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DIGITAL IDENTITY

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Abstract
The text aims to bring forward a topical issue, that of *digital identity*. Based on a series of international discussions (Davos Forum, EU) but also in the context of recent announcements in the field of new technologies (the announcement made by M. Zuckerberg on the *metaverse*), I proposed a socio-anthropological approach of the identity phenomenon today. At least in the documents consulted, the *classic social identity* is doubled by a *virtual social identity* and the latter has different names: *digital wallet, Good Health Pass, global identity*. From a phenomenological perspective and placed in the context of the distinction between utopia and heterotopia (M. Foucault) we can say that digital identity is revealed to us as a heterotopic identity that places our entire system of perception and identity construction in a new paradigm.

Keywords: digital identity, global identity, heterotopia, metaves

Resumé
Le texte vise à attirer l'attention sur une question d'actualité, celle de *l'identité numérique*. Sur la base d'une série de discussions internationales (Forum de Davos, UE) mais aussi dans le cadre d'annonces récentes dans le domaine des nouvelles technologies (l'annonce faite par M. Zuckerberg sur le métavers), j'ai proposé une approche socio-anthropologique de la phénomène identitaire aujourd'hui. Au moins dans les documents consultés, *l'identité sociale* classique est doublée d'une *identité sociale virtuelle* et cette dernière porte des noms différents: *porte-monnaie numérique, Good Health Pass, identité globale*. D'un point de vue phénoménologique et replacé dans le contexte de la distinction entre *utopie* et *hétérotopie* (M. Foucault) on peut dire que l'identité numérique se révèle à nous comme une *identité hétérotopique* qui place dans un nouveau paradigme tout notre système de perception et de construction identitaire.

Mots-clés: identité numérique, identité globale, hétérotopie, métaves

Rezumat
Textul îşi propune să aducă în atenţie o o temă de mare actualitate, cea a *identităţii digitale*. Plecând de la o serie de discuţii purtate la nivel internaţional (Forumul de la Davos, UE) dar şi în contextul recentelor anunţuri din sfera noilor tehnologii (anunţul făcut de M. Zuckerberg privind metaversul), am propus o abordare socio-antropologică a fenomenului identitar azi. Cel puţin la nivelul documentelor consultate, *identitatea socială* clasică este dublată de o identitate socială virtuală iar aceasta din urmă poartă diferite nume: *portofel digital*, *Good Health Pass*, *identitate globală*. Din perspectivă fenomenologică şi plasată în contextul distincţiei dintre *utopie* şi *heterotopie* (M. Foucault)

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putem spune că identitatea digitală ni se dezvăluie ca o *identitate heterotopică* ce plasează într-o nouă paradigmă întregul nostru sistem de percepție și construcție identitară.

Cuvinte cheie: identitate digitală, identitate globală, heterotopie, metaves

1. Preamble

At the end of January, 2021, the Davos Economic Forum was held for a week in Switzerland, its theme bearing a suggestive title: "The Davos Agenda", whose motto "The Great Reset" was announced before an editorial appearance by Klaus Schwab (Sckwab & Malleret, 2020). An article by Dani Rockhoff (2021), covered by the well-known news agency Hotnews of January 30, captures some of the topics debated at this meeting by the most important leaders of the world: global challenges, climate change, the inclusive world of the future, the fourth industrial revolution, etc. The author of the article, however, insists on some of the accents present in the speech of the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel and the host of Davos, Klaus Schwab. In the exchanges of ideas between the two, we identify a few sub-parts that need to be remembered: the "windows of opportunity" offered by the pandemic, the "capitalism of stakeholders", and "the merging of physical and digital identity". All this would be the starting point for the founder of the Davos Forum, Klaus Schwab, the starting point of the Fourth Industrial Revolution that will change the world thanks to digital innovation and artificial intelligence.

Another more recent event, covered by all news agencies in the world was the announcement launched by Mark Zuckerberg at the end of October 2021, the one regarding an ambitious *project Metaverse*, a new concept through which the internet becomes something organic. The man is no longer a spectator in front of a screen and becomes an integrated actor, engaged in virtual reality.

"The idea itself of Metaverse signifies that an increasing part of life, work, leisure, wealth, happiness and relationships will be lived within virtual worlds rather than just being expanded or aided by digital devices and software," Matthew Ball said in a commentary to the Washington Post. In fact, an erasure of the boundaries of reality and the expansion of identity into a whole series of avatars and alternative virtual worlds is at stake.

Both events, although coming from totally different directions, one from the area of leaders and decision-makers worldwide and the other from the private area and new communication technologies, draw attention by having as a focal point the idea of change with direct reference to the concept of identity. The two examples have as their main topic man and technology. If, in the first case, human identity expands in the virtual space of technology, in the second case things take a different course, opposite to the first one: the virtual space becomes organic, invading the physical space. The two perspectives announce major changes and are placed by a whole series of authors, journalists and analysts either under the sign of conspiracy theories, or likened to a utopian project, or in the category of a global attempt to get the world out of the crisis. The question

justifiably arises: Under the given circumstances, how is human identity reconfigured at the encounter with artificial intelligence?

2. Digital identity and identity

Etymologically, the concept of identity comes from the Latin *idem* (the same) and designates "the ability of an individual or group to self-know and be recognized by others" (Borlandi, Boudon, Cherkaoui & Valade, 2009, p. 357) Today, it is defined somewhat more technically: a "data sheet by which a person is identified" (Dexonline, n.d.). It basically eliminates that part of identity that derives from human interaction, perception and mutual exchange. However, our daily experiences show us that, in fact, we operate with several types of identities. In relation to the state and its institutions, we often assume an official identity by presenting an identity card. In relation to others we run a series of identities that encompass our social roles and a complex individual and social system of recognition.

From a sociological point of view, the issue of identity has taken a much more complex approach. H.C. Cooley (1902) launches the concept of *looking-glass self* to show that a person's identity cannot ignore the social and that between the two there is a permanent reciprocity. Both support and feed each other. For his part, G.H. Mead points out that "the self is a product by social essence" (Borlandi, Boudon, Cherkaoui & Valade, 2009, p. 357). For him, the relationship of identity with society is one of an integrative type, the individual being able to connect singular roles in a unitary Self *(the generalized Other).*

Therefore, identity is not just presented as an official formula, compressed into an identity card. It represents an accumulation of personal and social data, which are in a permanent negotiation process with a strong symbolic imprint and which, ultimately, can be expressed through clear language and categories. The data that enters this complex existential equation of identity can be of a biological, psychic, ethnic, racial, religious, economic, statutory, professional, professional, health nature, etc. All of them express our uniqueness but also our belonging to a certain social category. Therefore, the individual is not and cannot be regarded as an atom, an isolated ins and his identity involves a complex process of *identification* and *individuation.* (Tap, 1986; Sciolla, 2000).

The development of technology and the democratization of access to it has led to the use of a new concept, that of *digitized identity.* Although new, it refers to the idea of *virtual social identity*, used in sociology by E. Goffman (1963). For the well-known sociologist it has a strong, symbolic component. Together with *real social identities,* it forms the general picture of identity that, in Goffman's view, multiplies, diversifies and can have a provisional or experimental character according to the social scenes on which we evolve and according to a series of instances and symbolic elaborations of identity boundaries. This extremely versatile and flexible identity with which we operate on the stage of social life cannot be perceived by the current technological means. Today, in the digital world, identity appears rather as an authentication process. The processes used

are of the most diverse: from typing passwords or control questions to scanning documents or biometric data.

However, digital identity, as it is currently configured, is intended to be more than just a simple or even a more complex identity verification algorithm. At the moment, worldwide, this virtual identity bears different names: *digital wallet* in EU documents or Good *Health Pass* within id Alliance 2020. This founding member of the ID 2020 alliance is Microsoft, Gavi The Vaccine Alliance, Accenture, Ideo.org, Rokheffeler Foundation and brings together a large number of partners such as: Facebook, Mastercard, Grameen Foundation, International Computer Center, National Cybersecurity Center, Tech (5) Technology for inclusion etc. The projects already carried out and the upcoming projections for 2025 and 2030 announce rather the idea of *global identity* mediated and instrumented by new technologies.

Returning to the examples from which we started in this article, we can say that we distinguish two great meanings regarding digital identity.

First of all, it is designed as a digital transfer formula and management in this environment of our identity brands: identity card, bank cards, signature, personal data of all kinds, health card, documents, certificates, etc. At the limit, everything that defines us socially could be transferred to the digital universe. Considering this, digital identity bears the imprint of a need to keep up with technology and its pervading into the most varied sectors of social life. Therefore, digital identity is configured as a tool and undoubtedly has a *utilitarian character*. In her State of the European Union address on September 16, 2020, Ursula von der Leyen said: "Every time an app or website asks us to create a new digital identity or easily connect through a large platform, in reality we have no idea what is happening with our data. For this reason, the Commission will soon propose a secure European electronic identity. An identity that we trust and that any citizen can use all over Europe for any operation, from paying taxes to renting a bicycle. A technology in which we can control for ourselves what data is used and how it is used" (European digital identity, n.d.).

All official materials insist on this utilitarian aspect. Among the most important facilities evoked regarding digital identity are:

- It poses less risk of error in document control and identification than traditional, man-made methods. This would reduce the risks of forgery of documents and considerably reduce errors in identification.
- It facilitates access to various public services. The use of electronic documents and electronic signatures reduces bureaucracy, eliminates the time spent accessing some services and reduces the costs of data management and the process of identification (McKinsey Global Institute ,2019). In addition, the utility extends to more efficient monitoring of transactions.
- They have cross-border validity. On the official website of the European *Commission, the digital wallet* is a project that expresses the European digital identity. It is a necessity for the Brusseles officials because,

according to the eurobarometer statistics invoked, "only 14% of the providers of essential public services in all member states allow cross-border authentication" while 72% of users want to know how their data is processed and 63% of European Union citizens want a single digital means to be able to identify themselves (European digital identity, n.d.).

- It facilitates the realization of transactions from the payment of the partitions to important purchases, rentals, taxes, duties, etc.
- It is an accessible means of storing, confirming and using information to confirm a particular right (right of residence, work, study, health, travel, etc.)
- You can always and anywhere prove certain characteristics related to identity (age, profession, domicile, state of health, quality of insured, etc.)

Of course, these facilities are accompanied by a number of limits. Some are also highlighted in the European documents and others appear in the form of perplexities and questions that sprout in everyone's mind as a natural consequence of this challenge that the new technology brings:

- The vulnerability of digital systems and the danger of identity theft.
- Technological limitations present in certain regions of the world. Not everyone has access to a computer, and not in all areas internet access is possible:
- The refusal of the population to use this identification tool. The causes may be of the most diverse from the inability of the population to use the new technology (digital illiteracy) to the distrust of the safety systems offered by the system.
- Questions arise regarding data management and security in relation to the operators who are sitting behind the system.
- Energy crises or device power problems that would make it impossible to use data and could practically block people, groups, regions, etc.
- Increased control and limitation of freedom.
- They can be a lever to achieve abuses by the state or other entities in relation to citizens by favouring constraints and limitations.

Secondly, digital identity, beyond the management of personal data, tries to extend into the area of the symbolic, that of the social and the subtle mechanisms of producing our identities. We are witnessing, from a social level, a permanent construction and reconstruction of the concept of social identity. It is always invested with new meanings, while representations and values of the most diverse are weaved around it. Thus, technology interposes itself in the interactions between people, mediates them and generates in turn new categories such as: digital citizens / nondigital citizens; desirable citizens/ undesirable citizens;trusted citizens / citizens with a low level of trust; connoisseurs/ ignorant, etc. Depending on these categories, different levels of social accessibility can be created, implicitly generating a series of symbolic categories.

This can obviously influence our behaviors, attitudes and interactions with others and our association.

On the other hand, our symbolic universe is not only formed in the daily interactions, technologically mediated or not. They have a much more subtle anchoring in our inner universe. The imaginary, the phantasms, the archetypes or other raw data that haunts through the hidden corners of our being sketches us an identity profile. It is not measurable and quantifiable, but it is equally important. It shapes our beliefs, attitudes, representations, judgments, behaviors, ideals and mode of action and defines us as unique, unrepeatable beings. Or, from this perspective, the metaverse configured by the owner of Facebook is nothing more than a formula to connect technology to this inner symbolic universe that we are not fully aware of, but which represents that subtle ingredient that makes us unique in the way we think and act.

The accessibility of this inner universe, thanks to technology, is tantamount to a process of unveiling in the sense *of devouring* and not *asking* the imaginary (Culianu, 2015). Technology is one of the important brands of modernity and besides its undeniable benefits, it has also led to a disenchantment of the world (Weber, 1971 p. 270). In a similar register, new technologies have every chance to unveil the human being through accessibility of this fantastic inner world. The virtual worlds of the metaverse in which we can practice our freedom unhindered, in fact, access this inner symbolic universe and exploit it to the fullest. The status of master in your own virtually created world can reveal a multitude of symbolic fabrics and unravel the mystery of human being and identity. Man becomes an open book, easy to decipher and intuit, a certain ins in a place without place. The paradox of new technologies is that they can make our dreams become that way, but they can also drain us of them.

3. Digital heterotopia and identity without place

What has been presented so far indicates that the identity of the individual expands in the digital world encompassing a multitude of personal data and information (from age, home, tax data, professional data to financial or health data) taking over the symbolic and imaginary universe step by step. At the limit, one can imagine a digital identity in which man makes a common body with technology, merging into a hybrid identity of transhuman type (Gavriluță, 2018; Gavriluţă, Bănescu, 2019).

However, beyond these imaginary projections regarding a possible future of digital identity, we cannot fail to notice that our encounter with technology lies under the spectre *of canceling boundaries and borders*. It is a cancellation that takes place on several levels:

- It transgresses territorial and administrative boundaries and from this point of view one can speak of a global identity;
- It had crossed the barriers between the inner and outer universes, between the social I and the inner I, between the visible and the invisible;

- Transgresses the limits of intimacy and sociability
- It's pulling the boundaries of human nature when it comes to a fusion with technology.

This deterioration of its identity and boundlessness makes it a *fluid construction* (Bauman, 2000), hardly definable and somewhat paradoxical. We are everything and nothing, from everywhere and from nowhere. Such an interpretation refers to the writings of Michel Foucault that distinguishes between *utopia* and *heterotopy*. For the well-known French philosopher, *heterotopias* represent "a kind of utopias actually performed within which all the other real sites that we can actually find inside a culture are at the same time represented, challenged and reversed, a kind of places that are beyond place" (Foucault, 2004, p. 15). The digital world is a current hypostasis of heterotopia. It's a non-place. The fact is verifiable by reference to each principle of operation of heterotopia.

- Heterotopia is specific to all cultures, being a constant of human groups. If primitive populations have created their own heterotopies reserved for sacred spaces accompanied by taboos and prohibitions, in our country, contemporary virtual worlds can function as veritable spaces with their own rules and prohibitions. Access is limited by IDs, passwords and identification manners. There are security areas where only the chosen ones have access, like sacred spaces. As in the real world, our digital identities only allow us to access certain spaces, others being forbidden, inaccessible.
- Heterotopia has an accurate functionality determined by society and the culture within which it operates. If utopia is a "location without a real place", an ideal projection in relation to something real, heterotopia, however, can superimpose on a real space several spaces incompatible with each other. The metaphor of the mirror in which both the virtuality and the reality of our image overlap easily supports an analogy with any digital identity tool: it reflects a reality (visible or less visible) through a virtual projection.
- Another principle that lies in the functioning of heterotopy is to superimpose several spaces or locations incompatible with each other. Everything is like in a play where different spaces are superimposed. The same spatial condensation is found in the digital world where we can visit museums, work, attend a conference, attend concerts in different areas of the world, shop at virtual stores, etc. Concepts such as teleworking, telemedicine, teleschool have become increasingly common. The virtual space has a great versatility in terms of spatial composition of the world and its accessibility. Any place and any experience related to that place is a click away. Our identity experiences related to different spaces and roles end up being transferred little by little into the virtual universe.
- Heterotopias perform time clippings. They concentrate not only spaces but also various time sequences. They are like a library that, thanks to books,

allow access to multiple temporal universes, focusing materially in a seemingly continuous but sequenced present, the past, the present and an imagined future. The same goes for the digital world. Thanks to new technologies we can come into contact with different temporal expressions from the existence of the world and individual. They can preserve different temporal landmarks of our identity by making up collages with sequences from childhood, adolescence, adult life, etc.

- A final principle of operation of a heterotopia is that it has a system of inputs and outputs that are both isolated and awkward. A heterotopy is out of reach of anyone. An initiation is required, a set of rituals. In the case of the digital world it is totally inaccessible to the digitally illiterate. Then there are different levels of accessibility: for regular users, for specialists, for data management, for simple consumption. And our virtual identities do not have unlimited accessibility. There are access keys, controlled inputs and outputs, as is foreshadowed in the case of the digital wallet.

In essence, as heterotopias present themselves, they present themselves as a space of illusions that are intended to be real through the cutouts they concentrate and their functioning. It is what the French anthropologist Marc Augé called in being the reality of fiction and the fictionalization of reality (Augé, 1997). The virtual world wants a recomposing of the real world in the technological space by concentrating space-time fragments and generating a certain regime of accessibility and functioning. It is, of course, intended to be a perfect, flawless world from which all bureaucratic or operating impediments and all limitations of the real world are removed.

And in terms of how to generate a digital identity, the algorithm is respected. Spatio-temporal landmarks are defining. Socio-demographic, financial, material data, health and medical status data, educational, professional data, etc. are put to the date. At the limit, such an identity can extend to the area of the imaginary, the phantasms. They can manifest freely, unhindered in a metaverse that also brings out the hidden and deep dimension of one's own identity. Everything is like a play that compresses on the space of a vast virtual scene different situations, roles, aspects that characterize episodes of a man's life in a single and defining identity. Space-time experiences, visible, as well as less visible ones, can be merged into a comprehensive digital ID.

To a certain extent, things are the same in real life. We are the sum of all our interactions, actions, thoughts and beliefs, roles that we perform in our daily lives. However, judging a person by such an overlap of scenes and roles can be risky. We forget that human nature is much more complex than it reveals itself. There is a social self *(social identity)* and a deep one *(deep, spiritual identity)*, which is harder to capture. For example, the studies conducted by Bargh (2002) attest that virtual space facilitates the expression *of the real Self* when the person is not part of the circle of offline relationships. As relationships with new people crystallize, the Self begins to idealize itself. Basically, under the protection of

anonymity, the Self reveals itself differently and metamorphoses as soon as the idea of a social relationship enters the equation. In sociology, the fact was excellently explained by sociologist E. Goffman (1959) through his dramaturgical model. The real self and the social self are in a permanent negotiation mediated by the nature of human interactions and the social scenes on which it evolves.

In a contemporary heterotopic digital paradigm, we risk forgetting that theatre involves assuming roles and masks, permanent mechanisms for negotiating and reconfiguring identity. Beyond digitally and socially managed identities, there is a wealth of data that expresses the uniqueness of each person and his or her own way of being in the world.

The claim of reconfiguring a complete identity, perfectly functional in the virtual space, an identity that becomes a business card in our real everyday experiences, may seem like an administratively justified enterprise. But it carries some risks. One of them, however, also belongs to the hegemonic temptation of new technologies that want to transfer reality to the virtual world. Thus, a virtual identity tends to turn into a real one precisely by virtue of the operating algorithm and its usefulness. We say today that if you don't have an account on social media, you don't exist. To the same extent we can imagine a world where if you don't have a digital identity, you don't exist. In this logic, what matters can be the data stored in the virtual world, emptying the identity of its own reality. Living interactions and everyday actions are diluted, liquefied (Bauman, 2000) and the ineffable of spiritual experiences or those with deep symbolic connotations is lost in the magic of virtual worlds. The real world is unearthed (Weber, 1971) over and over again. It was suggestively called postsecular, carrying on its shoulders the *burden of its own self-determination* and aspirations (Baconschi, 2010). In such a context, the image and the ID take the place of the person who then virtualizes oneself. By depersonalizing reality, new technologies recompose a new register of reality in which the living experience is canceled, the subtle area of spiritual experiences is also lived. Although it reveals itself to us as a highly tender space, the digital universe ultimately offers a closed algorithmized experience, marked by operating rules, security and control filters. A digital fortress (Brown, 2013) that closes us in the formalism of algorithmized and depersonalized experiences despite, unlimited promises of exploration and identification.

Although heterotopies are not a novelty in human existence, in the current conditions they present themselves in a totally novel context, mediated by new technologies and artificial intelligence. From a scientific point of view and social-human assumption, this is a real challenge. The discourse is not focused simply on a trivial instrument and its usefulness, but rather on the social, political, legal, anthropological and cultural implications of an identity present beyond the reality. Time will decide whether the burden of our ambitions and creations is a bearable one or not. It will also decide whether we will be able to fill the new identity formulas with a deep and authentic meaning.

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