



TO BIND OR TO LOOSE: INDIVIDUALISM AND WEAK IDENTITY

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Abstract

Starting from the individual as a “potential being”, constantly pushed to exceed what he is to realise himself, the dynamics of this process is analyzed, that is the “aspirations”: it is through them that the subjective pushes and the collectivity’s influences are directed to the achievement of the personal goals.

The process of “individualization”, which has developed throughout the history of humanity but has experienced an extraordinary explosion in modernity, aims to enhance these dynamics through the absolutization of the principle of individual “freedom”, understood as a progressive thinning of space-time constraints and as priority of the private sphere compared to the public one.

Our thesis is that self-realization is basically a “relational enterprise” and that out of this relatedness we run the risk of causing a “short circuit” of the human, giving rise to a generation of a “depleted” (or “weak”) man.

Key words: fulfillment, social identity, aspirations, individualism, constraints and opportunities, freedom.

Realization As A Social Process

The process that we are going to deepen, that of the *identity construction*, is extremely vast and complex, and is the focus of several disciplines related to human sciences: from anthropology to psychology, from pedagogy to philosophy, to psychiatry etc. Our perspective, without precluding the valuable and sometimes essential contributions of the twin disciplines, circumscribes its field of investigation to the strictly sociological aspects of this process and, more particularly, to the radical changes that occurred in the transition to post-modernity.

To start, we must try to clarify the meaning of some central and multifaceted terms, such as *I* and *realization*, from a sociological perspective. For convenience of exposition, we shortly order some key concepts following, as possible, a consequential order, indicating the authors of the references (not really *schools* of thought) which will then be adequately documented.

Some contemporary sociologists (Donati and Colozzi 2006, Belardinelli 2008, Allodi 2008) propose (as we’ll document) the idea of the *I* associated with the *realization’s urgency*: from this structural condition, it would derive the inevitable boost to the *transcendence* from the here and now, to constantly project oneself elsewhere (Durkheim 1912, Duvignaud 1967 Jedlowski 2012). Therefore, a growing group of sociologists has lately devoted themselves to the study of the *aspirations* (Archer 2003, De Leonardis, Deriu 2012, Jedlowski 2012) which can only materialize within concrete social contexts (Colombo 2012, Mandich 2012) and find their motive in the *ultimate concerns* of the acting subject (Archer 2003, Willig 2009 Jedlowski 2012).

So let us start from some structurally elementary data of human action, regardless of the cultural connotation they then can take: if it is true that there are unquestionably «very different visions about what self-realization means» (Ferrara 2008, p. 51), on the contrary the claim that, unlike the animal, man is characterized by «a nature that implies the realization of self, of own existence» (Belardinelli 2008, p. 28) is now universally shared. This explains why the human individual can rightly be considered «a potential subject that goes beyond its corporeal nature (biophysics) to explore the world» (Donati and Colozzi 2006, p. 99), so distinguishing himself, exactly, from other living beings: the minimum condition for human self-consciousness is, even for the “explanatory psychology”, the perception «to be a someone who is directed toward something» (Tønnesvang 2005, p. 67).

Existentially this state of affairs is reflected in the fact that «man realizes not only that he is somebody, but also that he must be» (Belardinelli 2008, p. 28). He, to some extent, is not just “forced to be” (as in the case for things, plants and animals), but has also in his hands a great responsibility to “decide” what to be (Allodi 2008).

It is from this constant state of “not yet” which the typical human creativity (that goes tirelessly towards increasingly diverse accomplishments) derives. In this way we explain the so-called “protention’s mechanisms”, recently leaped to the forefront of the social science research: their root is in fact to be found in the non-objectionable observation that «life at every moment tends to transcend the present state of things» (Jedlowski 2012, p. 3).

It is an extravagant capacity unknown to other living beings, since «only man is entitled to conceiving the ideal and adding it to the real. From where does this singular privilege come?» (Durkheim 1912, trad. it. 1973, p. 485). At a closer look, however, rather than an “addition”, is more correct to speak of a dynamism inherent in the human condition itself, which forces us to “transcend it”: «If our substance was really given us, and we had it at

hand, we undoubtedly not would project ourselves beyond what limits us. But we are insufficient to ourselves. We appeal to what does not yet exist» (Duvignaud 1967, trad. it. 1969, p. 134).

The more properly sociological dimension of this situation is highlighted by the fact that «the alternative imagined reality is always “situated”, starting from specific social situations» (Colombo 2012, p. 54): this “being situated” of the imagination is what makes it ultimately a collective cultural product, before and even more than just a personal capacity. From this point of view, therefore, «desires, choices, preferences, projects, can not be understood except within the framework of social representations» (Mandich 2012, p. 23).

“Located” desires may be more properly called “aspirations”: in fact, «the aspirations are something like disciplined desires, that is desires placed in relation to the principle of reality» (Jedlowski 2012, p. 4). In other words, aspirations are concrete attempts to imagine “plausible” objectives and to prepare themselves to action’s viable courses, which is not essential, however, when you speak of desires.

From this point of view, also imagination (what is possible to think) is something different from aspiration (what is possible to desire and then to try to obtain): in a certain sense, «aspiration is the “political” dimension of imagination» (Colombo 2012, p. 59), which is accomplished through a “typically human device” that is the *project*.

Action projects «drastically separate men from all that is not human» since human beings «have a deliberative and reflexive capacity completely foreign to the inert matter» (Archer 2003, trad. it. 2006, p. 60). It is precisely in the effort to concretely realize the aspirations that people are pushed to learn to «navigate” between the social rules, and lean on them to pursue their own life projects» (De Leonardis, Deriu 2012, p. XII). One can show that this dynamism is inevitable reflecting on the fact that «if projects were optional, the social world would be like the natural world, governed only by the forces of nature» (Archer 2007, trad. It. 2009, p. 88).

But it must be noted, that by continuing to use the same demonstrative “experiential” logic, we encounter a second indisputable evidence: if on the one hand the aspirations are rooted in a shared social dimension, however, they are simultaneously the finding of an interaction of this dimension with the *uniqueness* (“ultimate concerns”) of the individual.

Aspirations are a phenomenon “emerging” from the interaction between social context and subjective ultimate concerns: if we do not admit this second factor, that of the original push of human aspirations, we would have to record, in fact, in identical contexts identical aspirations, which is patently unacceptable. So we must recognize that «the agents assess the situation in the light of their “interests”, as well as the circumstances, and have projects on reality» (Archer 2003, trad. it. 2006, p. 14).

Moreover, this original move is essential to the very definition of an individual recognizable as such and it is this ultimate and deep push towards the realization of a deep urgency that makes the individual a subject socially active and, above all, socially “watchful”: in fact, «those who aspire to something are more vigilant of those who haven’t aspirations, they are attentive to opportunities (that only an aspiration allows to consider such)» (Jedlowski 2012, p. 4).

The concept itself of opportunity and of its opposite, “bond”, has no “absolute” validity: there are no opportunities or constraints, facilities or obstacles if not in a “relative” situation, because favoring and stopping are transitive verbs, they provide an object. You can then «hinder or facilitate the realisation of a given agent’s initiative» (Archer 2003, trad. it. 2006, p. 59), because, without a project, it makes no sense to speak of an obstacle or of an occasion.

It is for the existence of that deliberative and reflective human ability, completely foreign to the inert matter, that environmental conditions can be considered constraints or facilities as emergent properties of the interaction with human projects: more precisely, a generic situation of circumstances becomes an “opportunity” only in terms of «self-realization purposes that were not previously accessible» (Willig 2009, p. 352).

New Identity Strategies: Modernity

The realization dynamic, therefore, could be summed up in the individual will to turn the events into *opportunities* and *constraints* starting from its own *aspirations*, that is, through a *planning* that comes from its *ultimate concerns*. The idea of an essentially simple process is contradicted by the consideration that aspiration is always *located*, that is it is dependent not only on the individual will but also on the social context in which it takes shape.

The recent sociological theory has identified an unprecedented break point in the relationship individual/society, a *radical transformation* (Luckmann 1963) which has gradually led to the rise of an *increasingly individualistic vision* of social life (Durkheim 1893, Hervieu-Leger 1986, Bixio 1988, Bauman 1999, Seligman 2000, Luckmann 2006, Abbruzzese 2010) which tends to regard the individual as *a set of desires* (Weber 1919, Luhmann 1976, Seligman 2000), exalting his/her *freedom* (Riesman 1950, Bauman 1999) and revolutionizing its *time dimensions* (Bauman 1999, Crespi 2005, Leccardi 2012). All this leads, according to some authors, to a sort of *crisis or cancellation of responsibility* (Nisbet 1966, Bauman 1999, Leccardi 2009, Willig 2009) and to the so-called phenomenon of *other direction* (Horkheimer 1947, Riesman 1950, Luckmann 2006).

Let us resume these steps, documenting them properly.

Social sciences are now in agreement in identifying, in the historic flow of the different human civilizations, some crossroads that mark points of no return, that distinguish a “before” from an “after”. So it becomes reasonable

to share the question of Thomas Luckmann: «And if the individual's relationship with the social order had undergone a radical transformation with the advent of modern society?» (1963, trad. it. 1969, p. 9).

If the individual's realization is a “bipolar” process, that is, constituted by the dimension of Ego that interacts with Alter (the other as an individual or as a system), we should consider that this relation, with the advent of the modernity (and, later, of the postmodernity) underwent “radical transformations”: let us try to focusing some of its features.

First of all, modernity is a theoretical and progressive exaltation of individual: it's surprising to read in Durkheim that just the appearance in the history of the “despotic” power, far from representing a principle of the individual's disappearance, marks, on the contrary, «the first accomplished step toward individualism», since «leaders are the first individual personalities who are disengaged from social mass [...] the equilibrium is broken» (Durkheim, 1893, trad. it. 1962, p. 204). In fact, according to the French sociologist, individualism and free thinking are two interrelated dimensions that mark always a progressive and steady development: «It is a phenomenon that does not begin anywhere, but which develops incessantly throughout the course of history» (ibid, p. 183).

To exalt one of the two dimensions of identity construction, the individual one, means reducing (theoretically) the importance of the other, the social one: this process may be referred to as «a disintegration of the peoples in individuals» (Abbruzzese 2010, p. 205). Modernity, in fact, «feeds an individual's unlimited realization [...] and makes this realization a moral duty and a sacred mission» (Hervieu-Leger 1986, p. 225): we may therefore say that «autonomous individuality becomes a duty for the modern individual!» (Luckmann 2006, p. 8).

And so, if the people disappears, one of its functions, that of the personal and “affective” support to the individual, is now being left to the freedom and to the “intimate” expressiveness of each individual, on condition of delegating the “public” or “political” dimension to the invasiveness and to the aseptic impersonality of the “system”: «The theory of the individual [...] believed that the real general relationship between individuals was the purely and technically private one. That individual's life was specifically private life and that all kind of public relationship was established, with respect to them, as relation between private» (Bixio, 1988, p. 162).

By the same logic, in late modernity, identity formation also becomes predominantly private rather than social, since «salvation is no longer a collective affair» (Seligman 2000, trad. it. 2002, p. 161). An unitary and shared conception of the universe of sense is replaced by the availability of different views of the world and values, achievements of modern free thinking and pluralism.

But if we admit the existence of «a close and irrevocable tie between the project of the social order and the project of individual life» (Bauman 1999, p. 59), we must follow that, after unting this link, even the social reality, that allows the individual to build itself giving him the tools and opportunities, will be, sooner or later, suffering.

And, in this vicious circle, the same individual will suffer. If the subject, in building his own good, is unable or does not feel the need to build the sake of loved ones, he will find to consume the (relational) goods that later generations will not be able to receive in dowry: «At this point, it becomes more and more difficult to develop an idea about the Self different from a particular set of desires» (Seligman 2000, trad. it. 2002, p. 187).

Thus we can see a tragic historical and cultural nemesis: the individualisation process is likely to thin the individual, up to turn it off in the exaltation of his inner upheavals. This is the only space left to his freedom. Rationalization and disenchantment of the world, removing naive belief in magic, simultaneously ensure that «the supreme and sublime values have become strangers to the general public to take refuge in the extra mundane realm of mystical life or in the brotherhood of the immediate and direct relations between individuals. It is not by chance that our best art is intimate and not monumental, and that today only within the smaller communities, in the man to man relationship, in the *pianissimo*, that indefinable feeling, which a time pervaded and strengthened as a prophetic breath and an impetuous flame the great communities, continues to pulsate» (Weber 1919, trad. it. 1997, p. 41); all this can only encourage the creation of «a dictatorship based on the exploitation of the emotional nature of the masses» (ibid, p. 89).

The shift from public to private brings easily «to the interpretation of existence as feeling» (Luhmann 1976, p. 133). That's how the identity can easily be understood «as a succession of different moments» (Crespi 2005, p. 85), emotionally charged, overflowing and contradictory.

Living the existence as a sentiment implies a radical reworking of social ties: they too, in some way, should be reconsidered on the basis not of a recognition of belonging but of an emotional experience.

Similarly, even the Weberian “supreme and sublime values” must be reread in this respect: here then that (individual) freedom becomes the absolute value «according to which every other value must be assessed and [becomes] the extent to which the wisdom of every rule and over-individual decision must be compared» (Bauman 1999, p. 9).

But this is a freedom that changes appearance with respect to the heroic and burdensome contents of humanistic tradition and becomes “meticulous cleansing” of all that is beyond “the human search for pleasures”. Postmodern freedom is then «the capacity to do what you like, a freedom of choice that involves the individual's right not to be hampered by others in carrying out its activity» (ibid, p. 77), because you are free if (and only if) you can act according to your will.

The contradiction between freedom and bonds is healed progressively by the constant reduction and narrowing of the field of action of the latters up to ensuring the absolute «right to choose their own identity» (ibid): «It is the

individual who must decide what to do and thus what he has to do with himself» (Riesman 1950, trad. it. 1973, p. 57).

Another great “supreme and sublime” value undisputed until the modernity is linked to the passage of *time*, as a dimension which enables man to find himself and to realize at the same time a project. In its “emotional” version, time is fragmented into episodes, separated from their past and their future: it «is no longer a river, but a set of puddles and pools [...] No strategy of life that has a certain coherence or cohesion» (Bauman 1999, p. 38).

But the fragmentation of the time brings with itself the fragmentation of the individual and, together, of the ties of which he is composed: the relationships are so reducible to a single function or a single service, become pure occasional instrumentality (precisely, an emotional one) carefully avoiding «the construction of networks of duties and mutual obligations that are permanent» (ibid, p. 49).

In fact, «to have an identity “for all life”, proves to be a handicap rather than an advantage, a burden that prevents movement» (ibid, p. 67). And here «the biography as a unitary dimension gives way to a narrative by fragments» (Leccardi 2012, p. 34), because «the obstacle is no longer discovering or inventing an identity, but avoiding it sticks» (Bauman 1999, p. 37).

All this can only raise new, previously unknown issues at relational and therefore social level: the link between one’s own actions and their consequences tends to become inevitably more fleeting and to open the way for what is now called “crisis of responsibility” whose boundaries «are gradually narrowed, until they coincide with those of the exercise of the role» (Leccardi 2009, p. 41). The new freedom seems to have as a reference an ancestral as utopian “guiding idea”, that of the «possible independence from time and space» (ibid, p. 51).

Even the “social space” can not escape this progressive erosion of its incidence on the individual action: independence, from this point of view, means progressive disintegration of interpersonal relationships, always a bulwark against the illusory intimistic reduction of moral categories. To achieve this autonomy from the influence of others it is necessary to promote a distance between oneself and the others, who must necessarily become object of aesthetic rather than moral valuation: it is necessary to succeed in transforming the “responsibility” to a personal “taste”.

In fact, the relationship with Alter must be scrupulously “cleared” since «to follow the moral impulse means taking responsibility [...] committing to his/her well-being» (Bauman 1999, p. 50). Instead, you must reach the removal of such impulse, since «the duty of the postmodern citizen is to lead a pleasant life» (ibid, p. 51).

This result is reached through careful management of relations that carefully excludes a “total” involvement with Alter, and that only settles in functional and instrumental aspects of the relationship: the city life is the prototype of «a morally poor life and therefore free to be subject to rules that do not meet moral criteria» (ibid, p. 91). In cities people are nothing more than “surfaces”, useful only for the feelings that they can produce: they «do not have a “natural behind” or a “depth”» (ibid, p. 94).

Expected results, however, do not coincide with what happens in fact: indeed, we could say that the effects of this exaltation of the freedom of the individual capacity do not seem capable of guaranteeing the realization process we are investigating.

With the personalization concept comes into the limelight that of *homo economicus*, rational, individualistic, utilitarian, calculating and instrumental actor that, in reality, can be seen, from social psychology, as «an impoverished ontology» (Houston 2010, p. 842) in which, «the individual is trapped in an incomplete idea of freedom and is forced to motivate, optimize and verify his/her live in order to increase efficiency» (Willig 2009, p. 358).

In fact, when you are alone in the face of normative requirements, «the positive practical relation to one's self is threatened [...] the individual is held prisoner in an exhausting - so to speak - hunt for recognition» (ibid, p. 359) .

Already Comte, moreover, had seen “the disease of the Western world» (Nisbet 1966, trad. it. 1987, p. 377) just in the individualism, by virtue of which an accent and an exaggerated emphasis on the agent's choice, «far from liberating individuals, has ensnared them in an empty chasm» (Houston 2010, p. 843). Indeed, «in the absence of a strong and resilient spirit in the view of the world [...] the dominant kind of modern personality will be adaptable - or other-directed» (Luckmann 2006, p. 11).

The other-direction, in the almost prophetic intuition by Riesman of over half a century ago, is the dynamic by which, in a ultimate self-determination (which could also be called *ultimate solitude*), an individual realizes himself simply realizing what the others want. The new thing is that this is not a process imposed by force (characteristic of the totalitarianism of the '900), but rather a formally free and voluntary choice, perceived as “natural”.

It is as if the “nature” endows the post-modern man of a “psychological radar” capable of detecting the action of others, especially the symbolic one: in this way, «the other-directed person acquires an intense interest in the ephemeral taste of the “others”» (Riesman 1950, trad. it. 1973, p. 93) and «the group of the peers becomes the measure of all things» (ibid, p. 102), the source of direction for the individual.

If this dynamic contains in itself a certain “naturalness”, that is, an anthropological necessity, since everybody, to some extent, wants and needs to please somebody, however it is «only the modern other-directed type that makes of this its main source of direction and its main sensitivity field» (ibid, p. 30). It is for this reason that the *approval* itself, regardless of its content, «becomes almost the only unequivocal good of this situation: you do well when you

are approved» (ibid, p. 62). Even the individual capacities or skills are so valued and rewarded not in itself but for the effect they have on others.

«From the moment of birth, the individual feels constantly repeating a lesson: there is only one way to get ahead in the world, that is, to give up the hope to fully realize oneself. The success can be achieved only through imitation [...] therefore he owes the salvation to the oldest biological survival gimmick, mimicry» (Horkheimer 1947, trad. it. 1970, p. 123).

The Weak Man Nemesis

How far, we ask ourselves in this last step, can one manage and manipulate the essential elements of identity construction and of its realisation, without endangering its proper development? One of the most delicate and critical points in the identity process is, according to the (not only) sociological tradition, a balanced *interaction Ego/Alter* (Luckmann 1963, Berger and Luckmann 1966, Tønnesvang 2005, Terenzi 2006) without which it is misleading to think to be able to “recognize” an individual.

This interaction, if on the one side does not happen in the abstract but always in a *space/time dimension* (Luhmann 1976, Luckmann 1983, Leccardi 2012) (that the postmodernity has strongly “earthquaked”), on the other hand it requires focusing on the relational dimension (Mead 1934, Berger and Berger 1975, Elias 1980, Dubar 1996, Seligman 2000, Archer 2003, Crespi 2005, Tønnesvang 2005, Donati and Colozzi 2006, Gattamorta 2008) essential for any identity maturation. The dynamics of recognition (Seligman 2000, Sparti 2008, Willig 2009), from this point of view, is the most crucial and delicate.

Let us now deepen and document the latter stages of our journey.

We hypothesized that the individual's relationship with the social order may have undergone a radical transformation with the advent of modern society. We ask now: below even profound changes in the dynamics of realization (closely related to socio-cultural variables) are there structurally immutable conditions? In other words, are there limits beyond which a change would lead to the annihilation of the process of identity construction? Let us analyze, as first step, the relationship between individual and system (which we could briefly indicate as Ego/Alter relation) trying to identify its constants and variables.

First, in traditional societies, «a knight was a knight and a farmer was a farmer, for others as well as for himself» (Berger and Luckmann 1966, trad. it. 1969, p. 224). This clearly does not imply that the farmer was happy with his identity or didn't wish to be a knight: simply the social mobility was then an impractical concept, and so you could not even feed nor imagine an “aspiration” of that kind. Identity was therefore not “a problem”: the majority of people, in fact, became «the one that was expected to become». Today, however, «the autonomy of individual existence appears to have become problematic» (Luckmann 1963, trad. it. 1969, p. 7).

The more options increase, in fact, the more the individual's relationship with the social system becomes problematic and, in this situation, in a more and more urgent way, «the question of the relationship between the individual's right to act and fulfill his desire and the duty to achieve higher moral ideals» (Tønnesvang 2005, p. 51) emerges.

The sociological theories of the “social hydraulic” have brought to the attention of scholars some central questions to understand the new ways in which the individual lives, interprets, uses or suffers the relationship with his social context: «What is the pressure of modern society on the course of individual life? How can a person maintain their autonomy in this society?» (Luckmann 1963, trad. it. 1969, p. 8).

For long time the sociological theory has settled on deterministic and ultra-socialized conceptions, for which the social system is considered to be the main agent able, by itself, to fully shape identity. Nowadays it has become usual to rethink some “surplus” of personal identity compared to the social context and to consider the identity «as a relationship between personal identity and social identity (identification and recognition)» (Terenzi 2006, p. 90).

Another component to consider to investigate properly the social construction of the identity processes is linked to the temporal dimension of these processes. If the construction of the self is a process, «time is the stuff of which the human self is built» (Luckmann 1983, p. 69). Also in this case the passage from the classical to the modern and postmodern cultures was decisive in many aspects and has produced previously unknown problems.

Social anthropology has made clear that identity is formed «by the continuity of the self over time» (Douglas 1983, p. 36). This is the essential element that can make a person “one with itself” over the changing phases of the whole life: the question of continuity, therefore, «is there for all questions of identity: similarity between the past and present circumstances [...], reasonable expectation that the similarity will continue» (ibid, p. 43).

On the contrary, precisely on this dimension postmodernity reveals a certain reluctance to recognize a continuous development as integral part of the human personality: this conflicts with the hypothesis that the identity can be defined, with the social psychology, «as an ongoing process, aimed at the elaboration and maintenance of positive psychological distinctive characters, as well as a sense of continuity and of social belonging» (Libebkind 1983, p. 187).

To question this principle, in its extreme logical consequences, can not but conflict with some of the cornerstones of the civil society itself: in fact, since the functioning of any legal system is based on the principle of personal responsibility, «the law requires that the person is conceived as continuous» (Douglas 1983, p. 37).

The law, that is, must assume the existence of continue and distinct identity, so that the fault committed yesterday can be considered as such today, through the continuity of the responsible, of the one guilty. We can therefore consider personal identity as «the outcome of the dialectical relationship between permanence and mutability, between continuity and discontinuity, between past, present and future» (Leccardi 2012, p. 40).

In the postmodernity all this is questioned: «We observe now the “loss of the stable state”» (Luhmann 1976, p. 134). In the seventeenth century, in fact, «the unity of existence and conservation broke down and the present time was conceived as discontinuous» (ibid, p. 133) giving rise to a so-called «era of instants in succession that take the place of the real experience of the time» (Leccardi 2005, p. 50) in which «the present time can therefore become an unique landmark» (ibid, p. 83).

But of all the critical aspects of the postmodern culture, what is perhaps incompatible (if pushed to its ultimate logical consequences) not just with the previous cultural tradition, but with the minimum basic requirements for the process of identity construction, is the management of “relationships”. In fact the conception of Alter as “surface” eliminates from the scene a protagonist essential to the individual's realization. The same result is obtained through the illusory transformation of one's own identity from public to private: the person, in fact, is humanized «not in solitude, or in the total social involvement, but in the inter-action with society» (Archer 2003, trad. it. 2006, p. 39).

“Healthy” personality, in fact, in psychiatry is «expression of a time and place, a system of interpersonal relations» (Murphy 1959, p. 83) since «identity for himself and identity for the other are at once inseparable and linked in a problematical way» (Dubar 1996, trad. it. 2004, p. 130). The effective depiction of Elias for which the identity is the result of two roots, *I/identity* (the proper name of the person), and *us/identity* (his last name) effectively emphasizes the irreducible complementarity of the two derivations.

Only Western society could afford the luxury of gradually accentuate the *I/identity* at the expense of *us/identity*: an identity “I without us”, though, can only flourish from the illusionary representation of the self that “adult, healthy and wealthy” people have (Elias, 1980), that is those who can enjoy short periods of fictitious self-sufficiency.

If «it is only through the others that we can arrive at the discovery of ourselves» (Berger and Berger 1975, trad. it. 1995, p. 81), it is only through the others, paradoxically, that the individual can progress in the conscience of his uniqueness and irreducibility up to «get to the point of going against the whole world» (Mead 1934, trad. it. 1966, p. 182). Identity, therefore, «is mediated by the relation, namely identity is formed through the relationship with the Other than oneself» (ibid, p. 364).

Without the contingency of the Alter-Ego relation, then, «person could not perform the steps required to develop his nature up to make the choices that affect his ultimate concerns» (Donati and Colozzi 2006, p. 104). In other words, «the social identity is formed in the dialogue between the “I” and the other identities» (ibid, p. 102). Just this dynamism, the *dialogue*, central in the identity development process, today seems to be in agony, with the general applause of those who, on the contrary, claim that they want to pursue and secure the rights of the individuality.

The Self develops up to his maturity only through dialogue, is a dialogical Self and coincides with «the task that every person has to become what it is through relationships and dialogical practices» (Gattamorta 2008, p. 228). It is naive to think that the person is able to enter into a relationship only as “already formed subject”: on the contrary, at the beginning there is just the relatedness «which makes possible the construction itself of individual subjects» (Crespi 2005, p. 8).

Such dynamic affects (and is condition of) all the stages of the identity development: «Without this root of relationship to others, the individual loses the reference point for the assessment of his experience» (Tønnesvang 2005, p. 56) and this disorientation, if should continue, would translate inevitably «in an experience of personal insignificance» (ibid).

We can, for this reason share a logical and extraordinarily demanding conclusion: «Self-realization is basically a quite relational feat [...] and only such self-realization-in-connection deserves to be called self-realization in a genuine sense» (ibid, p. 54). In a framework where “connections” become “surfaces” or are simply enjoyed at an instrumental level, the realization path can only be put at risk.

Nowadays the assumption that self-realisation and relatedness are incompatible terms is by now part of our way of thinking: in fact, the individual personality can be realized «only within the matrix of social relations, and therefore in full compliance with laws, standards and rules that define it» (Seligman 2000, trad. it. 2002, p. 64) and not simply «through self-realization of the will» (ibid, p. 65).

The experience that shows the more the non-negotiability of this dynamic is exactly the human need for “recognition”: «The need to be taken into account is not simply a need among many others, which we can eventually give up. The condition of possibility of our being persons is enrolled just in it» (Sparti 2008, p. 113). So the idea of “recognition” can be considered as “axial principle” in human relations, since «mutual recognition is a prerequisite for an optimal self- realization» (Houston 2010, p. 846).

Being recognized means to be the subject of that «expressive act by which another person makes a gesture of respect [...] to be welcome in any space/time context» (Willig 2009, p. 355). This is so true that if the expected recognition does not arrive, the individual falls into the invisibility: «Recognition is a basic human need to make sense to the self» (ibid).

One can better understand the centrality of this process in the light of the fact that, for each of us (in different variations), it is essential to make a distinctive contribution for the community «and, above all, to see recognized this contribution» (Houston 2010, p. 853). To thin, make superficial, barter or reset the social ties (especially those with the important others) means then delete the unique «context within which the individual can exist and be recognized» (Seligman 2000, trad. it. 2002, p. 188).

It should also be considered that the need for recognition is anything but childish or outdated, even in the most anonymous and bureaucratic relationships: we might indeed consider this element one of the most effective motives in setting in motion and in holding together the feverish activism of the advanced societies.

However, probably it is an impoverished recognition, reduced to its psychological or instrumental dimensions: «What remains to be recognized if the roles are emptied of meaning and are separated from the subjects in any meaningful way? When the authority is internalized, it becomes impossible to aspire to mutual recognition, and we find ourselves trapped in increasingly solipsistic forms of self-recognition, which is often reduced to a simple acclamation» (ibid, p. 190).

Are we still in the post-modernity? It would seem not, but there are still no clear signs that indicate the direction that this possible overcome might take. Certainly postmodern culture has not helped modern man in his realization urgency, compared to the “types” that preceded him.

Rights and opportunities have increased, wealth too have increased (which however threatens again a sensational climb-down) and with it the *deus ex machina*, the well-being. Nevertheless today it is not easier to answer the question of many human science researchers trying to measure happiness, that is, to determine what makes people happy and to measure the social progress as well. If it is almost trivial to point out that “people in rich countries are happier than people in poor countries” it is rather interesting to recognize that «once the level of wealth per capita of a society exceeds a threshold, any further increase have almost no effect on happiness» (Schwartz 2004, p. 106).

There is always something that is not “obtainable“, of which, however, we feel the need, as something essential. «But if money does not make people happy, what can do it? What seems to be the most important factor in providing happiness are the narrow social relationships [...] to be connected to others seems to be much more important to the subjective well-being than to be rich» (ibid, p. 107).

It should be noted that a bizarre paradox underlies these claims: social ties, those who would seem to favor the realization process of the person, «actually diminish the freedom, choice and autonomy» (ibid). The strongest bonds (marriage, friendship, ideological or religious affiliation) are in fact the ones that bind the individual’s action: and so, «what seems to contribute more to happiness binds us rather than to free us» (ibid, p. 108).

Let us conclude by two brief observations about the path followed until here.

Postmodernity has been a “short circuit” culture in which the human risks the *blackout*: when in fact other's urgency and self's exaltation are instrumentally opposed, one tries to turn on the engine, but closing the fuel pump. To enhance the individual coincides with to enhance the network of relations able to recognize it.

The outcome of this drunkenness is paradoxically an extreme and almost absolute solitude of the individual with himself, which, however, can only seek the recognition he needs through less demanding and possibly “virtual” relationships. This creates a human profile, an “ideal type” that should camp at the top of the postmodern dictionary and conclude it, the *weak man*, nemesis of the process that, in intentions, should have enhanced his consolidation and his self-determination ability: the deterioration of relational goods brings with itself the false exaltation of the *depleted man*.

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