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Explaining Social Processes

Perspectives from Current Social Theory
and Historical Sociology

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Identity Building: A Complex Phenomenon

The current accent on the topic of memory and historical consciousness is connected with the problem of identity. Simply put, identity is a question of who we are, our place in the world, and where we are heading. Like many notions of social sciences, the notion of identity is characterized by high levels of complexity and a number of possible theoretical approaches. Brewer (2001: 116) considers the debate on the identity issues so widespread that a "conceptual anarchy" exists. In principle, three scientific approaches to identity-related phenomena are possible: philosophical, psychological (see for example Leary and Tangney 2012) and sociological.

In order to provide a robust theoretical framework for a sociological approach to identity, the philosophical approach is a good start point. The word identity stems from the Latin term "identitas", stemming from the pronoun *idem*, "the same". From a strictly linguistic point of view, identity stands for "sameness", and the sameness of an individual through time represents the earliest idea of social actors, based upon differences among individuals (Sparti 1996: 15; Touraine 1992: 46).

Philosophical passages like the following from Augustine, in book Ten, chapter VI-9, of his Confessions can be seen as the theoretical basis for the interest in individuality of Western culture:

And I turned my thoughts into myself and said, "Who are you?" And I answered, "A man". For see, there is in me both a body and a soul; the one without, the other within. In which of these should I have sought my God, whom I had already sought with my body from earth to heaven, as far as I was able to send those messengers—the beams of my eyes? But the inner part is the better part; for to it, as both ruler and judge, all these messengers of the senses report the answers of heaven and earth and all the things therein, who said, "We are not God, but he made us." My inner man knew these things through the ministry of the outer man, and I, the inner man, knew all this I, the soul, through the senses of my body. I asked the whole frame of earth about my God, and it answered, "I am not he, but he made me" (Outler 1995).

The fact that the philosophical debate of the last thousand years has focused much more on individual differences among human beings, rather than similarities,

highlights the main criterion of identity description: classification vs. individualization (Sparti 1996: 21); according to this criterion, identity can be based on individual similarities to a broader group, or individual differences from other members of a group (see also Brewer 2001: 118; Rorty 1976: 1, 2; Sparti 1996: 30, 31; Vignoles et al. 2011).

Nevertheless, these distinctions still consist of substantial statements whose metaphysical nature put them beyond empirical or rational confirmation. Typical examples are Decartes' reflections that consider subjective identities as empirical manifestations of a sort of spiritual substance called "res cogitans". A number of other Western thinkers have defined identity as a "real" substance based upon metaphysical assessments.

This changed in the 1940s, when Wittgenstein and Analytical Philosophy rejected metaphysical discourses as axiomatic premises of philosophical systems; those systems become nothing more than "linguistic games" whose rules only work within the game itself. The only way Wittgenstein thought it possible to overcome this mental limit was to create a scientific language to match any word to one single empirical object and to describe the relationships between those objects through strict logical and syntactic rules (Wittgenstein and Ogden 2013 (1921): 2, 1).

Following this methodology, the easiest way to define identity is the situation where an individual can refer to themselves as "I". Individual representations, however, need some kind of public acknowledgment (Sparti 1996: 69), which is where the sociological approach begins. To take one example: I may consider myself a leading artist, but only if the community treats me as such—buying my records, asking for my autograph etc.—will this representation acquire continuity through time and provide identity (McKinlay and McVittie 2011); in other words, I could change arbitrarily my personal criteria of self-representation: tomorrow I might represent myself as an astronaut, but no other individual would consider this a reliable element to assess my actual identity. In other words, while philosophical tradition has provided the instruments to assess what identity *is*, as we have seen above, sociology has provided the instruments to assess how identity *works*. The fact that identity is not "*initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity*" (Mead 1955: 135), implies the need to seize and describe the social mechanisms for social actors to start and somehow govern this process (see also Cerulo 1997).

Actually, Mead's theoretical system is widely viewed as the classic instrument to master the social part of the identity building process, with the essential principle that "*the individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same group, or from the generalized standpoints of the social group as a whole to which he belongs*" (Mead 1955: 138). In other words, "*The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in the social experience*" (Mead 1955: 140). Thus, Mead's notion of identity relies on the reflexive idea of the human mind that North-American sociology produced in the past century. This model assumes that the mind's contents are not innate, but rather the outcome of social processes and interactions; as a consequence, even identity is the outcome of the individual's social

interactions, enabling self-representation. According to this model, the mind is reflexive: it can "split in two parts", one of which is the subject to the other part's observation. This is the core of social identities: the capability of human beings—only human beings—to be the object of their own thoughts.[1]

Corollary to this idea is the fact that at birth, every individual receives treatment corresponding to the representations of the world and social space that are part of their local culture. Thus, in their process of socialization, the individual will build a self-representation corresponding to the social position in which they live. In Roman society, for example, children would represent themselves differently according to their positions in the family (free, slave) or their gender. Once an adult, belonging to any *gens* or social class would be the key for assessing his identity, if male, or that of the man she wedded, if female. Of course, this would be much different in an American family of the 1950s. At that time, the identity factors were ethnicity and job (or husband's job).

Generally speaking, the criteria for building identities are obviously strictly connected to the values—i.e., the culture (Weber 1969: 54, 55)—prevailing in a given social environment; nevertheless, no direct causal relationship is given: identity is a complex process of adaptation and reciprocal acknowledgement among actors and the social environment, whose outcome is impossible to foresee in advance. The realization of different identities is influenced by the demands of the situation or social context, but the process is one of selecting from a repertoire of identities or self-representations that reside within the individual (Brewer 2001: 121).

To summarize, social identities are based upon a given number of cultural issues. In some social contexts, especially in ancient times, social class or gender may have been the only elements for an individual to build self-representation. In modern societies, by contrast, the pace and the importance of changes—historical, social and cultural—imply that the social-cultural inputs for social actors have increased in number and intensity. The consequence is that building social identities has become much more difficult in a single representation.

Identity in Turbulent Times

Building upon the definition of identity proposed in the introduction, the cultural conditions of the modern era imply at least the possibility of effective description of the *process* (Kellerhals et al. 2002), if not actual predictions. For example, while in the pre-modern era the social stratum was the main identity factor, in the 1950s a more complex social structure made it harder to find such a single reference. Industrialization had made clear class distinctions: factory workers, employees and entrepreneurs. Although it was quite easy to assess any individual's position by their

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[1] On reflexivity see also Giddens (1991: 34, 35).

possession of production goods, the classes of the industrial era had always been open; thus, a high degree of social mobility occurred, and in the political cultures of Anglo-Saxon countries in particular, becoming richer was a source of pride and basic part of the self-made-man's identity. A basic factor of identity remained gender, especially among the middle class—the roles of men and women were clearly designed so that belonging to a given gender implied having well-defined and differentiated roles.

In the 1950s, nation states were very powerful, and especially after the crisis of 1929 were supposed to rule over economic and social structures. The power of central public authorities was so powerful at modeling citizens' lives that being American, French or Swedish implied very different life conditions amid reciprocal expectations between citizens and institutions. Thus, although it required a quite large amount of information and data processing, it was still possible to assess individual identity. From the 1970s on, this task became harder and harder because of structural changes that have affected the world and seem to have compromised the certitudes that modernity offered.

Some scholars have defined this time as post-modernity (Bauman 1992; Castells 2010 (1997); Jencks 1977; Lyotard 1979; Lash 1990; Simon 2004), high modernity (Giddens 1990, 1991), or have stressed the crisis of one single issue like the crisis of Nation States (Beck 1999; Kinnvall 2004), or rationality (Touraine 1992). Essentially, these changes that have affected the whole world for decades are cultural, and the identity building process has turned tricky (Wagoner et al. 2017). In such an environment, in contemporary societies, social and cultural structures are highly sensitive to any external input, so that they cannot keep their shape for long (Bauman 2003: 60); one of the main consequences, besides the phenomena of identity disorders (Ruzzeddu 2008), is that the traditional scientific categories to comprehend identity building mechanisms are becoming less and less reliable. Attempts have been made to yield new models (Cheek and Cheek 2018; Gaither 2018); however, a complex approach to contemporary mechanisms of identity building shows that a deep cognitive gap has arisen.

The reaction of several categories of social actors to post-modernity's liquid and weak identity building mechanism, seems to be grasping at simple and immediately admitted features, especially ethnicity. Race, culture, ancestry and religion appear to be the most frequent identification criteria in the current time, whereas political orientations, life-styles and personal choices seem not to have the same appeal. In other words, facing a world whose social structure is quickly changing toward a globalized society characterized by international flows of trade, as well as the growing importance of supranational institutions, important layers of Western societies reach for their cultural origins, traditional religions or nationalities. It is time to consider how a complex approach (see also Pitasi 2010) can contribute to interpreting contemporary identity phenomena.

Complexity

Complexity theories emerged quite recently in the intellectual scenario (1970s) as the synthesis of the experience of scientific disciplines that had arisen in the preceding decades[2]: namely Systemic theory, Chaos theory and Cybernetics. Although independent disciplines, these immediately demonstrated their interrelation, as they could provide a common set of theoretical instruments to cope with a range of epistemic problems affecting scientific communities experiencing a crisis in the mechanical representation of the universe.

Very briefly, those problems concerned:

1. Causality: this is perhaps the Complexity Theories' main difference from the traditional visions of the world based upon a cause-effect model according to which empirical phenomena have one given direct cause with intensity of effects proportional to it; by controlling the cause it is possible to control the effect. Complexity theories have mostly focused on phenomena that causal models cannot comprehend, let alone foresee: non-linear dynamics and chaotic phenomena et al. (Gleick 1988; Holland 1992, 1999; Suteanu 2005; Waldrop 1994).

2. Multi-disciplinarity: Complexity Theories have always highlighted the fact that scientific domains can only grasp a small part of reality and support transdisciplinarity as the most viable form of investigation (Von Bertalanffy 1968; Morin 1977).

3. The observer-object relationship: this is the question of whether chaotic phenomena are actually chaotic or based upon organizational patterns which are too complex for the human mind; on this subject, part of the literature considers that incertitude is unavoidable (Bateson 1972, 1979; Maturana and Varela 1980, 1987; Prigogine 1977, 1997; Laszlo 1991, 2003, 2006a, b; Luhmann 1995); others think that the incertitude can be overcome (Morin 1990; Urry 2005; Gell-Mann 1994: 56 ff.).

Generally speaking, Complexity Theories evolved to cope with the uncertainty that has challenged the modern idea of an ordered, knowable and foreseeable universe, and to yield epistemic and communication strategies assisting us to manage ignorance or uncertainty (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 44). In relation to identity, it is worth noticing that Second-order Cybernetics provides a theoretical framework through which to consider identity building itself as a reduction of complexity. Based upon Second-order Cybernetics, Luhmann's idea of system is quite different

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[2]Actually, the first examples of complex phenomena referred to in the literature are the studies of Maxwell and Bolztmann on entropy in the 1860s. Entropy directly relates to the second principle of thermodynamics—for objects consisting of large amounts of basic elements; those objects have the property of dissipating their internal energy, ending up with a condition of the steadiness of those basic elements, which lose, during this process, any structured reciprocal boundaries (Porter 2003: 493 ff.).

from preceding ones. A crucial notion of Luhmann's theory is autopoiesis (Maturana and Varela 1987), which means that systems create themselves by setting barriers to the surrounding environment; inside the barriers, a process takes place of functional structuration of system elements; in other words, a reduction of the complexity of the environment (Luhmann 1995: 182, 183).[3]

The original theoretical core of Luhmann's theory is that this process has a double orientation: societies—i.e., social systems—are environments for human beings—i.e. persons (Luhmann 1995: 109)—and humans are environments for societies (Luhmann 1995: 179); "*social systems come into being on the basis of the noise that persons create in their attempts to communicate*" (Luhmann 1995: 214). The basic element of persons is consciousness (Luhmann 1995: 219), and the basic elements of societies are communications (Luhmann 1995: 182); this implies that persons set barriers from society by defining their identities through a process of conscious self-reflection. In the meantime, societies set barriers from individuals by defining the social boundaries to individual autonomy, through norms, culture, sense-making etc.—all activities that depend on communication. In other words, identity is a kind of complexity reduction through which people can interact. In terms of identity processes, it is important to note that this interaction mainly consists of expectations:

> In their mutual recognition of alter egos, ego and alter reach the understanding that is basic to communication. (…). The intended content of that utterance and alter's reaction to it constitute information for both ego and alter. Understanding, utterance, and information constitute the essence of communication for Luhmann. Each of these elements is a meaning selection event in the ongoing communications that constitute society. The underlying understanding of mutual recognition, for example, is a contingent selection to treat alter as alter ego. An utterance, such as a smile, is an expectation selectively put forward to express tentative friendliness and to test alter's friendliness. Alter's return smile constitutes information that is either selected or rejected by ego as a return offer of tentative friendliness (Bausch 2015: 392, 393).

Although interaction always manifests a certain degree of uncertainty, in order for the communications to turn into a social system they must achieve stability through time (recursivity). Interaction patterns that are stable enough will set up a social structure, organized into communication systems.

Within this framework, we may propose a scope for the identity crisis outlined above. The main contribution that Luhmann's systems theory offers to identity studies is to consider identity as a process (Welz 2005: 17), rather than a mere character, which individuals achieve during socialization. Identity is thus a co-evolution process that involves persons and social systems: is a continuous reciprocal adaptation between those different systems in term of reciprocal boundaries.

Currently, the interaction between psychic and social systems shows a deep gap between the social and the cultural structures. The former are evolving towards a

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[3]Luhmann also considers that the structuration of a system implies a reduction of complexity, because the system can only set a limited number of linked elements among the many possible.

globalized society, while the latter are reacting to that change through ascriptive characterization. In systemic terms, belonging to an ethnicity, a community, a nation does not imply big expectations from other systems, no matter whether psychic or social. An environment that focuses on ascriptive characters relies on representations of persons 'just the way they are': no effort is necessary to change internal psychic structure through inputs from the environment. This may permit saving lots of (psychic) energy: but the point is that the gap with the globalized social structure is real and, in spite of a few gestures by political subsystems to encourage self-representations, the social systems' evolutionary trends are to the contrary. We must highlight the potentially disruptive consequences of this gap, which is deeply asymmetric: if persons rely on simplified self-representations, it can lead to operational closure and inability to seize the complexity of the environment, especially social systems. Therefore, the risks are high that in reducing the flow of information, the energies and material resources that each system swaps with its environment shrink or disappear, with potential dangers of systemic collapse.

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