

THE RIGHT TO IDENTITY AND COMMUNICATION

F Á T I M A F E R N Á N D E Z C H R I S T L I E B

To talk about human rights today, in a country like Mexico, with so many violent deaths and countless kidnappings, journalists included, raises the question: what has happened to communication? In the last three years, Mexicans have seen the first page of the daily news turn red: drug cartels rolling the heads of their recently beheaded rivals, attacking military and police headquarters, eliminating the media workers that annoy them and killing civilians that dare to denounce them.

One wonders what the political class does in the face of these problems. Where are the institutions to which the Mexican Revolution of a century ago gave rise? Where are the human rights that were won long ago? Nobody has gotten used to what we see. I suppose everyone, within their own field, has added to their research agenda the communication issues that could finally put an end to this nightmare.

To be in a public space without fear of ending up in the middle of a shootout is a human right. It is a citizen's right to demand that government officials respond to and take responsibility for what is happening. It is each and every person's right to live without fear in a land abundantly endowed by nature. In the field of ecology, we could also say that we have the right to live in cities free of contamination, to have rivers without toxic residues, woods free of clandestine logging and clean streets. We could go on listing the rights that we can't exercise for the time being.

The right to reply, for example, although set out in the Mexican Constitution, cannot be exercised in practice as it has been impossible to establish communication between those who developed the initiatives to regulate it and other legislators. Political parties and their followers continuously block every possibility of communication by labelling the adversary a person of despicable ideas. The zone

of convergence is the last thing they seek. It seems that one identifies with a political group by distancing oneself from those that do not belong to it. Mexican citizens, as in many other parts of the world, vote for the *least-worst* option for public office and we now feel powerless facing the magnitude of the obstacles we need to overcome to exercise so many rights that could be translated into a more fortunately organized collective life. There are so many tasks that do not depend on our social groups. As Norbert Elias would say: we have unleashed destructive forces that have brought about unplanned developments and we are now bound to think about each one of the human frameworks, starting with the most immediate.

Which are the rights that we can make our own, regardless of the way constitutional and de facto powers, like drug trafficking, behave? Which are the rights rooted in our humanity and that we need in these times of worn-out politics and unleashed consumerism? Which are the rights that could form the foundation for the exercise of other rights? There are many. There is one that has just begun to enter the legislative arena but its main ingredient could never be a juridical object. I am talking about the personal right to identity. Who am I, facing political chaos? With whom do I identify myself in this sea of self-concern where everyone sees each other as a social or academic stepping stone? Who am I facing unleashed consumerism? What do I still keep from my first environment and which new vital ingredients have I discovered and adopted?

Who am I?, the first question of any identity, has become a right enshrined in the law in some cases; for example, for the children of parents who were kidnapped and disappeared during the years of Latin American dictatorships or during the *guerra sucia* (dirty war) in some of our countries. The question *who am I?* also found juridical shelter many years ago in children born out of wedlock. The question *where do I come from?* formulated by adopted minors has been echoed by legislation in several countries forcing the state to keep records of biological parents for adopted individuals who would like to know their origins.

There is another much more intimate aspect of identity that never will or should be a matter for judges or public authorities and that is ours to exercise. The question "Who am I?" has been put forth since humanity began to exist. The legacy of classical Greece and the best ontology of all time have been enriched in the last half century with a contribution by researchers from various disciplines that have put an emphasis on identity and offered a magnificent unexplored field to communication specialists.

I have reached these grounds, where several disciplines converge, driven by classroom circumstances. I want to tell a story that was pivotal: "Teacher, I want to draw my genogram with data from my biological parents but I only have information

on the adoptive ones". Long silence. I stammer a few words to overcome the surprise caused by the sentence uttered by a student in my Psychology and Communication course. From that moment on, I began researching the subject. What does Mexican legislation say about this kind of right to identity? Is it possible, for all who wish, to have state support to locate their biological parents? Is there some kind of legal link with them? I can think of many more questions in this legal line of reasoning, until it all comes to a halt. What is most important in all this? What would it do for this young lady to find out about her parents? Why not just leave it alone, just be grateful for the care and affection given by her adoptive parents and forget about the biological ones? Why not just leave the school paper at its initial objective, which was to identify the type of communication she had with each family member? What if she delivers a report only on the forms, styles, elements and aspects of her everyday communication with those around her, just like her schoolmates?

The semester ended but that doubt haunted me for years until I was able to verify with actual subjects the benefits not only of information obtained about the biological family but of communication with parents alive or deceased. Even when the greatest tragedies precede an adoption, if communication is established with the parents, whether it is in person or not, peace and clarity emerge for the affected individual, even when they decide not to involve those parents in their lives. Numerous therapeutic schools confirm each day that exercising this kind of right to personal identity translates into a vital force; not only for adoption cases but also when the father leaves home or in the case of forced disappearances. Parents need not be alive or physically present to establish communication, the elements of which are already being researched. In recent years I have witnessed the strengthening of personal and collective identity simply through recognition of and thanks for the origins of the biological family.

This may be one of the reasons why some countries, Spain among them, have included the right of knowing biological parents in their legislation (Spain, 2007).¹ Since 2007, the relevant public authorities are obliged to store the information they possess related to a child's origin, particularly information about the identity of their parents, as well as the child's medical history and that of his or her family. Mexico, on the other hand, has in recent regulations² eliminated the rights derived

¹ Article 12 of the Act 54/2007, of December 28th, on International Adoption, "Derecho a conocer los orígenes biológicos" (The right to know one's biological origins)

² The legislation regarding adoption in Mexico is not of a federal nature. Each state has its own regulations. In Mexico City, changes were made to the Civil Code that extinguished the existing

from biological relationships and learning about the background of one's biological family now requires a judicial ruling. There is nothing that requires authorities to keep information about biological parents despite the large number of applications and the future of genomic medicine.

The right to a complete identity, exemplified here with adoption, has many other aspects, some of which involve shedding light on the dark places of relationships at the core of the family system. No one can do without his origins; there is no human being treading this earth exempt of influence from those who reared him and from his genes. Most of these things keep working up to the moment of death; the issue is with what frequency and quality of self-communication.

We should also think about the right to identity from the perspective of certain phenomena that have grown in the first decade of the 21st century. I want to exemplify such phenomena with the answer given by another student, 18 years of age, when I asked her why she delivered her lecture reports with different names and using initials instead of surnames: "Oh, those are my alter-egos in Second Life," she said. And I was even more surprised when she told me about her lives under different accounts. Watching her fascination with the characters she plays online, I couldn't stop thinking that Zygmunt Bauman (2007) would find in her the perfect incarnation of the consumer turned into product, of the subject giving up his place to become a marketable item through fictitious characters. What worried me the most is that during group interaction, she was rather shy, uncomfortable with the looks of her flesh-and-blood classmates, as if she could not assume her real identity, as if she could not communicate with others through what she really is.

We are surrounded by unconscious relationship dynamics which are poorly explored by communication and which are decisive to identity. If we do not decipher them, we will be defending them blindly, without knowing we are trapped in invisible loyalties, as Hungarian physician Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy (2003) calls this phenomenon. Our history and that of our family system is the first step to finding our identity.

To get into all of that means to overcome, as Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987: 151) said, that deceitful safety provided by the reduction of communication problems to the media. Communication questions start here, with the first relational dynamics, with the questions that generate resistance and that we sometimes prefer to dodge.

affiliations between the adopted child and his parents, without mentioning the protection of information related to blood parents in case the adopted child would need to know them before coming of age. Mexico City Official Gazette, May 25th, 2000.

Which is my inner configuration? In the end, who am I? What are my assets and my deficiencies? What do I have to offer in my relationships with the other? What do I contribute to communication, that structural component of coexistence? Am I willing and do I know enough myself to relate to others and change our communication patterns? None of these questions is answered through judicious introspective exercise. There is no introspective method to get to know oneself,” Marco Millán says, “because the only sensible way to actually do it is to face something different (Millán, 2009: 25).

Antonio Pasquali expressed it wisely in the revised publication of his *Comprender la comunicación* (Understanding Communication): “Every change in established communication patterns will imply a change in coexistence and vice versa” (Pasquali, 2007: 136). And here, in the understanding of our own communication patterns and in untangling the ingredients of our identity lie the key and roots for making this inhospitable environment we were given a more livable one.

If we have the disposition to communicate with ourselves though our relationship with others, we may be able to enter that other sphere from which Martin Heidegger asks: “Will we be ever be able to say that entering the essence of personal identity through thought might come to be someday?” (Heidegger, 1988: 95). Hopefully we will.

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