



Identity as a Problem of Today

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„Identity as a problem of today.“ First published in: *Fromm Forum* (English Edition - ISBN 1437-1189) 14 / 2010, Tuebingen (Selbstverlag) 2010, pp. 43-51.

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The XV International Forum of Psychoanalysis (Santiago de Chile, October 2008) was held under the title „Identity and Globalization“. The title indicates the concern of the psychoanalytic movement about new realities connected with globalization and the problem of identity in the first place. Loss of identity on an unprecedented scale challenges the psychoanalytic doctrine as well as the practice of psychoanalysis. New types of neuroses, unusual neurotic manifestations impel psychoanalysts to find an adequate response to the requirements of the epoch. But where shall we find this response? Shall we improve techniques of psychoanalysis first of all or shall we begin with revising the theoretical base of psychoanalysis? In my opinion it's not enough to improve techniques. To cure effectively, we must understand the origin of new disturbing realities and then we'll decide what kind of deviations we encounter. Do we deal with individual neuroses or with social defects? And what is more I'm not sure that psychoanalytic approach is enough to cope with the problem of identity. I think that we deal with a complex problem and findings of some other studies are necessary. So first of all we must comprehend the situation as a whole and bring to light the causes of the phenomenon we are interested in. Then we'll be able to judge what to do.

As far as loss of identity is concerned I'd like to deal with several points.

1. What is the nature of identity? Is it a psychological phenomenon or a social one?
2. Why is globalization accompanied by loss of

identity?

3. What kind of peculiarities of the contemporary times promote lack of identity and what shall we do to cope with them?

Concept of identity

Generally speaking, identity is a capacity of man to identify him(her)self with somebody or something to feel his(her) belonging to something bigger or greater or more important than an individual. But now the term of identity is used in different senses as applied to different sides of human life.

Psychoanalysis traditionally dealt with a psychological aspect of identity. Strictly speaking, the term of identity is not typical for conventional psychoanalysis. Freud usually spoke about unconscious identifications with the most important figures of childhood and the father's figure in the first place. According to Freud, this identification through imitation of the father's behaviour plays a role in the formation of Oedipus complex and of the Ideal-Ego similar to the father as a pattern. Identification through imitation was regarded by Freud as a primary form of an emotional tie with a libidinal object and as a phenomenon of sexual nature.

Besides this consideration, Freud elaborated the concept of identification as a feeling of man belonging to a group or a clan. In this case, man has a common cultural, ethnic, or religious base with the other members of the group. Such identification looks as a mechanism of group



psychology. According to Freud, identification with a group comes from prehistory of family when Super-Ego was formed after the sons' collective action of killing their father. Freud believed that all mass formations as well as individual ones were sexual by nature because libido was a source of both group and individual psychic manifestations.

Rethinking Freud's doctrine, we can assume that the phenomenon we call „identity“ was considered as a result of the unconscious identifications man acquired during his life and identifications of the childhood in the first place. But Freud spoke nothing about loss of identity. As a biological (sexual) phenomenon identity seems not to be lost. On the contrary, sense of identity must be acquired because libido realizes through emotional ties of identifications. So conventional psychoanalysis gives a one-dimensional picture of identity.

In sociology and ethnic psychology identity is regarded quite differently. It is usually interpreted as „national identity“ or „racial identity“ to express an emotional experience of man belonging to an ethnic community, his identifying with this community in contrast to other communities. Ethnic identity includes both emotional and cognitive phenomena. Besides the unconscious strivings and emotions it embraces self-consciousness of a man as a representative of this community, his conscious estimation of the ethnic group he belongs to in contrast to other groups.

Sometimes social and ethnic aspects of identity are emphasized to the detriment of a psychological one. Such a concept of identity is as one-dimensional as the concept conventional psychoanalysis offered. Post-Freudians overcame the gap between these two one-dimensional concepts. Dr. E. H. Erikson emphasized the double nature of identity, individual on the one hand and social on the other. According to Erikson a sense of identity is formed in the process of socialization combined with assimilation of social experience by a child. It is not a mere sum of identifications of the childhood. Man joins different groups during his life and identifies with them. Identity arises as a combination of identifications of different ages and it implies

both levels – conscious and unconscious, including self-consciousness, self-appreciation and appreciation of the ethnic and social groups a man belongs to. So identity characterizes personality as a whole with ethnic and cultural identity as its manifestations.

This interpretation of identity gets along with E. Fromm's point of view. Fromm regarded the need to feel identity as one of the most important strivings of human being as a whole, a striving which stems from the very condition of human existence. According to Fromm, man can't remain sane if he lacks this feeling.

If man is deprived of his usual base of socialization he perceives his state as loss of identity. But it is unbearable for man as Fromm showed. Man will rather conform to a crowd and accept „herd identity“ than feel lack of identity. Man conforms to a herd because herd identity gives him hope and protection. So herd identity is quite real and necessary for man to such an extent that man can't stand without it. At the same time Fromm called herd identity an „illusory“ one. Why?

Following K.Marx, Fromm noted that capitalism eliminated fixed social hierarchy and liberated man from clan identity. Now man is free *from* the unquestionable dependency on the social stratum but what is he free *for*? Fromm shows that, theoretically speaking, man is free *for* developing himself according to the humanistic demands. But capitalist society is not interested in self-dependent development of its members, they are to develop themselves in favor of the functioning of society. Social character is a socio-psychological mechanism to channel human energy for the purpose of the functioning of society on the one hand, and to provide man with the illusion that he acts free in his own interest on the other hand. Social character induces man to join a given culture or a social group to feel identity, but at the same time man loses self-identity having lost subjectivity as the quality of a self-developing person. So in Fromm's humanistic psychoanalysis, true identity is regarded as self-identity of a free-developing man, of a responsible subject of his actions, although man continues to belong to some social



and ethnic communities and is connected with other members by joint productive activity. If man places himself under the command of a social group or a culture in order to acquire protection and to decline responsibility, this kind of identity is regarded as untrue or illusory.

Taking into consideration what was said above, we can define identity as an emotional experience of personal wholeness and this wholeness ensures continuity and persistence of man's changes. So identity expresses human subjectivity as something substantial. The need to feel identity means the need to have a substantial self. Man has no sense of identity if he has no substantial self. He loses identity when he loses himself as a whole person, as a subject of his personal activity. So identity is experienced as a feeling but it is not only a psychological phenomenon. It is a trait of personality as it has been formed in the process of socialization. Identity is sociality assimilated and digested by an individual and converted into his personal substance.

This interpretation of identity appears to be consonant to the humanistic tendency.

Identity under globalization

The concept of identity elaborated by Fromm shows that the problem of identity has emerged with capitalism. As a process of unification of countries and nations into the global system, globalization intensifies non-humanistic tendency of capitalism and aggravates the situation with identity. Under globalization cultures are unified, national and cultural differences are eliminated and borders between cultural and ethnic groups are obliterated. Under these circumstances man is deprived of his usual base of socialization and lack of identity appears. But it is not globalization itself that is causing the loss of identity, it's the capitalistic character of the global integration opposed to the humanistic tendency. Unfortunately globalization creates conditions favorable for loss of identity but the real cause of this phenomenon is an inhuman mode of global integration. We must emphasize this shade to understand properly who is really guilty of mass lack of identity to define our task more exactly. I suppose that we are to fight for

humanizing the process of global integration and not against globalization itself.

Is there a chance to avoid loss of identity returning back to the clan identity of the pre-capitalistic era? How to estimate the clan identity of the past? Was this kind of identity true that time? I think that before the capitalist mode of production was settled there was no problem of identity because everyone had belonged to a group or a clan from birth on and had felt his belonging to this group as natural. If a clan managed to preserve itself till now without changes, its members wouldn't encounter the problem of identity. The problem arises when members of a clan join other social groups taking part in the globalization process. I see three possibilities to avoid loss of identity.

The most optimistic way is connected with the humanistic tendency and the productive orientation. Unfortunately we have to mention humanism as a collateral tendency of the world history. It is not typical for our time although the true identity does exist as a manifestation of the humanistic tendency.

Two other cases look less optimistic but are quite more possible. Let's begin with the case of herd identity Fromm elaborated. Clan ties get broken and man gets rid of them. The situation described by Fromm comes into being: man is free from rigid dependency on his clan but is he ready to develop as a responsible subject of his activity according to the humanistic demands? Is he ready to become a self-dependent person? Usually he is not. Having brought up in inhuman surroundings, man lacks subjectivity and has no habit to acquire it to become a self-developing person. His personal substance is too poor to acquire true identity and he suffers from lack of identity.

As a result some people become neurotics and see psychoanalysts. They have much in common due to the unified life conditions. At the same time they may still have different systems of values inherited by them as representatives of different cultures. Such patients may make difficulties for psychoanalysts who have to take into account patient's frame of orientation. Modern analysts pay attention to it. Dr. Carola Mann emphasized this point at the Forum. I



consider this remark to be a valuable contribution to the psychoanalytic doctrine because Freud didn't meet with this problem and said nothing about it.

But the most part of people never see psychoanalysts and try to cope with their state through identification with some ethnic or religious communities which oppose to globalization. This tendency looks like an attempt to compensate for loss of identity by returning back to the clan identity of the past. People seem to make up for a lack of identity with an excessive liking for a national or religious group instead of developing the substantial self. It is the most typical attempt to avoid loss of identity nowadays.

If these groups had managed to avoid globalization, people might have returned back to the clan identity of the precapitalistic age and the problem would have been removed. But I'm not sure if there is any ethnic group untouched by the world integration. Perhaps on the Amazon river. If somebody uses a telephone or a radio-set to say nothing about a computer he is involved into the global integration. Today traditional ethnic and religious groups are influenced by globalization as a rule. And the greater part of humankind shares the dominant social character which influences all human life including identity. National and religious groups involved in the globalization process get into problems. On the one hand they are as necessary for person identification as before, on the other hand the dominant social character converts these identifications into pure formal functions among other social roles. Under these circumstances some ethnic or religious groups exalt their distinctive traits and religious beliefs to assume the right to be the only representatives of the appropriate culture or religion. This exaltation gives them a chance to win new members and to oppose to the rest of the world or to try to adjust the world to their demands. As a result, the real base of this culture or religion becomes restricted, their human substances are eliminated and the relations within these groups become non-productive.

This tendency is an inadequate reaction to the inhuman character of the globalization

process and it is as inhuman as capitalistic globalization. The most part of people who enter such ethnic or religious groups for the sake of identity consider themselves to be defenders of the appropriate national or religious values. In reality they solve their social problems, and the need of social protection in the first place. As a matter of fact these people pay a high price for social protection. Aggressiveness and destructiveness, nationalism and religious fanaticism are their usual manifestations. These people have to take the group demands for granted and to surrender to them. They consider themselves to be real subjects of the cultural or religious system of values but in fact they are not subjects of any productive spiritual or intellectual activity at all. Restricted by the demands they accept to suffer from loss of subjectivity while they aren't aware of it. In this case we deal with a variety of herd identity. We see a poor attempt to overcome one difficulty by the other.

If a child is brought up under these contradictory influences he (she) may look quite normal until he (she) encounters some national, cultural or religious challenges. Under these impacts his (her) loss of subjectivity becomes apparent. A person emotionally experiences this situation as a threat to his (her) national or religious identity while the matter is that he (she) hasn't got self-identity, and the previous identifications have no support in him(her)self. He (she) lacks of subjectivity to assemble all his (her) identifications into the integral identity.

The real causes of this situation are social, not psychological. They are rooted in negative forms of globalization. To grasp this situation, the psychoanalytic doctrine isn't enough. We must apply for some other researches. At the same time we must take into account that these circumstances engender psychological mechanisms which assist to bring up a man capable of functioning in the way globalization needs. We deal with the complex problem which includes a psychological aspect but is not reduced to it.

Factors promoting lack of identity

Having specified what true identity is and how globalization influences on identity we can set to analyze some peculiarities of the contempo-



rary situation promoting lack of identity and a striving for an illusory identity. I'd like to consider two points.

1. The main social character in its connection with loss of identity.
2. Post-modernism as the ideological foundations of loss of subjectivity and identity.

As I mentioned above referring to Fromm, social character is an effective instrument for children upbringing in the way the society needs and it plays an important role in identity formation. Fromm noted that at the period of free competition the marketing orientation dominated and promoted an illusory identity. The main character trait of the marketing social character is emptiness as a necessary condition for man's ability to change according to changing market demands. The marketing character deprives man of his substantial self in order to give him a chance of unlimited mutability. Naturally it results in loss of true identity. Man has to resort to herd identity in order to avoid insanity. That's why herd identity became so widespread at the beginning of the 20th century and attracted Fromm's attention.

Times have changed. Globalization is in process. But the problem of identity looks more acute now than before. The globalization epoch engendered a new type of social character. I call it „information character“. It stems from the global information system as a necessary component of globalization. Its main character trait is an ability to receive, to process and to transfer information. The information character deprives man of the true identity as the market character used to do. Man of the information character is accustomed to replace his personal experience with depersonalized information and turns into a set of functions as before. An illusory identity is suitable for him.

And what is more a new modification of information character has appeared and spreads now all over the world. I call it „virtual character“ to mark its connection with virtual reality created with help of computer. This modification of character excludes the substantial self absolutely. A man of this character is not a subject of his activity. To be more exact such man should be regarded as a set of functions. He

can't have true identity while he may feel a sense of identity with his partners involved into virtual reality. This man may be sure in his personal identity because he doesn't know what the true identity is. But his identity is as virtual as his activity.

The more this type of character orientation takes root, the more its non-productivity becomes apparent, the more dramatic the situation with identity is. The only way to improve the situation is to promote the productive social character. I doubt whether we can substitute the productive orientation for non-productive ones straight away. But we can do our best to put these measures into practice.

Domination of non-productive character orientation is ideologically supported by post-modernism. This philosophy pretends to be ideology-free but it turns into ideology perpetuating things as they are. According to post-modernism identity is impossible because the final identification is impossible. It's implied that there is no reality beyond notions. Post-modernists affirm that we deal with „simulacres“ as means of communications which can't be correlated with anything objective. „Simulacres“ are considered to exist in associations and connotations of the moment. As means of communications they acquire sense if addressant's connotations are actualized in addressee's perception. It's important to note that, according to post-modernist philosophy, it is not a subject who perceives addressant's connotations. Human perception consists of self-organizing experience which expresses itself in „simulacres“. So post-modernists conclude that using „simulacres“ man alienates his identity and gets free from his subjectivity.

We see that identity is closely connected with subjectivity and post-modernism proposes to get rid of both. I consider their reflections to be a good illustration of total alienation. I suppose that this situation is insane and should be improved. On the contrary philosophers of post-modernism regard this situation as normal. They assure us that they have managed to describe human being as it is, without anything substantial. They regard the notions of substantiality and of subjectivity as the errors of previ-



ous philosophic systems that must be corrected. So they perpetuate the situation of total alienation including the alienated state of mind.

I doubt whether we are able to abolish such attitude to man at once but we must not overlook the fact that silence gives consent, and if we don't object to this position we approve it and promote loss of subjectivity and identity.

I think that loss of subjectivity is basic for loss of identity. Identity is lost when loss of subjectivity takes place. But the problem of subjectivity is rather social than psychological. Philosophy and sociology usually deal with this problem and we must take into account philosophical and sociological aspects of it.

Conclusions

The problem of identity is based on the more fundamental problem of subjectivity. The more subjectivity is lost, the more acute the problem of identity is. But loss of subjectivity is one of

the main trends of our time. Both problems are rooted in non-humanistic orientation of modern globalization and they are rather social than psychological. But globalization engenders psychological mechanisms which assist to bring up a man capable of functioning in the inhuman way globalization needs. So psychoanalytic approach is necessary but it isn't enough. To cope with the problem we must use the findings of some other studies.

Is it possible to keep true identity or to avoid loss of it nowadays? I see the only satisfying opportunity in being connected with the humanistic tendency and the productive orientation. It is not typical for our time but the true identity does exist as a manifestation of the humanistic tendency. Only humankind as a whole can find the way out of this difficult situation. But psychoanalytic movement will make a valuable contribution to the improvement of the situation if it promotes the productive orientation and strengthening of subjectivity.