

DOI: 10.47743/ASAS-2021-2-655

“I AM LARGE, I CONTAIN MULTITUDES”: IDENTITY, ALTERITY AND THE TRANSITIONAL SELF

GABRIELA IOANA MOCAN¹

Abstract

What is identity and what makes us be who we are? The concept of identity has changed considerably over the past century, the subject finding itself at the intersection of nation, gender, the rise of multiculturalism and colonial history. While we are born with no self-awareness and our first point of reference is the world outside us, navigating existence involves a constant self-analysis and the realisation that any attempt at defining ourselves will result in newer interrogations. Aiming to provide some guidance to this relentless quest by introducing few of the key concepts used in identity research, the present paper addresses the fluidity of the self by focusing on the identity-alterity nexus and by prioritising the ‘becoming’ over the ‘being’. Identity is, thus, always shifting and never a given; it is a transitional process oscillating between self-identification and identification made by the others, a puzzle whose interlocked pieces can be moved around and change in meaning.

Keywords: identity and alterity, self-presentation, external evaluation, belonging, alter-ego, becoming.

Résumé

Qu'est-ce que l'identité et qu'est-ce qui fait de nous qui nous sommes? Le concept d'identité a considérablement changé au cours du siècle dernier, le sujet se trouvant à l'intersection de la nation, du genre, de la montée du multiculturalisme et de l'histoire coloniale. Alors que nous sommes nés sans conscience de soi et que notre premier point de référence est le monde extérieur à nous, naviguer dans l'existence implique une auto-analyse constante et la prise de conscience que toute tentative de nous définir entraînera de nouvelles interrogations. Visant à fournir quelques conseils à cette quête incessante en introduisant quelques-uns des concepts clés utilisés dans la recherche sur l'identité, le présent article aborde la fluidité du soi en se concentrant sur le lien identité-altérité et en donnant la priorité au « devenir » sur le 'être'. L'identité est donc toujours mouvante et jamais donnée ; c'est un processus de transition oscillant entre l'auto-identification et l'identification faite par les autres, un puzzle dont les pièces imbriquées peuvent être déplacées et changer de sens.

Mots-clés : identité et altérité, présentation de soi, évaluation externe, appartenance, alter-ego, devenir.

¹ Dr. Gabriela Mocan, Assistant Lecturer. Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Babeș-Bolyai University. Cluj Napoca, email: gabriela.mocan@econ.ubbcluj.ro.

Rezumat

Ce este identitatea și ce ne face să fim ceea ce suntem? Conceptul de identitate s-a schimbat considerabil de-a lungul secolului trecut, subiectul aflându-se la intersecția dintre națiune, gen, ascensiunea multiculturalismului și istoria colonială. Deși ne naștem fără conștiință de sine și primul nostru punct de referință este lumea din afara noastră, navigarea existenței implică o autoanaliză constantă și conștientizarea că orice încercare de a ne defini va avea ca rezultat interogații mai noi. Cu scopul de a oferi o îndrumare acestei căutări neobosite prin introducerea câtorva dintre conceptele cheie utilizate în cercetarea identității, prezenta lucrare abordează fluiditatea sinelui concentrându-se pe legătura identitate-alteritate și prin prioritizarea “devenirii” față de “ființă”. Identitatea este, astfel, mereu în schimbare și niciodată un dat; este un proces de tranziție care oscilează între autoidentificare și identificarea făcută de ceilalți, un puzzle ale cărui piese interconectate pot fi mutate și se pot schimba în sen

Cuvinte cheie: identitate și alteritate, autoprezentare, evaluare externă, apartenență, alter-ego, devenire.

1. Introduction

Far from the ages in which ‘roles’ were distributed on a social level, for they were assumed in a natural manner by the individuals who seldom had the chance to question them, a rather heavy task lies before contemporary man: he must face the toil resulting in the demarcation of his place in the world. While, in the past, society provided the individual with substantial identity references that he himself assumed rather unconsciously, contemporary times are less generous in this respect, leaving him to come up with the answer to the burning question of “Who am I?” himself.

Much too often, we are defined by ascribed identities that confine us to categories established and used by those around us. We are witnessing a shift from the collective individual to the self-focused individual, from a holistic conception of identity to one that is highly individualized. This, of course, does not mean the individual is completely disconnected from his surroundings; instead, identity can equally be defined as that part of the self-concept derived from the awareness of belonging to one or more groups or social categories (Tajfel, 1978). Belonging to a group may have positive or negative connotations, depending on social comparison: the mere need of positive evolution of the self equals the need to belong to groups evaluated positively in relation with other groups. Identity is thus portrayed as a concept that takes into account both the individual conscience and the social experience of the person, integrating it into a psychosocial context.

Coming back to this significant paradigm shift that marks the transition from a time when a person’s identity was assigned from the outside to one in which its definition is assumed individually, we can safely state that these are the times when individuals must embark on a journey of ceaseless life examination. This self-quest is certainly identifiable throughout the entire history of mankind; however, what makes it into a significant trait of the 20th century is its generalization, the fact that during this period it has manifested itself in the form

of social conformity. In this century, finding one's self becomes an obligation that seems to function on a large scale, targeting everyone, beyond any individual trait (social origin, age, profession, etc.). The 20th century is thus the period in which a key role has been assigned to the individual in defining his own identity, which has become almost exclusively the result of an individual endeavour.

The powerful doubts cast by the 20th century over one's identity become an obvious and indisputable explanation for the massively increased number of autobiographical writings. We do not merely refer here to the productions that aspire to belong to the realm of literature, but to attempts of identity clarification through in extenso writing. This phenomenon, observed and analyzed by all of the humanities confirms identity confusion as a defining trait of this century, and all those who lay down their life story on paper are haunted by the anxiety, confusion or frustration they hope to tame through writing. Their ordeal will be appeased in finding a satisfactory answer – through writing – to the burning question related to who they actually are. We believe, therefore, that any form of autobiography, whether written or oral, originates from the impossibility of the seeker to provide a clear and satisfactory answer to this question. Identity itself is neither a fixed formula, nor a presumed good, and the challenge of the search bears higher value than the spreading of certain convictions for one's self and for others.

Another variable that occurs when outlining identity is represented by the perception of permeability or non-permeability of the reference group so that the perception of border permeability leads to individual strategies, whereas border impermeability leads to group strategies. Also, the individual's encounter with a multicultural context requires a re-signification and the development of strategies to clear up the confusion implied by the different reference codes. These situations, whose essential characteristic is the symbolic relationship between identity and alterity, often socially compare groups considered unequal from the point of view of a criterion perceived as important at that moment (minority-majority relations, situations of immigration or integration in a wider geopolitical framework which requires the fulfilment of certain conditions).

According to existential theories, identity is "founded on the belief in 'essences', in essential realities, in substances both immutable and originary" (Dubar, 2003, p. 7), it is immutable reality, essence outside time limits, it is permanence in time. From an ontological perspective, the logic of categories and genres orders the permanence of empirical beings through the identical essence (eidos). Ipseity (the specific difference) conceives the differentiation from the other essences with a view to defining the specificity of the essence. In contrast to Heraclitus's theory, which states that there are no permanent essences (pantarhei - everything flows), Dubar asserts that "identity is not something that remains necessarily 'identical', but rather the result of a contingent 'identification'. It is the result of a double language operation: differentiation and generalization" (Dubar, 2003, p. 9). In other words, singularity signifies difference.

2. Negotiating Oneself as Another

Starting with prehistoric times, man distinguished between body and soul, between I and the other (identity and alterity), even if relatively instinctually and not through complex mental processes. People disguised themselves as animals, dressed in animal skins, wore masks and imitated animal movements and cries. The mask now plays an important role in determining the distance from and closeness to others and it will continue to be used without a doubt. On the world's great theater stages the mask represents a mode of manifestation of the universal self. Generally speaking, it does not alter the personality of the wearer, which means that the self is immutable, unaffected by its accidental manifestations. This, however, is only an appearance, since the change imposed by the actor's adaptation to the role, through his identification with the divinity he imitates, is the very purpose of the performance. "I call it the mimetic faculty, the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other" (Taussig, 1993, p. 235).

Identity negotiation is often performed behind masks, and in a confusion of roles: author-actor-character. Putting on a mask is one of the means of signaling a certain identity or any changes that might occur to it. For renowned anthropologist Donald Pollock (1995), masks are not simple images or direct representations of the objects or beings they portray, but rather symbols and identity clues. Masks represent only one of the countless semiotic systems, which are linked together by their conventional use in disguising, transforming, or displaying a certain identity. According to Taussig's theory, there is no identity, only masks of appearance, "longings lounging in the interstices of quaint necessities [...] nevertheless the masks of appearances do more than suffice. They are an absolute necessity" (1993, p. 254). By imitating the other and abandoning my own identity, I become the desire to be another, a social construct.

Notions such as 'internal' vs 'social' or 'personal self' vs 'collective self' explain the so-called interactive performances in which the individual manifests certain aspects of his identity, according to a particular context. In this respect, what people convey to others does not necessarily coincide with their self-perception. Freud (1960), with his famous distinction between the ego (self-in-the-world) and id (self), along with Snyder (1974) and Goffman (1956), are but a few of the advocates of a fragmented self, of the division of the individual and of the struggle between self-identification and the identification made by others. And it is this very struggle that leads contemporary man to move beyond boundaries that remain fluid, difficult to define and constantly reconstructed within specific social, economic or geo-political contexts (Baumann, 1996, 1997).

In contrast, in interacting with others, individuals communicate aspects of their self through a series of signals that others need to learn how to read and evaluate. The negotiation between self-presentation and external evaluation can be viewed as a performance that helps in the construction of the individual's social identity. While the internal identity is constructed and maintained in its

entirety by the individual, social identity is perceived externally, based not on intentions, but on expression and the manner in which an individual's presentation is perceived.

Taken together, similarity and difference are the two dynamic principles of identity, the core of social life. Inside a group each individual opens up toward the other (both consciously and unconsciously) in order to get to know himself. Identity therefore involves a process of constant communication: putting myself together with the beings of others. I am what I am (myself) only in contrast with another. Through reflection I draw my individuality. Accordingly, the environment plays an essential part in the production and perception of social identities, the public version of the self being influenced by the internalized version, which in turn evolves based on the individual's experiences. The more an experience incites the notion of self for an individual in relation to society, the greater its impact on his identity will be.

3. Identity and Alterity: towards a Fluid Self

Identity is permanently constructed on the basis of the I-alter relationship dynamics, both at an individual level and at a group level. With a view to this, we can outline two dimensions related to the way in which identity interacts with its surroundings: an objective dimension that refers to the way in which privileged identity carriers shift when the context changes and a subjective dimension pointing to the way in which individuals see themselves or the group they belong to. At this level, the identity-alterity relationship takes centre stage through representations of all that unites or all that differentiates individuals or groups from one another. Identity is, thus, constructed by means of a 'reaction', either to distance itself from the image the other has about him/ herself or to conform to it (Camilleri, 1990). Ultimately, identity is an individual reality, pervaded by personal meanings (Zavalloni, 1984).

The opposition between identity and alterity dominates the threefold structure of a person, alterity itself being divided into complementary alterity (you) and absolute alterity (him). We refer here to the transposition of the self into another soul, even to a personality split, an apparent hypertrophy of the 'I', an 'I' that nevertheless paradoxically extends into alters of ipseity by successive reflections. However, these 'dissipations' take it constantly further apart from its particular self. Therefore, the connection put forth as a reference point in the title of this endeavour is not a dialectic antinomy – identity vs alterity – for it becomes identity and alterity, or better yet both identity and alterity at the same time. We live in a postmodern world that alters the border of our social self and that exposes our identity within the paradoxical “I am another”. Identity is exposed in a double sense: it is firstly displayed, (ex)posed, as a series, image, representation, affiliation, but always as individual or collective memory, then exposed to the danger of being disbanded.

Alterity represents the belonging to the same class, paradox of identity, unique and divided, singularity and belonging: “There is no identity without

alterity” (Dubar, 2003). There are two types of identification: identity for the other (created by the others) and identity for oneself (created by one’s self). The two do not necessarily need to coincide. They will only coincide when “a human being internalizes their belonging inherited and defined by the others as the only possible or even imaginable” (Dubar, 2003, p. 10). Otherness is, hence, “necessary to the constitution of identity and its world. At the same time otherness resists categories that tend to limit it, or eliminate it altogether, subject it to the identity of the same. Otherness obstacles integrity, compact identity, the monologic totality” (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2019, p. 48).

The alter and the self maintain a symbolic relationships of identification or of positive /negative differentiation. These relations and symbolic reactions actually constitute a preview of the behaviours required by the external environment so that, upon meeting other people, an individual thinks and acts by duplicating the imaginary relationships he cultivates with alter on a symbolic level. Extreme behaviour is an extension of mental attitudes and representations, as an expression of each individual’s psychosocial identity (Zavalloni, 1984). An individual’s discriminatory behaviour stems from an alter representation focused on a polarized egomorphism: positive for the self, negative for the alter.

Overall, one person’s representational framework stands at the intersection of the ‘identity axis’ (self-other) with the ‘affectivity axis’ (positive-negative). In order to highlight this and starting from a representational perspective of identity, Zavalloni (1984) distinguishes between four quadrants: the positive pole of the self, the positive pole of the alter, the negative pole of the self, the negative pole of the alter. In accordance with this theoretical framework, social reality exists in representation, being the result of cognitive and affective mechanisms that distill information. Hence, social perception becomes the main instrument in constructing the social world, construction that triggers individuals’ behaviour and determines the evolution of groups and individuals.

The alter-ego resulted from the splitting of the self, which involves being aware of another, was overwhelmingly regarded by critics as an anomaly, a serious sign of derailment leading to the torpor of alienation. Hence, ‘a foreign thought’ that might arise within any of us at a given moment resembles the hallucinatory perception of a disturbed self that contaminates the universe with its own agony. The coexistence of multiple personalities within one and the same individual is, however, no longer considered a mental disorder and is no longer mistaken for schizophrenia, the crucial contribution of F.W. Putnam’s complex study stemming from the problematisation of the alter: “The existence of these entities raises questions related to the fundamental conviction regarding the unity of one’s personality and the structure of one’s conscience” (1989, p. 26). The author underlines further: “I believe evidence suggests that we were all born with a potential for multiple personalities and that, during normal development, we more or less manage to consolidate an integrated sense of self.” (idem, p. 34) We can, therefore, refer to the instability of the self as something that is “fragile,

fragmented and dispersed rather than integrated, as well as fluid, mutable and resistant to definition" (Scott, 2015, p. 16).

When contemplating the identity-alterity nexus, the symbolic image that comes to mind is that of the accordion in search of its own sounds: starting out with a clear knowledge of its own shape, but not its content (I, who can see my contour in the mirror, still, not understanding what is behind this surface), opens up with sounds produced by the expanding bellows and the pressing of the buttons (opening toward alterity, revealing the layers of identity and becoming aware of the differences, meeting in a space of common existence), for it only to return to its initial position, enriched, however, by a myriad of musical notes (opening toward the world, translated in terms of self-knowledge). Recently, at a conference entitled *What to do about the black horse?*, Romanian philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu spoke about the drama of love, which, according to him, consists of this stepping out of one's own person and placing oneself outside of it: "Every love lasts as long as its ecstasy, as long as the two (people) remain in a place that is outside of them – and outside of others – a place that holds and contains both of them. But as any ek-stasis, any placement of yourself outside yourself and any suspension of one's own breath are limited, every love gets tired in its own externalization or ex-propriation" (Liiceanu, 2011). We are wondering, however, if this 'externalization' of the being could be the driving force of love and the source of self-knowledge. For once we have stepped out of the grip of a shrunken shirt to greet the other, we are able to return to a brighter place: that of the awakened self.

4. Concluding remarks

The issue of personal identity is raised in terms of identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for maintaining this identity, since our beings cannot be reduced to a constant state, but rather that of a 'becoming'. Therefore, in order not to lose the true essence of personal identity, three elements will be put forth which, in our view, are defining and necessary in understanding the connection between identity and alterity, namely: memory, conscience and perception. Our identity is defined by a stream of experiences filtered through self-consciousness, which in turn is based on the power of our memory to place the current experience within a temporal continuum. Our personal histories are histories of lived experiences and this fact is essential in understanding one's own person. As pointed out by Alisdair MacIntyre (1981), the integrity of an individual's life is conditioned by its perception as a narrative that develops from birth to death.

We are tempted to assimilate our own identity at the level of the ego/I, which "is revealed to us as an independent reality, unique and well differentiated from the rest of our existence." With this temptation, identity is consciously constructed within the space of a personal history, based on what we know about ourselves, on what constitutes the uniqueness of our own existence and of the experiences we had. Psychoanalysis, says Freud (1960), shows us that this appearance is deceiving and that, in opposition, the ego breaks any precise limit,

extending into an unconscious psychic area that we call self and to which the ego only serves as a façade. At this point, when we realize that the I, seen as existing at the borderline between the self and the world, is rooted in the unconscious, we are forced to admit that our identity transcends the conscious limit of what we know about ourselves, entering an unfamiliar area that is, nevertheless, ours.

With all this being said, we are only left to admit that parts of our identity remain unknown to us, making us be, at the same time, a self and another. Alterity is, therefore, incorporated into our own identity, while we conceal a stranger deep within ourselves.

References

1. Baumann, G. (1996). *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Baumann, G. (1997). Dominant and Demotic Discourses of Culture: Their Relevance to Multi-Ethnic Alliances. In Werbner, P. and Modood, T. (Eds.), *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-racism*. Zed.
3. Camilleri, C. (1990). *Strategies identitaires*. P.U.F.
4. Dubar, C. (2003). *Criza identităților. Interpretarea unei mutații*. Editura Știința.
5. Freud, S. (1960). *The Ego and the Id*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
6. Goffman, E. (1956). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday.
7. Liiceanu, G. (2011). *Ce ne facem cu calul negru? Despre căderea în trup, dragoste și ipocrizie* (carte audio). Humanitas.
8. MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Duckworth.
9. Petrilli, S. & Ponzio, A. (2019). Identity and Alterity of the Text in Translation A Semioethic Approach. *International Journal of Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric*, Vol. 3, No. 1, p.48.
10. Pollock, D. (1995). Masks and the Semiotics of Identity. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 581-597.
11. Putnam, F.W. (1989). *Diagnosis and Treatment of Multiple Personality Disorder*. Guilford Press.
12. Scott, S. (2015). *Negotiating Identity. Symbolic Interactionist Approaches to Social Identity*. Polity Press.
13. Snyder, M. (1974). Self-Monitoring of Expressive Behaviour. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 30, pp. 526-537.
14. Tajfel, H. (1978). Interindividual and intergroup behaviour. In Tajfel, H. (Ed.) *Differentiation between groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*. Academic Press.
15. Taussig, M. (1993). *Mimesis and Alterity*. Routledge.
16. Zavalloni, M. & Luis-Guerin, C. (1984). *Identitésociale et conscience. Introduction à L'ego-écologie*. Les Press de L'Universite de Montreal.