

# Hybridity

Concept: Hybridity

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Description Hybridity, understood as a concept pertaining to social sciences and humanities, points to one of the most heated debates surrounding the notion and the practice of identity. This controversy can be explained by the unstable character of this concept, which resists an easy and conventional definition. Although the term is highly contested and controversial, hybridity can be defined as the process that involves a mixture or a combination of two different elements, which results in a third element that claims a difference from either of the two terms. For example, Singlish is the language spoken in Singapore. It consists of English inflected by particular accents, words, and expressions coming from various dialects of Chinese and from Malay. While Singlish is a mixture of different languages, it is quite different from either the English language or from the particular Chinese and Malay dialects. In these respects, it is an illustration of hybridity.

The current debates surrounding the term have to do with its troubled history. Sociologist Nikos Papastergiadis points to the ambivalence of the notion of hybridity. The concept bears uncomfortable traces of and references to notions of racial purity (organic theories of identity), and its origin seems to be inseparable from nineteenth century ideologies of white supremacy. Contemporary studies on hybridity (hailing mainly from cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and sociology) regard this concept as an indicator that current practices of identity need to be conceptualized in a manner that refutes essentialist portrayals of the ways in which individuals, groups, and collectivities locate themselves. The above mentioned example of Singlish illustrates the ways in which hybridity bears a history that denies a stereotypical interpretation of the ways in which individuals and groups identify themselves. English was the language of the colonial administration in Singapore, while the immigrant workers coming from China and Malaysia brought in their own expressions, accents, and words. This mixing of languages also implies that identities — particularly in an age where processes of globalization have intensified — must be understood and explored as processes, as ever changing and ever subjected to contestation and negotiation. Let us consider the recent trend of developing clothing styles that allow Muslim women to practice sports comfortably, while respecting traditional standards of modesty. The worldwide dissemination of ideas such as autonomy, personal freedom, and liberty has had a significant impact on the ways in which women from traditional societies do not view their roles as limited to the private sphere of the household. Rather they make claims to the public sphere, by requesting to be acknowledged as participating members of the societies in

which they live. New clothing styles reflect these changes and again the notion of hybridity.



(Photo: Stephanie Colvey, IDRC-CRDI)

The term's uses are not only contested, but they seem to fluctuate depending on the field that claims it as a concept. For example, in the field of post-colonial studies, hybridity refers to the impacts of the colonization processes on both the "colonized" and the "colonizers." Such impacts should not be understood as unidirectional and linear: colonialism's legacy, with all its violences, has altered not only the senses of identification of the people it subjugated. Rather, the impacts of such violent processes must be understood in both directions, by exploring the tensions and the transformations that they had on the psyches of both aggressors and aggressed. Therefore, hybridity needs to be viewed as an ongoing process of transformation and negotiation of practices of identity.

One can argue that hybridity as a process can be witnessed in the ways in which the former colonies' cultures and ways of life have been transformed by their experiences with colonialism, and in the ways in which societies that were the exporters of colonialism have been profoundly impacted by such experiences. For example, Indian society has undergone tremendous transformations as a result of its experiences with British colonialism. At the same time, one can make the argument that there has been a significant impact of this experience on British society itself. With the intensification of globalization processes — understood as the increased circulation on a global scale of flows of people, goods, images, and ideas — people from formerly colonized societies have been relocating to societies that were the generators of colonialism, in search of better labour

conditions and wages, and of better professional and personal opportunities. Former colonial metropolises, such as Great Britain, France, Holland, Portugal, Italy, and United States (with the qualification that US's colonial practices were not overtly recognized as colonial as was the case with the above mentioned European societies) have witnessed a tremendous increase — in the last several decades — in the influx of migrants coming from formerly colonized societies, such as India, Pakistan, Algeria, Morocco, Mexico, the Caribbean Islands, the Philippines (a former US colony), and others.

These flows of migrants to former colonial metropolises have had a significant impact on host societies on several levels: social, cultural, political, and economic. Many scholars argue that these migrations have produced and are continually producing hybridized identities (both individual and collective), in that encounters between various cultures have an effect not only on the uses of various languages (with the introduction of new terms and phrases), but also on the manner in which people as individuals and collectivities come to locate and identify themselves. For example, cultural critic and theorist Rey Chow discusses the ways in which Hong Kong's cultural productions and identities bear the traces of its experiences with British colonialism: collective senses of identification in Hong Kong have pointed to ambivalent and controversial claims that fluctuate between rallying around Western values of human rights, liberties, and free-market liberalism, and asserting its Chineseness through identifications with mainland China and its millennia-old traditions. Chow argues that such a location of identity that is fraught with ambivalence and tensions belongs not only to formerly colonized societies, such as Hong Kong, but also to Chinese diasporas. Moreover, it should be noted that former colonial metropolises undergo similar processes of contestation and re-negotiation, with the presence of various diasporas within their midst.

As post-colonial critic and cultural theorist Homi Bhabha would argue, identities within the processes of colonialism should not be understood in terms of the "Colonial Self" or the "Colonized Other." Rather, identifications, as shaped by colonialism, should be perceived in terms of "the disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness" (2004, 64). These statements imply that it is never the case that colonialism's violent practices have simply silenced the colonized, thereby inscribing the colonial White discourse and practices over the voices of oppressed peoples. Rather, Bhabha claims that colonialism should be perceived as a two-way process. While colonial projects attempted to impose a certain set of discourses and practices on various societies, the people (as individuals and as collectives) of the colonized societies have inscribed their own visions, practices, and voices into the narratives and practices of colonialism. This mutual process created a "third space," a hybrid discourse, language, and system of practices, which does not belong exclusively to either "colonizer" or "colonized." Rather, it is situated in between, and is fraught with ambivalence, tension, and fragmentation.

However, such a celebratory assertion of the colonized's resistance and subjectivity through hybridity is not without contestation and critique. Critics of the concept of hybridity point to the manner in which this notion is used to refer to fragmented, nomadic, multicultural, and mobile identities — understood as staple features in a globalized world — while instances of genocides, ethnic conflicts, and structural inequalities between classes and genders are neutralized by a discourse that privileges difference, mobility, and fragmentation. Other critics draw attention to the ways in which the very notion of hybridity is implicated in and related to certain global cultural developments of capitalism, particularly in the form of multicultural discourses. These discourses proclaim the conservation of different cultures (in the name of respecting differences), without paying attention to how various cultures are based on inequalities and discriminatory practices, thus keeping intact social and political hierarchies and stifling internal possibilities of resistance and contestation.

In the light of this discussion, a delicate, yet important, question arises: how does the notion of hybridity, with its emphasis on fragmentation, shifting loyalties, and mobility allow for collective claims to autonomy? As various groups are struggling to obtain a recognition of difference and autonomy, such as the Palestinians, the Kurds, and various indigenous movements, refutations of fixity, of claims to some sort of general(ized) traits, and of wholeness seem to place such struggles under a questionable light. Also, with its focus on mobility, nomadic identities, and shifting loyalties, how does hybridity deal with social hierarchies that pertain to the various ways in which processes of globalization are experienced, such as the unequal access to mobility? Many people around the world are still very much bound by their locales and by the immediacy of their loyalties. Individual and collective claims to autonomy involve a claim to some sort of essential characteristics that are supposed to be fixed and essential to those particular practices of identification. Therefore, in this era of globalization and transnational movements, it is important to ask ourselves what sort of politics lies in between making claims to hybrid (understood as mobile, shifting, and fragmented) identities, and asserting ourselves (as individuals and collectivities) as fixed, whole, and determined by our locations?

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