Pierluca Birindelli

Narrative Identity
A Personal Roadmap

Sociologia

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ISI Florence and Gonzaga University in Florence contributed to the publication of this book.

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Contents

Introduction	p.	11
1. Late-Modern Identity	»	13
2. *Homo Oeconomicus* and the Solitary Explorer	»	23
3. Finding a Safe Place	»	30
4. What Complexity and What Differentiation	»	35
5. The Criteria of Choice Dilemma	»	43
6. Recognising Oneself and Being Recognised	»	48
7. Concepts and Images of the Self	»	53
8. The Field of Identity and its Dissonances	»	59
9. Acceptance and Realisation of the Self over Time	»	65
10. Choices: Faltering Identities and False Selves	»	73
11. Authenticity and Existential Project	»	83
12. Youth: Dreams, Media and Social Reality	»	90
13. Narrations and Memory: The Scripts	»	101
14. Self-Narrative: Processes and Objectives	»	109
15. *Erfahrung* in the *Erlebnisgesellschaft*	»	120
References	»	127

This book is dedicated to my great friend Helen: I would never have finished nor even started this work, and many others, without her. Of course, this is not why she is my friend. It's because she has all my respect and admiration. She is altruistic, brilliant, profoundly reflexive and happy at the same time. This is quite extraordinary: a reflexive-happy-giver.

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Introduction

As a sociology researcher I began collecting and studying young people's life stories in the late 90s, while I was writing my dissertation. I've continued to do it for the past 30 years. I've never counted how many self-narratives of different kinds—autobiographies, full and partial autoethnographies—I've read, but definitely more than 1,000.

Why young people and the passage to adulthood? Why narratives? Because I believe that the liminal 'shadow line' between youth and adulthood is probably the richest and most promising interpretative field for understanding the lives of both young people and adults and the societies and cultures they live in. And I also believe that it's hard to challenge the conviction that narratives offer the most potent insights into what's going on in peoples' lives.

But beyond these 'scientific' motivations, there are also personal ones. In my youth I struggled to become an adult. Why all this struggle? A simple answer came to my mind just now, while writing this introduction. In early adolescence I was expecting to find more 'good' human beings in the world, more guides. That didn't happen. However, this book is not about morals or ethics. I'm not a philosopher or a priest, and somehow I came to terms with life and people the way they are.

As a sociology student at university I wanted to understand more about this challenging life-passage, also from an introspective angle. So, I began to keep a diary and later I wrote my autobiography. Was this helpful? Yes and no. Because my approach to the world—myself included—is neither therapeutic nor instrumental, but aimed simply at knowing a bit more. Although I've never been afraid to put myself on the line and engage in debate, I haven't found any of those clear-cut, strategic answers that are supposed to help you live a better life. I did become more aware of who I am and, as a result, of who 'they' are: the so-called 'others'. But I don't believe

there's a causal link between self/other awareness and wellbeing. On the contrary, I see no link at all. Most of the people I know who are living a 'happy life' possess a tactical awareness limited to the scope (making the most of their life) or are not self-aware at all.

This book reflects on personal identity, which for me can only mean narrative identity. It includes some passages from the autobiographies and autoethnographies of young people that I collected (Birindelli 2006, 2014) and from my own. It's a personal 'identity roadmap', accompanied by the suggestion (in the second part) of writing or telling your own story as a way of becoming a bit more self-aware.

This book is grounded in sociological thought. But sociology alone was not enough to make things clearer to me. It seems to me that at times sociologists use the concept 'identity' in the same way that some friends of mine use 'awareness': to get what they want. Sometimes the concept itself is not addressed, so that questions tend to remain within the boundary of the discipline.

Since I was using the term 'identity' extensively to interpret the collected life stories, I felt the need to question the concept and cross various disciplinary boundaries. I mainly moved into the territories of psychology, psychoanalysis and narrative studies. However, this book is certainly not an exhaustive anthology or textbook on narrative identity in late modernity. It's simply my small, personal, hand-crafted roadmap, travelling from one book to another in an attempt to chart an intellectual and critical territory useful for my fieldwork and myself.

In this roadmap you will find mostly classic or late-modern authors up to the early 2000s. The reason for this is simply that I understood them better than other, more recent, scholars. For instance, scholars who tried to shed light on the life of individuals in the social and cultural passage from modernity to late modernity were able to paint an extensive and profound portrait. When the debate moved into the framework of cultural globalization and cosmopolitanism, I felt that things started to become less clear and convincing.

I am not sure if this interpretative roadmap of narrative identity will be useful to the reader, but I hope so.

1. Late-Modern Identity

The sense of identity is a crucial aspect in the life of every individual. We perceive, organise, plan, choose and act through our self-awareness—or lack of it. Following a hermeneutic path that starts with literature and then branches out into the vast array of social science disciplines, one cannot fail to be intrigued by the richness and evocative power of the numerous representations, images, and metaphors relating to individual and collective identities. However, extracting a clear meaning from this wealth of material is no simple matter. The attempt to address the identity of an individual or a group has by now become a daunting task that calls for an uncommon critical capacity to manoeuvre between a multitude of lexical and theoretical ambiguities. To define identity more clearly, I have adopted a multidisciplinary perspective, using approaches, theories and concepts belonging to sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis, and narratology.

Put simply, the subject of these reflections is individuals thinking about themselves and the past *life paths* that led to the present. Then there is the *life plan* aspect: awareness of self-identity develops also on the basis of the aspirations and expectations that we cultivate for the future. Here therefore, identity is understood as 'narrative identity'. Narrative identity (Ricoeur 1984, 1985, 1988; Bruner 1990; Burke and Stets 2009) is always a retrospective interpretation of the past and an anticipation of the future.[1] It is a tale capable of binding the three times of existence as these were understood by Saint Augustine: the present of past things, the present of present

[1] For a detailed analysis of the concept of identity, with different disciplinary approaches, see among others James (1890/1983), Cooley (1902), Mead (1934), Lewin (1935), Erikson (1956, 1982), Berger and Luckmann (1966), Laing (1969/1990), Kohut (1971), Sennett (1977), Koselleck (1979/2004), Dennet (1991), Gergen (1991), Perinbanayagam (2000), Jenkins (2008), Burke and Stets (2009). On the narrative approach see among others Burke (1945), Bruner (1991), Ricoeur (1991, 1992), Ezzy (1998). For a review of the biographical approach see Miller (2005).

things, the present of future things. It is a psychological, sociological and anthropological mechanism not based on an 'entity': identity is a process not a thing. Identity is made up of the relations that the individual—also through intersubjective inside-outside group recognition—establishes, through memory, between the different and shifting perceptions of oneself in relation to the 'Other', and to the wider sense of belonging to a (national, regional, transnational, global) collective identity (Birindelli 2008).

The identity process is a progressive construction of (and through) the individual and collective memory framework (Halbwachs 1980), and consequently through the cultural repertoire of stories contained therein. Substantially, this is the shared meaning of 'identity' within social sciences, which speak of identity or of identity crisis depending on the solidity or the fragility of this construction.

> Identity is the human capacity—rooted in language—to know 'who's who' (and hence 'what's what'). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on: a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities. (Jenkins 2008, 5)

'Substantially' does not mean unanimously. Using 'identity' and 'collective identity' as heuristic concepts means partially disagreeing with those who (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Brubaker 2004) make a distinction between non-existent groups and real 'groupness'. Jenkins feels this distinction doesn't make much sociological sense since groups are constituted in and by their 'groupness': being social constructions doesn't make groups illusions, and everyday life is full of real encounters with small groups and manifestations of larger groups: 'It is the distinction that Brubaker draws between groups and "groupness" that is an illusion, and it does not help us to understand the local realities of the human world' (Jenkins 2008, 12).

What is at stake here is also the question of common sense brought to our attention by Alfred Schutz (1962/2012, 44): sociological models not only need to be scientifically adequate, they must also be commensurate with common sense. When a scholar forces concepts that are too rigid onto the ambivalences and haze of social reality, there is the risk of ending up further away from it, replacing the 'reality of the model' with a 'model of reality' (Bourdieu 1990, 39). By seeking unambiguous 'really real' analytical categories, Brubaker takes a broadly sensible argument to a logical extreme that is less sensible: attempting to impose theoretical order on a human world in which indeterminacy and ambiguity are the norm.

Social scientists must aim for the greatest possible clarity, but their concepts must also reflect the observable realities of the human world (Jenkins 2008, 9–10). Malesevic (2002, 2006) too argues that identity—more precisely ethnic identity—is a confusing analytical concept: it means too much and includes too many different dimensions. But the dumping of the term 'identity' for the sake of analytical clarity is not an appropriate solution (see Ashton et al. 2004, 82). As Jenkins puts it 'the genie is already out of the bottle' and not only is 'identity' an established concept in social sciences, it is also a widely-used construct in common parlance and public discourses, from politics to marketing and self-help (Jenkins 2008, 14).

In this book I want to focus more on the *conscious identity*, activated by subjects' reflection on their own temporal continuity and difference from others. Here, the *unconscious identity* is conceived as a series of elements that influence individuals' behaviour and reflections. However, if the unawareness is excessive, it will be conceptualised as absence: a hole in the knitted fabric of one's biography.

As noted above, the word 'identity' belongs both to scientific language and to common parlance, and this capacity for penetration and circulation in a myriad of social ambits has to be borne in mind. Every context and culture that addresses the subject of identity alters its meaning, so that an already inherently elusive concept is pervaded by a multiplicity of styles and rationales. 'Encrustation' is a useful metaphor to illustrate the concept's lack of purity and transparency, although one should also beware of eliminating this through over-simplistic approaches. Any topic discussed with an interest that raises doubts and perplexities is a vanguard issue. It is best to tolerate the uncertainty and ambiguity of this interpretative process until a shared outpost is built on this insidious terrain in the hope that over the years it may develop into a fortress, obviously one with the drawbridge permanently lowered.

To map out the ambivalences mentioned above, we can ask some simple questions. The identity of who and of what? To which individuals or groups does this term apply? In common parlance, through the media arena, identity is often linked with adjectives: gender, party, crisis, youth, national, culture and so forth. This immediately introduces a split in the use of the term: individuals and groups, personal and collective identities. What I am dealing with is individual identity, fully aware of the fact that collective and individual identities interact and assume different meanings depending on the relations between them.

The ease with which this concept is bandied about and freely yoked to others would appear to suggest that it requires no opening-up or explana-

tion. Often, however, it is used not because its meaning is clear and generally accepted, but rather on account of its evocative capacity and the feelings it arouses. Changing one's identity, becoming someone else, is something that has always fascinated human beings. In the same way, in all communities, people without a recognisable identity have always kindled a combination of interest and hostility, a sense of discomfort caused by the difficulty of encapsulating them in specific and reassuring definitions. Ways of radically changing one's identity have also always existed, such as shutting oneself up in a monastery, adopting a religion or joining the Foreign Legion. These and other classic modes of identity transfiguration have now been joined, on a massive scale, by physical alterations such as slimming diets, bodybuilding and plastic surgery. All this is related to one of the fundamental processes of identity construction, namely *self-acceptance*, which will be dealt with later on.

Now, to test the difficulty of a clear definition of the term identity, let's take a look at two generally accepted meanings in an Italian and in an American language dictionary. In the Garzanti Italian dictionary, 'identità' is defined as 'the set of physical and psychological characteristics that make a person what he or she is, different from everyone else: defending one's own identity; identity crisis, a contradictory notion that the individual has of him or herself; it may constitute a pathological state.'

This immediately brings up two interesting points. On the one hand, a concept of identity understood as the sum of physical and psychological characteristics given *a priori* and on the other hand, a vision of identity as a problem or crisis, which concentrates on the pathological aspect. So, we are dealing with a concept that emerges and is specified at the very moment in which its precariousness, inconsistencies and instability are perceived: the identity is in crisis or, at the very least, has to be defended.

Let's take another definition, this one from the American Heritage Dictionary: 'The set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group; the personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity.' Here the definition of identity as a socially acquired process makes clearer reference to an individual's belonging to a group, after which the personality of the individual and its persistence is mentioned. This meaning, on the one hand creates ambiguity through the use of the terms 'personality' and 'identity' as if they were synonyms, while on the other it uses concepts such as 'persistence', which means continuity but not change. Additionally, the term 'entity' cannot be associated with a dynamic concept of subjectivity; on the contrary it suggests the idea of an immoveable individual essence.

Even the language of the scientific community tends to create ambiguity. In addressing the question of identity, the arguments appear to evoke something which is implicit but that, in actual fact, is not explicitly understood. This can be discerned, for instance, in the work of scholars adopting a narrative approach to the subject of identity, who frequently use as synonyms the terms history, biography, autobiography, experience, memory, recollection, account and story. They also use in the same way terms such as 'identity' (qualified by the adjectives social, personal, individual), 'individuality', 'subjectivity', 'personality' and 'Self'.[2] Sometimes the reason for this is to avoid repetitions that are considered stylistically inelegant. People adopting such narrative approaches aspire to a mellifluous prose and are reluctant to strip their communicative content to the bare bones.

Some writers even resort to evocative terminology. These 'magic words' are usually polysemic and used as shields against possible criticism. Examples are ubiquitous terms such as 'hybrid' and 'half-caste'. These are words that indicate something indefinite in social reality: the scholar evokes the complexity of reality, albeit without helping us to understand it. One telling example of this is the famous expression 'Generation X', which was used by sociologists in the 1990s to indicate a generation of young people deemed unfathomable or, more simply, not very well understood. Even 'Millennials' (aka 'Generation Y') is clearly evocative rather than explicative. One might have hoped that the labelling would end with 'Generation Z', being the last letter in the alphabet. But apparently we have returned to go with 'Generation Alpha'.[3]

One of the reasons why the term 'identity' is not easily intelligible and does not enjoy autonomous theoretical status is because it overlaps with other terms. In the analytical axis stretching from the individual to society, the pivot of investigation—and hence of the consequent reconstruction of ideal types—is shifted towards the society that conditions the individual. Social scientists have sketched out numerous personality types of a social character, portraying in great detail the socio-cultural environment that stimulates or inhibits the development of particular values, attitudes and aims guiding the behaviour of the actors. Conversely, the interior and exterior means proper to the various types of identity tend to be very vaguely

[2] Writers who explain the meaning of the keywords of their argument help the reader. The need to create a glossary is, nevertheless, an indicator of the state-of-the-art of a discipline.

[3] I shall return frequently to the subject of the condition of youth and the passage to adult life: focusing what lies beyond the *Shadow Line* (Conrad 1917) can help to clarify the concept of individual identity tout court.

defined (Rositi 1983, 27)[4]: very often behaviour or attitudes that contribute to define identity are also reutilised to delineate the means. Examples of this are the inner-directed and other-directed types of Riesman (1950), the authoritarian personality of Adorno (1950), the Philistine, the Bohemian and the creative man of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918–1920/1958), Simmel's metropolitan type (1902/1964) and Schumpeter's entrepreneur (1929). These scholars emphasise the influence of the cultural context on the individual's psychological organisation and models of action: it is the socialised aspect of the individual that is investigated. The attainable roles, the more or less creative paths accessible within a particular social milieu are the fundamental elements for understanding the acquisition of a social identity.

The specificity of identity profiles, and the set of issues this brings to the fore, is derived from and moulded by the conditioning of the social context. From here, the attempt to comprehend the dialectic between social conditioning and the uniqueness of the subjective path and the capacity for self-reflection proceeds with a delicate and precarious analytical balancing. The knife-edge route is a rugged crest between two abysses that exert a dangerous attraction for those prone to vertigo. On one side is the cliff of the idealistic and Promethean representations of human beings, stressing their free will, total independence, and bordering on an image of omnipotence: the possibility of individuation within an array of alternatives standing out against backgrounds cleared of all restrictions and constraints. The other cliff face is populated by determinisms, the notion of a 'recipient individual' at the mercy of a social order—either subtle or coarse—that eliminates personal choice. Individuals' potential is locked up within the narrow enclosure of natural and cultural limitations. The two concepts could be summarised as *infinite possibility* versus *infinite frustration*.

In this scenario the concept of identity emerges as a possible way of understanding the social action of an individual in its uniqueness, without reducing it to a mere response to external stimuli, or conversely as the manifestation of a perfect free will. One might say that the concept of identity takes on a shade of conciliation, a compromise (or a conflict) between the individual and society. This dialectic between the constraints and freedom of the social actor is not easy to unravel, but is nevertheless a route to be followed, especially by constructing new hypotheses and carrying out re-

[4] Rositi also hints at the potential risk of the quest for an 'optimal identity': formulating a complete and systematic definition of the concept of identity—often supported by a dehistoricised theory of personality or cognitive development—can block or slow down the production of 'new images of man'.

search in the field. This route was already pursued long ago by the founding fathers of sociology (Durkheim, Weber and Simmel), and is now assiduously frequented by the social sciences in general and by sociology and social psychology in particular.

The emergence of the identity issue was closely tied up with the question of its construction in Western industrialised societies, and within the conceptual framework of the passage from a modern to a late-modern world. The intensification of functional, cultural and symbolic differentiation in the late modern age,[5] and the ensuing complication of orientation in social worlds, renders the models of identification supplied by the traditional institutions and agencies of socialisation less effective. At the same time the central question of identity construction—Who am I?—becomes increasingly urgent.

What emerges is a dynamic that is apparently antithetical but substantially consequential. On one side the need to respond to the identity request is more pressing, while on the other side the means to do so go up in smoke. The places, cultures and ideas through which the late-modern individual can plan and give a strong meaning to life projects are no longer clear, visible, certain or reassuring. The causal link could be reversed: if the objective answers embodied in traditional institutions lose their capacity to provide life with sense and meaning then the individual is forced—and at the same time free—to seek different modes and criteria of self-definition. Thus, we have greater autonomy in the process of individuation and less security in existential planning.

'Individuation' is the process of constructing an individuality starting from a common nature. For Jung, the end and meaning of existence are expressed in this process:

> Individuation, therefore, is a process of differentiation, having for its goal the development of the individual personality. Individuation is a natural necessity inasmuch as its prevention by leveling down to collective standards is injurious to the vital activity of the individual. (Jung 1921/2017, 411).

If the sense of identity becomes precarious and unstable, the individual constantly experiences a sense of uncertainty as regards self and social real-

[5] We can make distinctions between: functional differentiation, which is produced by the divisions of work and of technique and by the segmentation and multiplication of life environments in the structure of society; cultural differentiation, which can be understood as a diversification of the needs and a change in the expectations of individuals; and symbolic differentiation, which is not separate from cultural, but places emphasis on the multiplication of the demands for meanings to refer to.