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Blame it on Minorities!

Or How (Not) to Avoid Adaptive Leadership

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Introduction

This paper addresses the situation of minorities in contemporary European societies, as well the challenge it poses for public leadership. It revolves around the questions of why minorities have increasingly become the target of visceral exclusionary discourses, and what the role of leadership has been and consequently can be in such situation.

This short study draws on the distinct works of two authors, namely anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and senior lecturer in public leadership Ronald Heifetz. First, it looks at the function of minorities in liberal democracies. Then it explains how the nation-state perceives the position of minorities, as well as how the phenomenon of globalization with the transformations it entails has affected that position. In other words, it addresses the link between the condition of minorities within the modern nation-state and the marginalization of the nation-state by the forces of globalization. Second, it looks at how authorities deal with this new configuration and what qualifies it as an adaptive situation in contrary to a technical one. Finally, the paper approaches the implications of such a challenge and concludes with some recommendations for both leadership and its subjects.

Minority, majority, and the nation-state

The term minority represents a relational concept, in the sense that it cannot exist in isolation, but it is always associated with the idea of majority and, thus, totality. Minorities and majorities constitute recent historical inventions, as they have emerged from modern-world state processes of census, statistics, political representation, etc. Therefore, minorities are social and demographic categories and they bear specific configurations depending on the nation-states' circumstances that have produced them.

In *Fear of small numbers*, Appadurai (2006) argues that in liberal democracies, minorities initially played a procedural role. In Western liberal thought and particularly in the context of rational debate, they were attached a positive value as they held the fundamental right to dissent (for instance, the right of minorities in courts, parliaments, and other deliberative bodies to criticize the policies of the state, or the right to question the religious opinions of the majority). As such, they were minorities “solely by and of opinion” (Appadurai, 2006: 63) and, most importantly, they were temporary.

However, nowadays minorities have much to do with difference than with dissent. Minorities are no longer just procedural, but they have become social and cultural and, thus, permanent minorities. In the second half of the twentieth century, especially with the work of the United Nations in the human rights sphere, these social and cultural minorities became to be seen as bearers of real or potential rights. This “displacement of the liberal concern with protecting the opinions of procedural minorities [...] onto the rights of permanent cultural minorities” (Appadurai, 2006: 64) has not only generated struggles over citizenship and political participation, but it has also affected the sense of national boundaries, national sovereignty, and the purity of national ethnos. Consequently, an important characteristic of contemporary minorities is that they activate new concerns about rights, entitlements from the state, identity and belonging. This shift in the status of minorities is related to a broader transformation in global economy and politics that globalization has triggered.

Globalization and minorities within the nation-state

Inda and Rosaldo (2002: 6) argued that globalization "refers to the intensification of global interconnectedness, suggesting a world full of movement and mixture, contacts and linkages, and persistent cultural interaction and exchange." Four years later, they updated this definition and acknowledged a more profound dimension of the phenomenon, emphasizing that globalization does not constitute a growing interconnectedness solely, but that “it implies a fundamental reordering of time and space” (Inda & Rosaldo, 2006: 8). Other authors, for instance Anthony Giddens and David Harvey, have also discussed this new feature for which they employed the terms “disembedding” and, respectively, “time-space compression”, essentially referring to the speeding up of social life in general, and to the concomitant increased relativization of space. Neoliberalism and the economic interdependence it entails, the transnational flows asking for a redefinition of the role of the nation-state, the technological developments (especially the Internet) encouraging and even demanding contact and exchange, as well as the intertwining of local and global processes are the core configurations that have begun to depict a more and more abstract reality. Thus, the world in which we live today is characterized by an unprecedented cluster of features, encompassing interactions that are new both in terms of order and intensity.

The dynamics of present day-life (for some, schizophrenic and even chaotic) have begun to take a new shape, in which one of the most conspicuous transformations concerns the relation between economy, culture and politics. In his book *Modernity at large*, Arjun Appadurai (1996) analyzes this aspect and argues that the three represent power structures that ceased to operate in a harmonic fashion, in the sense that they have become increasingly disconnected from one another. He explains that different types of global cultural flows (for which he employs the terms “ethnoscapes”, “mediascapes”, “technoscapes”, “financescapes”, and “ideoscapes”) are in disjuncture, provided that they constitute fluid, irregular, unpredictable landscapes, governed by their own constraints and incentives, and therefore more prone to evolve independently. The disjunctive relation between these global flows of people, media, technology, money, and ideologies means that they are no longer synchronized coherently and operate with different rhythms. As such, they are bound to create tensions and contradictions that form, in turn, what Appadurai calls “a crisis of circulation” (Appadurai 2006: 29).

This crisis of circulation and particularly the speed and intensity with which global flows now circulate across national boundaries have created a new setting in which the modern system of nation-states finds itself undermined. In a way, the transformations triggered by globalization have urged us to rethink some of the core assumptions of the modern nation-state, as part of its fundamental verities (e.g. the idea of a population which it can count and include in its territorial boundaries, the idea of a reliable census, or the idea of fixed and transparent categories) have been deeply shattered. Moreover, especially the recent economic crisis made prominent not only the high level of interdependence that exists between states, but also how little control states can exercise over their own economies. The forces of globalization have torn apart the nation-state’s dream of a powerful national economy; as such, the nation-state is left with the cultural field as the only potential and possible full subject to its fantasies of becoming a pure, authentic, bounded and secure sphere. As Appadurai (2006: 23) explicitly writes, “the nation-state has been steadily reduced to the fiction of its ethos as the last cultural resource over which it may exercise full dominion.”

The intensity, fluidity and irregularity of global flows, as well as the transformations they inflicted upon the modern nation-state constitute the ubiquitous background on which governments are faced with an unprecedented level of social uncertainty, and increasingly confronted with demands to reestablish this balance. In this respect, the phenomenon of

globalization, the one perceived as the source of these changes, cannot constitute the target of governmental measures simply because it does not have a face or a concrete identification. But minorities can. Appadurai's fundamental argument is that there is a link between the position of minorities within the modern nation-state and the marginalization of the nation-state by the forces of globalization. More precisely, "minorities are the major site for displacing the anxieties of many states about their own minority or marginality (real or imagined) in a world of a few megastates, of unruly economic flows and comprised sovereignties" (Appadurai 2006: 43). Consequently, minorities are the flashpoints of governmental efforts to reestablish the necessary level of social certainty, and thus, have become the target of negative views, and highly exclusionary discourses and public actions. Drawing on the "competitive threat" theoretical model (according to which out-group populations are subject to hostility and exclusionary attitudes as a result of the threats they are perceived to be posing, and of the in-group's fear of competition), Gorodzeisky (2010) demonstrates that there is a growing tendency in European societies to oppose immigrant groups on the basis of the economic conditions in their countries of origin.

Roughly in the past five years, Europe experienced the resurgence of right-wing extremist parties and witnessed their growth, mainly in light of the support they managed to gather through the use of strong anti-immigrant discourses and manifestos. This month, the Greek party Golden Dawn, described by The Washington Post as the "most extreme of Europe's far right parties to enter Parliament", won 7% of the national elections, the equivalent of 21 seats in the national parliament. On 22nd April, the leader of France's National Front, Marine Le Pen, obtained nearly 18% of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections. She came in the third place after receiving more than 6 million votes. The same anti-immigrant and Euro-skeptic message made Austria's Freedom Party the second most popular in the country, which holds 34 of the 183 seats in parliament. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Freedom Party, the third-largest in the parliament after the 2010 elections with 24 seats, brought down the minority government last month, by refusing an austerity package and withdrawing its support. The People's Party is currently the third-largest party in Denmark, the country that has adopted some of the strictest immigration laws in Europe.

However, neither is this paper about extreme right-wing parties, nor does it try to weight their chances of ascending to power; more details on the rightist rhetoric of exclusion especially

towards immigrant is offered by Verena Stolcke (1995) in her article entitled “New boundaries, new rhetorics of exclusion in Europe”. The main point here is that parties such as the ones mentioned above have gained a high amount of support from the population by pledging acerbic opposition not only to immigration, but also to ethnic diversity and multiculturalism, which they perceive as endangering their countries and Europe in general. Their popularity cannot and should not be discarded on the ground that people who vote for them are uneducated or unemployed. Of paramount importance is to understand that these parties, their programmes and their actions feed an increasing amount of social uncertainty and insecurity that exists and that needs to be readjusted. In this respect, authorities are pressured to deal with this situation and to take the necessary measures to remedy it, but a certain sense of urgency pushes current leadership to throw quick fixes at problems that are more profound and that may not have short-term solutions. All motivations for such actions are comprised only of discourses on threats and national security, as well as on identity and cultural unity.

The French case illustrates a suitable example. Estimating that nearly 10% of all the crimes in France were committed by the Roma, president Nicolas Sarkozy (2010) embarked on a campaign to “put an end to the wild squatting and camping of the Roma.” In 2009, France began deporting almost 10,000 Roma back to their originating countries of Bulgaria and Romania. In 2010, the French government issued a policy according to which every Roma leaving the country voluntarily would receive a sum of 300 euro, and an additional 100 euro per child. 80% of the ones deported in 2010 took the money and left voluntarily. But of course, following logical reasoning, many of them regarded this as a free holiday opportunity, after which they went right back from where they had departed. Even though in 2010, France received EU as well as UN warnings that urged the country not only to restrain from discriminatory political speeches against minorities, but also to avoid collective deportations of the Roma, it continued its policy. Moreover, the goal set for 2011 was to repatriate 30,000 Roma. This case reflects the discrepancy between the challenges that indeed exist and the actions undertaken by public authorities, who in fact do not solve the problems but only prolong them. Ronald Heifetz addresses this issue in his book *Leadership without easy answers*.

Leadership and adaptive challenges

It is already known and accepted that in times of uncertainty or distress, we turn to authorities in order for them to provide us with direction and to reestablish the necessary order. They represent authority structures that, over time, have accumulated and developed expertise as a result of the problem-solving processes they have dealt with. In this regard, Ronald Heifetz distinguishes between technical problems and adaptive challenges, which differ in terms of the type of response they require. The former category entails problems that have already been faced in the past; they are called technical because there is sufficient knowledge and organization to solve them. In other words, they represent routine problems to which authority structures already know how to respond.

Nevertheless, there are still many problems for which no adequate solution has yet been found, for which no expertise can suffice, and for which no established procedure would function. They force a response that is outside the current repertoire, as the already existing organizational design or structure is not able to handle it completely and appropriately. To refer to these situations, Heifetz employs the phrase adaptive challenges. And according to him, these are the times for leadership.

There are certain indicators that distinguish problems that are technical from adaptive challenges. Crisis is one of the indicators of an adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 1998) and it reflects a problem that has been adaptive in the past, but has not been addressed properly or provided an inappropriate solution, and therefore resurfaces periodically up to the point of generating a crisis. Persistent conflict is another indicator of an adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 1998), a conflict that needs to be explored, articulated and diagnosed. But such problems continue to exist because the system of already accepted expertise that is being applied to them can no longer do its job. Authorities are forced to deliver answers they simply cannot provide. Nevertheless, because they are under pressure to offer decisive solutions, usually actions are taken that only seem to remedy the issue, this way deflecting attention from but not actually solving it.

This creates a dependency pattern, where citizens keep looking to authorities for solutions (which is, in fact, what they are supposed to do as part of the “entrust power in exchange for service” agreement), people in authority start losing credibility as a result of them not treating the specific issue adequately, they keep over-promising what they cannot deliver, citizens become more and more disappointed about what is delivered and yet the problem still

exists. In this respect, Heifetz points out that “in the long term, some problems get worse, and then frustration arises both with the problem situation and with those people in authority who were supposed to resolve it. In response to our frustration, we are likely to perpetuate the vicious cycle by looking even more earnestly to authority, but this time we look for someone new offering more certainty and better promises” (Heifetz, 1998: 73). The same pattern applies also to the currently studied case of minorities perceived as an underlying source of problems that are the target of erroneously conceived and designed actions of leaders in present authority positions, and that are promised to be better taken care of by other politicians unfortunately belonging to extremist parties, whose solutions are even farther from being suitable or potentially efficient.

In fact, a common mistake in leadership is diagnostic failure (Heifetz, 1998). Authority does not necessarily mean leadership. Often, people in authority positions fail to lead precisely because they engage in dealing with adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. Adaptive challenges are delivered technical fixes, which causes the situations to prolong and to rake up its issues periodically. Of paramount importance in leadership (and decisive for its success) is for authority figures to be able to identify or distinguish between the two types of situations, provided that they require different responses.

Heifetz’s core argument is that in an adaptive challenge, authority structures play their role, but this is not sufficient in order to overcome it; ordinary people are part of the problem and their ownership of and responsibility for the problem become part of the solution itself. Authorities cannot just take the problem off people’s shoulders and provide them with technical, decisive answers. Instead, what they can do is to mobilize their authoritative capacities toward a solution, to make use of a different discourse in which citizens realize that there are no quick, fix-all responses to existing issues, and that even the problems that today no longer exceed the current know-how repertoire, were adaptive challenges in the past, that became routines over time.

Conclusions

This paper argued that the phenomenon of globalization has altered some of the core assumptions of the world in which we live today and has shaped a new configuration for global interactions and exchanges that unfold at a pace and intensity never encountered in the past. In this new setting, the modern system of nation-states is particularly challenged. Nevertheless, it

would be absurd to talk about an end of the nation-state, but its weakened position on the global stage affects the internal processes that it fully ruled before, and that now have escaped its total control. In this sense, minorities are a constant reminder of this transformation and as such, have become the target of increasingly exclusionary discourses and practices.

In times characterized by unprecedented amounts of social uncertainty, by time pressure and by real or imagined threats, leadership is of paramount importance. In an attempt to re-balance the required level of certainty, people in authority positions mistakenly address adaptive challenges with technical fixes; they offer concrete and decisive solutions that only create the impression that the situations are under control and that the issues are being taken care of, while in fact the problems persist. With regard to this matter, the French case of the deportation of the Roma was used as an example.

Nonetheless, what is needed from current leadership is to develop strategies through which people become engaged in facing the adaptive challenge Europe is now experiencing. Citizens must understand that the difficulties emerging from immigration, and ethnic diversity and multiculturalism in general, are not to be solved by imposing radical decisions or by simply eliminating them. Instead, authoritative instruments can, at most, be useful in generating debate and steer processes of social learning, but not as a solution *per se*. Leadership entails authorities to help people realize that some of their perspectives, values, loyalties, attitudes and ways of being will need to be renegotiated and readjusted, and that them taking responsibility for the problem is part of the solution itself. A fundamentally adaptive challenge for European societies that remains to be tested, is whether leadership will succeed in making use of a new discourse in which citizens become aware of the fact that the role of people in authority positions is not necessarily to provide technical solutions and clear-cut answers, but is instead to frame the right question.

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