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Life Projects

by

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This short note is intended to contribute to ongoing discussions on the changing nature of identity in the contemporary era, marked by globalization and superdiversity (see Blommaert & Varis 2011, 2012).

In line with those earlier discussions, we will attempt to sketch a realistic and empirically sustainable research program, focusing on the actual patterns of behavior that people display as bases, or indexicals, for defining identities, avoiding a priori categorizations and rejecting the exclusivity of explicitly identitarian metadiscourses as a research object in the study of identities. What people explicitly tell about identity is too often a very poor indicator of, and stands in an awkward relationship with, their actual identity articulating practices. Instead, we shall focus on observable behavior in connection to what we can call a micropolitics of identity – the presence and function of ‘ordering scripts’ in which various micro-practical features are brought into line with each other, and together, as an orderly ‘package’, create recognizable meanings.

In what follows, we will describe such practices and the orderly way in which they occur as “life projects”. Adding to this, we will then suggest to view the specific kinds of ‘groupness’ that emerge from such practices as “focused but diverse”. Both notions will be introduced here in their most sketchy forms and without much reference to existing literature – the attempt here is to incite discussion and hypothesis testing through research, and even blunt and unfinished notional or analytic tools can be helpful in this process.

Life Projects

In earlier papers, we emphasized (a) that contemporary identity work revolves strongly around *consumption*, as predicted half a century ago by Marcuse (1964);

(b) that identity work, oriented towards ‘authenticity’, appears to involved complex ‘dosings’ of emblematic features; (c) within a rather narrow bandwidth of difference. Marcuse argued that identities are dislodged from the ‘grand politics’ of submission to or revolt against the political and economic system. Identities defined by orientations to specific commodities are thus depoliticized identities, identities that refer only to themselves and not to larger power structures.

Our earlier papers responded, we think, to this line of argument in three ways: (a) the ‘grand politics’ has not truly left the orbit of identity, but has been replaced by a micropolitics of “care of the self” that connects it in different ways to larger-scale political relations and social structures (Foucault 2007); and (b) this means that rather than *depoliticization*, we observe intense forms of *repoliticization*, oriented towards multiple, often ephemeral and temporary, but nonetheless compelling patterns of *order*, now dispersed over a vast terrain of everyday behaviors; (c) leading to limited forms of agency within a general structure of submission, perhaps aptly captured by the notion of “prosumer”: while submitting to the orders of consumption, people do *produce* something new, specific and unique – “culture as accent”. These three points are the takeoff position for what follows.

Let us consider two ordinary examples of contemporary advertisement, both referring to automobiles. Figure 1, a Mercedes Benz ad, projects the purchase of a car onto “a belief”. Note that in the ad, the car itself is not visible: we just see the iconic sign of the brand; what dominates the ad is the statement that buying a Mercedes Benz – *any* Mercedes Benz – is more than the purchase of a useful object: it is the purchase of a mythologized object (in the sense of Barthes 1957), an overdetermined object that bespeaks a vision, a set of ideals, a particular attitude in life. Purchasing a Mercedes Benz means buying *an identity*, and when you drive this vehicle, you *express* that identity (or so it is suggested).

BMW takes another route in Figure 2. Here, the object – the car – is connected to the role of a father and his relationship with his children. The connection with

(gendered!) identity is explicit here: “How do you become ‘best daddy in the world?’” The answer: by buying a BMW. You will “impress his friends” and make your child so happy.



YOU'RE NOT BUYING A CAR.
YOU'RE BUYING A BELIEF.

THE NOTION OF BUILDING A MERCEDES-BENZ HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN EXCEPTIONALLY MEANINGFUL ENDEAVOR. MORE THAN MAKING A MACHINE, WE ARE UPHOLDING AN IDEAL. MORE THAN SIMPLY TURNING OUT NEW MODELS, WE ARE ADVANCING AN ENTIRE INDUSTRY WITH EVERY NEW INNOVATION.

From the very beginning, from the moment we built the first automobile back in 1886, the world was watching. Learning. Adoring. We won races, design awards and recognition for safety developments. In turn, we earned the respect of every true automobile aficionado the world over.

2006 will be no different. The introduction of the new S-Class will once again raise the industry to new heights. In technology, design, performance and luxury, the car unveils an altogether unprecedented level of achievement. And demonstrates a belief that as long as we strive for the highest possible level of integrity in everything we do, there will be people on this earth who appreciate it.

Unlike any other.



Mercedes-Benz

Figure 1: Mercedes Benz advertisement



Figure 2: BMW advertisement.

We have grown accustomed to such forms of advertisement in which the commodity is loaded, so to speak, with intricate sets of personality features, and in which the purchase of that commodity, thus, becomes a way of buying those features of personality that are contained, as a crucial and defining characteristic, in the commodity. One, thus, buys an indexical, and such acts of consumption are always, and instantly, acts of identity. This is the reason why the commodity itself does not need to be displayed in ads: its not so much the commodity we desire, it is the identity indexical that comes with the commodity. We buy the "adjectives", to paraphrase Barthes.

We have also seen in Figure 1 that we do not necessarily need to purchase a specific object: buying a *brand* is sufficient. The "adjectives" – the identity indexicals – are attached to brands, more than to specific objects. Figure 3 shows an example of how one can literally become the brand. The young woman depicted in it is said to be "librarian by day, *Bacardi* by night".

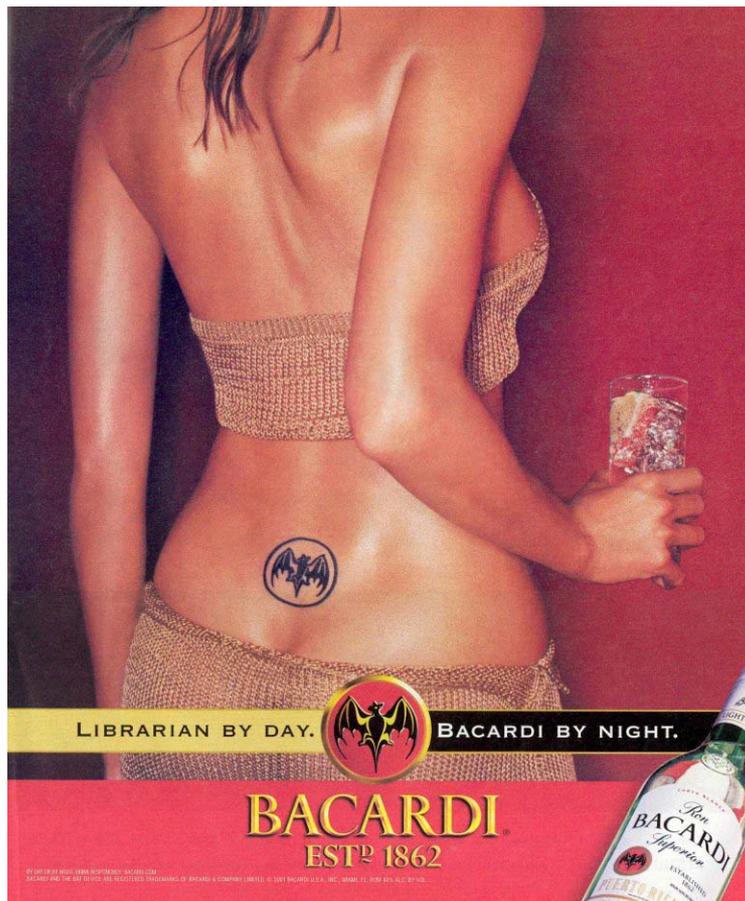


Figure 3: Bacardi ad.

The point here is to observe how commodities are linearly connected to identity features. Buying an object, preferably one with a recognizable brand, enables one to “become the brand”, i.e. to approach the identity archetypes indexically lodged in the brand. Young women drinking Bacardi, thus, can come closer to the attractive party girl suggested in Figure 3; a man buying a BMW can come closer to the ideal of “the best daddy in the world”.

Objects and brands, thus, propose *elements of stories of the self* to their prospective customers. And so, whenever we buy something, we can provide an *account or rationalization* of this particular purchase *with respect to who we are*. I can explain my preference for a BMW to others by arguing that I am a family man; I can explain my predilection for Bacardi by arguing that I am not just a (rather stuffy) librarian during the day but also a party girl at night.

Consumption, thus, becomes an essential ingredient in an escalating *culture of accountability* (escalating notably due to the use of social media) in which every aspect of our being and our lives can be questioned by others, and needs to be motivated, explained, rationalized. I buy an Apple computer, and I am supposed to explain this *specific* purchase by referring it to aspects of my personality. Answering “well, I just needed a PC” or “oh, I never thought of it” are dispreferred responses to questions about the reasons why we bought that specific PC. We are expected to be knowledgeable in the hugely complex field of *specific* indexicalities attached to *specific* brands and products, and we are expected to be competent in constructing such indexical accounts about the details of our consumption behavior. Consumption has been broken down into a cosmos of infinitesimally small meaningful chunks in which specific products project specific bits of identity. Bourdieu’s (1984) distinction appears to have achieved extreme forms of specialization.

Consumption, of course, is not a homogeneous field; buying a BMW is an activity that occurs in another zone of life than buying a Bacardi cocktail in a club, organic vegetables for dinner or a specific shower gel for everyday use. We made this point in earlier papers: specific zones of life and being are subject to specific microhegemonies. For every zone, we have the choice between a variety of ‘scripts’ that bring order to the potentially chaotic field of consumption-and-identity. Getting ready for work in the morning involves handling a dozen or more commodities, from the shower gel and toothpaste we use in the bathroom, over the dress, shoes, make-up and perfume we wear, to the organic breakfast cereals we eat and the low-fat milk we pour into our cup of fair trade coffee.

If we would see such stages of a day in terms of ‘ideological’ coherence – a symphony of dozens of indexicals all collapsing nicely into a coherent ‘me’ – we would find a cacophonous and internally contradictory complex. While my preference for organic cereals and fair trade coffee might bespeak an ‘ecological’ orientation, the skin lotion I use might be tested on animals, the low-fat milk can be produced in fully industrialized conditions, and the shower gel can contain seriously polluting phosphates. The thing is that *every separate item* in this

complex has its own 'logic', so to speak, and that we do not perceive the bundling of a range of different items into a complex activity such as getting ready for work as one complex, but rather as a sequence of separate orientations to specific commodities, each of which provides a reasonably plausible account of 'me'.

This does not preclude adherence to larger 'scripts' that organize bundles of such features. The cacophonous complex of features can still be shot through by arrangements that combine a multitude of details into more elaborate identity scripts or genres, that allow a measure of deviance while displaying instant 'total' recognizability. Figure 4 might illustrate this; it is an image we found when entering "managers" into Google Images.



Figure 4: "managers"

The gentlemen in the picture are both cleanly shaven, attractive, and wear a dark suit and necktie; the ladies are young, attractive, dressed in white shirts and (with one exception) dark jackets and have their hair either loose or tied into a

knot. They drink water or soft drinks; all of them carry writing equipment. We do not see piercings or visible tattoos, no unshaven male chins, no uncombed hair, no silly coffee mugs. What we see here is the recognizability of a collection, or *collocation* of features, that makes a reading of ‘managers’ more plausible than, say, ‘a group of philosophers discussing Schopenhauer’. The microhegemonies attached to specific objects and features can also be grouped into genres, and knowledgeability of individual indexicals needs to be accompanied by knowledgeability of such bundles of features.

This is where the notion of ‘life projects’ enters the picture. Our everyday lives, thus observed, become complex projects in which almost every aspect, from the very big to the very small, requires elaborate forms of accounting and explanation to others, and requires elaborate ‘ordering’ work in attempts to “be ourselves” – more precisely, in attempts to be *recognized* as the specific person I try to offer for ratification by others. “Project” here retains its intrinsic semantic ambivalence: we turn our existence into a project that demands perpetual work, elaboration, adjustment, change, transformation; and we do that by means of indexical ‘projections’ in which possession and display of a feature – my shoes, my car – triggers recognizable identity features. I arrive in my BMW at work, which makes me a “BMW guy”. I take my iPad from the car, which makes me an “Apple guy”. I walk in wearing my Boss suit, which makes me a “Boss guy”, and the receptionist is exposed to my Davidoff after-shave fragrance, which makes me a “Davidoff guy”, and so forth. At any moment of our everyday existence, thus, we are readable patchworks of recognizable micro-signs, each of which can be picked up by others and converted into identity projections.

Life projects are highly dynamic and subject to substantial, and rapid, change. The readable patchwork we were at the age of 17 differs tremendously from the one we became at the age of 30. Changes in fashion, general preference, or technological standards trigger vast and pervasive changes in the way we consume and, thus, can or have to “be ourselves”. We repeat that “being ourselves” – widely believed to be something that we construct autonomously, with almost unlimited agentivity – is very much a matter of uptake and

ratification by others. We can only “be ourselves” if and when others recognize and understand us as such. And evidently, this process is not restricted to what we would identify as the mainstream of society; it is as pervasive and as compelling in subcultures and in what Howard Becker (1963) a long time ago described as communities of “outsiders”.

Focused but diverse groups

The groups that emerge out of the complex patterns of life projects described above are best seen as *focused but diverse occasioned coagulations* of people. People converge or coagulate around a shared focus – an object, a shared interest, another person, an event. This focusing is occasioned in the sense that it is triggered by a specific prompt, bound in time and space (even in ‘virtual’ space), and thus not necessarily ‘eternal’ in nature. This is why such forms of coagulation should not be seen as creating uniformity or homogeneity: the people thus coagulating around a shared focus remain as diverse as before and after, in the sense that their identities remain as complex and multi-readable as before and after.

Take a group of people watching a football game in a pub. In all likelihood, while some of these people may know each other we cannot assume any degree of ‘deep’ affinity among those people. They converge on a shared focus, the game, which is a specific and unique occasion, but is also part of a genre of such occasions – football games broadcast in a pub. We see an amazingly robust group. During the game, these people will share an enormous degree of similarity in behavior, will experience a sense of almost intimate closeness and a vast amount of cognitive and emotional sharedness. A goal will provoke mass cheering, a missed chance provokes general distress and shouts of disappointment. Since they are in a pub, most if not all of them will consume drinks – while few, if any of them will order a meal during the game. And as soon as the game is over, the robust group will dissipate in no time. Several smaller groups will form, people will leave, and the patterns of behavior and interaction dominantly displayed during the game will vanish and be replaced by entirely

different ones. The diversity that characterized the group, even while displaying tremendous uniformity during the event – re-emerges as soon as the moment of focusing is over.

Let us not too quickly dismiss such groups as unimportant. We spend very important parts of our lives in such ephemeral forms of groupness. When our morning train is late again, we find ourselves in conversations with other strangers on the platform, voicing amazingly similar complaints; the moment the train pulls in, these interactions cease and we return to habituated patterns of behavior – minding one’s own business on a train. A traffic accident or another calamity likewise provokes coagulations of highly diverse people into tremendously uniform groups. And while the ‘managers’ in Figure 4 appear like a very solid group in this picture of a “meeting”, nothing will prevent the participants from drifting off into entirely different directions as soon as the meeting finishes. The common features that enabled the closeness of groupness during the moment of focusing do not neutralize the many other, diverse features that each participant displays and can enact, and as soon as the joint focus is lifted, each participant can return to an entirely different set of alignments based on entirely different features. Imagine, just for fun, that when the managers in Figure 4 end their meeting and walk off, the young man in the picture asks the blonde woman whether she would be interested in going to a Dire Straits concert together – he can get tickets; an entirely new set of features would become the stuff for coagulation at that point. And if they get to that concert, entirely different features of their identities will enable them to focus on the event, and will contribute to, again, a colossal robustness as a group. They will cheer simultaneously with thousands of other people, and they will even sing “Sultans of Swing” along with, and in precisely the same beat as thousands of people otherwise entirely unknown to them. All of these features were already present around the meeting table in Figure 4.

There is no reason why we should see such focused-but-diverse groups as fundamentally different from (or for that matter, inferior to) for instance “nations”, “ethnicities”, “religious identities” or what not. In the kind of empirical

heuristics we try to develop here, focusing around such 'big' identity elements is not necessarily more frequently or more intensely done than focusing around mundane events (such as train delays or a Dire Straits concert). We are not saying that features such as nationality or ethnicity are *absent* when people start chatting on a railway platform; we say, however, that they do not provide the triggers for focusing as a group at that moment, and that it is good to take that empirical *point de repère* seriously in our analyses of contemporary identities. Other features of identity can become relevant in the eyes of bystanders or after the fact – imagine two young people falling in love with each other and starting a relationship, which turns out to be solid gossip material for others because both are active politicians attached to parties that are otherwise each other's ideological adversaries. As we emphasized, the diversity characterizing the group does not disappear during moments of intense focusing; it remains a potential for multiple readings and interpretations that can be exploited at any point by anyone who can recognize the relevant features. Refocusing by others – here is the crucial aspect of uptake and ratification again – is also perpetually possible.

If we now briefly return to the consumption culture we used as our point of departure here, we see how multiple groups are continuously formed around shared aspects of individual life projects. All BMW drivers, in spite of enormous and fundamental differences between them, share a potential focus with each other: the brand of their cars. If they do not do this focusing themselves, others can (“oh hell, there's another arrogant BMW driver!!”). People sharing a preference for particular brands can find each other, even during very short moments, in very focused “brand fan” groups on social media. The “like” button on Facebook is that medium's sublime instrument for brief moments of focusing, in which people otherwise unrelated or unconnected can find themselves liking, at the same time and in the same space, the latest iPhone type or the new album of Shakira for instance.

It is not likely that we will understand, and be able to realistically generalize, contemporary “identity” unless we take into account these complex, ephemeral,

dynamic and unstable patterns of identity construction, identity ratification and group formation. Even more: we risk not understanding it at all when we fail to address patterns of identity processes that dominate enormous segments of our lives and are, empirically, clearly objects of intense concern for enormous numbers of people, who invest amazing amounts of resources and energy into them. Social and cultural phenomena should not be too quickly dismissed as irrelevant because they do not appear on our theoretical and analytical radars at present; if they occur and prove to be of significance in the social and cultural life of people, we at least need to examine them critically.

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