Culture, National Identity and Security

Alex Macleod

Université du Québec à Montréal

General argument and plan

It will be argued that the concepts of culture and collective identity, especially national identity, are very closely linked and that one has to be very careful about linking culture and security, let alone human security, since culture very often evokes exclusion rather than inclusion and that security carried out in the name of culture can sometimes have some very negative consequences. This means that we have to think carefully exactly how culture can be integrated into a human security agenda.

In this presentation, I'll look at three aspects of the issue:

1) the process of producing security (securitisation);

2) the relationship between culture, national identity and security;

3) the questions that have to be dealt with in integrating culture and identity into a more general human security agenda.

1. The process of producing security

It is very important to remember that security is not simply a "good", a value or a simple given, but is very much an ongoing project produced by a process known as securitisation, and is therefore clearly a "social construction". This process includes deciding what is to be the referent object of security, defining the threats to the security of this referent object and determining the means to ensure this security.

Though securitisation is often presented as a "speech act" on the part of the authorities, this is by no means the whole story. To begin with the "authorities", i.e. the government, are rarely the only participant in the securitisation process – a host of other players are involved directly or indirectly, such as security professionals, political parties, pressure groups and the

media. Secondly, no less important for securitisation is the actual practice of security, whether it involves applying security rules in airports, tightening up border controls, or declaring orange or yellow levels of "security alerts". Finally, security legislation comes somewhere between securitisation as a speech act and practice, since it usually translates the speech act into something more concrete and lays down the framework within which securitising practices take place.

Clearly, both the conditions in which securitisation takes place and the process itself are highly political, even though the declared objective of those taking part is to remove security from politics. But more important, from the point of view of the question being dealt with here, it is not a morally neutral process. Far from it, securitisation involves making moral decisions with ethical consequences. Thus if we decide that culture is fundamental referent object of security, then we must also accept or at least acknowledge what that may mean in terms of determining exactly what parts of that culture need to be protected, how do we do it and above all who or what is to be included and who or what is to be excluded. In the extreme case securitising culture may result in violence and even war. We all have examples in mind, whether it be the struggle for Basque independence, the situation in Northern Ireland or the turmoil in former Yugoslavia since the end of the Cold War.

2. Culture, National Identity and Security

To begin with we need at least a working definition of these three concepts. Culture, when related to identity, involves at least two distinct notions: culture as an integral part of identity; culture as an expression of identity. They are obviously linked, but they are not identical and have to be treated differently in any theory of cultural securitisation. I suggest a very simple definition of culture as it affects identity as a way of life, or a way of doing things, whether it be in an organization, a group or within a state.

Likewise, identity can be defined in a deceptively simple way as being how we define ourselves, both vis-à-vis our own selves (i.e. intrinsically) and vis-à-vis others (i.e. extrinsically). In the first case, we are talking about what Manuel Castell's calls a "core identity" (Castells 2004: 6-7), which involves sets of values, beliefs, attitudes about oneself and others. This is a fairly stable form of identity, though it can evolve through the years and may even change rapidly during and after critical events in one's life. The second type of identity concerns, in particular,

the roles that we play in society and our relationships with others. In this case, we often have multiple identities and they can be fluctuating quite substantially. In both types of identity, culture occupies a vital place. Identity is clearly a fundamental part of us as individuals, at least in liberal democratic societies, but the most important form of identity in our present debate is that of collective identity, and in particular national identity. Collective identity involves shared or intersubjective sets of values, beliefs etc. of which a collective culture is a fundamental part. Fluctuation and change are even more prevalent here than in the case of individual identity. In the words of the Irish political scientist Bill McSweeney: "Identity is not a fact of society; it is a process of negotiation among people and interest groups" (McSweeney 1999: 73). The concept of "national identity" is important, even if we reject a stato-centric view of international relations. In the first place, the state is one of the most important international actors, and the definition of its borders also acts as a definition of a particular identity. Secondly, in this era of growing nationalism, the (nation)-state is not the only form assumed by national identity, but is also an important point of reference in the modern political debate, as the recent referenda in the EU have clearly shown. Having said that, in this project we obviously cannot confine ourselves to national identity as the only form of relevant collective identity.

As for security, again I suggest a simple working definition, which suggest that something is declared sufficiently vital that it must be protected from a or several real or apprehended threats. Again we are entering a very complex area, where insecurities and fear abound. Where those wishing to gain, maintain or extend power may exploit concerns with security to attain their own ends. In particular, in the context of our present discussion, I would like to insist on the difference between what I call negative and positive conceptions of security. Negative security involves above all identifying threats and devising ways to eliminate them. In other words, negative security means absence of threat. It is usually founded on distrust of the Other and on the perpetual existence of a security dilemma. Positive security, on the other hand, implies two things: that very often the way to confront the Other is not by mistrust and hostility but by reassuring him or her; that, secondly, that eliminating the manifestations or expressions of a threat will not in itself remove that threat, that one must deal with insecurities at their source. To borrow from critical theorists, a positive conception of security is closely tied to the idea of emancipation, or freedom from insecurity, and the right to development. Obviously human security is a necessarily a form of positive security.

Culture, identity and security can be linked in at least five ways:

1) culture in the first meaning given above is part of national identity, and together they can become the referent object of security. Culture and identity can themselves be securitised. This is, of course, the area where the culture/security nexus can become particularly dangerous, especially when culture and identity are thought of in exclusionist terms;

2) culture and identity are involved in whether one has a negative or a positive view of security. American and Canadian attitudes to security very much reflect these differences;

3) the values attached to a national conception of security can actually become part of one's culture. I am thinking, for example, of the pacifist views of security which are now a fundamental part the national identities of post-World War II Japan and Germany;

4) culture and identity are connected to the way one sees and selects threats to security. For example, is there a natural hostility toward foreigners and all things "foreign"? Experiences of and traditional attitudes toward multiculturalism are integrated into the culture and influence perceptions of threats;

5) culture and identity very much influence the choice of means to ensure security. One only has to compare Spanish and American reactions to the events of March 11 2004 and September 11 2001, and the means chosen to deal with the threat to understand how culture affects the way we see the world and how we should conduct our relations with "alien" cultures.

3. Culture, National Identity and Human Security

In this final part of my presentation, I will confine myself mainly to a series of questions we have to answer if we are to develop a meaningful project around our general theme:

- How do we define culture and security, and in particular human security, in a satisfactory way for the ends of our project

- Whose culture are we protecting? Clearly some cultures are much more in need of protection than others. On the other hand, we must avoid a simple North/South dichotomy, since many cultures in the developed world are very much under threat from more powerful cultures.

- What criteria should be used to determine which cultures or what parts of any particular culture need protecting?

- What means should be used or proscribed to protect all or part of cultural identity?

- How do we avoid the twin pitfalls inherent in this type of project of cultural imperialism (i.e. imposing our own conceptions of what is culture and what is culturally acceptable) and cultural relativism (i.e. accepting any cultural practice on the grounds that we must avoid being cultural imperialists, however abhorrent practice may be)? Obvious examples spring to mind: trying to impose the values of liberal democracy from above, by war if necessary; accepting the practice of female excision in the name of "respecting cultural differences"). These examples suggest that a line must be drawn somewhere. The difficulty is knowing where

- How do we make the link between culture and human rights, a basic part of the whole concept of human security?