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| **The fluidity of cultural hybridity** |
| |  | | --- | | Answer to: Is it true that we live in a world of increasing ‘cultural hybridity’? Justify your answer. | |

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# Introduction and thesis

Currently, individuals live in a world of “global intercultural osmosis and interplay” (Pieterse, 1994:169-170). With the “increasing transnational flows of culture”, scholars have noted an implication of further heterogeneity, rather than the formation of a homogeneous society (Harrison, 1999:10) such as the idea of the melting pot (Appadurai, 1996). From this, cultural identity has been seen as possessing a hybrid nature, which is neither bound in the past nor by place. According to Appadurai (1996) culture is constructed through de-territorialised spaces. As any other, cultural identity is ambivalent and constantly being produced and reproduced (Hall, 1990). Moreover, culture in itself is not inherent to an individual, but rather constructionist and actionist; it is recreated through reassertions of its existence, similarly to Anderson (2006)’s perception of imagined communities. Furthermore, most literature sees culture as a process in an individual’s life lived with and among others to create social identities (Young, 1995). In this way, cultural identity is a subjective term, being constantly influenced by the interaction between individual agency and external circumstances. Thus, culture as a phenomenon can never be considered non-hybrid; a decrease or an increase of its hybridity would suggest a time of purity and homogeneity (Young, 1995:25), which has never been so (Bhabha, 1994).

This essay argues that the hybrid nature of culture is neither increasing nor decreasing, rather that it has already existed as such in spite of its’ ambivalent status. Cultural hybridity has been theorised in multiple ways, many of them contradictory, due to the term’s fluid nature per se (Kompridis, 2005). Its governmental and public perception has been even more controversial; however, what remains is its constant state of fluidity. What has changed throughout history is the amount of awareness of this hybridity and the new forms it creates through mixing and restructuring (Pieterse, 1994). Acceleration of mixing in terms of spread and scope could have occurred due to visibility and recognition of hybridity. Nationalist groups have not reached a stage of acceptance; to them hybridity is impossible (Modood, 1997). On the other hand, to some individuals, hybridity is part of their cultural identity. The latter has always been fluid as a result of the mixture between past and present contextually and socially. Throughout the essay, culture will be viewed as something transcending borders and constantly transforming through both people’s choices and their relationships with others. Thus, individuals have an active role in choosing their identity, which is also in consequence to a deeply rooted historical background. Cultural hybridity should be understood as the interplay between all of the above mentioned factors and their implications.

Therefore, this essay will begin with an investigation of the cultural purity discourse in opposition to the understanding of culture as hybrid and fluid. Later, the foundations of cultural identity within history will be explored, after which cultural identity will be viewed as a matter of both individual choice and external influence. The essay will conclude with a brief exploration of the Balkan/Eastern European region as an example of constant cultural hybridity.

# The non-purity of culture and multiculturalism

In spite of the far-right rhetoric that propagates the idea of cultural purity, culture has always been fluid and actionist. The only constant in cultural hybridity is its fluidity and flexibility, also known as “fuzziness and melange” (Pieterse, 1994:171).

In a Western European situation of post-pro-Brexit referendum, terrorist attacks, increase of far-right parties, culture is still being reiterated as singular within the us vs. them/ west vs. east rhetoric, despite below-the-surface hybridity of culture. Ideas “of colonizer and colonized, of self and Other, mirrors the ways in which today’s racial politics work through a relative polarization” (Young, 1995:179). Such purist notions of culture are often used by the far-right rhetoric as a defence mechanism towards the threatening and foreign ‘other’ (Modood, 1997). However, purity is not existent since cultures cannot be treated within closed systems without outside influences.

In the 19th century, hybridity used to be seen as negative and unwanted, but this conception gradually improved (Stewart, 2011). Moreover, such melange was producing threatening mixed forms (Young, 1995). These arguments ignore the core of hybridity – a result of natural influence between interacting cultures. Thus, scholars now are trying to break this 19th century and current far-right rhetoric’s stigma of the term in order for it to be re-positioned within a more positive discourse.

The term hybridity was initially used to counteract essentialist discourses, however, attempts to define it may still fall within the essentialist trap (Kompridis, 2005). Defining cultural hybridity as producing new phenomena (Pieterse, 2001) from the mixing of previously definite and bounded cultures is exactly that fall. To defy these understandings of hybridity, Bhabha (1994) suggests it to be viewed as a constant process of construction and renewal. However, Kompridis (2005:334) is wary of both essentialist and non-essentialist notions of hybridity and calls for a new understanding of cultural identity that takes neither side of the argument, but rather integrates both. It has also been asserted that hybridity involves the mixing of phenomena that are different (Kompridis, 2005, Stewart, 2011), not specifically clear-cut and bounded. Incorporating the above-mentioned arguments is required to develop a theory which encompasses how vast, subjective, liquid and multifaceted the term cultural hybridity is.

Both Kompridis (2005) and Stewart (2011) refer to the idea of distinctiveness between cultures as a way for cultural identification. They acknowledge the false argumentation of hybridity through terms of purity. However, distinctiveness has proven problematic in Europe due to public and political ideas of multiculturalism, which view cultural identity as pure and clear-cut. As a result of decades of migration and use of guest workers, multiculturalism continues to present challenges and exclusion of minorities (Modood, 1997). Multiculturalist views perpetuate the cultural boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’, between majority and minority (Harrison, 1999). Minority exclusion is reality despite the fact that social, economic and political changes have intertwined cultures. Furthermore, multiculturalist policies group individuals based on their collectiveness and common culture (Caglar, 1997:179). Such external identification puts cultural groups within boundaries that they have not identified themselves. Multiculturalist policies are similar to right-wing perceptions of identities as built on top of dichotomies and contrasting binaries (us vs. them). In this way, multiculturalism instead of promoting fluid hybridity of identity, perpetuates ideas of boundedness and separation through grouping (Caglar, 1997). Moreover, the construction of the other has always been a part of what culture is (Young, 1995). It is only natural for culture to be a comparative factor. However, this ignores how interrelated and influential cultures are to each other.

Thus, further recognition of hybridity instead of the pursuit of a homogenised society through multiculturalist politics is needed. Society needs to accept the existence of cultural heterogeneity (Pieterse, 2001). As the first step towards understanding the constant fluidity of hybridity and viewing culture as a product of history, interactions with other cultures and individual agency would be the celebration of diversity. The current society no longer follows the great idea of the melting pot, so desired by America (Appadurai, 1996). Cultures are not melting in a way to yield a perfectly homogenised society, nor should cultures be perceived as strictly bounded within the societal pot (Caglar, 1997). The term cultural hybridity resolves this by providing a balanced view halfway between societal heterogeneity and homogeneity. Moreover, due to the fact that cosmopolitanism promotes a vision of the world, in which despite cultural differences, individuals “can share a common humanity” (Macionis and Plummer, 2012:484), such values may be helpful for society to further accept hybridity (Appiah, 2016). Cosmopolitanism may be a more omnipresent and large-scale, but it can hybridise within local arenas. Many cosmopolitan ideas (cinema, art, restaurants, etc.) may transform from their initial global character to a more hybrid one in conjunction with local understandings (Appadurai, 1996).

Consequently, cultural hybridity should be understood as a practicable fluid (Young, 1995), not as a fixed possession or a tool through which one’s cultural-ness can be assessed; one person’s sense of Britishness might collide with another person’s due to their experiences and perceptions (a theme that will be discussed later in further detail). After all, every discourse is placed within one’s own background, thus impartiality cannot be employed in terms of cultural identity (Hall, 1990).

# Cultural identity with historical background

According to Pieterse (2001:221), much of hybridity theory forgets to acknowledge that it “is deeply rooted in history”. Additionally, Hall (1990:225) states that “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past”. Historically, cultures have been coming into contact for centuries and producing hybrid phenomena. Whether it was negative interaction such as coloniser-colonised or more positive in terms of trade, cultures have never been isolated from outsider influences. Moreover, past events have aided the construction of hybrid cultural identities back then but with consequences to the present, which implies that if hybridity was increasing, past purity would have been true (Young, 1995).

When hybridity is the result of a historical background such as the imperial past, former colonies and other subdued nations have tried to form cultural boundaries in order to differentiate themselves and reconstruct their identity independently (but their cultural identity is still influenced by the imperial period). Harrison (1999:10-11) concludes that cultural appropriation is boundary-construction in the process of identity formation due to the latter being “threatened by the foreign consumption or misappropriation of local cultural form”. Cultural appropriation does not negate the existence of cultural hybridity, but rather is a term warning of confusing hybridity with lack of understanding and appreciation of the mixing. What Appiah (2016) acknowledges as more important is the need for respect when using or working with other cultures. In such instances, appropriation will not be considered as offensive or boundary-crossing. Some scholars have noted that despite the mixings, cultural hybridity has its limits. Hybrid practices, incorporating multiple cultures or the new with the old, should not transgress these limits or they would become offensive (Werbner, 2001:143-144) similarly to cultural appropriation. She goes on to explain that this in-between-ness of two cultures may seem awkward as one culture’s practices may be controversial to the other. As a term, cultural hybridity should involve a way to reconcile the multiple cultures, which form what Bhabha (1994) refers to as the ‘third space’.

Despite cultural hybridity’s constant fluidity in both practice and theory, argued by theorists such as Pieterse (1994), situations of boundaries and limitations exist in the way nationalist groups try to strengthen their ethnicity. Harrison refers to the Greek nationalists’ identity formation in opposition to the Ottoman Empire (as the ‘other’) and as a continuation of Classical Greece (1999:12), the latter of which is a primordial view of the Greek nation. Nationalists form such arguments to build boundaries, develop the ‘self’ and create some uniformity within their cultural identity. This self-identification of nationalist groups portrays culture as more clear-cut and bounded than it actually is. It also ignores the fact that their identity has been influenced by the historical past through both Classical Greece and the Ottoman Empire. Denial of such influence and hybridisation ignores history and factual importance.

# Individual choice, external influences and globalisation

Cultural identity can also be viewed as a choice which is individually determined but also contextually and socially influenced by external environmental factors (Hall, 1990). Due to the fact that both the subject performing the identification and the external situation are changing, subjectivity persists within the notion of hybridity.

Cultural values are carried, not inherent; anyone can choose to embrace or disregard European values (Appiah, 2016). To Appiah (2016), this means leaving the obsolete view of organicism which saw culture as being a whole unity, an organism within which each part is important “to the functioning of the whole”. Instead, individuals are able to determine their cultural identity, composed of a multitude of identities, but neither of which is dependent on the other, rather the multitude represents a loose and fluid grouping. No cultural practice within an individual is in contradiction to other (Appiah, 2016).

In this case, is a whole organic European culture true? What is the relationship between European-ness and cultural hybridity? In light of the EU, which is transforming nation-states through its supra-national and transnational institutions, people are identifying with their own local ethnicities rather than with Europe (Kohli, 2000). Therefore, European identification hardly coexists with more localized notions of ethnic identities. With so many cultures under its roof, the single identity of being European does not unify individuals. To Appiah (2016), there is no single European identity due to the region’s cultural hybridity. Moreover, individuals refer to cultures, external to their own, as coherent and possessing past sameness; thus, creating essentialised notions such as the view of a European civilisation as the result of an untrue fixed past (Caglar, 1997). Appreciation of past cultural hybridity and recognition of the change process through history would be a helpful tool (Caglar, 1997) for surpassing such simplified views of European-ness. After all, culture on the European continent is highly influenced by Roman, Greek, Arab and Jewish traditions (Young, 1995).

When anyone can embrace European values, as Appiah (2016) argues, not many do. The supra-national EU institutions may celebrate cultural diversity within the nations within the union, but in reality individuals hardly identify as hybrids between Europe and their home nation. As cultural identity is an individual choice and perception (Appadurai, 1996), superficial and external imposition proves mostly futile to produce interconnectedness. For instance, some Turkish minorities in Germany do not interact with the German culture, have not learned German (as there is no need for that within their closed community, also referred to as a “parallel society”) and have a strong sense of patriarchal organisation (Fetzer and Soper, 2005). Whether a conscious choice or not, individuals within such communities have not embraced European values, promoted by their host country. In this case, hybridisation has not occurred, but let’s not forget the fact that the Turkish culture in itself is a hybrid due to the past of the Ottoman Empire. German kids, on the other hand, may enjoy eating “doner kebap” (Yalcin-Heckmann, 1997) as an example of their culture has been influenced by the foreign one. In other instances, some young people identify as both German and Turkish, when they have had the opportunity and resources to be educated in upper middle class schools (Faas, 2009). Cultural hybridity seems as a contradictory term in the case of Turkish minorities in Europe. Thus, due to its fluidity, cultural melange is highly contextual and subjective; occurs differently in different situations.

This situation in Europe and the notions European-ness (or lack of such) show the contradictory nature of cultural hybridity as in most instances it is based on personal experiences. Below the surface, however, cultural hybridity within Europe has always existed through both inter-continental and intra-continental interactions (Young, 1995). On the surface, however, acknowledgment of this hybridity may be difficult to achieve.

One person can identify with multiple cultures, turning him/her into a hybrid per se. Jumping from one identity to another depending on both context and individual determinations shows the fluidity of personal identity, which has been explored by Kabir (2016). The scholar (2016) discovered that the immigrant girls she interviewed were able to identify as both American and ethnicity-wise; one did not exclude the other. In this case, such a heterogeneous self-identification shows how cultural identity is not only fluid but also dependent on the experiences of an individual such as upbringing, family and friend connections, education. This argument is in line with the understanding of double consciousness by Werbner (2001) and Gilroy (1995). One’s reflexivity of their situation is determinant of how they perceive their identity. Identity-formation has been referred to as a creative process incorporating multiple parts of culture. Hall (1990:231) refers to the “new construction of Jamaican-ness” built after the postcolonial revolution (impact of history on cultural identity) through music and rights struggles. Such “‘identity’ …lives with and through, not despite, difference, hybridity” (Hall, 1990:234). How can one identify as both Jamaican and British if differences between the two cultures were not recognised and appreciated? Nevertheless, such personal reflexivity is part of the self-identification process, which has always depended on cultural mixes and influences (Pieterse, 1995).

Hybridity permeates a multitude of domains such as language, religion, science, but most of all within identities and lifestyle choices Pieterse (2001:223). Hybridity lives even in individual’s daily lives through everyday language. Hybridisation is visible through creole languages such as pidgin (Young, 1995:5-6). These languages are a product and signifier of cultural contacts, especially power relations between colonisers and colonised. Furthermore, hybridity can be seen through the ways that one’s experiences and ancestry shape an individual’s identity. In her TED talk, Tayie Selasi’s (2014) reflexive process of self-identification led her to the conclusion of multi-locality due to her lack of connection to a nation-state. According to her, individual experiences within local spaces as well as “rituals, relationships and restrictions” are defining factors for someone’s cultural identity. In this way, Selasi suggests a hybridity of locality. Here, Gilroy’s (1995) double consciousness becomes visible through the ways an individual identifies himself/herself in the possession of double identity; Selasi (2014) perceives herself as “a local of New York, Rome and Accra”. In Kabir’s work (2016), the immigrant girls seem to easily identify as one culture in some instances and as another in different situations. To Selasi (2014), however, identity is more fluid and multifaceted. Therefore, experiences of cultural identity are highly individual-specific; for some, the limits of each culture within their hybrid selves are easily recognisable whereas for others – not so much. One common denominator, nonetheless, remains the notion of multiplicity (thus, hybridity) of individual identification.

Arising from Selasi’s TED talk is the idea of globalisation, through which more people are choosing to live in various places outside of their home for a multitude of reasons (Pieterse, 1995). To some, this might suggest an increase in hybridity, however, it only stands for the opening of possibilities for hybridity recognition (Appadurai, 1996). In fact hybridity has always existed, been so fluid and constant throughout history. Globalisation has certainly opened the doors for further hybridisation through the “increase in the available modes of organisation: transnational, international, macro-regional, national, micro-regional, municipal, local” (Pieterse, 1994:166). What this means is the opportunity for hybridity to occur on multiple levels. With globalisation, technologies are developing; thus, providing easier and faster opportunities for cultural contact (Macionis and Plummer, 2012:52). This, however, does not signify increasing hybridity as interaction between cultures has been happening for a long time. Globalisation does not result in an increase of a society’s hybridity or heterogeneity. It employs tools of homogenisation, but society has remained heterogeneous, especially in terms of governments which are wary of “too much openness to global flows” (Appadurai, 1996:42). Furthermore, since culture is not place-bound, its reassertion in different places around the world can take various hybrid forms. Rap can be listened to in Japan, but understood and perceived differently than in New York (Macionis and Plummer, 2012:168).

# Cultural hybridity within the Balkan/Eastern European context

Utilising the above-mentioned theoretical perspectives, the essay will now briefly explore how cultural hybridity has always existed and still persists within the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Balkan identity has been shaped within the context of the Ottoman Empire and communist influence from the Soviet Union (as cultural identity’s historical background) as well as joining in the European Union (for some countries) as a present influence on identity. Balkan identity has long been considered as within the state of in-between-ness due to a crisis of identity (Petrunic, 2005). Historical background interferes with the ability of Balkan individuals to identify themselves due to such inter-connectedness.

The time after the collapse of the Soviet Union was indeed a time of identity reconstruction, especially in terms of the ‘other’ in the face of Western Europe (Modood, 1997). Nowadays, being Balkan or Eastern European is often used as an opposition to the rest of Europe. Western Europeans are fearful of the hybridity of Balkan people due to being seen as a mixture between European and Asian culture (Neuburger, 2011; Kurti, 1997).

In other cases within this age of digitisation and globalisation, uniformity may be developed internally, within the context of the cultural group. For example, websites such as Slavorum have been created within the past few years, which under the umbrella of comedy and profanity, bring together multiple ethnic groups with common past and present identity. Such websites give emigrants of those countries the sense of imagined community, which transforms into a unifying factor, in Anderson’s (2006) terms. Along with their unity under common Slavic/Eastern European ancestry as well as cultural practices, the fact that multiple groups from Bulgarians to Lithuanians follow and participate by submitting stories within such groups shows just how fluid Eastern European culture actually is. A past, present and future of mixing up and intertwining stands behind the Balkan and Eastern European nations.

Moreover, the cultures of the Balkan people are intertwined in areas such as music and food as examples of cultural hybridity in the whole Eastern European region. Dishes in Bulgaria have been found to have been highly influenced by the Ottoman Empire and nowadays, they are consumed by both Christians and Muslims alike (Todorova, 1997). Furthermore, Bartok, who was tasked to record Hungarian folk music in early 20th century, came across music in the Balkans that was a result of “the crossing and recrossing of cultural styles, genres, and materials” (Kompridis, 2005). Thus, songs can be considered as Bulgarian or Romanian, for instance, within the context of the particular culture, but taking a bird’s eye view, would confirm the many commonalities between the songs. Balkan identity is intertwined in a way that individuals are not able to distinguish where one culture ends and one another one starts; to them it all seems one, often a collective identity such as Bosnian Muslim, Serbian Orthodox, etc. (Petrunic, 2005). Often times, people of the region identify themselves through a more general national view, or a more local and bounded space and even through more fluid space (Balkans) (Todorova, 1997). In spite of this, below such identifications stands a very fluid hybrid culture.

Moreover, employing Appiah’s (2016) view of abandoning organicism as a descriptor of culture, Balkan identity is not the whole without which parts of it cannot function. Bulgarian identity is not dependent on the existence of a whole Balkan identity neither is a Balkan identity dependent on the multitude of Bulgarian, Romanian, Serbian, etc.; one can be both Bulgarian and Balkan.

It should be noted, however, that the area of Balkan/Eastern European identification as culturally hybrid needs further exploration and theorisation. The presented ideas here only briefly reflect how intertwined the region’s cultures are.

# Conclusion

As it has already been shown, cultural hybridity involves a multitude of social, historical and political aspects in the way one self-identifies. In this way, whether it is identity, music or languages, hybridity permeates most, if not all, aspects of life; thus its fluid state has preserved constancy through time. Cultural melange is a highly contextual and individual term as it is both a result of how one builds and perceives himself/herself in relation to others as well as of a deeply-rooted historical past. Furthermore, cultural identity occurs differently in variety of contexts but one commonality is that a group or a person’s culture does not exist within a closed system while it may seem so on the surface according to purist and essentialist discourses. Suggestions of increasing cultural hybridity would fall within essentialist notions such as multiculturalism which claim a time of cultural purity. Mistakenly, many argue that the world is becoming a more hybrid place through globalisation, but the latter only opens the doors for increased visibility of culturally hybrid aspects of life and society. In order for people to develop a better understanding into the permanence of cultural hybridity, it might be better to abandon the notion of organicism altogether and embrace cosmopolitanism as Appiah (2016) proposes.

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