WHAT IDENTITY IS NOT

This morning, each of us chose the way he/she would dress today, in order to fit the present circumstance: a circumstance in which we mainly stand as professionals, and secondarily as belonging to one or another gender, to a certain category of age, and to a certain nationality. This is why, to take an example I know well, I'm standing in front of you first as an academic, and secondarily as a more than sixty years old French woman.

This evening, the circumstance might be slightly different, since it will be a little less professional and a little more social: a reason why we might choose a slightly different way to dress. Tomorrow, the context will be apparently the same as today – still professional – but with a small difference: we will be on Saturday, which might incite some of you to choose a more informal presentation, a kind of "Friday wear", if I may say so for a Saturday. And on Sunday, within our familial contexts, no doubt we'll rather opt for a kind of sport wear, maybe even a unisex one: we won't present ourselves in front of the members of our family as professionals, or as Dutch, American or French, and maybe hardly as men or women: we'll stand as husbands or wives, parents and kins, as well maybe as amateur football or tennis players, cinema or music lovers.

This does not mean that our identity will change between today, tonight, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow: it only means that, according to the context, we choose to put one part of our identity at the front of the stage, while some other parts remain at the back, either invisible, or hardly visible, almost transparent. And this context is defined by both spatial and temporal parameters: today or tomorrow, this meeting room or the restaurant, etc. In the present context, for example, my concern is not only to perform a convincing talk in front of you, but also to let you focus on the fact that I'm an academic, a sociologist, rather than a French over-sixty-years-old woman.

Does this mean that we hide something of our identity, that we cheat, that we try to deceive each other, or that our mutual trust might be damaged by a change in our presentation? No: it only means that social life is a game we play in common, with certain implicit rules that we are more or less able to control; and that, among those rules, the ones governing our identity are essential, even if we are not fully aware of them. They pertain to what the great American sociologist Erving Goffman called "the presentation of self in everyday life", and to what the great German sociologist Norbert Elias called "the civilizing process". By the way, I have to confess that both are my favorite sociologists.

At this step, we have understood, first, that identity is not monolithic but plural, made out of a multiplicity of facets; second, that it is not absolute, independent of any context, but on the contrary that it highly depends on the circumstance we are in; and, third, that our ability

to perform social life mainly depends on our mastery in the choice of the facets of our identity that we spontaneously put forward according to the context.

In other words, we can already conclude that in order to fully understand what is identity, we should begin by getting rid of three misconceptions: first, the misconception according to which identity would be a global, monolithic, mono-dimensional entity; second, the misconception according to which it would always be the same, whatever the spatial and temporal context; and third, the misconception according to which we all would be equal in front of the ability to master identity issues.

Let me now say a little more about the various obstacles that we have to overcome in order to understand what identity *is*. And the easiest way to do so is to understand what it *is not*. So I'll start with a few more words about the non-mono-dimensional nature of identity.

The obstacle of the reduction of identity to a single dimension

When people hear the word "identity", they often understand "national identity". This is deeply misleading, since, as I just said, identity is made out of multiple dimensions: not only national, regional or ethnic, but also gendered, professional, religious, and so on. Even if nationality constitutes a fundamental benchmark, individual identity is far from being limited to it: it comes with a plurality of other references allowing one to belong to a collective. It can be a collective of age,

regarding the generational identity ("young", "old", "teen-ager"); a collective of gender, concerning gender identity ("man" or "woman" – to which some nowadays claim to add "transgenre"); a collective of religion, regarding confessional identity ("catholic", "protestant", "jewish", "muslim"); a collective of marital status, regarding civil identity ("married", "single", "divorced"); a collective of occupational status, regarding professional identity ("worker", "executive", "employee" in such or such a corporation), etc. Here you could recognize the basic benchmarks used by sociologists and statisticians when completing polls, relying on the so-called "socio-demographic parameters".

Some more unstable or informal collectives may be added, such as the sharing of a same level of wealth ("rich", "poor"), of a political position ("socialist", "liberal"), a level of education ("bachelor", "graduate"), a leisure activity ("swimmer", "guitarist"), a quality ("honest", "intelligent") or a sexual preference ("heterosexual", "homosexual"). The transition from these more informal identity markers to the almost official parameters of age, gender, etc. often happens through the shift from adjective to substantive: one is not only "young" but "a youngster", thus belonging to the category of young people, which helps define an identity and not describe a personality.

But the relevance of these various identity parameters depends on the context in which an individual is led to define himself: in a civil status form, gender, age, marital status, nationality will be put on the same level; in an opinion poll, profession and, often, level of education

will be mandatory items; and you will be more likely to say "I am Dutch" when in a sightseeing trip abroad than when having a family dinner. As I already underlined, the relevance of these different ways of defining oneself is thus relative to the situation in which the question of individual identity arises: certain elements of the status can be updated in a situation or remain in latent, in the background.

Although these remarks may appear to you as somehow trivial, I think they can help you understand better some political issues. For example, what about the fight between the two opposite conceptions of feminism, which is quite an issue nowadays, at least in France? You may know that feminism is divided into two very different trends, both aiming at gender equality : on the one side, the *differentialist* trend insists on the specificity of womanhood and claims that whatever the circumstances women should always be considered and treated as such; on the other side, the *universalist* trend demands that in contexts where gender is not relevant (for example, a professional context such as the present one), gender differences should not be taken into account, in order to put forward what is common to men and women, what is universal in their belonging to humanity. So the differentialist trend considers gender identity as independent of the context, and as the most relevant facet of identity in any case, whereas the universalist trend considers gender identity as relative to the context, and as one among several other parameters. Now I suppose you already guessed that my preference goes to the universalist trend, for both sociological and

political reasons: sociologically, I think it fits better the very nature of identity; and politically, I think it is a factor of peace rather than of war between genders.

I let you transpose this issue to ethnic or religious identities in order to grasp the deep political consequences of this conception of identity as multi-dimensional and contextual: fostering the suspension of ethnic or religious differences when they are not considered relevant in a given circumstance leads to a very specific conception of social and civic life – a conception that we, in France, call the "Republican" conception of citizenship. The Dutch one – at least the traditional one – is at the opposite, since it tends to define people according to their belonging to communities rather than to their belonging to the nation. Both conceptions probably have their flaws and their advantages; but both of them are sustained by two quite different conceptions of identity.

The obstacle of its reduction to politics

Now, I would not let you think that identity can be reduced to a political dimension. First, as I said, because national identity is but one dimension of identity, among others. And second, because such a reduction to politics would go against the very history of this notion.

In fact, the issue of identity emerged after the Second World War in American research, first in psychology, then in anthropology and sociology. The European social sciences used it from the 1970s with anthropology, then history, psychoanalysis, social psychology and

sociology, as well as philosophy. And it is much later, at the beginning of the XXI ° century, that it appeared in politics, with a rather marked rightist connotation, to the point that "identitary" ("identitaire" in French) has become today synonymous with ultra-reactionary. However, this issue has recently been taken up by the left, under the influence of American communitarianism, with claims for the defense of minorities, be they racial or sexual or religious.

Therefore, it is impossible to consider the issue of identity as constitutively "rightist" or "leftist": it depends on the context in which it is activated, and on its referent. If the reference group is in a weak position, such as a colonized people, the defense of their identity will appear as a *leftist* fight; if this reference group is in a strong position, such as a colonizing people, then the defense of its identity will appear as a *rightist* fight. Thus, the reduction to a political camp, or even to a political issue, is a very reductionist view, that blocks our insight and prevents us from understanding what is at stake.

The obstacle of its reduction to an objective fact

Let me come now to another obstacle that might prevent us from fully understanding the issue of identity: that is, the spontaneous tendency to consider it as an objective fact. And let's take once more the example of national identity, with a result borrowed from a recent poll on Dutch identity:

« When Dutch people are asked whether there is such a thing as a Dutch identity, 41% unhesitatingly answer 'yes'; 42% think it exists in some respects, and 6% absolutely reject the idea of a Dutch identity."

In other words, almost half the people in this survey consider their national identity as an existing reality, the same proportion of them are not quite sure, and a very small number are persuaded that no such thing exists. In case you would hesitate between the two opposite options – existing or not existing? – I can immediately help you make your choice: both options are wrong – and I'll try to explain why.

Obviously, the common, spontaneous conception of identity considers it as an objective, timeless, transcendent reality, which would exist independently of the idea that we would have of it. This is the traditional essentialist or metaphysical, even theological position. But such a conception is contradicted by three observations.

The first observation is that of temporality, which submits all identity to change. This temporal dimension forbids, for example, to conceive a nation as an "unalterable substance" whereas it is, obviously, a "historical entity", submitted to many variations according to the periods of time. As Norbert Elias explains, we must consider identity in its processual dimension, exactly like time: "Identity is not so much that of a substance as that of the continuity of transformations leading from one stage to the next".

The second observation which goes against the substantialist conception of identity as an independent reality is the recognition of its

narrative dimension, which implies not only a process rather than a state, but also a discourse rather than a matter of fact. It evidences the mediation of a shaping, whatever the way we name it - "narrative", as with philosopher Paul Ricoeur, "reflexivity", as with sociologist Anthony Giddens, or "language games", as with philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Finally, a third observation dismisses the naive belief in a factual reality of identity: it is the recognition of its plurality, through the multiplicity of the definitions of an identity and the lability of its limits. Various metaphors have been used to illustrate this shifting character of identity, such as Erving Goffman's "cotton candy", meaning that personal identity is "a unique and uninterrupted record of social facts, like a sticky substance to which new biographical details are continually sticking".

Subject to the vagaries of time, of narrative and of plurality, identity has decidedly nothing of a crude fact, of a reality pre-existing to the idea that people have of it.

The obstacle of its reduction to an illusion

Should we conclude then that identity is but an "illusion", as do 6% of Dutch people regarding national identity, following on this skeptical path the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu? That would make us fall into the trap of a radical constructivism or a naive post-modernism,

according to which there can exist only raw facts or illusions. But the fact that the history of a nation, or an individual biography, depend on a narrative, on reflexivity, on a process of reconstruction, does not imply that what they refer to would be an "illusion", that is, something artificial and even deceptive.

Neither illusion nor, on the contrary, objective reality, identity is a mental representation – a widely shared representation. For example, national identity is neither a fact nor an illusion, but a mental representation that individuals have of what a country is, or of what it should be: an idea, in the cognitive sense, as well as an ideal, in the normative sense. This idea is, of course, evolving and unequally shared; but it is nonetheless structured, based on objective characteristics, which can be described and analyzed. Even those who see the notion of national identity as a mere "linguistic convention " are forced to recognize that there are many recurring features that give a minimum consistency to the notion of national identity, such as a flag, a common language, state institutions, ritualized traditions, etc.

Once considered as a mental representation, identity does not need to be referred to a timeless nature or essence to be existing and acting: historically constructed, contextual, ideal, it has nonetheless concrete and sometimes powerful effects – just think of how people are able to fight for it. Identity does not need to be taken for an objective reality in order to generate speeches, actions, attachments: it only has to be a shared representation.

This denial of the very notion of mental representation was thus another obstacle to our understanding of the concept of identity. We can see it at work about the frequent hesitations about the notion of "European identity": does it exist, or not? The answer to the question is twofold. On one side, we can easily describe the objective clues leading to the existence of Europe: its borders, its institutions, its history, its culture, etc. But is this enough to construct such thing as a European identity? No, because this would require a widely shared representation by which individuals feel, or do not feel, that they are "European", that is, define themselves according to their belonging to this abstract entity. To what extent does this representation exist? There is no *a priori* answer to this question, which could be provided only by a sociological survey focused on the actual relationship of people to their European identity.

The obstacle of its reduction to a one and unique entity

Finally, I would like to warn you against a last obstacle to the full understanding of the notion of identity: that is, its reduction to a homogeneous block. Let me explain what I mean.

Individual identity unfolds according to various steps, which are more or less internal or external, more or less individual or collective. For example, at the most internal and individual pole, your christian name defines your identity inside your family: you are "John" or "Nathalie", which distinguishes you from your brother Peter or your

sister Mary. One step further, your family name defines your identity outside your family: you are a "Smith" or a "Dupont", which distinguishes you from a "Taylor" or a "Durand". Thus this latter step of your identity is a little more external and collective than the former. But still much more external and collective is your professional identity, for example when defined by your belonging to a company or an institution: you are the boss of, let's say, Google, and I'm a researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris (this is true). This is a rather external and collective step in the definition of your identity – but still less external and collective than your national identity, when you define yourself by your belonging to a country. So you can observe the continuity, step by step, between the most individual and the most collective poles of identity.

One could say that these steps of identity go from "personal" identity to "social" identity. But this binary conception – "personal" *vs* "social" – is itself problematic, because it tends to oppose the "social" to the "individual" as representation to authenticity, role to sincerity, artificiality to naturality, superficiality to depth, mere image to genuine reality. Indeed, such a dualism ignores that identity is not made only of what the subject perceives of him or herself (the moment I call "self-perception") or presents of him or herself (the moment I call "presentation"), but also of what is said of him or herself by other people (the moment I call "designation"). Self-perception, presentation,

designation: these are the three main *moments* of identity, the combination of which builds up your identity.

Let us start with the moment I called *designation*, when someone else tells who you are. Designation can be institutional (thus a tax slip, an administrative form) or interactional (passers-by, co-workers, friends, spouses, family members...). So it is the moment on which the subject has the least hold. It can intervene brutally, in total dissonance with self-perception and/or presentation. This is what happened, for instance, to the writer Albert Cohen when, at the age of ten, he was publicly called "Jew" and insulted as such by a streetboy, which caused him a real traumatism, a kind of violence or identity-breaking, of which he described later the devastating effects it had on him.

Thus designation can create discomfort, or even cognitive dissonance, when it does not match the other two moments of identity (presentation and self-perception), either because it is disqualifying (for example "Jewish", "homosexual"), or on the contrary because it is too qualifying (for example "artist", "boss"). Conversely it can also happily install the subject in the comfort of a coherence between the status which is recognized to him and what he perceives and shows of himself.

The second moment of identity, as I said, is "*presentation*", that is, the way you present yourself in front of others. In order to avoid any cognitive dissonance, presentation has to be confirmed by a concordant designation: let's think of the efforts made by Jews, during the Second World war, when trying to pretend to be Christians by getting fake

identity cards or masking a foreign accent. And as for the possible

dissonance between presentation and self-perception, it frequently

happens in case of stigmatization: homosexuals pushed to conceal their

sex life, Catholics continuing to go to Mass while they have lost faith,

illiterate pretending to be able to read, etc. These are, however, extreme

cases; most often, "self-presentation in everyday life" is simply an

internalized and routinized process, thus imperceptible: it does not

involve dissimulation or lies, but self-construction, work on one's image,

ways of speaking, dressing or putting on makeup – all those

innumerable layouts in which micro-strategies are subtly played,

sometimes even unconsciously.

As for the moment of *self-perception* – that is, the way you perceive

yourself – it is also inseparable from the other two: it manifests itself and,

probably, can be experienced only in the testing of confrontation with

others. This is why there is a strong link between the subjective moment

of the self-perceived identity, and these objectified moments that are the

identity as presented by the subject to others (presentation) and the

identity as returned by others (designation). And this is why, too, self-

perception, or "identity for oneself", is not more basic than the other two

moments.

Self-perception, presentation, designation: these three moments

occupy a specific position on the axis between interiority and exteriority.

Self-perception is the most interior moment, since it is a relation of

oneself to oneself mediatized by language and by the internalization of

the gaze of others; presentation is an intermediate moment, since it is about the image offered to others by the subject; designation is the moment of greater exteriority, being the return of one's own image in the eyes of others. Here we see the central character of presentation: it is what allows the subject to bring into coherence the interiority of self-perception and the exteriority of designation.

Designation (by others), presentation (for others), self-perception (of oneself to oneself): distinguishing these three "moments" of identity makes it possible to grasp all the subtlety of the identity games by which the subject can manipulate by his presentation the designation by others, but may also see his self-perception affected by this designation, perhaps leading him to change his presentation – and so on. "To feel", "to tell" or "to be told" do not belong to the same operations, do not use the same resources. These three moments are nonetheless equally indispensable to the sense of identity, while their eventual discordance is a source of tension, suffering and conflict.

All this means that far from depending only on one subject, identity as a mental representation is a *collective* creation, symbolized by words and objects, negotiated in interactions, carried on by institutions. In short, it is neither objective nor subjective, but it is a more or less shared representation, and as such infinitely more powerful than both the realities that present themselves as objective, and the perceptions that are considered subjective.

Conclusion

I will end by insisting on a fundamental property of identity: it only manifests itself when it has become a problem. No identity, therefore, without identity *crisis*, at the occasion of which one discovers that one has an identity. Even more than for "peoples" or "cultures", this rule holds true for human beings, whose identity crises are particularly problematic because they unfold according to the three linked dimensions of self-perception, presentation and designation, and according to the successive steps between the most internal-individual and the most external-collective levels.

A collective identity crisis can emerge through the confrontation between "established" and "outsiders" in a country or a city; and it will probably be felt in either groups, when established feel threatened in their way of life, while outsiders feel rejected because of their way of life. Then a solution might come from an identification to a more abstract and general collective, such as a nation, rather than identification to a more concrete and limited collective, such as a community, a clan or a family – but moving between those various modes of identification is not always easy.

Confrontation with others can also emerge at the individual level, for example through the social networks which incite individuals to compare their own boring life with the exciting lives of their "friends" on Facebook or Instagram: then an identity crisis may easily come out of such a comparison – and I'm sure that you can easily find some

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examples around you. Besides, many other kinds of identity crisis can emerge out of various situations, such as a change of employment, a marriage, the birth of a child, or a religious issue.

But, be they collective or individual, identity crises reveal by contrast how identity coherence is a fundamental condition of the social ability to cohabit with others and, beyond that, of our happiness to exist. This means that the very notion of identity does not deserve to be reduced to the political *weapon* that some people want to see in it: far beyond, it must be used, first of all, not as a weapon but as a *tool* to understand our relationship to ourselves as well as to the world we live in.

A last question: how does identity relates to "trust", which is the topic of our today meeting? In no way, apparently, since social trust obeys quite simple and well-known recipes: honesty, transparence, respect of the law, care for the general interest and public good rather than for private interests, avoidance of any tax evasion, etc. But if you consider that such a virtuous behavior is the condition for deserving the identity of a trustable person – that is, a person who perceives oneself, presents oneself and is designated by others as a trustable person – then I guess you do understand how the issue of identity may relate to the value of trust.

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