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Time and Social Identity

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Abstract

The paper aims to emphasize the close relations between identity, construction processes and temporal dimension. Analyzing the central concepts of "action", "continuity" and "shared time", we illustrate their radical changes caused by modernity and postmodernity. The phenomena of "discontinuous identity", "life project crisis" and "situationalism" are identified as outcomes of these sudden changes. We conclude that human reflexivity may represent a barrier to instrumental reduction of social relations, strengthen the interpersonal credibility, reconstitute subjective identity continuity.

Keywords: identity, social time, self-realization, reflexivity

1. Times of Identity

The aim of this study is to emphasize how crucial temporal dimension is for the construction of identity and how this dimension has significantly changed over time, at the collective, social, psychological, and individual levels.

I will start with two basic hypotheses. The first is that *identity is the result of an active relationship between the subject and his environment*. The second one is: «Has the subject's relationship with the social order undergone a *radical transformation with the advent of modern society?*» (Luckmann 1963, it. transl. 1969, p. 9).

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In the interplay between these two hypotheses it is possible to draw a line of progressive change that from the traditional strategies of construction of the social identity leads us to better understanding of how and why these processes look significantly different in our time commonly defined as postmodernity.

In Western traditional society (I use this term to define a form of social order that lasts up to the advent of the Humanism), «a knight was a knight and a farmer was a farmer, for others as well as for himself» (Berger and Luckmann 1966, it. transl. 1969, p. 224). We could metaphorically say that modernity began exactly when this axiom had been denied. As Berger and Luckmann immediately clarify, this does not imply that the medieval man was happy with his identity or did not wish to change it. It simply means that it did not involve an issue, because it was not, in fact, “changeable”. He was just what he have to be, without the need (or the opportunity) to think about alternatives, since «most people became what they were expected to become» (Luckmann 2006, p. 5).

We could therefore say that pre-modern social life was simpler, without being necessarily better.

Among many interacting factors (cultural, systemic, social, psychological, spiritual, etc.) that led to this change of processes of social identity construction, we want to examine in depth the one we rarely have to think about: «Time is the stuff of which a human self is built» (Luckmann 1983, p. 69). If in daily life we pay little attention to this fundamental dimension, it is because for all of us it seems natural that “yesterday I was the same as today, and tomorrow I will still be myself”. No matter how many changes take place as life goes on, how many breaks or sudden illuminations may have occurred: the assumption of a recognizable and claimable identity is the continuity of the self over time. What makes a person at “one” with himself, over the changing phases of life, is the dimension of time: «The question of continuity is there for all questions of identity: [...] resemblance between present and past circumstances, [...] reasonable expectation that the resemblance will continue» (Douglas 1983, p. 43).

Identity is a process that has to delicately balance between *event* (something that happens at a certain time regardless of any present experience) and *state* (something that lasts, regardless of the passage of various moments) (Luhmann 1968/2001).

Of course, to speaking today of continuity is certainly more problematic than in previous eras: the cultural models that are taking the stage show clear reluctance to recognize continuous development as integral part of the human personality, as well as of the society. Nevertheless, identity can only exist as a continuous process, finalized and subject to the elaboration and maintenance

of the distinguishing characteristics of the person. Ironically, if we try to radically deny this principle, the different identities would inexorably dissolve: *if there is no identity over time, there is no identity.*

The Elementary Factors: Action

In order to prove this thesis I'll start from the most basic level of expressiveness of identity perceivable at an interpersonal level: action. We can, along with psychology, define action as «a process that is subordinated to a conscious purpose» (Pontecorvo, 1999, p. 34). But if we accept this as a valid definition, what are the conditions to talk about of human action? «Actions are sequences of experience which were projected earlier whose meaning is constituted in (partial) fulfillment or (partial) frustration of the original project» (Luckmann 1983, p. 75). Anyone can recognize that every action is the result of a) a very quick consideration of everything that precedes it (facts, experiences, decisions, recent or distant past knowledge); b) deliberation; c) a decision in the present in vision of a future that we want to accomplish exactly through that act (the outcome, of course, is far from obvious). Every human action embodies (according to the purposes of the agent) a summary of past, present, future times. All this is done (in healthy people) in the fundamental dimension of continuity. It is the Ego in action that, in its expressive determination, makes coherent and (subjectively) organic temporal dimensions of its action.

Technically speaking, the *elementary temporal structure* that characterizes the intentional processes of human consciousness is the extraordinarily rich and fast synthesis, in the present, of *retentions of* past experiences and *protentions to* future (plausible or probable) experiences. The present action is therefore «surrounded by a horizon of definitely past experience, necessarily closed, and of potential future experience, necessarily open-ended but nonetheless anticipated as going to have not only a typical beginning but also a typical end». Each successive experience is the fulfillment or the disappointment of what was projected earlier» (Luckmann 1983, p. 77).

It is important to note that although the outcomes of actions can be considered “typical”, this typicality is not an absolute guarantee, but only a probable or conventionally expected event. In other words, it is certainly unlikely, but not impossible, that, if I ask a passerby what time it is, he will answer with an insult or physical violence without any motivation. The realization of a protention is never to be taken for granted, and yet everything we do is a synthesis of the past and present times managed in continuity by the person who performs it. Therefore «the present is the totality of an act, as conceived by consciousness» (Westin 1983, p. 103). This continuous leaning

on the past (made “present” in memory) and reaching out to the future (made “present” in anticipation) gives rise to the «conception of the tense of self» (ibid), that is an inexhaustible and boundless dynamic energy of man who, not finding fulfillment in the “here and now”, is forced to displace continually the satisfaction of his urgencies in a temporal and even spatial tension.

The Elementary Factors: Continuity

The natural dynamism of man (first conclusion) is therefore structured on the *synthesis of past experiences, present decisions, future expectations*. We could hardly recognize the identity of someone if the continuity of the temporal dimensions were drastically deconstructed, for «a stable order is one in which there is a close similarity between how things are now and how they used to be in the past» (Giddens 1979, p. 199). On the other hand, this principle is the foundation of a healthy person and the foundation of a person as *a subject inscribed within a legal order*. By eliminating this foundation any claim of *right* would lose its meaning. The functioning of the law is based on the principle of personal responsibility, and the concept of responsibility implies continuity among past, present, and future. Without this, talking about compensation or punishment would not make sense. The law requires the person to be conceived as a continuous: in principle it cannot accept justification of a crime on the basis of the argument: “Yes, I did that crime when I was yesterday’s me”. «The law needs to assume continuing and distinctive identity, so that it can locate guilt» (Douglas 1983, p. 37). And, paradoxically, it is necessary to assume continuity not only to identify the guilty, but to identify the victims as well.

We may therefore agree that the way «one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future» (Weinrich 1983, p. 164).

The Elementary Factors: Shared Time

Sociology has made us understand that the concept and the perception of the time within which each of us makes decisions and builds his/her own identity is not primarily the result of a subjective and isolable construction. Indeed, «it’s in the culture that the ideas of the future are shaped and find nourishment, as well as those relating to the past» (Appadurai 2004, it. transl. 2011, p. 4). The time that we daily live in is not only an objective phenomenon nor a merely subjective psychological dimension; it «is also a result of the culturally coded representations and expectations » (Crespi 2005, p. 7).

Durkheim was one of the first people to establish this social root of experience of the space-time dimensions of our existence by stating that time is not organized as it seems to the subject when he plans it, because in reality it is objectively thought by all the people of the same civilization: such an organization must be collective, just like the one of space (Durkheim 1912). Durkheim inverted the traditional viewpoint that considered time in a dichotomous perspective: chronological time (objective) and time subjectively perceived from consciousness. The interest now shifts to time as a «medium for social reproduction» (Leccardi 2009, p. 11). This view of disconnecting time and chronology leads to the assertion of existence of different social times (Luhmann, 1976, p. 135). In classic sociology Piritim A. Sorokin and Robert K. Merton explain this theory of the two different time systems: natural time (the astronomical and quantitative one) and time connected to the society, the qualitative one.

Another interesting way to state this duality in time valuation is the difference between *clock time* and *kairological time*. The latter, regardless of the purely quantitative aspect, indicates a subjective perception of the “right time”. It’s therefore the amount of time, i.e., in which a certain “event” (from Greek *kairòs*) is expected to happen: “I feel that it is time to ...”; it’s «“the time for”, the appropriate time, the right time for a certain activity or operation, or for the occurrence of a certain event» (Gasparini 2001, p. 13).

Clock time is the Newtonian one, the absolute one, infinitely divisible into units similar to the space, measurable in length, expressible as number and reversible, considered primarily as space which flows uniformly. However, even Einstein had cracked, just from the physical-scientific side, this univocal and straightforward concept, demonstrating that there is no fixed or absolute time regardless of the system to which it relates, because time is an internal local feature of any system of observation and of measurement (Urry 2009). Through the concept of *Eigenzeit* (local, proper, or system-specific time), for him «time has become a local, internal feature of observation system, dependent on observers and their measurements» (Adam 1990, p.55).

In the sociological perspective the concrete experience of time we have is an extraordinary and multi-faceted synthesis of chronological time, kairological time, and social time. It is true that the clock time has invaded many aspects of daily life (e.g. school classes, in which kairological time has been almost completely replaced by clock time). It is true that lived time experienced in and through “nature” has gradually disappeared, been replaced by measurement instruments, watches, and clocks which are separated by natural and social space (Urry 2009). But it is also true, from a purely practical point of view, that we must recognize a «preeminence of social dimension in the determination of time units, even those that at first sight appear as more

natural, e.g. the division into months» (Leccardi 2009, p. 12). Synthetically «the structure of lifeworldly time is built up where the subjective time of the stream of consciousness (of inner duration) intersects with the rhythm of the body as “biological time” in general, and with the seasons as world time in general, or as calendar or “social time”. We live in all these dimensions simultaneously» (Schutz e Luckmann 1973, p. 47).

Given this complex balance we come up with the conclusion that time consciousness is transformed in different periods according to the specific cultural forms of each society. For this reason it can be said that the “objective” categories of time are *socially* objective, because individuals orient their actions in the present and toward the future in respect to the groups with which they share values with (Cosser and Cosser 1963).

The final outcome of this continuous interaction between the subject and the context in which he/she lives is what is called “shared-time”, a concept very useful in clarifying the basic dimensions of identity processes. Our daily life is made of continuous encounters, clashes, alignments with other people’s decisions. If we want to make living together possible, the internal time must be mutually adjusted. This implies that each of us must perform continual time adjustments whenever we engage in a social interaction. Precisely because of this inevitable trend we must recognize that «Time in daily life is of necessity intersubjective; we may say that it is shared time» (Luckmann 1983, p. 78).

Our social life compels us to share the “community time” for any “situation” (to use a Goffmanian terminology). This implies that each of us in some way has to participate in the flow of life of another person, partly sharing his expectations, fears, and hopes. As Alfred Schutz says, we must “grow old together”. Whenever we enter an “institution”, from the most basic (a couple’s relationship) to the most anonymous (bureaucracy), we somehow accept that it will “take over” the relational time (perhaps, for example, we may be required to “get in line”). In the “classroom” situation it is clear that the chronological time of the transition from 09:59 to 10:00 leads to a radical transformation totally conventional with social results and psychological subjective reflections remarkably binding: we change teacher, subject, tools, locations, climate, and so on. All this implies that the new time binds students, teaching and nonteaching staff «into a common schedule within which their respective activities are structured, paced, timed, sequenced and prioritized» (Urry 2009, p. 184).

We can now mark an important milestone on our path of inquiry: *social interaction and personal identity formation are based on shared time* (Luckmann 1983). For this reason it is impossible for the subject to escape the influence of the decisive way in which, at different epochs, times were socially perceived. This

makes us understand why in every generation we invariably perceive a difference in those who came before and those who will follow us in the way we “live our own time” in the literal meaning of the expression. Every age has “new times” for the ever-changing events that occur and mainly for the common and shared way to “feel” the times.

The Arrival of Discontinuity

Recent historiography has made us aware of a very important process that has taken place in modernity and has strongly changed the consideration and perception of times. What has changed decisively is the way in which temporal dimensions of the past and future were compared to each other. In modern times, «the relationship between the past and the future was clearly transformed» (Koselleck 1979, it. transl. 1986, p. 5). In particular, «social scientists use the conceptualization of cyclical and linear time for a distinction between “traditional” and “modern” societies or ancient and contemporary cultures» (Adam 1990, p. 134).

The reflections of Niklas Luhmann in a well-known article of 1976 emphasize that while it is natural that human life always involves an immediate future and an immediate past, less obvious is the relationship with the further away times, the not “handy” ones. The distance allowed “managing” those times in a fideistic way, making them disappearing in the darkness of a “mythical time”. Hence the propensity of medieval philosophers not to feel compelled to point out a difference between “existence” and “perpetuation”, i.e. between what has been, what is, and what is yet to come, being all essentially only “God’s problems”.

According to Luhmann modernity has undermined this unitary and “pacified” view of last times (and, by extension, of social and individual times of daily life). Now present time becomes the turning point that changes the proceeding of time from past to future. It is the present time that changes in modernity and causes a change in all other times.

Luhmann locates in the 17th century the time in which «the unity of existence and preservation was split and the present was conceived as discontinuous» (Luhmann 1976, p. 133). In the modernity (but, as we shall see, more specifically in the postmodernity) time is no longer a continuous flow, the continuity goes haywire (let’s remember what was said about this essential factor of the identity process). The change in perspectives of time began, according to Luhmann, exactly with “reconceptualization of the present”. This process leads on the one hand to rethinking the actuality as “instantaneous change” and on the other hand to recognizing that since the relationship between the past and the future will not have the same form in

every society, a more distant past and a more distant future become “irrelevant” for us today. It is clear that this irrelevance opens up issues which could not be previously imagined, such as “mensuration”. How long is the temporal break that can make old and future times “irrelevant”? May the present time, as we shall see in Bauman, gradually fade into a single point? What would be the personal and social consequences of this shift?

The Arrival of Acceleration

Beyond the operative or moral judgment we can give about these theoretical approaches, the fact is that between the 16th and the 19th centuries took place what the historian Reinhart Koselleck calls “rational temporality of history”, a peculiar form of *acceleration* that characterizes modern times. During those three centuries, because of the deep spiritual and cultural crisis that undermined the European continent, the perception and experience of time have undergone a process of gradual acceleration that brought manifold cultural, ethical, psychological, and political consequences. The advent of modernity «changes the core of our fundamental being in time and space» (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009, p. 10), because the daily life rhythms change to a greater or lesser extent.

Here also explained the use of the adjective “metronimic”, the post-modern society is indicated with: the metronome, unlike the watch, can vary the paces. It is the pace that becomes “more important than the destination: anyone who stands firm, stands still; everything, above all time, becomes frantic motion: the new myth was speed”. (Nowotny 1989, p. 84).

Experiences become faster, often consequently shorter, and, from this transformation of collective temporal styles the so-called *culture of immediacy* takes shape: «Fashions, lifestyles, product cycles, jobs, relations to spouses and sexual partners, political and religious beliefs, forms of practice and association, as well particular orientations toward social action become increasingly contingent and unstable during the course of modernity» (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009, p. 5). In this breathless run to include an ever more exorbitant quantity of actions in the available time, in conflict with the paradoxical conjunction of «technological acceleration and the increasing scarcity of time» (Rosa 2009, p. 87) becomes frequent. In fact, «one of the resources that you most miss is time. The tyranny of time, even the tyranny of a scansion in the use of time, which is dictated by factors and situations not controlled by the social actor, seems to be the problem of modern man who often lives like a pinball ball that moves from one point to another in a social space driven by impulses external to his will» (Di Nicola 2002, p. 97). It is perhaps this shared perception of the new times that brings out in the young

generations «the feeling of being “out of place”, “late” with respect to an ideal schedule» (Leccardi 2005, p. 70).

This change is very important in our research especially because the sudden social acceleration undermines the capability of integrating the different temporal perspectives of the individual and therefore of developing «a coherent sense of self as well as those time-resistant priorities necessary for the exercise of autonomy» (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009, p. 18): in practice the acceleration of times contributes to a further complexity in today's identity processes.

The New Times

Finally the acceleration of present time has upset the way we relate to other times.

For example, the past began gradually to lose the qualities that occurred in “traditional” societies. It is interesting to note that the traditionalist approach is structured on the warranty of “continuity” both from the point of view of the universal/teleological destiny and from the individual/anthropological point of view. It is because of this undoubted continuity that history was for several millennia considered as a “school”. The axiom of *Historia Magistra Vitae* has significantly maintained its undisputed authority until the 18th century. This was only possible due to that particular mindset to consider human possibilities as included in a general historical continuum: «History can teach only if and until the premises to do so are essentially the same» (Koselleck 1979 it. transl. 1986, p. 32), only if you are convinced of the stability (continuity) of human nature. The attentive observer (and convinced moralist) as Alexis de Tocqueville noticed this unmistakable sign of new times coming from the American continent that would soon become the dominant culture at global level: «For the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit moves in darkness» (Tocqueville, 1835-40, 1961, p. 336).

So while the concept of *culture* seems to conclude the glorious “ideal” phase of the history of humanity in a now closed past (customs, traditions, heritages, memberships...), modernity relies on a different view of the world, that of the *economy*, the “science of the future” (needs, desires, hopes, calculations...) (Appadurai 2004): it is stated in the theme of “management of the future” that modernity is more greatly separated from previous eras.

The Management of the Future

It is not coincidental that Martin Luther was among the first people who realized that mankind was entering a new era. However from his point of view the evident “shortening” of the times was a visible sign of God's will that showed a desire to make the final judgment closer, accelerating it. The sudden reduction of present times was therefore seen as imminence of new future times.

The *prediction of the future* (and therefore its management) has since ancient times been an extraordinarily powerful weapon. It is easy to understand if one considers that the representations of the future being objects of social construction inevitably give rise to (even bloody) struggles to spread and to make prevail the interpretation most convenient to oneself or to one's own side. If a paterfamilias, data in hand, convinces all components that in the current economic environment there is no possibility of traveling abroad for holidays, there will be very little opportunities for discussions or arguments. In the absence of feasible alternatives, one accepts the representation that becomes the “official” one and consequently things impossible by definition are not designed for the future. But, «what is possible, probable or impossible is rarely an indisputable fact» (Jedlowski 2012, p. 14), and if the mother simply indicates an alternative representation, then discussions become plausible and even the children will feel entitled to having their say.

The importance of the decision on who should have the power to define the future is great, because it is also a recognition for the capacity to manage the present time. The imagined future acts as a cultural framework within which one builds the present time. This present time is somewhat, paradoxically rooted in a future that does not exist yet (Mandich 2012) and may not even be plausible (as it is in the case of classic paradox of “self-fulfilling prophecies”).

For reasons previously stated, in history the institutions entitled to make the future official have always defended this privilege with great care. For example, the peremptory indications with which the Roman Church submitted all the “visionaries” to its control are well known. To be publicly proclaimed a prophecy should have the ecclesiastical approval. Joan of Arc (then acknowledged saint) and Savonarola (whose cause of beatification is ongoing) paid with their lives for lack of compliance with these obligations.

With the Protestant Reformation the Church establishment was forced to abdicate this function (perhaps the first firm step towards the general following secularization) without leaving an institutional vacuum in the management of the future. It is interesting to note that the advent of free

conscience (without ecclesiastical mediation) in terms of personal salvation was, predictably, confined to the private, while representations of the future continued to be monopolized, but this time by the secular institutions. The genesis of the modern absolutist state is characterized by the ceaseless struggle against religious and political prophecies of all kinds. This way the State «takes on what used to be a task of the Church» (Koselleck 1979, it. transl. 1986, p. 18).

Of course, not everything stays the same in this transition: something is gained and something is lost. In contrast to the prophecy the modern concept of *rational prevision* loses part of the aura connected to the divine will but gains in terms of reliability from the point of view of the effects and timing of likely realization. The future becomes a field of finite possibilities and is defined by higher or lower degrees of probability. The modern Cardinal Richelieu liked to say that it is more important to “consider the future than the present”. If the interests of prelates move from the afterlife to this life, it becomes evident that the prophecy (which is beyond the horizon of the computable experience) is gradually leaving room to the prevision, or the prognosis that already implies willingness to change the concrete situation.

But the change of foretold future in predictable future would not be enough to lacerate the horizon of Christian expectations. This happens only with the advent of the philosophy of history, which attributes integrally any rational expectation of the future to the concept of *progress*. In the idolatry of progress the temporal path of civilization is linear and, exactly, progressive. The terminological shift through which the spiritual *profectus* (accomplished, realized, sainted, in the afterlife) was removed and replaced by the mundane *progressus* is significant: «the goal of a possible perfection, which previously could only be achieved in the afterlife, was used since then to improve life on earth» (Koselleck 1979, it. transl. 1986, p. 311). And while the prophecy transcends the world, progress refers to its active transformation.

Modern future has two disorienting features compared to pre-modern future. The first one is that the modern future is accelerated. The philosopher Gotthold Lessing photographs this new *habitus* of the modern man who «cannot just wait for the future. He wishes to accelerate the coming of this future and wants to speed it up with his work. In fact, what is it to him if what he sees being the best does not become the best while he's still alive?» (Koselleck 1979, it. transl. 1986, p. 26). We cannot help noticing the radical difference from the expectations of medieval laborers and architects who began monumental works without having the slightest chance of seeing them accomplished.

The second disorienting feature of the modern future is that it is free from constraints, if not the technological ones that can constantly be

overcome. A concept that has continued to maintain its charm despite the 20th century history having tragically disowned its practicability, is that what is technically possible is morally permissible. It is a future fully subject to the human domain, «free from the double influence of the bonds of nature and of the transcendent» (Leccardi 2012, p. 34).

Free from constraints it becomes irredeemably an “open future” (Luhmann, 1976), “without example”, that has completely overturned a centuries-old *topos*: «We can no longer expect advice from the past, but only from the future that has to create itself» (Koselleck 1979, it. transl. 1986, p. 51). In this perspective, the final passage is now possible *from prophecy to progress*, replacing «the doctrine of the last judgment with the risk of an open future» (ibid, p. 311).

But even these “magnificent and progressive fortunes” have had their day and the open future enters a manifest crisis: we are in the postmodernity, in which «“history” is devoid of any teleology and consequently no one can plausibly defend any version of “progress”» (Giddens 1990, it. transl. 1994, p. 53).

Modernity has freed the future from the constraints of transcendence, and has entrusted it entirely to the dynamics of rational probabilistic calculation. But these latter dynamics (that paradoxically have acquired fideistic characters) have shown in their historical failures of the 20th century that we have never been, nor we will ever be in the position to ensure stable management of the individual or social future. Acknowledgment of this failure opens the door to a new way of conceiving existence which undermines the roots of modern faith: the amazing idea begins to spread «that it may be a rational and even a secure strategy to prefer the insecure to the secure» (Luhmann 1976, p. 141).

Certainly, technological innovations and such institutions of banking, insurance, and laws all form part of what Hagerstrand (1985) calls the “colonization of the future”, providing protection for a period yet to come, but «our contemporary approach to the future seems to have shifted from colonialisation to something resembling elimination» (Adam 1990, p. 140).

The Discontinuous Identities

It should be noted that freedom and uncertainty appeared already in the concept of open future, essentially as one being the inevitable interface of the other. Now, however, «this uncertainty is transformed into a true “crisis of the future”» (Leccardi 2009, p. 50). The first consequence of the gradual spread of this new *habitus* towards daily reality is the development of a collective context even more pessimistic about the chances of actually managing the future, in

which the definition of projects at medium-long term is increasingly perceived as a poorly meaningful strategy. Thus, «the future guided by the principle of continuous improvement is replaced by the category of extended present» (ibid, p. 40, see also Nowotny 1989). It is a practice that tends to make the future disappear and reduces the times of planning to the classic “live day by day” (Crespi 2005), perhaps by stretching daytime as far as possible, allowing distractions to themselves: in this *extended present* everyone composes the changing texts of his/her own identities, «polishing the work of redefinition, day by day» (Bauman 1999, p. 140).

The first consequence of this crucial change, i.e. of this flattening of the existence to the present, is that time is increasingly seen as a series of moments in succession in which the memories result in being disconnected as snapshots without a chronological order. The present time then becomes a unique reference point or even better the turning point even if (or maybe exactly because) discontinuous (as Luhmann says). The sequence of these fragments generates an actuality which can be represented as a continuum of changing instants. Giddens is perhaps the author of this process being referred to as the crucial aspect of postmodernity: “My thesis arises from what I have elsewhere called a “discontinuist” interpretation of modern social development. By this I mean that modern social institutions are somehow unique: different from any other type of traditional order. I think that grasping the nature of this discontinuity is a prerequisite for analyzing the essence of modernity, as well as to predicting the actual consequences of it» (Giddens 1990, it. trans. 1994, p. 16).

The aspect most interesting to us is related to the effects that such a way of life inevitably produces the processes of definition of individual and social identity: life tends to become a series of «episodes that pass without a trace, without being transformed into lived experience» (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009, p. 18). Each episode is separated from its past and its future as «time is no longer a river, but a set of puddles and pools» (Bauman 1999, p. 38). Thus «the biography as unitary dimension gives way to narration by fragments» (Leccardi 2012, p. 34) which tends to make human relations «fragmentary (relations reducible to a single function or service) and discontinuous» (Bauman 1999, p. 39): in fact, «it can be difficult to tie an identity to relationships which are in themselves hopelessly disconnected» (ibid, p. 37).

Here resurface (in more than marginal roles) a series of identities that in traditional societies were stigmatized as dangerous for the stability of civil coexistence: the *flaneur*, the *vagabond*, the *tourist*, and the *gambler*. Today the styles traditionally practiced by marginal people in marginal periods and sites, «are practiced by the majority, in their prime, and in central places» (ibid, p. 39), i.e. they have become “lifestyles”. All this can be allowed or even

recommended because to have an identity “for life” in postmodernity proves to be a handicap rather than an asset, a burden that prevents movement. Therefore the obstacle is no longer that of discovering or inventing an identity, but that of avoiding this «from sticking» (ibid, p. 37). «Who lives in a place for a long time, is already well known, trusts and enjoys his confidence is harnessed just for this reason in a network of rules that he/she helped to weave, and from which it cannot extricate him/herself without giving up a part of own self - unless he/she completely disappears from the scene, leaving the illusion that he/she will always remain the same in another place» (Luhmann 1968/2001, it. transl. 2001, p. 98).

But if the future is freed from the burdens of the past and all comes down to the “extended present”, the dominant criterion of the action can become (or go back to being) instinct reactivity which, of course, cannot offer an adequate basis for any civil society.

Similarly «memory impairments and irreversible loss of memory often associated with old age constitute a reduction and degradation of living conditions of a subject and his possibilities of social interaction»(Gasparini 2001, p. 109). And so «in the extent that the “regime of the time in the short term” (Richard Sennett) also undermines the foundations of affective relationships, love, marriage, parenting and family, men and women suffer. Social life goes out» (Beck 1999, it. transl. 2000, p. 133).

The Project in Crisis

In this context of temporal restriction the intergenerational transmission of historical memory is increasingly being called into question, interrupting the process of osmosis between past and present (essential to modernity for the existence of individual and collective identity). And it is in this fading of the past that some see «the germs of the current youth disorientation in facing the future» (Rampazi 2012, p. 84). For others the fact that a life strategy is no longer plausible with a certain integrity or cohesion is nothing more than a reaction to constructions «of networks of mutual duties and obligations that are permanent» (Bauman 1999, p. 49). Instead of building their own identities gradually and with patience individuals will simply prefer to “start again from the beginning” to create “schedules of identities” where «“the art of losing memory” is a resource no less (if not more) important than the art of fixing in memory» (ibid, p. 65). Identity thus enters the era of *uncertainty*.

Uncertainty is not an invention of postmodernity. It is a constant feature of human existence. New is the perception of not having appropriate tools or

strategies to deal with it, or even its acceptance as an overall positive situation. Through the “normalization” of uncertainty postmodernity undermines even the strategy used until recently to face the contradictions of existence. For the modern man «the inevitable sense of uncertainty is controlled by the project» (Leccardi 2012, p. 34). The possibility of planning for the future was the main cornerstone of the idea of identity in the modern sense: a *life project* that would become the organizing principle of one’s own biography. The life project is perhaps the most proper expression of personal identity: identity happens where it tends to sort the items of the context in order to solve its internal urgency towards one’s own realization. It is therefore clear that «biographical schemes are most directly connected with personal identity» (Luckmann 1983, p. 89).

Biographical schemes do not simply coincide with personal dreams: they have the important function of connecting individual life and personal biographical episodes with longer natural social and cosmic times (Luckmann 1983). Through them the individual builds bridges with the past, present, and future reality, trying to find “one’s own place” in this huge mass of elements.

In modernity this project had long temporal arches, sometimes of the same length of the whole lifetime. It is exactly this hope and this investment of energy in the face of an ever-uncertain future that with the end of modernity enters into a serious crisis: the notion of life based on long-term commitments, duration, and stability is put in question. The ability to control highly variable situations of dealing with uncertainty is no longer a chance linked to the planning capacity. What is needed today is readiness to understand when you need to change direction if required by the events. In the long term all these strategies introduced to limit the damage of the unstable and uncertain social circumstances become a habitual attitude that consists simply in a reduction of temporal spans of project, and that labels the long-term ones as obsolete. But all this must consequently change “the temporal structure of identities” (Leccardi 2012, p. 40).

Some interesting effects of this change can be seen in the use of common language as a kind of *linguistic indicator of the identity uncertainty*. Nowadays the frequent use of temporary expressions is an often unconscious manner to delimit the temporal validity of traditional identity characteristics. It is now usual to say for example that someone is «working (for the time being) as a baker rather than being a baker, living with Mary rather than being Mary’s husband, going to the Methodist Church rather than being a Methodist, voting Republican rather than being a Republican, and so on» (Rose 2009, p. 99).

The Situationalism

The result of this strong transience of the stable identity characteristics creates the typical contemporary proceeding no longer planned along a line extending from the past to the future. Decisions are made from time to time «according to situational and contextual needs and desires» (Rose 2009, p. 100). This new way of proceeding within the changeability of circumstances is recently indicated by the colorful term *situationalism* which even when described in neutral or positive terms, replaces the temporally extended identity, a characteristic of modernity.

This new attitude may paradoxically be assimilated to «premodern forms of existence in which people had to cope with unforeseeable contingencies on a day-to-day basis without being able to plan for the future; however, whereas the dangers, events and contingencies that threatened the earlier forms of life (natural disasters, wars, diseases, etc.) were exogenous to society, the new situationalism is an endogenous product of social structures themselves» (Rosa and Scheurman 2009, p. 100).

This way of proceeding enclosed, confined, trapped in the present time is a realization of the ideal that seems to dominate the postmodern culture, that of «possible independence from time and space» (Leccardi 2009, p. 51). The first likely victim of this attitude is the reflective capacity of the person and then the person's autonomy. It is the adoption of long-term commitments that gives a sense of direction, priorities, "narratability" to life: to reject this dynamic involves the exaltation of the contingency, of situational forms of identity, « in which the dynamism of classical modernity, characterized by a strong sense of direction (perceived as progress) is replaced by a sense of directionless, frantic motion that is in fact form of inertia» (Rosa 2009, p. 101).

Notes

It is no longer the era of the *pilgrim*, because «as pilgrims, you can do more than just walk - you can walk towards» (Bauman 1999, p. 32). In walking "towards" time gains the unity of past, present, and future and life and time acquires *sense*. It is then no more the era of the meaning, of a recognized and accepted (no matter how confused) directionality (given) of individual and collective existence.

If elevated as a strategy, this situation raises new and important issues that the identity processes need to face.

Firstly, the meaning is a "compulsory" characteristic of a human: man is «an animal that inevitably has sense» (Rigotti and Cigada 2004, p. 25). Unlike animals he is not simply forced to live, he is also forced to wonder why to live,

otherwise he stops. If to be born is an obligation, to live is a decision for a man (the recent heated discussions about “end-of-life care” are making it more and more evident) and any decision is made on the basis of sense, since “the problem of meaning is fundamental first of all from the point of view of the individual actor” (Gasparini 2001, p. 137).

Psychology has long proven nonexistence of “nonsense” behavior : On the contrary, even the most incomprehensible and absurd actions of neurotics act to achieve a specific purpose and hide an inherent logic (Dogana 1993).

Reflexivity is the first element that distinguishes the human, forcing him not to remain in the dimension of pure reactivity. To reduce the perception of and the urgency for sense is to reduce the man and bring him back (after a long “walk” lasting many very rich centuries of cultural production) to his *natural* i.e. animal state. Strange nemesis: after much discussion about the very existence of human “naturalness” we now seem to set out along a path that takes us back to his pure reactive dynamic with the exception of minimum social standards that also characterize necessarily hives or termite mounds.

Sense is «a primary prereflective ambit characterized by needs, urges, emotions in which every conscious reflexivity of the subject becomes possible» (Crespi 2005, p. 26). For this reason it does not depend on the subject, but it is what is given as biological and relational structure: «It is the existence itself that in giving itself gives the sense: for the simple fact that something is given, sense is necessarily given. The giving of something causes a difference that determines a direction, a sense» (ibid).

“Quarantining” this primordial dimension has repercussions not just at the theoretical level.

It is not only about admitting that there might exist a meaning of existence, neither about being able to find it concretely. The problem arises when one tries to build a personal and collective identity trajectory as if it was possible to “do without” a sense when the optionality of a sense becomes the hypothesis of life, culture and social practice.

This contradiction in terms brings about gradual reduction of the design capacity of the individual, crucial feature of a mature identity. Action projects «dramatically separate men from all that is not human» (Archer 2003 it. transl. 2006, p. 60).

With the loss of design capacity one can no longer speak of *constraints* (obstacles) or of *facilities* (opportunities). Where there is lack of sense, project, «typically human device» (ibid, p. 59), can no longer even be conceived and time passes without leaving constructive or destructive marks on any identity processes. The ability to take advantage of opportunities can be linked to temperament or personal qualities, but «the will to take advantage of it» (Ammassari 1968, p. 20) can only be related to the decision of an individual

who guesses the sense of an engagement: «the decision of whether to use them or not depends on our reflexivity» (Archer 2007, it. transl. 2009, p. 90).

Even postmodernity can only be based on this dynamism. «Reflexivity is a distinctive feature of all human actions in the sense that all people normally “maintain contact” with the reasons for what they do as part of their act. Elsewhere I have called this fact “the reflexive monitoring of action”» (Giddens 1990, it. transl. 1994, p.45).

Yet the way to maintain a social life seems to coincide ever more with a radically *instrumental* translation of every aspect of reality with which the individual has to interact. In the process of general exploitation even time seems to have to bend to this reduction. The postmodern time has no meaning, it has been formally freed from it. It simply instrumentally “serves” the urgency of individual happiness, which still remains. The “shared time” also seems to have to bend to this fate. Interpersonal relations, which should encourage the development of identity through realization of meaningful projects, often help foster the depression, favoring the «separation of human and social as lack of sense» (Donati and Colozzi 2006, p. 58).

This landing unfortunately seems to refute the still optimistic expectations of Durkheim when a century ago (concluding his first important work) he imagined that the “perturbation of our faith” due to the loss of authority of tradition would be solved with the advent of a new morality which «cannot be improvised in the silence of a study [...] it can only rise by itself, little by little, thanks to the pressure of internal causes that make it necessary» (Durkheim, 1893, it. transl., 1962, p. 399). And again twenty years later he closed his last work predicting that even if humanity was crossing a phase of transition and moral mediocrity, the day would come when our society would still know moments of creative effervescence from which new ideals would arise: «There are no immortal gospels and there is no reason to believe that humanity is now incapable of devising new ones» (Durkheim, 1912, it. transl. 1973, p. 492).

Luckmann suggests that the new gospel is one which, attributing a sacred character to the increasing subjectivity of human existence (and to the illusion of kairological time as an alternative to the responsibility of living), at the same time encourages dehumanization of the social structure: «This liberation is an opportunity without historical precedents because the autonomy of personal life can be affirmed for “everyone”. But it contains a serious danger: the mass withdrawal into the “private sphere” while “Rome burns”. All in all then is it good thing or a bad thing?» (Luckmann 1963, it. transl. 1969, p. 164).

In short, today just the temporal dimension seems to be the determinant of the fate of the individual identity. Segmenting time indicates a direction in which simultaneously the person is segmented, deluded to be able to manage

the time, and therefore identity, in private, and convinced that this dimension is sufficient and the only possible one for one's own realization of urgencies. An aspiration that, paraphrasing Elias, is an illusory self-representation that "adult healthy and wealthy" people have (Elias, 1980) and therefore it is able to legitimize itself only in the *age of playing*, the one we could afford until yesterday.

In today's *era of crisis* this self-affirmation does not convince. It's hard to see how ever larger social realities that demand the right to work (without which each game ends), that begin to feel the tragedy of mass unemployment and see the specter of poverty appearing on the horizon, as well as the desolation of the dissolution of human relations like wax at fire, can settle for the private or the intimate in order to live a satisfactory existence. For this reason today even the "systemic trust" seems increasingly insufficient: this trust is applied not only «to social systems, but also to other individuals understood as personal systems» (Luhmann, 1968/2001, p. 33). The urgency of individual, interpersonal, and social *credibility* (Gili 2005) of a person, of his word, of his continuity that allows to connect the gesture of *before* with the one that will come *next*, the urgency of the consequent reliability of human relationships seems to emerge once again, and to generate examples of spontaneous solidarity that arise from the civil society in times of greatest need, in the face of tragedies and disasters.

If we consider certain striking phenomena of civil voluntary commitment as, for example, in our country the *Angels of mud* arisen to hold up flooded people in Liguria or the various initiatives of *Food collection*, designed to meet the increasingly widespread phenomenon of the population of living below the poverty line, we find a sign of renewed urgency of interpersonal and operational relationships. If we consider then that in Germany in 1994 a third of the population was committed in some volunteer activities and that in the USA, according to a Gallup poll in 1990, 54% of the population sacrifices an average of four hours a week for volunteering, we realize how such urgency is shared among large sections of "postmodern" cultures.

Of course, these phenomena open new questions: they are often transient, short-lived and struggling to build a "new culture". Moreover, «the more the spontaneity and the social responsibility are imposed, the lower is the probability that they may be realized ... so the question returns even more acutely: who organizes the spontaneity?» (Beck 1999, it . transl. 2000, p. 185). Great is thus the responsibility of those who will have to decide culturally or politically whether or not to encourage and support (in a subsidiary way) these alternative signals for a society that can hardly afford to play for a long time.

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