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I-Me-Other: asymmetries and current conditions of identity construction processes

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Abstract

The starting point of this research is that identity is a 'process of relational nature'. The social relations that underlie the identity processes are, in turn, inevitably marked by a more or less variable degree of 'asymmetry', linked to the roles and the characteristics of each participant. In a society that, according to many scholars, is becoming more and more 'horizontal' making use of new factors (the development of the 'welfare state', the technological progress and the social networks), it is considered, in the final observations, the not simple urgency to consider a re-collocation of the 'authoritativeness' social relationship.

Keywords: social identity, social relation, social asymmetry, autonomy, authoritativeness.

1. Being recognized to be

'We are what we are through our relationship with others' (Mead, 1934, It. transl. 1966: 364). With this now well-known synthetic phrase, the American social psychologist sets an essential starting point for our investigation, as it has been for the whole strand of research of psychosocial type on the processes of identity construction of the last century. Among the many questionable and discussed hypotheses of American pragmatism, this experiential and

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experimental evidence is now a given point also acquired by the entire scientific community: identity is a 'nature relational process'. A *relational* (therefore, an 'emerging' phenomenon) *process* (that is, a non-static event, but changing over time, from a state to another). In a synthetic way, the self 'is a relational phenomenon. Significant change comes only from relationships with others' (Sidorkin, 2002: 143); it is 'a relational enterprise. It is only this self-realization-in-connectedness that (as opposed to a large number of incomplete or distorted self-realizations) deserves to be called self-realization in the true sense. Without this hetero-referential root, the individual loses the point of reference to evaluate his experience' (Tønnesvang, 2005: 56).

Peter Berger, in collaboration with several colleagues, is the sociologist who perhaps best 'translated' this psychological insight into a more sociological perspective: 'Only by internalizing the voices of others we can speak of ourselves. If someone had not turned to us in an intelligible way from the outside, silence would be reigning inside us. It is only through others that we can reach to the discovery of ourselves' (Berger, Berger, 1975, It. transl. 1995: 81). As early as the first and founding text of 1966, *The Social Construction of Reality*, the Austro-American sociologist had investigated this relationality 'intrinsic' to the identity process since appearing to the world of the individual. In particular, what emerges from these first analyzes, is the irremediably 'asymmetric' character of the primary relationships that 'shape', from birth, the physiognomy of the newcomer. The child, in fact, 'assumes the roles and attitudes of the people who are important to him, that is, he internalizes them and makes them his own [...] the individual becomes what the people who are important to him call him' (Berger, Luckmann, 1966, It. transl. 1969: 182-183).

This first 'quality' (the *importance*) of the primary relationship, essential for each successive stage of the process indicates, incontrovertibly, an 'asymmetry' inherent in the most influential (and sometimes invasive) relationships in the adventure of self-construction since the first days of life. The others are not all the same: someone is 'important' (beyond the fact that he will prove to be worthy or otherwise of this prerogative granted by condition). The presence of this initial asymmetry is so decisive that is able to affirm that 'a certain congruence of sense in the action of these people constitutes the most relevant presupposition of a non pathological development of a person' (Berger, Luckmann, 1995, It. transl. 2010: 110). Therefore, the important others, in order not to hurt the newborn, must guarantee for him a 'certain congruence of meaning in acting', in order not to leave pathological (and often indelible) signs in his tender *consciousness-in-progress*.

We wanted to emphasize this 'asymmetric-from-the-beginning' dimension because it is perhaps one of the most 'problematic' elements in the management of 'modern' (interpersonal and systemic) social relations. As we will see, the

decades-long and right emphases of need to re-establish the 'horizontal' dimension of social relations have led to an equivocal polarity between 'democratic' and 'asymmetric' and to an equally equivocal reduction of the latter to 'unjust', 'illegitimate', 'discriminatory'. These semantic short circuits, linked to the dominant culture, risk confusing, absolutizing or over-simplifying elements (ending up deleting them) that are fundamental for understanding processes in their entirety.

The destiny of the terms delivered to ideological manipulation is to make them then unable of giving real reason for the phenomena they would like to describe. It is interesting to note how, in years of full affirmation of the 'democratic' culture on a planetary level, Robert Nisbet does not feel contradiction remembering that there is no form of community without some form of stratification and that 'wherever two or more people associate, there is a certain form of hierarchy, no matter how variable (changing from an actor to another). Hierarchy is, to some extent, inevitable' (Nisbet, 1976: 238). Equally, the most recent psychoanalysis reminds us that the improper management of this inevitable asymmetry inherent in any social relationship leads to the birth of 'an unprecedented generational confusion which [...] confuses children and parents in a single indistinct molasses' (Recalcati, 2014: 32).

Therefore, it is necessary, in order to make possible to understand the psychosocial process we are examining, to ask ourselves about the dynamisms from which this asymmetrical situation arises and about the opportunities associated with its effective management, rather than its ideological cancellation.

Sociologically speaking, we can identify the root of this asymmetry in the structural and active existence of the social 'role': 'having a role' and 'playing a role' means at the same time being similar to some but always, to someone extent, different. We could say that each one is socially different from another because of the role he has (with the reputation endowment connected to it) and his personal way of covering it. Once again, the social sciences' awareness of this state of affairs dates back to several decades ago: 'I re-encounter the other always through the role I play, as the other can only meet me with the mediation of my role' (Plessner, 1960, It. transl. 1974: 33). An awareness that is confirmed and reaffirmed in a richly metaphorical way by the most recent research. In them, the social role is represented as 'the means of its own immediacy' or as "'juncture' in inter-human contacts" (Allodi, 2008: 128 and 139).

It should be noted that the widespread perception of an operation that is in some way manipulative, insincere, constructed and therefore, little or much, hypocritical played by the social role is, in most cases, completely unjustified. From Parsons onwards, it is recognized to the social roles the function of enormous facilitation in interpersonal relationships (even among strangers) as

they favor the effective understanding of mutual expectations and their legitimate delimitation. 'Behave like a father' or 'being a father' (as it happens with any other role), indicates on the one hand a very strong connection between identity and social role (even though variable and provisional) and, on the other hand, the more or less effective temporal path necessary to 'recognize oneself in those shoes'. Sincerity or credibility are not linked to the 'deposition of the mask' (among other things impossible, because discarded the one linked to a certain role, one inevitably assumes another), but to the 'way' in which the roles are subjectively covered.

The path proposed so far (which is likely to be pleonastic for experts in the field) was however necessary to frame the first major topic of our investigation where we intend to focus our attention on: identity requires 'recognition', a relational process related in a narrow way to the social roles 'legitimated' to produce it. To simplify it, to be 'who' or 'what' I want to be, there needs to be someone who 'certifies' me that this 'identification' is socially granted, publicly and collectively recognized, with the related honors and burdens connected to the social role in question. Also in this case, the sociological awareness of these dynamics dates back to the middle of the last century: 'The whole image of the self is related above all to our relationships with other people and to their evaluations of us' (Gerth, Wright Mills, 1953, It. transl. 1969: 105). From then on a florilegium of ever more creative expressions can be documented which confirm the centrality of this fundamental social action for the construction and above all for the confirmation of the social identity of the individual: the recognition was therefore represented, over the last decades, as 'a fundamental human need to give meaning to the self' (Willig, 2009: 355); 'inherent from the beginning in social life as a moral tension' (Honneth, 1992, It. transl. 2002: 15); an 'axial principle in human relationships' (Houston, 2010: 846); 'a universal motivation that is ultimately at the bottom of every individual and collective action' (Crespi, 1989: 123).

It is important to note that this psychosocial dynamic, which has always existed, inevitably suffers from the cultural logic in which it is activated: every society and every culture includes specific 'liturgies' of recognition and temporal stages connected to them. It is thus clear that the current situation of this structural dynamism of the identity building is different from that of the past and it can present, for this reason, very peculiar problems. For some scholars, therefore, today 'the individual asks for constant recognition, but the conditions for recognition are changing faster than the individual can enjoy it, and is therefore held captive in an exhausting – let's say – recognition hunt' (Willig, 2009: 359). And so, the now famous *heterodirection*, now formalized and prophesied seventy years ago by Riesman, can be documented today by 'the

anguish of Narcissus, so dependent on the gaze of others, so sensitive to the esteem they have for him' (Ehrenberg, 2010, It. transl. 2010: 131).

At this point, it is worthy to highlight, in a necessarily concise manner, the changes that have taken place since the post-war period in consideration of the 'asymmetrical relationship', still decisive in the identity process, but differently problematic compared to the culture that preceded the so-called post-modernity.

In a successful attempt to find an effective slogan to represent the new axis of postmodern social relations, Bauman starts from the 'classic' definition of 'freedom' (according to him, the fulcrum of the revolutionary conception in progress) taken up by the thought of the Italian philosopher Guido De Ruggiero: 'Freedom is the ability to do whatever we like, a freedom of choice that implies the right of the individual not to be hindered by others in carrying out his activity' (Bauman, 1999: 19). As it can be read between the lines, this definition subtends a vision similar to a photographic 'negative': the 'others' are no longer an occasion or a need, but a potential 'threat' to my individual path. It follows, almost insensitively, a dominant conception starting from which there would exist 'an intrinsic incompatibility between self-realization and relationality - the more energy is dedicated to one, the less it is presumably available to the other' (Eagle, 2013: 20).

Some scholars have pointed out that, from this point of view, the culture of children, the 'culture of play' (a child strategy recognized by many as fundamental for auto- and hetero-definitions) today facilitates a perception of the other as a restrictive condition rather than as a challenging occasion. 'With robot animals, children can give enough to feel an attachment, but they have the opportunity to neglect them. They are learning a way of feeling bounded in which they are allowed to think only of themselves' (Turkle, 2011, It. transl. 2012: 82). In summary: 'Autonomous individuality becomes an almost doctrinal obligation for the modern individual' (Luckmann, 2006: 8).

We will have a way to reflect on the plausibility of this exaltation of the idealized situation of individual 'autonomy'. For the moment we observe that the 'heaviness' of the concrete human social relationship has been increasingly blunted and made marginal for two reasons. On one hand, economic and systemic conditions of postmodernity improved. On the other hand, through irreversible degenerations in the history of European culture and society of the twentieth century, asymmetry became an alibi for the greatest abuses of power and injustices of human history.

If, therefore, the authoritative relationship seems to have 'disappeared from the modern world' and if 'in practice no less than in theory, we are no longer able to know what authority really is' (Arendt, 1961, It. transl. 1999: 131), this is also due to the fact that, in the name of that same authority, the mass

crimes we all know have been accomplished. The reaction of so many post-war intellectuals was aimed at identifying and eradicating the cancer of authoritarianism is understandable (from Kurt Lewin to Eric Fromm, from Theodor Adorno to the entire Frankfurt School). But, in tragic situations, you always run the risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The authoritative relationship cannot be avoided: 'Having it lost means having lost the foundations of the world' (Arendt, 1961, It. transl. 1999: 134). Therefore, "it is useless to dwell on the various metaphors with which the eclipse of the idea of authority can be expressed, and which are then summarized in one: 'Disappearance of the idea of the Father'" (Del Noce, 1975).

Here it is not a matter of solving the short circuit that has been created by dusting off nostalgia for the times that were (which, among other things, were probably not better than the current ones). It is rather a question of not falling into the temptation of obliterating essential dimensions to the development of self-awareness in the name of their grave abuse, ideologically justified in the past.

2. Social 'asymmetries' and identity processes

From what has been said so far, if there is a theoretical problem concerning social asymmetries, such as to become the object of sociological study, it is not whether they exist or not: what is interesting instead to study is the different semantic frames related to common sense and systems regulations that outline their legitimacy and acceptability from time to time. In the sociological tradition, from this point of view, a forerunner thinking on the subject is undoubtedly represented by Max Weber's reflection. His observations (preliminary, if you will, and inevitably linked to the context that had stimulated them, but still valid) can clarify at least the meaning of certain fundamental definitions (even considering the difficulty of semantic and cultural translation of words strongly rooted in the sociolinguistic tradition of different countries).

It is essential, in a macro-social perspective like the Weberian one, to take into account the most striking relational asymmetry, that linked to the disparities of 'power'. It is defined as 'the possibility of finding obedience, among certain people, to a command that has a certain content; and about discipline we must imply the possibility of finding, by virtue of an acquired disposition, prompt, automatic and schematic obedience to a certain command by a plurality of men' (Weber, 1922, It. transl. 1999: 52). Even more recently, discipline has been defined as 'the habit of obedience' (Sennet, 1980, It. transl. 2006: 81). It is interesting to note, already from these first observations, that the asymmetry of power is in any case 'bipolar', that is, it foresees two active subjects, exactly as

in any type of human social relationship: power is a relationship. There is no one who commanding without someone obeying it is Weber himself who makes explicit the strange nature of this relationship when he states that ‘to every authentic power relationship there is a minimum of will to obey, that is an (internal or external) interest with obedience’ (Weber 1922, It. transl. 1999: 205).

A linguistic (and consequently substantial) problem is to distinguish the meaning (not just semantic, but rather social) of three terms that indicate three different types of social relations, deriving however from the same verbal root. *Authority*, *authoritarianism* and *authoritativeness* derive, in fact, from the Latin verb *augere* (increase, grow, let grow). While for the first two ones we available different sociological reflections, for the third one it is difficult to find a reflection that is satisfactory, even though, paradoxically, it is the most promising one in the process of constructing a non-alienating identity.

The characteristics of the first two asymmetrical relationships can be summarized schematically: authority is based on a widely shared legitimacy, in the name of the system, the tradition, the habits; authoritarianism legitimizes itself. We could therefore say that obeying authoritarian power is necessary and inevitable; obeying authority is socially due because legitimate. Democratic or delegation dynamics exist to replace an authority: authoritarian power, instead, ends up by natural death, by delegation from the autocrat or by the violent assertion of a stronger power. The first one is justified by assigning itself the task of ensuring compliance with the rules collectively established or by legitimate delegation; the second is justified by the absolute and self-referential power to create them.

What can we say about authoritativeness instead? How can we define this particular asymmetric relationship for which in some languages there does seem to exist even an *ad hoc* word? Among the definitions that seem to come closest to the Italian word and to the type of relationship it indicates, perhaps the richest one of detail is the one of Hannah Arendt (who defines it as ‘authority’, tout court): “The main characteristic of the holders of the authority is to have no power [...]. [A non-power] strangely elusive and impalpable. Mommsen called him ‘more than an advice and less than an order, a council that cannot be neglected without damage’ [...] It proves authoritative just because it consists of a pure and simple advice that does not require, to be followed, neither the imperative form, nor any external coercion” (Arendt, 1961: 168). The nuances around paradoxicality are very interesting: a ‘non-power’ that looks more like a ‘council’ than an ‘order’. But it must be distinguished (we add) from the simple and modern ‘opinion’ because ‘one cannot neglect it without damage’. And it doesn’t involve coercion.

Let's try to add some other features to this asymmetric relation *sui generis*. Authoritativeness is 'the strength of those who know'. It is authoritative who (to our eyes) shows that he knows things that interest us and that we do not know or we know only partially. The authority does not oblige to obey and does not provide for sanctions in the event of disobedience. Its following is a voluntary and optional fact, which provides a free, personal, non-binding, but convenient recognition. Any recognition of authority requires the investment of a trust, and therefore foresees a risk. The only 'forms of guarantee' in front of this inevitable risk are: the intelligence of reading the signs by those who follow; the possibility and ability to verify *ex post* the effectiveness or truthfulness of what is 'suggested'; which implies a situation of 'interpersonal' usability of 'how things actually are'.

In conclusion, we add that there is a particular form of authority, extraordinarily influential in the processes of identity construction, which is that linked to a certain type of knowledge, unique itself: the knowledge of the 'meaning' of things. As you can guess, this kind of authority has characteristics very similar to what Weber considered the only true human energy of revolutionary strength: the *charisma*.

Let us now go a step further: since we are dealing with three similar and different forms of social relationship (which we tried, if nothing else, to identify), we must ask ourselves how they can 'maintain' themselves. In fact, when we are facing an 'emerging' phenomenon (such as we have defined the interpersonal relationship) the willingness of a subject to guarantee its duration is not enough. Therefore we have to inevitably admit that 'at the heart of the problem of power lies the understanding of the origin, constitution and maintenance of voluntary obedience' (Gerth, Wright Mills, 1953, It. transl. 1969: 224). Weber himself was interested in this second 'side' of the relationship and had guessed that the asymmetrical relationship does not last without the presence of his two essential qualities: 'Experience shows that no power can be satisfied by its will to found its own permanence on reasons that are exclusively affective or rational with respect to value. Instead, every power seeks to arouse and cultivate faith in its own legitimacy' (Weber, 1922, It. transl. 1999: 208).

Therefore, *faith* and/in *legitimacy*. Let's start from this second dimension, legitimacy, while remembering that any request for legitimacy inevitably implies accreditation on a trust basis. The authority, therefore, can be defined as 'a social relationship in which some people are granted the legitimacy of driving and others agree to follow' (Pace, Hemmings, 2007: 6). For this reason, it is understood that it equally concerns those who obey it as those who exercise it, 'with recognized claims of legitimacy, which is the main instrument to ensure obedience [...]. Authority requires legitimate claims of competence' (Brubaker, 2012: 241). With the usual synthesis capacity, Berger summarizes this dimension

by effectively introducing the second one: “When we say that a certain authority is ‘legitimate’, we mean that people believe that the exercise on its part is right and that those who hold the power have full rights” (Berger, Berger 1975, It. transl. 1995: 308).

Therefore, let’s spend a few words on the second quality of the authoritative relationship, the one linked to the fiduciary dimension. It can be described through different definitions, more or less semantically loaded, such as ‘trust’, ‘belief’, ‘faith’. “According to the German sociologist, legitimacy is a ‘belief’: an institution is perceived as legitimate when a community believes it has the right to govern or make decisions” (D’Agati, 2015: 1505). Likewise, Sennett emphasizes the fact that ‘people would not obey those they consider illegitimate. Authority is a belief in legitimacy’ (Sennett, 1980, It. transl. 2006: 21).

To conclude this necessarily brief analysis of the ‘relational’ characteristics of authoritative interaction, it is important to note an element that would be in itself so obvious that it does not deserve to be explicitly expressed. If we consider it important to do so it is because we are, today more than ever, in a sort of potential and practiced semantic and operational fallacy. The dimension of *otherness* is essential to a definition of authority is. But if we consider that this obviousness deserved to be the object of philosophical reflection over a century ago, we can understand how the risk of its underestimation was already there then: ‘If authority is not the other (*to eteron*); if in some way it must simply designate an internal reinforcement of the identity, then there is no authority at all’ (Kierkegaard, 1917, Germ. transl. 1926: 170).

Actually, this risk has then turned out to be a widespread and practiced eventuality in the following decades so that, in our days, ‘authority is increasingly described as a result of how people feel within themselves and with others. The new motivational techniques imply a change of orientation from the external authority to the individual self [...] a shift of authority from outside to inside’ (Furedi, 2009, It. transl. 2012: 99 and 107). As you can guess, this shift towards the ‘intimate’ has an inevitable effect on the management of traditionally ‘authoritative’ relationships, from the familiar ones to the educational and formative ones. “Education cannot take place following the illusion of self-formation, but only thanks to the existence of at least ‘an-Other’: a professor, a teacher, a master, a tutor. Self-education does not exist except as a narcissistic phantom [...] there is no educational process that can be separated from the conditions dictated by the Other” (Recalcati, 2014: 63).

3. Asymmetry 'at the service' of identity

We want to conclude by trying to pull the strings of the cues sown here and there in the synthetic path that we have conducted so far.

First of all, social asymmetries preserve all the characteristics of any other type of 'relationship': they are an emerging phenomenon that therefore includes the activity of all the agents, according to different plans, rules and opportunities for intervention. On the one hand, they reveal themselves to be fundamental and inevitable in the processes of identifying construction, including an imbalance of power, which however never reset the activity of each participant. "The subjects of power are not slaves without alternatives; the power over them is 'always disputable' and it is in fact 'disputed in many respects'. In many important ways, the powers themselves have a dependent relationship on their subjects" (Friedman, 1999, It. transl. 2002: 355). From this point of view, 'credibility, like authority, is not – or is not alone – a personal characteristic, but it is something that is attributed, that is recognized by the others' (Gili 2005: 4).

This state of affairs makes the authoritative relationship always 'risky' on both sides, as is well understood, for example, in particular situations such as politics, psychoanalysis, education, defined by Freud as 'impossible jobs'. They are such because highly subordinated to the acceptance of the 'subjects', that is, of those who find themselves in the theoretical *down* position. This is because trust "cannot be imposed or 'paid'; it must be earned" (Bennis, Nanus, 1993: 143). To conclude our analytical journey, we explore some aspects of the asymmetrical relationship in one of the three 'impossible professions', the educational one. In it the repercussions of identity are normally more engraving (aware that the psychoanalytic relationship is qualitatively more 'invasive' on the re-construction of the personality, even if, to date, less quantitatively practiced).

Therefore, let's start from the obvious consideration that 'unlike doctors, lawyers and other professionals, the job of a teacher is to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes in children and adolescents who are involuntary clients' (Pace, Hemmings 2007: 7). This makes it clear that, the premises are not the best. The educational one is normally a 'suffered' relationship, which means that whoever is in an upper position will have the difficult task of making 'credible' (*faith*) not only its competence (*legitimacy*), but also the convenience of this obligatory relationship (*motivation*). This means that in the course of the concrete development of the relationship the master will have to make clear the fact that its asymmetric mediation is functional to the achievement of objectives recognized as valid by the receiver (*down* position).

In this frame, the aforementioned dimension of otherness plays a role even more at risk today, realizing itself in a context full of viable 'alternatives', not only the 'intimate' ones, but also the 'technological' ones. 'Thinking about

transmitting knowledge without going through the relationship with a person who embodies it, it is an illusion, because there is no teaching except in a human relationship. Those who would like to reduce the process of learning and teaching to the technological and aseptic transmission of information [...] claim to cancel the intrusion of the body in the didactic relationship and commit an obsessive error in a clinical sense. Learning itself must be reduced to a mere technique of assimilation' (Recalcati, 2014: 126).

In this formulation, education appears to be something more than 'passing on information', requiring, just for this reason, the introduction of the 'human' element, with all the 'spurious' and imperfect burden that it entails. We ask ourselves, as a last step, what role the 'human' and 'asymmetric' element plays in the individual processes of identity building within that very vast relationship we call education and which can be represented (ideal-typically) according to two polarities.

It is very instructive, to emphasize the difference in the approach, to take up the very explicit and direct picture built with a few skillful and caustic brushstrokes by Émile Durkheim a century ago. To give an idea of what constitutes the educational action and show its power, the French sociologist leans on the definition of the psychologist Jean-Marie Guyau, who compares education to hypnotic suggestion. Durkheim, in particular, is conquered by the idea that in hypnosis (exactly as in education) 'the state in which the subject is found is characterized by its exceptional passivity. The spirit is almost reduced to the conditions of *tabula rasa* [...] It follows that the suggested idea, not hampered by a contrary idea, can be installed by meeting a minimum of resistance; however, as the void is never complete ...' (Durkheim 1922, It. transl. 1972: 56). As you can guess, the asymmetry is total, so much that we can hypothesize that in this phase 'everything is possible': it is no coincidence that the French sociologist is very attentive to the contents that 'must be trodden', because it is not a question of creating a 'natural man', but the man that society wants him to be (in order to 'integrate' it harmoniously into the very society in which he will operate). Let us not forget that this process is based on the stability of the principles of organic solidarity, essential to maintain the social order.

However, what seems interesting to point out, because it is an extraordinarily significant index of a radically alternative perspective, is the presence of adverbs and adjectives that denounce the existence of noise elements, the 'spurious' dimension also presents in the newborn. Actually, it is a matter of an 'almost' blank slate, it is a matter of a 'minimum' of resistance (which is therefore not equal to zero), it is a matter of a 'never complete' void. What are these 'imperfections of resistance', manipulable yet present before any socio-cultural mark and therefore potentially or actually pre-cultural elements

of identity? And above all, how to treat them when you are in an extraordinarily favorite position in the *up-down* asymmetrical relationship?

In the 70s, an interesting empirical research on educational methods was published by three Dutch psychologists, experimentally evaluated in classes of young children. The innovative aspect was identified in the procedures that require a particular sensitivity on the part of the teacher to understand 'where' the learner's conscience or competence lies, in order to be able to 'get the hand of it' and accompany it to the formative objective. Using however (this is discriminating) the resources already available in the young person. This sensitivity arises from the conscience (and the methodological choice) of not inculcating, but, rather, of *e-ducare*, that is 'pulling out for'. This, from the point of view of the asymmetrical relationship, includes the awareness of some relational norms, including the "temporariness" of the intervention: "This temporary nature is sometimes included in the concept of fading. We argue that (effective) delivery is a process that includes fade of the teacher's support' (Smit, van Eerde, Bakker 2012: 821). Another interesting aspect is the concept of 'subsidiary' action contained in the pregnant English verb *to scaffold*, to construct a 'scaffolding' "as a form of 'vicarious consciousness' provided by an adult for the benefit of a younger student" (Littleton, 2013: 52). To sum up, in this relational approach, 'those in conditions of superiority use their own position to help subject positions to progressively reduce their inferiority [...]. So the relationship of authority tends to cancel itself over time becoming an equal relationship and mutual' (De Grada, 1972: 161 and 66).

We have seen, so far, two 'polar' settings: one based on the legitimacy of the *up* position to do everything that it considers useful for the integration of the subject in the *down* position, the other based on the hopefully fading of *up* in order to leave room for what is already seminally present in *down*). There is today a third, attractive alternative: that of a supposed and exalting 'autonomy', the radical cancellation of every possible asymmetry. It is a representation of social relations (but we could identify it with an *anti-relational* theory and practice) whose presuppositions, at least in their consequences, are incapable of constructing a stable identity of the subject that give him/herself to them. 'Many people are coming to believe that being autonomous means being free, this is why autonomy raises such strong sensations' (Sennett, 1980, It. transl. 2006: 106). Of course, the historical events of the European twenty century mentioned above and the changed economic and social conditions make this escape route theoretically plausible and fascinating. The situation that has been fortified in some ultra-advanced countries has definitely gone in this direction, which is why 'in our individual or collective lives, we are paying a considerable price for a quarter of a century of mutual disengagement. [...] Without realizing it, we have been separated from each other and from our communities' (Putnam

2000: 409 and 27). But the most recent research (especially in the psychoanalytic field) document that the pathological risks of this theoretical and practical approach are easily documented. This is because autonomy ‘erects a barrier against the world: once it has made its shield, a person can live as he wants [...] This individual is isolated, restless and dissatisfied: seeking freedom through autonomy generates a feeling of anguish’ (Sennett, 1980, It. transl. 2006: 106).

4. Concluding remarks: new ‘horizontal’ urgencies

A well-known American scholar of the History of Law, Lawrence M. Friedman, published twenty years ago a book entitled *The Horizontal Society*, in which he presents an interesting thesis to understand which are the new frontiers, or the new urgencies to which the dimension ‘asymmetric’ of identity relationships is faced. Global culture and practice seem to indicate a general direction towards the ‘leveling’ of every kind of disparity, discrimination, ‘level differences’. An increasingly ‘horizontal’ society, made possible by various factors, beginning, according to the author, by the very strong influence of television, which ‘has completed the process of eliminating the barriers of time and space that separate people. It is the primary instrument of horizontal communication [...] Its powerful ray spreads an ideology of needs, desires and achievements, an ideology of choice – the ideology of a horizontal world’ (Friedman, 1999, It. transl. 2002: 44 -45).

The most important aspect of this trend, according to the author (which coincides exactly with the most interesting aspect for our research) is that ‘a horizontal society influences, at the deepest levels, the sense a person has of himself’ (Friedman, 1999, It. transl. 2002: 348). Practically, horizontality is considered the natural development of identity practices, therefore an alternative to asymmetry, almost a temporary and imperfect stage in a process being perfected. The horizontal society, for the author, is a society of individuals and individualists who ‘teaches people, and they come to believe, that they have the right and the power to build a life, a meaning, an identity as unique individuals. I do not ignore the fact that the choice is often merely illusory [...] However, even the illusion of choice has an enormous social significance’ (Friedman, 1999, It. transl. 2002: 348).

And yet, in the twenty years that have elapsed since this interesting publication, so many things have changed, including the reflection on the plausibility of this new, more democratic and effective strategy for managing the identity process: the horizontal society has become, today, an ever greater aspiration full of confirmations. It is a question of the society we are already heading towards, ‘that in which all authority is transferred to institutions and to

rules, laws and rights. Only in this way we all can feel a sense of trust in our forces capable of harnessing the never-ending and ever-changing forms of privileged, pastoral or oligarchic power, of dogma or wealth' (Marzano, Urbinati, 2017: 28).

What happened in the meantime? Here we can only list a series of factors that have strongly influenced the conception and social function of asymmetric relations and therefore of what we have called authority.

First of all, the progress of the 'social state' has made it possible, in the most economically developed geographical areas, a greater rate of personal 'autonomy', previously impractical in these proportions. Let's think of how, in some northern European regions, such as Sweden, the 'non-dependence' on others has even become a legislative objective to be applied in all fields of social interaction. This has led to the exaltation of a type of asymmetry that is exclusively 'functional', 'systemic' and therefore anonymous, thus reducing the authoritative personal dimension in favor of the bureaucratic one of 'social roles'.

Another contributing factor has certainly been technological progress, which progressively replaces the need for personal intermediation to achieve individual goals. A particularly important and critical aspect of technological progress is that linked to the enormous development of Artificial Intelligence, which not only affects social interactions on the ground of speeding up operations and operativity, but above all, in recent times, it is cutting out a space of revolutionary importance in the field of sensory and 'affective' experience. The machine that makes you love is an increasingly efficient functional substitute to the person, full of inaccuracies and shortcomings. It is possible that American children, facing the use of robot animals to keep company to the elderly, wonder why there are no 'people who can do this job'. And they react with disarming naivety to the answers: "The robots, he said, 'they do everything right'; people 'do the best they can'. But according to Bruce it was human imperfection to create stronger bonds" (Turkle, 2011, It. transl. 2012: 68).

The horizontality of the relationships was finally consecrated by another product of technological development: network communication. Friedman could not imagine the *hubris* of online communication compared to what was considered the arrival point of mass media invasiveness, namely television. *Peer to peer* is the verb of social media, in which even to recover the horizontality, it is possible to invent an identity for any eventuality, since it has failed the obligation to submit to the investigative sensoriality of one's interlocutor. Being *online 24/7*, within a communicative *frame* that has replaced the *receiver* with the *follower*, means sublimating the affective energies and asymmetries behind the fragile improbability of free choice, from which to derive one's own vision of the world, unconsciously but unfailingly authoritatively.

To summarize, these last twenty years of processes underlying the horizontality seem to confer a patina of a 'prophetic' charge on what Edgar Morin guessed almost sixty years ago: 'And the first cracks already appear. On the one hand, a life less enslaved by material necessities and natural hazards; on the other, a life that becomes a slave of futility. On the one hand, a better life; on the other, a latent dissatisfaction. On the one hand, the less tiring work, on the other, a job without interest. On the one hand, a less oppressive family; on the other, a more oppressive solitude. On the one hand, a protector society and a welfare state; on the other, the death that is always irreducible and more absurd than ever. On the one hand, the increase in relations among human beings; on the other, the instability of these relationships. On the one hand, freer love; on the other, the precariousness of love. On the one hand, the emancipation of women; on the other, the new neuroses of women. On the one hand, less inequality; on the other, more selfishness' (Morin, 1962, It. transl. 1963: 186).

It is perhaps time to re-evaluate a re-collocation of the authoritative social relationship that does not delude us to (re)find equality through the censorship of asymmetry. In this way we risk not just inhibiting the difference (which, theoretically, we would like instead protecting) but doing something far more dangerous, on a human and social level: the exaltation of *indifference* as the ultimate and irreversible form of defense from human relations.

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