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Identity in the Globalizing World[1]

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'There has been a veritable discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of "identity",' observed Stuart Hall in the introduction to a volume of studies published in 1996. A few years have passed since that observation was made, during which the explosion has triggered an avalanche. No other aspect of contemporary life, it seems, attracts the same amount of attention these days from philosophers, social scientists and psychologists. It is not just that 'identity studies' are fast becoming a thriving industry in their own right; more than that is happening – one may say that 'identity' has now become a prism through which other topical aspects of contemporary life are spotted, grasped and examined. Established issues of social analysis are being rehashed and refurbished to fit the discourse now rotating around the 'identity' axis. For instance, the discussion of justice and equality tends to be conducted in terms of 'recognition', culture is debated in terms of individual, group or categorial difference, creolization and hybridity, while the political process is ever more often theorized around the issues of human rights (that is, the right to a separate identity) and of 'life polities' (that is, identity construction, negotiation and assertion).

I suggest that the spectacular rise of the 'identity discourse' can tell us more about the present-day state of human society than its conceptual and analytical results have told us thus far. And so, rather than composing another 'career report' of contentions and controversies which combine into that discourse, I intend to focus on the tracing of the experiential grounds, and through them the structural roots, of that remarkable shift in intellectual concerns of which the new centrality of the 'identity discourse' is a most salient symptom.

We know from Hegel that the owl of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, spreads its wings, prudently, at dusk; knowledge, or whatever passes under that name, arrives by the end of the day when the sun has set and things are no longer brightly lit and easily found and handled (long before Hegel coined the tarrying-owl metaphor, Sophocles made clarity of sight into the

monopoly of blind Teiresias). Martin Heidegger gave a new twist to Hegel's aphorism in his discussion of the priority of *Zuhandenheit* over *Vorhandenheit* and of the 'catastrophic' origin of the second: good lighting is the true blindness – one does not see what is all-too-visible, one does not note what is 'always there', things are noticed when they disappear or go bust, they must first fall out from the routinely 'given' for the search after their essences to start and the questions about their origin, whereabouts, use or value to be asked. In Arland Ussher's succinct summary, 'The world as world is only revealed to me when things go wrong'. (1955: 80) Or, in Vincent Vycinas's rendition (1969: 36–7), whatever my world consists of is brought to my attention only when it goes missing, or when it suddenly stops behaving as, monotonously, it did before, loses its usefulness or shows itself to be 'unready' for my attempts to use it. It is the awkward and unwieldy, unreliable, resistant and otherwise *frustrating* things that force themselves into our vision, attention and thought.

Let us note that the discovery that things do not keep their shape once and for all and may be different from what they are is an ambiguous experience. Unpredictability breeds anxiety and fear: the world is full of accidents and surprises, one must never let vigilance lapse and should never lay down arms. But the unsteadiness, softness and pliability of things may also trigger ambition and resolve: one can make things better than they are, and need not settle for what there is since no verdict of nature is final, no resistance of reality is unbreakable. One can now dream of a different life – more decent, bearable or enjoyable. And if in addition one has confidence in one's power of thought and in the strength of one's muscles, one can also act on those dreams and perhaps even force them to come true … Alain Peyrefitte (1998: 514–16) has suggested that the remarkable, unprecedented and unique dynamism of our modern capitalist society, all the spectacular advances made by 'Western civilization' over the last two or three centuries, would be unthinkable without such confidence: the triple trust – in oneself, in others, and in the jointly built, durable institutions in which one can confidently inscribe one's long-term plans and actions.

Anxiety and audacity, fear and courage, despair and hope are born together. But the proportion in which they are mixed depends on the resources in one's possession. Owners of foolproof vessels and skilled navigators view the sea as the site of exciting adventure; those condemned to unsound and hazardous dinghies would rather hide behind breakwaters and think of sailing with trepidation. Fears and joys emanating from the instability of things are distributed highly unequally.

Modernity, we may say, specialized in making *zuhanden* things into *vorhanden*. By 'setting the world in motion', it exposed the fragility and unsteadiness of things and threw open the possibility (and the need) of

reshaping them. Marx and Engels praised the capitalists, the bourgeois revolutionaries, for 'melting the solids and profaning the sacreds' which had for long centuries cramped human creative powers. Alexis de Tocqueville thought rather that the solids picked for melting in the heat of modernization were already in a state of advanced decomposition and so beyond salvation well before the modern overhaul of nature and society started. Whichever was the case, human nature, once seen as a lasting and not to be revoked legacy of one-off Divine creation, was thrown, together with the rest of Divine creation, into a melting pot. No more was it seen, no more could it be seen, as 'given'. Instead, it turned into a *task*, and a task which every man and woman had no choice but to face up to and perform to the best of their ability. 'Predestination' was replaced with 'life project', fate with vocation – and a 'human nature' into which one was born was replaced with 'identity' which one needs to saw up and make fit.

Philosophers of the Renaissance celebrated the new breathtaking vistas that the 'unfinishedness' of human nature opened up before the resourceful and the bold. 'Men can do all things if they will,' declared Leon Battista Alberti with pride. 'We can become what we will', announced Pico della Mirandola with joy and relish. Ovid's Proteus – who could turn at will from a young man into a lion, a wild boar or a snake, a stone or a tree – and the chameleon, that grandmaster of instant reincarnation, became the paragons of the newly discovered human virtue of self-constitution and self-assertion (see Davies, 1978: 62). A few decades later Jean-Jacques Rousseau would name *perfectibility* as the sole no-choice attribute with which nature had endowed the human race; he would insist that the capacity of self-transformation is the only 'human essence' and the only trait common to us all (see Rousseau, 1986 [1749/1754]: 148pp). Humans are free to self-create. What they are does not depend on a no-appeal-allowed verdict of Providence, is not a matter of predestination.

Which did not mean necessarily that humans are doomed to float and drift: Proteus may be a symbol of the potency of self-creation, but protean existence is not necessarily the first choice of free human beings. Solids may be melted, but they are melted in order to mould new solids better shaped and better fitted for human happiness than the old ones – but also more solid and so more 'certain' than the old solids managed to be. Melting the solids was to be but the preliminary, site-clearing stage of the modern undertaking to make the world more suitable for human habitation. Designing a new – tough, durable, reliable and trustworthy – setting for human life was to be the second stage, a stage that truly counted since it was to give meaning to the whole enterprise. One order needed to be dismantled so that it could be replaced with another, purpose-built and up to the standards of reason and logic.

As Immanuel Kant insisted, we are all – each one of us – endowed with the faculty of reason, that powerful tool which allows us to compare the options on offer and make our individual choices; but if we use that tool properly, we will all arrive at similar conclusions and will all accept one code of cohabitation which reason tells us is the best. Not all thinkers would be as sanguine as Kant was: not all were sure that each one of us would follow the guidance of reason of our own accord. Perhaps people need to be forced to be free, as Rousseau suspected? Perhaps the newly acquired freedom needs to be used *for* the people rather than *by* people? Perhaps we still need the despots, though ones who are 'enlightened' and so less erratic, more resolute and effective than the despots of yore, to design and fix reason-dictated patterns which would guarantee that people make right and proper uses of their freedom? Both suppositions sounded plausible and both had their enthusiasts, prophets and preachers. The idea of human self-construction and self-assertion carried, as it were, the seeds of democracy mixed with the spores of totalitarianism. The new era of flexible realities and freedom of choice was to be pregnant with unlikely twins: with human rights – but also with what Hannah Arendt called 'totalitarian temptation'.

These comments are on the face of it unrelated to our theme; if I made them here, I did it with the intention of showing that the ostensible unrelatedness is but an illusion, if not a grave mistake. Incompleteness of identity, and particularly the individual responsibility for its completion, are in fact intimately related to all other aspects of the modern condition. However it has been posited in our times and however it presents itself in our reflections, 'identity' is not a 'private matter' and a 'private worry'. That our individuality is socially produced is by now a trivial truth; but the obverse of that truth still needs to be repeated more often: the shape of our sociality, and so of the society we share, depends in its turn on the way in which the task of 'individualization' is framed and responded to.

What the idea of 'individualization' carries is the emancipation of the individual from the ascribed, inherited and inborn determination of his or her social character: a departure rightly seen as a most conspicuous and seminal feature of the modern condition. To put it in a nutshell, 'individualization' consists in transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' – and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance; in other words, it consists of establishing a '*de jure*' autonomy (though not necessarily a *de facto* one). One's place in society, one's 'social definition', has ceased to be *zuhanden* and has become *vorhanden* instead. One's place in society no longer comes as a (wanted or unwanted) gift. (As Jean-Paul Sartre famously put it: it is not enough to be born a bourgeois – one must live one's life as a bourgeois. The same did not need to be said, and could

not be said, about the princes, knights, serfs or townsmen of the premodern era.) Needing to *become* what one *is* is the feature of modern living (not of 'modern individualization' – that expression being evidently pleonastic; to speak of individualization and of modernity is to speak of the same social condition). Modernity replaces the *determination* of social standing with a compulsive and obligatory *self*-determination. This, let me repeat, holds for the whole of the modern era: for all periods and for all sectors of society. If this is so – then why has 'the veritable explosion' of concerns with identity occurred in recent years only? What, if anything, happened that was new to affect a problem as old as modernity itself?

Yes, there is something new in the old problem – and this explains the current alarm about the tasks which past generations seemed to handle routinely in a 'matter-of-fact' way. Within the shared predicament of identity-builders there are significant variations setting successive periods of modern history apart from each other. The 'self-identification' task put before men and women once the stiff frames of estates had been broken in the early modern era boiled down to the challenge of living 'true to kind' ('keeping up with the Joneses'): of actively conforming to the established social types and models of conduct, of imitating, following the pattern, 'acculturating', not falling out of step, not deviating from the norm. The falling apart of 'estates' did not set individuals drifting. 'Estates' came to be replaced by 'classes'.

While the estates were a matter of ascription, class membership entailed a large measure of achievement; classes, unlike the estates, had to be 'joined', and the membership had to be continuously renewed, reconfirmed and documented in day-by-day conduct. In other words, the 'disembedded' individuals were prompted and prodded to deploy their new powers and new right to self-determination in the frantic search for 're-embeddedness'. And there was no shortage of 'beds' waiting and ready to accommodate them. Class allocation, though formed and negotiable rather than inherited or simply 'born into' in the way the *estates*, *Stände* or *états* used to be, tended to become as solid, unalterable and resistant to individual manipulation as the premodern assignment to the estate. Class and gender hung heavily over the individual range of choices; to escape their constraint was not much easier than challenging one's place in the 'divine chain of beings'. If not in theory, then at least for practical intents and purposes, class and gender looked uncannily like 'facts of nature' and the task left to most self-assertive individuals was to 'fit in' into the allocated niche through behaving as its established residents did.

This is, precisely, what distinguished the 'individualization' of yore from the form it has taken now, in our own times of 'liquid' modernity, when not just the individual *placements* in society, but the *places* to which the individuals may gain access and in which they may wish to settle are melting fast and can hardly serve as targets for 'life projects'. This new

restlessness and fragility of goals affects us all, unskilled and skilled, uneducated and educated, work-shy and hard-working alike. There is little or nothing we can do to 'bind the future' through following diligently the current standards.

As Daniel Cohen has pointed out, '*Qui débute sa carrière chez Microsoft n'a aucune idée de là où il la terminera. La commencer chez Ford ou Renault s'était au contraire la quasi-certitude de la finir au même endroit*' (1997: 84). It is not just the individuals who are on the move but also the finishing lines of the tracks they run and the running tracks themselves. 'Disembeddedness' is now an experience which is likely to be repeated an unknown number of times in the course of an individual life, since few if any 'beds' for 're-embedding' look solid enough to augur the stability of long occupation. The 'beds' in view look rather like 'musical chairs' of various sizes and styles as well as of changing numbers and mobile positions, forcing men and women to be constantly on the run, promising no rest and none of the satisfaction of 'arriving', none of the comfort of reaching the destination where one can lay down one's arms, relax and stop worrying. There is no prospect of a 'final re-embeddedness' at the end of the road; being on the road has become the permanent way of life of the (now chronically) disembedded individuals.

Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Max Weber suggested that 'instrumental rationality' is the main factor regulating human behaviour in the era of modernity – perhaps the only one likely to emerge unscathed from the battle of motivational forces. The matter of ends seemed then to have been settled, and the remaining task of modern men and women was to select the best means to the ends. One could say that uncertainty as to the relative efficiency of means and their availability would be, as long as Weber's proposition held true, the main source of insecurity and anxiety characteristic of modern life. I suggest, though, that whether or not Weber's view was correct at the start of the twentieth century, its truth gradually yet relentlessly evaporated as the century drew to its close. Nowadays, it is not the means that are the prime source of insecurity and anxiety.

The twentieth century excelled in the overproduction of means; means have been produced at a constantly accelerating speed, overtaking the known, let alone acutely felt, needs. Abundant means came to seek the ends which they could serve; it was the turn of the solutions to search desperately for not-yet-articulated problems which they could resolve. On the other hand, though, the ends have become ever more diffuse, scattered and uncertain: the most profuse source of anxiety, the great unknown of men's and women's lives. If you look for a short, sharp yet apt and poignant expression of that new predicament in which people tend to find themselves these days, you could do worse than remember a small ad published

recently in the 'jobs sought' column of an English daily: 'Have car, can travel; awaiting propositions'.

And so the 'problem of identity', haunting men and women since the advent of modern times, has changed its shape and content. It used to be the kind of problem which pilgrims confront and struggle to resolve: a problem of 'how to get there?' It is now more like a problem with which the vagabonds, people without fixed addresses and *sans papiers*, struggle daily: 'Where could I, or should I, go? And where will this road I've taken bring me?' The task is no longer to muster enough strength and determination to proceed, through trials and errors, triumphs and defeats, along the beaten track stretching ahead. The task is to pick the least risky turn at the nearest crossroads, to change direction before the road ahead gets impassable or before the road scheme has been redesigned, or before the coveted destination is moved elsewhere or has lost its past glitter. In other words, the quandary tormenting men and women at the turn of the century is not so much how to obtain the identities of their choice and how to have them recognized by people around, but *which* identity to choose and how to keep alert and vigilant so that *another* choice can be made in case the previously chosen identity is withdrawn from the market or stripped of its seductive powers. The main, the most nerve-wracking worry is not how to find a place inside a solid frame of social class or category, and – having found it – how to guard it and avoid eviction; what makes one worry is the suspicion that the hard-won frame will soon be torn apart or melted.

In his by now classic statement of about forty years ago, Erik H. Erikson diagnosed the confusion suffered by the adolescents of that time as 'identity crisis' (a term first coined during the war to describe the condition of some mental patients who 'lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity'). 'Identity crisis' in adults, as Erikson put it, is a pathological condition which requires medical intervention; it is also a common yet passing stage in 'normal' personal development, which in all probability will come to its natural end as an adolescent matures. To the question of what the healthy state of a person should be, Erikson answered 'what identity feels like when you become aware of the fact that you do undoubtedly have one': it makes itself felt 'as a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity' (1974: pp. 17–19).

Either Erikson's opinion has aged, as opinions usually do, or the 'identity crisis' has become today more than a rare condition of mental patients or a passing condition of adolescence: that 'sameness' and 'continuity' are feelings seldom experienced nowadays either by the young or by adults. Furthermore, they are no longer coveted – and if desired, the dream is as a rule contaminated with sinister premonitions and fears. As the two prominent cultural analysts Zbyszko Melosik and Tomasz Szkudlarek have pointed out, it is a curse of all identity construction that 'I lose my freedom,

when I reach the goal; I am not myself, when I become somebody' (1998: 89). And in a kaleidoscopic world of reshuffled values, of moving tracks and melting frames, freedom of manoeuvre rises to the rank of the topmost value – indeed, the *meta* value, condition of access to all other values: past, present and above all those yet to come. Rational conduct in such a world demands that the options, as many as possible, are kept open, and gaining an identity which fits too tightly, an identity that once and for all offers 'sameness' and 'continuity', results in the closing of options or forfeiting them in advance. As Christopher Lasch famously observed, the 'identities' sought these days are such as 'can be adopted and discarded like a change of costume'; if they are 'freely chosen', the choice 'no longer implies commitments and consequences' – and so 'the freedom to choose amounts in practice to an abstention from choice' (1979: pp. 29–30), at least, let me add, from a binding choice.

In Grenoble, in December 1997, Pierre Bourdieu spoke of '*précarité*', which '*est aujourd'hui partout*' and '*hante les consciences et les inconscients*'. The fragility of all conceivable points of reference and endemic uncertainty about the future profoundly affect those who have already been hit and all the rest of us who cannot be certain that future blows will pass us by. '*En rendant tout 1'avenir incertain'*, says Bourdieu, *'la précarité interdit toute anticipation rationnelle et, en particulier, ce minimum de croyance et d'espérance en 1'avenir qu'il faut avoir pour se révolter, surtout collectivement, centre le présent, même le plus intolérable. Pour concevoir un projet révolutionnaire, c'est-à-dire une ambition raisonnée de transformer le présent par référence a un avenir projeté, il faut avoir un minimum de prise sur le présént*' (1998: 96–7) – and the grip on the present, the confidence of being in control of one's destiny, is what men and women in our type of society most conspicuously lack. Less and less we hope that by joining forces and standing arm in arm we may force a change in the rules of the game; perhaps the risks which make us afraid and the catastrophes which make us suffer have collective, social origins – but they seem to fall upon each one of us at random, as individual problems, of the kind that could be confronted only individually, and repaired, if at all, only by individual efforts.

There seems to be little point in designing alternative modes of togetherness, in stretching the imagination to visualize a society better serving the cause of freedom and security, in drawing blueprints of socially administered justice, if a collective agency capable of making the words flesh is nowhere in sight. Our dependencies are now truly global, our actions however are, as before, local. The powers which shape the conditions under which we confront our problems are beyond the reach of all the agencies invented by modern democracy in the two centuries of its history; as Manuel Castells put it – real power, the exterritorial global power, flows, but politics, confined now as in the past to the framework of nation-states, stays as before attached to the ground.

A vicious circle, indeed. The fast globalization of the power network seems to conspire and collaborate with a privatized life politics; they stimulate, sustain and reinforce each other. If globalization saps the capacity of established political institutions to act effectively, the massive retreat from the 'body politic' to the narrow concerns of life politics prevents the crystallization of alternative modes of collective action on a par with the globality of the network of dependencies. Everything seems to be in place to make *both* the globalization of life conditions *and* the 'morcellement', the atomization and privatization of life struggles, self-propelling and self-perpetuating. It is against this background that the logic and the endemic illogicality of contemporary 'identity concerns' and the actions they trigger need to be scrutinized and understood.

As Ulrich Beck has pointed out, there are no biographical solutions to systemic contradiction – though it is such solutions that we are pressed or cajoled to discover or invent. There can be no rational response to the rising *précarité* of human conditions so long as such a response is to be confined to the individual's action; the irrationality of possible responses is inescapable, given that the scope of life politics and of the network of forces which determine its conditions are, purely and simply, incomparable and widely disproportionate.

If you cannot, or don't believe you can, do what truly matters, you turn to things which matter less or perhaps not at all, but which you can do or believe you can; and by turning your attention and energy to such things, you may even make them matter – for a time at least … 'Having no hope', says Christopher Lasch,

> of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement; getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to 'relate', overcoming the 'fear of pleasure'. Harmless in themselves, these pursuits, elevated to a programme and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness, signify a retreat from politics … (Lasch, 1979: 23–30).

There is a wide and widening spectrum of 'substitute pastimes', symptomatic of the shift from things that matter but about which nothing can be done to things that matter less or do not matter, but which can be dealt with and handled. Compulsive shopping figures prominently among them. Mikhail Bakhtin's 'carnivals' used to be celebrated inside the home territory where 'routine life' was at other times conducted, and so allowed to lay bare the normally hidden alternatives which daily life contained. Unlike them, the trips to the shopping malls are expeditions to *another world* starkly different from the rest of daily life, to that 'elsewhere' where one can experience briefly that self-confidence and 'authenticity' which one is seeking in vain in

routine daily pursuits. Shopping expeditions fill the void left by the travels no longer undertaken by the imagination to an alternative, more secure, humane and just society.

The time-and-effort-consuming activity of putting together, dismantling and rearranging self-identity is another of the 'substitute pastimes'. That activity is, as we have already seen, conducted under conditions of acute insecurity: the targets of action are as precarious as its effects are uncertain. Efforts lead to frustration often enough for the fear of ultimate failure to poison the joy of temporary triumphs. No wonder that to dissolve personal fears in the 'might of numbers', to try to make them inaudible in the hubbub of a boisterous crowd, is a constant temptation which many a lonely 'identity-builder' finds it difficult to resist. Even stronger is the temptation to pretend that it is the similarity of individual fears that 'makes a community' and so one can make company out of solitude.

As Eric Hobsbawm recently observed, 'never was the word "community" used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life (1994: 428)', 'Men and women look for groups to which they can belong, certainly and forever, in a world in which all else is moving and shifting, in which nothing else is certain (1996: 40)'. Jock Young supplies a succinct and poignant gloss: 'Just as community collapses, identity is invented (1999: 164)'. 'Identity' owes the attention it attracts and the passions it begets to being a *surrogate of community*: of that allegedly 'natural home' which is no longer available in the rapidly privatized and individualized, fast globalizing world, and which for that reason can be safely imagined as a cosy shelter of security and confidence, and as such hotly desired. The paradox, though, is that in order to offer even a modicum of security and so to perform its healing role, identity must belie its origin, must deny being just a surrogate, and best of all needs to conjure up a phantom of the self-same community which it has come to replace. Identity sprouts on the graveyard of communities, but flourishes thanks to its promise to resurrect the dead.

The 'era of identity' is full of sound and fury. The search for identity divides and separates; yet the precariousness of the solitary identity-building prompts the identity-builders to seek pegs on which they can hang together their individually experienced fears and anxieties and perform the exorcism rites in the company of others, similarly afraid and anxious individuals. Whether such 'peg communities' provide what they are hoped to offer – a collective insurance against individually confronted risks – is a moot question; but mounting a barricade in the company of others does supply a momentary respite from loneliness. Effective or not, something has been done, and one can at least console oneself that the blows are not being taken with hands down. As Jonathan Friedman put it, in our globalizing

world 'one thing that is not happening is that boundaries are disappearing. Rather, they seem to be erected on every new street corner of every declining neighbourhood of our world (1999: 241)'.

Boundaries are not drawn to fence off and protect already existing identities. As the great Norwegian anthropologist Frederick Earth explained – it is exactly the other way round: the ostensibly shared, 'communal' identities are by-products of feverish boundary-drawing. It is only after the border-posts have been dug in that the myths of their antiquity are spun and the fresh cultural/political origins of identity are carefully covered up by the genesis stories. This stratagem attempts to belie the fact that (to quote Stuart Hall again) what the idea of identity does not signal is a 'stable core of the self, unfolding from the beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change (1996: 3).

Perhaps instead of talking about identities, inherited or acquired, it would be more in keeping with the realities of the globalizing world to speak of *identification*, a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged. There is little chance that the tensions, confrontations and conflicts which that activity generates will subside. The frantic search for identity is not a residue of preglobalization times which are not yet fully extirpated but bound to become extinct as the globalization progresses; it is, on the contrary, the side-effect and by-product of the combination of globalizing and individualizing pressures and the tensions they spawn. The identification wars are neither contrary to nor stand in the way of the globalizing tendency: they are a legitimate offspring and natural companion of globalization and, far from arresting it, lubricate its wheels.

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