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Ascribed identities in the global era: a complex approach

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the process of identity-building, wherein I aim to provide theoretical tools, other than social-psychology (especially symbolic interactionism), to help analyze the said process. Within the epistemic framework of complexity theories, I demonstrate that historical sociology provides sufficient background for understanding contemporary identity phenomena from a macro-sociological perspective. This enables the assessment of how, in the current scenario, identity dynamics can affect global phenomena and how the global social structure can affect identity-building processes worldwide. The notion of ascribed identities is, thus, crucial. In this study, I describe modernisation as a process where the ascribed characteristics (gender, religion, ethnicity) progressively lose their function of rigidly defining a person's identity, on behalf of personal achievements. Within this framework, I describe the current re-strengthening of ascribed identities and assess, through this description, which phase of the modernisation process is nowadays taking place.

Defining identity in psychology and sociology

Like numerous other sociological notions, it is difficult to reach a consensus regarding the definition of 'identity', as there are many scientific approaches and specific variables that must be considered. 'Identity' is a fundamental notion in both Psychology and Sociology.[1] In Psychology, it denotes the process by which an individual achieves self-representation that is reliable and consistent over time. In Sociology, it refers to the social and cultural mechanisms that facilitate this achievement.

According to McKinlay and McVittie (2011, p. 4), scientific debates suggested distinguishing between the two dimensions of this process, namely 'identity' that denotes the social aspect and 'self' that denotes the psychological aspect, i.e. the part of the identity that, 'is especially unique just to us' (p. 4) (see also the 'cultural' distinction of the two notions in Simon, 2004, p. 26).

It is evident how such a suggestion might create more problems than it solves, because even the process of constructing the self requires social interactions that occur through consistent cultural patterns. As Cooley (2003) indicated, it would be a mistake to consider the psychological and social dimensions of the identity-building process separately (see also: Cheek & Cheek, 2018). Verkuyten (2005, p. 42) made the following assessment:

> The identity concept is not about individuals as such, nor about society as such, but [rather] the relationship between the two.

In other words, the identity-building process is too complex to be the object of merely one scientific discipline. However, the human mind can approach complex objects by simplifying individual sciences and compiling the partial representations that emerge as research activity outputs, to formulate an idea of the object that is closer to the complexity of the object itself. Therefore, while it is clear that neither Psychology nor Sociology alone can grasp the complexity of identity-building, it is possible to comprehend how both disciplines reduce the complexity by observing their specific epistemic approaches.

In line with this perspective, Simon (2004, p. 20 ff.) proposed an integrated model that matches sociological knowledge with psychological knowledge (the Self-Aspect Model of Identity (SAMI); Simon, 2004, p. 43 ff.). Overall, the attempt is interesting, and Simon's sociological references, in particular, are worthy of attention. Specifically, he relied on two sociological approaches: role theory and symbolic interactionism. While symbolic interactionism is a cross-border theory that transverses sociology and social psychology, Simon (p. 22) only devoted a few lines to role theory, without any references. Thus, in spite of its advanced scientific level, Simon's work is, in my opinion, a good example of how the current scholarship on identity lacks effective, genuine sociological contributions. This flaw may be attributable to the fact that apart from Mead and other symbolic interactionism authors, no 'classical' work has expressly been devoted to the identity construction processes.

Although classical sociological literature provides robust theoretical bases – for example, Parsons and Goffman's theories on roles, and more recently, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) – very few have produced systematic works about identity. Only recently have there been attempts to create a purely sociological (see Welz, 2005, pp. 3–4) theory of identity (Calhoun, 1994; Castells, 2010; Taylor, 1991, 1994). Explaining the reason, Calhoun (1994, p. 12) clearly demonstrated why:

> [T]he modern era brought an increase in the multiplicity of identity schemes [that was] so substantial … it amounted to a qualitative break, albeit one unevenly distributed in time and space. In the modern era, identity is always constructed and situated in a field and amid a flow of contending cultural discourses.

Thus, due to modernisation, identity has become a sociological subject. In the following pages, I will discuss what the term 'modernity' should imply within the discourse on identity. Here, it is necessary to highlight that from a sociological perspective, 'identity' emerges when individuals are no longer subjected to a single, all-encompassing identity scheme (Castells, 2010, pp. 10–11).

Indeed, in the pre-modern era, kinship served as the sole reference for an individual's identity (Calhoun, 1994, p. 11; see also Bougard, Bührer-Thierry, & Le Jan, 2013), as it not only defined individuals' human relation networks, but also their economic status. More specifically, each family belonged to a given social status, and this was the sole variable upon which wealth distribution criteria were based. Moreover, these criteria were fixed to ensure that the likelihood of aristocrats losing their privileges remained very low. With the dawn of modernity, this immobility underwent radical changes. Not only did kinship lose its prominence, but no other social reference emerged to perform the same function. One of the main characteristics of the bourgeois society that arose in the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries, was that people's status and (self)-perception were mainly defined by wealth, implying a higher rate of social mobility. Since wealth was based on money rather than land, its flow could rapidly change direction, making it much easier to join (and leave) the ranks of the economic elites.

In other words, since modern times, the odds of changes in an individual's social position during their lifetime, increased greatly. Further, it is needless to expound on how much a newly-achieved economic status could affect an individual's self-representation, how they are perceived by others, and the strength of the temporary character of those representations. This new trend of social mobility, as I will show later, demonstrates that identity issues have emerged across the main social, economic, and cultural cleavages during the major conflicts that have produced modernity (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967, pp. 9–11).

There is one more crucial identity classification within this framework, which contemporary social literature seldom focus on: the distinction between ascribed identities, which are related to birth conditions, and achieved identities, which change over the course of an individual's lifetime.[2]

From a sociological perspective, the sociological approach to identity is closely linked to modernisation. The distinction between ascribed and achieved identity enables a clearer focus on this relationship. The modernisation process consisted of a cultural shift from an ascribed identity system to an achieved identity system.

This leads to the following research question (RQ): Can it be said that nowadays, the modernisation process is complete and that achieved identities prevail over ascribed ones?

Methodology and epistemology

To answer this RQ, a few epistemological considerations are necessary. As previously stated, identity is a complex issue. Here, the word 'complex' is significant, as I will use complexity theories (CTs) as an epistemic tool to address the objective of this study.

In its extreme synthesis, CTs highlight the inadequacy of traditional knowledge or scientific practices in relation to two main categories of cases:

- The number of variables of an object is much higher than usual (Suteanu, 2005)
- An object's behaviour does not fit into traditional scientific categories (Luhmann, 1979, p. 86. ff; 1995; Morin, 1990, 2005)

On other occasions (Ruzzeddu, 2007), distinctions have been made between the cognitive strategies that CTs have yielded to cope with those problems, including:

- Reducing complexity (i.e. the number of variables) according to the criteria the observer has clearly stated (von Foerster, 1984; Heims, 1991, p. 110 ff.; Luhmann, 1979, 1995;[3] Maturana & Varela, 1980, 1988; see also Guy, 2018, p. 862 ff.; Weber, 1949, p. 80 ff.)
- More sophisticated theoretical tools (von Bertalannfy, 1968; Gell-Mann, 1994; Leleur, 2008; Morin, 1977; Rivero, 2019; Urry, 2003, 2005)

It is worth highlighting that the two categories' tools are not mutually exclusive and can be used simultaneously for the same object.

Within this framework, I propose a model for identity study that focuses on the issues of abstraction-level choice (Gell-Mann, 1994, p. 51 ff.), provides a global scope[4] (Touraine, 2007, p. 93), and considers cultural dynamics in a cross-national dimension. This will entail disregarding a considerable amount of information; however, this level of abstraction might provide theoretical frameworks for more localised scholarship on identity in the future.

From Physics, CTs can borrow an important tool for assessing abstraction-level choice. Gleick (1987, p. 15 ff.) referred to the geophysicist Lorenz, who, in 1961, developed a mathematical model for weather forecasting that was radically different from the traditional mechanical models. Lorenz found that the forecast models changed according to the number of digits he entered into his computer:

> The problem lay in the numbers he had typed. In the computer's memory, six decimal places were stored: .506127. On the printout, to save space, just three appeared: .506. Lorenz had entered the shorter, rounded-off numbers, assuming that the difference – one part in a thousand – was inconsequential. (Gleick, 1987, p. 16)

This simple difference in the initial information resulted in drastically different weather forecasts and deeply affected the weather service's reliability. This was an early formulation of the renowned principle describing a system's dependence on initial conditions (popularly known as the butterfly effect). It states that a system's initial conditions affect its evolution at a nonlinear rate. This principle has been thoroughly mathematically formulated. However, the formula does not need to be presented here, as the aspect on which I want to focus is the observer's role.

As evidenced by a brief quotation from his book, Lorenz determined how much information to provide in order to obtain his forecasts. Generally, even a system's initial conditions, regardless of how simple and/or short, are the outcome of a subjective representation. What really matters here is that it is almost impossible to foresee a system's future state.

On the contrary, it is quite easy to understand how the initial conditions affect the system's current state. By applying this theoretical pattern to the social science domain, contemporary social dynamics are shown to be the outcome of nonlinear dynamics, which are rooted in the past. Similar to how small quantic irregularities in the early universe shaped the current cosmic laws, and a small frustration can burden a youth with life-long trauma, the Romans erected numerous *castra* at the empire's northern borders, which would subsequently evolve into independent feuds in the Middle Ages, hindering Germany's unification for centuries (Rokkan, 1975, p. 562 ff.; Tilly, 1984, p. 53).[5] This assumption also prompts a reconsideration of the theoretical link between sociology and historical studies (see Castañeda & Schneider, 2017; Lachman, 2013, p. 6; Skocpol, 1987). Similar to statistics or economics, historical studies can be data source for sociological researches, even while focusing on contemporary phenomena.

Regarding contemporary identity phenomena, the main assumption is that they are rooted in events that occurred during the early phases of modernity. Therefore, to understand these better, it is necessary to integrate them with deep reflections on modernity.

Identities in the modern era

First, it is necessary to define 'modernity', the characteristics of which have changed considerably over the centuries. There are essentially two approaches to defining this notion (Touraine, 2007, p. 71 ff.).

The first is a cultural approach, which consists of a set of representations of human nature rooted in the past. Touraine (1992, p. 50) defined Augustine's theology as the starting point of this process, especially the renowned passage in book 10 of his confessions about the divine nature of the human soul, which, in Augustine's view, is directly connected to God. According to Touraine, this is the core of future modern reflections (namely, those of Descartes and Kant) that define subjectivity as an entity with the same ontological degree of empirical reality. This idea of subjectivity is the foundation for a representation of the individual-society relationship that fully acknowledges that 'Les individus et les catégories sociales défendent leurs intérêts et leurs valeurs'[6] (Touraine, 1992, p. 70) from social boundaries and traditions.

The second is a structural macro-sociological approach, as it refers to the rise of capitalism. According to Pirenne (1937, p. 66 ff.), early forms of capitalism existed in Europe in the tenth century, long before the beginning of modernity. For centuries, two different economic organisations coexisted in Western Europe: feudalism, which was prevalent in the countryside, and mercantilism, which was prevalent in the cities. While the feudal system entailed a rigid division among social ranks, capitalism arose as a disruptive force, due to the serfs that had fled their native lands and destinies (Pirenne, 1937, p. 69). In other words, capitalism consisted of a new trade (later industrial) organisation and comprised formally free people[7] who rapidly changed their position in the social space, while attempting to maximise their personal income using *rationality*.

According to Touraine, individualism and rationality are the two core elements that define modernity. Since the early forms of capitalism arose, cultural and social structures have changed radically over centuries. However, a historical trend can be observed, in which individualism and rationality became the dominant, if not the only, orientations for social action.

Modernity and nation states

I have demonstrated that modernity coexisted with feudalism and aristocracy for several centuries. This coexistence could not but produce harsh, bloody reciprocal conflicts. Indeed, the two elements were so different from each other that clashes aimed at achieving ultimate supremacy were unavoidable.

This conflict is considered to have been the root of the establishment of nation states. Since the fall of the Holy Roman Empire, feudal warrior elites lived in an environment characterised by reciprocal conflict as well as continuous competition with the monarch, who aimed to achieve military and political supremacy. Capitalism resulted in the emergence of a wealthy merchant class, who could pay monetary taxes directly to the monarch, while local lords received tributes, mostly in the form of food products and other commodities. This provided the king with a structural advantage: he could afford larger and better-equipped armies, and thus, assert ultimate supremacy over more lands. The king transformed from a *primus inter pares* (first among equals) into the formally legitimate sovereign of a large territory. Consequently, the monarch achieved substantial power, the likes of which rulers of the Middle Ages could never have imagined.

Unprecedented monetary tributes and the absence of threats from neighbouring lords permitted the sovereign to effect radical social changes. Since the sixteenth century, with the fiscal income coming mainly from merchant taxes, the primary aim was to institute

conditions that facilitated the development of trade. Thus, laws were unified, internal tolls were abolished, and bandits were defeated[8] (Pincus, Robinson, & Grossi, 2016; Tilly, 1975, p. 34 ff.; 1990, p. 49; see also: Abbott, 2016, p. 586; Elias, 2000, p. 191 ff.; van der Linden, 2009).

In other words, for a few centuries, a peculiar process of social mobility took place in Europe, where the bourgeoisie constantly gained economic power, while political power and prestige were still based on ascriptive criteria, namely aristocracy and monarchy (see Touraine, 1977, p. 244 ff.). In such a contest, the role of the nation state changed significantly. While it emerged as a consequence of the clash between the monarchy and the aristocracy, it ventured into the arena of the bourgeoisie rise.

Despite diverse modalities and paces (Touraine, 2007, p. 50 ff.), the bourgeoisie managed to achieve power in several nations worldwide in the nineteenth century. One of the consequences was that birth status ceased to be the only criterion for belonging to political, financial, or cultural elites. Another major social consequence of this transformation affected social conflicts, in that the importance of religious or ethical factors declined drastically for clear economic reasons; the triumph of a religious confession or dynastic principle was supplanted by favourable economic condition. Similarly, the actors were no longer the subjects of a sovereign (a prince, pope, or an emperor), but instead, belonged to social classes, that is, categories of formally equal and free individuals (Touraine, 1971).

While class conflict gave birth, in a few countries, to revolutionary processes that turned into socialist regimes, early twentieth century liberal democracies (Touraine, 2007, p. 56 ff.) tried to find a balance between conflicting economic interests and strong welfare programmes, which attributed greater powers to national rulers, who were supposed to regulate the nation's economic growth and wealth distribution.

After the end of WWII, Western nation states appeared to be the best organisation to date in terms of social justice, personal freedom, and human rights. Therefore, they became the starting point for civil rights struggles (see Touraine, 1992, p. 275). Political power was the most effective instrument for overcoming economic, social, and culturally-ascribed disadvantages. The main examples include the 1960s' African-American movements and 1970s' second-wave feminism. These movements aimed to separate social expectations from ascribed characteristics, namely ethnicity and gender. Therefore, while African Americans overcame the rules that bound them to given professions, locales, and other restrictions, women refused to conform to social expectations, according to which they were only fit for domestic life and children's education. These movements' (partial) success paved the way for other movements, especially lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ), who refused to abide by the expectations associated with their ascribed characteristics.

The second half of the twentieth century revealed a paradoxical situation in the West. In democratic Western nation states, a cultural structure was developing that disregarded ascribed identifies in favour of achieved ones. Irrespective of the social class into which a citizen was born, they had the right to a given amount of welfare provisions as well as the opportunity to join the elite social class through hard work, regardless of gender or ethnicity. Specifically, men and women had the same rights to occupation, including political office, and all ethnic groups shared the same rights and duties.

Nevertheless, although democratic nation states served for a few decades as the best environment in which individuals could transgress their historically-ascribed boundaries, belonging to a specific nation state was itself an ascribed characteristic (Ross, 2019, p. 11), and it was crucial to both individual and collective identities:

> Why should the nation be able to exercise this kind of grip on the mind? It is commonly held that national identity is intrinsically salient. Nations are considered to have greater durability than many other types of groups. Their durability is reflected in the nation's historical continuity. Because nations are associated with a homeland, they can persist over time despite changing membership. (Hecther, 2004, p. 95; see also Malešević, 2006, p. 13 ff.)

Birth nations affect not only an individual's native language, but also their economic condition, educational patterns, social representations of the social space, and their historical memories. These elements are incredibly resistant to change in the social environment and have contributed extensively to defining identity in modern times.

Within this framework, it is important to understand the dynamics of identity processes, in a context where the state seems to have lost power over the decades. It is well known that in the West, since the 1970s, the idea of modernity has been facing a deep crisis; sociological literature has become aware that something was changing among the citizens of 'modern' countries. During an earlier phase, it seemed that the modernisation process was slowing down (Lyotard, 1979; see also: Jon & Reghezza-Zitt, 2020), and there were no clues as to what would replace modernity. Some authors subsequently asserted that the current times are just a later, albeit radically different, phase of modernity (late modernity: Beck, 1992, 1995, 1999; Giddens, 1990, 1991), while others held that we were witnessing a radical strengthening of modernity's main features (extreme modernity: Bauman, 2000; Touraine, 2007). I will discuss this later. What is important to highlight here is that in the recent decades, the 'modern' nation states seem to have lost most of their traditional functions,[9] and appear to be unable to provide the same economic development and strong identity references. Financial boundaries, large migration flows, and other globalisation-related phenomena seem to have disrupted a political balance that lasted for over 50 years (Beck, 2000, p. 23 ff.; Touraine, 1992, p. 157), destabilising social actors' main identity reference.

Ascription/achievement in the third millennium

This transformation has had important political effects. Especially among right-wing parties, political agendas aim at recovering the nation state's (supposed) twentieth century role by withdrawing from supranational organisations and limiting international trade (Flew, 2020; Gomez Arana, Rowe, de Ruyter, Semmens-Wheeler, & Hill, 2019). Furthermore, many collective action cases referring to ascribed identities have surfaced. Traditional religion has become part of the political agenda in a number of democratic countries (Turner, 2013, pp. 241–242); social movements have reasserted the traditional model of gender relationships and the right to marginalise sexual diversity and political parties that promise major reductions in migrant flows have achieved tremendous electoral success (Ignazi, 2003; Mammone, Godin, & Jenkins, 2013; Mudde, 2019).

However, it would be a mistake to examine the revival of ascribed identities from a conservative perspective. Ascribed identities have always been the basis for so-called

progressive forms of collective action; antinational and antitraditional movements in the Basque country, for example, have always been recognised as leftist or even radical (Conversi, 2009). Some feminist movements have stressed the biological diversity between women and men, and focused on systemic acknowledgement of these differences, rather than on equal treatment and opportunities (see Irigaray, 1985a, 1985b). Similarly, ethnic movements have often agitated for policies based on ethnicity recognition and valorisation, rather than seeking to overcome those distinctions (Brubaker, 2016, p. 56).

In other words, while there has undoubtedly been a revival of ascribed identities, pairing ascribed identities with conservative political positions, and achieved identities with progressive positions would not be reflective of the current reality. Only the simple/complex distinction seems to adequately describe contemporary identity processes.

I have already discussed simplified representations of identity, that is, identities based on a single factor (e.g. gender or class).[10] Contemporary identity processes involve a multiplicity of fuzzy issues that the subject cannot manage as a whole. This complexity is reflected in social life, both as an increase in the incidence of mixed identities due to the multiethnic and multicultural character of many social systems worldwide (Gaither, 2018; Ross, 2007; Spickard, 2013), and as deep identity changes in an individual's life (Ross, 2019, p. 283; Wagoner, Belavadi, & Jung, 2017), such as changes in sexual identity (Ishii, 2018) and religious conversions.

Discussion

The RQ inquired about the possible prevalence of achieved identities in the contemporary era as a desirable outcome of the modernisation process. By surveying a few decades, I have shown that with the modernisation process facing uncertainty, ascribed characteristics seem to be regaining some of the centrality they enjoyed in the pre-modern era. However, it seems unlikely that ascribed identities will function in the same way that they did in the past, when social actors internalised them deeply and manifested the associated identity so strongly that it appeared as second nature.

Choosing an ascribed characteristic as the cognitive basis for an (individual or collective) identity is the result of deliberate and conscious selection from among numerous options. Consequently, the selection of an ascribed identity implies the same psychological effort (individual) or political mobilisation (collective), as with achieved identities. In other words, basing self-perception, for example, on one's own ethnicity implies making decisions about social acquaintances (only those of the same ethnicity), language (no foreign words), food (only local products), and other similar choices. This would imply the same responsibilities, costs, and risks as, for instance, that of a cosmopolitan identity choice.

However, this makes it more difficult to clearly distinguish ascribed identities from achieved identities, which remain very strong. For example, what is the identity of migrants who have attained a high-ranking social position in the receiving country through their work? Are their cultural backgrounds and professional successes relevant? It is impossible to identify a clear provision. Each self-perception process is different. The only common feature is that each process is the outcome of a construction activity, regardless of whether it is based on ascribed or achieved features.

This complex condition clearly defines the current phase of modernisation. If we agree that modernity implies ascribed identities' loss of importance, the fact that presently, even

biological characteristics no longer produce permanent, unquestionable identities, is probably the most intense consequence of a process that started centuries ago, indicating, perhaps, the inadequacy of the 'extreme modernity' label.

In such a context, Sociology is expected to play a crucial role in the future. Sociologists will be required to analyze identity processes, especially large-scale ones, to highlight the historical and social roots of identity-building. They will be needed to identify the possible dysfunctional consequences of such processes among social actors in terms of cognitive biases about their own origins and their position within the global society.

Notes

1. Identity is also a philosophical notion. See Šubrt, Kumsa, and Ruzzeddu (2020, p. 83 ff).
2. Basing upon Linton's famous distinction (1936), in this work 'ascribed identities' refer to biological characteristics, gender and ethnic phenotypes, or social conditions, such as language, religion, and nationality. On the other hand, 'achieved identities' are changes that occur during an individual's lifetime (e.g. loss of status due to major events such as conflicts and natural disasters), and those that individuals strive for, such as professional achievements, religious conversions, partnerships, and membership in secondary groups, including political parties and clubs.
3. See also King and Thornhill (2003, p. 17 ff.); Valentinov and Pies (2018); Valeo and Underwood (2015).
4. See Lachman (2013, p. 8).
5. See also Spruyt (2017, p. 89 ff).
6. 'Individuals and social categories defend their own interests and values' (my translation).
7. At least in the pre-colonialist European countries; about the link between American capitalism and slavery, see Clegg (2020).
8. The second phase also saw colonial conquests and exploitation.
9. It is important to highlight that the expansive sovereignty that nation states allegedly enjoyed before the 1970s, is almost a mythological narrative. European states were actually under the influence of the United States and the Union of Soviet Social Republics, and had very limited political autonomy. Furthermore, financial and economic boundaries have always affected state politics, and states' sovereignty could be affected by the interventions of entities such as the Paris Club, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.
10. Actually, sociological theory has always been aware that identities depend on a multiplicity of factors, and it has coped with this problem through the notion of 'key identity'. However, recent decades have revealed a need for other more sophisticated instruments.

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Notes on contributor

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