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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

Education and Culture DG
Lifelong Learning Programme

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The origins of the crisis of the social and national identity as presented in 'Howard's End' by Edward Morgan Forster

Eliza Gładkowska
University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (Poland)

Abstract

The contemporary crisis of the notions such as citizenship and identity is the phenomenon resulting from the processes which have taken place for many decades. This paper discusses the origins of this situation by investigating E. M. Forster's novel 'Howards End' which reflects the change in the social structure and the idea of citizenship in early modernist Britain. The study concludes that the main characters manifested the profound awareness of the consequences of the social transformation although the attitudes towards those changes alter significantly among particular individuals. The modern city at the beginning of twentieth century was recognized as both the symbol and the cause for the breakthrough in social relations and the idea of citizenship which gave rise to a 'nomadic civilization'. The repercussions of the emergence of communities based on the alternative concepts are also anticipated. 'Howards End' proves to be a prophetic text about the Western world on the threshold of the crisis of identity.

Keywords: *national and social identity, crisis of identity, 'Howards End', Edward Morgan Forster*

Introduction

Concepts like identity, citizenship, and patriotism are not as stable or reliable as they used to be. Such a situation is not perceived as unusual for young people in the time of frequent migrations, political transformations and their consequences, and disillusionment with different social and political systems. When vagueness of notions of identity and citizenship is taken for granted it is difficult, if possible, to analyse, challenge or change this state of affairs. Thus, it seems valuable to reflect upon the works of literature which mirrors the origins of the blurring the discussed concepts of national and social identity. *Howards End*, a novel written by E. M. Forster around 1910, presents such an opportunity. The story about two middle class, intellectual sisters – Margaret and Helen Schlegel of German background who are constantly juxtaposed with the Wilcox family (a family of a wealthy businessman with colonial ties) and Leonard Bast (a sensitive clerk with ambitions but without money) is also a narrative about London. Presenting different attitudes towards the changing image of the city could be a great starting point for young people to analyse the contemporary approach towards the place, country and, consequently, national and social identity.

The general ambience of London in *Howards End*

At the beginning we may receive the signals what London is just about to cease – a stable symbol of unity of England, and Great Britain. An exemplary situation of London dwellers who are emotionally attached to their city is presented as follows:

> Like many others who have lived long in a great capital, she had strong feelings about the various railway termini. They are our gates to the glorious and the unknown. Through them we pass put into adventure and sunshine, to them alas! We return. In Paddington all Cornwall is latent and the remoter west; down the inclines of Liverpool Street lie fenlands and the illumitable Broads; Scotland is through the pylon of Euston; Wessex behind the poised chaos of Waterloo. Italians realize this, as in natural; those of them who are so unfortunate as to serve as waiters in Berlin call the Anhalt Bahnof the Stazione d'Italia, because by it they must return to their homes. And he is a chilly Londoner who does not endow his stations with some personality, and extend to them, however shyly, the emotions of fear and love. (Forster, 1992, p. 12)

The railway stations of London are presented from a broad, general perspective. It is remarkable how a vast area is covered within such a short fragment. The global effect is achieved by the enumeration of many geographical places (see the underlined) interconnected by means of transport and the travellers' emotional attachment to them. Moreover, the narrator assigns a specific meaning to a particular station. In this way, London termini stand for specific parts of the Island and the capital is the embodiment of the whole Great Britain. It functions not only on the administrative level but also on the emotional one in the collective consciousness - the narrator suggests that it would be quite uncommon for the London dweller not to personalise the termini. The passage also says a lot about London inhabitants and their attitude towards the city implying that the metropolis functions for them as a metaphor of the whole country and also that they develop personal attitude towards the city. The stations connect the metropolis with the other, often more rural sites of the country and beyond, not only literally but also figuratively. On top of that, to offer even a more general point of view, the global outlook is provided by showing the correlation between the discussed English stations and the German railway station in Berlin as the potential gate to Italy.

Then, the narrator narrows his scope of interest – he investigates just one station perceived by a particular individual, contrary to the previous passage where a collective point of view was explored:

> To Margaret – I hope that it will not set the reader against her – the station of King's Cross had always suggested Infinity. Its very situation – withdrawn a little behind the facile splendours of St. Pancras – implied a comment on the materialism of life. Those two great arches, colourless, indifferent, shouldering between them an unlovely clock, were fit portals for some eternal adventure, whose issue might be prosperous, but would certainly not be expressed in the ordinary language of prosperity. (Forster, 1992, p. 12)

Here, Margaret's reflections upon King's Cross station are presented: the building speaks to her in the language of forms, colours and shapes. Through its appearance the station delivers a message to her about the intangible, metaphysical realm – the infinity.

This interpretation and the perception of the station (e.g. ‘an unlovely clock’) are specific for Margaret.

Thus, when the two passages from *Howards End* are compared it could be easily seen how the perspective on the London termini narrows down and is further personalized to Margaret’s point of view. By these means the reader is provided with a more comprehensible outlook of London and its railway stations. One can also notice the possibility of the diverse angles which can be undertaken when experiencing the city. The combination of these different points of view also allows to perceive its duality – London operates on various layers of the awareness – it is present in collective (as in the first passage) as well as in individual consciousness (as in the second passage) and those two levels are not equal but they influence each other. Parallel to this, figuratively London’s stations correlate with other parts of Great Britain but also with other railway stations in the world forming the net of co-dependency of places and their meanings.

However, this representation is to be lost forever. It is as if to show how the world looked like just yesterday because as the action advances London also is being perceived more and more often as unbalanced, unpredictable and, finally, decaying. The personal state of the characters is influences by the chaos of the capital as presented below:

> “Yes, in summer especially, the mews is a serious nuisance. The smoking-room, too, is an abominable little den. The house opposite has been taken by operatic people. Ducie Street’s going down, it’s my private opinion.”
>
> “How sad! It’s only a few years since they built those pretty houses.”
>
> “Shows things are moving. Good for trade.”
>
> “I hate this continual flux of London. It is an epitome of us at our worst – eternal formlessness; all the qualities, good, bad, and indifferent, streaming away – streaming, streaming for ever. That’s why I dread it so. I mistrust rivers, even in scenery. Now, the sea-” (Forster, 1992, p. 190)

By undertaking the subject of transformation of Ducie Street, the passage exemplifies the alternation of many London streets occurring in that time. This short conversation also distinctly demonstrates the difference between Margret’s and Henry’s personalities and their approaches towards London. They reflect on the change in Ducie Street from completely different points of view. Mr. Wilcox, as a man passionate about business, does not see anything wrong in treating the street as a subject of real estate speculators and examines the condition of his house from a very practical angle. In contrast, Margaret represents the sentimental approach to London, expressing sorrow after the decline of the district and at the same time emphasizing the fact that the value of the street lies mostly in its aesthetic aspects (‘those pretty houses’). Most importantly, however, Margaret’s response is so significant because she manifestly expresses her opinion towards the key issue of ‘the flux of London’. The sense of the fluctuation of the city is permanent throughout the novel and although Misses Schlegel present themselves as liberal, the feature of the unrest of the modernistic city is consistently rejected by Margaret. Most probably, her attitude towards London reveals that she is not so progressive and liberal as she would like to think about herself. She longs for traditional values. In this constant instability, Margaret sees the dangerous unification of all distinctive values. She refuses to accept the reality in which one cannot make clear-cut

judgments and define oneself, yet London represents such a reality. Moreover, Margaret claims that it discloses the shameful aspect of human nature, i.e. 'the eternal formlessness', implying that there is no hope for the city to regain permanence. The metaphor of a river strengthens this impression as the city 'streams away for ever'. The compilation of the words 'eternal', 'for ever', and 'streaming' repeated three times creates the striking contrast between the qualities of permanence and transience. The next quotation also contributes to the impression that in the flux of London many ideas may be found but the distinction is lost:

> She could not concentrate on details. Parliament, the Thames, the irresponsive chauffer, would flash into the field of house-hunting, and all demand comment or response. It is impossible to see modern life steadily and see it whole, and she had chosen to see it a whole. (Forster, 1992, p. 168)

Again, Margaret's resistance to accept the defragmented, frantic vision of London might be noticed. Margaret's distress is caused by life which is impossible to comprehend in London. The passage portrays an individual overwhelmed by the challenges posed by the hectic, modern city. As a result, Margaret is not able to prioritize and perceive the reality clearly. However, she denies surrendering to this situation and tries 'to see it a whole' i.e. comprehend life in London as regular, ordered and complete. The situation is paradoxical because she has already stated that 'It is impossible to see modern life steadily and see it whole'. Thus, similarly to the previous passage, there is no hope for steadiness in London and so the city constitutes a deadlock for Margaret who chooses to stick to her principles. Her discontent is evident for others. In the following passage, Mr. Wilcox confronts it directly:

> So, by the way, with London. I have heard you rail against London, Miss Schlegel, and it seems a funny thing to say, but I was very angry with you. What do you know about London? You only see civilization from the outside. I don't say in your case but in too many cases that attitude leads to morbidity, discontent, and Socialism. (Forster, 1992, p. 153)

Interestingly, what Margaret perceives as unsettling for Henry is the source of stability. Mr. Wilcox' statement clarifies that for Margaret London equals civilization and she does not deny it. As it might be clearly observed in previous quotations, the elder of the Schlegel sisters believes that the world of old values is endangered by modern life of London. The opinions of Mr. Wilcox on this very issue are contrary: for him London as an embodiment of civilization is a guarantee of the old order, organised life and development. He even accuses Margaret of having too superficial an insight to this subject which potentially may lead to the degradation of the existing social order. Mr. Wilcox, as many others, sees this threat in socialism distinctly collating it with 'morbidity' and 'discontent.'

Margaret perceives the danger of the decline of social organisation and national identity in this what Henry praises as civilization:

> Margaret was silent. Marriage had not saved her from the sense of flux. London was but a foretaste of this nomadic civilization which is altering human nature

> so profoundly, and throws upon personal relations a stress greater than they have ever borne before. Under cosmopolitanism, if it comes, we shall receive no help from the earth. Trees and meadows and mountains will only be a spectacle, and the binding force that they once exercised on character must be entrusted to Love alone. May Love be equal to the task! (Forster, 1992, pp. 272-273)

The fluctuating, disintegrated London (as concluded from the quotations presented before) constitutes a starting point for the transformation of social order and identity. The reflection bears a hint of anxiety resulting from anticipation of these changes. Margaret feels that people without common national identity will impact a place so that a country will not define their citizens any longer. It is coherent with her belief that the modern city is not permanent so from mutual reasons the connection between a man and a place will be broken. The space will be objectified and insignificant which is presented in the sentence 'Trees and meadows and mountains will only be a spectacle'. Thus, people will not feel the connection with their country and will create a 'nomadic civilization.' As such, the social transformation must entail meaningful and far-reaching consequences and Margaret foresees that it will alter man's disposition. Therefore, people devoid of elevated conceptions of a nation and a significant relationship with space will be only able to develop meaningful relations with each other. All stages and effects of this transgressions Margaret embodies and associates with London. Hence London is a harbinger of the untrustworthy aspects of civilization.

Margaret seems to ignore positive side of civilization, including culture:

> Margret grew depressed; she was anxious to settle on a house before they left town to pay their annual visit to Mrs. Munt. She enjoyed this visit, and wanted to have her mind at ease for it. Swanage, though dull, was stable, and this year she longed more than usual for its fresh air and for the magnificent downs that guard it on the north. But London only stimulates, it cannot sustain; and Margaret, hurrying over its surface for a house without knowing what sort of a house she wanted, was paying for many thrilling sensation in the past. She could not even break loose from culture, and her time was wasted by concerts which it would be a sin to miss, and invitations which it would never do to refuse. At last she grew desperate; she resolved that she would go nowhere and be at home to no one until she found a house, and broke the resolution in half an hour. (Forster, 1992, p. 157)

Misses Schlegel are presented in the beginning of the novel as paying a lot of attention to cultural events, books and modern movements in arts and society. They enjoy the company of artist and theoretical debates in a conversational group and with friends. It seems all the more unexpected that Margaret refutes the special place that London holds in English culture and the cultivation of intellectual life in general. Concerts and social visits are perceived now as simple waste of time and she deplores the fact that she 'could not even break loose from culture' as if culture entraps her. Margaret does not recognize the liberating power of culture any more, instead she wants to liberate herself from culture which she interpret now as a set of conventions. Remarkable may seem the statement: '(...) London only stimulates, it cannot sustain;' as it can be easily referred to

cultural activities of the sisters. Their debates are merely theoretical, yet they consume a lot of their energy and commitment. Similarly, London also provides many stimuli but it is difficult to find a secure place there to process them. Thus, Margaret is beleaguered and distracted to such an extent that it prevents her from finding a new house for her family. The frenetic pace of the city overwhelms her so much that she cannot interact with it anymore or sense the city on its many levels which could be noticed in the phrase 'hurrying over its surface'. Hence, Margaret seeks solace in rural Swanage as it stands for the qualities she lacks in London (see the underlined).

Howards End evokes similar feelings in Margaret as Swanage does:

> He [Mr. Wilcox] had to be up on London by seven – if possible, by six thirty. Once more she lost the sense of space; once more trees, houses, people, animals, hills, merged and heaved into one dirtiness, and she was at Wickham Place.
>
> Her evening was pleasant. The sense of flux which had haunted her all the year disappeared for a time. She forgot the luggage and the motor-cars, and the hurrying men who know so much and connect so little. She recaptured the sense of space, which is the basis of all earthly beauty, and starting from Howards End, she attempted to realize England. (Forster, 1992, p. 213)

The passage quoted is structured upon the contradiction between the metropolitan London symbolised by Wickham Place and rural England epitomized by Howards End. London is associated with a disintegrated individual unable to connect with nature and space whose habitat is 'one dirtiness'. Thus man in the modern city becomes devoid of the ingrained ability to identify and interact with nature. In opposition to that, Howards End provides the sense of relief because it is an organized part of the microcosm where an individual may find its place in the universe (see the underlined). What is more, Howards End and indirectly the English countryside allows one to identify nationally. Contrary to rural Howard's End, London is cosmopolitan, fragmented and it means that the spirit of the country is not embraced in the modern, chaotic life. A similar idea is conveyed in the conversation between Helen and Margaret:

> 'I hope it will be permanent,' said Helen, drifting away to other thoughts.
>
> 'I think so. There are moments when I feel Howards End peculiarly our own.'
>
> 'All the same, London's creeping.'
>
> She pointed over the meadow-over eight or nine meadows but at the end of them was a red rust.
>
> 'You see that in Surrey and even Hampshire now,' she continued. 'I can see it from the Purbeck Downs. And London is only part of something else, I'm afraid. Life's going to be melted down, all over the world.'
>
> Margaret knew that her sister spoke truly. Howards End, Oniton, the Purbeck Downs, the Oderberge, were all survivals, and the melting-pot was being prepared for them. Logically, they had no right to be alive. One's hope was in the weakness of logic. Were they possibly the earth beating time?

> ‘Because a thing is going strong now, it need not go strong for ever,’ she said. ‘This craze for motion has only set in during the last hundred years. It may be followed by a civilization that won’t be a movement, because it will rest on earth. All the signs are against it now, but I can’t help hoping, and very early in the morning in the garden I feel that our house is the future as well as the past.’ (Forster, 1992, p. 335)

This passage epitomises the deliberations thus far in this section. If we assume that Howards End stands for Englishness then England is presented as steadiness. London is located in opposition to Englishness; it is embodied by ‘the craze for motion’ which leads to the unification in the national and the global scale (see the underlined). The progress of the modern civilization is perceived as an ominous sign of danger when Helen says ‘All the same, London’s creeping.’ In this sentence, Helen implies that London is like a dangerous animal ‘creeping’ before an attack. Then, the existence of peaceful rural districts, are justified by the question ‘Were they possibly the earth beating time?’ which endows the situation with the atmosphere of a struggle with the inevitable. However, by the end of the quotation a ray of hope appears: Helen confesses that in Howards End she feels the connection with place and time. When she admits: ‘I feel that our house is the future as well as the past’ it is as if the battle with time is won. The spirit of England is stable interconnecting the history with the modern times. On top of that, if Howards End is the past and the future it may be interpreted that England, stability and peace are eternal.

Conclusion

Summing up, a hundred years ago, Forster in his novel *Howards End* foresaw a crisis that we are dealing now. Moreover, the characters of Forster’s book were very conscious of the transformations that were taking place back then. On the contrary, we, who were brought up in the environment that is already an outcome of those changes, not only in Britain but generally in Europe and in the West, having two World Wars in our collective memory, many political transformations of the twentieth century, are not so conscious that nomadic civilization is actually a part of our *modus vivendi*. The crisis of national identity and citizenship accompanied with the growing role of technology in our lives also disrupts our psychological identity and even physical health. That is why *Howards End* carries the much needed educational potential. Adopting the sociological approach to *Howards End* enables us nowadays to realise the model of the world that we are living now. It allows a profound reflexion on the state of contemporary society but also our individual identity. Therefore, analysing *Howards End* would constitute a very beneficial part of curriculum in many countries.

References

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