SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY AND SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION: THE INDIVIDUAL IN AMBIGUOUS MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the diverse ways of self-definition of individuals in a changing reality, which is attributed to a hybrid and ambiguous character. The emphasis is on identity discourse in the individual dimension. While questioning the possibility of clearly defining the Self in the world of diverse relations and ambiguous social reality, a dilemma arises: one identity or many identities? It should be pointed out here that there is a transition from identity as a complex and dynamic attribute (aspect) of the individual to the multiplicity of individual identities as a variety of its identifications with the objects of the social world. More radically, doubts can be raised here about the usefulness of the category of identity. Behind such thinking are not merely methodological difficulties in recognizing the different dimensions and contexts in which the individual defines his or her identity or identities. It is certainly possible to speak here of a different meaning attributed to the category of identity, especially in its theoretical-cognitive sense. The consequence of this is also the different meaning that is attributed to the utility of this category, i.e. its instrumental use for the self-determination of individuals. The stronger the adherence to the terminology of modernity, the stronger the indication of a possible and fully conscious (reflexive) project that identity may become for the constructively acting individual. Departure from modern nomenclature complicates the issues of defining identity itself, and thus also does not make the task easier in the sphere of social practice and does not provide easy utilitarian solutions. Moreover, the difficulties concern not only what individual identity is (or could be) in the functional sense, but also its very structure and the fundamental question of its durability (or at least relative stability) in the context of individualization.

Keywords: *Individual Identity, Social Identifications, Individualism, Process of Individualization, Ambiguous (Hybrid) Reality*

INTRODUCTION

Regarding the genesis of identity as a product of modernity, there is quite a general consensus in the social sciences. However, when it comes to the contemporary formulations of the category's scope of meaning, there is no such agreement. It suffices to point to the discrepancies in defining identity in two different contexts of analysis of modernity, namely the reality of late modernity

and postmodernity. The definition of individual identity, although repeatedly undertaken in the field of sociology and other social sciences, is still far from unambiguous. In a way, this is because the differences in meaning result from different theoretical currents and intellectual traditions in which the category of identity has been explained. Despite the disputes over the definition, there is, however, quite a general consensus that the issue of identity entered the social sciences with modernity, that is, when the actual conditions of social life seemed to provide an opportunity for individual self-definition in a changing world. It seems, however, that the lack of consensus as to the status of this concept in sociology has not prevented its fairly widespread use and application as a tool for examining the condition of individuals, and even – in the collective dimension – of entire groups. More important than the theoretical-cognitive specification turned out to be its research application. The dispute over definition, however cognitively interesting, turned out to be unsolvable.

The interest in identity in social sciences derives from two different sources, which causes it to take two main forms: psychodynamic – based on Freud's theory of identification and Erikson's concept of "identity crisis", and sociological – directly connected with symbolic interactionism and James's pragmatic theory of the self. [1] The former one is primarily an internal process of self-identification, that is, locating oneself in socially constructed categories, which happens through language. The second form of identity is nowadays exposed to enormous challenges related to the dispersion and ambiguity of the contexts of participation in the social world, and consequently to the increasing difficulties in building common, consensually shared meanings. Indeed, defining oneself on the basis of coexistence with others must take into account the ways in which communities construct conceptions of human beings and social life. Hybrid forms of social life do not provide a foundation that guarantees transparency and stability. And this is one of the essential elements in the process of forming one's Self. It should be underlined that modern man has been largely stripped of the identity previously guaranteed by the so-called *commonsense*. Therefore, identity has been described in a pessimistic mode, where the distinctions between culture and self are blurred in mass culture, resulting in the rise of the narcissistic personality or marked by meaninglessness, lack of sense and the possibility of losing authority figures. All of these, combined, lead to the growth of selfish, closed to others, inbred identities. However, it also takes into account its optimistic dimension, understood as the „democratization of personality". In this view, thanks to the increasing individualization of life, such mechanisms are liberated that allow the individual to make free choices from among a wide range of identities. [2]

However, regardless of the origin of the concept, in the case of the concept of individual identity one can clearly see its connections with the structures of consciousness. The sociological theory of individual identity was sparked by the idea of the self-conscious social subject. The spread of this notion and the increase in its popularity had to do with real transformations in the ways of human functioning in the world. Just as the sphere of consciousness has been linked to

the category of the subject, or rather the subject has taken possession of it and made it his own, so identity has emerged as another stage in the development of subjective consciousness. [3] Being so correlated with modernity, the identity perspective turned out to be adequate to describe the condition of an individual in the world in which the view of reality is reduced primarily to the optics of individual functioning and coping with the rapid changes. Gaining self-awareness, understood as empowerment (in the philosophical sense, it is the possibility of being and remaining oneself and influencing the shape of being oneself in relation to the surrounding world) has constitutive features in common with identity formation. In a broader context, the process of human empowerment as accompanying the emergence of modernity became the subject of Alain Touraine's analysis. [4]

AROUND THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

Identity is most often understood as a process, a phenomenon that continues and develops over time. Though the phenomenon itself is not fully defined, to some extent it defines the individual or even the necessary mechanism needed for that definition. When searching for identity, one asks a fundamental question: "who am I?" Definitional discrepancies include the durability of the construct called identity. In sociology we can point to the presentation of identity as a real and permanent object defining an individual (self-conception) and as a changeable and contextual phenomenon (self-image). These two ways of explaining identity, originating in the tradition of American symbolic interactionism, can be, in a way of simplification, considered as typological patterns of defining identity and the ends of the continuum, between which many intermediate forms of individual identity can be found, never in their pure form, but always within the framework of such dichotomously considered ideal types of identity. In other words, the term "identity" is applied both to a long-lasting and hardly removable structure (self-conception) and to the image of a person at a given moment (self-image). A more appropriate term here is the Self, and individual identity is essentially that which lies between the biographical self and the situated Self. More precisely, it is what results from their continuous coexistence. It is a resultant of an established concept of oneself and an impression about oneself created in the situation of each act of interaction. [5]

Although various concepts of identity approach in their form to one end of the mentioned continuum, in reality both models are realized in individual lives. For example, Anthony Giddens, presenting the concept of individual identity as a reflexive project carried out in late modernity, is closer to understanding identity as a biographical self. Although he emphasizes the dependence of the construction of oneself on every single act of decision made by an individual in everyday life, the overall vision, according to him, is closed in the broader plans of life and determines the trajectory of identity. [6] The individual's behaviour on the way of constructing oneself is deeply considered, takes into account the risk inherent in late modern existence and treats the achievements of highly developed societies

as an opportunity for individual development and modelling one's own life according to intended goals and in a specific time (conducting a dialogue with time).

On the other hand, the postmodern world, as described by Zygmunt Bauman, seems to determine identity to a greater extent in every single act of action and decision-making. The changing (fluid) and multifaceted context of individual actions makes the process of identity construction not so much an opportunity as a necessity, even a requirement. In this sense, it becomes a task to be performed and takes on ethical significance because it is really a way of survival and individual being-in-the-world. The indication of contextuality and situationality in identity formation reflects the difficulties an individual encounters in their attempts to define themselves holistically. The biographical self, however dynamic, possesses the qualities of a certain stability and continuous construction may seem to be an unhelpful strategy in a hybrid world due to fragmentation, uprooting and trust deficit in society. To use Bauman's metaphor, it is the personality model of the "tourist" that is more adequate in liquid modernity than that of the "pilgrim". [7]

Once again, it should be emphasized that individual identity is usually related to the temporal factor, and different understandings of time and the positioning of the human being in relation to its different dimensions. As an illustration, we can point to private time (the individual's internal time), intersubjective time (shared with other people with whom the individual stays), and biographical time (determined by the individual's life course). In all its dimensions we can speak of manifestations of identity, in varying scope and intensity. The degree of its articulability, i.e. the individual's awareness of the essence of his or her own identity and the possibility of verbal expression of what features are its essential components, probably also varies. From a methodological point of view, it is the recognition and naming of these characteristics and the ability to verbally express the components of one's identity, and therefore the ability to answer the question "who am I?".

Apart from temporality, the active and passive aspects of identity should be pointed out. The most significant determinant of the understanding of identity is the active aspect, that is, the description of identity by each individual in terms of processuality and duration over time. Instead, the semantics of the term indicates that identity is a property of being "the same" or a feature of "being" in general. However, in his opinion, it is contextuality, interactivity and dynamism (constant changeability) that are the most significant features reflecting the nature of identity. Hence, the "having an identity" thesis should be considered a simplification typical for the social sciences, which stems from the fact that they try to describe reality as it is or appears to be (a state of affairs rather than a process, difficult to grasp methodologically). Therefore, it would be more appropriate to speak of the attribution of identity to others and identification. However, the identification includes both external (objective) and subjective

(internal) processes. The former, as externally imposed, is related to power because it illustrates the relationship between the identifier and the identified. This relationship is based on naming and identification: The second process, i.e. the attribution of characteristics from within, is in other words self-definition, which is in close relation to an externally imposed identity (it may or may not accept it). [8]

In light of the above, the shortest definition of identity can be formulated as follows: it is a complex consisting of self-creation and external identifications. Only with the assumption that we adopt a static view of identity can it be treated as a set (syndrome) of social or cultural features focused in the individual and manifested in a specific situation (in a certain social context). Only in this limited sense is any adjudication of "possession" of identity legitimate.

USEFULNESS OF THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

A cognitively interesting question is to what extent can identity be considered a useful category in explaining the condition of contemporary man? Does the process of individualization mark the detachment of individuals from social conditions and complete freedom in the process of self-creation? It is then the free, intentional acts of identification of the individual with human objects and subjects that become important. Or does the inscription of individuals in institutional worlds still set limits on their creative self-definition? The answer cannot be unambiguous. It seems, however, that still identity, also due to the high popularity of the concept and its ambiguity, brings many unknowns, but at the same time hope for finding a meaning-oriented key to the contemporary man. [9]

In broad terms, constructing identity is one way of using practical reason. Leszek Koczanowicz, using the terminology borrowed from Michel Foucault, identifies four basic "technologies" developed by humans as ways of actively realising themselves. [10] These are:

- production technologies that allow things to be transformed, produced and operated in any way;
- sign systems technologies, i.e. the use of symbols, the recognition of meaning and the use of all kinds of signs, including language;
- power technologies that subordinate human behaviour to certain goals or to a particular dominance, thereby organizing and objectifying it;
- identity technologies.

It would probably be inappropriate to reason that currently, human self-realisation takes place only within the scope determined by the last sphere of activity. However, it is probably not much of an exaggeration to say that it is precisely the technologies of identity that are considered as a determinant of

modern times. Practical reason still has ample opportunity to realize itself and emanate its activity in all the spheres indicated, and this is indeed what happens. However, it can be assumed that the strong emphasis currently placed (starting from the modern era) on identity technologies is related to the profound changes taking place in the other three technologies. This is indicated by the justifications that identity sociology theorists use to find the foundations of their proposed concepts. For instance, Giddens and Bauman show such specific phenomena in the sphere of work, new rules of establishing relations, and transformations in the world of power that make individual self-determination through identity both an opportunity and a necessity in modern societies. Identity is seen as an antidote to the challenges posed by the ongoing transformations to the functioning of an individual in a diverse and semantically ambiguous social environment. [11]

Reaching for the mechanisms of self-creation has become a determinant of modern times, and individual existence is based today on a deepened awareness of oneself and the world in which one lives and acts. Identity is largely a consequence of using one's own thought structure, reflecting on oneself, but it also includes attempts to understand the surrounding world. It can also be considered in terms of instrumentality – since it is a consciously created project, it becomes, in a way, a tool for shaping oneself. Recognition by the unit of the conditions of its operation allows for their optimal use and inclusion in the unit project carried out. The intensification of such tendencies is evident in the recognition of the role of conscious reflection on reality as a fundamental attribute (and practical skill) of modern man. He/she is required to develop such strong thinking as a desirable and useful competence. In such a context one can place the definition of contemporary developed societies as reflective or simply knowledge societies.

Since the concept of identity is to introduce new possibilities of capturing the dimensions of self-identification and self-definition of individuals, the variability of the social world becomes at the same time the basis on which individual identity is built. The ongoing changes in society result in different conditions for identity formation and the acquisition of self-awareness. In this sense, it is a search for the "real Self" (Ralph Turner's term), which is the expression of one's own Self and, according to him, increasingly shifts from emanation in the world of institutions to emanation in the form of "impulse". Bauman presents such a view of identity as a recipe for life in fluid modernity and, at the same time, as a constant struggle with the process of its creation. On top of that, he repeatedly emphasized the weakening role of the nation-state in the post-industrial era. Touraine, on the other hand, goes even further in his considerations, as he discredits the very concept of society as inadequate to describe contemporary "societies"

IDENTITY AND THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUALIZATION

In general, it should be said that the philosophical search for the sources of identity and its existence as a phenomenon has been linked either directly to

consciousness (thinking) or to the subject. Nowadays, the development of the ideas of consciousness and subjectivity are important for the definition of identity, if only in the sense that consciousness makes it possible to see one's own life as a narrative (which is a condition for constructing identity), and subjectivity determines self-determination, that is, it organizes basically everything that an individual may be a part of during his or her life.

However, what is most significant, in terms of contemporary identity contexts, is the relationship of this category to the process of individualization. The popularity that the concept of identity has gained in the social sciences, including sociology, in recent decades can be attributed to the process of individualization. The fact that it is applied to both individual and collective being does not undermine this thesis, because the heterogeneous sources of identity make it possible to separate its collective and individual dimensions. Although there is a visible tendency to transfer the characteristics of individual identity to social entities, the existence of individual identity is impossible without the social environment in which it is created.

In tying the category of identity to the process of individualization one must point to a quite clear gap between the European and the American view of the question of individualism. It should be emphasized that individualism and the process of individualization appear in many forms and are variously understood not only because of their different origins, but also their variability with social development and modernization. We can speak here, for example, about individualism of the "first modernity" and various models of "late modernity" individualism. [12] Regardless of the differences in interpretation, it should be acknowledged that individualism is an essential component of modernity. What aroused resentment and strong criticism, and what in Europe was regarded as a threat of some sort, in America was a virtue on which the whole democratic machinery and its influence rested. We are speaking here, of course, of individualism as a trait determining the functioning of entire communities, and thus an attribute shaping interpersonal relations and individual self-determination.

Nowadays, however, individualisation is most often perceived as a real tendency, an objective process accompanying the transition of societies from the stage of industrial capitalism to post-industrial capitalism, or in other words to the "economy of minds". In a more radical version, it is heading towards a new post-market era. [13] Such are the social conditions for the realization of the main slogan of modernity, i.e. individual self-determination carried out in the identity scheme. As Jean-Claude Kaufmann notes, individualization is the key to understanding modernity, and personal identity construction is its expression. However, in his view, true individual liberation came relatively late, only in the second half of the 20th century. [14] According to Ulrich Beck, on the other hand, individualization seems to be the most advanced form/scheme of socialization. [15] This means that the process of individualization is spreading and becoming

more widespread (democratising) and that it actually forces the individual to self-determination and self-definition, inscribing numerous threads of the external world into his or her self-created biography. They take the form of institutionalized regulations of social life, but they can equally represent unpredictable and ambivalent patterns flowing from a hybrid, ambiguous contemporary.

CONCLUSION

The historical variability of identity models is a fact. However, there are doubts whether and to what extent the construction of individual identity is connected with the conditions in which this process takes place. If there are any socially produced rules that govern this process, then identity construction must refer to these rules and cultural patterns in place at a given time and place. If, on the other hand, we assume that with the advent of modernity man decides individually about the formation of oneself and is fully autonomous in these decisions, then identity no longer belongs organically to the culture in which it is created and does not have to reproduce its patterns. All the more so if culture can no longer be defined in a hierarchical system defined by a symbolic code. The second type of point of view on the formation of individual identity includes, for example, the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, in which the individual has at his disposal essentially unlimited means in the construction of his or her own personality.

The existing differentiation in defining identity, mentioned above, derived from the two sources of the concept, means also specific consequences for the process of identity formation. Identity consists of elements and patterns received from others, internalised in the course of interaction (identification), as well as distinctness and uniqueness, and thus a psychic internal construction (identification). Such definitions, so to say, external and internal identity, together determine the proper construction of the individual, which is the result of the constant clash (confrontation) of these two ways of looking at identity.

Considering the deep and dynamic changes taking place in the globalising world identity can be reduced to "consciousness of continuity". This is to be understood in the sense that identity marks the human remaining the same (but not identical) in the course of the changing circumstances of life, even if these circumstances provide heterogeneous or even contradictory patterns. It is a kind of temporal continuation (continuity) of certain personality traits or personality as such and signifies for the individual the sameness of his/her self (self-sameness). Even in the context of hybrid social reality.

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