Collective Identity as a Rhetorical Device

Abstract

Of the plural dimensions of collective identity, this paper explores identity as a rhetorical device. The identity tag is a case in point of pragmatic effectiveness. To account for such a power a hypothetical model of identity categories is presented. Its constituent modules shape four basic dimensions: position, deindividuation, exclusion and cognitive shielding. Such delineated narrative identity becomes equivalent to an informal ideology (Halliday, 2005). As constitutive rhetoric (Charland, 1987), the narrative construction of identities converts self-referential tautology into strategies of discrimination, purification and extermination of exponents of otherness. Last century mass destruction – totalitarianism, colonialism, ethno-nationalism – has been tributary to the identity paradigm.

Key words
collective identity, rhetoric, us vs. them, exclusion, moral obligation, political violence

“Ogni identità è anche orribile perché per esistere deve tracciare un confine e respingere chi sta dall’altra parte.”
C. Magris (Microcosmi, 43)

“It is not the attribute that makes the group, but the group and group differences that make the attribute important (…) What counts is not whether objective differences are present, but whether they are used to mark one group off from another.”
D. Horowitz (1985: 50)

“Sitôt qu’un homme se compare aux autres il devient nécessairement leur ennemi.”
J. J. Rousseau (Fragments Politiques, O.C. III: 478)

“Nous sommes tous frères, nous nous sentons comme un seul homme. (…) À présent, nous sommes nous. (…) Nous voulons de nouvelles frontières. Nous voulons un empire.”
V. Stevanović (La neige et les chiens, 68)

In this article* I link the concept of group loyalty with that of uncivil behaviour. Therefore, the scope of this relationship should be qualified from the

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beginning. In principle, the concept of loyalty bears positive connotations and justifiably so. In the collective experience, loyalty schemes can contribute to social cooperation through membership integrators such as liberal nationalism or constitutional patriotism. But they can, reciprocally, in another instance of the ambivalence of social processes, lead to intolerance, intransigence and exclusion, through destructive competition. Social identities “have been employed to mobilize support for genocide and collective resistance to genocide” (Reicher et al., 2005: 621). This paradox underlies the thesis of Diana Mutz: “Homogeneous networks can be a force for positive change or a source of intolerance and extremism” (2006: 148). The determining factor for shifting to the negative side is, in my view, the degree of emphasis on homogeneity/difference, rather than on the side of heterogeneity/equality. This accounts for the swing towards the exclusive and exclusionary component of affiliation (Gomez, 2001; Ignatieff, 1993; Reicher et al., 2005; Wamwere, 2003). As Maalouf states (2003: 37, 40), the conception of identity allows men of all countries, conditions and faiths, to be transformed into murderers and fanatics.

Identity is a polysemous concept and one of remarkable generative strength. Of its many facets, this paper will focus on the cognitive-discursive side of collective identity. The process of identity configuration could be described as a continuous. On one extreme, a rhetorical device of constituent properties (self-categorization); on the opposite, expressions of social mobilization leading to uncivil practices and resulting in the conversion of rhetoric energy into political power. This paper deals mainly with the first part of the continuum, leaving aside the crucial aspect concerning the interaction between meaning and context, mental constructions and social contingencies.

If identity shows such an influence on social processes, it is reasonable to inquire where its force lays. When the historian Th. Mommsen responded at the end of the 19th century to the call for a critical comment on Semitism: “You are wrong, you assume that by means of reason is possible to get something. But it is useless, utterly useless” (in Horkheimer, 1986: 184, and Massing, 1949: 167–168); and P. Vilar (1977: 156), Wilkinson and Pickett (2009: 58) remind what social psychologists since S. Ash have observed again and again – that confronting socio-evaluative threats can be even more terrible than confronting the war – then, one is invited to consider why particular systems of beliefs are insoluble in the conventional logic of rationality. It seems therefore convenient to inquire about the core of this difficulty to cope with such a social force of gravitation, so emblematically represented by Ionesco’s play Rhinoceros. The analysis must begin by pointing out a basic fact: as humans we do not usually deal with raw or primary facts, rather the object of our concerns are conceptually manufactured realities, for there is no reality outside the cognitive frames that shape data, conforming them into a comprehensible and mentally digestible stuff (Melucci, 1996: 77). To place rhetoric in the foreground of this presentation is due, therefore, to the requirements of explanation in social sciences. I will adopt the so-called social problems approach. It is a modality of constructivism that defines social problems, according to Spector and Kitsuse, as “the activities of individuals and groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative condition”, so that the central task for a theory of social problems is to “account for the emergence, nature and maintenance of claims-making and responding activities” (in Berger, 2002: 17). What concerns this inquiry is a particular case in which the putative condition is determined by the content of the generically denominated identity ascription category (IAC).
This essay seeks to outline the answer to a couple of basic questions: i) which are the conceptual constituents of collective identity frames; ii) why are they so powerful, so efficient, in terms of the social consequences they precipitate. To both questions underlies the contention that rhetoric remains an essential piece to decode the riddle of political violence (Alonso, 2010).

Loyalty, identity and exclusionary practices

What kind of elective affinities prefigure the scripts grounded on collective identity categories? A central issue for social interaction is that of those who make up the “we”, creditor of moral obligations, and those who, by contrast, constitute the “they” deprived of such attributions (Gamson, 1991: 3). Helen Fein, in her scheme to explain the genocide and other forms of violence collectively approved, coined the concept of universe of obligation to refer to the sphere of persons to whom we have commitments and against which we consider ourselves responsible for our actions (1979: 7). She adds that such universes can be conceived in an inclusive manner, in which case the limits of the universe virtually coincide with the boundaries of society, or exclusive, when only a part of society is accommodated within the borders protected by moral imperatives. It seems that identity-based cognitive frames tend to favour the second type. Accordingly, conceptual systems are created that assign differential values to behaviours depending on the position of the referent. Therefore, an unfailing characteristic of the mainstream of political violence is its transitiveness: the targets of aggression are invariably located on the other side of the demarcation line. The process of justification of violence is, as it were, dissolved in the process of manufacturing the other in the work of hetero-definition.

The incisive pen of Miguel de Unamuno (1991: 25), witness of the horror of the Spanish Civil War, sums up the argument in a simple phrase of unnecessary attribution:

“– But what? Not antipatriotics, here?
– No
– What a pity! To whom shall we kill?”

The master of sociologists Ch. Tilly (2003: 11) addresses the question that motivates this section with this summary statement: the empirical evidence shows the “surprising prominence of ‘us-them’ categorical distinctions in all the varieties of collective violence”. This remark invites to investigate who holds the status of subject, as it is him who, at the same time, issues the protective definition and promotes the uncivil drifts – which sometimes remain at the less severe point of invisibilisation (as in the novel of R. W. Ellison), while others reach the opposite extreme of destructive action, of extermination. Because the narrative of self-aggrandizement involves a symmetrical counterpart of hetero-degradation and dehumanization (Alonso, 2009a; Horkheimer 1986: 182; Wamwere, 2003), as suggested by I. Buruma (2002: 12), “identity is a bloody business”. Next section will explore how collective identity labels are manufactured.

An identity model: dimensions and modules

For clarification purposes it seems appropriate to sketch the geometry of the figure in order to isolate the ideological products belonging to the identity paradigm. After recalling its strong generative capacity, it should be pointed
out that, in general terms, an identity matrix creed typically includes a set of dimensions or, as Melucci (1996: 76) put it, “a system of vectors in tension”, incorporating each of them a cluster of interrelated fuzzily separated modules. The hypothetical identity model to be suggested contains four basic dimensions: position, deindividuation, exclusion and cognitive shielding. I will outline them by describing the constituent modules.

**Position dimension**

The position dimension refers to the processes and strategies aimed at defining a dominant affiliation – dominant in the double sense of powerful, superior, or privileged, and primary, principal or prevailing. Four basic modules make up this dimension: topological, axiological, stratigraphic and psychological.

1. **Topological module.** The starting point of identity construction processes is the layout of a dividing line that erects a protective gate around the in-group and that, conversely, places outside its walls the members of the out-group. At the origin of identity conceptions we always recognize the craftwork of synecdoche, the figure that divides the social space by marking an area of exclusive use for an incumbent “we” previously constituted. Incandescent identities produce a social geography of trenches or, in less extreme cases, a juxtaposition of homogeneous enclaves – a federation of isomorphic entities or plural monoculturalisms (Sen, 2006: 157) – as an antithesis of pluralism, for in this case permeable spaces for the multiple categories of common citizenship distributed along the social actors are required. S. Arana (1999: 346), the founder of Basque nationalism, a strand of which encourages ETA violence even nowadays, managed to condense the knot of the module into a successful formula: “a colored cloth and an imaginary line mark the beginning of hate”, although it is worth remembering that he said nothing about the Vordenkers calling to waving flags and drawing the lines. The script in its naked dualistic simplicity is already visible in Plato’s *Menexenus* (245). Social markers are formidable polarizing tools culminating in a complete separation of people into clear-cut groups.

Identity ascription categories fulfil the function of the word ‘civilization’ in the ideograph ‘clash of civilizations’: foreshadow a collision and the previous manufacture of the belligerent actors. Through categorization, boundary markers impinge on individuals. The narratives of identity bear serious social implications; compared to a constitutional topology (an open space in the double dimensions of democracy and law), the identity maps represent walled, gated, pigeonholed and compartmentalized spaces (Bowman, 2003; M. Margalit, 2010; Ron, 2003), to mention just one of a vast range of implications for two particular contexts, Israel and former Yugoslavia.

2. **Axiological module.** The divide creates ontological differences, assigns values based on the respective location, so that membership confers a “strong sense of superior human value” (Elias, 2003: 242). Remember the words of the *Führer*: “It must be a greater honor to be a street-cleaner and citizen in this Reich than a king in a foreign state” (Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, II, 3). This feature marks the plutocracy of belonging. The biggest difference is achieved, as evidenced by the minimal group paradigm in social psychology, with a dual interdependent map of the identity trench: the exaltation of one’s own tribe by the mechanisms of self-affirmation – *Her-
renvolk – in the advantageous side, the dysphemisms of dehumanising degradation – Lebensunwert – in the opposite; the negative prejudice is a single thing with the positive (Horkheimer, 1986: 182). “Without the dark Jew there would never have been the shining figure of Germanic Nordic” (Klemperer 2001: 254); if someone refers to the Evil Empire, he becomes ipso facto self-ascribed to the Good Empire. In practical terms, the clash of (multiple) civilizations is reduced to a duel between “West” and “Islam”, that is, between (the one) civilization and barbarism, in the same terms James Mill opposed colonialist Britain to colonised India (in Sen, 2006: 87). If there is an unequivocal indicator of the identity gap it is humiliation, an emblem of asymmetry inherent to any form of domination for it entails the deepest treatment of dispossession and plundering, the one affecting dignity and honour (Margalit, 2007: 17; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 156). And this identity ditch of haughtiness/humiliation continues even inside the grave, where those outside the group are buried face down, following a widespread custom since prehistoric times, according to archaeologist Inés Pregeiro (El País, 22/7/2010). Such is the case when Achilles denies Hector the funeral rite, dragging and profaning his corpse. “The trajectory that begins with the narcissism of minor differences can end with utter moral abjection” (Ignatieff, 1997: 62). And when moral substance is added to the polarized social field, then Manicheanism is the predictable output.

3. **Stratigraphic module.** The combination of the two mentioned modules results in a stratified, hierarchical world view, headed by an elected group holder of exclusive rights. It should be recalled that the construction of pyramids, as figurehead of the artefacts legitimising inequality, is a historical constant and that the particular locus assigned to an individual produces crucial effects on his life opportunities in terms of what might be called law of social gravitation; a law that generates a consequence of rhetoric nature: those at the top normally present their privileges as rights. We should add that, as is the case for identities, independent hierarchical systems can coexist – class and gender provide an example at hand. The social consequences are obvious: identity frames operate functionally as a variant of the processes of stratification that express the logic of domination, of social discrimination. In its extreme forms they are equivalent to vertical segregation evoking the ascritive closed estates of the Ancient Régime. Identity programs are one of the redistributive policies available to political elites; investment on nationalism is part or the opportunity structure in the political competition for constituencies. According to Hitler, the “folkish philosophy” serves the basic aristocratic idea of Nature… [and will prepare the way in order that] at last the best of humanity having achieved possession of this earth, will have a free path… (Mein Kampf, II, 1).

4. **Psychological module.** The basis of belief and value supporting the identity complex is a mental state defined by a positive enveloping affectivity. The feeling associated to the affiliation category to which you ascribe takes a motivational dimension: achieving positive distinctiveness – narcissism of small differences – as a share in a high corporate self-esteem. The distinctiveness needs contrast to be consolidated, and such a contrast produces the emotional asymmetry underlying the cognitive level (Melucci, 1996: 83). Membership incorporates an endogenous reward system capable of overcoming the conventional utilitarian criteria, so that the individual may sacrifice valuable material goods – even life itself – to achieve other
imaginary ones associated with the cognitive-emotional mental state described. Suicide bombers do nothing but to redeem life for identity and obtain as reward the crown of martyrdom, the highest degree of being in the ranks of the membership category. They are not alone, as shown in Jesus Casquete monograph on the political religion of radical Basque nationalism. If I mentioned an endogenous reward system it is because: a) “it is intrinsically reassuring and rewarding for people to see that other share their perspectives” (Mutz, 2006: 148), and b) “his ego is inflated by the fact of belonging to the good race; the place of the individual merits is transferred to the feeling of belonging to a community” (Horkheimer, 1986: 182). When Lt. General William Boykin evoked his battle against Muslims asserting that “I knew that my God was bigger than his” and that while the Christian God “was a real God, [the Muslim’s] was an idol” (in Sen, 2006: 13), it expressed at the same time the conviction of a higher collective self-esteem and the exclusionary pragmatics of humiliation. But the conviction of a higher value – of an inflated self-esteem – does not limit its impact to the psychological level, for it foreshadows a grade of expectations and an incentive scheme coextensively high, proportional to the superlative selfconcept represented by the notion of ‘the chosen people’. And, in this point, the social effects mimic the psychology of the spoiled child: the low threshold of tolerance to frustration because reality and social interactions will be hardly up to such expectations. From this mindset to the melancholy of irredentism, the stolen destiny and the exaltation of victimhood, there is a very short step (Alonso, 2009b). Such a complex yields consequences to the cognitive sphere (see epistemological module, below). In effect, it contradicts the functioning of the binary logic by way of an inversionary device; for if you agree with, you support the believer’s position – the conviction that he is right – while if you disagree it means that there are enemies; ergo, he is also right. In the language of games theory: if they win, they are right; and if they lose, there is a conspiracy against them because they are right. This is the kind of dilemma presented when trying to convince a hypochondriac.

Deindividuation dimension

When the salient feature of identity is of a collective kind, processes of compacting particular individuals into social blocks are required. Four modules cooperate in that end: genealogical, organismic, essentialist and teleological. While the position dimension provides an “us vs. them” picture, the deindividuation dimension commands the thick relations portraying the tribal image. As M. Ignatieff (1995: 188) writes about the main political expression of identity: “Being only yourself is what an ethnic nationalism will not allow”. The whole work of the cultural historian George L. Mosse is a superb exemplification of the process of deindividuation or, in his own terms, the ‘depersonalization of man’, and its consequences.

5. Genealogical module. The reference group has maintained a continuous existence throughout the relevant time segment, i.e. the one which is parallel with the alleged life of the collective. It may so claim the attribute of ancestral, primitive, historical, atavistic, primordial, native, indigenous, original, legendary, traditional, ancient, foundational, and so on. Antiquity is not only a birth certificate; it becomes, moreover, equivalent to a deed of assignment of the resources at stake. The diachronic tract from a constructed or reconstructed past gives the story its narrative legitimacy.
for “the further back you go the greater the validity of the claim or tradition” (Halliday, 2000: 168). As Mosse put it (1987: 205): “Only he who has ties with the genuine past could have a true soul, could be an organic and not a materialistic human being”. Genealogy transfigures temporal substance into the identity hypostasis. Confirming his motto of the (Croatian) “thousand-year-old dream”, according to F. Tudman (1996: 325), “historical continuity was manifested in the most impressive way in 1984, when at the closing part of the celebration of Thirteen Centuries of Christianity among Croatians (…), a crowd of about 400.000 devotees congregated…”. Conceptual formations of this kind refer to the “mandate of the beginning” (Heidegger) or, more precisely, the paleo-politics or tyranny of origin, that states that it is the atavistic imagined community what engenders the political tie and claims sovereignty in the realm of legitimacy – a legacy of Romanticism co-opted by many varieties of identity politics. The importance of origin lies in that identity’s definitions favour stratification through descent to the detriment of achievement (acquired status). Again, the use of ascriptive and pre-modern forms of status. Now I will take an example not usually associated with the paradigms of identity; the Communist Party of Kampuchea under Pol Pot established two broad categories, the ‘new people’, the inhabitants of cities chosen for deportation – main victims of Khmer genocide – and ‘old people’, the traditional farmers who expressed original ideological purity assumed as akin to the identity of the party (Hinton, 2002: 15). From the point of view of the texture of discourse, genealogy provides the illusion of depth, countervailing in that manner its contingent and manufactured condition.

6. Organismic module. The group in its biological essence has remained consistently homogeneous, and therefore pure and uncontaminated throughout its existence, and this homogeneity – that requires imperatively deindividuation both in the in- and the out-group – and purity, are the very conditions of its survival; both command a hygienic and surgical duty as a categorical imperative, as a supreme guide for group behaviour. National Socialism employed the term Gleichschaltung to describe this process, which for an anonymous German meant “that the same current must flow through the political body of the Volk” (in Koonz, 2003: 93). The nationalist discourse, writes M. Thompson (1992: 198), “compacts all Serbs into a ‘we’ that creates ‘they’, who are forever doing all manner of evil things to Serbia”. Organicism is usually accompanied by three corollaries. First, the Parmenidean fixity of immutable essences (Gómez, 2000: 31); second, the use of anthropomorphic metonymies manifested in the attribution of human feelings and moral qualities to related natural features, especially the territory as “sacred land” (Halliday, 2000: 168) – hence, the mobilizing force of irredentism – and third and foremost, the denial of the sphere of autonomy and individual self-determination, that is, of responsibility and moral conscience. It is the organicism bias which accounts for the transfer of agency from individual to collective entities, conceiving the last one as homogeneous, built of interchangeable identical pieces, whose value is just function of the fact of being bits of the whole. The relevant actor is not consequently the individual but the qualified bearer which incarnates the mystic body (v. soteriological module).

7. Essentialist module. Although apparently very distant from the lexical repertoire of the previous feature, in fact it is intertwined with it, since the
holistic structure is of an ideal nature. Idealist reductionism is a current drift in the identity discourse, which is explained by a compulsive search for the difference. But, as we read in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy, “the higher grades of essentialism give rise to puzzling conundrums”. Usual ways of escape are tautological fallacies. One of them has to do with who speaks on behalf of the collective actor. Another one confines in self-referentiality: the self-constituted people is the very group believing in the existence of such self-constituted people (Charland, 1987). A major consequence of both is the perversion of political representation by a tautologically induced synecdoche: “we” – the believers in the collective substance – are we – the entitled political actors. As for its social implications, essentialist preferences entail a parallel process of dematerialization, devaluation or masking of economic and social factors under the cover of instances of higher value – an endemic strategy of social conservatism.

8. Teleological module. What has always been must remain so in its very immutability. To the chronological depth of the past corresponds a parallel projection of necessity on the future. Identity narratives convey the texture of a timeless continuity. The ideograms of the thousand-years Reich, Al-Quaeda’s Al-Andalus, or eternal Spain, are good examples: the invention of essences creates the annexed feeling of eternity and thus prevent any feebleness arising from the perception of its ephemeral historicity. The dreams of a community become self-fulfilling prophecies. As the creator of the fascist Spanish Falange proclaimed, nations are foundations, not contracts – a statement involving the repudiation of politics. Repudiation of the political, contingency and freedom realms, results from the belief that identity dictates a destiny, a prescribed unalterable trajectory. As stated by Beveridge in the melody of Manifest Destiny, “since the North American Republic is part of the movement of a race – the race that historically possesses the biggest spirit of domination – the hand of man can not hold the movements of the race. They are strong responses to godly dictates” (in Weinberg, 1968: 259). The deterministic flavour of identity politics is usually ascribed to right-wing ideologies; the left is not completely free from it, however. As has been stated for Kampuchea Khmers in the genealogical module, class origin was for Stalin and Stalinists as strong a destiny as was race for social Darwinists (A. Margalit, 2010: 191). It could therefore be argued that such similarity in grammar is one of the elements accounting for the relatively easy conversion from communism to national-socialism (Sternhell, 1983), or ethnonationalism, from third world socialism to religious fundamentalism.

Exclusion dimension

When a group consolidates its cohesiveness by a strong consciousness of belonging – deindividuation dimension – and considers itself endowed with exclusive rights, the perspective for those not included in the protective “us” is exclusion, in its polymorphous phenomenology. The reverse of collective identity arrogance, of national grandeur, is heterophobia. The sociological, ethical and soteriological modules provide the rhetorical materials to the exclusionary politics.

9. Sociological module. The conviction of superiority culminates in an unrestricted application motto: “we have the right” (the object to be attached does not matter at all), which is expressed in programs like Lebensraum,
the manifest destiny, la mission civilisatrice, the Full Spectrum Dominance of the American neoconservative PNAC (Project for a New American Century), Greater Serbia, Eretz Israel, Imperial Spain, the political Euskal Herria, or, in general, the megali idea; real or perceived rebuttal of that right is framed as injustice or grievance, and will vindicate a veneful irredentist response. This module is the extension of the spoiled child syndrome reported in the psychological vector. It reflects the appeal of victimhood (Chaumont, 1997) in the multiple variations of the “Al-Andalus syndrome” (Alonso, 2009b), the “chosen trauma” (Volkan, 1998), the “culture of defeat” (Lieven, 2005: 88; Molina, 2010: 251; Schivelbusch, 2003), “defensive narcissism” (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 199), “perceived injustice” and so on. All of them indebted to the assessment of Renan whereby sufferings, real or perceived, have more power than joys to compact individuals into social blocks, on the one side, and to the comparative advantage of negative emotions, on the other. On the other hand, the group provides a context that renders aggressive behaviour socially acceptable and normatively appropriate (Mummendey, 1988: 284).

It would amount to a Herculean task to collect the repertoire of slogans invoked to back up exclusion. Suffice it to mention as examples Denton’s (1670) “[d]ivine Hand… removing or cutting off the Indians”, Kipling’s “white man burden”, Conrad’s character formula “[e]xterminate all the brutes”, and Spencer’s severe conviction – “[b]e the human being, or be he brute, the hindrance must be got rid of” (Lindqvist, 2004: 29, 158).

10. Ethical module. Practices performed by members of the in-group are protected by impunity – no matter how criminal they may become – from the assumption that potential victims are by definition outside the universe of moral obligation, which coincides with the enclave of affiliation (extragrupal amoralism). I want to back this view with two statements from the field of sociology. As R. K. Merton (1968: 514) put it, “it is only that the ugly fence that encloses the in-group excludes individuals who form the out-groups to be treated with the decency usually given to humans”. To W. Gamson (1995: 17), the common denominator of all the processes of exclusion is “the creation of an ‘other’ who is outside one or more universes of obligation”. The thesis can be supported from the opposite side, considering the difficulty to assert the rights of those labelled as ‘others’. According to the ethical module, virtue is a prerogative of the in-group, so that the actions accomplished by its members are intrinsically moral, despite its eventual murderous nature (Koonz, 2003: 228). This co-opted ethics composes a stuffed historical fresco of paradoxical behaviours, again epitomized by Nazi Germany: “an ethical society with regard to its fellow Germans and a deeply immoral society with regard to humanity at large” (A. Margalit, 2010: 122). Once the IAC has been crowned as the “highest moral referent”, the territoriality of obligation becomes normative: moral values end at the frontier (Halliday, 2000: 165, 161). And, as M. Ignatieff has written (1995: 188): “When people come by terror or exaltation, to think of themselves as patriots, first, individuals, second, they have embarked on a path of ethical abdication”.

11. Soteriological module. The link between identity and salvation is at least twofold. On the one hand, security is monopolistically circumscribed to the inside of the gate: extra ecclesiam nulla salus. On the other hand, the blend of essentialist, organismic and exclusivist elements as well as the exaltation of the loyalty category, account for the proclivity of such doc-
trinal agglomerates to develop palingenetic programs aimed at the regeneration and salvation of the community (Tismaneanu, 1998). A messianic dynamic that ends in millenarian intransigence (Mosse, 1987: 165). War becomes holy once macerated in this blend. Again, political implications are obvious. Perhaps the most evident is the preference for messianic charismatic leadership profiles that bypass the representative models of liberal democratic inspiration. Messianism is usually associated with an idiosyncratic vision and the function of mediator to reveal the synecdochial category to the common people. The proclivity of identity queries to the variegated canvas of esoteric materials expresses, on one side, the lust for transcendence, and, on the other, the need to infuse content in the ghostly identity labels. History is overwhelmed by the copiousness of these irrational materials, from the enthusiastic occultism of national-socialist leaders to the charlutanry and superstition in Milosevic’s Serbia, from the exuberance of holy apparitions in Francoist Spain to the Torah fetishism of the settler movement. There seems to be an elective affinity between identity ruminations and völkish taste. Part of this semantic constellation exhibits a tendency to manufacture conspiracy theories, which, correlatively, appeal to redemptive schemes. Soteriology replicates, in the transcendent sphere, the finality of the topological divide: fences, salvations programs and Messiahs, share the common imperative task of protecting an asset of the greatest worth. The reverse of the processes is the destruction of the “other”, as a radical paradigm of zero-sum game strategies. Consequently, many expressions of existential dilemmas result in the “neutralization” of real, potential or imaginary foes. Salvation projects display the repertoire of useful means to survival end – terminating a state of affairs which is felt as aversive and for which an “other” is held responsible (Mummendey, 1988: 286).

I will conclude this rather formal description with a primary source material exemplifying the terminal phase of identity rhetoric when backed by the sufficient amount of military power (M. Margalit, 2010: 21–22):

“A single house or an entire compound becomes a fortified site in the finest colonial traditions of the nineteenth century – a gated community in the 21st century.

Every Jewish site in East Jerusalem requires a security fence, guard-posts with armed security personnel, projectors and often closed circuit cameras, accompanied, of course, by provocative Israeli flag. […]

Space is crucial to the exercise of power, but power also creates a particular kind of space (Koskela, 2003). The settlement creates a cartography of exclusion, organises the space in accordance with structures of power and control, and transforms it from ‘a space’ into a zone of conflict. The settlements divide the space into two groups – those who exercise power and those who are subjugated to it.”

**Cognitive shielding dimension**

We know that remorse is hardly found in political criminals (Maaluf, 2003: 39). How to whitewash an objectively patent immoral behaviour and exhibit a peaceful moral conscience? To harmonize these conflicting strands is a necessity for psychological consonance. This function is implemented by what could be denominated a cognitive shielding dimension. It consists mainly of an epistemological module, very closely related to some of the former modules, particularly the psychological one. Epistemic exclusion is the extreme consequence of the identity divide, defining spheres of truth-values according to the affiliation. “If you are not part of the ‘us’ you cannot understand our
problems, therefore your eventual disapproval is discarded as irrelevant; and
if you are a formal member of the ‘us’ you cannot disapprove unless you be-
came a traitor, i.e., excluding yourself from the club of truth-values holders”.
This is not a casual variation of the win or win strategy; both are indebted
to what Halliday (2000: 167) calls the fallacy of the autogenic culture. The
frame of epistemic invulnerability exploits a vast repertoire of materials, from
“fairy tales” narratives (Mosse, 1987: 164), to “carnival of mendacity” (Hal-

12. Epistemological module. I place this module at the end of the picture
because it is of a higher order and conditions the other dimensions. This
item seeks to throw light on a recurring point when confronting concep-
tual frameworks of this modality: the insidious viscosity of the underly-
ing logic and a similar refractoriness to the usual tools of conventional
argumentation. The most bitter identity beliefs are organized in closed
dogmatic systems, impervious to criticism, and endowed with epistemic
immunity. Identity narratives lead to a circular and tautological logic:
assertions reverberate in the rhetoric vault of the identity bubble (App-
piah, 2005: 137). Any dissenting or heterodox will be disqualified on
the very basis of identity categories (Jew vs. Arian, Mason vs. Catholic,
Spanish nationalist vs. abertzale, Islamic fundamentalist vs. Christian/
Western faithful), or by an attribution of intention dissolving the con-
tents of the objections in the flask of the ad hominem fallacy. Identity
constructions are typical examples of self-consistency systems of beliefs.
In such systems the value of a belief does not depend on the degree of
correspondence with any standard of facts, but on his congruity with the
world view ingrained in the self-concept story. Negationism is but one
consequence embodied in a mechanism of defence aimed at the a poste-
riori protection of collective identity image. This marks a critical point
for the management of beliefs of this brand, as refractory to conventional
tools of dialogical transactions and public deliberation that characterize
communities socialized into the values of liberal pluralism. These are the
dark waters of fanatical intransigence, with the terrible corollary to the
humanist rationalism so accurately stated by Camus: “It was in Spain
where my generation learned that one can be right and be beaten, that
force can destroy the soul; and that sometimes courage gets no reward”.

Two consequences can be drawn from it. On the one hand, the need to tem-
per the excessive reliance on intellectualism. On the mood put forward by
Mommsen, Horkheimer (1986: 183) reminds the evidence that “it’s futile to
argue against rigid prejudices”. This statement requires an auxiliary observa-
tion: politics of identity displays a greater affinity with what we might call
the logic of emotions; hence, its comparative advantage over programme-
like ideologies. Political scientists as B. Nyhan or J. Kuklinski confirm the
age-old intuition that facts do not necessarily have the power to change our
minds, but rather the opposite; therefore, “it’s hard to be optimistic about the
effectiveness of fact-checking” (Keoane, 2010). Kahneman and colleagues’
studies on the psychology of preferences have reached similar conclusions
validating the strength of egocentrism: it is not the extrinsic value of a thing
what determines the preference, but the subjective preference that determines
the assigned value. Academic profiles do not score better than common peo-
ple, rather the opposite (Keoane, 2010). An old classical dictum – corruptio
optimi pessima – enclosed the morals: cultivated people are not more rational
but more skilful to rationalise the actions – right or wrong – of the group
they belong to. On the other hand, an equivalent requirement to identify the premises inspiring our partners beliefs is necessary, owing to the fact that it is manifestly inappropriate to conform to the parameters of dialogue and negotiation – as some more or less self-proclaimed pacifists have experienced and experience – when the counterparty shows no commitment to such values. The issue here is not to be blind to the imperative of political realism, even if disguised in the language of the highest values. We should not overlook that where ethnic and civil loyalty conflict, the first usually prevails (Connor, 1994: 196); similar conclusion applies to the conflict between identity and reason. It is unrealistic to claim dialogue with an armed speaker. I would like to put an end to this central point concerning the way to deal with identity issues with the inspired words of Mark Lilla (2009: 38, 40):

“But [the liberal mentality], owing to its openness, also tends to assume that everyone shares these values. It is so open that it finds psychologically difficult to recognize the existence of other closed mentalities. And when it does, it is harder still to decide how to relate to them. There is a clever definition of a liberal as ‘someone who refuses to put its own side in a discussion’. The joke is funny because we know that is true, perhaps even in ourselves. But it stops being funny at the time that closed mentalities are willing to use force to reach illiberal ends. What happens in this case? What about tolerance when those we tolerate are intolerant of others? (...) The liberal pluralists are interested in the happiness of individuals and societies, but remain muted when confronted with options or cultural habits that are obviously self-destructive. Even they find it difficult to recognize, let alone condemn, those explicitly declaring themselves contrary to liberal tolerance.”

Three final notes should be appended to complete the hypothetical model of this section. The first is obvious and committed to take over the dose of arbitrariness in the alleged resulting tetragram. In any case, the relevant point comes to determine whether the characteristics attributed to the listed dimensions portray or not identity scripts (for other approaches: Appiah, 2005: 66; Melucci, 1996:70). The second bears a more substantive tone. The rhetoric of identity performs the function of provision of symbolic capital. However, as far as identity issues tend to be indivisible (Hirschman, 1995: 244) and to follow zero-sum models – because of their essentialist nature – they involve a symmetrical repertoire of negative uncivil practices aimed at the symbolic and material dispossession of the tenant circumscribed by the hetero-definition. From this, in the third place, very concrete risks follow to the sustainability of pluralism. They affect those programs that place identity as their cornerstone, particularly in its most monolithic all-engulfing expressions.

**Ubiquitous discriminatory strategies**

These dimensions draw a template or formal structure, capable of accommodating different markers criteria such as race, faith, tribe, clan, nation, ethnicity, class, gender or civilization; notwithstanding, its formulation leans to the political side. Such a structure would be a kind of deep grammar capable of encircling surface constructions as different as the ones just mentioned. But the anchoring of such a structure is of a psychological nature, a state of mind (Orwell, 1968: 418), recurrently displayed (Sen, 2006: 9). What matters for purposes of identity potential is the psychological activation of the basic script – integrated, roughly speaking, by the dimensions referred to as characteristics capable to be generalized to any other marker, in other words, an identity ascription category – being secondary the specific content of the program. The artificial nature of the criterion is something that social psychology from Lewin on has shown with solvency. The functional over-determination
explains biographical conversions, such as from the class pattern in communism to the ethnic pattern of nationalism (Merino and Alonso, 2010).

Linking mental states with powerful social forces requires paying attention to the theorem of W. I. Thomas – “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” – especially if we consider that membership is a key element of the definition of the situation (Merton, 1980: 509), and that politics is nothing but “a struggle for the articulation of identity itself” (Weeks, 1994: 12). As N. Elias wrote (2003: 239, 247):

“The problem lies in how and why human beings perceive themselves as belonging to the same group and include themselves within the group borders they set to designate, in their mutual communications, to an ‘us’, while, at the same time, exclude other human beings they perceive as members of another group, referred to collectively as ‘them’.”

Elias insists that the right question is why we have become accustomed to perceive individuals with certain characteristics as members of a different group. The same idea is reflected in Horowitz (1995: 50).

The worst tragedies of the twentieth century were carried out on the basis of diacritical definitions supported by hetero-phobic categorizations: the Other as the Jew of anti-Semitism, the Other as an “enemy of the people” in people’s democracies, the other as barbarian or indigenous in centuries of colonialism, the Other as ethnic or national foe. What we perceive in the 21st century, with the recent records of killed Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, shows a disturbing continuity. Serious episodes of violence reflect a consistent pattern of intolerance to both otherness and plurality. Identity salience increases the flammability in group contention, as has rightly warned Moore (2001: 178) explaining the destructive potential of monotheisms.

These reflections show that the constitutive power of identity is displayed simultaneously in a tautological logic, in a self-referential ideology, and in a pleonastic and ahistorical framework for action – despite the incontinent handling of the lexicon of historiography (Halliday, 2000: 166). However, symmetric continuity reveals its political dimension and motivational impetus; dissatisfaction with the present draws an anomaly or discontinuity – pseudomorfosis, grievance, irredentism – to be redirected so as not to succumb to the existential threat: the disappearance of the essence (IAC), which by its very condition is formulated as an existential problem. Such anomalies often encourage the search for fathers of the entity, charismatic guides as Hitler, Franco, Stalin, Milošević, Pol Pot, Mussolini, Mao, Codreanu, Tuđman and many others, ready to load on their shoulders the burden of restoring the foundational soul of the nation by purging it from the obnoxious “other” guilty of its decadence. The amount of violence caused by the aforementioned leaders helps to countervail the idea that conceptions (as part of agency) are sufficient conditions; it is not the case, context plays a very important function. The configuration of a divide is a common factor in identity paradigms, but to erect a separating wall, as in Israel, a powerful army and a degree of international complicity are needed. Rhetorical materials are the energetic elements for the effective mobilization, for cognitive definitions – the field explored in my presentation – are conditions for collective action (Melucci, 1996: 70); in this case actions contributing to an opportunity structure in which iniquity is cheaper than decency. Therefore, if identity liquefies rhetorically in the tautological solvent on the one side, it allows nevertheless incubating the complete arsenal of exclusion, on the other.

I would appeal, to conclude, to a metaphorical exhortation by the prophetic verses or Spanish poet León Felipe: “poets never sing the same people’s story
nor a single flower garden / let all people and all gardens be ours”. Compare this attitude, to encompass the ambivalence mentioned at the beginning, with the parallel botanical injunction of the father of Basque nationalism, Sabino Arana (1999: 374): “The Tree of Gernika is a symbol of the welfare of our people, not anyone else’s. Not in our soil can coexist with any other tree.”

References


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**Kollektive Identität als rhetorisches Werkzeug**

Zusammenfassung


Schlüsselwörter
kollektive Identität, Rhetorik, wir vs. sie, Ausschließung, Moralverpflichtung, politische Gewaltakte
Résumé


Mots-clés

identité collective, rhétorique, nous vs eux, exclusion, contraintes morales, violence politique