

A group-analytic model to create a personal and social dynamic identity

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Abstract

A group-analytic model to create a personal and social dynamic identity. Identity needs time to build up, to learn flexibility and adaptability while maintaining a sense of self-consistence, a time difficult to find in contemporary society dominated by expectation of "everything at once" We, as psychoanalysts, can help to restart the time in all its articulations from what Pontalis (1997) called *Fifth season* an evoking name to designate the unconscious as an open circuit. The analytic relationship restores the depth of time and the specific features for each subject coming through it. The peculiarity of the group-analytical work stems from the fact that each patient's tales are enriched and amplified by the interactions with others and by other people's tales, thus producing crucial movements towards a healthy individuation and to the pleasure, not the obligation, of sharing and belonging. Each of the participants, session after session, goes through the founding values of the others for the construction of his identity. The culture of flexibility and the unencumbered stream of change will release the subject from the flat identification with his symptoms or with his original culture. Even within the group, this whole process is not free of conflicts, that can even degenerate into fights. Fights that the therapist has to turn into a conflict which can be used to give value to differences and enable a new and creative awareness of identity, an awareness that won't be afraid to mix with other identities. This issue can represent a good model also for our contemporary society, as the meeting with immigration is unavoidable, given that migrations will increase in time. In our society it would be advisable to look up to the group-analytic model that should be able, even if with some difficulties, to spread a culture where prejudices can be discussed and become hypothesis to be proved or disproved, not anymore creating strict barriers and value scales that end to the aberration of considering the stranger unworthy of being considered human. I believe that the foundational paradigms of group analysis and groupanalytic culture can provide a valid contribution to the establishment of a healthy identity that does not fear but enhances the dialogue with otherness.

Key words: group-analytic culture, identity, otherness

Such an headline for a convention about Identity Agonies may seem provocative, but it comes from my agreement with this quotation by Albert Einstein (1931) about crisis:

"Creativity is born from the distress, as the day is born from the dark night. (...) It is in the crisis where the best of each other rise up, without crises any wind is caress

(...) we must work hard (...)the only crises threatening, that is the tragedy of not wanting to fight for it"

About this, the scheme of the five stages of grief and of every kind of "traumatic" loss comes to mind. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) elaborated them as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, and it is legitimate to doubt that we are on the verge of sliding into the uncritical depression of the fifth stage.

Perhaps, at the times when Einstein was writing, the crisis was less global, but I think his words can still be an important warning, even if I don't want to deny that in a society like ours, marked by crisis and instability, it is very difficult to find satisfactory answers about our identity.

Identity needs time to build up, to learn flexibility and adaptability while maintaining a sense of self-consistence: a time that must include the past, the present and the future, a time to develop growth processes and projects and be able to welcome even death, the only certainty we cannot avoid.

The concept of time, however, is all but simple. Rovelli (2017) reminds us that the flowing of time is not a universal feature but a specific characteristic of the physical system in which we exist. He also says that *"time is the source of our identity"* (pag 161). Benasayag (2015) underlines a peculiarity that the contemporary human beings have to deal with: the possibility to be connected and communicate *"in real time"* on one hand, and the need our mind has to *"take its (biological) time"*, the need not to react in synchrony with physical linear time, on the other.

According to this author, this peculiarity produces a phenomenon called *biotechnological hybridization*, ensuing functional and physiological mutations that are out of our control and put the subjectivisation process and the categories of responsibility and civilization at risk.

In his opinion, *"The challenge of our times is focused on the possibility to combine our incredible knowledge and technological power with the understanding and respect of life circuits"* (pag. 193). That's not easy and makes our times, as Bollas said (2015), *the Era of bewilderment*.

The ideology of "everything at once", shared by the whole Western society, implies that the future is right now, there's no time to project or build it.

The flux of change is not gradual but brutally fast, and it leaves behind holes and gaps where solitude and discomfort, expectations and disappointments nest and grow. Superheroes and frightened children wander in a foggy, indefinite space, without borders and limits. And then, the confrontation with reality and the lack of work possibilities obstruct every project and hinder, or block altogether, development and growth processes. The kid, that in the videogames has learnt that every character has at least seven lives, as an adult discovers that life is just one and, disoriented, wants to exploit its whole temporal dimensions. What can I do? This question is immediately followed by a deeper and more involving enquiry. Who am I? Which are the rites of passage able to confirm and make worthy the right rhythms of growth and to allow the foundation of my identity?

Knowing that identity arises from the encounter with the others, and that we can't avoid the difficult relationship between Western and Islamic values, I was inspired to look for an encounter.

After reading *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'islam* (2002) by the French-Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama, I found out that there are a number of similarities (as well as differences) between the discomfort plaguing the Western society and the discomfort plaguing the Islamic society. With regards to this, Benslama chooses a very fitting word: *intersections*. He writes: "*Intersections between the European and the Islamic cultures are numerous, and are to be intended in the double meaning of intersection, that is both encounter and fracture*" (pag 9).

Here my attention goes to the intersection about the issue of time, connected to the process of subjectivisation, of the construction of identity. According to the writer, whose text can be referred to for further analysis, Islam is flattened on the past, while it harbours "*a frightening desire for revenge on the present, given that the actual event is just the shadow of what already happened*", (ibidem).

On this issue we find an intersection between Western and Arabic cultures: not being able to live his temporality to the fullest, the Western man flattens himself on the present and locks himself in and exasperated individualism, while the Muslim exasperates a belonging that demands the past to be re-actualized. It is curious, and significant, that the lack of liberty in the Islamic world and the illusion of total liberty in the Western world lead to the same result, that is to the crisis of subjectivisation – even if with reverse manifestations – and to the impossibility of appreciating temporality to the whole. But isn't the point of origin the same? Wasn't it the greed for riches that led the Arabic powers to leave the masses in their ignorance and hate for the present, and wasn't it the dominance of finance over politics to cause poverty, desperation and crisis of identity in the Western world? And all this associated with a technology which is not human-friendly and has been destabilizing the space-time parameters and the way we look towards the different stages of life, towards procreation, towards death. These changes have a deep impact on fundamental elements of human existence, on the way we relate with ourselves, with other people and with the world, and even on our way of thinking. Bollas (2015) reckons that, while Freud *focused on that kind of censorship that leads to removed subconscious* (...), since last century another kind of censorship has been built, a *censorship not aimed at unacceptable sexual or aggressive contents, but aimed at the right of the Self to exist* (...). *The oppression took innumerable forms* (...), splitting in many different stories (...) *leading to the assimilation of human beings into the capitalistic system – so much so that the "forces" of the system trample on human rights* (pag. 416). He makes dramatically clear that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, while the *removed* is concerned with contents which have become subconscious, the *oppressed* is concerned with the impairment of the mental process which should have built the thought (...) leaving *the Self disoriented* (pag 417). If, thanks to the psychoanalytic work, the *oppressed manages to be translated into words*, and in the end it attains the

consciousness, it has been however *transformed by the impaired forms of reception, thought and communication (...) through which we live* (pag. 418). *The psychic values of the contemporary subject of analysis will be less and less based upon unmediated experiences and more on indirect perceptions generated by the IT revolution. The contemporary Selves seem to retreat from involvement with reality – withdrawing from the unmediated (...).* The labourers at the assembly lines were alienated from their work, but *the 21st century Self completely identifies as a "part" of the communication machine, and not as someone who puts together the object and sets it in motion* (pag. 419). The expectation of "everything at once" goes to the detriment of the capacity for reflection, too quick solutions put the human dimension at risk. We are witnessing the appearance of an unprecedented way of "thinking". The capacity of creating a scale of values, a hierarchical priority order has been replaced, according to Bollas, by a sort of *equivalences that ascribe the same validity to any information, which the author calls horizontalism*. Experts are not valued anymore, *the internet social-democracy turns us all into experts of everything, the risk being the involuntary promotion of the uninformed Self* (pag. 423). Bollas coins a neologism: *fastnet*, meaning the merger of speed, internet and social networking (pag 420). In his opinion, *fastnet* has caused the expansion of *horizontalism*, of *operationalism*, defined as a *propensity to develop statements of actions, instead of reflections* (how often do our patients say, yes I got that, but what shall I do now?), and of *homogenisation*, aiming at reducing the differences and the value of their creative tension, the importance of a potential, healthy conflict. This is why Bollas speaks of the 21st century as of the *Era of bewilderment*, given the vastness and complexity of the problems we have to deal with, and concludes: *"If we cannot bear positive dreams for ourselves, our families and the human race, if we thus cannot build a future as a mental object collecting these dreams and using them for the vital matrixes linking the citizens of all countries in a meaningful progression, as adaptive creatures we must seek new strategies to keep afloat"*.

Unfortunately, he does not say what these strategies could be, and just concludes like this: *"If the 21st century generations will receive a legacy of a mentally impaired world, there's always hope in the strong human instinct to resilience"* (pag 432). But, as the old saying goes, *who lives on hope, dies in desperation*.

To recover the founding value of limits, of borders, of history, of memories, of life stages, of the past and of the future, we psychoanalysts can contribute to restart time, with all its structured dimensions, from the *Fifth season*. Pontalis (1997) refers to the *Fifth season* by quoting Pascal Quignard in the book *Albucius* (1990): *"There's something that doesn't belong to the order of time, and however comes back every year as fall and winter come, as spring and summer come. Something that bears its fruits and sheds its light"* (pag. 30).

Albucius harks back to this actual pre-season that sneaks around throughout our whole life, that pursues the seasons on the calendar, that from time to time visits our daily activities, often our feelings, always our sleep, in the roundabouts of dreams

and of the tales in which they are translated..." Pontalis considers this Fifth season as an evoking name to designate the subconscious, both topically and dynamically "applying a force of attraction upon the other systems, the other seasons, an attraction that imparts them movement: subconscious this time as an open circuit" ibidem (pag 31).

If we contemplate subconscious as an open circuit, within the analytical relationship we will be able to listen to suggestions coming from the pre-conscious that, thanks to dreams and free associations, will enable the process of subjectivisation, leading the patient of individual or group analysis to recover every dimension of time. Thanks to something that is out of the flux of time, analysis will turn unthought thoughts into actual, current thoughts, thoughts that can be spoken of and transformed, thoughts that will be able to enter into chronological time and enrich it with dreams and fantasies which will nurture self-recognition and the building of a new identity, not anymore flattened on stereotypes and not anymore prone to homologation. The analytic relationship restores the depth of time and the specific features for each subject coming through it. The peculiarity of the group-analytical work stems from the fact that each patient's tales are enriched and amplified by the interactions with others and by other people's tales, thus producing crucial movements towards a healthy individuation and to the pleasure, not the obligation, of sharing and belonging.

The activity within the group, at the intersection of times and relationships, offers an additional possibility to create a shared story, where to re-experience, or experience for the first time, important turning points of existence. Each of the participants, session after session, goes through the founding values of the others for the construction of his identity. In the group new rites are invented, to share and give value to moments of deep changing, the mutative events such as birth, death, love, war. Rites are important to contain, to give meaning to occurrences and stimulate the passages from the individual to the group and back, establishing supportive relationships both for the individual and for the whole group.

The presence within the analytical group of patients from different generations enables the newcomer to appreciate the values of change, of transformation, told by other participants, especially the ones who are at the end of the therapeutic process. This will encourage hope and lessen the fear of the unknown, ensued by every kind of change.

The culture of flexibility and the unencumbered stream of change will release the subject from the flat identification with his symptoms or with his original culture. In everyday life, however, it's too easy to forget the importance of singularity and the value of each human being's story: owing to our prejudices, created in the struggle against the anguish in front of the unknown, we are prone to throw out the baby with the bathwater, mix up the part and the whole.

We often try to protect ourselves from negative feelings that we don't want to acknowledge and that we are not able to metabolize by projecting them upon the

others. In our society, both in big and small groups, it would be advisable to look up to the group-analytic model that should be able, even if with some difficulties, to spread a culture where prejudices can be discussed and become hypothesis to be proved or disproved, not anymore creating strict barriers and value scales that end to the aberration of considering the stranger unworthy of being considered human.

During the group work, the evolutional movements of each participant, the emancipation from destructive and repetitive behaviours, are interpreted as the result of a shared process, to which everybody contributed and from which everybody is and will be able to draw new hope and creativity. This way it's possible to understand a third option, besides disappearing into a reassuring, homogeneous mass and basking in an exasperated narcissism. Even within the group, this whole process is not free of conflicts, that can even degenerate into fights. The limited time of this speech does not allow me to describe clinical examples to support my statements and so I cannot explain how the therapist has to turn the fight into a conflict which can be used to give value to differences and enable a new and creative awareness of identity, an awareness that won't be afraid to mix with other identities. This issue can represent a good model also for our contemporary society, as the meeting with immigration is unavoidable, given that migrations will increase in time.

Our society is always changing and it's impossible to retreat from dealing with the Otherness and with the transformations of our identity that this dealing ensues. I have really appreciated the project of an imminent new regulation in Italy, a law called *Cultural prevention*, aimed at preventing the Isis from recruiting proselytes by activating interventions in schools, prisons and on the new media.

I think that this counteroffensive on the level of ideas and values could possibly mark the transition from the bombing of (often screaming and misleading) information towards educational projects. This could be a really important occasion, an opportunity to build projects yielding positive consequences, not just aimed at blocking the spreading of jihadist radicalization but also focused on replacing the current culture, based on exasperated individualism, with a different culture, which I would like to be the culture of group analysis. This culture would be able to avoid the reduction of the brain to a machine and the inconsiderate use of digitalized information, and to give value to a knowledge based on experience, which enables the building of a personal and social identity both flexible and dynamic, able to be constructively resilient and not obliged to passively accept a pathological reality.

I'm obviously not suggesting a massive group therapy for everyone, but as a psychoanalyst, group analyst and Coirag teacher I believe it's our political and social duty to be available, together with experts in other disciplines, as interlocutors and trainers for those who'll be dealing with cultural prevention. I hope and think that we will be able to move in this direction.

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