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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 debe tracciare un confine e respingere chi sta dall'alltra 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 present, 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 digestive 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).

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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

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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-*

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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 Pick-
ett, 2009: 156). And this identity ditch of haughtiness/humiliation contin-
ues 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 Manichaeism is the
predictable output.

3. *Stratigraphic module*. The combination of the two mentioned modules re-
sults 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 histori-
cal constant and that the particular locus assigned to an individual produc-
es 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 na-
ture: 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 con-
sequences 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 ascriptive closed estates of the Ancient Régime.
Identity programs are one of the redistributive policies available to politi-
cal elites; investment on nationalism is part or the opportunity structure in
the political competition for constituencies. According to Hitler, the "folk-
ish 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 distinc-
tiveness 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

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imaginary ones associated with the cognitive-emotional mental state de-
scribed. Suicide bombers do nothing but to redeem life for identity and
obtain as award 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 na-
tionalism. 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 peo-
ple'. 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 ex-
altation 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 con-
spiracy 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 com-
pacting 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 deindi-
viduation dimension commands the thick relations portraying the tribal im-
age. 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 exem-
plification of the process of deindividuation or, in his own terms, the 'deper-
sonalization 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 par-
   allel 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. Antiq-
   uity 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

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(Bruner, 1991: 20) and provide the political sphere with normative worth, 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 transfuses temporal substance into the identity hypostasis. Confirming his motto of the (Croatian) "thousand-year-old dream", according to F. Tuđman (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

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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*,

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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 vengeful 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 he 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-

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trinal agglomerates to develop palingenetic programs aimed at the regen-
eration 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 synecdo-
chial 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 charlatanry 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 con-
stellation 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, sal-
vations 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 re-
sult in the "neutralization" of real, potential or imaginary foes. Salvation
projects display the repertoire of useful means to survival end – terminat-
ing 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 suf-
ficient 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 a provoca-
tive Israeli flag. […].

Space is crucial to the exercise of power, but power also creates a particular kind of space (Ko-
skela, 2003). The settlement creates a cartography of exclusion, organises the space in accordan-
ce 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 ne-
cessity 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 mod-
ules, 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

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problems, therefore your eventual disapproval is discarded as irrelevant; and if you are a formal member of the 'us' you cannot disapprove unless you became 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" (Halliday, 2000: 168).

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 conceptual frameworks of this modality: the insidious viscosity of the underlying 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 (Appiah, 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 contents 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 posteriori* 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 temper 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 observation: 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, bur 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 people, 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

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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 nego-
tiation – 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 is-
sues 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 ot-
her 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 fun
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 dimen-
sions 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-defini-
tion. From this, in the third place, very concrete risks follow to the sustain-
ability 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 accom-
modating different markers criteria such as race, faith, tribe, clan, nation, eth-
nicity, 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 char-
acteristics capable to be generalized to any other marker, in other words, an
identity ascription category – being secondary the specific content of the pro-
gram. The artificial nature of the criterion is something that social psychology
from Lewin on has shown with solvency. The functional over-determination

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explains biographical conversions, such as from the class pattern in commu-
nism 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 poli-
tics 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 conti-
nuity. 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 impe-
tus; dissatisfaction with the present draws an anomaly or discontinuity – pseu-
domorfosis, 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 foun-
dational 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 interna-
tional 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 tauto-
logical 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

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/ 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."

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Kolektivni identitet kao retorički alat

Sažetak

Među mnoštvom dimenzija kolektivnog identiteta, ovaj rad istražuje identitet kao retorički alat. Identitetska oznaka je upravo primjer pragmatične učinkovitosti. Kako bi se objasnila ta moć, izložit će se hipotetički model identitetskih kategorija. Njegovi konstitutivni moduli oblikuju četiri osnovne dimenzije: pozicija, deindividualizacija, isključenje i kognitivna zaštita. Tako ocrtan narativni identitet postaje ekvivalentan neformalnoj ideologiji (Halliday, 2005). Kao konstitutivna retorika (Charland, 1987), narativna konstrukcija identiteta pretvara autoreferencijalnu tautologiju u strategije diskriminacije, pročišćenja i istrebljenja nositelja drugosti. Masovna uništenja u prošlom stoljeću – totalitarizam, kolonijalizam, etno-nacionalizam – proizvodi su identitetske paradigme.

Ključne riječi

kolektivni identitet, retorika, mi *vs.* oni, isključenje, moralne obveze, političko nasilje

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Kollektive Identität als rhetorisches Werkzeug

Zusammenfassung

Von der Mehrzahl der Dimensionen kollektiver Identität erkundet diese Arbeit die Identität als rhetorisches Werkzeug. Die Identitätsmarke steht für einen für die pragmatische Effektivität relevanten Fall. Um eine solche Macht zu erläutern, wird ein hypothetisches Modell der Identitätskategorien dargeboten. Dessen Bestandsmodule formen vier Basisdimensionen: Position, Entindividualisierung, Ausschließung sowie kognitive Abschirmung. Eine so deskribierte narrative Identität wird zum Äquivalent der informellen Ideologie (Halliday, 2005). Als konstitutive Rhetorik (Charland, 1987) überführt die narrative Identitätskonstruktion die selbstreferenzielle Tautologie in die Strategien der Diskriminierung, Säuberung und Ausrottung der Anderheitsvertreter. Die Massenvernichtungen des zurückliegenden Jahrhunderts – Totalitarismus, Kolonialismus, Ethnonationalismus – sind Fabrikate des Identitätsparadigmas.

Schlüsselwörter

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

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L'identité collective en tant qu'instrument rhétorique

Résumé

Parmi les nombreuses dimensions de l'identité collective, cet article examine celle de l'identité en tant qu'instrument rhétorique. Le repère identitaire est précisément un exemple d'efficacité pragmatique. Afin d'expliquer un tel pouvoir, un modèle hypothétique des catégories d'identité sera présenté. Ses éléments constitutifs forment quatre dimensions principales : position, désindividuation, exclusion et protection cognitive. L'identité narrative ainsi définie devient équivalente à une idéologie informelle (Halliday, 2005). En tant que rhétorique constitutive (Charland, 1987), la construction narrative de l'identité transforme la tautologie autoréférentielle en stratégies de discrimination, d'épuration et d'extermination du porteur d'altérité. Les violences massives du siècle passé – totalitarisme, colonialisme, ethno-nationalisme – sont tributaires du paradigme identitaire.

Mots-clés

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