity is a blessing or a curse will depend on the conditions under which it is being realized. As Sabine Broeck has pointed out,

> What tends to get lost in those enthusiastic formulations of hybridity as the postmodern condition are delicate nuances within hybridity: the question whether hybridity is chosen or imposed, accepted or rejected is decisive but often remains hidden under a certain aesthetizisation of the phenomenon (Broeck, 2007: 50).

Accordingly, it is likely that there will be a difference between, on the one hand, a British university professor who has chosen to live for some time in Istanbul or in Cairo and then goes on to teach in Berlin or Paris, and, on the other hand,

> an impoverished Pakistani family ... whose parents, children and grandchildren by the end of the 1990s are scattered in places like Switzerland, Italy, England, the USA and/or an African country, holding on to their respective positions mostly by bare thread (Broeck, 2007: 54).

The fact that we are probably more likely to label the British professor a 'cosmopolitan' rather than a 'hybrid' suggests that the conditions of her moving between cultures are different from those of the migrant Pakistani worker. A cosmopolitan is, literally, a 'citizen of the cosmos', a person who feels equally at home everywhere, and cosmopolitanism is 'an adventure and an ideal', driven by a curiosity for other cultures and ways of life, 'perfectly consistent with picking and choosing among the options you find in your search' (Appiah, 2006: xx, 5). While a cosmopolitan may pick and choose, a hybrid may be more likely to find herself simply subjected to cultural challenges.

This, of course, does not mean that a hybrid person cannot be creative in the ways she deals with these challenges. We should never assume that a migrant between cultures, regardless of how meagre her prospects are, is doomed to be a passive recipient of external events. On the contrary, the capacity for agency should always be presumed in any human being, unless we have sufficient reason to believe otherwise. And there is also empirical support for the view that hybridity can be consistent with agency. A recent study of Turkish immigrants in the German city of Bremen, for instance, suggests that they 'have traditionally displayed a higher degree of self-determination and ambition in their entrepreneurial and housing performances than tends to be recognised for Turks in Germany as a whole', resulting in 'success, integration and a feeling of loyalty to their local German surroundings' (Hackett, 2015: 9–10).

Now, Bhabha's conception of hybridity has been criticized for suggesting an idea of 'cultural exchange' that seems to imply 'negating and neglecting the imbalance and inequality of the power relations it references' (Ashcroft et al, 2007: 109). And from the multiculturalist camp we receive the complaint that

having a hybrid identity will not be empowering unless it is also recognized and respected. This is so, since

> our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves (Taylor, 1994: 25).

Some would even claim that to the extent that the undefined character of a particular hybrid identity makes its possessor uncertain about who she is, this would constitute a threat against the individual's self-esteem and self-confidence, and thereby also to her capacity for self-fulfilment. Alan Gewirth, for instance, has argued that '[t]o have ... a secure sense of one's own identity helps one to make the best of oneself because the complexities of one's self are thereby molded into a unity of self-regard' (Gewirth, 1998: 115).

Moreover, as Arjun Appadurai has pointed out, at the societal and collective level uncertainties about belonging, about 'us' and 'them', may well under certain circumstances of social unrest and economic decline turn into intergroup fear and distrust. As a result, minorities may face intolerance and violence 'as a part of an emerging repertoire of efforts to produce previously unrequired levels of certainty about social identity, values, survival, and dignity' (Appadurai, 2006: 7). Under such circumstances, hybridity is more likely to be perceived as a problem and a threat than as an instrument of liberation.

Here we will assume that there are good as well as bad experiences of hybridity. In order to assess the value of a particular person's hybridity, we suggest that one looks at its impact on her *capacity for agency*, that is, her capacity to realize her goals by means of her voluntary and purposive behaviour. This would be a relevant criterion, since we often tend to associate success or failure in our lives with our capacity to bring about desired outcomes. Consequently, a person's hybridity would have positive or negative value depending on the extent to which it either expands or diminishes her capacity for agency.

Moreover, the impact of hybridity on one's capacity for agency is likely to depend on whether or not the condition of hybridity itself is something freely chosen. In the case of at least some migrants, hybridity is more or less forced upon them, as Dimple Godiwala's points out: 'living or based permanently in a different culture with its different organizing systems of class, economy, society and cultural production, it is incumbent on the relocated subject to *hybridize*' (Godiwala, 2007: 68; emphasis in the original). Of course, imposed hybridity does not preclude agency, but it is likely to make agency more difficult as it makes the agent less confident about who she is and consequently also less confident in her agency.

Now, to evaluate hybridity in terms of its impact on persons' capacity for agency is also in line with recent theorizing about human rights. For instance, Alan Gewirth has argued that all human agents must claim rights to freedom and well-being as these are the necessary conditions of successful agency and

hence necessary goods for all agents (Gewirth, 1978). Likewise, Amartya Sen has argued that we have a human right to freedom because freedom and the capabilities it supports are necessary to our agency (Sen, 1999). And, more recently, James Griffin has grounded human rights in the necessary conditions of what he calls 'normative agency', that is, the capacity to choose and pursue one's conception of a worthwhile life (Griffin, 2008). Hence, to evaluate hybridity from the point of view of its impact on persons' capacity for agency would, according to theories like the ones just mentioned, be consistent with evaluating it from the point of view of human rights. This would also go a long way to make at least certain experiences of hybridity significant, not only psychologically, but also morally, as being either supportive or undermining of human rights.

Migrants, hybridity, and agency

Studies of migrants are highly relevant to an understanding of the complexity of hybridity. The hybridity that is the outcome of migration is likely to bring with it positive as well as negative experiences, as the migrant's combination of cultural identities either benefits her socially and economically or makes her suffer from confusion and alienation. Migrants may also have mixed experiences of their hybridity, perceiving their capacity for agency to be improved in some respects, diminished in others. In such cases, they are also likely to evaluate their hybridity in ambiguous terms, as being both a blessing and a curse.

Our hypothesis will be illuminated by a study of second and third generation Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands, made by Fatma Fulya Tepe, one of the authors of the present article. This study, inspired by constructivist grounded theory, collecting and constructing data 'through our observations, interactions, and materials that we gather about the topic or setting' (Charmaz, 2006: 3), consists of a series of interviews made in the spring of 2007 with nine informants. While the number of informants is too limited to allow any generalizations, it is still sufficient to illustrate our hypothesis about how hybridity is experienced and evaluated in accordance with its impact on the individual's capacity for agency.

In these interviews a recurrent theme was found, namely, that of migrants feeling themselves estranged from Dutch as well as Turkish society. In the words of 55 year old jeweller Mehmet,[1] a second generation Turkish immigrant:

> Wherever you go, you are a foreigner, both here and in Turkey. You do not have any local connection. How can you have anything local? You are a foreigner both here (The Netherlands) and there (Turkey).

Eda, a 25-year-old third generation female Turkish immigrant, born in the Netherlands and working in her father's butcher's shop, agrees:

[1] Throughout the text, the names given to informants are not their real names.

> [W]hen you go to Turkey you are a foreigner in one way, and here you are a foreigner in a different way. It is like being a thing in between.

Now, the problem with being 'a thing in between' seems to be related to a loss of capacity for agency. Hybridity, at least sometimes, can make it more difficult for persons to realize their goals of action, as it makes them less confident about how to relate to other people. Eda, for instance, describes how her unfamiliarity with the Turkish language makes her appear like a foreigner when visiting Turkey:

> Even when you go to Turkey ... you are being seen as a foreigner ... First of all, you cannot speak the Turkish language as people in Turkey do. What is proper Turkish, where and how does one speak it? We do not know this. For example, the reason why I speak as much Turkish as I actually do is that I took a Turkish language class at school for an hour every week ... But when I go to Turkey, where I have got nieces, the way they speak is very different from the way we speak. They are more polite compared to us.

For instance, there is a difference between the more formal (and hence more 'polite') *geliyorum* (meaning 'I am coming') and the more vernacular (and hence less 'polite') *geliyom*. Not to be aware of this distinction carries with it the risk of being characterized as 'foreign' in a Turkish context:

> I have a little bit of difficulty when speaking Turkish ... It is also about being polite ... At home and among friends, I can say *geliyom*. Among others we have this obligation to be polite ... When talking to a friend, I do not think I ever speak in this polite manner, saying things like 'in case you are available, may I come and see you?' ... But in Turkey, it is polite to speak like this.

Hence, from the point of view of language, Eda experiences hybridity not only as being in between Turkish and Dutch cultures. She is also 'in between' in relation to Turkish culture itself.

Likewise, Mehmet describes how his way of speaking Turkish makes him appear as a foreigner in Turkey, and how this has consequences for the way in which he is being treated there. He finds himself overcharged and exploited like a tourist:

> In Turkey, they try to sell you products at a higher price. They take more money from Turks coming from here. They treat you like a tourist. Tourists are being oppressed.

Mehmet finds his capacity for agency reduced, as it becomes more difficult for him to be successful in business and on the market in general, being perceived as a foreigner. His pessimistic conclusion concerning his Turkish-Dutch hybridity is that

> we do not get anything from neither of these two languages and cultures – we cannot really come to an understanding with them.

This would seem to confirm the observation made by Dimple Godiwala, that

> [l]iving in a different culture for a period of time (and I do not mean as a tourist) is like Alice going through the looking glass: there is no return, as one has changed so much, often imperceptibly, that going back to one's original perceptions is impossible (Godiwala, 2007: 67).

However, not every informant was equally negative about being in between cultures. Mert, a student at a law school and born in the Netherlands, while describing Turkish immigrants as victims of prejudice ('They think that we dress in fez and our women in black religious clothes'), also claimed that being foreign could be something good:

> Being a foreigner is a nice thing. I am happy (to be a foreigner). I like being a foreigner ... I don't see it as an obstacle in social life. I am Dutch and Turkish … So you are a foreigner to both (cultures) and you are within both (cultures). It depends on how you look upon things.

Likewise, Fikret, a 27-year-old male, born in an immigrant Turkish family and a university graduate in the field of business communication and information technology, also views his position as one in which he has access to two cultures rather than as one in which he is deprived of both of them. Saying that he feels himself sixty per cent Turkish and forty per cent Dutch, he gives the impression that he enjoys this mixed identity:

> You know the negative and positive ways of both cultures. So you can take what you like from both of them and add to your daily life.

According to our hypothesis, the reason why Mert and Fikret find something valuable in their hybridity is that it does not obstruct their agency, but rather enhances it. As Mert says, hybridity is not an 'obstacle in social life'. Fikret, too, has the approach of an agent, speaking of his ability to 'take what you like from both of them'.

Now, to the extent that hybridity does not interfere with one's ability to successfully realize one's goals of action, but rather facilitates one's agency, it may well be a positive experience. Things are different, however, when, as in the case of Mehmet and Eda, agents find their lives being made more complicated by their hybridity, and when their capacity for agency is weakened by their lack of confidence in their ability to manage their hybridized identity.

Likewise, in a similar study of migrants coming from the rural and Kurdish-speaking eastern parts of Turkey to settle in Istanbul, it is observed that although they feel torn between a village life which is no longer theirs and an urban life which is not yet theirs, they still recognize the positive aspects of living and working in Istanbul. The multicultural environment of the big city as well as the requirements of adaptability and flexibility inherent in all kinds of commercial activities functioned for them 'as a source of education that had enabled them to understand, resist and cope with oppression in a superior way'

(Sonnenschein and van Meijl, 2014: 494). In other words, although the move from rural village life to the life of a metropolis results in a hybrid identity, this identity is not thought of in negative terms, since it is associated with an experience of having one's capacity for agency expanded.

In this context, one should also note that one of the reasons why people dream about migrating, whether or not they actually realize this dream, is that their present conditions seem to limit rather than to expand their capacity for agency. In a study of young and educated Bangladeshis, one of the informants 'refers to the lack of possibilities for individual development in Bangladesh, to an overall sense of frustration, and to places that would offer all the possibilities he is yearning for' (Bal, 2014: 277).

Conclusion

Whether or not hybridity is a positive experience along the lines suggested by Homi Bhabha depends on how it affects persons' capacity for agency. Hybridity may well have emancipatory and anti-authoritarian effects as Bhabha claims, but there is no necessity about it. It will all depend on the social and cultural setting of a hybrid identity, and how this setting affects persons' capacity for agency.

For instance, there is likely to be a difference between, on the one hand, a colonized people who appropriate aspects of the colonizers' culture and then use the resulting hybrid identity to challenge the colonizers, and, on the other hand, a group of immigrants in a society cuturally different from their own. While the colonized people at least have a secure basis in their relation to the place in which they live, the immigrants cannot with an equal ease claim a 'property right' in the host country. The colonized people can at least argue that it is the colonizers who are the 'foreigners', but this option is not available to the immigrants.

Likewise, it is one thing if a person's hybridity experience is related to a secure and internationally recognized status as, for instance, a university professor. In this case hybridity may indeed come with all the benefits and advantages associated with the phenomenon labelled cosmopolitanism, expanding the person's capacity for agency, rather than limiting it. But it is another thing if a person's hybridity experience is related to her being a migrant or a child of migrants, finding herself alienated from the culture of the society from which she or her parents have migrated as well as from the culture of the society in which she now lives. In such a case, hybridity may bring about a loss of self-confidence which in turn may inhibit the agent's capacity to realize her goals. Here hybridity is more likely to be a negative experience. However, there is no necessity about this. Migrants may well turn their hybridity into a confident self-conception as well as into successful agency.

The limited studies that we and others have made on the experiences of migrants strongly suggest that cases of hybridity should be evaluated in terms of their impact on persons' capacity for agency. By studying hybridity from the

point of view of its impact on the agency of particular persons, we will reach a more grounded position as regards the value of hybridity than if we just assume that it has to be liberating because it dissolves certain essentialist conceptions of identity.

After all, the anti-essentialism inherent in hybridity does not care whether the identities it breaks down belong to people in power or people victimized by power. Hence, we should keep an open mind about the value of hybridity, reminding ourselves of the different contexts in which different hybridized persons may find themselves. Here we would also like to point to the need for more empirical research concerning the impact of hybridity on the choices available to persons as well as on their capacity to realize these choices.

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