

The Spectrum of (National) Identity: Some Philosophical Considerations

Abstract. In this article I expect to reveal some parallels between the philosophical definitions of identity and constructions of identity in musical contexts. I will briefly discuss the definitions of identity from the phenomenological and (post)structuralist perspectives. Then, I will glimpse at how the concept of identity evolves in the artistic sphere, especially along the dialectic of national and global in music. The aim of this article is to contextualize and critically reflect on the concept of artistic identity.

It will be revealed that identity can hardly be considered as *idem* or a definite locus. As phenomenological and (post)structuralist studies reveal, the experiential and personal are intrinsically interpenetrated with the symbolic and communal. If identity is a part of the semiotic continuum, identity is already a complex identity in which the whole continuum is reflected. If every identity is constituted by relation with another identity, neither of the identities is substantial. However, the nationalist or personalist hermeneutics of art intend to reduce the ambiguous complexity of this concept and consider identity as a simplified essence.

In the musical field, that which is national is defined by having the most successful international reception and recognition of composers; thus, what is “national” is indeed (inter)national. National needs *inter* in order to be, like any identity needs (m)other to be itself. The collection of attributes that make music universal function as a gravitational center that draw in and integrate elements that may signify national difference. On the other hand, the collection of universal elements cannot be manifested in any way other than endless variations that individualize them as personal or national.

If the personal or national identity are “grand narratives” (Lyotard), it is not surprising that nowadays they are critically reflected. However, reflections do not affect their validity—concepts of national/personal and global identities are as operative as before, and behind them lie the fundamental dialectics of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, mechanical and organic, self and other.

Keywords: identity, national, global, phenomenology, schizophrenia, constructed identity, auto-evolving identity, semiotic axes.

In order to delve into concepts of national and global, first at all we need to discuss philosophically the question of identity. Identity, as the Latin term etymologically suggests, is about sameness (*idem*), constancy, stability, unchangeability, something, that remains under any conditions. Therefore, this concept could be placed among most fundamental Western ontological concepts, such as being, essence, or form. Although it has never gained so much attention during the history of philosophy, in the sphere of culture and society in recent centuries, the notion of identity figures as a fundamental principle and requirement. Identity is considered as a collection of certain attributes characteristic to person or culture. Thus, identity emerges as determination by associating with certain attributes and at the same time dissociating from other attributes, chosen by a subject or collective subject, as is the case with nation. Looking from this perspective, the structure of personal identity and national identity have many aspects in common.

The experiential or phenomenological perspective would be a relevant starting point in attempts to define identity. At least three barely inseparable layers of identity can be seen in phenomenological research: 1. layers of the self and embodied existence, 2. time and world, and 3. sociality and identity (cf. Čapek and Loidolt 2021, 232). The experience of identity is based on the intuition of bodily, psychological, communal, or ideological continuity and imply such definitions as “change, persistence, constancy, and ‘becoming other’” (ibid. 219). The most basic layer of identity and existence is “pure ego” or “minimal self” (Husserl), which is distinct from the social self. However, there are problems in defining this layer as initial, since “pure experience” (Nishida 1990, 3) does not explain diachronicity and continuity that are fundamental for experiencing ego as an identity. Thus, according to MacIntyre (cf. Čapek and Loidolt 2021, 221), “[A]ll attempts to elucidate the notion of personal identity independently of and in isolation from the notions of narrative, intelligibility and accountability are bound to fail”. If the initial layer of identity can be grasped, it is possible only on a “secondary” layer of identity; however, in this way “initial” can hardly be considered as initial. For identity to exist, recollection (memory), time, and language are necessary. However, experiential time, crucial to any identity formation “is not to be reduced to a succession of events comparable to a cord or a flow”; it is, “a succession grasped by someone from a certain present according to the past-present-future distinction” (ibid. 228).

Time distinctions imply narrativity and language which mediate our experiences both in the personal and collective senses. Only by naming certain experiences and temporalizing them does a subject start to exist as a subject. The most “foreground” layer of identity, on which manifestations of national identity are also based, is social interrelational identity, which “take place in the forms of struggle, recognition, and conflict, or on the level of shared emotions, values, and activities” (Čapek and Loidolt 2021, 230).

As McIntyre (2012, 63) notices, “as a solitary subject I could have no sense of my *own* personhood”. His research is based on Husserl’s investigations (*Ideas II* and *Cartesian Meditations*) on intersubjectivity; he explores how emphatic apperception of others enables us to constitute ourselves as a living being. Thus “my sense of the ‘mineness’ of my self is yet another byproduct of my sense of others”; accordingly, “I experience myself and others as co-constitutors of that intersubjective world of objects” (McIntyre 2012, 67). The experiential core of communal existence is “emphatic pairing”, and “[B]y giving each other status as credible co-perceivers, we become not just a co-constituting group but a communally constituting group” (McIntyre 2012, 73) in which “[T]he things posited by others are also mine: in empathy I participate in the other’s positing” (cf. Husserl, *Ideas II*, §46). In this way, communal selves should have shared feelings, values, intentions which are expressed in appropriate linguistic rendering. National identity could be also considered as communal; however, it is rather a conceptual or “imaginary community” (Anderson 2006), which does not necessarily involve emphatic and corporeal being together characteristic for smaller communities of shared interest. “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 2006, 6). National identity, in this way is also based on pairing, however, it is a conceptual pairing that implies notions of togetherness in history, ways of thinking, and the goals of the nation.

Starting from phenomenological observations and finding that narrative is a necessary precondition of (having) identity in both the personal and collective senses, it may be relevant now to turn to a structuralist definition of identity. From this point of view, any identity as a linguistic articulation must have its contra-identity. Self-identity, or national identity as narratives, unavoidably imply (m)other. On the experiential level, self as a subject can emerge only as an opposite perspective to an object, language, or community; on the level of cultural or national identity narratives, any identity needs (m)other identity to articulate itself. We immediately see that from this point of view, a pure, naturally emerging, uncontaminated (Derrida) identity, is not possible. Thus, identity could be considered an ever-changing act of linguistic constructing, taking position in a differential linguistic network, making associations with something which means at the same time dissociations from something else. Conceptual linguistic distinctions, or semiotic axes such as I–other, we–they, local–cosmopolitan, national–global, tradition–progress are necessary in any identity formation. National needs global in order to be national. Global is the (m)other of national, and vice versa.

Are phenomenological, structuralist and even poststructuralist notions of identity comparable? I will try to elucidate their points of contact here. My foreground narrative identity is defined by endless dialogue with the other. Thus, identity is never something in-itself and via-itself. In the most initial sense, identity unfolds as a spontaneous libido act which emerges in the subject–object, me-and-the-world opposition and thus belong together. This kind of primordial distinction that makes identity emerge extends into the world of animals and microbes. The most primordial level of national cultural identity also emerges spontaneously in this dialectic when the subject faces the surrounding nature or everyday objects we see around us, the gestures of humans, or the melody of language we hear. All these experiences happen before there is time for reflection, and therefore we are hardly aware of it as our identity. Heidegger explains *Dasein’s* initial state of being-in-the-world in a similar way. These experiences could be comparable with the phenomenological concept of *hyle*—a primordial experiential substratum—which cannot be grasped without *morphe*, i.e., noetic mediation and language. However, it is not an identity as we usually define it. I or we are *aware* of self as a self, and only in this awareness rendered in most cases as a narrative do we emerge as a certain distinct being—personal or collectively personal. I or we also construct our distinctiveness—we collect attributes that could be considered as ours and reject those that could be considered as foreign.

The “semiotic regime” (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987), predominant in the West for at least the last two centuries, encourages or even requires to be the unique self in the personal and collective personal (national) senses. The origins and reasons of such thinking is not the concern of this paper. However, in the concept of identity as something identical and in-itself, the paranoid regime (Deleuze) is at work. There is an attempt to make identity integral and therefore closed. It is defined by dissociation from other identities and tries to defend itself. It brings to the foreground elements of sameness and continuity, by making insignificant elements of discontinuity and otherness, which are also part of any identity. Deleuze’s insight about thinking and immanence could be also applied to the construction of identity: “one does not think without becoming something else, something that does not think—an animal, a molecule, a particle—and that comes back to thought and revives it” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 42).

Since identity is plural and not self-evident, that is why we try to define its boundaries. Looking from the Deleuzian perspective, identity emerges in an endless and multilayered matrix, in which “I” am/is always mediated by non-I. Such dialectical structures are well known from German idealism. However, as distinct from idealist tendencies of self-made identity, Deleuze invites opening up the schizophrenic identity. If identity in a romantic manner is related to naturality that emerges spontaneously, the romantic identity should also be schizophrenic and open. However, as we know from many examples—it is not so. The romantic identity in most cases is a voluntary action of constructing self and eliminating elements that contaminate it. Construction of this kind of identity is like nothing before in the history of art and is based on the conflict between I and non-I. Consider, for example, Oscar Wilde’s invitation to be authentic from *De profundis* (1926, 70): “Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation”; or Henri Fuseli’s (2000, 950) manifesto-like claims, that “Every artist has, or ought to have, a character or system of his own Mediocrity is formed, and talent submits ... but genius, free and unbounded as its origin, scorns to receive commands, or in submissions, neglects those it received”. These are just a few of the numerous examples of romantic authenticity-via-conflict, which have made up the core of Western artistic identities for at least the last two centuries. However, the semiotic axes of conflict inherent in these sayings show the (m)other’s presence.

After these considerations, I would like to offer an experimental model that elucidates the structure of identity and combines all—phenomenological, structuralist and poststructuralist—perspectives. It is reminiscent of Greimas’ (cf. Structural Semiotics) “generative trajectory” model. There are three interconnected layers of narratives—fundamental syntax, discursive syntax, and narrative syntax. There are the differences of specific stories. However, all stories, including personal identity or national identity stories, are based on more fundamental mechanisms of meaning articulation and can be analyzed as multilayer narratives.

At the most fundamental layer of identity-narrative construction we find subject-object distinction, libido-based conjunctions or disjunctions of these polarities, and linguistic differentiation as a basic mode of human being in the world. At the medium level we will find the rudiments of narrativization, temporal continuity, and disruptions as a basis of identity, mechanisms of identification with certain entities and dis-identifications from others. At the most visible surface level we will find a specific narrative that manifests a certain identity; also, concrete distinctions between my style and other’s style, our national identity and their national identity and, stylistic choices of myths or aesthetic manifestations of identity.

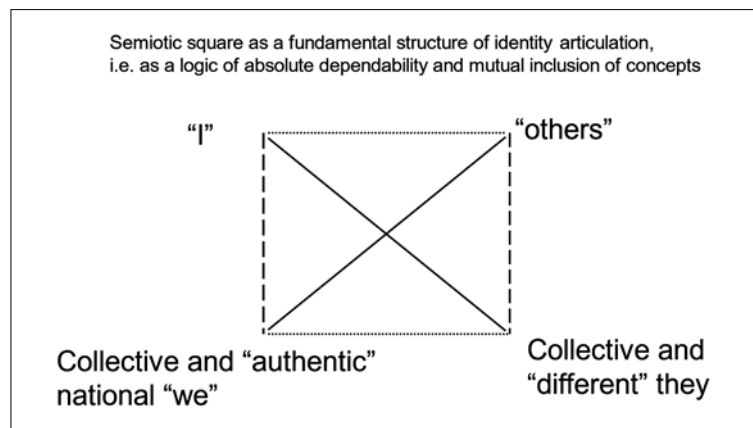


Diagram 1

Identity as a narrative could be presented as a differential process in a semiotic square (see Diagram 1). Dissociation from something means dependability on what we are dissociating from, and inclusion of the dissociated element into a constitution of identity. In this way, because of the always present otherness in any “molar” (cf. Deleuze 1987) identity, the poststructuralist perspective could also be seen in this model. To represent this totality in terms of a structure, we could think about identity not as a position in a semiotic square, but rather as a dance on all semiotic axes, or as a middle of the square, where we cannot identify the identity as something *idem*, but rather as all possibilities encompassing the dynamic space. Identity encompasses all the positions, and in this way denies itself. It is inseparable from the matrix of all other possible identities that

define any identity. Identity is not a locus, but rather a spectrum. In a spectrum, a certain territory is more visible in the foreground, but other territories are also constitutive parts of this. This spectrum perspective, of course, has a lot in common with schizo-analysis and deconstructive analysis.

In this way, phenomenological, structuralist and poststructuralist perspectives reveal the structural affinities of identity articulation. The *morphe-hyle*, self-other, molar-molecular, paranoia-schizophrenia semiotic axes refer to different totalities in which similar dynamics are at work. If identity is part of a continuum, identity is already a complex identity in which the whole continuum is reflected. If narrative is a part of a continuum of narratives, every narrative is already a complex narrative in which the whole continuum of narratives is reflected. If every identity is constituted by relation with another identity, neither of the identities is substantial.

After discussing these philosophical issues, I would like to shortly glimpse at how the concept of identity evolves in the artistic sphere, especially in the dialectics of national and global in music. The emergence of nationalism with all its artistic manifestations, as Ernest Gellner's study (1983) reveals, is inseparable from processes of rationalization and industrialization, which started with the modern ages and reached their peak during the 19th century. The new organizational unit—all social strata unifying the national state—was needed in order to replace traditional hierarchy-based social models. Art, together with a standardized state-administered education system, was among the most powerful devices to create a sense of unity between new nation-based communities' members. The power of art in fostering national consciousness can especially be seen in national operas, which functioned as collectively experienced national myth and affected political events.

As Gellner's study shows, members of traditional societies are hardly aware of nation and national identity. The concept of identity is limited to certain tribes, social groups, or geographical areas. Identity naturally evolves by inheriting the lifestyles or habits of these groups. However, this identity does not concern itself as a distinct identity. The self of lower or higher social origin is defined as part of the cosmic order, which is inherited and hardly changeable. Thus, this kind of identity could be defined as *auto-evolving*. According to Gellner (1983, 111), "In most of the closed micro-communities of the agrarian age the limits of the culture were the limits of the world, and the culture often itself remained unperceived, invisible: no-one thought of it as the ideal political boundary". *Auto-evolving* identity may have parallels with phenomenological definition of "minimal self". "Minimal self" evolves in a spontaneous experiential substratum; however, it does not reflect itself in an identity-ascribing discourse with characteristic framing and oppositions. It is different from the concept of identity that stems from Enlightenment and Romantic paradigms and which requires an ego or collective ego position in regards to self and others. Emancipated and self-aware personal or political subjectivity is at the core of identity that considers itself as different from others. It would imply a discursive and social ego, which identifies itself with certain attributes and because of the intention to frame the evolving experiential chaos and infinity, this kind of ego has paranoid aspects.

The above-mentioned difference has to be consciously defined and preserved. This is why it can be called a *constructed identity*. All the attributes can be invoked for the differentiation strategy—a glorious past, historical and cultural heroes, the epitomized uniqueness of language and nature related with psychological aspects of community, as well as differentiations from neighbors that are often characterized by stereotypes (cf. Billig's notion of banal nationalism)—all these are essential attributes of the national identity myth. On the personal level, identity construction is based on the I-others, inner-outer, authentic-inauthentic semiotic axes, privileging the first terms. To be unique means to be aware about tradition and contexts against which uniqueness is constructed, although, these contexts as well as strategies of being unique are seldom reflected by artists themselves. The romantic artistic self has to invent and defend its boundaries and such a strategy can be seen in both the stylistic choices of artists and in the verbally expressed claims of authenticity vs imitation, banality vs progress, inner self vs outer others, artistic depth vs superficiality. Yet, at the same time, the inner and authentic, can be accessible and communicable only through the symbolic and communal. As Taruskin (2010, 64) notices, John Field's

meticulously crafted public impersonation of solitude (described by Liszt, another great pianist, in collusion) leaves no doubt that a state of 'artistic solitude' had come to represent artistic truth. It was the way a public performer in the heyday of romanticism 'did sincerity'. And not only sincerity: disinterestedness had also to be simulated in the name of art 'for art's sake'.

The I–others, national–global semiotic axes are virtually present in all manifestations of music and reception of music narratives of the last two centuries, when the principle of constructed identity became predominant. Desire of the initial purity, uncontaminated by civilization (Rousseau), characterizes both personal and national romanticisms. However, national or personal “purity” can be revealed only by means of the most advanced, international, and common musical means. As Taruskin notices (2010, 233), “Russia received its notions about national character, and its nationalistic aspirations, from the West; Russian “nationalistic” music has therefore to be regarded as an aspect of the country’s musical Westernization”. As the study shows, Glinka’s *A life for the Tzar* (1836) could be considered as the first opera by a Russian composer in which “organic unity” that comes from a ‘dominating idea’” (Taruskin 2010, 237) was fully manifested. These were the new principles of romantic music. Opera became national precisely because of the cosmopolitan, international achievements it realized. The same can be said about many other national composers. Thus, romantic national music could be defined rather as “a uniform, international nationalism” (James Parakilas’s notion, cf. Taruskin 2010, 367). Since German music represents the most progressive cosmopolitan tendencies of the time, which were meant to be accepted by all cultured societies, Chopin, Glinka, Grieg, or Smetana, beside being representatives of national cultures, could be also considered as Germans. However, German composers, especially in the case of Wagner, are also not only purely German, since to be genuinely German also implies detachment from the Italian taste of opera (cf. Taruskin 2010, 567) or French commercialism (cf. Taruskin 2010, 229); in this way, the definition of German music by detachment is “contaminated” by the non–German aspect. The same can be said about French intentions to construct *Ars gallica* after the historical events of 1871 and the intention to cleanse French music of German influences. These examples show that neither identity of the contemporary world can be considered a closed locus, but rather as a schizophrenically dialectical spectrum.

The history of national art, which started with the emergence of nation states, could be regarded as a history of successful compromises. National music is created by internationally trained composers. National identity manifestations cannot manage without the achievements of international high culture. This echoes Gellner’s noticed paradoxes of national styles:

The basic deception and self-deception practised by nationalism is this: nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population. It means that generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication. It is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually substitutable atomized individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind, in place of a previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves. But this is the very opposite of what nationalism affirms and what nationalists fervently believe. (Gellner 1983, 57)

National art, in this way, abolishes genuinely local national art, folklore. In the traditional pre-global world, with many separated local communities and styles, genuine identities existed but the members of these communities were not concerned about them. In the global world, with its unavoidable cultural industry principles and homogenization, a unique identity is hardly possible, therefore attempts are made to construct it within the internationally institutionalized boundaries. It is difficult to define what exactly characterizes the national in music, because international elements are predominant everywhere. For this reason, in many cases nationality in music is defined not by intra-musical criteria, but by its place of origin and the hermeneutics of nationhood. In times of political confrontations, like between Germany and France in the last decades of the 19th century, the music of the whole country is reduced to some hardly analyzable and analytically unreflected essence. This can be seen, for example, in Wagner’s *Mein Leben*, where he distances himself from Berlioz’s *Roméo and Juliette*, now “empty and shallow” and even rewrites his autobiography to replace this earlier admired piece by a German music example (cf. Taruskin 2010, 482–483).

To have an identity in the modern and contemporary world implies endlessly solving an unsolvable compromise of how to be unique, but at the same time to be universal, or to find compromises between what is defined as genuinely local and cosmopolitan or global. This also refers to the narratives of national uniqueness from the creators’ side as well as the hermeneutics of national uniqueness or exoticism from the receivers’ side.

The wish to be (nationally) unique is also fostered by the commercial reasons of the global market. For example, as Taruskin noticed (cf. 2010, 347), the more international Chopin's career was, the more national his music became. Besides the "tourist appeal" elements in music, there was an otherness attributing a specific program from the receivers' side. There is an expectation and intention to interpret composers as national, especially if their origin is not of nations that were traditionally predominant in European music (Italy, France, Germany). Contemporary composers these days seldom consider themselves as national. However, we can still find elements of national uniqueness hermeneutics that function as a way for composers to be visible in the global contemporary music market. Examples could be the cases of Tan Dun or Tōru Takemitsu, with their uniqueness providing East–West distinction narratives that function as a program for their reception in the world.

National–global, personal–universal dialectics and unity manifest the locus–spectrum and identity–continuum dynamics discussed above. These conceptual definitions and their cognition are possible only in regard to each other, one via other, and the mentioned examples of national–via–global music illustrate this dynamic. What is national is defined by having the most successful international reception and recognition of composers (e.g., the cases of Grieg and Sibelius, cf. Taruskin 2010, 816, 821); thus, what is "national" is indeed (inter)national. National needs *inter* in order to be, so the national is never *idem*. The collection of attributes that make music "civilized" function as a gravitational center which pulls to itself and integrates elements that may signify difference. On the other hand, the collection of universal elements cannot be manifested otherwise than as endless invariants individualizing them as personal or national.

One of the most recent examples of "national" manifestations in music is so-called "world music". Elements that sound exotically local are incorporated into global popular music that is then broadcast worldwide. According to Connell and Gibson (2004, 342), "The expansion of world music exemplifies the deterritorialization of cultures and emphasizes how the rise of a particular cultural commodity (world music) is primarily a commercial phenomenon, but could not have occurred without the construction and contestation of discourses of place and otherness". Otherness is desirable and welcomed and the global world culture, from the first view, should be openly schizophrenic. However, it is not so, and paranoia is manifested in universally spread cultural industry principles that tolerate only elements that are acceptable to the market. A global market requires uniqueness. However, at the same time it needs to neutralize genuine uniqueness by placing too-exotic elements into well-established, commercially successful forms. The same is welcomed, whereas the truly different is marginalized. In this way, the current local–global dialectics in music repeats the hybridization patterns that started with the emergence of national art in the 19th century.

Liotard's (1984, 12–13) insight about the postmodern condition, democracy, and capitalism could be applied to local–global dialectics in music as well: there are plural language games, which, however, do not destroy the system, but on the contrary—make it work more effectively. If the personal or national identity are "grand narratives", it is not surprising that nowadays they are critically reflected. However, reflections do not affect their validity—concepts of national/personal and global identities are as operative as before and behind them there is the dialectics of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, mechanical and organic, self and other (cf. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988). These dialectics, together with claims of authentic identity, remain essential elements of culture in the age of cultural industry, to which it seems, there is hardly an end in sight.

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(Nacionalinio) identiteto spektras: filosofiniai svarstymai

Santrauka

Straipsnyje bandoma atskleisti tam tikras paraleles tarp filosofinių identiteto apibrėžčių ir jo konstrukcijų muzikiniame kontekste, aptariami tapatybės apibrėžimai iš fenomenologinės ir (post)struktūralistinės perspektyvų. Taip pat nagrinėjama, kaip tapatybės samprata tarpsta meno sferoje, ypač atsižvelgiant į nacionalumo ir globalumo dialektiką muzikoje. Straipsnio tikslas – kontekstualizuoti ir kritiškai apmąstyti meninės tapatybės sampratą.

Teigiama, kad identitetas vargu ar gali būti laikomas *idem* ar konkrečiu *locus*. Fenomenologinės ir (post)struktūralistinės studijos atskleidžia, kad patirtinis ir personalinis identitetas neatsiejamai susipina su simboliniu ir bendruomeniniu. Jei tapatybė yra semiotinio kontinuumo dalis, vadinasi, ji yra kompleksinė, joje reflektuojamas visas kontinuumas. Jei kiekviena tapatybė remiasi santykiu su kita tapatybe, nė viena iš jų nėra substanciali. Vis dėlto nacionalistinei ar personalistinei meno hermeneutikai būdingas siekis sumažinti šios sąvokos kompleksiskumą iki supaprastintos esmės.

Muzikos sferoje tai, kas nacionalu, apibrėžiama atsižvelgiant į tarptautinę kompozitorių recepciją ir pripažinimą; vadinasi, tai, kas nacionalu, iš tiesų yra (inter)nacionalu. Nacionalumui *inter-* elementas yra reikalingas lygiai taip pat, kaip ir bet kuriai tapatybei reikalingas santykis su „kitu“. Muzikos universalumą lemiančių atributų rinkinys veikia kaip gravitacinis centras, kuris integruoja ir elementus, žyminčius nacionalumą. Kita vertus, universalių elementų rinkinys gali pasireikšti tik begalinėmis variacijomis, atspindinčiomis individualumą ar nacionalumą.

Jei individualus ar nacionalinis identitetas yra „didieji naratyvai“ (pagal Jeaną-François Lyotard'ą), nenuostabu, kad šiais laikais jie yra kritiškai reflektuojami. Vis dėlto tokios refleksijos neturi įtakos jų validumui – nacionalinio ir (ar) individualaus bei globalaus identiteto koncepcijos išlieka gajos kaip ir anksčiau, o už jų slypi esminė Apšvietos ir romantizmo, mechanizmo ir organiškumo, savęs ir „kito“ dialektika.