„ESCAPING FROM SELF" AND REBUILDING IDENTITY

NICU GAVRILUȚĂ[1]

Abstract

This article proposes an understanding of the issue of personal / social identity as the result of binary choices such as yes or no. They make up a fractal complex of our own lives. Depending on these choices, each of us builds and rebuilds our life, but also our own identity. Some of the hypostases of our identity are quantifiable and captured by empirical sociological analyzes. I illustrated the idea with the results of field sociological research on European identity from 2015-1017. This classic identity - focused on social representations of country, language, religion, family and national culture - is reconfigured as a result of "self-escape" (David Le Breton) and the magic of new technologies. The escape into the white space of the virtual world is often accompanied by the reconfiguration of otherness by identifying with social otherness in the guise of radical religious movements or classical religious denominations. To all these challenges and problems that appeared as a result of the recomposition of the identity, we also proposed a series of solutions.

Keywords: choices, identity, mental form, self-escape, white space, new technologies, religious otherness.

Resumé

Cet article propose une compréhension de la question de l'identité personnelle/sociale comme résultat de choix binaires tels que oui ou non. Ils constituent un complexe fractal de nos propres vies. En fonction de ces choix, chacun de nous construit et reconstruit sa vie, mais aussi sa propre identité. Certaines hypostases de notre identité sont quantifiables et saisies par des analyses sociologiques empiriques. J'ai illustré l'idée avec les résultats d'une recherche sociologique de terrain sur l'identité européenne de 2015 à 1017. Cette identité classique - centrée sur les représentations sociales du pays, de la langue, de la religion, de la famille et de la culture nationale - est reconfigurée sous l'effet de « l'évasion » (David Le Breton) et de la magie des nouvelles technologies. L'évasion dans l'espace blanc du monde virtuel s'accompagne souvent de la reconfiguration de l'altérité en s'identifiant à l'altérité sociale sous le couvert de mouvements religieux radicaux ou de confessions religieuses classiques. Nous avons également proposé une série de solutions à tous ces défis et problèmes qui ont surgi à la suite de la recomposition de l'identité.

Mots-clés: choix, identité, forme mentale, fuite de soi, espace blanc, nouvelles technologies, altérité religieuse.

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[1] Professor, Ph.D., Departament of Sociology and Social Work, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, România. E-mail: nicolas@uaic.ro.

Rezumat

Articolul de față propune o înțelegere a problematicii identității personale/sociale ca fiind rezultatul unor alegeri binare de tipul da sau nu. Ele alcătuiesc un complex fractalic al propriei noastre vieți. În funcție de aceste alegeri, fiecare dintre noi ne construim și reconstruim viața, dar și propria identitate. O parte dintre ipostazele identității noastre sunt cuantificabile și surprinse de analizele sociologice empirice. Am ilustrat ideea cu rezultatele cercetării sociologice de teren privind identitatea europeană din perioada 2015-1017. Aceastá identitate de tip clasic - axată pe reprezentări sociale privind țara, limba, religia, familia și cultura națională - este reconfigurată ca urmare a "evadării din sine" (David Le Breton) și a magiei exercitată de noile tehnologii. Evadarea în spațiul alb al lumii virtuale este însoțită deseori de reconfigurarea alterității prin identificarea cu alteritatea socilală în ipostaza mișcărilor religioase radicale sau a denominațiunilor religioase clasice. La toate aceste provocări și probleme apărute ca urmare a recompunerii identității am propus și o serie de soluții.

Cuvinte cheie: alegeri, identitate, forma mentis, evadare din sine, spațiu alb, noi tehnologii, alteritate religioasă.

1. Identity is the result of our choices

"Each individual is made up of a wardrobe of characters in which they fit, but not in a random way, because each one moves within an identity spectrum, a nimb whose meaning is indiscernible and which only circumstances highlight. He never accesses the ensemble of his characters, possesses only a life and not the infinity of lives he could have lived" (Le Breton, 2018, p. 229). Our own identity contains a lot of virtualities that, when they come into life, have the faces of strange characters. These characters are part of the content of what David Le Breton calls to be an *identity spectrum*. Their number is very large and I do not think it can be known. "No one can live all the virtualities that are in it, they cannot even imagine them. Every moment that passes leaves behind it an infinity of possible lives that have held only one breath" (Le Breton, 2018, p. 238). For these lives that have me as the main character to cross the boundary between virtual and real, our choices are required.

Thus, a recognized truth is that each of us is the sum of our choices. In life we are often faced with binary choices of the type *yes* or *no*. All these choices form a complex system of life understood as "a fractal in the Hibert space" (Eliade, Culianu, 2007, p. 20).

A choice or refusal creates a new identity. It involves combining *mentis form* in different dosages (representations about country, language, religion, family, national culture). Therefore, each of us has the chance to activate some unique hypostases of our own identity. Theoretically, their number is infinite. Basically, he's up to our own options. By saying *yes*, I make it possible for a new character from my own identity spectrum to enter the world. In his mirror I recognize myself more or less, but he is an updated *alter-ego* of mine. Refusing a certain option, I remain in a position to preserve my identity. In conclusion, life forces us to choose and to permanently (re)build our identity hypostases. Some of them are also captured by sociological research of empirical type.

2. The residual pillars of the Romanian identity

In Romanian culture, the theme of identity has always been a permanent concern, some even obsessive. The historian Ioan Aurel Pop blames it on the "terror of history" (Mircea Eliade), the fact that the Romanians were historically and fatedly located on the border between three great empires. However, almost miraculously, Romanians have survived the times and challenges of history. Why? Among other things, because they had and have a national identity of their own. In a clear, concise and profound formulation, this national identity refers to "the Romanians' way of being and feeling together, on the basis of several characteristics, such as language (speech), origin (stirpea), culture (spiritual creations and adjacent institutions), religion (Christianity), territory, customs (traditions), etc." (Pop, 2019, p. 22). It is interesting to notice the subtle fact observed by Ioan Aurel Pop that only together and in interaction the five elements really define the Romanian identity.

This fact is also confirmed by relatively recent sociological analyses. Thus, a *Pew Research Center* research from 2015-1017 was conducted on a representative sample of 56,000 major subjects from 34 countries of Central, Western, Northern and Eastern Europe (Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues, 2018). The general theme was centered around a major research question: *how do current Europeans (still) represent their national identity?* The results were more than surprising. Thus, being a *Christian* is an important component of national identity in eastern European countries. For example, 74% of Romanians identify Romanianism with Christianity. For them, "to be a true Romanian is to be a Christian". With this score, Romanians are placed on the 5th place in Central and Eastern Europe, after Armenians (82%), Georgians (81%), Serbs (78%) and Greeks (76%). In the last five places we find highly secularized European countries, such as Latvia (11%), Sweden (15%), Estonia (15%), Denmark (19%) and Belgium (19%). For the latter, Christianity, regardless of its denomination, is not an important component of national identity.

This self-presentation of identity manifests itself against the background of the declaration of 98% of Romanians as Christians. This fact comes with a consistent dose of *conservatism*. For example, only 29% of the Romanians surveyed would agree that a Jew or a Muslim should be part of their neighbors or their families.

Another essential pillar of identity is the *national culture*. The Pew Research Center's research during that period also looked at how Europeans still represent their own culture today. The results reveal high and very high scores on belief in the values of national culture for Eastern Europeans: Greeks (89%), Georgians (85%), Armenians (85%), Bulgarians (69%), Russians (68%), Bosnians (66%), Romanians (66%) and Serbs (65%).

Some of these values are related to the old, pre-Christian *popular culture*. They are stronger in the area of Central and Eastern Europe. They refer, among other things, to beliefs in fate, curses, spells and the evil eye. It is not by chance

that Armenians believe in *fate* in the percentage of (83%), Bosnians (80%), Moldovans (75%), Lithuanians (74%) and Georgians (73%). Similarly, 68% of Romanians believe in the implacable force of destiny. At the bottom of the ranking of belief in fate are Italians (24%), English (25%), Swiss (28%), Germans and French (31%).

Beliefs in the unusual strength *of the evil eye* also achieved significant scores: Latvians and Greeks (66%), followed by Ukrainians (60%), Armenians (50%) and Moldovans (57%). In their turn, Romanians believe in the evils of the evil eye in the percentage of 44%. The ranking of European countries with low scores on the belief in the evil eye is as follows: Sweden and Denmark (9%), Finland (10%), the Netherlands 12%), respectively the United Kingdom, Germany and Austria (13%). Equally high scores were obtained by sociologists in other areas of the world (sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, for example). Why? Because there, as in Eastern Europe, the old, indigenous cultures were particularly strong.

This is explained by the existence of different histories in these areas of the world. In Eastern Europe, for example, Christianity did not have the force of annihilating traditional, pre-Christian cultures, as it happened in Central and Western Europe. In the eastern part of the continent (including Romania) we have not had confessional wars, monastic orders with a missionary role, scholastic disputes, inquisitorial processes or radical attitudes of rejection of popular culture, as it happened in the other part of the continent. Therefore, traditional culture has survived time better, becoming today a very important part of the representation of national identity.

Another indicator of the representation of national identity is *the fact that you were born in your country.* Here, Romanians rank first in Europe considering 88% that "being a good Romanian" implies being born in your country. They are followed by Bulgarians (85%), Hungarians (83%), Poles (82%) and Portuguese (81%). For all of them, being born in your own country is a very important element of your national identity. On the contrary, Swedes (22%), Danes (36%), Norwegians (41%), Dutch (41%) and Germans (48%) are convinced that their national identity is not significantly linked to being born in your own country.

Similarly, *the cult* of family and *ancestors* was another equally important indicator of how Europeans assume their own identity. Thus, in descending order of importance given to the family and cult of ancestors, the European ranking is as follows: Armenians (92%), Georgians (90%), Hungarians (89%), Romanians (87%) and Greeks (85%). Conversely, the European countries that do not significantly link their own identity to the family and the respect given to their forefathers are Sweden (21%), Denmark (35%), the Netherlands (38%), Norway (48%) and Belgium (42%).

In contrast, when we consider the link between speaking the *national language* and identity, the situation is completely different. The top of the association of the national language spoken and one's own identity is no longer dominated by Eastern Europeans. On their first are Hungarians (98%), followed

by Norwegians (97%), Dutch (96%), Portuguese (95%) and Czechs (95%). The countries that achieved the lowest scores on this indicator are Belarus (54%), Ukraine (62%), Moldova (66%), Finland (68%) and Bosnia (69%).

3. Identity crisis and self-escape

Beyond all these sociological considerations, what we can certainly argue is that individual and social identity are subject to permanent challenges today. They are permanently configured and reconfigured. "Identity has become an essential notion for the issues of every individual as well as of society in crisis today; the question of identity fuels a "radical uncertainty over the continuity and solidarity of the self" (Gauchet, 2004, p. 257). (…). To maintain, as an individual, a place of your own in the bosom of social ties involves a strain, an effort" (Le Breton, 2018, p. 11).

At the limit, these social ties can be greatly diminished or even suspended. They end up being weakened during the pandemic crisis, but also after the end of the pandemic. It is not infrequently that we get to communicate with others through the means of new technologies. We graciously avoid communion because we have become accustomed to loneliness. For some of us, it has come to be second nature. Dominated by loneliness we prefer, out of convenience, *contactless interaction.* In the Western world, it has become a real *lifestyle:* "we attend yoga classes through an app on the phone, we "talk" with a robot at customer service, and not with a real person, we attend a religious service live from our own living room or we do our shopping through Amazon Go, the new chain of stores of the tech giant, where you can shop without having direct contact with other people" (Hertz, 2021, p. 19).

This form of limit to contactless human interactions reconfigures our identity. The theme is extensively analyzed in one of his books – *The Escape from Self. A contemporary temptation*– by French sociologist David Le Breton. He observed and finely analyzed a strange contemporary phenomenon: *the self-flight of modern man.* Some of us get tired of being ourselves anymore. We feel through all the pores of our being the desire to "take a well-deserved vacation", as the author says. We escape from ourselves into the anonymity of social decay. According to the expression of David Le Breton, from *the person* we become *the persona*, that is, a mask behind which nothing is hidden. We retreat strategically (not permanently) into a *white space* of detachment from the world. Defining it, David Le Breton associates it with the *wu-wei* principle of Chinese philosophy. It is an attitude of temporary detachment from the world and the desire to let things be, without getting involved in their natural flow.

A sure way to unseal and multiply our identity is that offered by *virtual worlds.* "Entering chats, forums, or online video games and the parallel worlds of the Internet, by multiplying pseudonyms and avatars, is a simple way to free ourselves from identity constraints" (Le Breton, 2018, p. 113). So sometimes identity is felt as a burden from which we want to free ourselves. An easy solution would be to use new technologies and get lost in the magic of virtual

worlds. Here we multiply our existence and build false identities (pseudonyms or avatars), thus trying to live other lives completely different from the real one.

For example, we can give up our real student identity and make a false one, obviously if the technique allows us to disguise it. Behind this virtual mask we can freely relate to anyone in this world: "an engineer from Tokyo, an unemployed man from Berlin, a teenage girl from Oslo and a technician from Vancouver (...)" (Le Breton, 2018, p. 114). Obviously, all of them can also assume false virtual identities. In this case it would be a dialogue of virtual masks worn by those frustrated by their real identity. They may relate wonderfully in their virtual universes, but they may prove to be sociopaths or socially autistic in their real worlds. They can be seduced by the magic of freedom in virtual spaces, without taking on elementary real-world responsibilities. In the latter case, adventurers who betray their identity can build a new *lifestyle* based on the avoidance of social contacts and the absence of natural, human responsibilities.

What is interesting is that these virtually constructed avatars are *ideal expressions* of one's own identity. We don't project ourselves on social media platforms as we are, but the way we want to be. We intensely publicize only our ideal image. In other words, "the life we post online is made up of a carefully selected gallery of happy moments, parties and anniversaries, sunny beaches and dishes that leave our mouths watering" (Hertz, 2021, pp. 139-140). But we all know that the reality is quite different. However, sometimes we go so far as to look like we want to beautify our real face to look as much like our ideal avatar as possible. The FaceTune application from the Apple App Store, for example, allows us to discover a filter "that can smooth the skin, define the cheekbones and enlarge the eyes, thus creating a slightly improved version of our own face, under the appearance of an innocent *selfie*" (Hertz, 2021, p. 141). There are then other digital editing programs, writes Noreena Hertz, which improve our face by "brightening our complexion, elongating our jaw line and thus thinning our cheeks, whitening our teeth, redrawing our nose, contour and width of our face" (Hertz, 2021, p. 142). With this image of his own manifestly improved face we go to a plastic surgeon and ask him to reshape our face to resemble our ideal avatar.

4. Reconstruction of identity by identification with religious otherness

Another method frequently assumed, especially by young people, of reinventing identity is the *religious* one. "Adherence to one religious group is a renunciation of the constraints of identity, a retreat into the other. The sect (or fundamentalist group in any other aspect) severs any connection with the world, establishing its own dimension of self-proclaimed transcendence in order to move geographically or symbolically away from an impure, pagan or devoid of self-consciousness humanity. With its flat convictions presented as sacred truths, with its rigid hierarchy, it eliminates the infinite complexity of the world. It is intended to be totalizing, if not totalitarian in its actions. It simplifies the world to the

extreme around a few elementary truths and specific ways of functioning, finally offering a lot of trouble" (Le Breton, 2018, 127).

In this situation, the one in which the young man in crisis withdraws is another *collective one.* Otherness is the social group, more precisely the sect or the fundamentalist group. Both hypostases of saving otherness are extreme versions of religious fact. More precisely, they internalize the absolute and absolutize certain values and social behaviors. This religious offer is doubled by an extreme negativization of the Other. The other – the world, the society – are seen as hypostases of the ultimate, total human degradation. The salvation of the one in identity crisis comes from the full renunciation of the old world and the sincere assumption of the new religious path.

In conclusion, the one in an identity crisis finds in the offer of the radical religious movement to which he adheres "a secure limit, a precise container to find his landmarks, an ideology to build a place under the sun and finally feel a development of the sense of his own existence. Palliative for an unbearable depressive feeling, it gives at first simple and firm answers to the great questions of existence, where our societies have lost some of their anthropological orientation, exposing the individual to an unlimited freedom, but difficult to assume (Le Breton, 2018, p. 129).

There are also different situations in which identity adherence to a religious group is made as a result of the discovery of a *religious vocation of a devotional type.* This is also the case for ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel and other parts of the world. From a clothing point of view, they are easily recognizable: they wear black hats with wide brims, long cloaks and white shirts. Today, ultra-Orthodox Jews "make up about 12% of Israel's population, a percentage that is likely to increase to 16% by 2030" (Hertz, 2021, p. 29). Although they have an unhealthy lifestyle (food with butter, fat and sugar) and modest incomes (54% of them live below the poverty level), they still have a life expectancy above the average in Israel.

How is this explained? Noreena Hertz resorts to a study and explains the increased longevity of ultra-Orthodox Jews through "*participation in* religious services" (Hertz, 2021, p. 31). This would "increase life expectancy by up to seven years" (Hertz, 2021, p 31). With honesty, Noreena Hertz invokes other studies that explain the longer life that most ultra-Orthodox Jews live by their intense *religious faith.* I personally credit the second explanation. Religious faith can often work wonders, while mere participation in a religious event or intense community life (close family and collective ties) are not enough to achieve *well-being*, so necessary to increase life expectancy.

5. Conclusions

The issue of identity is a complex and susceptible to multiple interpretations. I had in mind the thesis that the individual/social identity is, above all, the result of our own choices. We have at our disposal an infinite identity spectrum and we are destined to choose and update several aspects of

our identity. Some of them can also be captured by sociological field research. We presented the results of such a complex research conducted in Europe by the Pew Research Center.

In view of the fact that the pillars of national identity are still to be found today in the European social mindset, we must take into account the challenges of today's world in regards to identity. Some of these relate to the escape from oneself and the flight into the white space of virtual worlds created by new technologies. Other challenges concern the reconfiguration of identity as a result of religious reconversion and identification with radical religious movements or classical denominations.

To all these diseases we can think and announce certain solutions. In order to avoid escaping from himself, David Le Breton proposed walking, sports, trips, trips, hiking, meetings with friends at the seaside or in the mountains, temporary retreat to the house of parents / grandparents, discreet living for a while at the monastery, reading, writing, listening to one's favorite music, meditation, sleep, long distance driving, etc. In other words, we all frequently feel the need to escape to a special space of a comforting silence and the dreamy bliss. This place is a kind of *intermundium* between the social world and nothingness. It is a form of suspension of life and an imitation of death. This is precisely what we have all deepened during the pandemic crisis. This beneficial and comforting retreat and we will practice therapeutically throughout our entire life.

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