THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY TROUGH THE WEB IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES

Matteo CONTE

Graduate student in Science of Training and Education, Department of Education, Psychology, Communication, University of Bari "Aldo Moro", Bari, Italy

Abstract: *In our Liquid Modernity, the online and offline experiences represent two dimensions that might be confused, jeopardizing the very formation of a person. The advent of new media is changing, in terms of structure and functionality, one's own Self and one's identity. To build the current dimension, characterized by globalization processes on one hand and by migratory flows that produce miscegenation on the other hand, it is vital not to break the thread binding us to our tradition, culture and roots. In other words, we cannot and we should not give up our cultural identity, trying to develop as much as possible a 'glocal' identity. The joint commitment is therefore to build, also through new media, a model of civilization and culture capable of activating paths of harmonic coexistence between the various cultures, while preserving their identity and membership. The use of New media confronts us with a new modality called "Culture of Encounter", based on man's ability to use the cyberspace to shorten the distance between individuals who cohabit the same planet; this, provided that the global citizen has sufficient digital skills and sufficient media education. In fact, in absence of a proper education, the virtual dimension could strengthen a "Culture of Clashing" fueling the distances between peoples, cultures and traditions, through the dissemination of stereotypes and prejudices. Has the realization of the global village by MacLuan materialized? Or, as claimed by Lazarsfeld and Merton, there is a homophilia condition in which the Net surfer has undermined the possibility of creating a global village by searching only those people that share its same interests? My paper winds on these key points.*

Keywords: *community; intercultural context; communication; identity; new media*

1. INTRODUCTION

In our Liquid Modernity, (Bauman), we often hear speaking about identity and we wonder about its relationship and significance; substantially, we wonder if it means being different from everyone else in one's own uniqueness, or it means to be included in a precise category because identical to someone else. Whatever may be the motives and circumstances in which the process of construction of the identity happens, it clearly appears that identity is defined in terms of equality and difference, of inclusion or exclusion in relation to a group or a category. This means that it implies simultaneously sameness and differentiation. In fact, we observe opposing but complementary trends: on one hand, an increasingly common habit by the individual to turn in on himself and to concentrate solely on his person and on his individual identity, highlighting differences and traits that distinguish him; on the other hand, the need to belong to a wider grouping, have thus a shared and collective identity. When speaking of socialization, we refer to the complex process through which the individual becomes a social being, integrating himself in in a social group or community, and this happens through "the inter-generational transfer of cultural values, symbolic systems and social norms" (Heinz, 1998). In the Classical theories of socialization, two phases are distinct: the primary socialization and the secondary one. The primary socialization refers to the early years of a child's life. At this stage the family plays a key role, the child becomes able to confront himself with and to assume those regulatory/ symbolic orientations and roles of people who care for him, of his parents first; the child not only assumes roles, but starting from a specific language internalizes a whole view of the specific world that is the basis of every group and every social order. The secondary socialization begins when the child enters the school and continues throughout life. In this second phase, also other socialization agencies such as the school, social groups, the working environment and new media, play an extremely important role. The new

has an impact on what has already been acquired by becoming integral part of the personal identity. This one, is constituted, preserved and developed within a net of social relationships, which have a center represented by the closest and most important people. Usually what prevents us from breaking down barriers is the fear that the contact with diversity and cultural inter-mixture may overwhelm those boundaries we have built and our person along with them. Fear, though, makes us forget that the other is a complementary and essential part of the process of defining our own self and, as a result, we cannot see the positive effects produced by the breaking down of barriers and by crossing the borders. Indeed, although the identity needs to be formed within certain boundaries, it also needs to have confrontation with the other; in fact "No culture and no civilization reaches its fullness if does not enter into a relationship with the others" (Bauman, 2005). A closing attitude toward others reflects the same attitude towards oneself, and consequently we lose our true nature and relational skill. Only through contact with the other, it is possible to open to the world and thus avoid the fossilization of our being. The interaction and exchanges with diversity are undoubtedly part of the continuous process of definition and elaboration of identities. Without dialogue and confrontation, a complete and fully developed individuality would be impossible. Instead, if we allow the interaction between different identities or cultures, we will see that such contacts are not destructive, but rather feed such identities and make them stronger; and, above all, that differences may continue to exist even though, although mixed. Exchange and interaction do not necessarily lead to an indistinct uniformity, but are to be considered as a great opportunity for growth and enrichment.

> Not due to the fact that the exchange often leads to the change everyone will end up diluted in an indistinct magma where identities will be lost or strangled, and differences will be deleted. Change through exchange amounts to enrich ourselves in the highest sense of the term, not to get lost. (Chamoiseau, 2008).

Therefore, we must find the right fit, the right combination of separation and interaction, of opening and closing.

2. LIQUID LIFE BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE

The emphasis on the relational aspect requires particular attention toward and for the other, especially in an age that glorifies individualism, not altruism, and that promotes the exclusion of
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diversity, not the dialogue and the meeting. Social relations have the priority on the assertion of one's subjectivity. This is not to say that relationships take precedence over the individual, because one's own Self, the subjectivity, exists independently from the other individual and before him; but we cannot deny that fact that the individual can establish himself and be himself only through relationships with the other one.

> The postmodern man does not want to feel stuck in a stable relationship, but he cannot do without the other; for this reason he looks for opportunities where the relationship does not require commitment and is easy to abandon and replace with another relationship just as fragile and temporary. And so we seek shelter in networks, to which, compared to rigid links, you can connect and disconnect with the same ease. (Bauman, 2005)

The same technological and informatics tools encourage us to seek and build short, fragile and impersonal relationships. Media devices, such as the mobile phone, allow us to get in touch with someone, but keeping the distance and avoiding the risk of creating a relationship deeper than what the man of the modern liquidity actually desires. A phone call, a little text message or an email let you stay in touch, but always with due distance. The lack of safe places, able to produce aggregation, and the inability to create stable ties result in the birth of the so-called "closet communities". However, the speed and ease with which one enters and exits these communities and the lack of long-lasting ties compromise the quality. The individual reacts to this poor quality by developing multiple identities and memberships, as to compensate what the new type of community is unable to give him. Therefore, with the crisis of the concept of community, an unbridled individualism emerges, where no one has more fellow traveler but each one is an antagonist from whom to beware. The technological progress grew faster and faster, leaving behind the development of consciences, of human relations and one of the first effects of this new society is the fear of loneliness, the need not to feel alone. The model to be, to prove our own existence, has changed significantly compared to the time when Descartes formulated his axiom *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am); this was certain to Descartes, but is no longer valid today. The fact that we think and that we are able to prove our own existence is the final proof that our presence is real and not imaginary. In the postmodern age, nothing resists so long intact and unchanged. Like any other entity, the identity is subject to the tendency of

continuous renewal and transformation. It becomes a testing material, since the individual faces a wide range of identities that he tries, changes, puts on and takes off depending on his desires and needs. In this regard, it is appropriate to dwell on the antinomy Online/Offline. Bauman, in fact, has already wondered about the effects that new technologies bring within the contemporary society. In particular, the author claims that the Offline is that part of the day when the subject lives in the ordinary world; the Online id the time that the subject passes inside the screen (about 7 ½ hours a day). He does not focus on technologies earnings (while recognizing them) because he puts them in the background for a moment; instead, he speaks of the losses that technologies bring in the ordinary life, with the purpose to inform young people (and so, future generations) of many problems, often underestimated. Bauman supports the idea that the use of technologies and social networks stems from the need for personal security of individuals (especially noted in each one's efforts to seek friendships): to be able to check on friends and have a list of them seems to erase the fear of the man to be abandoned. According to sociologists, this is a downside because seems to "facilitate" life but actually leads to build fragile and insecure identities. Instead, in real life (offline), the social links involve many more risks and hardships, but also allow to have certainties that are not "fictitious" and that are based on experience. Perhaps, this is our most challenging difficulty: being able to build true friendships. The online world is seen as a comfort zone, a "conflict-free" world, where the subject is surrounded by people like him (mirror relationship) and does not compare himself with idea and opinions other than his own; so, for example, he opens only sites that prefers and does nothing but confirms what he already thinks. In that regard, sociologists Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld study such effects by extending the features cited by Bauman and distinguishing the "homophilia status" from the "homophilia value". The first describes individuals with social status similarities that are more likely to associate with one another (given their common characteristics); the second one refers to the tendency to associate with other people who think in similar ways, regardless of differences of status. Speaking of this, Bauman sees the future of the generations with a vein of pessimism because today, with current technologies, the man has learned to escape from disagreements and this will prevent his development. He claims that the next century will be an "unpleasant" century in which to live. However, he leaves a little hope affirming

that we, youngsters, should build the future by taking responsibility. It is interesting and useful that Bauman puts aside for the moment the positive aspects of technologies so much highlighted, to focus on negative ones that are gradually damaging the man; this in order to make young people aware of the society in which they live. If we do not acknowledge the losses progressively suffered, the future of the man will be deeply wounded and devoid of values. Further, as stated by the sociologist,

> we ourselves create the future, so we still have time to change. Therefore, the problem are not technologies, but the man who abuses by making an improper and excessive use of them. It is necessary learning to use them as tools, through a critical sense.

Therefore, today more than ever, there is a need for Media Education. Contextualizing the inevitable strong imposition of media, one of the axioms of Media Education is

> to promote a critical, creative and conscious attitude toward the media; to be able to dominate them, not being enslaved, to be able to evaluate them in their context and to adapt them to our needs (A. Calvani, 2010).

Therefore, we should not demonize the media, being scared or getting away from them; we must try to embrace the change with a positive and adventurous spirit, given the vastness of tools and possibilities that they offer. For this reason, there should be an area of study helping the individual to achieve what expressed from the axiom mentioned above. To begin stopping creating situations of adaption to these tools in an old age, there is nothing better than introducing them in the universal sphere of development of each individual: the school. The school must change in all possible facets, permanently abandoning a defensive and defeatist position and redefining concepts, skills and methods. The Media Education is dedicated to make these changes concrete, protected and entitled as soon as possible, trying to develop *an education to media and with media*. With *education to media,* we refer to education that has as its object the study of the technological tool itself, while *education with media* means the integration of the technological tool within the teaching and learning, as a means of support. In the school, the *media education* should find room with a double meaning: first, as training in the use of these media in their valence as cognitive tools, as an exercise of

analysis (in this case we can refer to blogs and to *social networks*); but the network of virtual communication should not be confused with the social communication. Secondly, the *media education* should be considered as critical form that allows a reflexive and meta-cognitive retroaction. A school that wants to integrate new technologies within the educational process must develop its projects' abilities related to the media education, considering the use of new technologies not as an additional element to traditional teaching, but as something contextual to it. However, this process will be possible only with an institutional commitment to invest in economic resources (rigging of schools with digital tools) and human resources (professional updating of teachers). Only in that way we can reach a picture less fragmented and disorganized of the results achieved by the medial practices at schools. A development of the media education could help to fill the digital gap existing between young people who have easy access to the network and those that do not have such a luck due to their socio-economic condition. In addition, it may fill the participatory gap between students who have developed good skills in interacting with the web and those who have not yet developed a proper critical sense. In fact, we should not forget how important it is a good support to the media education so that young people may develop a strong sense of citizenship and may understand the importance of an active participation to the community life. As seen, the new media offer enormous opportunities at this regard if training agencies are able to exploit digital technologies in implementing educational dynamics. If positive interventions will be realized within medial education in formal and non-formal contexts, we can hope for new generations the development of a good digital literacy that touches also the topic of openness to other cultures. All this because the mass media have brought an estrangement from otherness: there is the need, expressed by Emmanuel Lèvinas in 1998, to found a *humanism of the other man* starting from the symmetry, which means to recognize the other's face as equal to ours, as subject-individual-person. We need not a damnation of the media but of a mediation: the school has the time to do this because it can judge and it is the depositary of a high ritual of culture. Moving toward a more general model of pluralism, faced with this mixture of mass media culture, it is necessary to develop an attitude of reflexivity toward their intrusiveness and omnipresence. In short, we need to equip young people with antibodies: a critical conscience and a habit of critical thinking.

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3. NEW MEDIA AND IDENTITY

Today the distances between various parts of the world have shortened and thanks to mass media, we can establish a dense network of communication between various parts of our planet. For this reason, we feel more and more members of a global community, inside which circulate ideas and principles that apply to all. However, we should recall that a mass culture could not shatter the deep roots of every nation, which actually represent an important resource that has be protected in its individuality. The culture of a people is its identity, the system of ideas where a social group reflects itself and through which finds a way to express its mental symbols, explicating its way of relating to reality. A general and global culture cannot replace the individual culture. A global culture, however, can be a valuable tool to build a broader cultural communication able to overcome individualism and mental closures. If the literature has often reiterated that digital natives, as sons of the global culture, live in an era characterized by the liquefaction of the concepts of space and time, just as often studies on the Net generation have overlooked issues like the relationship between inter-culturalism and new technologies. Nonetheless, some of the earlier studies on the Web focused on the relationship between the media development and spatial barriers removal, in continuation of the already famous concept of the modern "global village" developed by McLuhan (1964). With this expression, the famous representative of the Toronto's school, so-called deterministic current, saw in electronic media the tools able to mark the change from a urban space-centrist model, firmly anchored to the idea of the city as a hub of civilization, to the global model based on a wide society in which individuals and institutions live free from boundaries and territorial barriers. Another term frequently approached with the global adjective is "community", strongly connected to the role of new media. Rheingold (1993), another guru of social studies on the Internet in the early 1990s, has begun talking about "virtual communities" foreseeing that through the network it would have been possible to build relationships so vast and profound to lead to the formation of a kind of virtual nation. A nation composed of aware citizens able to turn telematics sites into real spaces of democratic confrontation. The point is that new media are not technologies that emerge from nothing, but artifacts that interact with complex cultural systems, with stories and different structures. Therefore, starting from this

reflection, it raises the crucial question on which we intend to dwell, namely the relationship between inter-culturalism and new media, in view of the new generations. Some studies, however, seem to indicate the path of a substantially unresolved contradiction. On one side, the web and connective technologies propose themselves as windows on the world, able to provide information and to intrigue about what is happening to communities to which we do not belong; on the other side, however, this opening does not determine the formation of that community "as big as the world", which Rheingold hoped for. Therefore, talking of identity brings us on a twisty terrain that connotes a dimension of being halfway between the subject's inner world and his social context. In particular, the social psychology tends to distinguish between personal identity and social identity of the individual (Tajfel, 1981), i.e. between that set of personalizing features characterizing each of us, in the relationship with ourselves, and the way to present ourselves to others, to interact with them, to modulate our attitudes depending on the situation. For digital generations the new media are a unifying element that becomes a means of socialization used daily, sometimes spontaneously. Thus, the connective technologies can rise to the role of a "generational" factor, carrying a common feeling translated into a collective identity. This conception leads us back and rejoins to the need of somehow categorizing the young cohorts based on cognitive dresses. Hence, the note definitions: digital natives, net generation, y generation, and so on. In his book "Tragic Joy", Vincenzo Susca (2010) continues the discourse on young people's countercultures, noting that what characterized them is the need of assert one's own collective identity, which corresponds to the individual need of recognition and emancipation of teenage self. This process has always had powerful vehicles in relational and informal universes, like those created by the consumption system including technologies. For example, the music, clothing and television were in the past among the main communication tools used by young people to present themselves to the adults' world. However, often we do not recognize such an expressive force to digital generations because, as highlighted by Susca, the new media deprive the need of identity for young people: these tools expand so much the public and relational sphere and offer so many possibilities of self-representation that fail to form a real and effective generational glue. After all, to quote Goffman (1959), the new media often appear as mediators that allow adjusting the way of presenting our own self in various stages, depending on personal factors related to the corporeal world. Instead, the subject immersed in the world 2.0 lives in a different condition, in universes based on sharing, on the socialization of resources and knowledge, on the traceability of personal data. In a few words, what Castells (2009) defines auto-communication of the mass. In this perspective, the Web may be considered space and tool for building and exchanging meanings, especially for the younger cohorts, that growing from childhood in contact with the network and with the digital world have in them an important reference. The processes of understanding the world, who are always underway and that in the past were only corporeal, cannot be withheld in the Web 2.0; the Web 2.0 is, above all, sociability and sharing. This marks a decisive difference between the cohorts born in the 1990s and the digital natives of Prensky, still bearers of cognitive dresses still tied to a pre-digital cultural context. Therefore, the possibility of real contact with the inhabitants of any part of the world, even more than the digital globalization of internet and of social networks, has knocked down many myths and raised many questions. As claimed by Bennet, we are in a society where the desirable paradigm seems to be represented by the self-determined citizenship, characteristic of a globalized society, structured on reticular relations and on a consequent horizontal communication model, without hierarchies, dynamic and implemented by the development of tools that feed the collaboration, interaction and permanent participation among people, no longer considering them as passive counterparts but equipped with a positive and pro-active right to citizenship. In this sense, the Network is regarded as a formidable democratic gym where practice "forms of participatory democracy, in which everyone is called to his own mission of citizen of the world". And it is this latter assumption that allows us be glocal, while localism is now an empirical fact that cannot be challenged. This term was introduced by the studies of sociologists like Roland Robertson and Zygmunt Bauman to indicate the phenomena arising from the impact of the globalization on local realities and vice versa.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Today, there are no places that are not increasingly crossed by global flows of various kinds, nor global flows that are not inflected according to the many peculiarities of places. The glocalization is thus a turning point, determined by

the change in organizational paradigms of the world and society, especially as a result of technological innovation, which has profoundly changed the way we relate to the concepts of time and place. Today the man is testing the opportunity to live in an environment dominated by the mobility of people, things and signs. In the passage from an inter-national world to a glocal one, it was exactly the new concept of mobility that caused a profound change in a series of conceptual parameters to which we were accustomed, including the idea of citizenship, of belonging and nationality (and, therefore, also of the very concept of inter-national relations). Serious reflections should be developed on this transformation and on new consequent conceptualizations relate to the definition of border and of territory.

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