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The Evolution of Identity in Modern Society: A Sociological Exploration

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Abstract:
The concept of 'identity' has transitioned from a peripheral notion within mainstream Western sociology to a central and dynamic focus of contemporary sociological studies. This shift is evident in the evolution of identity theories, as initially laid out by classical sociologists like Mead and Cooley, who emphasized the socio-psychological aspects of identity. Based on recent writings, this paper argues that in modern times, identity encompasses both individual and collective forms and is recognized as a multifaceted, fluid, and transformative construct. The quest for identity in contemporary society is a shared endeavour that involves various forms, both individual and collective. This evolution of identity is a product of modernity, impacting societal structures, politics, and individual self-concept. The dynamics of modernization, technological advancements, and shifting power relationships are central to understanding the complexities of identity in the modern world.

Keywords: Identity, Modernity, Identity Politics, Reflexive Self-Identity, Collective Identity

Introduction

Academically, the concept of 'identity' has historically received limited attention within mainstream Western sociology. While exploring the works of classical sociologists, it becomes evident that detailed references to the question of identity are primarily found in the writings of Mead and Cooley. However, their approach to identity was more socio-psychological than political sociological, which is the lens through which contemporary debates on identity are often examined. Mead and Cooley discussed 'identity' in the context of understanding the formation of an 'individual self' within collective settings, emphasizing the role of meaningful interactions and the process of socialization (Cooley 1962, Mead 1934).

The crucial point emphasized by Mead and Cooley in their discussion was the significance of the 'other' in shaping an individual's self-identity. Later sociologists also highlighted the importance of validation in the construction of individual or collective identities. Merely asserting an identity was deemed insufficient; it needed to be acknowledged (or rejected) by those with whom one interacted (Jenkin 1996:210). In his seminal work on ethnicity, Barth argued that simply conveying a message about the distinctiveness of one's identity was not adequate; it required acceptance from significant others before an identity could be considered established. Thus, identities were discovered and negotiated at the intersections of internal and external boundaries (Jenkin 1996: 23).

The Emergence of Identity in Contemporary Sociology

Academically, the concept of 'identity' has gained significant prominence in contemporary sociological studies. Since the 1950s and 1960s, when Eriksion (1968) popularized the notion of an 'identity crisis' and

Goffman explored stigma as a 'spoiled identity,' surrounding identity have permeated the field. Erikson (1963) emphasized the importance of identity, stating that "in the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity" (Erikson 1963:240). Initially rooted in psychoanalysis and psychology, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a growing recognition of the need to consider not only individual but also collective forms of identity (Bendle 2002:2). Mervyn Bendle (2002) highlights two reasons for this shift. Firstly, there is a perception that identity is both crucial and problematic in the era of high modernity. Secondly, while sociology acknowledges this importance, its theoretical accounts of identity are inconsistent, underdeveloped, and ill-equipped to bear the analytical weight placed upon them. Consequently, a fundamental contradiction arises between the recognition of identity as profoundly significant for personal well-being and a theoretical understanding of 'identity' as something constructed, fluid, multifaceted, impermanent, and fragmented. Thus, the contemporary crisis of identity manifests as both a crisis of society and a crisis of theory (Bendle 2002:1).

Modernity and Identity

Mervyn Bendle (2002) establishes a connection between the contemporary crisis of identity and the advent of modernity. According to Bendle, the process of modern secularization prioritized the attainment of self-realization in the present world, rather than relying on the anticipation of rewards in the afterlife. Additionally, the breakdown of hierarchies, the rise of individualism, social mobility, and the potential for profound social change all contributed to the emergence of new identities to be pursued within the confines of the earthly realm. Moreover, there was a newfound flexibility in self-definition. Previously, identity had been defined within rigid and predictable social structures and processes. However, with the decline of such structures, the foundation for defining identity became shifting and non-absolute (Bendle 2002:6). The discourse on identity is undeniably a product of modern times. Scholars argue that the emphasis on identity, based on various organizing principles such as ethnicity, religion, language, gender, sexual preferences, or caste positions, arises as a response to counter the sense of anonymity prevalent in an impersonal modern world. It is seen as a means to establish a sense of belonging, seek comfort, and foster a sense of community.

Identity in Response to Modernization

The transformative effects of modernization have brought about distinct structural changes that are reshaping societies. Consequently, the cultural landscape of caste, class, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and even nationality, which traditionally provided a secure framework for social individuals, is undergoing fragmentation.

These societal transformations also have profound implications for personal identities, leading to a destabilization of our integrated sense of self. The erosion of a stable "sense of self" not only disconnects individuals from their social and cultural contexts but also generates a crisis of identity at the individual level (Hall 1996:597).

According to Kobena Mercer, the notion of identity only becomes a matter of concern when it is in a state of crisis. This crisis arises when something that was previously assumed to be fixed, coherent, and stable is disrupted, leading to doubt and uncertainty (Mercer, 1990:43). Craig Calhoun (1994) accurately captures this situation by highlighting that in modern times, there is a heightened emphasis on consolidating individual and categorical identities and reaffirming a sense of self. However, the complex social changes and the intricate interplay of various forces, factors, and events in the modern world have

made the production and recognition of identities problematic. It implies that the search for an 'authentic self or identity' is not a straightforward and unambiguous process. It involves negotiating with other, often overlapping and contested multiple 'selves'.

Nevertheless, the concerns surrounding individual and collective identity, which simultaneously seek to highlight differences and establish commonalities with others who share similar distinctions, have become a universal endeavour. The quest for identity is no longer confined to specific groups or contexts but is a shared pursuit in contemporary society.

Identity in Modern Politics

In his book "Identity Politics in India and Europe," Michael Dusche (2010) explores the impact of modernity on identity politics. He seeks to uncover the roots of identity conflicts and their role in modern politics, particularly within the context of nation-state formation. A defining characteristic of modern polity, whether formally democratic or not, is that the ruling elite derives its legitimacy both from the grassroots and from a socially transcendent authority. It is within this framework that the significance of identity politics becomes apparent.

Dusche discusses two important functions of identity politics in the modern polity. First, it serves as a means for the ruling elites to generate power, often in a demagogic manner. Second, it mobilizes and engages the masses by creating an external enemy. However, as Dusche argues, in the modern era, the perceived enemy does not appear in an unmediated manner. Rather, it is mediated through public discourse, mass media, and other channels (Dusche 2010:49). This is where modernity, characterized by significant technological advancements, influences and transforms the nature of identity politics in contemporary contexts.

Identity in Modern Societies

In understanding identity formation and its role in modern societies, the works of Anthony Giddens (1991) and Manuel Castells (1997) are of great importance. Giddens places identity at the center of his theory of individuation, reflexive modernization, and the emergence of post-traditional societies within a global system. According to Giddens, as traditions lose their grip and daily life is reconstituted through the interplay of the local and the global, individuals are compelled to negotiate lifestyle choices amidst a diversity of options. This reflexive approach to life planning becomes a fundamental aspect of self-identity formation (Giddens 1991:5). It is accompanied by an ongoing or retrospective "narrative of the self," which serves as the means through which self-identity is reflexively understood (Giddens 1991:242). Self-identity, in Giddens's view, is the individual's reflexive understanding of themselves in terms of their biography (Giddens 1991:244).

Central to Giddens's concept of self-identity is trust, which sustains a sense of "ontological security" in the face of the potential chaos that lurks beyond everyday conventions (Giddens 1991:37). Trust fosters confidence in the continuity of the self, the reliability of others, and the surrounding social environment. Giddens argues that trust serves as the foundation from which an emotive-cognitive orientation towards others, the object-world, and self-identity emerges (Giddens 1991:38). The crucial period for establishing a stable self-identity is childhood, when emotional inoculation against existential anxieties is received, relating to future threats and dangers (Giddens 1991:39). A stable self-identity provides the basis for ongoing interactions in an ever-changing and unpredictable world.

When self-identity faces crisis due to illness, deviance, anxiety, or alienation, high modernity relies on the intervention of expert systems comprised of trained professionals. This entails the sequestration of experience by these expert systems, as individuals and civil society lose the capacity, present in traditional societies, to handle such crises. Consequently, society is disempowered and deskilled in critical areas of intimate life, and the acquisition and maintenance of identity become increasingly problematic, falling under the domain of external and impersonal expert systems.

Identity serves as a central theme in M. Castells' (1997) analysis of the information age, where he highlights that our world and our lives are shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity. Castells describes the emergence of the network society, which is characterized by technological advancements, changes in capitalism, and the decline of statism. This network society exhibits features such as flexible and unstable work, individualization of labour, network-based organizational forms, and a culture of virtuality based on complex media systems. It also entails transformations in the material foundations of life, space, and time, along with the rise of new cosmopolitan ruling elites (Castells, 1997:1).

In contrast, Castells argues that this profound transformation is being strongly contested by the widespread surge of collective identity expressions. These collective identities can take various forms, including gender, religious, national, ethnic, territorial, or socio-biological identities. They are diverse, shaped by each culture's contours and historical sources. These identities, whether progressive or reactionary, increasingly employ media and telecommunications systems as tools. Castells emphasizes that these identities challenge the forces of globalization and cosmopolitanism, advocating for cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment (Castells, 1997:2).

Castells posits that identities serve as sources of meaning for individuals themselves and are constructed through a process of individuation. Individual identity is built upon cultural attributes that take precedence over other sources of meaning, but dominant social institutions and roles become part of an individual's identity only if they are internalized and imbued with personal meaning. Identity, therefore, is an active process of construction, and Castells defines "meaning" as the symbolic identification by a social actor of the purpose behind their actions (Castells, 1997:7).

However, the specific form that an identity assumes is influenced by power relationships. Castells identifies three main types of identity: (1) legitimizing identity, which upholds systems of domination; (2) resistance identity, which opposes the struggles faced by marginalized groups within those systems; and (3) project identity, which involves the construction of new identities that imply the transformation of the broader social structure. These three identity types give rise to three corresponding modes of collectivity: civil society, comprised of the market and its legitimizing institutions; communities formed through collective resistance to marginalization caused by market processes; and subjects who seek to transcend markets and communities, constituting a collective social actor through which individuals find holistic meaning in their experiences (Castells, 1997:10).

Subjects, in this context, are not solely focused on resistance but are committed to the project of social transformation. Among the triads described, project identity and the transformative subject emerge as superior forms that reject the prevailing level of social development. Currently, the formation of collective identity in the form of communities holds the most significance. Castells posits that the constitution of subjects, which lies at the core of the process of social change, takes a different route compared to what

was known during modernity and late modernity. Instead of being built upon disintegrating civil societies, subjects are now constructed as an extension of communal resistance to globalization (Castells, 1997:11). Castells proposes a radical communitarian politics of identity as the pathway to full subjecthood. He explores this possibility through various manifestations such as guerrilla movements, militias, religious cults, environmentalism, gay rights, and feminism.

Identity Types and Modes of Collectivity

In addition to Castells' analysis, Stuart Hall (1996) presents three different conceptions of identity: the Enlightenment subject, the sociological subject, and the postmodern subject. These conceptualizations are highly relevant in understanding the formation and assertion of identity. The Enlightenment subject was based on the idea of the human person as a fully centered, unified individual endowed with reason, consciousness, and agency. The center of this subject consisted of an inner core that emerged at birth and remained essentially the same throughout their existence. The concept of identity was central to this individualistic understanding of the subject (Hall et al., 1996:597).

The notion of the sociological subject recognizes the complexity of the modern world and acknowledges that the inner core of the subject is not autonomous or self-sufficient. Instead, it is shaped in relation to "significant others" who mediate the values, meanings, and symbols of the cultural worlds in which the subject exists. Sociologists such as G.H. Mead, C.H. Cooley, and symbolic interactionists have developed this interactive understanding of identity and the self. According to this view, which has become a classic sociological conception, identity is formed through the interaction between the self and society. The subject possesses an inner core or essence, known as the "real me," but this core is continuously shaped and modified through dialogue with the external cultural worlds and the identities they offer. In this sociological conception, identity serves as a bridge between the personal and public realms, connecting the subjective feelings of individuals with their objective social and cultural positions. The process of projecting oneself into cultural identities and internalizing their meanings and values helps align personal experiences with social structures, creating a sense of stability and predictability for both individuals and the cultural worlds they inhabit (ibid: 597-98).

Conceptions of Identity today

However, as Stuart Hall notes, these previously stable identities are now said to be "shifting." The subject, once experienced as possessing a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented, comprised of multiple, sometimes contradictory or unresolved identities. Simultaneously, the identities that make up the social landscapes are also breaking down due to structural and institutional changes. The process of identification, through which individuals project themselves into cultural identities, has become more open-ended, variable, and problematic. This gives rise to the postmodern subject, characterized by the absence of a fixed, essential, or permanent identity. Identity becomes a fluid construct, continuously formed and transformed in relation to the ways in which individuals are represented or addressed within cultural systems. Identity is defined historically rather than biologically. The subject assumes different identities at different times, and these identities are not unified around a coherent self. Contradictory identities coexist within individuals, pulling them in different directions, resulting in constantly shifting identifications. The perception of a unified and secure identity from birth to death is merely a comforting narrative constructed by individuals. The notion of a fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity

is a fantasy. Instead, as systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, individuals are confronted with a bewildering array of potential identities, any of which they could temporarily identify with (ibid: 598).

These three conceptualizations of identity provide insights into the quest for identity today. As a consequence of rapid modernization, the search for self-identity is evident, aligning with the conception of the "Enlightenment Subject." The changing dynamics of inter-caste and inter-community relations, the shift from a hierarchical caste system to an ethically dominant caste system in its twenty-first-century form, reveal the notion of the "Sociological Subject." Meanwhile, the assertion of various identities, be it caste, religious, or communal, depending on the context, reflects the conceptualization of the "Postmodern Subject." It is important to note that these different conceptions of identity are not mutually exclusive but rather overlap and intersect with one another.

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