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Chapter 11 High-flyers and underdogs: the polarisation of Finnish academic identities¹

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Introduction

The macro-level changes in the policy, funding and governance of higher education impact on the micro-level of daily activities in academia, shaping and moulding how academics make sense of their work and their roles. The image of the university as a territory inhabited by distinct academic tribes - with their own disciplinary cultures, and academics as tribe members with firm disciplinary identities (Becher, 1989) - has been challenged by increasing, and often conflicting, external pressures on higher education. New managerial practices with audits, performance measurements, rankings, profilings and competition for funding have substantially transformed the academy as a workplace (Enders et al., 2009; Nixon, 1996, 2003) as academics are expected to increase and improve their performance in both teaching and research, and demonstrate societal impact. Alongside this, short-term employment has become commonplace since casualisation has been a standard response to an insecure funding environment (e.g. Enders, 2000; Rhoades, 2010; Ylijoki, 2010).

The Finnish higher education system has witnessed several transformations that are indicative of such a changing context; whilst based on the Nordic welfare state model that perceives higher education as a public good, it has nonetheless become increasingly market-oriented in recent decades. Since the turn of the century in particular, several significant transformations have taken place. A more performance-based salary structure was introduced in 2005 (Jauhiainen et al., 2009); the New Universities Act of 2010 devolved the university sector from government control and transformed civil-service employment relationships into contractual ones (Välilmaa, 2012); institutional mergers created three new universities in 2010 (Ursin et al., 2010; Ylijoki, 2014); and an outcomes-based funding formula is scheduled for introduction in 2015. All of these changes have increased competition between and within Finnish higher education institutions.

Similar changes across the developed world have increasingly fragmented and blurred the academic profession (e.g. Clegg, 2008; Fanghanel, 2012; Henkel, 2010, 2000; Gornall & Salisbury, 2012; McInnis, 2010; Musselin, 2005; Ylijoki, 2013). In addition, growing competition at all levels of higher education has promoted the stratification and polarisation of academic staff into two tiers, the 'haves' and the 'have-nots': those who benefit from the changes and those who do not (e.g. Kogan et al., 1994; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Ylijoki, 2014). These transformations shape academic culture, influencing academic identity constructions and interpretations of what it means to be an academic in the present-day university.

In this chapter we explore academic identity formation from a narrative perspective, which views stories as a fundamental form of human understanding through which individuals make sense of their experiences and of themselves (e.g. Carroll, 2001; Elliot, 2005; Herman, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1988). A cultural stock of stories that are prominent in a given cultural context serve as resources for individuals to orient themselves in the social world, interpret that world in an appropriate manner, and relate to others in meaningful ways. Narratives also reflect a moral order

¹ Some of the arguments presented in this chapter were developed in Ylijoki, O-H. & Ursin, J. (2013), 'The construction of academic identity in the changes of Finnish higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 38: 1135–1149.

(Harré, 1983), which defines what is seen as good, right and valued; and what as bad, wrong and worthless, enabling individuals to reach shared understandings of the core values and basic assumptions that prevail within and define their culture. On the one hand narratives have normative power over individuals - and sometimes a particular narrative may become so dominant and hegemonic that it is treated as a self-evident fact beyond all human intervention; on the other hand, without narrative resources individuals would be lost, unable to orient themselves and come to terms with changes in their environments. Individuals live amongst a variety of narratives, ensuring that there is always at least some space for agency and choice. Narratives are therefore not culturally imposed straightjackets that determine individual's action, but cultural tools that may be not only adopted and absorbed, but also redefined, reshaped and recreated in and through social interaction.

We argue that academics make sense of their work and of themselves by absorbing, negotiating, reshaping and co-creating stories. Faced with continuous changes, they need to rework and redefine what it means to be an academic and what actually are their key values and moral commitments under these changing circumstances. Drawing upon data generated through an empirical research project, in this chapter we examine the diversity of narratives of changes in academic work that prevail in the present-day Finnish university, and consider what kinds of narratives Finnish academics use to make sense of their work experiences and to build their academic identities. We begin by outlining details of our research.

The research project: an outline of the design and method

The empirical basis of our paper is data generated through focused interviews with 42 Finnish academics. The interviews formed part of a joint research project, 'Universities' structural development, academic communities and change' (2008–2009), funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education. Data collection included interviews with academics from eight Finnish research universities that had undergone structural reforms at the institutional and/or unit level. The interviewees represented different disciplinary fields and organisational positions and ranged from senior to early career academics. The themes addressed in the interview conversations included recent transformations at the institutional level, and more generally in the Finnish higher education system, as well as interviewees' day-to-day work experiences and responses to the changes.

Drawing upon a narrative perspective, we explore the variety of narratives through which academics understand change and its impact upon their work, and accordingly, what kinds of identities are thereby constructed. We are interested in the content of narratives, not in the linguistic forms of narration; in other words, we pose 'what?' rather than 'how?' questions (Hyvärinen, 2008, 47). In doing so, we seek to illustrate how differently the apparently same changes in higher education are interpreted, resulting in dramatically distinct - even totally opposing - academic identities that emerge from the current Finnish university context.

It is important to emphasise that the unit of our analysis was not the individual academic but a fairly coherent discursive act, which we conceptualise as a distinct narrative that relates specifically to recent changes in Finnish academia. This means that there is no one-to-one relationship between a particular narrative and a particular academic; rather, in the course of her/his interview, an academic may have identified her or his reliance on several narratives, depending on which issues and themes were discussed. Whilst one narrative typically emerged from the

interviewee's account as a principal influence, other influential narratives would also be identified as interviewees related their work experiences.

Based on our narrative analysis of the data, we identify eight different narratives, each providing a specific way of making sense of the changes to have impacted upon higher education in Finland, and of what it means to be an academic in that context. We have classified these eight narratives into two basic storylines: regressive and progressive (see Gergen & Gergen, 1983). In regressive storylines recent changes are perceived negatively as representing the deterioration of one's work context and situation, and of one's standing in academia. In progressive storylines, in contrast, changes are described positively: as representing improvement and progress. Our analysis led us to identify five different regressive storyline narratives that were focused on academic life (the narratives of: resistance, loss, work overload, job insecurity and cynical bystander), all incorporating descriptions of worries, disillusionments, fears or dissatisfaction of some kind. Three narratives represent the progressive storyline (the narratives of: success, mobility and change agency), exuding contentment, optimism and high morale.

Conflicting narratives of academic identities

We present the eight narratives one by one, beginning in each case with quotes that illustrate the tone of the narrative in question. After the quotes, we outline how the changes in higher education are understood, and then characterise the essence of the academic identity embedded in each narrative. Since regressive storylines are the more typical category represented in our interview data, we begin with them.

The Narrative of Resistance

Overall I'm annoyed that business principles have been introduced into the university. (...) There are ethical questions involved, so I don't want this. (...) I mean, what's happening in the university system nationally, how things are, and also what's happening inside the university. All this development, in my opinion, is heading in the wrong direction. I think we need a Humboldtian university (female associate professor).

I was involved at the time in the protests about salary, and now I'm involved a lot in this opposition to the University Act. They're not good, these things - and this new salary structure, for example, it really annoys me. They're rather ... how shall I put it? - they're ethically dubious (male associate professor).

In this narrative the recent changes in higher education are strongly opposed for moral and ethical reasons. Irritated and resentful, academics associate these changes with what they consider unacceptable managerialist and neo-liberal ideologies. The trend of presenting students as consumers or customers and academic knowledge as a marketable commodity are perceived as particularly objectionable, so overt opposition and protestations are seen as morally justifiable and legitimate responses to the changes occurring not only in universities, but in many cases in wider society.

The form of academic identity embedded in this resistance narrative is that of critic and rebel. Academics make sense of their work through a lens of negativity; they are first and foremost opposed to current neo-liberal policy. Their own working conditions and their positions

within academia may not necessarily have been affected, so their opposition does not always reflect self-interest; it is a *principled* objection. Their opposition often reflects nostalgic yearning for what they imagine as a golden age of 'traditional' academic values and ideals: academic freedom, autonomy, collegiality, knowledge as a common good and the principles that underpin the Humboldtian university model - these epitomise the standards and moral virtues perceived as seriously threatened, and which therefore need actively defending. Whilst reflecting negativity – representing an oppositional stance – this identity incorporates a positive dimension insofar as it generates an academic identity that incorporates strong personal conviction and commitment to specific ideologies and values.

The Narrative of Loss

We've been extensively reorganised. First, our new head said he wouldn't delegate any decision making authority to us. (...) It's led to a reduction of the number of posts - also the number of admin. staff has been reduced. (...) It has an enormous impact on day-to-day life. (...) I think we'll survive somehow, but our resources have been cut back (male professor).

My career's in decline. (...) I mean my career's about to end. (...) I've been forced to resign. (...) I still find the field interesting. It'd still be nice to do something ... to achieve something (male professor).

The narrative of loss follows the plot structure of a tragedy. The line it takes is that external changes to higher education have had a serious deleterious effect on the nature of academic work. This is not simply about opposition in principle, but to specific actual changes that have already occurred: cuts; new types of profiling and forced mergers between universities, departments and units, leading to redundancies; questionable power relations; and the marginalisation of one's disciplinary field. Although the changes have created widespread general dissatisfaction, the narrative of loss does not incorporate reference to active opposition and resistance; on the contrary, it conveys acquiescence and passivity. It is a gloomy and dark narrative that includes no reference to light at the end of the tunnel - no vision of or hope for a better future.

Resonant of the plight of a tragic victim, this academic identity is one of vulnerability, weakness and defencelessness. The academic has no capacity for opposition or fight against the changes imposed from above; identity construction is characterised by submission to the inevitable. All that can be done is to endure and try to survive – often by waiting for retirement. At the same time, by relying on this narrative academics are able to construct themselves as innocent and guiltless, and by extension they attribute responsibility for the current grim situation to external forces within or outside their departments.

The Narrative of Administrative Work Overload

What's been particularly annoying is the proliferation of all kinds of reporting and control and self-assessment and external evaluations and planning and surveillance. A totally unreasonable proportion of my working hours goes into filling in these different forms. This kind of administrative burden has been steadily increasing. (...) Quite clearly, administration has become an end in itself (male professor).

My aim is to go into part-time retirement since I'm now old enough. It's partly because I want more time for research. Unfortunately it has to be done this way, since there's no other reasonable way (male lecturer).

This narrative portrays academic work as involving an ever increasing administrative workload, due to the managerialist regulation mechanisms that have created a flood of administrative tasks related to, *inter alia*: audits, self-assessments, strategic planning, mission statements, electronic control and monitoring systems. These are perceived as a futile waste of time, preventing academics from fulfilling their real purpose: teaching and research. Shouldering heavy administrative burdens creates the risk of falling completely behind with research. This narrative highlights the fact that academic work is increasingly infiltrated and diluted by unavoidable and uncontrollable administrative duties, which are assigned from the top, with no real possibility of avoiding or amending them. This is seen as narrowing down the scope of autonomy and academic freedom, turning academics into 'managed professionals' (Rhoades, 1998) who are subordinated to managerial power. This, in turn, threatens the essence of being an academic.

The identity construction entailed in this narrative is that of an exhausted and overworked academic who is about to collapse under the weight of a constantly increasing administrative burden, and who yearns to devote her or himself to scholarly activities. This often gives rise to special identity work, in which academics have to renegotiate the meaning of being an academic: how to be an academic without being research-active. It illustrates the strength of the traditional notion of an academic as one who is committed to research, and that it is through research that prestige and recognition are won. Even retirement is considered as an option, in order to free up time for research. This leads to a paradox: in order to retain an identity as an academic, one must leave academia.

The Narrative of Job Insecurity

The biggest problem from an employee's perspective is what I've been complaining about all the time: the university's employment policy. I can't understand why it's so problematic (...) why a university can't be a normal workplace where you can get a permanent post after a certain period. (...) All the time I've worked here I've complained about these temporary contracts. I've always said that a researcher's a human being too (male associate professor).

My five year period ends next summer and I'm a bit worried about it. It's not clear whether I'll get another five years. It's not clear any more - particularly because of the merger; there are several areas that they could target with this associate professorship. It's a bit open, really. Although, by rights, I should get it, I can't take anything for granted. Anything can happen; cuts that you wouldn't imagine are made all over the place; they could happen here, too. I'm a bit worried, really (female associate professor).

This narrative describes the insecurity and anxiety around temporary contracts, which are a common feature of the Finnish university system. Our data revealed this kind of employment to

affect not only junior academics, but also some senior ones whose employment has entailed decades-long successions of fixed-term contracts. Academics without permanent posts tend to refer to this narrative in relating their work experiences.

The narrative of job insecurity tells of living and working in the shadow of potential unemployment. Linked with uncertainty, it also entails speculation and reflection as to how committed to the university one should be under the current conditions. The narrative also highlights the increasing precariousness of the fixed term employment culture that is a consequence of increasing competition and restructuring at all levels of academia. Although in the past it was perhaps reasonable to expect something – another contract, or a renewal of one’s current contract – to turn up, such confidence has dissipated. Yet, contrary to the narrative of loss, the narrative of job insecurity embraces hope for the future: that a new contract – and, for some, even a permanent one, eventually – may be on the horizon.

The academic identity embedded in this narrative is one of precarity and fragility combined with anxiety and distress over the future. Consequently, identity as an academic remains rather weak and wavering, incorporating consideration and contemplation of alternatives and fall-back positions that unemployment may precipitate. Short-term employment engenders an identity as a wage earner - academics are considered knowledge workers who sell their labour for a salary. Instead of reflecting vocation and calling, academic work is perceived as paid work and contract researchers and short-term-contract academics as members of an exploited precariat. In a similar vein, academia is not seen as a collegial *alma mater* but as an employer that dispenses and administers contracts. This narrative was the only one to emerge from our data in which salaries and contracts feature, indicating that within academic culture they become an issue only when there is a risk of losing them.

The Narrative of Bystander

I haven’t followed these much. (...) I haven’t got involved with these. (...) It’s staff of a certain level who negotiate and get stressed (female researcher).

I haven’t really noticed these. (...) I suppose it’s all right; we’ll just carry on. (...) I’m old enough to have seen so many different things come and go. They’ve had very little impact on me (male associate professor).

The narrative of bystander interprets changes in higher education as remote and distant, occurring at the upper levels of the administrative hierarchy with little impact on one’s daily work. A distinction is thus made between one’s own work and policy- and institutional-level changes; the two are perceived as independent of each other. This narrative reflects a passive and cynical stance towards the changes – a perception that changes tend to come and go irrespective of one’s preferences, so it is pointless to bother too much about them; they are likened to increasingly disturbing background noise that needs to be blocked out. The interviewees who applied this storyline did not have much to say about changes to their work – they were not identified as an issue worthy of mention.

The identity constructed in this narrative is one of a bystander or onlooker who is absorbed in, or focused on, his or her immediate tasks, and the university environment and its transformations do not feature within this confined field of attention or concern. Keeping her or his head below the parapet, the ‘bystander’s’ perspective on academia incorporates cynicism and

indifference, coupled in some cases with a kind of pragmatic resignation to their impotency in resisting change, which prompts disengagement with it.

In sharp contrast to these regressive storyline narratives, we present three below that, representing the progressive storyline, are focused on improvement and advancement over time.

The Narrative of Change Agency

So it was quite a provocative paper [about merging the activities of two faculties from two different universities], as it brought up for discussion those sensitive issues from both parties, but I think it was worth it and justified. I got the worst telling-off of my life, though (female professor).

I need to make sure that everybody's able to earn a living. That means I need to work pretty hard to get money from somewhere so that our budget will stay healthy. The only way to really save money is to sack a researcher or somebody; it's possible to sack a researcher and save money, it's not possible to make savings from anything else. But then, is that the right thing to do? (male professor).

The narrative of change agency reflects an assumption that some academics act as the driving force behind and the instigators of reforms. This narrative is often associated with academics who have roles as departmental heads or deans of a faculty - with one's organisational role as a sort of 'third space professional' (Whitchurch, 2008) and with the power that accompanies it. Reform management and other administrative duties are seen not as an unpleasant burden or a waste of time, but as an integral part of one's work, and reforms are considered the conduit to the right course or direction - although the narrative acknowledges that in the short term transformation tends to create stress, anxiety and insecurity amongst staff, so it is important to support colleagues and help them get through the transition period.

The academic identity embedded in this narrative is one of change agent and facilitator, combining soft managerialism with the role of a university teacher-researcher. As reforms are often personalised to the one in charge of the process, the protagonist of this narrative needs to confront resistance and criticism from colleagues, which requires conflict resolution skills together with the ability and willpower to make tough decisions in order to achieve the changes considered legitimate and necessary. In this way the identity involves negotiating a balance between collegial and managerial stances; rather than resorting to harsh, top-down managerialism, the change facilitator seeks to be compassionate and supportive. Hence, this narrative portrays an academic who understands the worries that transformation creates, but who is nonetheless persistent with implementing it.

The Narrative of Mobility

At some point I will go back to industry or somewhere else. I haven't made any decisions yet. (...) I haven't stayed in any job for more than 10 years. When I came here I thought, 'I won't be here as a professor for 30 years until retirement; I'll definitely move on again, go for somewhere else'. It's just that the time's gone so quickly that I haven't yet gone anywhere during these 5 years here (male professor).

I really don't think I'll stay in this post until retirement. It's not that I don't like this job, but, rather, that I've given myself a personal challenge that I'll still make another move into something – but I don't know what, yet; it could be at university or somewhere else. (...) I've worked abroad a few times, so an overseas post would be an interesting option for me (male research director).

The narrative of mobility glorifies dynamism and flexibility, perceiving them as advantageous characteristics. Current changes in higher education are regarded as opportunities for engagement with other spheres of society, for promoting interdisciplinary, and for inter-sectoral, inter-organisational and international mobility. This impetus is highly valued on account of the opportunities it presents for branching out along exciting, new, personal career paths. Accordingly, academic work has no particular intrinsic value, but is simply one of several potentially interesting jobs. Although academia as such is perceived as holding no special status or attraction, it presents itself as a good place to work during a certain stage of one's career. The narrative's tone is light, bright and forward-looking; it describes 'the world as one's oyster' - including the academic world: brimming with interesting career options and challenging opportunities from which the protagonist may take her or his pick.

The academic identity embedded in this narrative is not stable, deep-rooted, and fixed, but fluid, transitory and provisional – flexible enough to re-shape and take on the features of another professional identity. An identity as an academic entrepreneur, for example, facilitates border-crossing between academia and business, accompanied with a corresponding change in identity. Thus the traditional notions of academic calling and vocation are seen as constricting and obsolete remnants of the past, potentially impeding the dynamism and mobility that motivate and empower the protagonist in her or his current working life context. The identity constructed in this narrative is individualistic; it incorporates recognition of the individual's ability to spot – and to capitalise on - the potential of different situations for career change and diversification. Academic identity is hence an outcome of one's own choices and decisions, based on calculation of what would best suit oneself at a certain point of time.

The Narrative of Success

We got the maximum 7 points in an international [research] assessment, and it said that in these fields we're the trendsetter, globally – we're the ones who set the direction for others. (...) This environment is really good from our point of view. As this has been a priority area, we've received special support from the university management for developing infrastructure, and for some posts as well. In fact, there's really nothing to complain about (male professor).

We got to the crux of the matter straight away; we were the first to make headlines. From our point of view this is a really good thing. The overall status of natural sciences will increase now; we're going to be at the centre of one of the key priority areas (male professor).

The narrative of success sees the current reforms in an entirely positive light on account of their having yielded great benefits to one's own situation and one's academic profile. This perspective is

crystallised in slogans or mantras such as ‘success fosters success’ and ‘the winner takes all’, which highlight the accumulation of advantages and the Matthew effect (Merton, 1968) in science. This narrative conveys the standing of an individual academic, research group, or field of study as having been strong from the outset, demonstrated by success - particularly in obtaining funding and in research and teaching assessments. The recent transformations, in turn, have further improved their status by providing significant extra revenue, new university posts, world-wide visibility and international recognition, and correspondingly high profiles. This narrative is particularly evident in the natural sciences, technology and medicine – all of which have been identified by the university as strategic priority areas, and are highly valued on account of their potential to impact positively on societal and economic growth. High status of this kind – elite status, in effect - offers a kind of immunity to the potential negative effects of reforms and external pressures; having become invaluable, or even indispensable, to a given university, allows the deflection of, or the capacity to take in one’s stride and remain relatively unaffected by, any unfavourable changes.

The academic identity associated with the narrative of success is characterised by self-confidence grounded in the conviction that one’s academic standing both locally and in the international community is strong – and is going from strength to strength. The protagonist in this type of narrative is a winner – someone who is not only skilled in playing particular academic ‘games’, but who may also be a game-shaper and a game-changer, wielding enough power, on account of the scientific capital that she or he has accrued, to be able, at times, to determine the ‘rules’, or to ignore them. Irrespective of the kind of reform taking place, the self-confidence of the protagonist remains relatively unaffected. The identity constructed in this narrative may be either individualistic or collectivistic; a charismatic individual or a highly valued research group or disciplinary field is capable of reaching an indispensable position within the academic community.

Conclusions

On the evidence of our findings, we argue that there are strikingly diversified and polarised ways to make sense of academic work and identity in the current Finnish higher education context. In this regard our results corroborate several other studies revealing increasing fragmentation and heterogeneity within the academic profession or sectors of it (e.g. Anderson, 2008; Barry et al., 2006; Duberley et al., 2006; Evans, 2015; Fanghanel, 2012; Gornall & Salisbury, 2012; Henkel, 2005; Nikunen, 2012; Smith, 2012). Although the academic profession has always been differentiated into distinct cultures with specific notions of academic identity that relate to disciplinary fields and institutional settings (Becher, 1989; Clark, 1986), this diversity has become more pronounced due to the managerial and structural transformations in the university environment. The eight narratives identified in this study accordingly represent highly polarised understandings of what it means to be an academic. Adopting an identity as a rebel, loser, overstretched worker, precariat or cynical bystander reflects a negative, resistant and resigned stance towards one’s current working conditions and position, whereas self-identifying as a winner, mobile careerist, or change agent implies celebration of the current changes, underpinned by a positive, bright and enthusiastic attitude towards the academic work setting. The university is similarly perceived and interpreted in strikingly distinct ways through different narratives, ranging from idealised Humboldtian scholarly community to greedy exploitative employing institution.

None of the narratives emerged as dominant; they all co-exist alongside each other, mosaic-like, collectively defining Finnish academia as it is currently perceived and enacted, with all

its diversity. Colleagues within one unit may thus understand their work and themselves as academics in totally different ways, making academia internally fragmented and blurred. Academic work and identities moreover reflect not only diversity but also stratification and polarisation: there are high-flyers and underdogs; ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, who exist side-by-side and must come to terms with each other. This kind of polarisation flies in the face of the welfare state ideology, and its strong emphasis on equity, that is a deeply rooted fundamental tenet of Finnish public sector policy-making, sharing many similarities with the French republican ideology that Normand (2015) describes (in this volume). In parallel with the recent trends that he discerns glimmers of in France (Normand, 2015), increasing marketisation and managerialism seem to be threatening – if not eroding away - Finland’s Nordic welfare state ideology.

The eight narratives outlined above, and the identity constructions embedded in them, were not able to be linked emphatically and exclusively with individuals since our interviewees generally called upon different narratives, depending on the themes discussed. The narratives of success and change agency, for example, were articulated within one interview, with the interviewee speaking both of his role as the leader of a research group, and of his administrative role. Not all narrative combinations, however, are feasible in this academic context. Most obviously, the narratives of loss and success as well as those of bystander and change agency incorporate entirely opposing and mutually exclusive perceptions of academic work and identity. As Clegg (2008) points out, academic identities are not fixed and clear-cut; they are constantly being rebuilt, shaped and (re-)negotiated in social interaction - the interview setting included.

The findings from this study pose challenging questions about academic career building, especially at the early career stage (see Hakala, 2009). The current academic culture indicates a diversity of responses to the question of what it means to be an academic in the present-day Finnish university, but the crucial issue from junior academics’ perspective is what it means to be a *successful* academic (Evans, 2014). How is a successful academic career defined? Is success inseparably linked with the progressive narratives? – which were all testaments of one kind or another to the positive effects of the market-driven changes in higher education and the advantages of a high-flyer identity. This is related to the question of what kinds of competencies, abilities, values and ideals should be fostered and cultivated in university education and researcher training and development (see Evans, 2012). Our study suggests that, whilst traditional academic values and commitments may not necessarily have dissipated, they manifest themselves principally in the regressive narratives that reflect academic identity as a sort of underdog - most evidently in the narrative of resistance. Resistance in itself may involve appeal and charm, but is it enough to keep tradition alive in the midst of the accelerating change?

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