

Rethinking Identity:

Concepts of Identity and 'the Other' in Sociological Perspective

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Contrasting different approaches to identity the search is for a specific sociological concept which will offer an alternative to an essentialist understanding of identity as well as to its complementary opposite, the celebration of 'the Other'.

Whereas the latter means a sanguine or pessimistic reification of group differences, the former view has become increasingly outdated: in a globalized world the real experience of alterity and the Other, that is the experience of different identities (rather than identity in the singular), renders essentialist interpretations of identity obsolete.

(1) *The question of alterity.* Firstly, it will be explored why the theoretical and practical discourse on the Other and alterity (and the problem of cultural recognition) became extremely popular in contemporary social and human sciences.

(2) *Thinking identity and the Other.* Secondly, theories of identity and the Other will be discussed. Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, Alfred Schutz's phenomenological sociology and George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism are the main versions. Newer approaches as Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and Pierre Bourdieu's genetic structuralism are calling to rethink identity.

(3) *Rethinking identity.* Finally, identity has to be rethought in sociological perspective and in regard to the current phenomenon of people and groups who articulate their concerns in identity politics.

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THE SOCIETY

Identity has many faces. Contrasting different approaches to identity the search is for a specific sociological concept which will offer an alternative to an essentialist understanding of identity as well as to the contradictory celebration of the Other. Whereas the latter is currently wide spread in intellectual debates but ultimately means a sanguine or pessimistic reification of group differences, the former view has become increasingly obsolete: in the era of globalization where the possibilities of experiencing alterity and therefore questioning identity have increased immeasurably. Firstly, the question is why the theoretical discourse on the Other and alterity as well as the practical discourse on the otherness of people and the problem of 'cultural recognition' (Rorty 2000) became topical in contemporary social and human sciences. Secondly, theories of identity (and its other) are discussed with the final aim of, thirdly, rethinking identity in search for a sociological contribution to the current global phenomenon of identity politics.

The Question of Alterity

Whereas the debate on alterity is a recent one, the sociological concept of identity has its origins in the American pragmatism of the eighteen-nineties. And it was in the nineteen-fifties that it enjoyed its first efflorescence. For in posing questions about the survival of the individual in mass society, which bulked large on the agenda of intellectuals at that time, the quest for identity became popular. Since the nineteen-sixties, 'identity' has become practically relevant in that social groups have sought recourse to traditional identity-securing concepts such as those of race and ethnicity, gender or even nationality. This was the case first of all in the United States. In contemporary identity politics, however, turning the concept

to practical use has become a precarious business. It is exactly at this point, in the realm of theory, that the *concept* of the Other – or, as we may say by way of theoretical generalization, of *alterity* – has its point of application. The Other is contrasted, deciphered, celebrated. In any case, the foundationalist but trendy invocation of ‚identity‘ is undermined by the reference to the Other. The reasons can be found on the one hand in methodological reflections. On the other hand they are rooted in social structural conditions. Both are connected.

Methodologically, the category of the Other relativizes the relevant category of the self. It undermines essentialist assumptions about the ego or subject as they circulate in the generous everyday deployment of the concept of identity. Referring to Alterity and the Other erodes the belief in self-identity as more or less fixed at birth and integrated into stable forms of custom or ritual. While identity reflects the affirmation of who we are by contrasting our way of life with that of others, the continuous reference to many versions of alterity, which can be understood as discourse on the otherness of people, institutions and everything else beyond one’s own horizon, can relativize the one’s belief in the uniqueness of pre-determined identities.

Of course, however, as T. K. Oommen writes (1997: 11), ‚the search for identity is common to the whole of humanity,‘ and in the empirical reality it is widespread and there are tendencies that it became more important recently in the context of globalization: ‚Even the First World,‘ Oommen continues, ‚is witnessing an incessant search for roots.‘ However, for when the talk is of plural identities and those of others, instead of identity in the singular, the contingency of each subject’s own identity becomes apparent. Therefore, the reference to the ‚Other‘ is used methodically to call the presumed ‚natural‘ identities of

given groups into question. Even the methodical recourse to alterity is based on concrete social experiences. Two experiential sets of circumstances have caused the individual attainment of or even normative orientation towards identity to appear increasingly problematic. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck’s (1992) individualization theory that has been developed in response to recent trends in German social structure articulates one state of affairs: an increase in social as well as in geographical mobility; a state-organized social insurance system, which mitigates the many risks of working life, and which has also neutralized many potential starting-points of class solidarity; the expansion in education of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, which made a multiplicity of career paths possible for the first time; new large-scale urban settlements, which make it difficult to sustain natural relations in a neighbourhood; as well as a labour market dynamic, which draws in more and more sectors of the population and demands their functional differentiation – all this has brought about an individualization of ways and situations of living, and thus has contributed to the erosion of traditional bonds and milieus (Beck 1983). And it is precisely for this reason that it has become much harder for individuals to develop that sense of continuity and consistency of self in the course of life-changes and in the various areas of life which is commonly described as *Identity* (Doebert / Habermas / Nunner-Winkler 1980: 9), that is the affirmation of who we are in contrasting our way of life with that of others. The second state of affairs, which calls into question Erik H. Erikson’s (1973: 124) classic assumption of identity on the grounds of being identical with oneself, namely the assumption of an inner self which survives through external change, and which anticipates further fragile identities, applies on the level of culture and orientation systems. This

concerns the confusing perception of a world which has been created by the multiplication of social relations as well as by means of globalized communications technologies, and which was articulated in the postmodernist discourse of the nineteen-eighties – a world in which, as Lyotard pointedly puts it (1988: 195), ‘reality itself has become destabilized to such an extent that it no longer provides any material for experience.’

While the methodological recourse to the Other undermines essentialist assumptions about the ego or subject, concrete experience of the Other and the experience of contingency via alterity as such in modern society also come emphatically on the scene in a *social-structural sense*. By this, I mean not only the current exponentially increasing empirical confrontation with the ‘Other’ in processes of globalization and migration, telecommunications and tourism. Rather it is the new historical reality which came into being with the industrial and political revolution of the modern period and delivered a new order of reality, which became the experience of alterity *per se*. It dissolved the old rigidly given social order of hierarchically organized strata into an on-going process (Freyer 1984: 81) just as it similarly dissolved the central cosmic order and the notion of a single all-subsuming grand design in terms of how the world was envisaged. While the concept of identity, which, in contrast to the process concept of identification, suggests a self-contained, completed thing, representing a sign of the world’s stability and taken from the model of traditional society, it is however the historical experience of *difference*, in which sociology came into being as an academic discipline, whose characteristic feature is the anti-essentialist explanation of the given by means of the Other.

The dissolution of living together in homogeneous groups, the structural differentiation of modern society,

causes the increase of experiencing the Other in everyday life. And that causes changes in the conception of the world and in the conception of identity as well. But even when the concept of alterity, of the ‘Other,’ is used in a methodological strategy to challenge the notion of identity, bearing social-structural witness to a mobile society: it does not thereby however deliver an understanding of identity.

In immediate connection with this first contextualization of the theme of the Other in relation to identity and alterity, two levels on which the subject of ‘identity’ can be taken up will thus be distinguished in the light of corresponding sociological approaches. Then by means of these, the theoretical resources provided by social theory will afford four different perspectives on the theme under review.

The first may be termed the *level of object reference*, the theory-guiding reference to Ego or Alter ego (Other). On this level, the sociological approach turns out to be crucial in replacing the first-person subject of the Enlightenment thinkers into the sociological subject. The latter is no longer autonomous. It is not given as an essentialized centrality, but rather it first emerges in dialogue and intercourse with ‘significant Others’ (Mead). Without an other, there is no ego. While the sociological model is thus able to transform the essentialism of identity into an anti-essentialist interactive analytical concept, the origin (in the other) and product of identity nevertheless continue to be treated as equivalent within this conceptual framework. While this may be appropriate when examining a segmented or stratified society of the pre-modern type, which is split into clearly differentiated groups, it is not appropriate when examining the contemporary problematic of fragmented identities (Bauman 1995). The ‘logic of identity’ approach (on the *theoretical plane*), as Peter Wagner has called it

(1998: 56), requires that the phenomena under consideration have a stable existence. Difference-theory approaches, by contrast, emphasize the constructivist aspect of identity-constitution from the outset. A stable identity may be improbable, but it is not ruled out entirely. By means of these two distinctions – between Ego and Other on the referential level of object representation, and between logic-of-identity and constructivist approaches on the epistemological level of theory construction – the following four perspectives on identity and the Other emerge:

Figure 1 Perspectives on Identity (and their *main concepts*)

Main Object Reference Logic of Theory	Ego	Other
Identity	Phenomenological theory <i>Ego = Other</i>	Symbolic interactionism <i>Identity</i> <i>(Other = Ego)</i>
Difference (Constructivism)	Genetic structuralism <i>Identity</i>	Systems theory <i>Alterity</i>

What are these perspectives in more detail? The individual first-person subject under consideration and a strategy, which is concerned with a reduction to essences, are the chief characteristics of the *phenomenological theory*. The behaviour and attitudes of the Other are, by contrast, the origin for each particular identity according to the perspective of *symbolic interactionism*, particularly in the work of George Herbert Mead. As a strict difference theory, *systems theory* explodes the conceptual framework of traditional approaches. Rejecting so-called realist descriptions of the social world on the level of theory, it

attempts to open up a perspective for alterity, that means for ‘other possibilities.’ Finally, a *structural-genetic approach* that became popular through the work of Pierre Bourdieu but has similarities to structuration theory as well (Giddens 1993) does indeed permit an inquiry into identity but it is suggestive of a historicized perspective. There are structures of the subject. Nevertheless, these structures are not fixed, they are not pre-given, they are constituted in practice (Bourdieu 1990).

Thinking Identity and the Other

All four approaches are now characterized in turn. In doing so even at the first short presentation, we need to borrow conceptually from the field of philosophy. Because it is precisely the subject’s constitution of itself through interactions with others which determines sociological interpretation, the description of the world as constituted by the originating acts of the subject opposes the sociological perspective. As a theory of a starting-point for the first-person subject, the *phenomenological approach* is exemplified in the foregoing sketch. After all, Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology in its reception and reworking by Alfred Schutz also had a sociological layer. The so-called ‘absolute ego’ (Husserliana VIII: 506) of phenomenological analysis as a point of departure and/or refuge is assigned and pre-set by Husserl. What this approach takes into account, according to Husserl, is ‘the individual ego which encounters only itself absolutely, and [which constitutes] the external world in stages as the result of appearances, a world which is transcendent to the ego, but which is a world of appearance relative to him’ (Hua IV: 324). Already here on a methodological level the Other is left out of the picture. The phenomenological reduction, which is demanded by Husserl’s methodology, requires instead first of all from the transcendental perspective the dissolution of any pretence of

being in consciousness and requires in addition an eidetic reduction, which secures what survives through variation as identical. All in all Husserl thereby pursues access to the 'realm of transcendental consciousness,' as he says, 'as being in a certain sense, that of 'absolute' being' (Hua III/1: 158f). That the thus exposed 'ego ... contains an immense *innate a priori*, and that the entire phenomenology ... is the revelation of this inherent *a priori*' (Hua I: 28), to be sure, is neither suited to the contemporary experience of fragmented identities nor to the idea that alterity is relevant to identity. So at this juncture that form of theoretical critique, for example levelled by Lyotard, that Husserl represents a form of transcendentalism, which 'derives all knowledge from a foundational Ego' (Lyotard 1993: 54) will not be contested at this point. It should however be remembered that with Husserl's phenomenology, a theoretical plateau was already reached at the turn of the last century (Welz 1996), which runs the risk of going by the board in many contemporary approaches and especially in cultural justifications. There is however no need to immediately throw the baby out with the bathwater. For in a certain sense Husserl's notion of the constitutive absolute first-person subject does reveal itself as fitting into a world understood in many areas in terms of process, in which nature is historicized and in which according to Darwin human beings are integrated in the chain of being.

In this way, phenomenological *Egologie* (Ego logic) seems for example to be protected against dangerous collaboration of the liberal recognition of the Other, the uniqueness of individuals, groups and their modes of orientation, with a cultural fundamentalism which yields a justification for excluding the 'alien' singular and therefore also the 'alien' plural (Stolcke 1994: 58). It arms itself in advance against a reified understanding of ethnicity, a kind

of essentialized interpretation of cultural identity, which is intrinsic to cultural relativism. In 1911, Husserl conceived of his 'philosophy as a rigorous science' as a counter-blow which would combat not merely any 'naturalization of consciousness [respectively ...] of ideas' but also the relativist tendencies in 'historicism and world-view philosophy' (Husserl 1981: 13ff; 49ff). On the one hand experimental psychology is for Husserl no less an adversary than the fully contra-distinguished position of the naturalistic, which the given 'in empirical intellectual life' – completely 'without naturalizing it' – 'posits absolutely' (ibid.). Relativist 'historicism,' or nowadays the 'micro-history of everyday life' of nineteen-eighties' neohistoricism, whose 'identity-related interest in history,' in Juergen Kocka's words, underlies its support for the inalienable right of the alien, past and individual, leads according to Husserl inevitably to 'extremely sceptical subjectivism' (Husserl 1981: 51). For the fulfilment of the function in which the phenomenological approach counterpoises itself by means of the conceptual device of an 'absolute Ego' to Weberian 'polytheism' of 'value-rankings of the world,' which are in 'an insoluble state of war with one another' (Weber 1985: 603), it would be necessary today to discover or even to invent for the first time the theoretical means to cut the ground away from beneath the essentialization of cultural differences and their cruel reality. However, Husserl's theory opposes itself to the thinking, which explains the contingent as eternal. As is already the case for Kant (1976: 378a) with the 'logical subject of thought,' so it is also the case for Husserl that the Ego-subject which he discovers can no longer be seen as a substance which forms part of reality. In contrast with Kant, however, Husserl in no way sets out from the level of an anonymous consciousness. He begins with the individual

first-person subject of the phenomenological observer. Instead leaning on Kant's apagogic procedure of deduction from the given body of knowledge provided by the natural sciences, Husserl's understanding of the subject – identity is a later concept of the social sciences – makes emphatically clear that 'a conceptual and terminological fixing ... of each ... flowing state of concretion is not to be contemplated' (Hua III/1: 157). For phenomenology, an essentialization of identity is out of the question.

However, Husserl's conception also leaves no space for the concept of the Other. Its emphasis on the transcendental ascendancy of the first-person subject remains absolute. Can this be relevant to a sociological approach? Alfred Schutz, often portrayed as a pupil of Husserl, had no interest in anything of this nature. According to him, social science needs 'no transcendental Ego' (Schutz 1985: 402). The way in which Schutz sets out his putative 'phenomenological' social theory appears at first even to be the diametrically opposed antithesis of the Husserlian approach. 'All cultural and social science is indeed' he writes, 'in principle mundane, and bears no relation to a transcendental Ego or to a transcendental alter ego' (1971: 138). Instead of proceeding from a transcendental first-person subject, Schutz requires that the point of departure should be the assumption of a given 'mundane You.' Instead of investigating the self-identical subject, he requires the 'investigation ... of the alien first-person subject' (1974: 230/226). For Schutz, it is always the processes by which meanings are constituted which interest an interpretative sociology. It is obvious that it is those processes of meaning constitution of the Other, of he or she who live in the social world: the 'prime objective of every form of social science,' according to Schutz, is the 'maximal clarification and explication of that which those who exist in

the social world generally think about [the social world]' (1974: 315). However, what sort of Other is it that Schutz is presupposing here? Postulating, in contrast with Husserl, the 'general thesis of the *existence* of an alter Ego,' Schutz proceeds from the assumption that the 'stream of thought of the Other manifests the same fundamental structure as my own consciousness.' As a result, the Other stands in a precise analogy to the phenomenological transcendental Ego. As a consequence Schutz is able to conceptualize a reciprocal understanding, should the need arise, as an attempted approach in 'perpetual progress' (1971: 201; 1974: 150). Correspondingly, he finds he has to place self- and other-interpretation in opposition to one another. What is principally rendered dubious 'cogitations which have an aspect other-mindedness to the object,' while by contrast 'immanent acts directed towards one's own experience' remain indubitable (1974: 148). How alien 'processes of consciousness' are to be inferred, then clearly suggests itself. The 'interpretation of the processes of consciousness of the 'alter Ego'' always has to be preceded by 'the self-interpretation of the interpreter'. Understanding is confined to what one can accomplish oneself. It always takes its point of departure from the 'given Now and How provided by the interpreter's own experience' (p156; p177). To the extent that Schutz on the one hand thus explicitly determines the naturally given other as an object of sociological understanding, and on the other hand holds to the ego-centric perspective of phenomenological investigation, he institutes a radical scission between first- and second-person singular subjects. The observer and the observed remain alien to one another (Perinbanayagam 1992: 142). To summarize: Schutz postulates the Other rhetorically – and yet finds no access to it. What he proposes is the inference of the alien based on the model of the first-person subject.

This explains the characteristic equation of the Other with the first-person subject in the preceding tabulation.

In contrast with this approach, a genuinely sociological view of the subject does not start from the individual. It abandons the subject-centred perspective. It rejects the essentializing interpretation of the subject because what is crucial to such a sociology is the *social* origin of first-person subject identity: the Other becomes constitutive of identity. Identity is not just ‘there,’ but develops itself (Mead 1973: 177). In order to see this, the *symbolic interactionism* devised by George Herbert Mead does not set up the internal and external worlds as ontological contraries. Internal and external are rather combined with one another pragmatically in interactive behaviour. For instead of leaving the generation of symbolic meanings to a private consciousness, Mead appeals from the very outset to a relationship between subjects, in which the active body constitutes a bridge to the Other. The idea of developed identity as the capacity to become an object for one’s own reflection, counts for Mead as a social structure which emerges from social experiences (Mead 1973: 182). While Schutz’s phenomenological approach also appeals to the foundational concept of action, according to which an action once performed acquires significance in retrospective reflection, Mead’s pragmatic approach takes its origin from the world of practical action. It is not the first-person subject which typifies the Other or the first-person subject’s own action. Rather, on the contrary, it is the Other whose views on the first-person subject are the material for the latter’s conceptualization of itself.

First of all Mead describes the genesis of human communication as a transition from interaction which is mediated gesturally to one which is mediated symbolically; in which the latter already demands interpretation. A

decisive factor in the constitution of identity, furthermore, is then the capacity to adopt the attitude of others towards the individual. By this means, the latter acquires the capacity for reflection about itself. As occurs in a game, one first adopts the variety of attitudes of others towards oneself like a set of different roles. As in the example of a competition, one accordingly adopts the attitudes of all those taking part. Beside the organization of expectations about behaviour from the standpoint of others, an integral part of the comprehensive constitution of identity is also the organization of the attitude of what Mead calls the ‘generalized Other’: ‘The attitude of this generalized Other,’ Mead writes, ‘is that of the entire community.’ It is this, that is the ‘generalized Other’, which provides the ‘individual with his unitary identity’ (Mead 1973: 196).

This demonstrates that Mead’s interactionist model is a characteristic product of the first half of the twentieth century. Identity became a problem following the emergence of large-scale society and the relative decline of traditional group life. On the one hand, Mead’s model reflects the growing complexity of the modern, in the conviction that the innermost nucleus of the subject is not a self-contained thing. The subject is not a pre-existing substance. Rather it first constitutes itself through intercourse with significant others. How at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the melting pot of American society, social integration could be conceived? How – as a theme in fashion during the 1950s (Gleason 1983: 926) – could the constitution and survival of the individual in anonymous mass society be conceived? These are the questions posed in advance of the scientific inquiry. On the other hand, the subject remains interlocked by means of identity with the surrounding social structure. Thus Mead still sees ‘no sharp dividing line between our own identity and the identity of other people’ – indeed, self-

identity expresses itself rather as the ‘general pattern of behaviour [of the] given social group’ to which one belongs: the community, according to Mead, ‘exercises control over the behaviour of its individual members’ (1973: 206/198). Seen in this light, Mead’s approach does not only address the topic of identity. In addition, a good deal on the level of its theoretical architecture points to an identity-logical construction (though here ‘identity’ is no longer meant in its sociological or psychological sense but in an epistemological or even logical sense, that is $A=A$). For on the conceptual level, according to Mead, it is basically determined in advance in any given social group, what thereafter constitutes itself in the subject.

It is of course true that in Mead’s view identity constitutes itself in the adoption of the attitudes of many others. Furthermore, in addition to Mead’s ‘Me’ which consists in the adopted viewpoint of others towards me, there is the ‘I,’ the creative potential of the first-person subject, which sees to it that I am an authentic individual and not simply a clone of an other. However, Mead’s ‘I’ remains a sort of residual category. It remains undefined and it is not clear what significance it has in the construction of any given individual identity. In other words: without any contribution having been made by the creative first-person subject, that in which self-identity is held to consist already is available in its component-parts in the attitudes of others towards me. But do I belong to a clearly fixed group, whose attitudes are equivalent to my own?

Rethinking Identity

A differentiated society, which is less clearly factored into groups or into clearly ordered social strata which regulate social interaction, has made this approach problematic. Perhaps one can read Mead’s theory, indeed, as precisely an attempt to rethink social integration after the

end of such a stratified society or at least after the dissolution of its immediate matrix of preconditions. In this connection, the pressing question is how personal orientations can remain in harmony with those who find themselves in a society, which is perpetually in transition. Mead’s conception remains to the extent that it is a mediated reaction to the dissolution of the model of social order in which there are sub-communities available to inspection, in which everyone was assigned a determinate position in the array of social groupings from the outset. Another theoretical response however deals with the problem directly. This is provided by the research perspective afforded by so-called *difference theory*. For theories which are characterized by and which are emphasizing ‘difference’, difference is central to theoretical arguments that view identity not as a pre-given entity bound by the fixed attributes of groups but as constituted. Consequently, seen from this perspective, identity is nothing but a construction. As for example,

Jacques Derrida’s intellectual project has been challenging all essentializing in philosophy and cultural sciences via his deconstructivist approach of ‘difference theory’ (1967). A radically constructivist other version of this idea is represented by the *systems theory* of Niklas Luhmann (1995), the German sociologist, which by contrast with post-structuralist approaches locates itself against the background of social-structural displacement. According to the systems-theoretic approach, the conception and construction of identity becomes possible for the first time in a modern society, which displays high levels of specialization in the workplace and systemic differentiation into different realms. Only once society has factored out into functional sub-systems, which are only weakly interconnected with one another, such as economy, law and

science, that there is, on the one hand, a collapse of totalizing interpretations of the world, while on the other there is also a pluralization of individual biographies which first give rise to questions such as ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where do I belong?’

In order to differentiate this model from the ‘looking-glass self’ of interactionism (Cooley 1902), according to which the self finds itself in the viewpoint of the Other as if in a mirror, we need only turn the model upside down. After all, as Luhmann might frame the question: what does one see in the mirror? Only the observer him- or herself. This is what marks out the difference-theoretic approach: the ‘radical de-ontologizing of objects as such’ (Luhmann 1995: 177) by a shift in perspective to the differentia by means of which ‘reality’ is fabricated. This is enough in itself, with regard to the concept of identity, to yield a completely different way of formulating the question in comparison with the perspectives discussed above. Thus instead of starting with given aspects of identity, Luhmann poses the ‘question of how identity is produced’. Instead of asking ‘what sort of thing identity *is*,’ according to Luhmann, we should rather ask ‘*how* it is *manufactured*, what is made fundamental to the observation of identity’ (1990: 21). A difference-theoretical approach therefore assumes no object and no concept as something already given. Rather the point of departure for the theory lies in the present case in distinctions as, for example, those between identity and difference, which in each instance cannot be made ‘in themselves’ but only as ‘relative to the standpoint of the observer’. An object concept such as the identity of the subject loses all significance in Luhmann’s constructivist view of the world as the processing of differences. Already at the conceptual level identities no longer ‘exist.’ They can however in case of need be generated recursively (Luhmann

1997: 46f). In this connection, it is the contingently occurring repetition of the denotation of one side of a differentiation, which is condensed to something temporarily identical and thereby becomes re-identifiable. It is decisive that from this viewpoint identities are not primordial data, but can only be defined negatively through differences from others. In relation to the subject of individual identity, Luhmann is not at all concerned to search for the key to subjective reality, which the concept of identity promises either incidentally to or precisely because of the referral back to social structuring. The question about the subjective being-the-same-as-oneself and the corresponding role of the Other do not come up in Luhmann’s subjectless systems theory, which is centred on the concept of communications. At best, for example, systems theory provides for the investigation of the deployment of the binary opposition between Us and Them (Ego/Other) in the communicative discourse of the mass media, analyzing the extent to which it is supported by racist (using Luhmann’s own terminology) ‘programs’ and how far by the programs of a cultural fundamentalism.

It should be noticed that systems-theoretic constructivism does not deconstruct ‘identity’ on the level of the object by adverting to the Other. Rather a concept is projected which dissolves the objects of each essentializing understanding. In the concrete case, the popular concept of a basic personality of cultural identity becomes obsolete in the constructivist lexicon. Precisely in this connection, moreover, very abstract theoretical operations could in my opinion become practically applicable once again. In this respect it is an advantage enjoyed by difference-*theoretic* approaches to infiltrate essentialist representations of culture just as it is to bring into the spotlight the fragility of modern identities, *without* inscribing the being of the Other in an

argumentatively deployed ‘cult of the Other’ at the level of the object. For every now and then, as far as the latter goes, the ‘professing of radical alterity [at the thematic level, F.W.] [...] passes over ‘into ethnocentric xenophobia’ as Aleida Assmann (1994: 29) writes.

In order however not to abandon entirely the theme of identity on the *empirical level*, one cannot avoid crossing over from Luhmann’s radical constructivist conception to a *structural-genetic approach*. From this perspective, in addition, identity is not a given datum, nor is it set out in advance in the surrounding social world. This remains rather a criticism of Mead’s identity-logic model, which sees set out in the current interaction situation what constitutes itself as identity. The thus safeguarded integration of society by means of an ‘always already existing’ shared cultural pre-understanding no longer seems to be universally or wholly to the social structure of the present. In contrast with this, it is more appropriate to foreground with Pierre Bourdieu the historicity of mental structures. Of course the incorporation of historical objective social structures should in no way be excluded from consideration, but the habitus constitution, as Bourdieu terms it (Bourdieu 1992: 139; Wacquant 1992: 20), should be opened up to a ‘genetic’ analysis. On the one hand, the habitus peculiar to each subject is not to be straightforwardly derived from the social attitudes of others or from society per se however it is understood. The habitus is an active and practical identity, which is not reducible to passive perceptions. Denoted within this is, above all, a kind of active centre of action. It is not the abstracted transcendental first-person subject of phenomenology. It is rather a centre of action with its own characteristics. Practical identity must have constituted itself in the practice of individual life histories. Consequently, identity cannot be freely modelled according to this perspective. Identity

becomes a dynamic category. It becomes a life-long project of coming to terms with constantly changing situations. However, through its life-historical connections with the biography of each individual and its structural context it is not just any old project of will.

The currently fashionable, much alluded to ‘self-made biographies’ have, from this perspective, two limitations, an internal and an external one. Throughout the social, which Bourdieu envisages as a complex field of objective relations, leaves its mark in a temporal process on the body and behaviour processes as well as on the subjective schemata of perception and judgement. In this way, identities can be understood as open and shifting, but also as being nevertheless given. They should count as both: as constituting and as being constituted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, two facts should be held in view: the real experience of alterity that is the experience of different identities (rather than identity in the singular) renders essentialist interpretations of identity obsolete. In addition, the limits of internalization approaches to identity and the self are becoming obvious (Blasi 2001). Relational recourse to the Other is unavoidable. Moreover, owing to the social-structural dissolution of hierarchically stratified society, the forms of action required for the construction of conventional identities have moreover become exiguous. By the way, in my opinion that applies also to the practical and not merely the rhetorical generation of collective identities. Quite clearly, the sociological perspective demands that reference be made to the social and cultural formation processes constituting identities. Smashing theoretically an essentialist understanding of the latter may perhaps be its contribution to the discursive and practical struggle of identities. Identity

does not exist as an immutable essence. The ambivalent mobilization effects of so-called ethnic identities will exist only for so long as their mode of construction remains unexamined. The Other – masculine, feminine and neuter, meant in a practical social world sense, is what prompts us to rethinking the concept of identity and to investigating its social construction further.

Translated by Glen Newey and Frank Welz

Note

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