

Investigating the Challenges and Opportunities of Iranians' National Identity in the Age of Globalization

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Abstract

Identity is the process of answering a bunch of questions of a person about himself/herself, such as: Who is he/she? Where has he/she been? To what tribe, race or nation does he/she belong? Where is his/her origin? And, what role does he/she play in world's civilization? Meanwhile, national identity is a means to distinguish one nation from another one based on shared consciousness around some collectively defined concepts, and no national identity will be developed unless there would be a common consciousness. However, the situation of national identity of countries especially developing countries such as Iran has more complicated in the age of so-called Globalization. This phenomenon that is caused by the change of economic infrastructure of capitalist world and the expansion of transportation and communication means such as mass media, have connected all societies, cultures etc. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to investigate the components of Iranians' national identity and the challenges and opportunities posed in this regard in the era of globalization, using desk research methodology. In this context, the main question of the research is "What impact globalization has had on Iranians' national identity?" In other words, does globalization process undermine Iranians' national identity or strengthen it? The hypothesis proposed here is that globalization is both a challenge and opportunity; hence, Iranians' national identity should possess the capacity to cope with new sub-national and transnational identities. Finally, the required data and information has been collected from archival, library and internet resources.

Keywords: Identity, National Identity, Globalization

Introduction

There is a plethora of meanings and symbols in all societies that is relatively continuous and constant over time and allows the members of a group or society to share history, land, and other social and cultural factors such as language, religion, customs and traditions, so that they can consider themselves to be a incorporated unit which is called "national identity" and is the highest level of identity for individuals and causes that the people of different lands can be distinguished from each other. The concept of national identity is a complex phenomenon and includes objective and subjective aspects; by subjective aspect of national identity, we mean that a nation continually remembers its distinction and such feeling is always present in human's unconsciousness. Meanwhile, the objective dimension of national identity is linked to the social division of labor. It plays an important role in one's position and in shaping his/her individual identity, and makes a person to displace loyalty to ethnic identity with national identity. However, some issues have happened today that have changed all spheres of life, including culture, history, religion and national identity of individuals due to their extensive nature, and since identity is the relationship between inner and outer world, globalization affects identities unintentionally. Globalization in general, is a complex process, which is one of the defining features of the final decade of the twentieth century as well as the most important challenge in the twenty-first century. Lack of a common acceptable definition and proper understanding of this concept have given rise to several debates, such that different theories have been proposed on the basis of various perceptions and numerous definitions. Indeed, cultural globalization affects the glo-

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balization of norms, beliefs and goals of a particular culture and civilization, regardless of cultural, historical and social distinctions and differences with other nations and civilizations (Jam, 2002). Nevertheless, Iranians' national identity should have the capacity to deal with threats of this phenomenon as well as to capture the opportunities that are presented by it.

Definition of Concepts

Globalization

Consequences of globalization as an encompassing process have affected all individual or group aspects of humankind life in the realm of space. The level and depth of this process is directly connected with the role-playing of political units in the realm of sciences, economics, the level of benefiting from the technology etc. (Salzano, 2003). Numerous definitions have been proposed for the term "globalization", some of which are presented here.

Malcolm Waters argue that globalization is a social process in which geographical constraints imposed on social relations and cultural ties will be eliminated, and people increasingly become aware of the decrease of such constraints (Waters, 2000). Klaus Dodds also mentions the foundation of globalization as the end of the Cold War, data and financial networks, fragmentation of sovereignty of states, regionalism and media (Dodds, 2000). At macro-level analysis, Martin Albrow defines globalization as processes based on which all people of the world join an inclusive global society (Sedaghat, 2000). In fact, the offered definitions for globalization are considerably diverse; these may include: compactness of the world, more interdependence of different parts of the world, integration of all economic aspects in global extent, broadening of impact and influence range of social interactions, reduced costs imposed by space and time etc. In general, some common elements can be identified within these diverse definitions and conceptions (Archer, 1991). The major common issue in all of these different views and understandings of globalization can be summarized as "reducing the impact of the national borders and their collapse", in a way that national states lose their sovereignty over their lands and some partners will be found on this issue (Saeedi & KIA, 2006).

Identity

Identity is the process of answering a bunch of questions knowingly by a person about himself/herself, such as: Who is he/she? Where has he/she been? What has he/she been? Who is he/she? To what tribe, race or nation does he/she belong? Where is his/her origin? And what role does he/she play in world's civilization? → (Bavand, 1998) some scholars have defined identity with an emphasis on "distinction aspect", for example, Sheykhavandi believes that: Identity represents a set of attributes, which make an explicit definition of an object or a person, possible (Sheykhavandi, 2001). In addition, some sociologists have defined identity with its "argumentative and confrontational view"; they believe that basically, identity can be defined against "other". If space will be homogeneous, identity cannot emerge. From this perspective, identity means existence, something by which an individual can be identified and he/she may differentiate himself/herself from the others. Humans define their identity in eliminating something or against something else → (Tajik, 2011). Identity is a concept that applies to personal states and actions, and is rooted in upbringing in family, cultural teachings and cultural and social beliefs; it creates distinction and individuality for a person or a society. In fact, identity is formed by social processes and after manifestation remains, changes, or even is reshaped as a result of social interactions → (Berger and Luckmann, 1996). Objective components of identity at social level provide structures of national identity and differentiate it from other national identities and nationalities → (Hafez Nia et al, 2006). National identity undergoes metamorphosis due to the changes of political system, evolution in cultural beliefs and its openness to other cultural teachings and becomes relative and age-dependence issues, which direct consciousness, identity, attitudes and behaviors of people → (Haghdar, 2001). Accordingly, we can say that the behavioral characteristics of the people of a society at any time are inspired by their awareness and knowledge that, in addition to shaping the identity of the same society, it becomes the historical underpinnings for future generations → (Shakeri, 2004).

National Identity

One of the attitudes of individuals in terms of identity is their national identity as the foundation of formation of a nation. Several definitions have

been provided for the term “national identity”, some of which will be discussed here.

According to Ahmed Ashraf, the phenomenon has become popularized as a replacement for the term “national character” in the second half of the last century and is constructed by social sciences (Ashraf, 2006). Mackenzie also understands national identity as one of the four types of identities survived from the nineteenth century, along with the other three types, namely class, religious and ethnic identities. Some definitions of national identity stress the integrating elements of an independent political unit, and define it as a set of positive attitudes towards identity making and integrating elements and patterns at the level of country as a political unit (Hajiani, 2000). Anthony D. Smith provides this definition of national identity, “persistent reproduction and reinterpretation of pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that constitute the nation’s distinctive heritage and identification of the identity of the individuals by such pattern, heritage and cultural elements” (Smith, 2004). Ernest Renan’s definition of national identity is based on two categories, one which comes from history and is having a rich heritage, and the other is dependent on today, which is the existence of consciousness and consensus regarding the fact that individuals of a society are determined to continue their life as a single unit and continue inherited values (Aminian, 2007). Generally, national identity is the sense of loyalty and belongingness to some shared elements and symbols such as historical, social, geographical, political, religious, and cultural dimensions (Tavassoli and Ghasemi, 2002) and the bases of such dependencies, affiliations and distinct identities distinguishes nation-states from each other and defines their identity based on the term “nation” (Tehrani, 1997).

Theoretical Approach

Ronald Robertson Theory

Robertson understands globalization as a result of two simultaneous processes, i.e. particularism and universalism. He considers the first cycle of globalization more inclusive, and the second cycle as reflection of diverse globalizations shaped in homogeneous global circles according to professional, religious, ethnic, linguistic, and even gender-based desires. Robertson believes that both particular and universal should be fully taken into consideration. We are witnessing and participating in a massive

two-dimensional process, which is the simultaneous universalization of the particular and particularization of the universal. With such a view, we see the formation of many globalizations worldwide. Regarding the importance of this principle, Robertson writes, “in recent times the position of particularism and universalism is a kind of a world culture or in fact a major axis in structuring the whole world”. This two-way vision results in the situation where globalization is not only a chance and opportunity for revitalization and presentation of eastern cultures and religions, but also for various subcultures around the world that were to be destroyed, and now, thanks to communication technology, they have been able to strengthen and widen their ties and by means of cultural exchanges provide the grounds for further prosperity and creativity of themselves. According to this theory, globalization provides the chance for diverse cultures and identities to present themselves in an open world and can retrieve and reproduce. In this open space, cultures and identities become aware of their potentials and due to such understanding moves from “for themselves” position towards “in themselves” (Heydari, 2004). Globalization theory as proposed by Giddens is a description of this kind of situation; according to Giddens, by transforming the meaning of time and place and blurring the political and geographic boundaries, globalization will provide presentation and prosperity opportunity not only for cultures, but also even for subcultures (Giddens, 1999).

The Theory of Dual Globalization

The paradigm of dual globalization believes in two worlds in everyday life environment of human beings. The first world is the real world, the world already there, and human beings have nothing to do in making it, and our ancestors have experienced just this kind of world. However, the second world is the virtual world, which dates back not more than a few decades. This is the result of information and communication technology revolution and is a manmade world. The first world is distinguishable from the latter due to having geography, political system based on the nation-state, being natural-industrial, tangible and the feeling of being older. The second world also has some traits like placelessness, being beyond time, being solely industrial, not restricted by civil law based on nation-states, benefiting from altered postmodern epistemology, simultaneously available, being beyond space and benefiting from new cultural, ideological, econom-

ic and political spaces and thus is partially distinguished from the first world. In many cases, these two worlds will become like conjoined twins, where personal and social interaction in many realms depends on the interactions of these dual worlds, and here we are faced with conjoined dual globalization, where removing one of them will lead to the death of the others. Accordingly, today the most important change in the lives of people, which determines the future of the world, will be competitiveness of these two different worlds with each other. The emergence of the virtual world will designate many of the future trends, attitudes and potential of the world (Ameli, 2003: 55).

Berger and Luckmann's Theory

According to Berger and Luckmann, identity is one of the primary components of subjective reality and, like any subjective reality, is in a dialectical relationship with society. Identity is formed by social processes and after manifestation remains, changes, or even is reshaped as a result of social interactions. Social processes that are involved in the formation of identity and its preservation change in terms of social structure; furthermore, human being is interested in that identity which is confirmed by others (Yazdani and Morovvati, 2011).

Guy Rocher's Theory and Israel and Tajghol's Theory

According to Guy Rocher, each individual develops his/her identity by or through various environments to which he/she belongs, or turns, i.e. he/she can provide a definition of what is individual or social to him/her, for himself/herself or for others, as what is called social character is the same identity which provides the person with a place in the society and gives an integration to his/her being and action (Guy Rocher, 1991). However, according to Israel and Tajghol's theory, social identity is determined by the group to which he/she belongs, and such identity is a function of the cultural characteristics of the same group, and is based on an interpretation of inside the group and outside of the group (Almal, 1996).

Challenges of Iranians' National Identity in the Age of Globalization

National identity in Iran has many dimensions; nevertheless, any challenge for each dimension of national identity can have adverse effects on national identity as a whole. This section examines the

challenges of globalization for different dimensions of Iranians' national identity.

1. Historical-geographical Challenges of Iranian National Identity in the Age of Globalization

History is the collective consciousness of a community regarding its historic past, a sense of attachment to it, feeling a historical identity and Historicism. Time is considered as one of the elements involved in producing identities, and continuity over the time can grant identity. A person can claim to have identity only when he/she is ensured of his/her continuity. The past is important for fostering a sense of stability of character. Hence, in traditional societies, the past is much respected. However, as a result of globalization, the link between shared past and present is broken and the traditional order based on exclusive locations and meaningful and identity-making continuations are destroyed (Gol-Mohammadi, 2002: 236). Tradition links an individual to the history and decline of traditions weakens the link to the past and creates a gap between past and present.

However, one of the major challenges for Iranians' national identity in terms of geographic dimension due to the phenomenon of globalization is immigration feeling. Immigration feeling is different from immigration itself; in former case, the person is living in Iran, but his/her mind, attachments, entertainment, costumes etc. are in line with another culture. When migration feeling takes place, a kind of lost in the virtual world also occurs (Ameli, 2007: 473). In addition to increased penetrability of the boundaries due to expanding communication technologies, one of the consequences of globalization is the spread of democracy and self-determination and human rights issues that may affect the countries that have ethnic, linguistic and religious differences. Indeed, globalization has not only reduced the level of governmental authority, but also strengthens and stimulates subcultures, and by prioritizing sub-national identities promotes centrifugal tendencies; because many organizations adopt the disguise of humanitarian reasons and protection of minority rights to put pressure on the states and prevent them to take measures in order to effectively control and prevent centrifugal forces. This will eventually cause problems to the integrity and sovereignty of the countries with multiple languages, religions etc. It should be noted that, however, communication and the Internet provides many opportunities for sub-national identities in terms of mobilization of forces and extensive dissemination

of information. In other words, in the past, sub-national identities were faced with many restrictions on the reproduction and distribution of their books, pamphlets and announcements; meanwhile, nowadays they can easily perform such activities through the Internet (Mokhtari, 2007). Alongside the development approach and enhancing exchanges and transactions, this becomes an underlying reason for expansion of cultural and ethnic awareness and ends up in ethnic upheavals. Some researchers such as Walker Kunar, Elizabeth Robinson, Herbert Bloomer and Michael Brown has stressed this role and the impact of one-dimensional efforts of states for cultural standardization and consider communications more important than convergence in ethnic crises. Here, the role of communications is not considered a ground for national and global unity but for paving the way for crises. One of the major examples of geographical challenges of Iranians' national identity in the age of globalization is the Iranian Kurds' quest for autonomy and separation from Iran, to foster solidarity with the Kurds in Syria and Iraq for the formation of an independent country which has been under the influence of promotion of globalization phenomenon more than any other factor.

2. Cultural-social Challenges of Iranian National Identity in the Age of Globalization

Cultural heritage of each nation, which influences its national identity, includes a series of public rituals, architectural practices, traditions, festivals, myths, customs and folklore. C. S. Peirce classifies folklore issues in three categories that include:

A. Beliefs, customs and habits for heaven and earth and animal world;

B. The customs pertaining to economic, political and social authorities and leisure activities, occupations and games;

C. Stories, songs and proverbs of each nation— (Sani Ejlal, 2005).

On the other hand, the important socio-cultural indicators of Iran include common rituals and traditions, celebrations, festivals, and folklore culture, traditional values, costumes, architecture of building and sites, traditions and customs, national and local arts (Hajjani, 2000).

In general, in the field of cultural globalization, inequality has created a deep gap between the rich and the poor, and with increasing gap between the metropolis and the periphery countries, we are witnessing a brain drain to the West. Wallerstein believes that cultural globalization means the domi-

nance of the Western culture on other cultures that leads to cultural duality in the south. Thus, globalization thinking supports capitalism, free markets, free trade, human rights, political pluralism and cultural pluralism. On the other hand, promotion of consumerism and capitalism creates a gap between the past and present culture. The spread of Western culture due to information and communication technology cause some abnormalities and such as organized crimes, human trafficking and drug abuse, alcoholism etc. Moreover, satellite channels and the Internet websites broadcast immoral scenes and films; undermine national values and cultures of the communities. On the other hand, promotion of consumerism and capitalism creates a gap between the past and present culture. Because of the pressure by the West for opening political space, this strengthens the subcultures and gives rise to ethnic feelings, and it can become a threat to national customs and traditions and may strengthen separatist waves.

3. Political Challenges of Iranian National Identity in the Age of Globalization

One of the main political opportunities and, of course, challenges of Iranians' national identity in the age of globalization can be found in the field of democracy. Regarding the democracy, the impact of globalization on political administration and structure of the world has been of a dual nature: in one hand, quick circulation of information has strengthened supervision of public opinions on political process and has fortified and expanded the foundations of democracy. In addition, spread of modern ties to developing and developed countries has led to the development and strengthening of the foundations of democracy in the world. On the other hand, the emergence and growth of powerful transnational corporations and institutions, and lack of appropriate political structures that can guarantee their compliance with democratic governance by the society has disrupted the balance of power to the detriment of democracy, and has given rise to the phenomenon of "democratic deficit". In developing and underdeveloped countries, democratic deficit is severe, because in many cases the strength of the economy of such countries is much less than the power of transnational corporations. Moreover, developing and underdeveloped countries suffer from lack of effective representation in international organizations like the IMF and World Bank, which play a decisive role in the economic and political development in developing

and underdeveloped countries. Continued spread of globalization requires correction of such deficiencies and establishment of democratic structures in order to provide sustainable and fair development of globalization process. Otherwise, the process of globalization will face crises that could threaten the stability and peace in the world. The rapid and widespread growth of communication technology has increased public awareness of the world, especially regarding the living conditions of the people in other countries; this in turn leads to increased demands and decreased political tolerance, and as a result, democracy has been promoted— (Zamani, 2005).

Opportunities of Iranians' National Identity in the Age of Globalization

Nowadays, with the arrival of mass media such as newspapers, books, radio, TV and internet network life has changed. Today, in a rapid process the media are able to create virtual identities for individuals and groups, without violating the political borders militarily. Although, the realization of a global culture that leads to the integration of other ethnic and local cultures in a single global land with a new identity can be virtually ruled out. What can be said is that globalization does not necessarily lead to the elimination and strengthening of national identities, but its negative or positive impact is like a double-edged sword that can impose national identities with challenges as well as opportunities. If properly controlled, some of the functions of globalization such as increased information and cultural exchanges can be benefitted from in favor of acceptable values, and the ground for imposition of cultural policies of the West, that is enacted by information inequities and destroying special features of local communities and identities can be eliminated.

For this purpose, taking necessary measures, detailed planning, benefiting from all facilities, mobilizing all available resources, increased public awareness in the community and other levels of national decision makers is necessary conditions for benefiting from opportunities of globalization. These strategic actions will lead to the strengthening of indigenous beliefs and social values as the most important factor of cultural resistance in confronting with imposed methods of the Western culture and in immunizing the national identities. Cultural identities will be able to compete in the new system, only when more importance can

be given to nongovernmental actors and more independence can be granted for the sphere of culture. In that case, with increased power of such actors, choice exchanges to adopt positive points of each other increase among communities. Accordingly, the political and cultural elites can find appropriate rules of play in the field of cultural exchange and can enhance the role of national identities in the process of globalization. Meanwhile, in the direction of creating a global identity, there are a lot of problems due to hostilities and differences, causing impossibility of interaction between global identity and national identity, and will achieve a virtual and artificial character (Montserrat, 1999).

Robertson, a postmodern thinker, argues that the current system of national states cannot be regarded as the political structuration of the process of globalization; it is true that the system of national states has created global norms and has made the practice and behavior of the states uniform, but such uniformity does not mean formation of the world as a whole. In today's world, with formation of a new discourse of postmodernism, localism and nationalism step into a new direction, so that some of the proponents of this theory insist on development with stress on differences instead of convergences. National identity is the main development in the twentieth century, and the same transformation expedited the process of independence of new countries. When a nation shapes, it will seek independence, sovereignty and power and this will lead to demand for sovereignty, or in other words, the national state. National culture, however, is backing for national identity; thus understanding national identity is essential for achieving national culture. To dominate The Third World Countries, the West can only strip them from their identity. In fact, the barriers for formation of national identity in the context of lack of cultural identity result from Westernization, Easternization and alienation. Meanwhile, the countries of the world, following the intrinsic nature of globalization and their impressionability, more often tend to form a powerful global hub, to maintain their own national identity and culture and to have reasonable and fair relationships with other nations. These concepts are the preconditions of comprehensive interaction of globalization and national identity. If globalization is adjusted according to self-esteem and national feelings, with the aim to confront with imperialism and colonialism, by mobilizing the capacities to achieve science and technology, by insisting

on independence and the principle of equality with other nations, increased national power etc. international cooperation can better be strengthened in the framework of national identities. Therefore, national identities are influenced by two sets of conditions in the global arena: first, the function of globalization in various fields; and secondly the positive performance of the education system in each country for propagation of own culture.

There is no doubt that in the era of globalization, those powers will be more benefitted who have a larger share in the production and supply of information. However, we should not forget that it also provides some opportunities for others to be able to raise themselves, and perhaps in this way, with the assistance, cooperation and awareness of nations, by using evolution of media and by strengthening national and local cultures and presenting them to world, they may destroy the single-culture domination system. By means of international media, cross-cultural interactions and exchanges that occur at regional and global levels and many of the values, cultures and identities can find a space for themselves (Imam Jome, and Hamegan Morad, 2011: 42).

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, the main objective of this paper is to answer the questions: What impact globalization has had on Iranians' national identity? Does globalization process undermine national identity or strengthen it? After reviewing the concepts of globalization, identity, national identity and the issues surrounding them, we found that globalization does not necessarily lead to the elimination or enhancement of national identities; but its negative or positive impact is like a double-edged sword that can impose national identities with challenges as well as opportunities. If properly controlled, some of the functions of globalization such as increased information and cultural exchanges can be benefitted from in favor of acceptable values, and the ground for imposition of cultural policies of the West, that is enacted by information inequities and destroying special features of local communities and identities can be eliminated. For this purpose, taking necessary measures, detailed planning, benefiting from all facilities, mobilizing all available resources, increased public awareness in the community and other levels of national decision makers is necessary conditions for benefiting

from opportunities of globalization. These strategic actions will lead to the strengthening of indigenous beliefs and social values as the most important factor of cultural resistance in confronting with imposed methods of the Western culture and in immunizing the Iranians' national identity.

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