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What Is Rational About Identity?

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ABSTRACT: In this article we explore the positive use of “social identity” in order to explain certain instances of social action. We attempt to isolate its explanatory power alongside the two great motivational mechanisms of the sociological tradition: interests and instrumental rationality, on the one hand; and values, norms and practical reason, on the other. We discover an ample sphere for a reductionist strategy where identity is and must be translated to the language of either interests and preferences or norms and values with which the individual identifies himself. Nevertheless, in the final part of this paper we also explore the possibility and circumstances of the appearance of reasons of identity proper as independent and irreducible agency factors.

WHAT IS RATIONAL ABOUT IDENTITY?

The literature on identity, not only in the scope of sociology, is simply overwhelming. “‘Identity’ – writes Jenkins – ‘has become one of the unifying frameworks of intellectual debate in the 1990s’” (Jenkins, 1996, p. 7). At the beginning of the new century the situation is not very different. However, when delving further into the literature we soon come up against numerous conceptual obstacles. To begin with, we must tackle the enormous amount of adjectives that accompany the noun *identity*. Although by no means exhaustive, we have found a good twenty generic adjectives that typically accompany the term¹. To the best of our knowledge, no other relevant category in the social sciences, perhaps with the exception of *role*, is bedecked with such a long cloak of adjectives. Take, for example, the habitual use of categories such as class, status, power, capital, group, action, structure, authority or organization. It seems as if the semantic content of the concept of identity were plunged into obscurity and light can only be shed upon it by resorting to other concepts that serve to qualify it. Here we find that a large part of these categories which are central to sociology “specify” a type of identity. Thus, for the term culture we encounter *cultural identity*; for society that of *social identity*; for group, *group identity* and so on. In this article, we will use the most general term possible, that of *social identity*; a term that encompasses all its possible and more concrete specifications.

By “social identity” we understand the set R of traits that are shared and known² by a group of individuals with a sufficient number of members, but which is of an indeterminate size (a social group)³, traits that permit these individuals to define their

social self and which, supposedly, are *expressed* in their behavior (Stryker, 1980, p. 385; Callero, 1985, p. 205; Callero, 2003; Gusfield, Johnston and Laraña, 1994; Calvert, 2000)⁴. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the individual's social identity is not observable in itself, but is *revealed* through action. Indeed, it is in the action of individuals, which *is* observable, where social identity must be *discovered*. It makes full sense then to examine the *causal-cum-intentional* relationship between identity and action, either because it is considered, in an immediate way, that identity causes action, or because it is assumed that action causes identity insofar as individuals intentionally seek an identity through action

This is precisely the aim of the present paper: to explore the possible set of causal and intentional relationships between identity and action, that is to say, the connections that can be made between the social identity of X and what X does. This will be done in three phases. In the first phase, we will explore the relationship between identity, interests and action. This will be achieved by analyzing three concrete possibilities: *X does M because he is Y*; *X is Y because he does M*, and *X does M to be Y*. Following this analysis, we attempt to determine the independent explanatory power of identity, if indeed it does exist, in one of the core theoretical strategies in the social sciences: that based on means-ends or instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*). In the second phase, our attention will turn to the relationship between identity, norms and value rationality (*Wertrationalität*), that is to say, where rationality is understood in a deontological sense, according to principles. As we will see, the first two phases clearly respond to a *reductionist* analytical strategy. We want to know if and to what degree the explanatory power of social identity is reducible to these interests and values (be they individual or collective); to instrumental rationality or practical rationality. We

will find, in fact, that the sphere and possibilities of reduction are truly broad. In a third phase, however, we will explore one last possibility, that is, that of the *reasons of identity proper*, which are irreducible to any other type of reasons, be they instrumental or normative.

IDENTITY, INTERESTS AND INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY

X does M because he is Y

Let us suppose that X is a 35-year-old black male, the father of one child, tall, married, a member of a football club, Spanish, a trade unionist, a high school teacher, of Guinean descent, a bullfighting fan, a fervent defender of gender equality and outgoing. All of these traits Y of X are traits that identify X as X. Of these, some are biological, others are social; some are a product of chance, others of need; some are the result of deliberate decisions, others of the consequences (foreseen or not) of those decisions; and yet others are culturally determined. Surely Y does not encompass all of what X is; but we *can* say that X is, at least, all that. In reality, any subset of traits that we might select would accurately identify X to a greater or lesser degree, although none would comprehend all the properties of X. It should go without saying that what interests us here are X's socially shared traits, those that constitute his social identity.

On the other hand, the statement *X does M because he is Y*, is not always clear. While it would seem to be evident that we are attempting to explain action M according to the identity Y of X, this would not permit us to affirm, for example, that X takes part in a pro human rights movement *because* he is black, or that he participates in a

demonstration on May 1st *because* he is a trade unionist, or that he defends his homeland *because* he is Spanish. In fact, there are many black people who do not participate in anti-racism movements (this does not mean that they stop being black) and many Spaniards who are not willing to defend their homeland (this does not mean that they are no longer Spanish) and many trade unionists that go for picnics on the 1st of May (they still continue to be union activists). Hence, it appears that something more must be added to these identifying traits in order to explain X's social action. We are not attempting to be original by saying that one of the key contenders among the explanations for social action- albeit not the only one as we shall see - are *individual interests*. The problem is how to include them.

In our opinion, this opens up two possibilities:

a) *Social identities define or cause individual interests*. If I have traits $R = \{h, i, j, \dots, n\}$ that are shared with other individuals and shape my/our social identity, it is to be expected that the set of individuals that share R have a vector defined by converging interests. This causal relationship can be shown in the following schematic way:

FIGURE 1



For our purposes, however, this relationship entails certain problems. In effect, there are many ways for one to identify oneself with a given trait; there are many ways to be or feel Basque or a woman or a husband or an ecologist or a Catholic. It is not at all clear what set of interests can be inferred from these ways of being; from these social

identities (Serpe, 1987). Furthermore, there is an additional problem when attempting to establish a direct causal relationship between identity and interest, when affirming that identities define the interests that cause action, namely that individuals have *multiple* and *interweaved* (or overlapping) social identities⁵. And, accordingly, the intensities of identification vary enormously. Perhaps the fact that I belong to an extreme right group such as the *Ultra Sur*⁶ could explain my occasional vandalistic behavior, or the fact of belonging to the Freemasonry explains certain instances of a mason's conduct. But these are cases of strong local identities which, at times, albeit rarely, override (or overdetermine) individuals' interests, desires and preferences and explain a great deal of their action. Normally, however, individuals have multiple, interweaved identities of diverse intensity (Aguilar and de Francisco, 2002; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Being Basque can be a broad cupola that gives shelter to many other short distance, high intensity identities (to be a fan of the Real Sociedad, a member of a gastronomic club, or a consultant for the BBVA); identities which are, in many cases, incompatible with others of the same kind (a fan of the Athletic de Bilbao Football Club or a union representative of the above-mentioned bank)⁷. All of them can share the overlapping Basque identity. But, then, being Basque would tell us little about the behavior of these individuals, unless that identity is no longer of low intensity or long distance (overlapping) and comes to absorb the other identities (in the Basque case, an ETA activist, for example).

For all of these reasons, the following statement would seem to be a more reasonable alternative to explain the relationship between interests and social identity:

b) *Individuals have interests and preferences, and according to these interests and preferences we can identify ourselves with other individuals with converging interests and preferences, thus contributing to shaping our social and collective identities.* Schematically, this can be represented as follows:

FIGURE 2



As shown in graph b), this second line of argument conceals a reductionist strategy by which the concept of identity is reduced to that of *identification* with interests. Initially, this strategy appears to be more promising than the previous one. Indeed, it is difficult to negate the fact that individuals have distinctive interests and preferences and - as we will examine below- favor specific values; and that they identify with others that share these values, thus making *commitments* to them. And, it should be added, albeit in passing, that we differentiate ourselves from those that reject these interests and preferences (identification and differentiation are complementary processes). We are tempted here to affirm -although we will soon see that our affirmation may be too hasty- that the concept of social identity is an empty (or rather obscure) concept if it does not take into account these complex sets of interests and

preferences (and, as we will see, values) that prompt individuals to action, particularly collective action: “if we did not have identifications” -Hardin writes- “that is, commitments, it would not matter so much that we have the quasi objective identities we have” (Hardin, 1995, p. 7). We believe that this reductionist interpretation holds better with empirical investigations regarding social identities⁸. Beyond the symbolic manipulations of the leaders of social movements, behind the identity banners and flags, there are usually both projective and reactive interests that are more or less organized and explicit; there are preferences and desires that are defended with better or worse fortune. And perhaps more importantly, they *can only be defended collectively*. Quite another thing is that, in the end, the symbolic power of social identities substitutes or masks those interests, or that the manipulation of identity symbols creates false interests or beliefs with enormous mobilizing power. This is neither a remote nor an infrequent possibility: fascism, religious fundamentalism, certain types of nationalistic fanaticism, in our minds, fit into this last category. Nonetheless, determining the real power of blind loyalty or unconditional support continues to be a matter of empirical testing. Whatever the case may be, this last (reductionist) strategy to analyze the relationship between identity, interests and action, that is, the strategy that takes interests and preferences as given in order to infer social identities via identification, leads us directly to our second possibility: *X is Y because he does M*. Let us now turn to this question.

X is Y because he does M

Although this possibility emerges from the previous line of argument, as we have just said, the statement *X is Y because he does M* introduces a significant change in meaning that is well worth examining insofar as it has a much more explicit moral element than the previous statement; an element which is beautifully reflected in Cervantes' saying "each is the son of his acts". But this is neither the time nor the place to follow this string of thought.

From the positive sociological perspective that is of interest to us here, however, the above statement seems to indicate that identity is no longer held to be the *explanans* of a causal argument where human behavior acts as a dependent variable. Instead, here individual identity is the *explanandum* and action the independent variable. But, what does this supposed causality mean here? Several possibilities come to mind.

i) In reality, what we are affirming is that social identities are *expressed* or *revealed* in action: if I vote for the X party, I support that party; if I pay my party dues, I am a good activist; if I take up arms to free my nation, I am a radical nationalist; if I attend mass every Sunday, I am devout; if I risk my life in a zodiac to save whales, I am an ecologist, etc. Clearly, there is a problem here in that this is contrary to what we said in the previous section (strategy a), that is: that identities tend to be underdetermined by the action or *partially expressed* through it. Yet what constitutes a sufficient set of actions to consider that an identity is revealed through them? What constitutes *necessary* actions? Is it necessary to resort to violence to be a radical nationalist? Is it enough to go to mass every Sunday to be devout? Is it necessary to climb aboard a zodiac to be an ecologist? Is it sufficient to pay one's party fees to be a good activist?

We believe that this path needs to be cleared in order to endow the concept of social identity with empirical content. In effect, there must be a necessary and sufficient set of actions, at least in the sphere of theoretical concepts, that provides indicators of social identity and endows the concept with empirical content. By taking this path, we will be able to measure our concepts of social identity by assigning different intensities to the distinct sets of actions and differentiate, for example, between strong, medium and weak identities.

Another way to understand the causality in the statement *X is Y because he does M* is:

ii) To consider identity as an emergent and lateral effect of a series of n individual actions. One does things without giving them a unifying meaning and finally discovers in them, by becoming reflexively aware of their meaning, a particular personal identity. It is not that personal identity is an *end-state* at which one arrives at a given moment in time like a ship that docks in port; in reality- at least in our opinion- one always departs from an identity and is always arriving at it: we make our identity in a gradual manner by rediscovering it, reforming it and reshaping it⁹. We are unaware of our bravery or courage until we are confronted with a series of challenges and successfully deal with them; we are unaware of our generosity until we have made enough unconditional donations; we are unaware of our sense of duty, responsibility and justice until we have performed a series of acts that qualify us as respectable, responsible or just; and so on and so forth with a whole slew of possible vices and virtues. To a large extent *we are* - in a lateral and emerging way if you will - *what we do*. The same can be said of social identities. However, we believe that social identities in particular, although personal identity in general as well, are better understood if the statement *X is Y because he does*

M is construed not so much from the standpoint of individual action, but from the following perspective:

iii) *Interaction*. In short, when we talk about identity (especially social identity) we are really talking about the intersubjective construction of shared meaning. To say that I have a particular social identity is to say that *I am* to the extent that I participate in a “we are”. Clearly this implies actions, but actions whose meaning is interpreted jointly; it implies communication and symbolic interaction. Now, how does this fit in with the reduction of identity to interests, which in our manner of seeing things, operates when identity is linked to action? At a first glance, it would seem as if we were moving away from our own reductionist strategy since the path of the intersubjective construction of meaning could imply the separation of identity from mere individual interests and preferences. Although this is the case to some degree, it is not necessary to abandon the language of interests and preferences in order to address the relationship between identity and interaction, which keeps us from falling back on an *essentialist* vision of identity to explain action. The fact that *X does M because he is Y* may be a reflection or an expression of a collective preference: “X does M because he is Y and all Y does M or collectively prefers to do M”. This collective preference, which is a product of interaction and with which individuals identify themselves, is not reducible to a simple individual preference: it is grounded in collective intentions and desires, not in aggregating individual desires. The violinist that plays in an orchestra or the central defender on a football team do do “something only as part of [their] doing something,” that is, playing football or playing in an orchestra (Searle, 1997, p. 41), that is, playing football or playing in an orchestra (Searle, 1997, p. 41). The violinist assumes the orchestra’s failure as his own and it is of little good that only he played well. But this

still implies, with regard to what is of interest to us here, that identity is reducible in the last instance to preferences, be they individual or collective. In the first case, identification is equivalent to a process of aggregation; in the second it is the collective preference itself (“we prefer”) that the individual assumes. Identity is, in this second case, but identification with a we that prefers collectively. Interaction gives rise to collective preferences that individuals express in their actions; preferences that form part of what we call “social identity”. These preferences -endowed with an intersubjective meaning- provide members of the group with reasons for action (to defend themselves against the opposing team, to play the violin in an orchestra), reasons that lack in meaning outside the group, but which create obligations with it (Gilbert, 2001, p. 114). As we will see below, this will allow us to build a bridge between identity, preferences and values.

X does M to be Y

This would be the case, for example, of rites of passage, where a series of actions must be performed in order to be admitted to the group to which we want to belong. Here the intentionality of the action is unquestionable: people seek an identity because they want that identity (they want to be a mod, a punk or a Basque separatist)¹⁰. Once this identity has been attained, we can say that people do certain things because they have this or that social identity (*X does M to be Y*, and when he achieves it, *X does M because he is Y*). However, it is not easy to obviate the intentionality here, and it is a difficult task not to reduce social or collective identity - not individual identity- to the

identification of our interests with those of others (desires, beliefs, collective expectations shared with others); one of the key lines of argument in this paper.

Yet the statement that *X does M to be Y* can also be understood from the *microsociological* viewpoint of “impression management strategies” in the sense of Goffman (Goffman, 1969). According to this approach, we perform on *dramaturgical* stages before audiences that we are capable of “segregating”, thus constructing our own fronts and publicly displaying our personal identities. According to the Goffmanian dramaturgy, these are not so much objective identities as created appearances and caused impressions by which we negotiate our place in the social order. The University of Harvard is a good case to illustrate this notion. It would not take long for anyone who has studied there for any amount of time as a visiting scholar or visiting student to observe that neither professors nor students have a minute to lose. The campus is crossed at a trot, meals are taken at great speed, it is a very complicated task to get an appointment with any of the university’s many academic “stars” and when you do, they are terribly brief. In short, time there is considered a scarce resource and one of great value. Or, at least, and this is where we are heading, that *seems* to be the case. Indeed, one soon realizes that this order of things can be explained by the enormously competitive academic atmosphere defining the university. And, at the same time, one soon begins to suspect that this pressure could also spur individuals to “strategically manage the impressions” of their conduct by working intensely, that is true, but also by pretending to do so when, in fact, doing nothing at all. The *signs equipment* (to put it in Goffman’s words) preferred by the individual in this environment is clearly aimed at transmitting a set of signals which cause the impression in the receiver that the sender is absolutely swamped with work and therefore has not a moment to lose and who is, in

consequence, a very academically productive professional. And it goes without saying that in the effective control and management of these impressions, particular marks of social identity come into play -those of the work ethics.

Assuming that the description given here is a plausible one, certain conclusions can be drawn from the case in point. 1) The dramaturgical approach allows us to elaborate further upon our statement insofar as *X does M to be or appear to be Y*. 2) The Goffmanian conceptual artillery seems to point at particular forms of interaction based on pretending.¹¹ Nevertheless, 3) the extent of pretending in impressions management is not unlimited. In our case, one can appear to be very productive by sending out different signals, but success (to cause the desired impression) will depend, to a large degree – in the mid term- on the objective proof that the individual is able to contribute something to the community of reference, it will depend on his successfully overcoming multiple “moments of truth” or “acid tests”. To put it another way, what one is (one’s essence) imposes important constraints upon what one appears to be (one’s appearance), regardless of one’s desires and preferences and strategies of self-presentation. Finally, 4) the so-called dramaturgical action presupposes not only the agents’ intentionality (where the subjective representation of desired and pursued impressions have their own motivational force), but also a good dose of strategic rationality. Without these two ingredients we would be hard put to imagine individuals employing impression management strategies.

IDENTITY, NORMS AND VALUE RATIONALITY

Until now, our strategy has been to reduce, within plausible limits, identity to individual *identification* with interests and preferences: either where identity is an independent variable in sociological propositions of the kind “X does M because he is Y” (where it is assumed that identity causes action), or where identity is the dependent variable in the proposition “X is Y because he does M” (where it is assumed that the action produces or causes identity), or in intentional propositions of the kind “X does M to be Y”. We have seen, at least in principle, that this reduction of social identity to shared interests is possible and recommendable if we want to endow causal or intentional propositions like those above with microfoundations.

The link between identity and instrumental rationality thus emerges in an immediate way as a necessary mechanism to adapt the means to the ends. But note that we have not committed ourselves to any specific contents regarding the preferences and motivations. Indeed, our previous argument includes both self-interested and altruistic motivations or the existence of several types of preferences. Nor have we defined strategic rationality as maximization or satisfaction. All of these complications - which were not our topic here - are compatible with a consequentialist pattern of individual action mediated by strategic rationality.

Nonetheless, we often act for other reasons that have nothing to do with the consequences of our actions. On the contrary, our actions are often only understandable from a *deontological* perspective. And this, it goes without saying, does not mean renouncing rationality. Instead, we find ourselves in the midst of the *Wertrationalität* which, in the sociological tradition, is key to understanding individual action in

accordance with *social norms*. In fact, social norms, together with individual interests, are the other major contender to explain human behavior. Thus, whereas before we sought to establish the relationship between social identity, individual interests and instrumental rationality; we are now concerned with the relationship between identity, norm and value rationality or, to put it in a more general way, practical rationality. As we will see below, in order to fully understand the concept of social identity we must reduce it once again to *identification*, albeit, in this case, with social norms and values.

According to the theory of social roles, we integrate our conduct into normative structures that are regulated. These are *normative* structures because they have the capacity to provide positive incentives for conforming to the rules, and negative incentives (sanctions) for deviating from them. Additionally, the rules that govern social roles are internalized by individuals by means of a long, and strictly speaking, unfinished process of social learning beginning with primary socialization. As a whole, the process of socialization comprehends more things than just roles; it comprises values and the very emotional structure of individuals. In fact, the violation of these norms gives rise to very specific emotions: “embarrassment, guilt and shame in the violator; anger and indignation in the observers” (Elster, 1989, p. 113). Yet, what relationship might social roles have with individuals’ social identity? Which of them, roles or identities, is more explicative or retrodictive of action? Which appears to be the most promising heuristic tool?

The so-called *functional systems*, that is, those systems of interaction in which the *actor* performs a social *role* (Boudon, 1979), have been widely studied, and today we know that they are anything but unequivocal or simple. In effect, social roles not only (a) admit, in Parson’s words, *variability* in their codification (thereby endowing the

individual with an enormous amount of autonomy regarding their strategic interpretation), but are also (b) often defined in an ambiguous or contradictory¹² manner and (c) frequently comprise a complex set of subroles. If to this we add the fact that individuals are multiple actors - that we play many different roles simultaneously - we come to understand exactly to what degree concrete individual behavior is underdetermined by the functional systems in which it occurs (de Francisco, 1997, 57-58). Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the rules that govern roles determine human behavior and largely define their *opportunity set*, and that functional systems may more fully explain individual action by the set of actions that they exclude rather than for their capacity to determine particular individual actions or behavior¹³. Be that as it may, what relationship exists between functional systems and social identities?

The relationship is by no means a simple one. Here we will focus on exploring some possibilities:

i) *Social norms can act as a source of individuals' social identity.* Let us return to the previous example and select the traits of male, married and father. These three traits not only imply certain social roles, but also particular symbolic elements that aid individuals in defining themselves, in knowing who they are. However, the identity of father, male or married man does not seem to shed much light on our understanding of individual X's behavior, other than his conformity with or deviation from the norms and rules that structure the roles of father, husband or male. There are numerous cases in which rules and social norms can serve to *confirm* an individual's social identity: norms of dress or rules of etiquette, for example, would seem to fulfill this function¹⁴. However, it can also occur that:

ii) *The way in which rules and social norms are interpreted is determined by the values held by individuals, values that form part of their social identity.* Indeed, there are many ways to be male, a father or a husband, and this variation may have to do with the *values and principles* that individuals choose so that, through them, they can interpret the role in question. I can be a husband who gives great importance to the value of equality within marriage and opt for an interpretation of the role of husband that includes those behaviors that favor equality (e.g. sharing household tasks, reaching a consensus on our children's education, making decisions that effect the couple in a democratic manner, respecting my spouse's right to take personal decisions, etc.)¹⁵. We could say, then, that because I am (as an identity trait) an *egalitarian*, I behave the way I do in my condition of husband. This leads us to a more general hypothesis, namely that we *identify ourselves* with values and ethical principles and these "normative identities" serve, in the least of cases, to reduce the *sociological ambivalence* (as Merton puts it) of interpreting the roles that govern individual behavior. Values, then, do count. They count to explain certain actions (or to explain the exclusion of certain actions from the individual's "opportunity set") and they count for individual self-awareness, to know who we are. And, following this same logic, the *Wertrationalität* counts, since regulated behavior can only be aligned to values through the *reflexive equilibrium* of values and norms (rules) guided by practical rationality. Rationality (practical) is not only necessary to select the ends wisely, but also to define norms of behavior and consolidate habits of conduct that are *coherent* with them. This leads us to make the following assertion: in addition to the reasons that explain our conduct in purely instrumental terms, we must add *normative reasons*.¹⁶ These normative reasons would explain our conduct according to the values by which we

define ourselves and by which we interpret the social norms and rules imposed by the institutions through which we participate in social life. We do certain things (we cooperate with others, we save lives, we support causes) because we are the type of person that does these things, because we believe we *should*, because on the contrary we would not understand ourselves nor would we be the kind of person that we believe we are or that we want to be. And it is precisely through these specific normative actions that we express our principles and values.

In any case, sociological propositions with predicates of identity that are solely grounded in the norms and values with which individuals identify themselves are of the type: “You are Y, do (or you should do) M”. It is these reasons for action (one’s duty to do M) provided by the identity (to be Y), in this case sustained by social norms and values, what we call our normative reasons. These reasons define what we could call the normative identity of the person, and no doubt contribute to explaining part of his action. They are reasons, it goes without saying, that break away from the consequentialist pattern of actions in which means are rationally adapted to ends. Yet this does not mean that they are of no utility to the individual. They have no instrumental utility, this is true, but they do have a *symbolic utility* (Nozick, 1995, p. 49 and ff.). Indeed, the symbolic utility could be such that it compensates for the loss of instrumental utility. In effect, as Robert Nozick has pointed out:

“In some Prisoner’s Dilemma situations, performing the dominated action -what is usually called the “cooperative action”- may have symbolic value for the person. It may stand for his being a cooperative person in interactions with others, a willing and noncarping participant in joint

ventures of mutual benefit. [...] Because he gives great utility to being a cooperative person, in a particular Prisoner's Dilemma situation he performs the dominated act that symbolizes this. [...] [O]ur responses to the Prisoner's Dilemma are governed, in part, by our view of the kind of person we wish to be and the kinds of ways we wish to relate to others" (Nozick, 1995, p 56-57)

Bearing this in mind, the following points can be made:

- 1) Normative reasons imply a second reduction of the concept of social identity: a reduction to the values with which individuals *identify* themselves and/or the norms that shape their action.
- 2) According to this viewpoint, normative reasons offer intentional explanations regarding conduct in much the same way as instrumental rationality. In these cases the intention is, if you will, *expressive*.
- 3) Normative reasons and instrumental reasons are not necessarily mutually exclusive, although as demonstrated in Nozick's description of the prisoner's dilemma, they can be.
- 4) Normative reasons endow the explanation of social behavior in terms of identity predicates with a symbolic element. Individual action often reveals the type of person that one wants to be.

REASONS OF IDENTITY?

Until now we have followed a *reductionist* strategy to analyze the relationship between identity and action, in a search for either the reduction to rationally pursued interests, or the reduction to values and norms which are deontologically expressed in the action. However, before concluding this article we would first like to explore, albeit briefly, the non-reductionist approach to the analysis of identity. To put it another way, we want to conclude by examining the following question: Are there reasons of identity proper? In other words, are there actions whose only meaning and purpose are to express the social identity in and of itself, regardless of values and interests?

Although we believe that the answer to this question is affirmative, we also suspect that these types of actions are relatively few and far between, at least in comparison to actions that respond to the other two great motivational mechanisms of the sociological tradition (interests and values). Equally, we suspect that they emerge only under specific conditions or circumstances. In this sense, we believe that it would not be a far-flung hypothesis to approach these self-expressive actions from the standpoint of social *stigma*, that is to say, by isolating the circumstances in which one's very social identity is threatened, disparaged or berated. Indeed, this is often the case of ethnic, sexual or cultural minorities. It is not unusual for these minorities to react against the subjective perception of the stigmatization to which they are subjected with merely symbolic actions through which, expressing who they are, they defend their threatened social identity.

Clearly, the mere fact that the stigma or the threat exists is not sufficient in itself to activate this type of expressive reaction. At times, the stigma can run so deep that it

even serves to repress or inhibit these identity actions for fear of sanctions or due to simple self-negation. Self-affirming actions as a means of reacting against the stigma no doubt require certain levels of collective security, of self-confidence in the group whose social identity is under threat. Yet we run into the empirical problem of thresholds and threshold equilibriums: thresholds of self-confidence and thresholds of fear. If the levels of collective fear are below a given threshold and those of collective self-confidence are above a given threshold, we might suspect – and this is what we conjecture – that minority groups which suffer from the stigma would “speak out” to express and affirm their social identity. A fitting example of this threshold scheme is that of the expressive actions of homosexuals on “Gay Pride Day”. In fact, the very name of the event contains a word – “pride” – which captures the purely identity dimension of the expressive action, in this case, a mass demonstration. The homosexuals that march through the streets on such a significant day for them, have doubtless overcome their fear, enjoy sufficiently high levels of collective self-confidence and demonstrate to affirm a social identity that is stigmatized.

To say, then, that someone has a pure identity reason to do M is to say that the self-categorization of the person is under threat – personal and social identity are under threat – and the person is justified to M-ing from the perspective of preserving her self-definition. The fact that the person is or defines herself as an Y and the Y identity is under threat or simply banned, could explain some of her actions in terms of pure identity reasons for action – for example, the fight for social recognition. But those identity reasons are not reducible to mere interest – in spite of the fact that the person is or could be interested in being recognised – because in many social situations the Xs that are Y are submitted to such a social pressure that they prefer do not express their

real identity. Neither are identity reasons reducible to social norms and values. On the contrary, sometimes identity reasons are completely opposed to social norms and values and even the X that is an Y rejects his or her identity -rejects to be an Y. Pure reasons of identity are not reducible, then, to interests and norms.¹⁷

Now, reasons of identity do not have to be incompatible with purely instrumental reasons nor with normative reasons. In fact, these reasons of identity may even constitute in some cases a condition *sine qua non* to uphold and validate purely instrumental reasons. Let us take the example of *The Rational Peasant* by Samuel Popkin (1979) to throw further light on what we are attempting to say here. This is an especially significant example given that Popkin studies the Vietnamese revolution from the standpoint of Mancur Olson's logic of collective action, that is, from the most orthodox viewpoint of rational choice in which there is no room for questions of identity that are irreducible to interests. However, moving away from the central core of his argument, Popkin points out that while the Communist Party of Vietnam limited itself to offering material incentives to the peasants that joined the party, it was unsuccessful in winning them over to the Communist cause. Religious groups, in contrast, appealed to factors such as nation, culture or ethnicity - all of which formed part of the Vietnamese peasant's definition of himself, his social identity - to encourage the peasants to fight for a better future:

"So long as the Communists argued only in terms of material incentives and neglected to add an ethnic, Vietnamese content to their discussions of the future, they were unable to present a credible vision of that future to the peasants; hence, their early failures at organization" (Popkin, 1979, p. 261)

In his work, Popkin explains the peasants' behavior basically from the approach of rational choice theory: these were instrumentally rational individuals who attempted to gain the maximum benefit from the revolution. But this does not mean that they no longer wanted to be Vietnamese, an element that formed part of their self-categorization, and that the Communist Party was too westernized: being Vietnamese provided them with reasons of identity for action. Reasons of identity, then, provide a purpose to act in situations where the most important thing is to "be" a certain way that we share and defend with other, if it is possible. Popkin concludes his explanation of the rational peasant's conduct by appealing to what we have called here reasons of identity (a term that he does not use), without which this same rational peasant would not have considered other reasons of an instrumental kind.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been exploratory and tentative. Our intention has been to metatheoretically analyze the positive use of the concept of social identity within the rich sociological tradition, for which individual interests and social norms have come to be the two key factors in explaining human behavior. By exploring the possible connections between these two motivational mechanisms and the social identity of individuals, we have attempted to gauge the independent heuristic power of the concept of social identity and its place in sociological thought. If any conclusions can be drawn from our exploration it is that, regardless of the interests and social norms (and values),

the independent explanatory power of social identities is relatively marginal, and that under very specific circumstances, reasons of identity proper are a mobilizing factor in and of themselves. Furthermore, cases of non-overlapping and absorbent local identities, that is, those that overdetermine the preferences, interests and symbolic utilities of individuals seem to be relatively marginal, although this is always an empirical question. The most normal thing - at least in contemporary post-industrial capitalist societies - is for individuals to have multiple and interwoven identities that tell us very little about the reasons that prompt them into action. If, on the other hand, we understand social identities as expressed in individual or collective action we come up against a problem: What is the set of necessary and sufficient actions that express a social identity? Again, we tread on safer ground if we depart from a set of shared interests and values rather than identities to ascertain what is expressed through action. If agreement is reached in a practical manner, through a process of interaction, again what seems to come to light are (collective) preferences and value judgments regarding what is most convenient or advisable or just or good for all (for a given *we*), more than *quasi*-objective social identities. Equally, the Goffmanian dramaturgical approach brings us to the core of strategic rationality. We are not attempting to negate the fact that social identity has a motivating and mobilizing force, nor that it cannot be a possible argument in the symbolic functions of utility to individuals. In fact, we have defended the existence, under certain circumstances, of reasons of identity proper that operate regardless of the interests and social values that individuals may hold and defend at a given moment. Nonetheless, we continue to believe that the reductionist strategy described in the first two sections of our paper is the most promising approach

given that, in our opinion, interests and values comprehend (and explain) a broader scope of individual actions.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ With regard to identity, “national” could be considered a generic adjective as compared to “Spanish” or “Basque”, for example. The list of generic adjectives is as follows: sexual, gender, racial, ethnic, political, party, personal, individual, class, civic, cultural, social, collective, role, religious, national, local, communitarian, modern, postmodern, latemodern, organizational or “narrative (Somers and Gibson, 1996, p. 66 and ff.) If to these we add those of “legitimizing”, “ resistance” and “project” used by Castells (1997, p. 8), we come up with a total of 26 adjectives.

² That is, for an individual X to have a “social identity” it is not sufficient for him to objectively share a set R of traits with other individuals. He must also know that he shares them, he must be aware of that fact. The subjective dimension of identity is unquestionable.

³ Given that identity can be related, as we have said, to large human collectives such as an ethnic group, to somewhat large groups such as social class or to small groups such as sects, it is preferable to speak in general terms of “social group” in order to account for all these differences.

⁴ This way of presenting the concept of social identity is linked to the long sociological tradition that began with Mead and Cooley and which has been handed down to us by the heirs to symbolic interactionism (Serpe, 1987; Hogh, Terry and White (1995), Cerulo (1997). Although this is not the topic of the present article, we want to point out that, in our opinion, the social self of individuals does not fully comprehend their

personal identity, their “I” – as certain types of communitarianism may like to think – that is, their social identity does not wholly embrace their personal identity.

⁵ This concept of interweaved identity is inspired in the Rawlsian concept of “overlapping consensus” (Rawls, 1999).

⁶ The Ultra Sur are a group of Real Madrid soccer team fans. They are characterized by the fact that: a) they sit on the southern side of the Santiago Bernabeu stadium to see the games; and b) they have neo-fascist tendencies.

⁷ The Real Sociedad de San Sebastián and Athletic de Bilbao are historical Basque soccer teams that play in the 1st Division of the Professional Soccer League. The BBVA is a Basque financial entity.

⁸ For more on this see the interesting and carefully researched work by Castells (1997).

⁹ This dialectic is developed by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset (1973, p. 95-130).

¹⁰ Quite another thing is why one wants that identity. This is another interesting issue that addresses the question of people’s motivations, but which takes us away from the problem of how to link identity and action from a causal and intentional approach.

¹¹ In fact, this would be an ideal microsociological complement to a theory of the civilizing process in the psychogenetic sense described by Elias (1994). In effect, in Elias’ opinion, civilization (of behavior), finds its maximum expression in the court society that incorporates a model of good society such as the *société polie*, where the self-control of psychic energies and the emotional apparatus of individuals (courtesans) are oriented towards the behavioural expression of refined manners, courtesy and distinction: the essential elements of the so called *bonne compagnie*. It is easy to imagine the amount of psychic resources that individuals in this social sphere had to

employ in order to achieve the effective management of impressions: “In taking over French etiquette and Parisian ceremony”-writes Elias- “the various rulers obtained the desired instruments to express their dignity, to make visible the hierarchy of society, and to make all others, first and foremost the courtly nobility themselves aware of their dependence” (Elias, 1994, p. 267).

¹² That is, if we consider social roles in the same way as Merton; as “a dynamic organization of norms and counternorms” (Merton, 1976, p. 17).

¹³ Given the lax interpretation (Boudon, 1979) of roles, we are inclined to consider them- roles and the norms that justify them- more as constraints on action rather than determinants of action. For an excellent synthesis of roles and norms in this sense see Boudon and Bourricaud (1989, p. 308-312). Elster holds the opposite opinion (1989, p. 13), although his position is not conclusive.

¹⁴ Elster (1989, p. 121) points to this possibility, although he also provides reasons to question it.

¹⁵ Clearly, the interpretation that roles govern behavior could be determined by strategies guided by particularist interests and preferences; strategies used by individuals who are not actors but intentional agents. The strategic manipulation of functional systems is always a possibility for individual action. What is hypocrisy but an instantiation of that possibility?

¹⁶ We follow here Michael Smith’s definition of a normative reason: “To say that someone has a normative reason to ϕ is to say that there is some normative requirement that she ϕ ’s, and is thus to say that her ϕ -ing is justified from the perspective of the normative system that generates that requirement” (Smith, 1994, p. 95). The normative

system in moral philosophy is an ethical theory, in society is a set of social values with which the individual identifies herself.

¹⁷ Non-reducible reasons of identity appear clearly in personal or collective traumas. People with HIV/AIDS, for example, integrate “HIV into a meaningful view of one’s life history” that reinforce social identity as such, not only interest and social norms (Rinken, 2000, p. 12). The reconstruction of African-american identity is another case of identity-in-danger that move people to self-categorize in a substantive way non reducible to mere interest and external social values (see Eyerman, 2002).