(DIS-) CONTINUITIES OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS IN TRANSITION PERIODS[*]

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Problem

We can argue that the identity of individual members of a society may be particularly affected within transition periods. Why identity and what do we actually describe with the concept of identity? If we follow Luckmann's argumentation, identity must be considered as "personal identity" which describes a complex form of the organization of life characterized by interdependent features. The first one is the ability of an individuated organism to act and to control its actions relatively independent of the circumstances of a concrete situation. The second one is the assumption of responsibility for actions taken over by the individual[1]. The individual actor as organism and with consciousness is the carrier of identity. Personal identity, as Berger and Luckmann would argue, is constructed within the dialectical relationship of individual and society. They argue that identity is a key element of subjective reality. It is crucial to mention that identity is formed by social processes. Once identity is crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or reshaped by social relations. And the social processes involved in the formation and the maintenance of identity are determined by the social structure. Identities are produced by the interplay of organism, individual consciousness and social structure and conversely react upon the given social structure, at the same time maintaining it, modifying it, or reshaping it[2].

First of all, I will concentrate on the concept of identity showing the different aspects of this form of self-description within the dialectic of individual and society. In this context, I will differentiate between "personal" and "participative identity". Then I will focus on the significance of problematic identity constructions in transition periods, using the case example of the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the subsequent reunification of Germany. In the third part of the article I will apply the identity concepts of sociology of knowledge to further elaborate transition and identification processes.

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[1] **Luckmann, Th.** On the Evolution and Historical Construction of Personal Identity in Unverwechselbarkeit. Persönliche Identität und Identifikation in der vormodernen Gesellschaft, edited by Peter von Moos. Köln: Böhlau, 2004, p. 21.

[2] **Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, Th.** The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, p. 173.

Personal and participative identity

The identity concept functions as a theoretical link between the individual and the collective or society. The concepts of the "other" and the "self" which are stored in the stock of knowledge are significant for the development of *identity*. The individual constantly redefines him- or herself through interactions with "significant others" (in mirroring processes within a specific milieu). Thus, a gradual, constantly developing *identity formation* emerges[3]. In the interactions with fellow human beings, the typifications and constructions of the *other*, constructed in these processes by others, in turn have an effect on the respective *self* of the interaction partner. The self is thus "a reflected entity, reflecting the attitudes first taken by significant others toward it"[4]. The individual becomes what he or she is within processes of interaction first of all with significant others. It is decisive that this is not a mechanistic, one-sided process; it is a dialectical process of identification by others and self-identification, "between objectively assigned and subjectively appropriated identity" (ibid.). In defining "identity" as link between objective and subjective reality within the dialectic of individual and society, Berger/Luckmann are able to differentiate themselves from the concept of "collective identity" which includes the insinuation of a false hypostatization of collective categories independently of the individual actor.

Identity to a certain degree is influenced by objectively given world views as part of symbolic universes. A cultural sense of belonging, historically defined categories of "nationality", "ethnicity" etc. become part of the identity of the individual as imposed self-definitions. Identity is always intended as *relational* and not *substantial*. This means it always develops out of concrete or imagined "encounters" with others.

At this point of the argumentation, I propose another differentiation of the identity concept, following Alois Hahn – I would like to distinguish between "personal" and "participative identity". In this way, the two intertwined forms of identity construction can be realized as solution for the problem of an individual's integration in society as a whole. In the case of "personal identity", it is a matter of biographically determined meaning, subjectively relevant meaning to the individual, which must define his or her personal identity by dissociation from other individuals. "Participative identity constructions"[5] are closely linked to the development of "personal identity": The formation of "personal identity" in an emphatic sense, as something that does not arise in financial, legal, political, work-related, religious, family etc. function contexts,

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[3] **Mead, G. H.** Mind, Self, and Society. From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967 [1934], p. 132 ff.

[4] **Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, Th.** The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987 [1966], p. 132.

[5] This term exhibits an affinity to Erving Goffman's term of "social identity". "Social identity" aims to characterize an individual isolated combination of affiliations and the synchronicity of role characteristics (**Goffman, E.** Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963). In terms of the construction of "participative identity" it is however important that "participation" describes the moment of collective identification – identification with the collective – as well as the creation of solidarity (**Willems, H. and Hahn, A.** Einleitung: Modernisierung, soziale Differenzierung und Identitätsbildung in Identität und Moderne, edited by Herbert Willems/Alois Hahn. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1999).

results in the experience of alienation[6], when contrary identifications have to be agreed upon. "Participative identity constructions", such as affiliation with nationality, ethnicity, gender or religious affiliati0on are self-correlations of persons, whereas identification with "supposed" affiliation with a collective is established by the simultaneous exclusion of others – as defined by Niklas Luhmann's description of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion – from this affiliation: a person is East German or West German, Armenian or Georgian etc.

While "participative identity" is solely based on social constellations and is defined through relationships to others, "personal identity" is defined by the relationship of the individual to him- or herself and the characteristics and experiences it gains over time – which are of course shaped by society –, whereby it distinguishes itself from others. Self-focus by means of "participative identities" is the result of an identification that asserts its claim to affiliation and simultaneously excludes others from this affiliation – thus inclusion and exclusion are instruments of self-description. In this context, "identity" is to be understood as an assumption or description[7].

"Transitional identity" – the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR)

Now I briefly refer to my example of the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) followed by the reunification of Germany. The specific transition process connected to this historical event is of particular interest if we focus on identity construction. Decisive for the transitional process was an intrinsic revolution within the GDR based on courage, engagement and the willingness to take risks of the East Germans who articulated their protest agains the regime in their Monday demonstrations. The slogan used during this period of protest was "We are the people" ("Wir sind das Volk") which later on, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was transformed into "We are one people" ("Wir sind ein Volk"). For those demonstrating in the streets during the first period before the fall of the Wall there was the fear of a forced suppression of the protest. When the frontiers actually were opened, a majority of the East Germans felt pleasure and pride with relation to their self-release.

The second phase after the fall of the Berlin Wall is characterized by the projection of a common German national identity. The reasons and motives for this change of objective of the demonstrations are economic and political. In this context we have to mention the economic collapse of the GDR and the economic capability of the Federal Republic of Germany. Other reasons were the continuing exposures of abuse of authority, of surveillances of GDR citizens and violations of human rights in the GDR, but also the hope for democarcy and freedom of speech, and also the idea of reunification which was decisive especially for the older generation[8].

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[6] **Willems, H. and Hahn, A.** Einleitung: Modernisierung, soziale Differenzierung und Identitätsbildung in Identität und Moderne, edited by Herbert Willems/Alois Hahn. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1999, pp. 15-17.

[7] **Hahn, A.** Konstruktionen des Selbst, der Welt und der Geschichte. Aufsätze zur Kultursoziologie. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2000, s. 13.

[8] **Reimann, K. E.** Schreiben nach der Wende - Wende im Schreiben? Literarische Reflexionen nach 1989/90. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008, s. 36.

But the change of direction within the reform movement in the GDR was at the same time accompanied by the massive collective feeling of uncertainty. The rapid breakdown of the socialist state system in Eastern Europe and specifically within the GDR was followed by an erosion of identificatory relations. Not only the state system collapsed, the social order, value concepts, a world view broke down. Those who grew up and were socialized within the GDR, no matter if they were supporting or in opposition with the system, were affected by a destabalization of collective identification. Václav Havel, when receiving the honorary doctor at the University of Dresden in 1995, describes the feeling of disorientation which occurred even though it was a self-release, which took place not only in Germany and which he shares with the East Germans. In his speech he portrays the situation that in spite of happiness of the political revolution, the atmosphere turned into the contrary[9]. Depression was the result and one recognized that with the fall of the Berlin Wall a whole structure of values which one learned to bear, broke down. Then the feeling of insecurity and emptiness arose, everyone felt uprooted and deprived of all points of orientation.

This disorientation of the East Germans explains why the majority of the GDR citizens in the end of 1989 pleads for a reunification of Germany. In an Infas-Survey in 1990 East Germans were asked if they feel rather as "GDR citizen" or as "German" – only 35 % argued that they felt as GDR citizens while 51% said that they felt German. That the East Germans willingly accepted a national, greater German collective affiliation demonstrates that they abandoned their former identification with the GDR without a strong necessity to reappraise the past. This specific form of collective identification of the East Germans is rooted in GDR history. Only a small minority was affiliated and identified with the regime, the majority within the GDR distanced themselves critically from imposed collective state symbolism which was impregnated by the socialist ideology. The collective identification of the GDR can be described as inconsistent and ambivalent from the beginning; it was based on the discrepancy between partial social integration and political distance. A crisis related to collective identification could be recognized already in the beginning of the 1980s which had the effect of a passive strategy of denial and disobediance with relation to what state institutions imposed on the citizens.

An entire upheaval of the life situation of the East Germans was the result of the political collapse followed by an economic and social system change. After the reunification, a new political system was imposed onto the former GDR, as well as new cultural value system. The annexion as well as the speed with which the reunification was organized signified for the GDR citizens the leap into a new and strange world. The euphoria from a few months just after the fall of the Berlin Wall was quickly followed by an attitude of victimization. The reunification in the fall of 1990 had the effect of a devaluation of economic and cultural principles and ideas. Many of the East Germans had the impression that they were the losers of the reunification. The takeover of the West German political system represented the radical adaption to Western dominant culture. The system change transformed the former GDR citizens into 'strangers in their

[9] Ibid. 37.

own country' who had to start from the beginning. They first of all had the problem that they had to confront new demands on the basis of patterns of action and psychic dispositions which were formed within the societal conditions of the GDR and which were only to some extent suitable for the new challenges. Formerly established patterns of behavior and of thought were no longer valid or were being questioned. The reunification of the two German states in the end did not mean a convergence of the two sides including a syntesis. The transformation process above all demanded from the East Germans an adaption to Western patterns of thought and action. Together with the worse material preconditions in the new federal states of the former GDR, the East Germans developed a feeling of inferiority which was accompanied by the impression that they were "second class citizens."

Problematic constructions of transitional identities

The specific transformation process after the collapse of the GDR and the subsequent reunification of Germany had the result of a problematic construction of personal identity especially for the East Germans, as we have seen. The stabilization of the personal identity of the former citizens of the GDR turned out to be a highly controversial project. There was already an ambivalence related to the affiliation with the collective symbolism offered, imposed on, but mostly rejected by the majority of the citizens. There was a participative identification with specific groups with tendencies against the regime which survived in certain niches of the society. The social structure with its effect on identity construction could not provide a stringent and understandable basis for the individual to form a firm personal identity. After the reunification, thought and action patterns as part of a world view did not function any more because the ideological construct of the GDR was replaced by West German collective symbolism. The result was a participative identification with the idea of a greater German nation which united East and West Germans. The poor functioning of the collective symbolism of the GDR was replaced by a diffuse national symbolism related to Germany as one nation.

I would like to add some remarks on symbols and symbolism since they are closely related to identity construction. With the help of symbols, human beings are able to communicate ideas referring to their religious experience, to political ideologies and entities, to scientific thought systems etc. At the same time, within these communicative processes, the social entities thus symbolized are defined through their continuous objectification by the individual actors.

The symbols that are of special importance for transitional processes are collective symbols. It is above all through them that societies achieve cohesion. Social collectivities, all kinds of political entities (such as the "nation" or "state"), religious or cultural groups are represented by powerful shared symbols which form the basis for identity construction on the part of individuals belonging to these collectivities. Symbols function within the dialectical relationship between individual and society[10]. They simultaneously enable every human being to "experience" these collectivities as social entities, while their permanent objectification by the individual members secures the continuing

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[10] **Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, Th.** The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987 [1966], p. 92ff.

existence of these social phenomena[11]. For an analysis of "what keeps society together," one therefore must concentrate on the functioning of symbols and symbolism within specific collectivities, in this case within the unified Germany after the collapse of the GDR. Until today the formation process of a convincing collective symbolism for participative identity construction for the two unified parts of Germany is going on.

To finish my presentation, I would like to mention a specifically important aspect of the identity concept with relation to our case, the GDR. If we focus on the construction of personal identity within the discrepancy of social constraints and personal autonomy, the revolutionary process before the Wall came down is specifically important. Imposed social constraints from the Socialist regime could not prevent revolutionary actions any more. The individual GDR citizen, discontented with the existential conditions, decided to chose personal autonomy in spite of the threat of the regime during the Monday Demonstrations. Personal autonomy as part of personal identity rejecting imposed social structural conditions is the basis for revolutionary movements. And this example specifically demonstrates why we should approach the identity concept with reference to the dialectical relationship between individual and collectivity.

ՅՈՀԵՆ ԴՐԵՀԵՐ – *Ինքնության կառուցակցման ընդհատությունն ու անընդհատությունը անցումային փուլերում* – Հոդվածում ներկայացված են ազգային ինքնության կառուցակցման վերաբերյալ Թ. Լուկմանի և Պ. Բերգերի մշակած տեսական մոտեցումները, որոնց համաձայն՝ մարդու ինքնությունը ձևավորվում է անձի և հասարակության միջև ընթացող մշտական երկխոսության շնորհիվ: Ըստ այդմ՝ հեղինակը վերլուծում է Գերմանիայի Դեմոկրատական Հանրապետության լուծարման և Բեռլինի պատը քանդելուց հետո արևելյան գերմանացիների ինքնության փոփոխության գործընթացը, որը պայմանավորված է եղել նախկին ինքնությունից հրաժարվելու և նոր՝ համազգային ինքնության ընդունումով: Այդ անցումը դրսևորվել է բազմաթիվ խորհրդանշական ձևերով, ի մասնավորի՝ Բեռլինի պատի քանդման ընթացքում, արևելյան գերմանացիների կողմից առաջադրված «Մենք ազգ ենք» կարգախոսով, որը հետագայում վերափոխվեց «Մենք մեկ ազգ ենք» կարգախոսի:

ЙОХЕН ДРЕЕР – *Прерывность и непрерывность конструирования идентичности в переходные периоды.* – В статье рассматриваются теоретические подходы к исследованию конструирования идентичности, в частности, его теория, разработанная Т. Лукманом и П. Бергером, согласно которой идентичность человека формируется в его постоянном диалоге с обществом. На основе данного подхода рассматривается конструирование идентичности в ГДР периода ее развала и разрушения Берлинской стены. Проанализированы многие символические формы, выразившие переход от старой идентичности к новой, в том числе видоизменение национального слогана, который до разрушения стены звучал "Мы – нация", а после – "Мы – одна нация".

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[11] **Dreher, J.** "The Symbol and the Theory of the Life-World. »The Transcendences of the Life-World and their Overcoming by Signs and Symbols«," in Human Studies, 2003, № 26, 2, p. 155ff.