

Jean-François Bayart.

The Illusion of Cultural Identity

Translated by Steven Rendall, Janet Roitman, Cynthia Schoch and Jonathan Derrick.

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The Illusion of Cultural Identity is a sophisticated and provocative text with the potential to make meaningful contributions to the sociological examinations of culture, politics, globalization and post-colonialism, specifically, and to sociological theory and historical sociology, more generally. In this text, Jean-François Bayart offers a complex account of the social world, attending primarily to the relationships between “cultural representations and political practices, popular modes of political action, and the political *imaginaire*” in a global context (ix). Describing his aims as both modest and Nietzschean, the author advances in the preface that intellectual inquiry ought to help us “free ourselves from ourselves” by leading us astray from what we (think we) know. Throughout, Bayart develops a caustic critique of “culturalism” and specifically, of the belief in the existence of “primordial identities...imperturbably travers(ing) the centuries” (85) with incandescent cultural “cores.” His over-arching concern is with the commonplace reduction of political action to an expression of an underlying and/or immanently unfolding cultural identity. The alternative to culturalism that is creatively developed and identified under the rubric of the “*imaginaire*” brings the historically contingent, negotiated, differentiated, recycled, and invented nature of social formations into the foreground of an understanding of the intersections of cultural and political life.

This book was first published in French in 1996; in its 2005 foreword it is proposed that “there are few contemporary matters that do not involve the problem of the illusion of cultural identity” (x). This “illusion,” Bayart argues, is reiterated in various ways, including through expressions of Western Islamophobia, Hindu nationalism in India, references to a “Confucian legacy” to account for economic “miracles” in East Asia, “political correctness” and multi-culturalism in the United States, and French government policy’s tacit support of the Rwandan genocide through the invocation of an uncontestable “Francophone cultural community.” The author’s passion to discredit all forms of culturalist reasoning is fuelled in large part by the shadows cast by recent wars and insurgencies which, as he puts it, drew “lethal power from the assumption that a so-called ‘cultural identity’... corresponds to a ‘political identity’” (ix). Thus while Bayart’s field of inquiry is impressively broad and includes examples as diverse as “hillbilly” music competitions in the United States, the chewing of khat in Yemen, and the invention of “authentic Turkmen” carpets for the global market, it is the troubling backdrop of violence, war, “ethnic cleansing,” and genocide that gives this polemical text its particular force.

While the culturalist position that is being railed against is not new, Bayart suggests that in the contemporary period, there is a haunting spectre of the vanishing of difference (and dilution of particularity) that accompanies the general “opening up” of societies (globalisation); this engenders an exacerbation of particular identities (e.g. religious, national, ethnic, popular cultural), whereby heritage is overstated and innovation is concealed. Further, while cultural values may generally be understood as “relative” in the contemporary world, Bayart argues that a troubling assumption that tends to accompany this (now) commonplace recognition is that “we belong to different species or sub-species” and that “communication between cultures is impossible in principle” (xii).

The narrative is organized into two major sections. In part one (chapters 1 and 2), Bayart develops his unrelenting —and at times comical — critique of culturalism. Through a prolific and strongly

theoretical engagement with diverse examples drawn from across the globe, and taken primarily from his extensive research on the societies of sub-Saharan Africa, Turkey and Iran, Bayart works to puncture the “hallucinatory discourses” of culturalism by uncovering the heterogeneous, contradictory, conflictual, derivative, and endlessly transformed “core” of any group configuration. The very concept of culture, it is argued, has an ossifying tendency which leads the author to suggest — in one of this text’s more hyperbolic moments — that if language were biodegradable, we would be best to do away with the notion altogether!

In part II (chapters 3 and 4), the notion of the imaginaire (the imaginary) is used to explore how different political repertoires are creatively constituted out of ambivalent, ambiguous and imagined components of culture. The imaginaire is, in essence, a social imagination, a set of interwoven meanings (and representations) whose *enunciation* is constitutive and open-ended. Considered less reifying than the concept of culture, the imaginaire is formulated along the lines of an absorbent “blotter” which “soaks up the ink” of political action, in an implicit and perpetual dialogue interweaving past, present and imagined futures of a society. While Bayart strongly rejects the Weberian conception of modern society as disenchanting, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is held up as an exemplary text for how it highlights the place of contingency, overlapping influences, and “sequences of circumstances” in the ironies and paradoxes of human history. With respect to culture’s relation to politics specifically, a significant thematic running through the text is that “there are only strategies based on identity, rationally conducted by identifiable actors” (x). Alluding to his recommendation that the social analyst attend to how different repertoires are enunciated by identifiable actors, who are embedded in particular sets of social relations, Bayart remarks that “Christians have sometimes interpreted the grammatical sentence, 'Thou shalt not kill' in strange ways, with the Church’s blessing” (121).

The importance of the relationship between interpretive acts and “a certain materiality” is developed persuasively. It is noted, for example, that the time-space compression which is characteristic of “the imaginaire of globalization” (182) is tied inextricably to particular transformations in communication and transportation technologies. Along analytically similar, but historically different lines, Bayart elaborates upon how the imaginaire of Terror during the French Revolution emerged in part out of “the countless technical difficulties raised by the guillotine” (182). Political imaginaires are also materialized (and contested) through subjectively meaningful everyday practices and bodily rituals. On this theme, Bayart presents an insightful discussion of how particular hair-styles, clothing styles and culinary customs come to crystallize distinctive political subjectivities and modes of existence, albeit in contradictory and conflictual ways. A timely illustration of the polysemousness of such materializations appears in a lengthy discussion of the “Muslim” veil (the *hijab*).

A major thrust in Bayart’s theoretic approach, which is explicated in the conclusion, is that every society is marked indissolubly by radical heterogeneity and thus, by a radical incompleteness. While he acknowledges that various social theorists (e.g. Tocqueville, Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Elias, Bakhtin, Foucault) noted the absence of coherent social totalities “long ago,” Bayart remarks that, curiously, western societies generally “find it difficult to acknowledge and incorporate this fundamental lesson” (234). While the text does not really take this up as an interesting (and/or analyzable) phenomenon in its own right, one of its notable strengths is how it encourages a reflexive reading of the relations between (so-called) identity, culture, and politics. The text concludes with the statement that more than anything today, the “illusion of cultural identity” threatens the very stability of social order. This ending is somewhat unsatisfactory in its abruptness; it would have been helpful if Bayart had developed the implications of his argument further by

elaborating upon what a social world might look like, or how our current global and political configurations could be different, if the theoretical schema that he has elaborated were to be widely taken up and deployed.

One of the exceptional strengths of this text is Bayart's ability to move artfully between theoretical discussion and empirical example, while avoiding the excesses of either abstract theoreticism or concrete empiricism. This is not incidental; the alternative to culturalism that Bayart expounds (and embodies) in this text requires nuanced interpretive analysis of the variations and "leaps" between "identity-registers" (94) that occur within (and between) particular social formations across space and time. The text borders on repetitiousness and Bayart sometimes meanders in his discussion of examples; that said, the diverse repertoire of material that is so richly woven into the argument has the advantage of enabling the reader to clarify the complex theoretical moves that are being made through their vivid illustrations.

While this text offers a stimulating contribution to many existing sociological conversations, it was clearly written with an eye towards influencing the very categories that we use more generally to speak and make judgments about the social world(s) in which we are embedded. In this spirit, if one drawback is that it is not always clear to whom Bayart is referring when he invokes the maligned figure of the culturalist (professional academic, policy maker, political analyst, journalist, or everyday member?), a corresponding strength is, arguably, the belief in the possibility that thoughtful inquiry can transcend any border.

Tara H. Milbrandt

Trent University
taramilbrandt@trentu.ca

Tara Milbrandt is an assistant professor in the Sociology department at Trent University, where she teaches classical theory and introductory sociology. Her current research explores the negotiated order of the city through interpretive inquiry into the contested terrain of public spaces, with a focus upon contemporary Toronto.

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