

Transformation of Identity from Traditional to Postmodern

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Abstract

Identity has become one of the unifying subjects of social sciences since the 1990's. It does not seem to be losing popularity. Everyone has something to say: from anthropologists, geographers, historians, philosophers, politicians, psychologists and sociologists to those spending effort to restructuring postmodern interest and gendered social traditions and to understanding the reviving of ethnic politics again, this interest is quite high. Identity is about everything from political defection to credit card theft. "It is a familiar tool in the sociological tool box." Identity has entered the area of interest of sociology with modernity and has become one of the main subjects' sociology is interested in with post-modernity. The subject of this study is to determine how the meaning of identity changes in line with the historical contexts of societies and the collective commitments which individuals are a part of. Identity transforms according to historical and social conditions and involves unique characteristics in each period. We are aiming at presenting the primary characteristics of identity from traditional society to post-modern society in general terms and comparing these. In fact, this is a comparative study. Actually, while the subject of identity is almost never a part of solution of classic sociology related to traditional societies and identity's transformation from modern society to post-modern society is discussed today, it has become a necessity to look back and consider how identity was in traditional societies. Identity is recreated and produced in the phases it goes through from traditional society to postmodern society. Today, the background of the concept of identity and the construction processes of identities are firstly based on culture. While identities are determined in

traditional societies as being extra personal and society centered and almost never change, they are based on social structures which transcend locality in parallel to intellectual and social structures in modern societies. In the postmodern condition, the temporariness of identity is striking as well besides its extreme fragmentation and diversity.

Keywords: Traditional Identity, Modern Identity, Postmodern Identity

Introduction

In essence, if we take into consideration that identity did not have a central place in sociological thought and remained as an object of philosophical thought until thirty, or forty years ago, we can understand that this issue is a real problem and difficulty for sociology in a better light. Today, identity is the most important agenda in the eyes of the public and a problem which awaits a solution in everyone's mind and talk. If the founding fathers of sociology had lived long enough to meet it, then the thing which would grab their attention would have been the sudden interest towards identity rather than identity itself (Bauman 2017a, 26). Identity has attracted sociological interest during the modern and postmodern periods. Although there was the phenomenon of identity in the traditional period, it has not directly been present in the interest areas of classical sociology. When structural and macro problems were being discussed and the individual was being neglected, the issue of identity was started to be discussed with modernization and has become an important area of study with the emergence of new kinds of identities in the postmodern period.

There are two types of identity in the sociological perspective: social identity and individual identity. Social identity refers to the characteristic attributed to an individual by others and these show who that person is in the basic sense. It is area a person sets aside for group membership and a group. Many individuals have more than one social identity. Whereas individual identity is the individual's creation of the sense of self (Giddens 2005, 29). The aspects which determine the social behaviors of individuals within the social structure (values, norms, status, roles)

are in a relationship between the characteristics which belong to social categorization as the determinants of social identity (Karaduman 2010, 2887). The processes in which the two identities are created are similar to each other. While the primary difference between them is based on social identity similarity, individual identity is based on difference. Our social identities are large scale structures embody age, gender, race, religion and nation and make the individual a part of a social group. While our individual identities display differences, our social identities are those which make us similar within a structure and allow us to exist together. In fact, social and individual identities are intertwined.

“The phenomenon of identity points out to a process of social construction. The structuring of identity is both a long and variable process. That is the reason why identities constructed depending on historical, psycho-social processes are removed from subjective reality and have a flexible and transitional characteristic” (Karaduman 2010, 2888). It is argued that postmodern identity which is the focus of interest in discussions related to identity is different from traditional and modern identities. In this respect, we can understand the structural change identity has gone through in the postmodern period by displaying its characteristics in the traditional and modern periods.

Identity in Traditional Society

In sociological terms, what lies under the effort to display the characteristics of traditional society is the emergence of modern society and the effort to define it. The West has defined modern societies by displaying the structural characteristics and differences of societies which existed before itself. It has been able to define modern society through traditional society. The founding fathers of society have always spent effort to define the modern structural process they were in, understand the changes, chaos and conflicts this process brought along and explain the characteristics of the old traditional society to give direction to it. Durkheim has argued that the previous society was based on mechanical solidarity, whereas modern society is based on organic solidarity. Comte has suggested that modern societies have progressed to the positive phase from the metaphysical phase. Spencer has asserted that modern societies have been constructed by passing on to industrial society from military society, whereas Tönnies has claimed that this has been

possible by passing on to community from congregation. The essence of the matter is that, it has not been suggested that modern society is organic solidarity, positive, industrial society and community without stating that the previous society is mechanical solidarity, metaphysical, military and congregation.

Taking the sociological theoretical perspectives as the starting point, it is suggested that traditional societies do not carry characteristics such as industrialization, urbanization, rationalism and individualism which are the characteristics of modern society. The interpersonal relationships in traditional societies face to face, primary and social mobility is slow. Since the dynamism of social practices is determined within the framework of the rigid rules of tradition which has become intertwined with religion, change is quite slow. Therefore, it has a more fixed structure compared to modern society. Traditional society is agricultural and family production is in question. In traditional society, the life of the individual was not enveloped by institutions (the most important institutions were family and religious organizations). Individuals were born in their homes and died there. However, individuals are born at hospitals and die there in modern society. In traditional society, the individuals did not (could not) go outside where they were born and did not have knowledge about other places. They could travel to nearby places the most and even that was rare. In traditional society, division of labor was simple and a seven year old child and a seventy year old man were hoeing the soil together in their yard. Social control was stronger and individuals' social identities were pressuring their individual identities. In traditional society, while individuals went on with their lives with identities such as gender, class, race, nation and family given to them by birth, individuals exist in modern society by achieving status and developing their identities.

“In traditional societies the individual's identity was stable, being determined by a pre-established social role. The place of the individual in the world known and familiar to him was established by myths, which offered behavior models, thought patterns, the entire system of relations in which his life was inscribed. The roles of hunter, fisher, chief or member of a tribe did not change during the life of the individual, so his identity did not suffer radical transformations. Identity was established

according to the tribe, the group or the collective of which he was part.” (Abrudan 2011, 24)

A person would be born and die as a member of a clan, fixed system of relatives and a tribe or group whose life line was predetermined. In societies prior to the modern period, identity was neither a problem, nor a criticism or subject of argument. People would not experience an identity crisis or gravitate towards a rooted identity change” (Kellner 2001, 187). In short, there was no discussion about identity, identity crisis and recognition problem of identity in the times prior to modern. According to Taylor, the reason for this is not (2000, 49-50). Identity was the integration of consistent structures such as tradition, belief and ceremonial ritual. Therefore, the self of the individual who experienced all these was whole and the identity was decisive.

In the foundation of the individualization of identity, there is its process of modernization. Modernization has encumbered the individual the responsibility of constructing identity. In modern capitalist society, changing production styles and division of labor have caused an increase in social responsibilities and in turn, problems related to identity (Karaduman 2010, 2889-90).

Identity in Modern Society

Modernization is the replacement of old structures and processes with contemporary structures and processes. It is a period which has emerged in Western Europe in 17th-19th centuries and spread to the whole world. The basic principles of modernization, which has caused significant changes and transformations in numerous areas such as intellectual, economic, political, social and technological, are rationalism, objectivity, universality, holism and advancement. Modern society is a society in which industrialization, democratization, universal humanitarian values and a secular system is visible and develops. “The discourse of liberalization has carried an indispensable importance in terms of achieving individual rights and the legal basis of the use of these rights” (Karaduman 2010, 2889).

In modernity, there is still a structure of interaction with socially defined and available roles, norms, customs, and expectations, among which one must choose and reproduce to gain identity in a complex process of mutual recognition (Kellner 2003, 231). Modernity’s identity

types are in essence relatively unchanging, substantive and fixed; identity is still formed by a cluster of defined and bordered rules and norms. According to this, a person is a mother, a son, an inhabitant of Texas, a professor, a socialist, a Catholic, a lesbian – a person is rather a combination of these social roles and opportunities. Thus, although the borders of identities, possible identities constantly expand, identities are still relatively bordered, restricting and fixed (Kellner 2001, 187-188).

In the understanding of identity in the modern period, individuals who have been able to supervise themselves, take responsibility and proclaim their independence have come to the fore. With modernization, the idea that the individual was unique has been adopted and individualization has become inevitable. Since the modern period consists of an integrated structure, it has ignored differences by prioritizing collective identities. The purpose of the modern period is to create a homogenous society; therefore, identities are constructed as to serve this purpose (Yavuz and Zavalısz 2015, 137). In modernity, there is still an interaction between socially defined current roles, norms, traditions and expectations; the individual needs to make choices, lay claims to and reproduce in order to acquire an identity within the complex process of mutual recognition among these (Kellner 2001, 188).

“The modern era brought with it a certain level of distancing from tradition in the sense of gaining the right to self-conscience. The main acquisition of the modern individual was the autonomous, self-constituted subject, the realization of the modern self by opting for the ideal choice, that whose coordinates were depth and coherence.” (Abrudan 2011, 24) “Identity in modernity was also linked to individuality, to developing a uniquely individual self. Whereas traditionally, identity was a function of the tribe, the group, or a collective, in modernity identity was a function of creating a particularized individuality.” (Kellner 2003, 232-233). An individual who does not begin to experience an identity problem in traditional society begins to experience this in modern society. According to Kellner, identity problem in modernity means, how we form, comprehend, interpret our self as present to ourselves and others (2001, 189). Due to people being obliged to live within societies, the life-styles and identities foreseen by modernity replace them. When the life-styles and identities required by modernity are not adopted, the possible anxiety related to being isolated from society facilitates the

acceptance of these life-styles and identities (Avcioğlu 2011, 367). The individual who puts distance between himself and the future is able to exist due to the roles and opportunities he has acquired in society.

In the experience of modernity, in which traditional life-styles are demolished and innovations are produced, the self is aware of the fact that it can always change its identity and whenever it wishes to do so and make some changes. The individual worries about the acceptance and approval of his identity by the others. The human identity can become out of fashion, old or unnecessary or may lose its social validity. As a consequence, a person may experience a state of anomy, a great alienation such as not belonging to anywhere in the World; or the opposite may happen and a person's identity can call into place and become quite established or become solidified to the extent that causes boredom and weariness. The individual is done with his life and that state and he is tired. He is caught up in a web of social roles and expectations. He does not see an escape route or a possibility to change. Or the individual is stuck within roles which are very different from each other that conflict and he no longer knows who he is. Thus, while identity becomes more of a problem in modernity, the issue of identity becomes a problem by itself (Kellner 2001, 188-189).

Kellner explains that with modernism, the movement of identity has become multi-faceted, individualistic, self-reflective and open to change and innovation (2001, 195-196). Alex Inkeles lists the characteristics of modern individuals as follows: (Köker 1990, 23-24): (1) Ready to new experiences, open to innovations and change, (2) spends effort to understand many problems around him, (3) gravitates towards the present time and the future rather than the past, (4) is planned, tries to organize his life, (5) according to this person, behaviors are not determined by fate or whims; he has more confidence that the institutions and other people around him will carry out their obligations and responsibilities, (6) he thinks that the world is predictable, (7) his tendency to respect others is stronger and he is more aware of others' sensitivities, (8) he has more faith in science and technology and (9) he believes in distributive justice.

Despite this, the decisive features of identity are mostly preserved in the modern times as well.

Hundred years ago, 'being modern' meant trying to reach the 'highest level of perfection' possible – but now, it means a development process which never ends and the lack of an ultimate purpose to reach and the lack of such a desire (Bauman 2017b, 12-13). Bauman who claims so thinks that a new period which he calls fluid modernity has begun instead of postmodern.

Postmodern Identity

The social universe in which identity is formed in the postmodern times represents a radical differentiation from the earlier times. The issue on which arguments related to society defined as postmodern are being focused on is whether the differentiation between modernity and postmodernity in terms of being essentially different or not should be continued. In relation to these arguments, social theorists are divided into two. While thinkers such as Lyotard, Baudrillard, Derrida and Deleuze claim that postmodern society has replaced modern society, the second group of theorists argues that modern society has begun a new phase but that it has not ended yet. In terms of the phase societies have reached, Bauman regards it as fluid modernity, Giddens as a machine which has lost control and Habermas as an incomplete project.

The aspect which initiated modernity was the signs which showed that enduring buildings and the horrible images of short-lived and temporary things which attacked the broken structures [solid] and the empty spaces they left behind. However, after not even 200 years have passed, the superiority/inferiority relationship between the values of permanence and temporariness has completely been reversed. What is important right now – along with ties which are easy to loosen, commitments which can be taken back and rules of the game which are not longer than the game and sometimes even last shorter – is the ease with which we can reverse everything, leave them aside and leave. And we are all pushed in a hunt which cannot be stopped in search of new excitements (Bauman 2017b, 16).

The transition from modern societies to postmodern societies is characterized by the transition from production of industry to production of information and service. Identity has in particular gone through certain changes with the globalization process and identities have taken on a fluid character which can transcend borders and have experienced

a transformation as a part of a timeless and placeless space. Collective identities have gone through erosion and sub-identity, supra-identity or multi-culturalism have taken its place. "With the transition from modernity to postmodernity, all integrative concepts such as nation and class have been abandoned in terms of identity and these have been replaced by partial identities (such as gender, race and ethnicity). Fragmentation, dividedness, distinctness, pluralism, diversity and individuality are values which are glorified; the concept of identity is of a structure which is constructed on the axis of differences and similarities which can be deserted whenever desired. The basic elements of the construction of post-modern identity are image and appearance (Karaduman 2010, 2897).

According to Bauman, if controlling and confirming the future are at the heart of modernity which is in its 'solid' state, then the target in its 'fluid' state is guaranteeing that the future is not servient. It is the increasing confirmation that the only thing which does not change is change and the only definite thing is ambiguity (Bauman 2017b, 12-14). Postmodernism can be defined as a thinking style which gives the messages, 'everything fits' and 'everyone is right,' brings many paradoxes within modernity to the agenda and invents new concepts such as multiple perspectives, locality and partiality, image and simile, interpretation, relativity, contingency, identity, distinctness and pluralism against modernity's concepts such as metanarratives, universality, reality, intelligence, authenticity, dialectic and class and approaches instrumental rationality and liberation discourses with suspicion (Möngü 2013, 35).

Identity has not disappeared in postmodern society; it is only open to new opportunities, styles, models and shapes, besides new identifications which are presented and new powers as well. The overwhelming variability of the new subject positions, possibilities of identity and a multiple culture of image without doubt provide new expansions for a person to reconstruct his identity but they produce an extreme amount of unstable identities as well (Güven 2015, 282). "Postmodern identity, then, is constituted theatrically through role playing and image construction. While the locus of modern identity revolved around one's occupation, one's function in the public sphere (or family), postmodern identity revolves around leisure, centered on looks, images, and consumption. Modern identity was a serious affair involving fundamental choices that defined who one was (profession, family, political

identifications, and so on), while postmodern identity is a function of leisure and is grounded in play, in gamesmanship, in producing an image.” (Keller 2003, 242).

While the postmodern individual turns into the object he consumes, he is in fact transforming into a different and new identity each day. Therefore, the individual is crushed under the chaos of the world with multiple identities which he has created (Yavuz and Zavalsız 2017, 147). “As we shall see, the postmodern identity depends on the way in which the individual constructs, perceives, interprets and presents himself to others. The individual is aware that identity is a construct that involves a permanent process of innovation and renewal in accordance to societal evolutions and to new models, even if they are imposed by the consumer society through the mass-media.” (Abrudan 2011, 25).

In the “Postmodern identity, the subject is perceived as multifaceted and conflicting; therefore, identity is not seen as singular and decisive as it is rather seen as plural and changeable. In fact, what makes all the components of the value system (its identity included) is the general postmodern ambiguity and ambiguity. Successively, the “ontological ambiguity” of postmodernism (Dumitrescu 2001, 12).

Contrary to the stability of modern identity, postmodern identity stands at a ‘hyper variable’ and ‘unstable’ point (Özbek 2008, 97). In modernity, there is the policy of dominating the other. Whereas in postmodernism, this is a rejection of this dominance: “Postmodernism, in which fragmentation, dividedness, distinctness and individuality are glorified, aims at discussing reconstructing the concept of identity on the axis of differences and partiality – even at the cost of fragmenting the society” (Selçuk 2012, 82).

Identify has become independent of lands and the shared world of meaning has been destroyed (Aksoy 1994, 44). Postmodern discourse states that the universal shared identities of subjects is no longer possible. Universality is now history. In the period which came after the modern period, social actors have constructed their identities over their partiality and not over universal values (Karaduman 2896). In postmodern period, partial identities such as gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality rather than universal identities such as class and nation and the partial struggle of these identities are underlined (Selçuk 2012, 91). While the status of modern identity is formed around a person’s occupation and function

in the public or open area, postmodern identities are formed within the framework of appearances, images and activities based on consumption. Identities formed through images display multiple, fluid, mobile, situational characteristics which are open to speedy changes (Güven 2015, 278). The postmodern individual does not claim to have a self. Since the individual does not have integration in terms of self and will, he cannot be held responsible for actions and consequences (Akça 2005, 11).

Identity in contemporary cultures is mostly constructed against dominant agreements, common admissions and moral order; therefore, there is an immoral quality or an aspect which forms a threat against morality in relation to postmodern selves which are fluid, multiple and open to speedy changes (Kallner 2001, 203). The valid identity discourse of this period is shaped in accordance with heterogeneity and distinction. Image and appearance are the basic elements of postmodern culture of image and construction of postmodern identity. Identities constructed through images are multiple, fluid, mobile and open to speedy changes. Postmodern identity which adopts multiple identities tends to have a structure which is rather shaped with spare time activities, chosen freely and can change freely. Therefore, the emphasis put on the understanding of plurality and diversity carried importance (Karaduman 2010, 2895).

Kellner who has analyzed the series *Miami Vice* states that, Crockett and Tubbs whom he defined as having postmodern character structure in the series act as criminals and easily transform into being bad guys from good guys. This kind of double coded identities point out that identity is artificial, is not a given thing, is constructed and is an issue of attitude and behavior rather than very basic moral psychological characteristics. He argues that identity is a game played by people and that people can easily assume one identity after the other. He sees the Castillo character in the series as a person who expresses himself through his moral values and actions, an earnest man who is lost in thought and gains the respect of others, controls his emotions very well and does not speak much and an introverted and independent subject. His identity is the most stable, balanced and unchanging one; he is an independent subject with a strong and established identity. In brief, he is the person who is not postmodern (Kellner 2001, 198-199). In terms of morality, it seems that if a person changes his identity whenever he

wants in a deep rooted manner, he may lose control and pathologically become contradictory, incompatible, fragmented and lacking in thinking and acting in an independent manner. Therefore, if we take appearance into consideration, identity tends to be constructed rather from spare time and consumption images and is much more diverse and open to change. According to this kind of understanding of identity, a person can change his life at any time, identity can always be reconstructed and a person is free to change and produce himself in line with his choices. Postmodern identities are multiple, freely chosen and easily used and discarded (Kellner 2001, 200).

The spirit of the times makes changing identity in a fast manner, quickly passing from one identity to the other, acquiring identity (identities) suitable for the postmodern understanding with the blending on various identities, or in short, being mobile in the face of life-styles and identities advantageous. Changing identities in a speedy manner and choosing new identities are not issues turned into problems by the postmodern individual. His worry is whether he can recognize the identity he should assume right away or not. The worry of the postmodern individual is not acquiring or choosing new identities; it is whether he will be able to recognize the new identity right away or not in line with the speedily changing conditions.

Conclusion

The change in the economic system, culture, technology and the practices of living together in the world has transformed identity. Identity which has not experienced a problem in terms of being defined in traditional societies has existed in the multiple roles whose borders have been socially determined in modern society. With the modern social structure, traditional society's forms of belonging have changed and identities defined within groups and family have started to break down. The individual's being alone in industrial society and in urban environment, the inactivation or weakening of traditional barriers that protected the individual have resulted in an identity crisis. As a result of this, identity has emerged as a way for the individual to define himself and exist within the new world and its dynamics. The individual has joined those who share the same values, move towards religious, national, political and social collectiveness, fought against fragmentation and formed his/her

identities. Identity transforms into a concept built by some roles given within society, social division of labor and the communication between them. With identity becoming a constructed concept, individualism has increased and entered the center of social life. Since transmission is realized through traditions in traditional societies, differentiation between the members of society and expressing oneself individually becomes difficult. As the individual who severs his/her ties with traditions in modern society loses his/her collective values as the group ties weaken, internalizes all these values which are injected in him/her as givens within a greater social group, under the umbrella of a nation. Thus, characteristics which come from tradition mostly transformed, the identifications related to group and community left their place to macro scale identifications in modern society such as corporate structure and nation-state. Modern identity is still decisive and consistent.

Modern individual's disciplined, controlled and punctual attitude has limited his/her identity and roles as well. For instance, a day of a modern mother is planned and it is mostly determined where she will be and do at which hour of the day. During the day, she is at her office, parental roles come into the picture at home, her free hours are determined and even where and how she will spend her free hours is pre-planned. All days of a mother with a modern identity pass in the same manner one after the other. The next day resembles the day before.

An individual who does not experience an identity problem in traditional society begins to experience this in modern society. According to Kellner, the identity problem in modernity is how we create, comprehend, interpret our self and present it to ourselves and others. While modern man worries about the recognition and approval of his identity by others, being recognized and approved of by others is not a concern for postmodern identity.

In the postmodern times, identity has gone under a multicentered and multipartite transformation on the speedy novelties brought by the informatics and communication technology and the new media order. In the postmodern period, the ground on which the individuals Express themselves and define who they are is quite slippery. The individual who tries to remain standing up on this ground and to keep up with the constantly changing axis has to rebuild his/her identity in line with the constantly changing conditions. This has caused a stable and fixed

understanding of identity to be replaced by more mobile, fluid and plural identities. Since postmodernity is a style of thoughts which suspects reality, identity has had its share from this. Modern arguments who claimed that identity was whole have left their place to centerless and fragmental identities in the postmodern times in which multiple identities were dominant. The subject has been fragmented and the subject which has achieved dominance over everything has been replaced with the postmodern individual whose wish is to be a single identity. In the postmodern times, identity resembles a fellow traveler who is accompanied for a while and then being deserted and not a target which must be reached. It is changeable, fragmented, dispersed and open to changes. In this respect, identity in postmodernism is a phenomenon which is not fixed, but one that constantly changes places and fluid. It escapes the constants of modernism. The construction of postmodern identity has not been done on solid foundations contrary to the modern period. It carries the characteristics of ambiguity, variety, heterogeneity, relativity, difference and fragmentation. In the postmodern period, the individual makes himself/herself exist according to the conditions which change each day. The individual makes the choices about his/her life himself/herself and produces his/her identity in an infinite manner within the reproduction process of identity.

We may briefly conclude the subject as follows: In traditional societies, identity is determined as society centered and almost never changes; whereas in modern societies, it is constructed in line with rational, intellectual and social structure. Modern societies have defended order, system and uniformity. In postmodern society, identity is extremely fragmented, disorderly, disconnected, multiple, open and temporary. According to Bauman who states that there has been a transition from modernity to fluid modernity, modern identity is disciplined, target oriented, monotonous, whereas fluid identity is hedonistic, consumeristic, changes speedily, flows and has lost direction. Bauman explains this through the pilgrim and tourist example: The target of the pilgrims who represent modern identity is apparent and it is clear where they are going and with what purpose they are going; however, it is not known where tourists who represent postmodern identity are going and what they will be doing.

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